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America's Uncomfortable Relationship With Nationalism

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Policy Recommendations

- The rise of strong nationalist feelings anywhere is the smoke before the fire, a sign of latent trouble. It represents an important indicator of a society stirred by powerful emotions and grievances that could push it in difficult or dangerous directions against us. Therefore, when we witness the emergence of strong nationalist sentiments, they need to be treated with some caution—to fly in their face is to court trouble as we inevitably then encounter “irrational behavior.”
- This does not mean that nationalism must be placated, but the United States must examine its roots and sources carefully before undertaking confrontation with it. Efforts at intimidation of the nationalists will usually be counterproductive.
- Confrontation of other nationalisms with American nationalism operating as a superpower is a particularly volatile combination. The United States needs to work with broad and credible international coalitions representing something of a global consensus in handling such situations. The United States as sole global superpower must walk a great deal more softly if it is to avoid creating a bandwagoning of international forces against it—forces that can

seriously block and stymie our own goals and that we sometimes cannot prevent short of war.

- We need to acknowledge that the way Islamist movements view and deal with the United States reflects “nationalist” motivations as much as, or more than, religious extremism per se.
- Policymakers and analysts are not doing their duty if they do not attempt to place foreign issues in a reversed US context: “How would the United States react if Britain or France invaded the United States to stop the US Civil War or stayed on to occupy the country until order was established?” or “How would we feel if China launched a preemptive attack on the United States out of fear that the United States represented a military threat to China’s emergence in East Asia?” Meaningful parallels can always be found that at the least help explain where other societies and countries are coming from in their actions.
- As the sole global superpower, we must remain alert to a natural tendency of the powerful toward insensitivity or blindness toward nationalist emotions in other states and peoples; awareness of this potential blind spot is the first step toward coping with the problem.

The United States has a big problem with nationalism: it's uncomfortable with everybody else's. Yet there's a great irony here: the United States seems quite unaware of the fact that it is one of the most enthusiastically flag-waving, nationalistic countries of the world. More remarkably, it regularly miscalculates the force of nationalism abroad. Today nationalism is probably the single most widespread ideology in politics across the globe. That the United States should be tone-deaf to this phenomenon in its dealings with others represents a serious vulnerability in the formulation of its foreign policies.

Because of the strongly multiethnic, multicultural nature of our own country, we have our own strong national predispositions in the way we understand the phenomenon of nationalism. In the United States we also like to distinguish sharply between what we call "patriotism" in the United States and "nationalism" everywhere else. In reality this distinction is somewhat misleading.

If you ask most Americans what they think about nationalism, you'll likely get a negative response. Nationalism will be variously characterized as archaic, narrow, intolerant, racist, zealous, irrational, uncompromising, a hindrance to the creation of a more globalized world, and an overall danger to the international order. In short, America would generally like to see nationalism go away. This brief will look at the roots of American views of nationalism, and the problems that these views create. This brief will also study the character of American nationalism itself, the nature of the United States as a superpower, and how that status influences our views of nationalism abroad. Finally, we will suggest how the United States might more usefully address the whole phenomenon of nationalism abroad in order to better manage the issue.

American Nationalism or Patriotism?

Before we can understand American views of nationalisms abroad, we first need to grasp the character of our own. Is there such a thing as American nationalism, or is it simply "patriotism"? I will argue that,

national myth to the contrary, American patriotism in relation to the outside world is in fact functionally a form of nationalism in most respects. Furthermore, despite our own multicultural character as a society, at the popular level we remain quite ambivalent about the real implications of multiculturalism and show some reluctance to abandon our "European," or even our "Anglo-Saxon," founding identity.

From de Tocqueville on, observers of this country have remarked that the character of American nationalism differs significantly from that of most other countries, above all in its immigrant origins. In our founding national myths, we conveniently overlook aboriginal peoples and begin our own immigrant society with a "clean slate," established on territory that has "no history." We believe that our immigrant-based society ignores ethnic or religious ties as a binding element for its society and polity.

In the "old countries" of the world, citizenship has been primarily based upon a founding ethnic group that lives in a specific homeland, and upon an allegiance to that group and its longstanding communal language and culture. The United States differs from these "old countries" because it bases its concept of national allegiance upon a vision of the Constitution and a set of shared ideals to form our political culture. Much the same can be said of other immigrant societies as well, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Latin America.

It's long been clear, however, that the image of the United States as a state based purely upon mutually shared ideals has never represented the whole story. Nor is it true of most of the other preeminently immigrant societies that also nominally ignored ethnicity in their founding ideals. They did all seek to build new societies free of the baggage of the past, but most of them (except for the Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America, and the French founders of Canada) were preeminently of UK origin (Anglo-Saxon/Scottish) in their early ethnic makeup. They naturally brought their own native English language with them to

constitute the founding language of the state and society. Of course all of these societies ran roughshod over their aboriginal peoples—marginalizing, if not outright eliminating, them.

Thus, for all its nominal blindness to ethnicity in its founding values, the United States did possess a de facto founding ethnicity of its own from the start. This founding culture remained the basis of American culture for a long period, later compelled only by dint of ongoing immigration to incorporate newer French, German, and Dutch communities—creating then a kind of generalized northern European ethnicity. Through a long, uncomfortable, and bumpy process that culture in turn was compelled to incorporate other seemingly “unassimilable” minorities such as African, Spanish, Irish, Italian, Jewish, East European, and East Asian ethnicities, not to mention the ravaged and decimated aboriginal Native Americans. This process of integration has been painful, often ugly, and is still far from complete, smooth, or comfortable. American society has been described by some as still racist at heart, riddled with de facto discrimination for all its nonracial ideals. Muslims of course represent the last, presently most controversial, element to seek discrimination-free integration.

What is undeniably true and important about the United States, however, is that its *founding ideals, documents, formal structure, and national vision* do assiduously ignore all elements of ethnicity. There is no place for official identification of or glorification of any particular race, its culture, or history, as essential to American identity. The country is justly proud of its absence of de jure discrimination at the federal level.

Yet the reality is that we find within the *practice* of American nationalism/patriotism a major tension. On the one hand, we have the ideal of a racially blind multicultural society founded on common ideals; on the other, we have the reality of a society whose elite even today still perceives itself as an expanded “Anglo-Saxon plus” culture. This is not surprising given the centrality of the Anglo-Saxon founders of early American colonies. Indeed, this latter view finds pro-

ponents all the way from the ugly chauvinism of the Ku Klux Klan that wants to keep America “white” to the elegantly argued theses of Samuel Huntington proclaiming the vital necessity of retaining the essentials of our British-inherited founding political culture as the indispensable central value system essential to the sound functioning of the United States.¹ Indeed, some American nativists still interpret belongingness in the United States as a basically northern European, “white” thing. Fortunately, their numbers and threat to the system are dwindling.

Even here, a national debate still rages between advocates of total assimilation of all peoples into a common founding Anglo-Saxon culture on the one hand versus a multiculturalism that permits retention of ethnic culture, pride, and language as enriching components within American society on the other. In fact, is it misleading to think of either of these views as absolutes? Both are ideals at opposite ends of a long spectrum along which all countries lie in their various mixtures of component identities and (constructed) sense of national homogeneity.

All this puts the discussion of American attitudes toward foreign nationalism in a more complex light. Can we be patriotic without ethnicity? Yes indeed, in principle, as long as foreign conflicts don’t directly touch upon any one group within the country such as with the Germans or Japanese during World War II, Muslims religiously “linked” to 9/11, or Mexicans today as symbolic of large-scale immigration problems. There are still residual fears that a multitude of subnational identities, cultures, languages, and pride can vitiate the unity and potential homogeneity of the nation. But given our ideals, Americans are, with some legitimacy, suspicious of ethnic nationalism abroad—largely perceived as a source of chauvinism and conflict as history readily demonstrates.

But even here, the deliberately weak *ethnic* basis of American nationalism does not spare the country from periodic descent into jingoism and chauvinism that can nearly match the intensity of ethnic nationalist chauvinism elsewhere. Current popular slogans still

¹ See Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004).

demonstrate this: “America: love it or leave it,” “Love America, bomb Iraq,” “Every patriotic American is a terrorist target!” “My country right or wrong, but my country,” and “America #1 in the world forever!” When it comes to dealing with foreigners, Americans can be just as nationalistic as the next, even if that chauvinism is not overtly expressed in *racial* terms. Americans are characterized in the literature of many other countries going back several hundred years as flag-wavers even then, with a strong sense of their own superiority over others.

Given our belief in the “race-blind” character of the United States and its patriotism, we tend to think, then, that our society has *transcended ethnic particularisms to become something of a “universal culture.”* It is therefore not surprising that Americans tend to be surprised and sometimes discomfited to encounter foreign descriptions of what they see as a distinctive American character and American psychology. Like all peoples, we like to think that we represent the “norm” as opposed to the “peculiarities” of foreign behavior. We are uncomfortable with being (psycho)analyzed as a country, with having our own “national character” described by others, often in unflattering terms. Yet it is imperative that we recognize the existence of our own national/nationalist peculiarities in order to operate in the real world.

Nationalism, Hegemony, and the Role of Values in Superpower Policy

Great powers generally aspire to hegemony. By definition they tend to pursue a global agenda. In this context, certain ideals, ideologies, or values play an important role in the superpower’s vision of itself and the way it justifies its role to the world. These values are often attacked by nationalists or other opponents abroad who do not buy into the rationale.

First, a policy of free trade and open borders clearly plays to the strengths of the superpower or hegemon: other powers are less well poised to take full advantage of unrestricted global trade and to enforce the rules of the system in its own interests. At the same time, though, the superpower or hegemon prefers to cast its preeminent advantage in global free trade in more legitimating universal terms, ones that seemingly transcend mere parochial interests.

To acknowledge the special instrumental benefit the superpower derives from free trade or “globalization” of trade is not to denigrate the virtues of globalization per se. But globalization invariably creates winners and losers on the economic scene, just as unfettered capitalism at the domestic level likewise benefits some while disadvantaging others. Globalization, despite its name, leaves many by the wayside. For the superpower, globalization is its most viable ideology for the purpose of seeking markets for its global reach, for its own economic productivity, to maintain its ability to influence the actions of others, and to defend its own national interests with greater muscle than other countries possess. There may be little question that free markets tend to bring lower prices to big-consumer societies, but at the same time they can weaken the ability of most countries to compete at the same level of production. Indeed, most successful industrial nations underwent periods of determinedly protectionist policies; their goal was precisely to develop an indigenous productive capacity, protected from the withering competition of other industrial states that could drive them out of business.

Thus, rather than a value in itself, globalization must be viewed as an amoral concept—much as capitalism itself—which only by being managed and controlled wisely can bring much good to human existence. Globalization can also be costly and damaging to societies when poorly or narrowly implemented. Of course, economics is a key component of national life for all societies, but never the sum total. Economic efficiency must be balanced off against other social goods such as maximum employment, social security, social cohesion, cultural capital, and the overall quality of life, which cannot be measured strictly in terms of absolute production or consumption.

Indeed, many leaders may accord priority to values that cannot be measured in purely economic terms: the creation and preservation of national power, national identity, and cohesion. Nationalists lay particular stress on these latter arguments.

Superpowers such as the British Empire in the nineteenth century, or today’s qualitatively different American empire, tend to elevate the benefits of globalization and free trade to the level of an absolute—indeed *universal* value in itself. Most British or

Americans automatically accept this ideological aspect of empire rather than viewing it as an instrumentality of particular value to its own society. (Even here, globalization as a value has its own considerable domestic detractors even in the United States as it leads to outsourcing of jobs, capital transfers abroad, and significant competitive challenges from countries such as China possessing low-wage structures and high-skilled productivity. It also tends to be narrower American nationalists who are most concerned with these negative affects.)

Other values are similarly pressed into play to provide broader justification of US policies, particularly *democratization* and *human rights* in more recent times. Yet these values come to be applied *selectively* where they clearly benefit the national interest, but not where they do not. This raises the predictable and inevitable charge from others that the superpower practices “double standards.” Indeed, all governments practice double standards. But the practice becomes more egregious when the values trumpeted abroad by the superpower (and employed as an instrument of its own power) are then frequently seen to be violated by its own most vocal advocate.

Worse, selective championing of so-called universal values leads to dangerous national self-deception, even when its selective application is done without any conscious sense of hypocrisy. American statesmen and the public often actually believe that the actions of the state, undertaken selectively in the national interest, are really and truly nothing more than the altruistic pursuit of universal values. Worse still, selective and instrumental use of these principles by the superpower robs the principles themselves of credibility and vitiates their ability to command respect.

This discussion of the instrumental use of values and ideology is not to suggest that American invocation of values is entirely cynical; these values are indeed meaningful to Americans (or British or French or others before them). These values matter; many major powers including the United States and European states do domestically practice these values in quite admirable ways—in stark contrast, say, to the Soviet Union that also invoked them abroad, but never remotely practiced them at home.

Nonetheless, an empire is still an empire; however enlightened or unenlightened it may be, it still raises problems for those who wish to avoid incorporation within it. In short, we need to acknowledge the way in which we selectively employ values as instruments of our national interests. We must avoid deceiving ourselves that our actions are therefore invariably conducted out of altruism, are devoid of nationalism, and that those who oppose them must therefore be against those values themselves.

For instance, because democracy is taken as a universal good—and in the abstract it very probably is—we take the argument one step further: we come to convince ourselves that democratization must almost invariably therefore lead other countries to acquiesce to American leadership or dominance under those principles. For example, “if China or Russia would only democratize, they would surely pursue policies more in accord with our own interests.” Here we find complete conflation of our values and our interests that simply ignores reality. Above all, it ignores a broader principle that no great power will welcome the overwhelming dominance of any other great power.

Nationalism as Resistance

Nationalism is one of the most powerful emotive forces on the globe, capable of forging group solidarity around belief and action. History is partly about the search for group identity as it evolves over time. And the history of human political development is that of the gradual broadening—by fits, starts, and even occasional retrogression—of a vision of what constitutes the *appropriate unit of solidarity*. Thus, over the course of history, we witness a progression of loyalties from the extended family, the clan, the tribe, the region, the ethno-linguistic unit, sometimes a religious unit, finally emerging into a formal multicultural formation of some kind.

The common bonds within any unit at any one time must be sufficiently strong to forge *consensus of action* within the group and to generate the will to withstand external challenge. The more diverse the polity, the more complex the task of forging such meaningful and sustainable common bonds. Bonds that have not organically developed and are not rooted in established and meaningful interrelationships will not

withstand serious external challenge. In fact, this is a key concern for many about the long-term viability of multicultural societies: is their common denominator so theoretical, weak, or attenuated that it precludes vigorous and decisive common action by the society? In other words, *what unit of solidarity will be most efficacious in creating a strong nationalism that will strengthen the group or state?*

Nationalism as an organizing sociopolitical concept of the West has been a formidably potent instrument in building the powerful modern Western state. The concept of nationalism has gradually spread across the globe, but not always readily transplanted: other states have often lacked the institutionalized sociocultural homogeneity that Europe forged for itself over centuries. The hastily built new “national” state outside of Europe was often dominated by a single clan, tribe, region, or religious sect bereft of genuine “national” cohesion. Indeed, one of the key problems of the developing world remains the quest for genuine and convincing inclusivity for all within the “national” ideal—consider today’s agony of Iraq in its current efforts at building a coherent state created by a consenting population.

This is why “identity politics” becomes such an important issue—does the selected identity provide a viable basis for strong and capable group action? We cannot dismiss identity politics as some narrow, selfish, or illegitimate concept as some Americans are wont to do: any group gravitates toward whatever identity is the most meaningful, potent, serviceable, mobilizable, and actionable in the face of challenge. We all have “identity politics”—it just is a question of how broad, sound, and comprehensive the identity of that polity is. Nationalism as a form of identity politics thus can have a quite positive role if it truly reflects the broadest and most meaningful unit of cohesion at any particular moment in the life of a community or society. The expansiveness of its vision of inclusivity emerges only over time; indeed it can expand or contract depending upon circumstance and threats to the community. Here Washington must acknowledge nationalism as reflecting the *true organic correlation* of interests among social groups as they exist at a given moment. That does not mean this correlation of interests is ideal or cannot gradually grow more inclusive, but their current inclu-

sivity (or lack thereof) reflects a *default vision of essential identity*, especially when it comes under siege as much of the Muslim world does today.

Modern nationalism is often perhaps most quickly forged in the face of a common enemy, a threatening intruder whose presence unites disparate social elements into a cohesive whole, at least for ad hoc action purposes. For instance, a Martian invasion of Earth would immediately unite all ethnicities and faiths of the world together to confront the common alien enemy. Thus even if the United States is doing its best to resist selfishly conceived national impulses, the very extent of today’s American imperial reach generates national cohesiveness among others to resist the encroachment of US power. Here it is not always strong *preexisting* nationalism that resists US power, but rather that US power kindles nationalist feelings to join a common resistance.

“Nationalism as resistance” is particularly present in two forms that top the US national security agenda today: “rogue nations” and Islamism. Now, when the United States casts its global vision in universalistic terms, the immediate implication is that no reasonable party could quarrel with such value-based vision except “rogues.” The concept of “rogue nations” is a relatively recent geopolitical creation of Washington. “Roguedom” can indeed involve particularly outrageous policies of a given leader, but it is usually applied to a smaller state whose embrace of outspoken nationalistic principle—often bolstered by an alternative ideology of some kind—involves a rejection of the reigning order of the superpower. Its objection to the reigning global order is taken as a massive affront to the US (or earlier, British) superpower and therefore must be quarantined or brought down. Cases are multiple: Egypt (Nasser), Panama, the Falklands, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya, Syria, and Venezuela.

In the Cold War era there were many more examples since elimination of “rogue” leaders could be readily justified as moves on the strategically vital Cold War chessboard. In particular, both superpowers were ever mindful and always worried about their general credibility vis-à-vis the other, including alliance relations, nuclear deterrence, conventional threats, and other symbolic forms of power. Thus, according to

Cold War logic, the superpower must remain alert for states that flagrantly choose to block or weaken the superpower's interests: such opposition in and of itself challenges the credibility of the superpower. This logic, or legacy, from the Cold War has survived to this day in the form of negative relations with so-called rogue states in the developing world.

Second, Islamism, or political Islam, in its broad spectrum and multiple variations across the Muslim world, generates particular anxiety in Washington because it is particularly perceived as an irrational, "they-hate-our-values" type of religious fanaticism. It goes without saying that religion plays a significant role in shaping the broad phenomenon of political Islam. But when it comes to Muslims' dealings with the *West*, political Islam *functionally* becomes a form of nationalism: Islam becomes a symbol of the threatened Muslim *community* and its threatened identity that must be protected by repelling the foreign invader or hegemon at whatever cost. That is why Islamists, communists, leftists, nationalists, socialists, and Ba'thists in the Muslim world are all readily able to find a common cause in opposing the foreign invader and occupier. Religion is not driving this impulse, but rather communal nationalism under an Islamic banner.

Is Nationalism Irrational?

In our American belief that we as a nation operate on a "rational" basis, we tend to seek "objective facts" in seeking to understand the course of history or current events. Americans are prone to believe that our historical migrant flight from a "tainted" Europe enabled us to escape what Marx called "the unbearable burden of history" to begin afresh without the accumulated passions of the past. Furthermore, in our thrall to science and the technological mentality that accompanies it, we naturally seek scientific objectivity (and why not?) in political analysis; we are deeply persuaded that "objective" accounts of situations should provide the central element of explanation and reality.

Yet nationalism by its very nature is not "objective" in its view of the world. An "objective" scholarly reading of the history of the Balkans, for example, is not persuasive to most citizens of the Balkans, since it does not accord with their own "reality." The true "reality" of the post-Yugoslav crises resides in the myths, fables, leg-

ends, grievances, and psychology of each of the players: those elements constitute the sole "reality" with which outsiders must contend if they wish to be effective.

In short, "objective reality," whatever that may be, is quite irrelevant to how actors will behave. Grasping the essence of their *subjectivities* is what is instructive; here is the force of nationalism at work. The United States has its own cultural problems in coming to terms with these highly nationalistic visions of reality by dismissing the historical accuracy, and hence validity, of the passions behind communitarian legend and grievance.

In the same vein, the United States fears that nationalisms inherently pursue parochial goals that stray from the presumed universal US agenda—although they might happen to coincide on occasion. These nationalisms generate an emotional power to resist the preferred policies of the United States. The forces of nationalism, almost by definition, are antiglobalization and antihegemonic. That does not mean that a state cannot derive some benefits from economic globalization or the imperial order on an ad hoc basis. However nationalists know that the goal of empire is not designed to serve their own national interests—although ad hoc accommodations can occasionally be made. Any attempt by a superpower to suggest that this system, of maximum utility to the superpower, is of some kind of *universal* value is viewed with great suspicion.

Nationalism by definition seeks maximum independence to develop and pursue its own national goals. Nationalists jealously reserve the right itself to define the state's own national interests; it will not permit others to define it for them. By definition then, nationalism strongly prefers a multipolar world that offers maximum options, including the ability to play off one power against another to maximize leverage. This lies in contradiction to the current global reality, which is a unipolar world dominated by the United States as a hegemon.

Nonetheless, US diplomacy regularly speaks of "shared interests" with other states when it seeks to gain their close cooperation. These "shared values," however, are usually extremely broad and generalized to the point where they become unexceptional—concepts with

which few states would disagree in principle: freedom, prosperity, opposition to terrorism, stability, etc. These “shared interests” often begin to lose credibility though when they turn to specific situations and applications. If they are made too specific (e.g., “we both oppose Iran”), then they lose moral clarity as “shared interests” or become little more than a statement of transient and finite shared threats. That is usually not sufficiently persuasive enough to a nationalistic state to warrant signing on to a broader US global vision. Nationalism tends to strip off the higher-flown rhetoric behind talk of “shared values” to look at the details of the situation on the ground.

Problems of US Perception of Nationalism

US wariness of nationalism stems not only from differing or clashing interests with other states but also from US psychological inability to grasp the full range of the phenomenon, for at least two reasons. First is an overall bias toward a “scientific,” technological, or “rational” view of the world that dominates our governmental, think tank, and even much academic thinking. Americans live geographically far removed from most of the theaters in which we are contending. Indeed, we have historically preferred it that way, given our traditional national distaste for “foreign imbroglions.” In some situations this distaste is not an altogether undesirable instinct if it serves to inhibit adventuristic forays into imperial action.) Our governmental culture, society, and even academia in recent decades have shown greater and greater reluctance to actually get to know foreign cultures firsthand—meaning the hard disciplines of going to unstable places, learning difficult foreign languages, and acquiring detailed knowledge of foreign cultures, including their history, literature, political culture, and psychology.

If one is driven by a social *science* point of view, these latter cultural disciplines are soft, imprecise, and involve broad elements of interpretation. Above all, acquisition of this kind of knowledge requires active *interaction* or dialogue with a culture, and even demands a degree of empathy if it is to be successful. Yet this process has somehow become increasingly foreign, distasteful, complicated, or exotic to Americans over time who prefer a one-way “scientific” examination—as through a microscope—of other cultures that might impact us. As a “scientific” approach to foreign

cultures has grown more dominant in American thinking, foreign culture becomes an object studied at a clean distance—a kind of “immaculate” process of information acquisition, free of the entangling and messy need of interaction. It leans increasingly on statistical or theoretical analysis of various types of data to explain events perhaps best understood through direct experience. Yet without this interaction, the feelings, impulses, beliefs, and views of other cultures remain remote, mysterious, “irrational,” and poorly comprehended. These motivations are, of course, the roots of nationalist instincts as well.

This factor is one of the key reasons why foreign language study is so important. It is not so much that the foreign language immediately grants access to all kinds of material that the monolingual English speaker lacks—although that may still be somewhat true even in our age of widespread international use of English. More importantly, a serious study of a foreign language compels the student to interact regularly with a foreign culture, its mode of thought, and above all the attitudes of its speakers. This kind of experience and knowledge can also be gained to some extent without a foreign language, but only through serious, long-term extensive and empathetic inquiry into a foreign culture and its citizens in the course of living abroad. But willingness to confront that demanding task seems to be diminishing in American society.

Lacking firsthand exposure, American observers of other countries are likely to fall into pop-analyses of other cultures, typically exemplified in the series of books called “Culture Shock”—introductions to the “psychology” and attitudes of foreign cultures and customs, usually written with witty condescension. Their one virtue, however, is at least to raise awareness that foreign cultures, attitudes, and customs do exist and are different, often representing quite an unfamiliar set of views of the world.

Alternatively, and to the detriment of US policies, we turn to fluent English-speaking expatriates arriving from other countries who are often only too happy to interpret their culture to Washington. These players frequently promote their own self-serving interests, offering Americans the “true voice” of foreign peoples without the hassle of actually going there. While our

embassies abroad are designed to gain local access and direct observation, the problem is that they are not much listened to anymore in Washington in the swirl of domestic politics and high testosterone cable news television.

Second, Americans, even in our highly multicultural country, are singularly deprived of exposure to in-depth foreign culture and attitudes in our media—all our 500 channels of satellite television even seem to speak with one voice. Americans are chastely protected from the worldview of CNN International, much less BBC International, and are left instead with the more comfortable versions of domestic CNN or BBC America—ostensibly on the grounds of US “market preferences.”

Al Jazeera offers a very different worldview, indeed one that typifies the interests and attitudes of a great part of the developing world. US military operations are portrayed from an angle independent of US-censored and US-spun press releases from “embedded” reporters. The prettied-up, immaculate, Nintendo version of our wars for domestic television consumption bears little relation to the real blood, gore, and destruction of war abroad as experienced by people who actually live there. Is it any wonder that their views and psychology of the same situation are profoundly different than the American? Hopefully, in the future Americans will actually be able to view alternative visions of world events as furnished by alternative global news services—the single best way to sharpen American perception of foreign reality.

It is not that Al Jazeera, BBC, Agence France Presse, or Xinhua (China) news services represent “the truth” and ours do not. Rather, it is that foreign news media offer interpretations and analyses of current events that are generally closer to reality and local attitudes than our own coverage, which almost guarantees our inability to understand the true impact of events there. In politics—an inherently subjective field—perceptions and interpretations matter as much as facts.

Without such regular inputs into the American consciousness, our media simply reflects national or administration preferences that offer only one of many interpretations of factual events. Americans, therefore,

stand little chance of grasping the nature and content of foreign nationalism and competing psychological impulses and concerns. Indeed, the framework within which even our policymakers understand foreign reality is more influenced by the ambient media milieu in which they live than by “exotic” intelligence reporting. Intelligence reporting today is primarily appreciated by policymakers for its concrete factual content—numbers of weapons, enemy movements, flow of monies, and intercepted conversations—than it is consulted for its grasp of the *rationales* of the hostile culture or “enemy.” The “subjective” mentality of the opponent is ignored or dismissed as a product of their own irrational nationalism, making predictions of their future actions and reactions difficult indeed.

The United States then is singularly isolated and handicapped for a major global power. Most other middling foreign powers have a vastly deeper grasp of foreign realities than the United States does simply because it is central to their own survival. Now, with a much neutered US mainstream media, Americans’ exposure to foreign reality is more limited than ever, requiring access to the online European press or proliferating blogs if Americans really seek to get the full picture.

Conclusion: The Pitfalls of Superpowerdom

Being the world’s sole superpower, unrivalled by any power anywhere, poses problems and constraints upon American’s grasp of foreign reality. Given our overwhelming power, we adopt the position that it is our own actions that ultimately matter on the international scene. No other power is in a position to play international policeman, to build the global architecture that is required. “We create our own reality,” as many in Washington have suggested. The task of other nations is simply to grasp this reality of the world and get on with the program as outlined in Washington—one that, after all, pursues “universal values.” In short, what others think simply does not matter much to the Washington policy community.

Thus nationalism on the part of other states and their resistance to the US agenda is at the very least a complication, an irritant, a problem and, at worst, poses a “threat” to US interests. We fear foreign nationalism because its well-springs are different than our own

interests, and it can often powerfully drive others to resist the best-laid American plans.

Nationalism, of course, can be considered “irrational” in a global sense in that it primarily serves only the interests of its own limited number of proponents. Furthermore, it can often be driven by paranoid suspicion of others, or include elements of the psychology of historical victimization, making it exceptionally prickly. Nationalism can fuel vicious discrimination, racism, and persecution of minorities and can promote jingoistic leaders. But none of these negative features make it any less worthy of study. Indeed, precisely because of its heavy influence on decision making of governments throughout the developing world today, it is all the more important for outsiders to reckon with and accurately grasp the details and consequences of the growing nationalist phenomenon.

Given the pervasiveness of flourishing nationalisms, even a superpower is required to take the phenomenon seriously. As we see in Iraq, for all its shattered sectarian character, a form of Iraqi nationalism and resistance against occupation can doom US strategic planning. Similar nationalist forces that simply refuse to give in are also vivid in Vietnamese, Palestinian, or Chechen resistance. We fear to recognize the impulses and forces of foreign nationalism, as if doing so would acknowledge the legitimacy of alternative views of foreign reality and national interests that may not conform with our own.

On occasion, the United States (and other powers) will actually exploit these irrational factors of nationalism for its own purposes. Small nationalisms can be turned against bigger nationalisms: Ukrainians, Poles, and Chechens against Russians; Arabs and Turks against Persians; Columbians against Venezuelans, etc., in order to whittle down rival powers to size. Indeed, other nations do the same against us when the opportunity arises. Enemies or rivals of the United States find rampant anti-imperial nationalism around the world a highly useful instrument to check US ability to impose its own agenda.

In sum, America’s encounter with nationalism is problematic. It reflects some of its own anxieties about the

potentially divisive role subnationalism can play within American society. Nationalism is also perceived as a broad force overseas that is fundamentally programmed to resist the American superpower agenda. American problems in grasping the character and dynamic of foreign nationalism are deeply entrenched. There are few ways to change this fundamental reality. It can only be managed more skillfully. ■

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