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America and the Ambivalence of Power

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

If the last century is viewed as a great struggle between the rule of power and the rule of law among states, the American role in this drama has been paradoxical. As the world's foremost champion of multilateral rules and institutions, the United States also has consistently resisted entangling itself in commitments and obligations. No other country has advanced such far reaching and elaborate ideas about how rules and multilateral institutions might be established to manage international relations. Yet the United States has been reluctant to tie itself too tightly to such an order—especially recently. Nowhere has this ambivalence about multilateralism and the rule of law been more clearly on display than in the manner of America's invasion and occupation of Iraq. Nowhere, either, are the growing costs of going it alone more apparent.

Across the twentieth century, but particularly at the major postwar turning points of 1919, 1945, and 1989, the United States articulated grand visions of rule-based international order meant to replace or mitigate the balance of power and strategic rivalry. After 1919, America put the League of Nations at the center of its designs for world order; collective security and international law were to provide mechanisms for dispute resolution and the enforcement of agreements. After 1945, the United States came forward with a breathtaking array of new multilateral institutions and rule-based agreements, including the United Nations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the Inter-

national Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. After the cold war the United States again pursued an ambitious institutional agenda, including the expansion of NATO and the launching of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation conference, and the World Trade Organization.

At each turn, however, the United States also resisted erosion of its sovereignty and policy autonomy. Its rejections of the League of Nations in 1919, the International Trade Organization in 1947, and, more recently, the International Criminal Court, Kyoto Protocol on global warming, and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, offer dramatic evidence of America's reluctance to commit itself to a rule-based international order.

THE NEW UNILATERALISM

Since entering the White House, the Bush administration has articulated a far-reaching skepticism regarding cooperative rule-based relations. Charles Krauthammer, the neoconservative pundit, calls it the “new unilateralism,” which “seeks to strengthen American power and unashamedly deploy it on behalf of self-defined global ends.”

This new unilateralism is most evident in the Bush administration's rhetoric and policy regarding the use of force. To undergird the fight against terrorism and rogue states that seek weapons of mass destruction, US officials have established an assertive, go-it-alone-if-necessary doctrine. The administration's 2002 *National Security Strategy* captures its view on the limits of concerted use of force: “While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country.” Gone are the old justifications of war based on self-defense and

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imminent threat enshrined in Article 51 of the United Nations charter. America alone will determine when it needs to use force.

In the background of the invasion of Iraq, and emboldened by the 9-11 terrorist attacks on the United States, hard-right policymakers and pundits like Krauthammer have put forward radical new ideas about America's role in the world. These neo-conservative thinkers argue for an era of US global rule organized around the bold exercise of unilateral American military power, gradual disentanglement from the constraints of alliances and international rules, and an aggressive push to bring freedom and democracy to threatening countries.

This attitude, exemplified by the Iraq experience but not limited to it, has unsettled world politics. The stakes are high because, in the decade since the end of the cold war, the United States has emerged as an unrivaled and unprecedented global superpower. At no other time in modern history has a single state loomed so large globally. This growth of American power confronts the international community with a frustrating dilemma. The United States has become more crucial to other countries in the realization of their economic and security goals and is increasingly in a position to help or hurt other nations. But America's power also makes it less dependent on weaker states, so it is easier for the United States to resist or ignore them. To other nations, America seems poised between two alternative worlds. In one, the United States continues to build international order around multilateral rules and institutions. In the other, it begins to disentangle itself from international constraints, reverting to a world of power politics where might makes right.

Why is America so conflicted about international rules and laws? Will it, as the world's preeminent global power, retreat even further from a rule-based order to embrace power politics? While some policymakers want to use US supremacy to resist multilateralism and the rule of law, the lesson of history is that even powerful states—and certainly a unipolar America—gain advantage by supporting and operating within an international system of rules and institutions.

THE ROOTS OF AMBIVALENCE

Sovereign states inevitably are of two minds about international order based on the rule of law. The creation of rules and institutions among states offers the promise of peaceful and stable relationships so that governments can conduct their affairs in a more predictable and cooperative environment.

But rules and institutions also entail some diminution of a nation-state's sovereign authority and freedom of action. Nation-states are never able or willing to cede full or absolute authority to international rules and agreements, so the international order is always a mixed system where the rule of law and power politics interact.

The simplest explanation for America's ambivalence about rules and institutions is that the country supports them when it can dominate and manipulate them to its advantage, and resists them when it cannot. But a more complex calculation is involved. A rule-based order is attractive to the United States because it locks other states into stable and predictable policy orientations, thereby reducing America's need to use coercion. The United States may be the world's preeminent power, but to rely only on power to get its way is shortsighted and costly. It is much better to persuade weaker and smaller states to operate within a set of rules and institutions that serve the powerful state's long-term interests. Doing so not only reduces the "enforcement costs" that the United States must shoulder to get other states to cooperate, but also "locks in" other states to a framework of cooperation that could last beyond the era of American preeminence.

Still, the United States must pay a price for this rule-based cooperation in the form of constraints on US autonomy and power. In its economic and security ties with East Asia and Europe since 1945, the United States has had to confront a central question: How much policy "lock in" of East Asian and European governments—ensured through multilateral institutions and alliance agreements—is worth how much reduction in US policy autonomy and freedom of action?

RULES THAT BENEFIT THE RULEMAKERS

It is easy to see why the United States sought to build a post-1945 order with multilateral economic and security arrangements organized around the Bretton Woods agreements on monetary and trade relations and the NATO security pact. The United States ended the war in an unprecedented position of power, and the weaker European countries attached a premium to taming and harnessing this newly powerful state. Britain, France, and other major states were willing to accept multilateral agreements to the extent that they also constrained and regularized US economic and security actions. America's agreement to operate within a multilateral economic order and to make an alliance-based security commitment to Europe and Japan were

worth the price: it ensured the integration of Japan, Germany, and the rest of Western Europe into a wider US-centered international order.

The mutual benefits of this institutional bargain have been clear enough. The United States has not had to expend its power capabilities to coerce other states, and weaker states have not had to expend resources to protect themselves from a dominating and unpredictable America. The actual restraints on US policy have been minimal. Convertible currencies and open trade have served America's national economic interest. The United States did provide a binding security guarantee to Japan and Western Europe, which rendered US power more acceptable to these countries and left them more eager to cooperate with America in other areas. But the United States did not forswear the right to unilaterally use force elsewhere. It did agree to operate economically and militarily within multilateral institutions organized around agreed-upon rules and principles. But this also ensured that Japan and Western Europe would be firmly anchored in a global political order that advanced America's long-term national interest.

States within this American-centered order are connected by economic and security relationships

informed by rules, norms, and institutions. Participating states accept these rules as a reflection of loosely accepted rights, obligations, and expectations about how "business" is to be done within the order. It is an open system in which members exhibit diffuse reciprocity. Power does not disappear from this multilateral order; it operates in a bargaining system, in which rules and institutions—and power—play an interactive role.

Building on this foundational multilateral order, states have offered and signed a growing number and variety of multilateral agreements. At a global level, between 1970 and 1997, the number of international treaties more than tripled. From 1985 to 1999 alone, the number of international institutions increased by two-thirds. The United States has become party to a growing number of these multilateral contracts. Roughly 150 multilateral treaties included the United States in 1950; the total rose to 400 in 1980 and close to 600 in 2000. The number of multilateral treaties joined by the United States over five-year increments suggests that in the most recent period—from 1996 to 2000—the United

States ratified treaties at roughly the same rate as in earlier postwar periods. Measured in these aggregate terms, the United States has continued to increase its institutional connections to the rest of the world.

THE PREROGATIVES OF UNIPOLARITY

Has the rise of America's unipolar power in recent years reduced its incentives to operate in a multilateral, rule-based order? Has the United States become so powerful that it no longer needs to sacrifice autonomy and freedom of action within multilateral agreements? With the end of the cold war and the absence of serious geopolitical challengers, the United States is now able to act alone without serious costs, according to the proponents of unilateralism. If they are right, the international order is in the early stages of a significant transformation, triggered by a continuous and determined effort by the United States to disentangle itself from the multilateral restraints of an earlier era. It matters little who is

president and what political party runs the government: the United States will exercise its power more directly, with less mediation or constraint by international rules, institutions,

or alliances. The result will be a hegemonic, power-based international order. The rest of the world will complain but other nations will not be able or willing to impose sufficient costs on the United States to alter its growing unilateral orientation.

Many officials in the Bush administration reflect this view. Multilateralism can be a tool or expedient in some circumstances, they believe, but states generally will avoid or shed international and rule-based restraints when they can. Power disparities make it easier for the United States to walk away from potential international agreements. Across the spectrum of policy concerns—from economic and security to environmental issues—the advantages of US power make unilateralism more feasible since the costs of nonagreement are lower for the United States than for other nations. This gives it bargaining advantages if it wants them, but also affords a greater ability to live without agreements and not suffer consequences.

The shifting power differentials have also created a new divergence in interests between the United States and the rest of the world, which further reduces the possibilities for multilateral coopera-

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tion. For example, the sheer size of the American economy—boosted by more than a decade of growth unmatched by Europe, Japan, or the other advanced countries—means that US obligations under a Kyoto Protocol to reduce global-warming emissions would have been vastly greater than those of other states.

In the security realm, the United States has global interests and faces threats that no other state shares. America is more likely than other countries to dispatch troops to distant battlefields, which means it would face greater exposure to the legal liabilities of the International Criminal Court. Similarly, the United States must worry about threats to its interests in all the major regions of the world; as the 9-11 terrorist attacks made explicit, American unipolar power makes it a unique target for terrorism. The United States feels itself to be at war while Europeans do not. It is not surprising, therefore, that European and Asian threat assessments about terrorism and rogue states seeking weapons of mass destruction might differ from those of the United States. This growing divergence could make multilateral agreements about the use of force less easy to achieve—and less desirable from America's perspective.

NOT GOING IT ALONE

Yet the United States is not structurally destined to disentangle itself from multilateral order and go it alone. There continue to be deep underlying incentives for the United States to support multilateralism and rule-based order—incentives that are growing. These stem from three sources: the functional demands of interdependence, the long-term calculations of power management, and America's political tradition and identity.

American support for multilateralism is likely to be sustained—even in the face of ideological resistance within the Bush administration—in part because of a simple logic: as global economic interdependence grows, the need for multilateral coordination of policies also grows. The more economically interconnected states become, the more dependent they are on the actions of other states for the realization of their objectives. Rising economic interdependence is one of the great hallmarks of the contemporary international system. For more than half a century, states have actively and consistently sought to open markets and reap the economic, social, and technological gains that derive from integration into the world economy. If this remains true in the years ahead, it is easy to

predict that demands for multilateral agreements, even and perhaps especially by the United States, will grow rather than shrink.

As the world's dominant country after World War II, America championed GATT and the Bretton Woods institutions to lock other countries into an open global economy that would ensure massive economic gains for itself. But to get these states to organize their domestic orders around an open economy—and accept the political risks and vulnerabilities associated with integration—the United States had to signal that it too would play by the rules and not exploit or abandon these weaker countries. The postwar multilateral institutions facilitated this necessary step. As the world economy and trading system have expanded over the decades, this logic has continued. It is reflected in the World Trade Organization, which replaced GATT in 1995 and embodies an expansive array of legal-institutional rules and mechanisms.

In return for the continued support by other states of an increasingly complex international economic system, America must itself become more embedded in this web of rules and institutions. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the Bush administration sought and gained “fast track” authority from Congress to negotiate trade pacts that legislators could not amend when debating ratification, or that the administration led the launch of a new multilateral round of trade talks. Although the recent collapse of trade negotiations in Cancún suggests that agreement on agricultural trade between the advanced and developing worlds is not likely for some years to come, the incentives to search for more open markets remain and will continue to increase.

A second stake that America retains in multilateralism stems from the grand strategic interest in preserving power and creating a stable and legitimate international order. Support for multilateralism offers a way to signal US restraint and commitment to other states, thereby encouraging their acquiescence and cooperation. The United States pursued this strategy throughout the twentieth century—it helps explain the remarkably durable, inclusive, and legitimate character of the existing international order. From this perspective, the search for rule-based agreements should increase rather than decrease with the rise of American unipolarity. The need to manage power effectively with the help of multilateral arrangements will create incentives that will likely limit the Bush administration's unilateral tilt.

THE STRUGGLE OVER IRAQ

The recent struggle between the United States and its security partners over how to deal with Iraq has put American strategic restraint and multilateral security cooperation to the test. Governments around the world were extremely uncomfortable with America's largely unilateral use of force. The Bush administration insisted on its right to act without UN approval, and it ultimately exercised that right. But the decision to seek Security Council support for the war, like the return to the United Nations this fall to ask for help with occupation and reconstruction, implies a growing appreciation for the costs of acting autonomously, if not a preference for placing Iraq policy in a multilateral framework.

It is not surprising that the administration, despite its biases, might be increasingly sensitive to the costs of unilateralism. A chorus of voices from the United States and abroad had warned that the expense in Iraq would be considerable. By going into Iraq largely alone, it was said, America would lack sufficient support after the war for the costly and long-term challenge of rebuilding the country. These warnings have come true. On September 7, President Bush went before the American people to ask for \$87 billion in the next fiscal year for the reconstruction of Iraq. This was on top of \$54 billion already budgeted. Very soon the cost of the Iraqi occupation will reach a quarter trillion dollars. Congress will provide funding to avoid an even worse disaster in Iraq, but a growing body of opinion insisted that the administration go back to the international community for help to fund reconstruction. Bush's unilateralism is looking increasingly expensive to skeptical Americans.

Beyond the costs involved, the diplomatic struggles over US policy in Iraq also reflect a more general debate about whether agreed-upon rules and principles will guide and limit the exercise of American power. The United Nations Security Council will continue to be a focus of this debate. To bring use of force issues into the Security Council threatens to entangle US foreign policy with the geopolitical agendas of other major states. But the Security Council offers a potential source of legitimacy for American action. The Bush administration wants to protect its freedom to act alone while giving just enough diplomatic ground to preserve the legiti-

macy of America's global position and garner support for the practical challenges of fighting terrorism. Nation building, however, has proved an increasingly messy as well as expensive business. As a result, calculations of power management compel the administration, almost in spite of itself, to make trade-offs between autonomy and the benefits derived from multilateral cooperation.

SUPPRESSING THE IMPERIAL TEMPTATION

A final source of multilateralism in US foreign policy emerges from the polity itself. America has a distinctive self-understanding about the nature of its own political order, and this has implications for how it thinks about international political order. To be sure, the United States encompasses multiple political traditions that reflect divergent and often competing ideas about how America should relate to the rest of the world. These traditions variously

counsel isolationism and activism, realism and idealism, aloofness and engagement in the conduct of foreign policy. But behind these political-intel-

lectual traditions lie deeper aspects of the nation's political identity that inform the way America seeks to build order in the larger global system.

The United States, from the Enlightenment origins of its founding, has inherited a belief that its political principles possess universal significance and scope. The republican democratic tradition that enshrines the rule of law reflects an enduring American view that polities—domestic or international—are best organized around universally applicable rules and principles of order. America's tradition of civil nationalism also reinforces an orientation that sees the rule of law as the source of legitimacy and political inclusion. This tradition, grounded in national identity, provides background support for a multilateralist foreign policy.

Granted, political leaders can campaign against multilateral institutions and treaties and win votes. America's repudiation of the League of Nations treaty in 1919 constitutes the most dramatic instance among countless examples. Granted, too, the resort to multilateralism is often begrudged or belated. When President Bush went to the United Nations in early 2003 to rally support for his Iraq policy, he did not articulate a central role for the world body in promoting international security and

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peace. He told the General Assembly that “We will work with the UN Security Council for the necessary resolutions.” But he also made clear that the “purposes of the United States should not be doubted. The Security Council resolutions will be enforced . . . or action will be unavoidable.”

In contrast, just over a decade earlier, when the elder President Bush appeared before the General Assembly to press his case for resisting Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, he offered a “vision of a new partnership of nations . . . a partnership based on consultations, cooperation and collective action, especially through international and regional organizations; a partnership united by principle and the rule of law and supported by an equitable sharing of both cost and commitment.” It would appear that presidents can articulate quite divergent visions of American foreign policy, each resonating in its own way with ideas and beliefs within the American polity. But if this is true, it means that presidents have political and intellectual space to shape policy. They are not captives of what they believe to be a unilateralist-minded public.

Indeed, recent public opinion polls show that the American public is remarkably committed to multilateralism and liberal internationalism. A poll by the German Marshall Fund and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations found that a majority of Americans favor ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court. When presented with three alternatives about the US role in solving international problems, a clear majority of Ameri-

cans said that the United States should act to solve problems together with other countries. Only 17 percent agreed that “as the sole remaining superpower the United States should continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems.” Americans also strongly support strengthening the United Nations and participating in multilateral peacekeeping operations. Politicians can champion go-it-alone diplomacy, but they are not doing so because the public demands it.

American ambivalence about multilateralism and rule-based international order will not go away, but there are limits on how far the United States can or will remove itself from such an order. A powerful strain of ideology resists the notion of being bound to international rules and institutions. The commanding position of US power today makes these isolationist and unilateralist ideas more influential. The war on terrorism, which leaves the United States feeling vulnerable in new ways, also legitimates these anti-rule-based attitudes. In the background of American foreign policy, an imperial temptation lurks.

Yet, despite these forces and impulses, the United States continues to need an international order organized around rules and institutional cooperation. America cannot achieve its goals without multilateral agreements and institutionalized partnerships. This is why the great drama of the past century persists in the twenty-first, as the United States both resists and rediscovers the international rule of law. ■