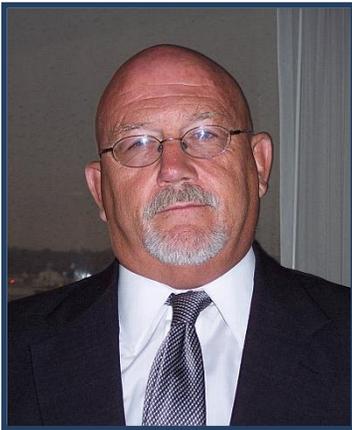


PRINCIPLE AND PRUDENCE IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

By Mackubin T. Owens



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U.S. foreign policy is in shambles, characterized by drift and incoherence. It is at best *a-strategic* at worst *anti-strategic*, lacking any concept of how to apply limited resources to obtain our foreign policy goals because this administration has articulated no clear goals or objectives to be achieved. The foreign policy failures of the Obama Administration are legion: the Russian "reset" that has enabled Vladimir Putin to strut about as a latter-day czar; the betrayal of allies, especially in Central Europe, not to mention Israel; snatching defeat from the jaws of victory in Iraq by failing to achieve a status of forces agreement (SOFA) that would help to keep Iraq out of the Iranian orbit; the muddled approach to Afghanistan; our feckless policy—or lack of policy—regarding Iranian nuclear weapons, not to mention Libya and Benghazi, as well as Syria. President Obama has said that he was elected to end wars, not to start them, as if wars are fought for their own purpose. Ending wars is no virtue if the chance for success has been thrown away, as it was in Iraq.

Observers disagree about the causes of the Obama failures in foreign policy. Some attribute them to indifference, others to incompetence—although the two are not unrelated. Still others contend that the results we are seeing represent the desired outcomes of more insidious motivations. But no matter the cause of Obama's dysfunctional foreign policy, the result is the same: weakness that opens the way for those who wish America ill. Winston Churchill's 1936 characterization of the Stanley Baldwin government as Hitler gained strength on the Continent echoes ominously today: it was, said Churchill, "decided only to be undecided, resolved to irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent."

To the extent that it has any intellectual foundation, the Obama foreign policy represents a species of "liberal internationalism," which holds that the actors in the international political system (IPS) tend towards cooperation rather than competition. Liberal internationalists contend that the goals of actors within the IPS transcend power and security; they also see an important role for actors in the IPS other than states, including international institutions such as the United Nations.

It is easy to criticize the foreign policy of the Obama Administration, but what are the alternatives? Some, citing war weariness, have succumbed to the siren call of strategic disengagement offered most consistently by Senator Rand Paul. Others call for a return to traditional realism in foreign policy which emphasizes the international balance of power, the careful coordination of diplomacy and force, and the international (rather than domestic) behavior of other states. Still others, for instance Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, reject what they see as the utopianism of liberal internationalism but nonetheless have supported U.S. intervention in Libya and Syria.

The United States has been most successful when it has followed a foreign policy of what might be called “prudent American realism,” which links American *principles* with Aristotelian *prudence*. On the one hand, this approach is based on the recognition that American realism differs from the realism taught as part of academic international relations courses: American realism has always fused the features of traditional realism—power and security—with prosperity and the preservation of American principles. George Washington articulated this unique American realism in his Farewell Address:

If we remain one People, under an efficient government, the period is not far off, when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest guided by justice shall Counsel.

On the other hand, Aristotle called prudence the virtue most characteristic of the statesman. Prudence requires the statesman to always maintain a clear vision of what needs to be achieved—the *ends* of policy—while maintaining flexibility regarding the *means*. Successful American foreign policy, for example that pursued by Ronald Reagan, fused American power and American principles in order to ensure the survival of those principles.

Prudent American realism, as opposed to a more traditional realism, recognizes that the internal character of regimes matters and that foreign policy must reflect the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. And unlike liberal internationalism, which holds that international law and institutions alone are sufficient to achieve peace, prudent American realism understands that there are certain problems that can be addressed only through the prudent exercise of power. Thus, the strategic objective of prudent American realism is to maintain a liberal world order characterized by freedom and prosperity.

Prudent American realism represents a species of primacy. Primacy is based on hegemonic stability theory, which holds that a “liberal world order” does not arise spontaneously as the result of some global “invisible hand.” Instead, such a system requires a “hegemonic power, a state willing and able to provide the world with the collective goods of economic stability and international security.” The United States, as Great Britain before it, took up the role of hegemon not out of altruism but because it is in its national interest to do so.

Primacy can be caricatured as a “go-it-alone” approach in which the United States intimidates both friends and allies, wields power unilaterally, and ignores international institutions. But prudent American realism is a “benevolent” primacy, an approach in keeping with the liberal political tradition of the United States but which recognizes the world as a dangerous place in which a just peace is maintained only by the strong. The form of primacy embodied in prudent American realism is based on the idea that U.S. power is good not only for the United States itself but also for the rest of the world. Yet, the desired outcome is not motivated by altruism but by the recognition that the United States can be fully secure, free, and prosperous only in a world where everyone else is also secure, free and prosperous. The mere existence of liberal institutions is not sufficient. A liberal world order is possible only if the United States is willing and able to maintain it. In the words of the late Sam Huntington,

the maintenance of U.S. primacy matters for the world as well as for the United States....

A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country in shaping global affairs. The sustained international primacy of the United States is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world.

According to the theory of hegemonic stability, the alternative to U.S. power is a more disorderly, less peaceful world. The precedent for the United States is the decay of *Pax Britannica*, which, many believe, created the necessary, if not sufficient conditions for the two world wars of the twentieth century. As British hegemony declined, smaller states that previously had incentives to cooperate with Britain “defected” to other powers, causing the international system to fragment. The outcome was depression and war. The decline of American power could lead to a similar outcome.

In addition to fusing principle and power, a foreign policy of prudent American realism must recognize certain operational principles. First, it needs to distinguish between friends and allies, on the one hand, and enemies and adversaries, on the other. For the last six years, the Obama Administration has failed to make this distinction, causing our allies to lose faith in the United States, while emboldening our enemies. Second, any attempt to spread democracy abroad must be limited by considerations of prudence. For one thing, “democracy” is not always *liberal* democracy. For another, U.S. resources are finite, and good strategy requires the United States to prioritize among the goals it wishes to accomplish.

Third, the United States must return to the more classical connection between force and diplomacy. For too long, American policy makers, motivated by the assumptions of liberal internationalism, have acted as if diplomacy alone is sufficient to achieve our foreign policy goals. But as Frederick the Great once observed, “Diplomacy without force is like music without instruments.” Prudent American realism recognizes that diplomacy and force are two sides of the same coin. Finally, the United States should not hesitate to use its economic power as an instrument of foreign policy. The changing geopolitics of energy provides an opportunity for the United States to counter the likes of Putin, and others in the world who have wielded the energy weapon against America in the past.

President Obama’s foreign policy has been a disaster, not only for the United States but also for the hopes of those who desire a more free and prosperous world. Only an approach such as prudent American realism can stanch the loss of American power, influence, and credibility. As the passage from Huntington makes clear, it matters who the hegemonic power is. For those who desire freedom and prosperity, there is no alternative to the United States.

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