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FOREIGN POLICY AND CIVIL SOCIETY OR WHY THE 21ST CENTURY WILL BE ANOTHER AMERICAN CENTURY

— Peter Van Praagh

More than 200 years ago the American Revolution sparked a new worldwide consciousness about the potential of the individual human spirit. That American-made optimism that anything was possible was contagious and remains so to this very day. The ideas inherent in the 1776 Revolution — namely that individuals have rights and can and should play a role in determining their future — was followed, in time, by another American-made revolution: the communications revolution.

The result is that ideas and technology that were made in the USA have created a world where individual human beings, through their ability to instantly communicate ideas and actions, now have more of an impact on the decisions of their political leaders than ever before. Today's revolution is currently inspiring and empowering people everywhere to create their own future.

However, current conversations on the role of the United States in today's changing world can be summed up in two opposing views: On one hand, the argument is that the era of a unipolar world dominated by a single American superpower was brief, and is finished. Supporters of this argument declare that the United States is a normal country — albeit a very large one — and has to learn how to get along better with the new emerging powers. On the other hand, it is argued that the United States continues to be, by any significant measure, the world's most powerful country, and, as such, should take its rightful place as global leader. Since everyone likes a leader, the reasoning goes, other countries will follow.

This paper will argue that rather than being contradictory, the two positions can at some level be reconciled. Indeed, taking the best insights from

both arguments is the secret to making the 21st century another American century: not only will today's United States get along better with other countries, by doing so it will create a thirst for strong American leadership of today's world.

Of course, there are substantial reasons for the existence of these opposing positions and they are not to be dismissed lightly. Those who pronounce the United States to be a power on the decline, whose influence around the world will only continue to diminish, argue that America's problems are real and, what's more, have been revealed for all to see. American military power did not shock and awe its enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq into automatic defeat. This revealed vulnerability. American economic might was exposed to bad investments by its banks. This revealed further susceptibility. Finally, the moral authority that the world's only superpower claimed was stained by allegations of torture as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo became household names. These generated deep disappointment among those who wanted the United States to succeed and warm satisfaction among those who wanted it to fail. And now, the argument goes, it would be best for everyone, America included, if the United States acknowledged, atoned, and apologized for its mistakes, and adopted a more "realistic" posture in its management of global affairs.

Although there are merits to such an analysis, the conclusion that American influence has been permanently reduced is flawed. Simply put, the argument does not take into account the fact that the nation lying prone on the commentator's table is resilient, dynamic, and capable not only of full recovery, but of emerging stronger than before. Indeed, as a patient, the United States has always

recuperated well enough to surprise those who predicted its downfall. It will do so again. On the other side of the discussion, there are those who argue that the United States, despite its weakened position, continues to be by far the strongest country in the world. They point to economic and military indicators that indeed confirm that the United States' position is unrivaled. The United States economy is three times larger than China's and about the same size as its four nearest competitors combined: the economies of China, Japan, Germany, and France. In terms of annual per capita income, the United States' \$47,000 embarrasses China's \$2,900. As others have pointed out, never before in modern history have the economic gaps between great powers been so wide. Militarily, the gaps are even wider. In 2008, the United States spent almost as much on its military — \$607 billion — as the rest of the world combined. In terms of naval strength, the ability to project power abroad, the U.S. Navy exceeds the next 17 fleets combined. And so, the argument goes, since the United States is so big, so rich, and so strong compared to every other country, it is then, by default, the world's leader.

But who wants to lead the world by default? Although this analysis also has merits, it is based on old thinking. Instead of comparing conventional economic and military indicators in the United States to other countries, it is at least as important to examine those American intangible assets that are not available in countries that are potential competitors. It is these American assets that will contribute most to its future success and will ensure that it reclaims its position — not by default — as the world's leader.

Apart from the magnetic pull of American values and societal achievements, the United States has another major advantage today that is often overlooked. More than any other individual country, the United States played a fundamental role in creating today's world. Everything from popular culture to communications technology to the global political and economic institutions that govern us was overwhelmingly influenced by Americans. In short, the world of 2010 was largely made in the USA. As such, the United States and its people are better equipped to figure out how to navigate it; once that is figured out — and that process is now well underway — nations and individuals will again call upon the United States to lead. And again, the United States will provide resolute global leadership.

Made in the USA: Politics and People, and the Whole Wide World

For the best part of a century, the United States has led the world in virtually all economic indicators. Its potential for making war was not fully tested until it was attacked at Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and finally joined the Allies in World War Two. But when it was tested, it rose to the occasion. Its position as leader of the free world emerged during and immediately after, and continued into the Cold War. Over that period, there were always professional detractors who predicted that American influence was on the wane. But at the same time, large numbers of ordinary people all over the world admired the United States and its leaders. During the 1960s in the most remote villages of India, there were often two pictures in every dwelling: Mahatma Gandhi and John F. Kennedy. During the 1990s, throughout Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union, areas that had been ruled by Communists, American visitors were thanked warmly for what Ronald Reagan had done for them.

The United States was not admired because it had more missiles than any other country, which it had. And it was not admired because its economy dwarfed every other economy on the planet, which it did. The United States was admired because of the ideas and values that it represented and the way its leaders consistently communicated and stood up for those ideas and values. Although its declaration of independence and its constitution had inspired individuals everywhere for generations, after the war the United States became more than a country. It became an ideal.

Through its political steadfastness against Soviet Communism and its ability to communicate effectively to the world, the United States' influence in virtually all sectors grew steadily throughout the 20th century. This increased influence in the world occurred naturally: as the model of success for what an open society could achieve, the United States inspired individuals determined to make their own countries more open and free. As political breakthroughs began to take hold in the 1980s and 1990s, new democratic governments built strong bilateral relations with it, and the United States became increasingly popular. American leadership was relished.

Of course, there were periods of American failure that led to disappointment, even anger in some quarters, in the second half of the 20th century. The botched invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 severely embarrassed the brand-new Kennedy administration. The prolonged Vietnam War that

ended with the fall of Saigon to the Communists challenged the United States' reputation. And leaving Afghanistan to Saudi and Pakistani influence after the Red Army retreated from it had terrible consequences. It could, in any case, be said that it was necessity that led individuals and countries to look to the United States for leadership against real enemies such as the Soviet Union and its communist allies. But whatever the reason, those who placed their confidence in the United States were more often than not grateful to have been delivered resolute global leadership in return.

By the turn of the century, the United States had achieved hyper-power status — so far ahead of any other country by any real or imagined indicator that its supremacy could not be questioned. Its ability to influence events in every corner of the earth sometimes seemed limitless. But by the fall of 2008, American influence was on the wane and now, two years later, the world's attention is focused more on how the emerging powers will influence events, and less on how the United States will. It behooves those who want to see the United States, and the values that it stands for, regain a pre-eminent position to understand how its influence fell in the first decade of the 21st century.

Where Have You Gone, Joe DiMaggio?

There are many potential entry points into this issue, but consider this as an illustration. In March 2008, Romania had not only become a member of NATO and the European Union, but Bucharest, its capital, was preparing to host the largest NATO Summit in history. On the surface, it should have been a time to celebrate: the military alliance had by then grown to include countries of the former Warsaw Pact, and at Bucharest, it was preparing to admit Croatia, Albania, and the Republic of Macedonia, referred to together as the Adriatic Three. Also, Georgia and Ukraine became the first former Soviet Republics to be considered for NATO's Membership Action Plan — a rigorous institutional program with strict guidelines designed to tutor and build closer links between the democratic military Alliance and countries that aspired to full membership. If the tradition of following American leadership at NATO had been alive and well, much could have been achieved to signal to the world that the Western Alliance and what it stood for was similarly healthy.

But the tradition was not alive and well, as was soon to be made publicly clear. On the morning of the opening day of the NATO summit, President Bush delivered a speech to the German Marshall Fund's Bucharest Conference, convened in

conjunction with the summit. His was exactly the speech that over the previous seven years the world had come to expect. In it was talk about the importance of freedom over tyranny and the American commitment to stand for democracy. The President spoke about the challenges that the United States and NATO faced in Afghanistan, but confirmed again that together they would meet those challenges and bring democracy to that war-torn land. He urged all NATO allies to support full membership for the Adriatic Three and declared that the United States endorsed Georgia and Ukraine for the Membership Action Plan.

Within hours, the Allies had rebuffed American leadership: not only did Greece remain recalcitrant and refuse to let the Republic of Macedonia join NATO until it changed the name of its country, Ukraine and Georgia were not admitted to the NATO program. While it had been true for some time, now it was apparent for everyone to see that American leadership — even at NATO — was truly diminished. For dramatic emphasis, President Vladimir Putin, the authoritarian leader of Russia, was invited to dinner with NATO leaders and seated politely at the head table.

The American failure to lead NATO at Bucharest was followed by momentous events: war in the Caucasus between Russia and Georgia erupted that summer. Democrats in Georgia were surprised and disappointed that the United States couldn't do more to defend them against an aggressive, larger neighbor. With the virtual collapse of the American banking sector a few weeks later, friends of America everywhere began asking questions about the United States' ability to defend their interests and to some, even their independence.

The Attack

On the morning of September 12, 2001, I heard a young Turkish journalist in Ankara ask her American boss what was going to happen now that the United States had been attacked so severely by terrorists. The American predicted that the United States was going to go to war against the people who attacked it and that the world was going to change. "But why?" the Turk asked — and then answered her own question. "It doesn't need to. Everybody loves the United States right now. It can do so much good with that love. And if it goes to war, all that love will be lost. And nothing will be achieved." The American was only angry at the images coming in from New York and from the Pentagon and rebuffed her coldly. "The United States doesn't need the world's sympathy." Back in Washington, the president was also, of course,

American. And the advice that he received, and ultimately the decisions that he made, were made in America.

When Islamic terrorists attacked Americans at their workplace in New York and at the Pentagon, it appeared that much of the world was ready to help the United States. In Paris, *Le Monde* declared, “Nous sommes tous Américains.” A week later in Moscow, Russian politicians surprised American visitors when they stood up seemingly spontaneously, some of them with tears in their eyes, and sang the “Star-Spangled Banner” to demonstrate their kinship with the United States. Of course, the extent to which verbal expressions of sympathy would truly have translated into action remains an open question and to be sure, in some quarters, the attack gave professional anti-Americans an opportunity to suggest that the United States somehow deserved to be attacked. But that distasteful commentary was the exception. Throughout the world, there was an outburst of sympathy.

However, the American political leadership and the super elite who headed the foreign policy establishment — who know well how to express sympathy on behalf of the United States when unfortunate episodes occur in other countries — did not know what to do with this outpouring of compassion. So they ignored it. Instead of focusing on the worldwide affection and good will that the murderous terrorists unleashed by killing Americans with passenger aircraft, and at least trying to harness it, those in power became fixed on the hatred the terrorists themselves unleashed on Americans. At home, instead of channeling the American people’s willingness to help, the President separated the military from the nonmilitary and made it solely a military cause.

But separating the American people from a military effort doesn’t work, and at the beginning of the 21st century, it was doomed from the outset. There are a few things to keep in mind about the situation in the fall of 2001. First, the United States had just been attacked for the first time since Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japanese Zeros on December 7, 1941. At that time, people heard of the attack on their radios and no images were available. In 2001, everybody had a TV in their homes, if not also at work, and the horrors of the attacks were replayed over and over again. Telephone and email allowed Americans to share their grief instantly with everyone they knew, not just their immediate neighbors. Also, in 1941 most Americans had never even heard of Pearl Harbor and certainly couldn’t locate it on a map. There was not the same type of attachment to a far away Navy base in the Pacific as

there was to Manhattan’s World Trade Center and the Washington area’s Pentagon, some of the most famous buildings in the United States, if not the world.

The attack on Pearl Harbor galvanized the American spirit and the whole country looked to its President for leadership. Although President Roosevelt wasn’t able to engage Americans in the war against Imperial Japan and Hitler’s Nazi Germany prior to Pearl Harbor, his leadership after the attack made the most of the massive resources now available to him and unleashed American brute force on the European continent and in the Pacific. The attack on civilians in 2001 similarly galvanized the American spirit — perhaps even more so. Again, the whole country looked to its President for leadership. This time, the American President delivered a different type of message: Go shop.

Trust in the American People

Of course, encouraging shopping was the government’s way of keeping the economy going. That was a priority because the United States needed to demonstrate that an attack on its people would not alter their way of life. But asking Americans to shop and not to contribute to the effort by making other sacrifices was a complete misreading of the American psyche. For a brief window, the President was commander-in-chief of all Americans, not just of the uniformed services: the American people were ready to do what he asked them to do. If it was “we need you to go and fight,” they would have gone to fight. If it was “we need you to volunteer for the Peace Corps,” they would have signed up in droves. If it was “we need you to pay higher taxes,” Americans would have sent in checks to support the effort to defeat the terrorists. And so when the president said, “go shop,” the American people responded. But the decision not to involve the American people in the War on Terror in any other real way had counterproductive consequences for the entire effort.

All the while, President Bush continued saying that his American foreign policy was about people: protecting the American people’s way of life and fighting for the rights of individuals around the world. Over and over again in his speeches, he talked about how American action was helping the people of the countries where it was operating. To the National Endowment for Democracy in 2005, on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of September 11, President Bush said that “as Americans, we believe that people everywhere — everywhere — prefer freedom to slavery, and that liberty, once chosen, improves the lives of all. And so we’re confident, as our coalition and the

Iraqi people each do their part, Iraqi democracy will succeed.” And to the United Nations General Assembly a year later, he spoke “directly to the people across the broader Middle East” and said, “freedom, by its nature, cannot be imposed — it must be chosen. From Beirut to Baghdad, people are making the choice for freedom.” These were worthy and important messages. But his government’s actions were simultaneously speaking louder than his heartfelt words.

To be credible, a politician’s words must match what everybody already knows about that politician, including what he or she stands for. When President Bush gave speech after speech about the power of freedom, and the strength of democracy, and the American commitment to provide real help to democrats everywhere, it simply didn’t resonate because, to too many, the messenger had already lost credibility. The incidents that everyone is now so familiar with, including reports of ill treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, the humiliation of prisoners caught on film at Abu Ghraib prison, and his administration condoning methods of interrogation that simulated the sensation of drowning, not to mention the invasion of Iraq itself, were, to so many, the actions that spoke louder than the president’s words.

On January 20, 2005, George W. Bush delivered what should have been considered one of the great American presidential inaugural addresses. He declared that the cause of freedom around the world was now the policy of the United States government. “All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors,” he said. “When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you.” Tragically, by the time of this speech, the American President’s global constituency had largely already made up its mind about him, and his soaring words fell flat. “America’s influence is not unlimited,” he said, “but fortunately for the oppressed, America’s influence is considerable and we will use it confidently in freedom’s cause.” Sadly for the oppressed, America’s influence was diminishing fast.

What is more, by elevating the cause of global freedom to official American policy, he was calling on the United States government to do the work. The United States of America is viewed by many around the world as an ideal. But the United States is also a country. And like every country, it is largely run by government bureaucrats with specific responsibilities. Enlisting the U.S. government and its bureaucrats as the delivery system for global freedom was never going to work on its own.

Government employees spend their days interacting with other government employees. Diplomats are simply government employees who are specially trained to interact with government employees from other countries. Of course there are exceptions, but for the most part, when government bureaucrats interact with regular people, it is rarely an inspiring experience. And now government employees were being asked to inspire and work closely with freedom fighters demanding a better life in their own countries. Despite the best of intentions, President Bush was calling for the impossible.

Tea, Anyone?

The straightforward and simple way for the United States government to deliver what President Bush said he wanted his country to achieve was to empower civil society throughout the world. And the best way for the United States government to do that was for its political leaders to make appropriate and credible statements at the right juncture. The Bush team did this exactly the right way during Georgia’s Rose Revolution in November 2003, and again as the Orange Revolution got underway in Ukraine a year later. Indeed, Colin Powell, President Bush’s secretary of state, might very well have made all the difference in Ukraine when he called the initial election results fraudulent. But other than smart and timely rhetorical support that encourages nongovernmental organizations, it is best if the government, and its accompanying bureaucrats, stay far, far away from the issue.

President Reagan understood this vital point clearly when he delivered an address at Westminster in June 1982. The speech that is better remembered for the phrase, “the march of freedom and democracy will leave Marxism and Leninism on the ash heap of history,” was an important outline for how the United States would contribute most effectively to the worldwide promotion of freedom and democracy. “It is time that we committed ourselves as a nation — in both the public and private sectors — to assisting democratic development,” Reagan said. “The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way, to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.”

Reagan understood that the strongest natural resource the United States had was American civil society and that once empowered and unleashed effectively, it would contribute to his overarching global vision. The result of President Reagan’s

speech was an effective study complete with recommendations from the chairmen and other leaders of the national Republican and Democratic Party organizations, congressional leaders of both parties, representatives of business, labor, and other major institutions in American society, and ultimately the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy. The by-product was an engaged American civil society that both contributed to the United States' democracy and human rights agenda and that felt that it had contributed to the United States' democracy and human rights agenda. President Bush did not come to the same understanding. He did not invite experts from essential American institutions into his campaign for increased freedom around the world in any real way.

And then, feeling left out of the decision-making on the most important American mission in a generation, disenchantment set in and a release-point seemed inevitable. American civil society ultimately did what American civil society does best: it got organized. Barack Obama, a charming first-time U.S. senator and former community organizer, understood how to harness American civil society's energy and used it to catapult himself to the White House. But frustration at being ignored applied more widely, and after the 2008 presidential election, those Americans who didn't support Obama mounted a grassroots civic campaign of their own. The Tea Party Movement might have begun formally after Obama became President, and might have galvanized around issues related to increased taxes, but the disillusionment that many Americans had felt at being ignored while others made big decisions all around them had started long before that. After an extended period of hibernation, American civil society woke up kicking.

It's Politics, Stupid

In June 2008, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told a Washington, D.C. audience that foreign policy was uncomplicated. "Ultimately," she said, "it's about getting other countries to do what you want them to do." If Albright's maxim is indeed true, the follow up question is: how?

Traditional answers to that question often include mixed-metaphors that make little sense in today's wired world. The answer might begin with a "toolbox" of policy options. For the longest time, great power strategists viewed countries as "pieces on a chess board" that could be moved to act with both "carrots" and "sticks." But a motivated civil society, combined with the American communications revolution, is changing the game

dramatically and irreversibly. If the traditional toolbox and its contents were aimed merely at a country's government, the United States must now, in the 21st century, carry with it a second bag of gizmos to share with a country's people.

The man currently tasked with carrying that bag of gizmos is President Barack Obama. His election sparked enormous excitement and optimism globally, reminding everyone once again that the American president is the only public office holder who has the potential to motivate, inspire and lead the world. At Berlin, as candidate, Barack Obama already demonstrated that he had figured out how to navigate this era. At Prague, Ankara, Cairo, Moscow, and Oslo, President Obama spoke over the heads of governments and communicated directly with people. By so doing, he acknowledged that foreign policy, like all public policy, is about people, and returned to the great American tradition of including civil society — this time global civil society — in his guiding strategy. With a new messenger, American-made optimism once again traveled the world.

New American leadership has gone out of its way to acknowledge, and even apologize, for American mistakes. This should not be misread as weakness. Instead, it's good politics of the global variety. People everywhere look for credible, honest, fair leadership. President Obama took the necessary time to communicate widely that the United States is ready to listen to all sides. This was an important first step in reclaiming American global leadership. Indeed, Obama's messages to the Iranian people in the spring of 2009, when he spoke to them over the heads of their leaders, must have played some role in encouraging and emboldening the protesters who marched bravely after another election was stolen from them.

Of course, people everywhere also value courage and strength in their leaders. And if Obama's messages to the Iranians encouraged their protests, or even if they didn't, Iranian democrats certainly hoped for more than the American president delivered at the time they most needed him. Obama's silence might have been because his administration was caught off guard by events, or worse, it might have been a deliberate and somewhat stubborn attempt to be different from President Bush. Whatever the reason, this misstep opened the door for some critics to proclaim that Obama does not share the goals of defending freedom and democracy globally as strongly as his predecessors, if at all. But that seems unlikely. Like his predecessors, Obama, too, was made in America and carries with him that uniquely American

responsibility to the world. His early speeches as president and his most recent actions, including calling for the release of Liu Xiaobo, the imprisoned Chinese dissident who won the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2010, are positive signs that such a pessimistic assessment may well be misplaced.

At a time when individuals around the world are more politically aware and have more of an impact on their leaders' decisions than ever before, the president of the United States has a distinct advantage. Modern communications tools are products of America and American leaders must know how to use them to strike a common chord to harness the vast resources of civil society

throughout the world. As a new multi-polar era emerges, it is precisely within this resource where the world's most advanced democracy finds its potent and enduring advantage over all existing and potential rivals. If American leaders have the courage and the vision to trust in informed and engaged citizens, the United States will continue to have the strongest magnetic pull, and the 21st century will be as American as the one that preceded it.

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