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What Is a Moral Foreign Policy?

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How should we judge the morality of a president's foreign policy? Joseph Nye suggests a rubric that is based on a

three-dimensional ethics of intentions, means, and consequences and that draws from realism, cosmopolitanism, and liberalism.



While historians write about American exceptionalism and moralism, diplomats and theorists like George Kennan have often warned about the negative consequences of the American moralist-legalist tradition. According to this line of thinking, international relations is anarchic and there is no world government to provide order. States must provide for their own defense and when survival is at stake, the ends justify the means. Where there is no meaningful choice there can be no ethics. Thus, in judging a president's foreign policy, we should simply ask whether it worked, not whether it was moral. However, in my experience as a scholar and sometime practitioner of foreign policy, morals do matter.

The skeptics duck the hard questions by oversimplifying things. The absence of world government does not, in fact, mean the absence of all order. And while some foreign policy issues do relate to America's survival as a nation, most do not. Since World War II, the United States has been involved in several wars but none were necessary to ensure its survival. Many important foreign policy choices having to do with human rights or climate change or internet freedom do not involve war at all. Instead, most foreign policy issues involve making trade-offs

between values — something that requires making choices — not the application of a rigid formula of “raison d’état.” A cynical French official once told me, “I define good as what is good for the interests of France. Morals are irrelevant.” He seemed unaware that his statement was a moral judgment. 

It is tautological, or at best trivial, to say that all states try to act in their national interest. The important question is how leaders choose to define and pursue that national interest under different circumstances. Access to oil, sales of military equipment, and regional stability are all national interests, but so too are values and principles that are attractive to others. How can these two categories of interests be combined?

Moreover, whether practitioners like it or not, Americans continuously make moral judgments about presidents and foreign policies.¹ The election of Donald Trump has revived interest in what is a moral foreign policy, shifting it from a theoretical question to front page news. For example, after the 2018 killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabia consulate in Istanbul, Trump was criticized for ignoring clear evidence of a brutal crime in order to maintain good relations with the Saudi crown prince. The *New York Times* labelled Trump’s statement about Khashoggi “remorselessly transactional, heedless of the facts,” while the *Wall Street Journal* editorialized that “we are aware of no President, not even such ruthless pragmatists as Richard Nixon or Lyndon Johnson, who would have written a public statement

like this without so much as a grace note about America's abiding values and principles.”²



Unfortunately, many judgments about ethics and foreign policy are haphazard or poorly thought through, and too much of the current debate focuses on Trump's personality. Americans are seldom clear about the criteria by which they judge a moral foreign policy. They praise a president like Ronald Reagan for the moral clarity of his statements, as though rhetorical good intentions are sufficient in making ethical judgments. However, Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush showed that good intentions without adequate means to achieve them can lead to ethically bad consequences, such as the failure of Wilson's Treaty of Versailles or Bush's invasion of Iraq. Or they judge a president simply on results. Some observers have praised Richard Nixon for ending the Vietnam War, but was he right to sacrifice 21,000 American lives just to create a reputational “decent interval” that turned out to be an ephemeral pause on the road to defeat?

In this essay, I suggest an approach to comparing different moral foreign policies. I first argue that good moral reasoning should be three dimensional: weighing and balancing the intentions, the means, and the consequences of a president's decisions. Determining a moral foreign policy is not a matter of intentions versus consequences but must include both as well as the means that were used. I then examine and compare the elements of three common mental maps of world politics — realism, cosmopolitanism, and liberalism.

Presidents often combine these three mental maps in different ways that shape the intentions, means, and assessment of consequences of their foreign policy. I illustrate this process with a discussion of the problem of intervention. Finally, I develop a scoring system that allows us to compare their policies, and then apply it to three presidents. Given the different cultural backgrounds, political views, and religious beliefs of Americans, moral reasoning about foreign policy is hotly contested both by politicians and analysts, but it is inescapable.³ This article aims not to solve but to bring structure to these arguments.

Three-Dimensional Ethics

In their daily lives, most people make moral judgments along three dimensions: intentions, means, and consequences. Intentions are more than just goals. They include both stated values and personal motives (as in, “her motives were well meant”). Most leaders publicly express goals that sound noble and worthy, even though their personal motives, such as ego and self-interest, may subtly corrupt those goals. Moreover, good goals must not only satisfy one’s values, they also have to pass a feasibility test. Otherwise, the best of intentions can have disastrous moral consequences, often providing the proverbial pavement for the road to hell. Johnson may have had good intentions when he sent American troops to Vietnam, but a leader’s good intentions are not proof of what is sometimes misleadingly called “moral clarity.” Judgments based on good intentions alone are simply one-dimensional ethics. For

example, Ari Fleischer, the press secretary for George W. Bush, praised his boss for the “moral clarity” of his intentions, but more than that is needed for a sound moral evaluation of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.⁴

The second important dimension of moral judgment is means. Means are spoken of as being *effective* if they achieve one’s goals, but *ethical* means also depend upon their quality as well as their efficacy. How do leaders treat others? A moral leader must likewise consider the soft power of attraction and the importance of developing the trust of other countries. When it comes to means, leaders must decide how to combine the hard power of inducements and threats with the soft power of values, culture, diplomacy, and policies that attract people to their goals.⁵ Using hard power when soft power will do or using soft power alone when hard power is necessary to protect values raises serious ethical questions about means.

As for consequences, effectiveness is crucial and involves achieving the country’s goals, but ethical consequences must also be good not merely for Americans, but for others as well. “America first” must be tempered by what the Declaration of Independence called “a proper consideration for the opinions of mankind.” In practice, effectiveness and ethical means are often closely related. A leader who pursues moral but unrealistic goals or uses ineffective means can produce terrible moral consequences at home and abroad. Leaders with good intentions but weak contextual intelligence and reckless reality-

testing sometimes produce bad consequences and lead to ethical failure.



In their daily lives, most people make moral judgments along three dimensions: intentions, means, and consequences.

Given the complexity of foreign policy, prudence is more than just an instrumental virtue. Recklessness in assessing what just war theorists call “a reasonable prospect of success” can become culpable negligence in moral terms. Good moral reasoning about consequences must also consider maintaining an institutional order that encourages moral interests as well as particular newsworthy actions, such as helping a human rights dissident. It is also important to include the ethical consequences of “non-actions,” such as President Harry Truman’s willingness to accept stalemate and domestic political punishment during the Korean War rather than follow Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s recommendation to use nuclear weapons.

Good moral reasoning does not judge presidential choices based on stated intentions or outcomes alone, but on all three dimensions of intentions, means, and consequences.⁶



Mental Maps of the World and Moral Foreign Policy

What is an accurate picture of world politics? Is it so harsh that leaders must abandon their morals at the border? Do they have any duties to those who are not fellow citizens? Cynics might say, “No, because foreigners don’t vote.” Total skeptics argue that the entire notion of a “world community” is a myth, and that where there is no community, there are no moral rights and duties. Nonetheless, moral discourse in the realm of foreign policy persists, and leaders use three prevailing mental maps of world politics to offer different answers to these questions.

Realism

While there are various strands of realism, realists all portray a world of anarchy where a state’s survival depends upon it helping itself — international morals and institutions provide little succor. Unlike total skeptics, realists accept some moral obligations but see them as limited primarily to practicing the virtue of prudence in the harsh environment of world politics. John Bolton argues for “defending American interests as vigorously as possible and seeing yourself as an advocate for the US rather than a guardian of the world itself.”⁷ Hans Morgenthau wrote that “the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation...get in the way of successful political survival.”⁸ Realism, then, considers prudence...to be the supreme virtue ...

politics.”⁸ In the words of John Mearsheimer, “States operate in a self-help world in which the best way to survive is to be as powerful as possible, even if that requires pursuing ruthless policies. That is not a pretty story, but there is no better alternative if survival is a country’s paramount goal.”⁹

In dire situations of survival, consequences may indeed justify what appear to be immoral acts. Robert D. Kaplan argues that “the rare individuals who have recognized the necessity of violating such morality, acted accordingly, and taken responsibility for their actions are among the most necessary leaders for their countries.”¹⁰ A frequently cited example is when Winston Churchill attacked the French fleet in 1940, killing some 1,300 Frenchmen, rather than let the fleet fall into Hitler’s hands. Churchill referred to that crisis of British survival as a “supreme emergency,” and Michael Walzer argues that in such rare instances moral rules can be overridden even though “there are no moments in human history that are not governed by moral rules.”¹¹

For instance, some ethicists have justified Churchill’s bombing of German civilian targets in the early days of World War II when Britain’s survival was at stake, but condemned his later support for the fire-bombing of Dresden in February 1945 when victory in Europe was already assured.¹² In the early days of the war, Churchill could claim the necessity of “dirty hands” as his justification for overriding the moral rules, but he was wrong to continue to do so in the later days of the war when he had more leeway. In general, such dire straits of supreme emergency a

rare and leaders often exaggerate dangers and threats to justify their actions. For example, Trump justified his mild reaction to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi with, “America First! The world is a dangerous place!”¹³ But realists who describe the world in a way that pretends moral choices do not exist are, in fact, making a moral choice and then merely disguising that choice. Survival comes first, but that is not the end of the list of values. Most of international politics is *not* about survival.

A smart realist also knows different types of power exist. No president can lead without power, at home or abroad, but power is more than bombs, bullets, or resources. You can get others to do what you want by coercion (sticks), payment (carrots), and attraction (soft power), and a full understanding of power encompasses all three of these behaviors. Because soft power is rarely sufficient by itself and takes longer to accomplish its effects, leaders find the hard power of coercion or payment more appealing. But when wielded alone, hard power can exact higher costs than when it is combined with the soft power of attraction. The Roman empire rested not only on its legions, but also on the attraction of Roman culture. The Berlin Wall came down not under an artillery barrage, but from hammers and bulldozers wielded by people who had lost faith in communism. A nation’s soft power rests upon its culture, its values, and its policies (when the latter are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others). It can be reinforced by the narratives that a president uses to explain his foreign policy. John F. Kennedy, Reagan, and Barack Obama, for example, framed their policies in ways that attracted support both at home and abroad. Nixon and Trump

were less successful in attracting those outside the United States. There is a moral difference between a broad, long-term definition of national interest that can include citizens of other nations and a myopic definition that excludes others.

Cosmopolitanism

Another important mental map of the world involves viewing the world through a lens of common humanity, known as cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitans see all humans as of equal moral worth regardless of borders. While it may be weak, some degree of international human community exists. As neural science has shown, moral intuition about other humans is evolutionarily hard-wired into people.¹⁴ Most Americans respond with empathy to pictures of starving or drowned children even if not all Americans would allow them to cross the U.S. border or would take them into their homes, although some would.

The cosmopolitan mental map rests on the belief that basic human rights are universal. David Luban argues that rights “are not respecters of political boundaries and require a universalist politics to implement them; even if this means breaching the wall of state sovereignty.”¹⁵ Many Americans hold multiple loyalties to several communities at the same time in a series of widening concentric circles that extend beyond national boundaries. One can simultaneously feel part of a town, a state, a region, a profession, a transnational ethnic group, and humanity at large. However, loyalty to the outer circles tends

be weaker and generate weaker moral duties than cosmopolitans often assume. One can be a stout inclusive nationalist and a moderate globalist at the same time, but the community of nationality is usually stronger.



Borders are arbitrary and sometimes unjust, but nations are communities that similarly engender additional roles, rights, and responsibilities.

I often used to ask my students to test their moral intuitions about the existence and limits of cosmopolitanism with the following thought experiment. Suppose you are a good swimmer reading at the beach and you notice a child drowning in the surf. Would you put down your book and rescue her? Most would say yes. Would it matter whether she called, “Help!” or cried out in a foreign language? Most would say the foreign language would make no difference. If she were somewhat further out and you were not a strong swimmer, how much risk would you take? Answers would range from the prudent to the heroic. If there were two children, one of which was yours, and you could rescue only one, would it matter whether it was yours? Most would say yes.

In other words, one's role as parent adds moral rights and duties beyond the common humanitarian duty that would prompt one to rescue an anonymous drowning child. Borders are arbitrary and sometimes unjust, but nations are communities that similarly engender additional roles, rights, and responsibilities. As Stanley Hoffmann pointed out, "States may be no more than a collection of individuals and borders may be mere facts, but a moral significance is attached to them."¹⁶ A cosmopolitan who ignores the moral, legal, and institutional significance of borders fails to do justice to the difficult job of balancing rights in the international realm as much as the blinkered realist who sees everything as a matter of national survival. A humanitarian duty to rescue can coexist with a preference for prioritizing the protection of one's fellow citizens.¹⁷ The devil is in the details of how far and how much.



Liberalism

There are various strands of liberalism including economic liberalism, which stresses the pacific benefits of trade; social liberalism, which emphasizes contacts among people; and institutional liberalism, which argues that institutions can create a society of states that mitigates the negative effects of anarchy. International politics is often called anarchic, but anarchy simply means "without government," and does not necessarily mean chaos. Liberals argue that rudimentary practices and institutions such as the balance of power, international law, norms, and international organizations can create enough order to establish a framework for making

meaningful moral choices in most cases. Institutions shape expectations of future behavior, which allows leaders to go beyond simple transactionalism.



Institutions of international law and morality play a role even in war. The just war doctrine originated in the early Christian church as Saint Augustine and others wrestled with the paradox that if the good did not fight back, they would perish and the evil would inherit the earth. That doctrine of just self-defense became secularized after the 17th century and today it provides a broad normative structure that encompasses all three moral dimensions discussed above: good intentions represented by a just cause; forceful means that are proportional to the situation and which discriminate between military and civilian targets; and good consequences that emerge from a prudent regard for the probability of success. Just war doctrine is more than theoretical. It is enshrined both in international humanitarian law (e.g., the Geneva Conventions) and the American military's Uniform Code of Military Justice. Soldiers who violated the moral principles that are enshrined in the law of armed conflict have been jailed in many countries including the United States.

Different mental maps of the world portray anarchy differently, and that affects the way leaders frame their moral choices. Writing in 1651 after the bloody English civil war in which the king was decapitated, the realist Thomas Hobbes thought of anarchy as chaotic and imagined a state of nature without government as a war of all against all where life was “nasty, brutish, and short.” In contrast, writing in a somewhat more

peaceful period a few decades later, the liberal John Locke thought of anarchy as the absence of government, but imagining that such a state of nature would involve social contracts that permitted the successful pursuit of life, liberty, and property. Modern liberals follow the Lockean approach to international anarchy and believe that institutions stabilize expectations in ways that permit reciprocity and morality to enter into policy decisions. They help create a “long shadow of the future,” that is a means to escape zero-sum calculations.¹⁸

Liberals argue that while there is no world government, there is a degree of world *governance*. They argue that anarchy therefore has limits. At the same time, they recognize that the state is a key institution of world politics both as a reality and as a moral community. Even a renowned liberal philosopher like John Rawls believed that the conditions for his theory of justice applied only to domestic society.¹⁹ At the same time, Rawls argued that a liberal society’s duties went beyond its borders: These should include mutual aid in dire circumstances and respect for laws and institutions that ensure basic human rights while allowing people in a diverse world to determine their own affairs as much as possible.²⁰

The rise of human rights law after World War II, particularly in reaction to the horror of genocide, has complicated presidential choices. The American public wants some response to genocide, but it is divided over how much. For example, in retrospect, Bill Clinton criticized his own failure to respond to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.²¹ Yet, after the death of American soldiers in

earlier humanitarian intervention in Somalia in 1993, had Clinton tried to send American troops to Rwanda he would have encountered stiff resistance in parts of his administration, the Congress, and the public. Clinton has acknowledged that he could have done more to help the United Nations and other countries to save some of the lives that were lost in Rwanda, but this example is a reminder that good leaders today are often caught between their cosmopolitan inclinations and their more traditional democratic obligations to the people who elected them.

Mixing Mental Maps

These three mental maps of world politics are not mutually exclusive — in practice, leaders mix them in inconsistent ways in different contexts to shape the stated intent, means, and consequences of their foreign policies. In a detailed comparison of the 14 American presidents since 1945, I found that most have turned out to be “liberal realists with a touch of cosmopolitanism.”²² Realism is the default position that most presidents use to chart their course in foreign policy. Given a world of sovereign states, in my personal policy experience, realism is the best map to start with. For example, at the end of the Cold War when I participated in formulating an East Asia policy in the Clinton administration, we wanted to integrate a rising China into liberal international institutions, but we started with a realist policy of reaffirming the U.S.-Japan security relationship, which was, at that point, in disarray. By reaffirming America’s position in the regional balance of power

we were taking out a realist insurance policy in case our policy of liberal integration failed. The two approaches were complementary to one another.



Realism is the right place to start, but too many realists stop where they start without realizing that realism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for crafting good policy. They fail to recognize that cosmopolitanism and liberalism often have something important to contribute to forming an accurate moral map. When survival is in jeopardy, realism is a necessary basis for a moral foreign policy, but it is not sufficient for all foreign policy scenarios. The question again is one of degree. Since no state can attain perfect security, the moral issue is what degree of security must be assured before other values such as welfare, identity, or rights become part of a president's foreign policy? Most foreign policy choices involve questions about authorizing arms sales to authoritarian allies or criticizing the human rights behavior of another country. When some realists treat such issues as similar to Churchill's decision to attack the French fleet, they are simply ducking hard moral issues. It is not enough to say that security comes first or that justice presupposes some degree of order. Presidents have to assess how closely a situation fits a Hobbesian or Lockean mental map, or where an action lies on a continuum between ensuring security and pursuing other important values.



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Public opinion also shows a similar pattern of mixing mental maps. Because the American people are usually more concerned with domestic issues than foreign policy, they tend toward a basic form of realism. Security from attack and economic security generally rank highest in opinion polls. Because elite opinion is often more interventionist than the public, some critics argue that the elite is more liberal than the public.²³ However, patterns of “strong, widespread public support for

international organizations, multilateral agreements and actions, and collective international decision making suggest that most Americans are...‘neo liberals,’” while support for humanitarian assistance shows strands of cosmopolitanism.²⁴



The Example of Intervention

Intervention has been a fraught issue in recent foreign policy debates, prompting questions about when the United States should take actions that involve extending its reach beyond its own borders. Since 1945, the liberal Charter of the United Nations has limited the use of force to self-defense or actions authorized by the Security Council (where the United States and four other countries have veto power). Realists argue that intervention can be justified if it prevents disruption of the balance of power upon which order depends. Cosmopolitans prioritize justice and individual human rights to justify humanitarian intervention. Liberals argue that nations are groups of people with a sovereign right — enshrined in the U.N. Charter — to determine their own fate. Intervention can only be justified to counter a prior intervention or to prevent a massacre that would make a mockery of self-determination.²⁵

In practice, these principles often get combined in odd ways. In Vietnam, Kennedy and Johnson argued that America was countering a North Vietnamese intervention in the South, but the Vietnamese saw themselves as one nation that had been artificially divided for realist, Cold War balance-of-power purposes. In the first Gulf War, George H.W. Bush used force

expel Iraq's forces from Kuwait in order to preserve the regional balance of power, but he did so using the liberal mechanism of a U.N. collective security resolution and a broad coalition to enhance American legitimacy and soft power. Bush considered himself a realist and refused to intervene to stop the shelling of civilians in Sarajevo, but after devastating pictures of starving Somalis were shown on American television in December 1992, he sent American troops on a cosmopolitan humanitarian intervention in Mogadishu, which subsequently became a problem for his successor.²⁶

In the second Gulf War, American motives for intervention were mixed. Theorists have sparred over whether the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a realist or a liberal intervention.²⁷ Some key figures in the George W. Bush administration, such as Richard Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, were realists concerned about Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction and the local balance of power. The "neo-conservatives" in the administration (many of whom were former liberals) stressed promoting democracy as well as maintaining American hegemony. Outside the administration, some liberals supported the war because of Hussein's abominable human rights record, while others opposed Bush for failing to obtain the institutional support of the U.N. Security Council as his father had in the first Gulf War. Stephen Walt, a realist skeptic about intervention, argues that "had realists been at the helm of US foreign policy over the past 20 years, it is likely that a number of costly debacles would have been avoided."²⁸ Perhaps he is right, but his case is far from clear, for there are many varian

of realism as well as of liberalism. Realism is a broad tendency, not a precise category with clear implications for policy.  Certainly Cheney and Rumsfeld considered themselves realists. In the 2016 presidential debate, both Trump and Hillary Clinton said the United States had a responsibility to prevent mass casualties in Syria, but neither advocated major military intervention. While some commentators argue that liberal interventionism to promote democracy has “grown into ‘America’s self-designation as a special nation,’” there is an enormous difference between democracy promotion by coercive and non-coercive means.²⁹ Voice of America broadcasts and the National Endowment for Democracy cross international borders in a very different manner than does the 82nd Airborne Division. In terms of consequences, the means are as important as the ends. No one of the mental maps of the world provides presidents with an easy answer or substitutes for their good judgment and contextual intelligence when deciding whether to intervene or not.

In its broadest definition, intervention refers to external actions that influence the domestic affairs of another sovereign state, and they can range from broadcasts, economic aid, and support for opposition parties at the low-coercion end of the spectrum, to blockades, cyber attacks, drone strikes, and military invasion at the high-coercive end. From a moral point of view, the degree of coercion involved is very important in terms of restricting local choice and rights. Moreover, military intervention is a dangerous instrument to use. It looks deceptively simple, but rarely is. Prudence warns against unintended consequences.

“The Best Moral Choice in the Context”: A Presidential Scorecard



How then should we judge the morality of a foreign policy? Presidents have their own values and convictions but they are also leaders living in what Max Weber described as a political world of non-perfectionist ethics.³⁰ Arnold Wolfers, a sophisticated and subtle Swiss-American realist, argued after World War II that “the interpretation of what constitutes a vital national interest and how much value should be attached to it is a moral question. It cannot be answered by reference to alleged amoral necessities inherent in international politics.” At the same time, leaders cannot always follow a simple formula. The best one can hope for in judging the ethics of foreign policy leaders, Wolfers concluded, is determining whether they made “the best moral choices that circumstances permit.”³¹ While this is true, it is not completely helpful. It is a necessary but certainly not a sufficient standard. As mentioned above, prudence is a virtue in an anarchic world, but such a broad rule of prudence can easily be abused.

How, then, can Americans decide whether their presidents did indeed make “the best moral choices” under the circumstances? They can start by making sure to judge them in terms of three-dimensional ethics, deriving criteria for each dimension from the wisdom of all three mental maps of realism, liberalism, and cosmopolitanism (in that order). When looking at the foreign

policy goals that presidents have sought, one should not expect them to have pursued justice at the international level similar to what they aspired to in their domestic policies. In the August 1941 Atlantic Charter, one of the founding documents of the liberal international order, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Churchill declared their devotion to ensuring freedom from want and from fear (though they disagreed about the British empire),³² but Roosevelt did not try to transfer his domestic New Deal to the international stage.

No one of the mental maps of the world provides presidents with an easy answer or substitutes for their good judgment and contextual intelligence when deciding whether to intervene or not.

As mentioned earlier, survival comes first, but liberals and cosmopolitans argue that America has duties abroad that include humanitarian assistance and respect for basic human rights. Beyond that, Rawlsian liberals want to allow peoples in a diverse world to determine their own affairs as much as

possible.³³ Thus, Americans should ask whether a president's goals include a vision that expresses widely attractive values both at home and abroad, but also prudently balances those values and assesses risks so that there is a reasonable prospect of success. It is not enough to articulate noble goals — feasibility also matters. This means a president should be judged not only on his or her character and intentions, but also on contextual intelligence when it comes to promoting values.

Regarding ethical means, presidents can be judged by the well-established just war criteria of proportional and discriminate use of force that are the law of the land in the United States. They can also be judged by Rawls' liberal concern for minimal degrees of intervention in order to respect the rights and institutions of other peoples.

As for ethical consequences, Americans can ask whether a president succeeded in promoting the country's long-term national interests, but also whether he respected cosmopolitan values regarding human life by avoiding extreme insularity totally discounts harm to foreigners. The example that leaders set also has important moral consequences, as does whether they are promoting truth and trust that broadens moral discourse at home and abroad.

These criteria are modest and derived from insights from realism, liberalism, and cosmopolitanism. The resulting "scorecard" below is by no means complete. Others might select other criteria from the different mental maps and weight the

differently. Nevertheless, this scorecard provides some basic guidance to determine what constitutes a moral foreign policy that goes beyond Wolfers' simple generality about prudence:

Intentions: Goals and Motives

1. Moral vision: Did the president express attractive values, and did those values determine his motives? Did he have the “emotional IQ” to avoid contradicting those values because of his personal needs?³⁴
2. Prudence: Did he have the contextual intelligence to wisely balance the values he pursued and the risks he imposed on others?

Means

3. Use of force: Did he use force while paying attention to necessity, discrimination in the treatment of civilians, and the proportionality of benefits and harm?
4. Liberal concerns: Did he try to respect and use institutions at home and abroad? To what extent did he consider the rights of other peoples?

Consequences

5. Fiduciary: Was he a good trustee of America's long-term interests?
6. Cosmopolitan: Did he consider the interests of other peoples and minimize causing them unnecessary harm?

7. Educational: Did he respect the truth and build credibility? Did he respect facts? Did he try to create and broaden moral discourse at home and abroad?

Three Illustrations

This three-dimensional scorecard hardly solves all problems of judgment, but it encourages looking at all dimensions of a president's actions when comparing the morality of different foreign policy leadership. Consider the example of Reagan and the two Bushes. When people sometimes call for a "Reaganite foreign policy," they tend to mean the moral clarity that went with Reagan's simplification of complex issues and his effective rhetoric in the presentation of his values. Not only is this type of morality inadequate and one-dimensional for reasons explained above, but it also mistakes the success of Reagan's moral leadership, which included the ability to bargain and compromise as he pursued his policies. Nonetheless, clear and clearly stated objectives can educate and motivate the public. The key question is whether Reagan was prudent in balancing his aspirations and the risks of trying to achieve his objectives. Reagan's initial rhetoric in his first term created a dangerous degree of tension and distrust in U.S.–Soviet relations that increased the prospect of a miscalculation or accident leading to war, but it also created incentives to bargain which Reagan later put to good advantage when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in Reagan's second term. In terms of consequences, Reagan undoubtedly advanced the national interests of the United States, though most of the credit for ending the Cold War an.

the Soviet Union belongs to Gorbachev. In any event, Reagan took good advantage of the opportunity in a manner that did not exclusively benefit insular American interests. He ranks near the top of the second quartile.

By his own account, George H. W. Bush did not have a transformational vision for the world, but was interested in avoiding disaster in a world that was changing dramatically at the end of the Cold War. While he referred to a “new world order” he never spelled out what this would look like. As Bush and his team responded to the forces that were largely outside of his control, he set goals that balanced opportunities and prudence. In each instance, Bush limited his short-term aims in order to pursue long-term stability, prompting some critics to complain that Bush did not set more transformational objectives.³⁵ In ethical terms, although Bush did not express a strong moral vision, it is difficult to make the case that he should have been less prudent and taken more risks. In terms of consequences, Bush was a worthy fiduciary in accomplishing national goals and managed to do so in a manner that was not unduly insular and did minimal damage to the interests of foreigners. He was careful not to humiliate Gorbachev and to manage Boris Yeltsin’s transition to power in Russia. At the same time, not all foreigners were adequately protected; for example, Bush assigned a lower priority to Kurds in northern Iraq, to dissidents in China, or to Bosnians who were embroiled in a civil war in the former Yugoslavia. In that sense, Bush’s realist approach limited his cosmopolitan impulses. With better communication skills, Bush might also have been able to do

more to educate the American public about the changing nature of the world they faced after the Cold War. But given the uncertainties of history, and the potential for disaster as the Cold War era came to a close, Bush had one of the best foreign policies of the period after 1945. He allowed America to benefit from a rising tide and his skills avoided shipwreck during tempest. He ranks in the top quartile (along with Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower.)³⁶

In contrast, George W. Bush started his first term in office as a limited realist with little interest in foreign policy, but his objectives became transformational after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Like Wilson, Roosevelt, and Truman, Bush became concerned about security but turned to the rhetoric of democracy to rally his followers in a time of crisis. His 2002 national security strategy, which came to be called the Bush Doctrine, proclaimed that the United States would “identify and eliminate terrorists wherever they are, together with the regimes that sustain them.”³⁷ In this new game, there were no rules. The solution to the terrorist problem was to spread democracy everywhere, and a freedom agenda thus became the basis of his 2006 national security strategy.³⁸ But the removal of Hussein did not accomplish the mission, and inadequate understanding of the context plus poor planning and management undercut Bush’s grand objectives. As a result, I rank him in the bottom quartile of presidents since World War II.

Conclusion

A perpetual problem in American foreign policy is the complexity of the context, and that is why contextual intelligence is such an important skill for presidents to have in framing an ethical foreign policy. Contextual intelligence is the ability to understand an evolving environment and capitalize on trends.³⁹ Sometimes prudence is dismissed as mere strategic self-interest and contrasted with moral conviction. But in three-dimensional ethics, both are essential. As Max Weber famously pointed out, conviction is important but in a complex political environment like foreign policy, the president is a trustee who must follow an ethic of responsibility.⁴⁰ In that context, weak contextual intelligence that produces negligent assessment and reckless risk-taking leads to immoral consequences. In legal terms, irresponsible assessment is termed “culpable negligence.” In assessing foreign policy, Trump’s rejection of intelligence and reliance on television sources raises serious moral as well as practical questions.



We live in a world of diverse cultures and still know very little about social engineering and how to “build nations.” When one cannot be sure how to improve the world, prudence becomes an important virtue in an ethic of responsibility, while hubristic visions can do serious damage. Prudence usually requires emotional intelligence and the ability to manage one’s emotions and turn them to constructive purposes rather than to be dominated by them.



We cannot responsibly banish moral discourse from foreign policy, but we can try to be more disciplined in how we structure our moral reasoning about it.

That returns us to the role of institutions, public goods, and how broadly a president defines America's national interest. The overall assessment of a president's foreign policy depends not just on specific actions but also on how a pattern of actions shapes the environment of world politics. A president may have a broad and long-term vision but be unable to convince the public — witness Wilson in 1919. The disastrous 1930s were caused when the United States replaced Britain as the largest global power but failed to take on Britain's role in providing global public goods. The result was the collapse of the global system into depression, genocide, and world war. In the domestic realm, governments produce public goods such as policing or clean water from which all citizens can benefit and none are excluded. At the anarchic global level, where there is no government, public goods — such as managing climate

change, ensuring financial stability, or guaranteeing freedom of the seas — are provided by coalitions led by the largest powers. Small countries have little incentive to pay for such global public goods: Because their small contributions make little difference to whether they benefit or not from these goods, it is rational for them to ride for free. But the largest powers can see the effect and feel the benefit of their own contributions. Thus, it is rational and in the long-term national interest of the largest countries to lead. Part of American exceptionalism is America's disproportionate size. Leadership by the largest country in the production of global public goods is consistent with "America First" but it rests on a broader historical and institutional understanding of the current context than Trump has shown when he uses that term.

As Henry Kissinger has argued,

to strike a balance between the two aspects of world order — power and legitimacy — is the essence of statesmanship. Calculations of power without a moral dimension will turn every disagreement into a test of strength. ... Moral prescriptions without concern for equilibrium, on the other hand, tend toward either crusades or an impotent policy tempting challenges; either extreme risks endangering the coherence of the international order itself.⁴¹

Well-meaning interventions that are not based on good contextual intelligence can alter millions of lives for the worse.

For presidents, prudence is a necessary virtue for a good foreign policy, but it is not sufficient. American presidents in the interwar period were prudent when they instead needed to embrace a broader institutional vision. Wilson had such a vision, but without adequate contextual intelligence. Roosevelt began his presidency without a foreign policy vision but developed one on the job. In the future, a sense of vision and strategy that correctly understands and responds to new technological and environmental changes, such as cyber threats and climate change, will be crucial. In judging a president's record of pursuing a moral foreign policy that makes Americans safer but also makes the world a better place, it is important to look at the full range of his or her leadership skills, to look at both actions and institutions, commissions and omissions, and to make three-dimensional moral judgments. Even then, we will often wind up with mixed verdicts — but that is the nature of foreign policy. We cannot responsibly banish moral discourse from foreign policy, but we can try to be more disciplined in how we structure our moral reasoning about it.

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Image: Sgt. Bryan Lewis

Endnotes

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