

THE DANGERS OF GOING IT ALONE

As he leads us toward war, the President proclaims that America's course does not depend on decisions of others. While seeking UN support for war against Iraq, our government indicates its willingness to launch such wars without international approval. Bold plans for unilateral military actions might produce short-term successes, but we must recognize their long-term dangers. In claiming that America has unlimited power to attack enemies anywhere in the world, we are spreading seeds of fear that may yield a bitter harvest.

Today we see threats to our national security only from terrorist cells and small rogue states. No other army spends even one-fifth of what America allocates for defense. But we should not forget the greater danger of armed conflict among great powers. Americans have suffered through two world wars, and we have lived in the shadow of ten thousand nuclear warheads. Great-power rivalries can start again, with their uncontrollable arms races feeding on mutual distrust.

America's status as unrivaled superpower persists only because other nations of the world accept it without challenge. Their acceptance has been based on confidence that American military dominance does not threaten their security. We must not take their confidence for granted. If our government invades Iraq without articulating any principles that could constrain future use of American power, this confidence will be seriously at risk.

When American forces invade one country after another, people everywhere must ask what keeps them from becoming another American target. In countries where there is no clear answer to this question, politicians will seek military deterrents against America, because people everywhere demand leaders who can promise security.

What has our government done to address these concerns? Two kinds of responses are evident. The President has promised that American power will serve democracy and freedom around the world. He has also tried to deter future arms races by a general threat to keep our military strengths beyond anyone's challenge.

But our promises to serve global democracy and freedom become less reassuring when our government insists that only it can judge how they apply. Claims of lofty goals

can be adapted to serve narrower interests, and the function of American democracy itself is to make our government serve the interests of American voters.

Furthermore, small countries will always have unsuccessful politicians who could hope to win power by persuading America to intervene for "democracy" in their country. So unrestrained American power, however well-intentioned, carries the threat of a new world order in which ambitious politicians everywhere find that their path to power may go through Washington.

Foreigners' fears of us may be stifled if they believe that arming to rival America would be hopeless, because we would always spend more to maintain our military superiority. But this argument assumes that American taxpayers can make a credible commitment to pay any imaginable cost in an arms race to end all arms races.

Worse, some could also argue that Soviet Russia's investment in nuclear arms successfully deterred America from military actions in much of the world. We should not want anyone to perceive such reasons for investing anew in dangerous nuclear arsenals.

When these risks are taken into account, it would be much safer for America to reassure the world now by accepting some limits on our use of force. Americans understand that liberty is held secure in a community only when those who hold power can be called to independent judgment by the rest of the community. If America now claims dominant power in the world community, then we must be prepared for other nations to judge how we may use it.

The manifest danger of international terrorists, infiltrating our increasingly globalized society, demands new responses from our government. But people in cities have always lived in close proximity with anonymous strangers, and have found security with institutions of law that punish and deter criminal violence. No one doubts that American forces are needed now to punish and deter international terrorists. The only question is whether American forces are to be used within some framework of international law.

Our government's policy of denying any need for foreign approval of American military actions may seem bold and effective now, but in the long run it can incite deadly rivalries to haunt our future. From a simplistic viewpoint, it might seem paradoxical that

a country with overwhelming military superiority can become more secure by accepting some constraints from the international community, to reassure its neighbors. Bismark understood this fact well, but Kaiser Wilhelm II ignored it disastrously at the turn of the twentieth century. For the safety of our civilization in the twenty-first century, American statesmen need to understand it now.

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Published Feb 17, 2003, in the Minneapolis Star Tribune

<http://www.startribune.com/stories/562/3651945.html>