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Author(s): Stephen M. Walt

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Taming American Power

Stephen M. Walt

THE GREAT DEBATE

U.S. POLICYMAKERS have spent the past decade debating how best to wield American power. For the rest of the world, the debate is over how best to deal with it. With so much power in the hands of one country—a country that considers itself destined to lead the world—how should other nations respond?

Imagine, for a moment, that you are the president of France. You regard U.S. foreign policy as often naive and overweening, and your ideal world order is one in which no single state is dominant. So what do you do about the United States? Now picture yourself as the president of Russia. The only remnants of your country's former superpower status are an aging nuclear arsenal and membership in the UN Security Council. How do you improve Russia's situation in a world dominated by U.S. power? Or perhaps you are the prime minister of India. You face serious regional challenges—including the rising power of China—but relations with Washington are sometimes prickly, and the United States' global dominance is disquieting. Can you take advantage of parallel U.S. interests to advance those of India?

Leaders throughout the world face similar issues, some more daunting than others. Consider Kim Jong Il. He rules a country that George W. Bush has called part of an "axis of evil," and North Korea's entire GDP is only one-twentieth the size of the U.S. defense budget. So how can Kim stay in power, much less improve his position, given

STEPHEN M. WALT is Academic Dean and Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. This article is adapted from his new book, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*.

U.S. opposition and North Korea's Lilliputian status? On the other end of the spectrum, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and British Prime Minister Tony Blair have worked hard to establish personal connections with U.S. presidents. Israel and the United Kingdom have long relied on their special relationships with the United States, and the political fortunes of Sharon and Blair depend on keeping these relationships strong.

How do you deal with American power? This question is one for which every world leader must have an answer. And the response of other states to U.S. power is something Americans must care about as well. Basic security is at issue, as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks demonstrated. So is the health of the U.S. economy, with the market share of U.S. firms declining in key overseas markets due to anti-American sentiment. The time to worry is now.

To be sure, many governments still value U.S. power and seek to use it to advance their own interests. Yet even Washington's close allies are now looking for ways to tame the United States' might. Many countries fear U.S. influence, and they have devised numerous strategies to manage and limit it. The United States will not and should not exit the world stage anytime soon. But it must make its dominant position acceptable to others—by using military force sparingly, by fostering greater cooperation with key allies, and, most important of all, by rebuilding its crumbling international image.

OF POWER AND POLICY

AMERICANS TEND to see U.S. primacy as beneficial to both their country and the rest of the world. In 2002, the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that 79 percent of U.S. citizens believe it is good that "American ideas and customs are spreading around the world," and more than 70 percent think that U.S. foreign policy takes the interests of other states into account either "a great deal" or "a fair amount." Bill Clinton has described the United States as "a beacon of hope to peoples around the world," and Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington has declared U.S. predominance to be "central to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order." In other words, without a benign hegemon maintaining a peaceful global order, many

countries would not be able to enjoy the prosperity and security they have come to take for granted.

Unfortunately, this rosy view of U.S. power is not shared overseas, where, according to the 2002 Pew survey, overwhelming majorities say that the United States considers the interests of others “not much” or “not at all.” Between 40 percent and 60 percent of foreigners polled think the United States is waging its war on terrorism not solely out of security concerns, but also to “control Mideast oil,” “protect Israel,” “target Muslim governments,” or “dominate the world.” A January 2005 BBC survey of 21 countries found only five—India, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, and South Korea—where a majority of people had “positive” attitudes toward the United States. Although the United States’ global standing has rebounded slightly since the invasion of Iraq two years ago, Pew reported in June 2005 that majorities in all 15 countries it surveyed “favor another country challenging America’s global military supremacy,” and that support for the U.S.-led “war on terror” is declining on every continent. Indeed, citizens in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and the United Kingdom now hold more favorable views of China than of the United States.

The United States’ image is especially bleak in the Arab world. Although Arab populations view U.S. popular culture, U.S. science and technology, and the American people somewhat favorably, a 2004 Zogby International poll found that fewer than 10 percent of those surveyed in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates approved of U.S. policy on Arabs, Iraq, or the Palestinians. Indeed, when asked to indicate their “first thought” about the United States, the most common response was “unfair foreign policy.” The same year, a Pew survey revealed that Osama bin Laden’s popularity rating was more than 40 points higher than President Bush’s in Jordan, Morocco, and Pakistan. In 2005, Pew reported that majorities in predominantly Muslim countries “express concern that U.S. military power may ultimately be turned against them.”

If the United States’ primacy is a force for good—as the country’s leaders proclaim and its citizens overwhelmingly believe—why do even its allies have concerns about its influence? They have misgivings because they recognize that Washington’s power could threaten their own interests. Even those countries that do not fear a U.S. attack are

still aware that the United States' position as the world's lone super-power makes it easier for Washington to get its way. And of course, U.S. leaders have sought primacy precisely because they understand that weaker nations have less clout. It should come as no surprise, then, that other states remain wary despite assurances from Washington that U.S. power benefits the entire world. As a Chinese official remarked

Those who think that firm resolve is enough for the United States to overcome any global resistance to its policies are sadly mistaken.

a few years ago, "How can we base our own national security on your assurances of goodwill?" Moreover, even well-intentioned U.S. policies can inadvertently harm other nations, giving them more reason for concern about the long reach of U.S. power. When it supported the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s, the United States was not trying to create a global terrorist organization. And the United States was not trying to get al Qaeda to bomb the Madrid subway when it courted Spanish support for the war in Iraq. Yet both unfortunate developments were, in part, the unintended consequences of U.S. policy, illustrating why all states must be somewhat concerned about the ways the United States chooses to use its power.

Proponents of a muscular U.S. foreign policy tend to portray anti-Americanism as hostility toward American values or simple resentment of U.S. dominance. President Bush has said that "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon of freedom ... in the world." He later explained, "The terrorists who attacked our country on September 11, 2001, were not protesting our policies. They were protesting our existence." And the Pentagon's new National Defense Strategy, issued in March, stated, "Our leading position in the world will continue to breed unease, a degree of resentment, and resistance."

There is a grain of truth in this argument, but foreign opposition to the United States is mostly a reaction to specific U.S. policies. The United States has been the sole great power for nearly 15 years, but its international standing remained fairly high through the late 1990s. Although some foreign leaders expressed concerns about the power imbalance, most nations—their people and their governments—looked favorably on the United States and welcomed Washington's global

leadership. Attributing the current unpopularity of the United States solely to its power or values cannot explain the sharp decline in its image that has occurred since 2000, or especially the intense antipathy toward President Bush himself.

Moreover, the United States' main opponents have themselves repeatedly indicated that problematic U.S. policies are their primary concern. For example, bin Laden has made it clear that his hatred is fueled by opposition to what he regards as unjust U.S. actions in the Middle East, not to American values per se. According to the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes survey, "Antipathy toward the United States is shaped more by what it *does* in the international arena than by what it *stands* for politically and economically" (*italics in the original*). Similarly, a 2004 study by the Pentagon's Defense Science Board concluded that "Muslims do not 'hate our freedom,' but rather they hate our policies." And the State Department's Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy concluded in 2003 that "Arabs and Muslims ... support our values but believe that our policies do not live up to them."

Disagreement with U.S. foreign policy does not mean the policy is wrong, but it does mean U.S. actions come with a price. When foreign populations disapprove of U.S. policy and are fearful of U.S. dominance, their governments are less likely to endorse Washington's initiatives and more likely to look for ways to hinder them. Rising anti-Americanism also increases the number of extremists who can be recruited into violent movements such as al Qaeda. The United States may still be able to gain others' compliance and overcome overt resistance, but achieving success will be more difficult and more expensive.

Regardless of whether they disagree with U.S. policy or with the simple fact of U.S. power, can other states do anything to tame the American colossus? Historian Niall Ferguson has argued that the central issue is whether Americans have a "will to power" equal to their global responsibilities. President Bush, for his part, has downplayed the risk of going it alone: "At some point we may be the only ones left. ... That's okay with me. We are America." Such statements imply that the United States can overcome any international resistance to its agenda so long as its resolve is firm.

But this confidence is unwarranted. Although other states cannot diminish U.S. primacy in the near term, there are still many ways they

Stephen M. Walt

can rein in U.S. power. Some countries seek to manipulate the United States for their own purposes, using accommodation to gain Washington's trust, support, and protection. Others are more confrontational, attempting to oppose and undercut U.S. interests. In either case, the United States' ability to defend or advance its own foreign policy agenda is impaired.

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT 'EM

GIVEN THE REALITY of U.S. power, some states choose to accommodate it—and in doing so, attempt to ensure that it is used to their benefit. A few countries, wary of coercive measures or even possible military intervention by the United States, may choose to realign their policies to accord with U.S. interests in order to deflect U.S. pressure. More frequently, countries ally themselves with Washington to counter threats posed by their regional adversaries. By developing a close relationship with the United States, as well as with key American constituencies, foreign powers can manipulate U.S. primacy to their own advantage.

Instead of resisting U.S. power, a few states—Libya is the most recent example—“bandwagon” with the United States. To appease Washington, bandwagoners realign their foreign policies according to Washington's dictates. Although the United States has often tried to compel such realignments by pressuring weak and isolated opponents—including Iraq, North Korea, Serbia, and Syria—this strategy rarely works. Even Libya's acquiescence was due as much to prolonged sanctions as to any implied military threat.

More commonly, states choose to ally themselves with the United States out of a desire for U.S. protection from a regional threat. The United States has long been an attractive ally against intimidating neighbors: it is strong enough to shift a regional balance of power, and it generally does so without conquering its allies in the process. Poland, for example, seeks stronger ties with the United States because, as one Polish official explained, Poland “is a country that thinks seriously about security ... [and] for such a country, it's good to be a close ally of the United States.” The specter of China's rising power has created a host of diplomatic opportunities for Washington in Asia: India wants

to develop a strategic partnership with the United States, and Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore want U.S. forces to remain in the region. Similarly, several smaller Persian Gulf states see the United States as a valuable counterweight to their larger neighbors.

States that do ally themselves with the United States do not do so passively. Indeed, they often go to considerable lengths to ensure that, in return, U.S. power is used in ways that further their own interests. By cultivating personal ties with U.S. officials, especially the president, foreign leaders such as Tony Blair seek to reinforce the United States' commitment to them and to affect how Washington wields its power. Blair's stated goal is to "remain the closest ally of the U.S., and as allies influence [the Americans] to continue broadening their agenda." Not every state can have a special relationship with Washington, of course, and leaders who embrace unpopular U.S. policies sometimes pay a large political price back home. Former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar's party fell from power in 2004 in part because he had supported the Iraq war. And Blair's own domestic popularity has suffered due to his close relationship with President Bush and his unswerving support for key U.S. policies.

Foreign powers also attempt to take advantage of the unusual openness of the U.S. political system. After the September 11, 2001, attacks, Saudi Arabia launched a multimillion-dollar public relations campaign to counter the perception that the royal family was supporting terrorism. More commonly, foreign governments collaborate with domestic special-interest groups to encourage the U.S. government to support them. The open, decentralized, and divided U.S. political system is extremely vulnerable to this sort of manipulation. And the tradition of free speech and the multitude of media outlets also give organized interest groups considerable latitude. To influence U.S. foreign policy, foreign governments can court American journalists, hire paid lobbyists, cultivate key U.S. legislators and congressional aides, try to co-opt influential members of the executive branch, and mobilize sympathetic Americans to put pressure on their elected officials.

The most significant cases of foreign penetration occur when U.S. ethnic groups lobby on behalf of their traditional homelands. Such lobbying has promoted the causes of Armenia, Greece, Ireland, Israel,

Stephen M. Walt

and Taiwan, for example. The efforts of these ethnic lobbies rely on familiar tools of political pressure, including campaign contributions, direct congressional lobbying, and extensive letter-writing or media campaigns. Several other ethnic groups are trying to imitate the well-documented success of organizations such as the Armenian Assembly of America, the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Indian Americans, for example, have formed several political lobbying organizations in recent years. The groups' potential impact has not been lost on the Indian government: in 2004, an official Indian government commission concluded that "the Indian community in the United States constitutes an invaluable asset in strengthening India's relationship with the world's only superpower."

Apart from occasional attempts by some ethnic lobbies to silence U.S. domestic opposition to their agendas (attempts that violate the democratic principle of open debate), these activities are legitimate. But they could also entice the United States into acting against its best interests. Such influence can lead U.S. foreign policy astray precisely because the United States' dominant global position gives U.S. leaders so much latitude in making foreign policy decisions.

OPPOSING AMERICAN POWER

ALTHOUGH COUNTRIES use strategies of accommodation to further their own ambitions, the United States usually gets something important out of them: compliance. Many countries, however, are not content to achieve their goals by accommodating or allying themselves with the United States. When foreign powers have aims that are incompatible with U.S. policy, they must develop workable strategies of opposition. Some countries attempt to balance U.S. power by banding together against the United States or by developing specific military options; others try to bind U.S. power within the constraints of international institutions. Some resort to blackmail, attempting to extract concessions from Washington by threatening it with undesirable consequences such as the spread of nuclear weapons; others simply ignore or refuse U.S. demands. And many countries are trying to undermine U.S. power by attacking U.S. legitimacy, a strategy that Washington's recent

actions have greatly facilitated. Such efforts to balance the power of the United States have thus far been muted, but they are beginning to hamstring U.S. foreign policy.

Although a number of leaders have openly called for a more multipolar world, the global response to U.S. primacy does not resemble the coalitions that defeated Germany in both world wars or the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The reason other nations have not forged a formal anti-U.S. alliance is simple: the United States does not pose the same level of threat. Yet states are beginning to join forces in subtler ways, with the explicit aim of checking U.S. power. Rather than forming an anti-U.S. alliance, countries are “soft balancing”: coordinating their diplomatic positions to oppose U.S. policy and obtain more influence together. To name just a few examples: France, Germany, and Russia pursued a unified strategy that helped prevent the United States from obtaining UN Security Council authorization for the invasion of Iraq, and their actions allowed weaker states such as Mexico and Chile to resist U.S. pressure as well. Later, President Bush tried to persuade France, Germany, and the United Kingdom to get tough on Iran’s nuclear programs, but he failed to drive a wedge between them and ended up endorsing their diplomatic campaign instead. Beyond Europe, combined opposition from Latin American countries has defeated the Bush administration’s efforts to pressure the government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, thwarted U.S. attempts to select the new head of the Organization of American States, and blocked a U.S. proposal to create a “democracy review” panel within the OAS.

Some ways of balancing U.S. power are less benign, such as when countries mobilize their military resources and develop defensive strategies that exploit areas in which U.S. strength is not overwhelming. As the Pentagon’s 2005 National Defense Strategy notes, “The U.S. military predominates in the world of *traditional* forms of warfare. Potential adversaries accordingly shift away from challenging the United States through *traditional* military actions and adopt asymmetric capabilities and methods” (italics in the original).

Efforts to balance the power of the United States are beginning to hamstring U.S. foreign policy.

Weaker states typically rely on some combination of three broad options. First, they develop conventional military capabilities specifically designed to neutralize U.S. strengths. In the 1999 Kosovo war, Serbia used surface-to-air missiles as well as camouflage and other deceptive tactics to blunt NATO's air offensive. Facing a vastly stronger coalition, the Serbs eventually lost, but they performed far better than NATO expected. Similarly, China is now acquiring military capabilities—including anti-ship cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and electronic countermeasure technologies—that could hinder U.S. forces if they tried to operate in China's neighborhood.

Second, adversaries sometimes depend on terrorism, the classic "weapon of the weak." Terrorists win by attacking the stronger side's resolve and forcing it to take actions that alienate potential supporters. Al Qaeda and the Iraqi insurgency use terrorism because it allows them to attack vulnerable targets while avoiding direct confrontation with superior U.S. forces. Terrorism can also provoke the United States into overreacting in ways that could increase opposition to the U.S. presence in the Middle East. Sometimes, the strategy works: terrorism helped bin Laden drive much of the U.S. presence out of Saudi Arabia—and it may still defeat the U.S. mission in Iraq.

Third, to balance U.S. primacy, some countries attempt to obtain weapons of mass destruction (WMD), especially nuclear arms. The current nuclear powers developed these weapons to deter their enemies, and that is why Iran and North Korea want them today. As one Iranian reformer stated, "It is basically a matter of equilibrium. If I don't have [nuclear weapons], I don't have security."

Instead of forming such a direct counterpoise to U.S. dominance, many states hope to constrain the United States by binding it within powerful international institutions. Binding works best in areas in which U.S. primacy is not so pronounced, such as international economic affairs. It is not, however, an effective strategy for restraining U.S. action in core areas of national security. The United States failed to obtain Security Council authorization for the wars in Kosovo and Iraq, but that did not stop it from waging them. Nor could Washington keep other states from establishing an International Criminal Court, even though it has refused to acknowledge the court's authority over the United States.

Taming American Power

Binding works in economics because the United States is less dominant in that area and because international trade and finance cannot occur without commonly accepted rules. For example, although the rules of the World Trade Organization generally favor U.S. interests, Washington cannot prevent the organization from issuing unfavorable rulings when the United States violates its principles. Nor can Washington ignore these rulings without jeopardizing the trading order on which U.S. prosperity depends. Moreover, the United States cannot simply dictate the terms of multilateral trade agreements—which also helps explain Washington's propensity to negotiate bilateral deals with individual states. The United States can thus be partly bound in this arena, but less easily than other states.

Blackmailing the United States, on the other hand, is an especially effective strategy for states to use—if they can get away with it. Blackmailers must make a credible threat that the United States cannot easily guard against and demands that it can reasonably satisfy. As long as Washington believes that the demands will not be repeated, it may choose to comply. But blackmailing only works in very special circumstances. Threats to use WMD or give them to terrorists are not credible, because blackmailers would thereby trigger their own destruction. Threatening to acquire WMD is, however, another matter. North Korea has been using this threat to great effect, even though the power of the United States dwarfs that of North Korea. Yet Pyongyang was able to extract repeated concessions from Washington and its allies—most obviously in the 1994 Agreed Framework—simply by continuing to develop nuclear weapons. Although North Korea's broken promises have made the Bush administration reluctant to try the same approach again, Pyongyang may still succeed in winning additional concessions, because at this point more attractive options are not available.

Even the United States' allies sometimes use blackmail to gain concessions—by threatening their own collapse if they do not receive more U.S. support. Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistan's military leader, Pervez Musharraf, for example, have both won additional benefits by convincing Washington that radicals would seize power if their regimes were to fall.

Another strategy, balking, is a more passive way for states to limit U.S. power: when the United States demands something, they simply

refuse. Balking is an especially effective method, too, because even a country as powerful as the United States cannot force every state to do its bidding all of the time. And the more some states balk, the more overextended the United States becomes—making it easier for other states to balk as well. Russia has balked, for example, when asked to end its nuclear collaboration with Iran, just as India and Pakistan balked by resisting U.S. pressure to forgo nuclear testing in 1998.

Balking is sometimes overt—as when Turkey refused to grant the United States use of its territory for the Iraq war—but many countries choose a subtler approach, formally acquiescing to U.S. demands and then doing as little as possible to fulfill them. Thus, Israel has repeatedly pledged to stop building settlements and the Palestinians

As the world's dominant nation, the United States has much to gain from the perception that its power is legitimate.

have promised to crack down on militants, but neither side has actually done much. U.S. leaders are frequently tempted to look the other way when others balk, rather than risk a costly dispute or let others see that they can be openly defied.

Attacking U.S. legitimacy is also a favorite way to erode Washington's international clout. As the world's dominant power, the United States has much to gain from the per-

ception that its power is legitimate. When people around the world believe that U.S. primacy advances broader global interests, Washington finds it easier to rally international support for its policies, leaving its opposition isolated and ineffective. Accordingly, the United States' opponents are currently seeking to convince others that Washington is selfish, hypocritical, immoral, and unsuited for world leadership, and that its dominance harms them. This assault on U.S. legitimacy does not directly challenge U.S. power, but it encourages other people to resent and resist U.S. supremacy.

Unfortunately, the United States has unwittingly given its critics a great deal of ammunition in recent years. Not only did the Bush administration disregard the UN Security Council when it launched its preventive war against Iraq, but its justification for the war turned out to be false, and its bungled occupation has inflicted new suffering on the Iraqi people. President Bush may truly believe

Taming American Power

that “life [in Iraq] is being improved by liberty,” but the rest of the world sees the invasion as a demonstration of the dangers of unchecked U.S. power.

To make matters worse, U.S. policies since September 11 have reinforced the belief that the United States does not abide by its own ideals. The torture and abuse graphically documented at Abu Ghraib prison, the deaths of Muslim prisoners of war in U.S. custody, the desecration of the Koran by U.S. interrogators, the harsh treatment of and denial of due process to prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, and the conspicuous absence of a single high-level resignation in the wake of these revelations have all made it easy for the United States’ critics to portray the country as quick to condemn everyone but itself. Given this background, it is hardly surprising that this summer an Italian judge ordered the arrest of 13 people believed to have been involved in a CIA operation that kidnapped a terrorism suspect in Italy and flew him to Egypt for interrogation in February 2003.

Like President Bush, who said that the Abu Ghraib abuses did not reflect “the America I know,” Americans may dismiss these accusations as false, misleading, or exaggerated. But the issue is not what Americans think of their nation’s conduct; the issue is how that conduct appears to others. Some of these accusations may be unfounded, but many are seen as valid. And they are rapidly draining the reservoir of international goodwill that makes the United States’ status as a superpower acceptable to the world.

The United States is in a global struggle for hearts and minds, and it is losing. If anti-Americanism continues to grow, Washington will face greater resistance and find it harder to attract support. Americans will feel increasingly threatened in such a world, but trying to counter these threats alone will merely exacerbate the fear of U.S. power and isolate the United States even more.

A NEW APPROACH

OVER THE LAST 15 years, the unipolar era has taught an important lesson: Americans may believe that their dominant position is good for the world, but other countries are far more ambivalent about U.S. supremacy and have developed ways to tame U.S. power. Ironically,

then, instead of allowing the United States to act with impunity, primacy requires Washington to work harder to convince the other nations of the world that U.S. power is to be welcomed rather than feared.

A retreat to isolationism should be ruled out immediately. True, efforts to restrict U.S. strength would diminish if the United States withdrew from world affairs, but the benefits would not be worth the costs. Despite what critics may believe, the global community does indeed depend on the United States, to maintain the freedom of the seas, wage the war on terrorism, lead the campaign to control WMD, and underwrite the UN, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, among other things. Washington's overarching influence also helps maintain a stable world order by dampening great-power rivalries in several regions. Few states would be safer or more prosperous if the United States withdrew completely.

Instead, the United States should resume its traditional role as an "offshore balancer." This strategy assumes that only a few parts of the world are of strategic importance to the United States, such as Europe, industrialized Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Instead of controlling these areas directly, the United States would rely on local actors to maintain the regional balance of power. The United States would still stand ready to deploy its power against specific threats to its interests, but it would intervene only when absolutely necessary—when the local balance broke down and vital U.S. interests were clearly threatened by hostile forces. In short, while remaining engaged with its allies, the United States should keep its military presence as small as possible. Reducing the size of the U.S. footprint would diminish the likelihood that foreign terrorists—especially suicide bombers—would target the United States, because such responses are most often triggered by perceived foreign occupation.

Being less directly involved on the ground would also bolster the United States' freedom of action. Washington would be able to play hard to get, making its support for others conditional on broad compliance with U.S. goals. Other states would be less likely to take U.S. protection for granted. By diminishing global concerns about U.S. dominance, this approach would also make it easier for Washington to gain global backing on those rare occasions when it needed to use force. Playing hard to get would not win over a recalcitrant regime

such as that in Pyongyang, but it would make it easier for the United States to attract broad assistance for its policies in even those hard cases.

Most important, the United States must defend its international legitimacy. Washington must first recognize how it appears to others and then develop a sustained campaign to shape these perceptions. The United States cannot expect to win over the entire world, but it can surely do better than it has of late. Four years ago, President Bush declared that “we’ve got to do a better job of making our case,” but the administration’s advocacy has been flaccid. Voice of America broadcasts in English have been cut nearly in half, and the voa’s Arabic-language news programming has been replaced by politicized, commercial-style broadcasts that attract few listeners and enjoy little credibility in the Middle East. Meanwhile, two different public diplomacy czars have come and gone since the September 11 attacks, and the most recent appointee, Karen Hughes, is not expected to begin full-time work until several months after her appointment. This lackadaisical approach hardly conveys a serious desire to upgrade the United States’ image abroad. And Washington’s reputation has hardly been bolstered by President Bush’s stubborn defense of his decisions on Iraq or by his controversial nomination of John Bolton as UN ambassador. Whatever one thinks of the actual merits of these actions, they have reinforced the prevailing perception of American arrogance.

To be effective, a public relations campaign needs a good product. If U.S. foreign policy makes global problems worse while U.S. government and military personnel trample on human rights, then no amount of public diplomacy will rescue the nation’s image. To restore the moral stature it possessed before the abuses at Abu Ghraib, at Guantánamo, and in Afghanistan, Washington must sincerely apologize to the victims, and the senior officials responsible should be asked to resign. By failing to hold top officials accountable, the United States demonstrates that it values neither the rights of others nor its own ideals. It is hard to imagine a worse way to rebuild the nation’s global image.

U.S. foreign policy must reflect a greater appreciation of what U.S. power can and cannot accomplish. Possessing unmatched strength does not mean the United States can or should impose its values on others, no matter how selfless Americans think their motives are.

Stephen M. Walt

Instead of telling the world what to do and how to live—a temptation that both neoconservative empire-builders and liberal internationalists find hard to resist—the United States must lead by example. Over time, other nations will see how Americans live and what they stand for, and the rest of the world will want those things too. As Woodrow Wilson once counseled, the United States should “exercise the self-restraint of a really great nation, which realizes its own strength and scorns to misuse it.”

In the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush declared that other nations would be attracted to the United States if it were strong but also “humble.” They would be repulsed, he warned, if the United States used its power in an “arrogant” fashion. Bush’s instincts were correct, but his failure to follow them has led to precisely the results he predicted. The United States’ current task is to rebuild the sense of trust, admiration, and legitimacy it once enjoyed, so that the rest of the world can focus not on taming U.S. power but on reaping the benefits that it can bring. 🌐