

What Bin Laden and Global Warming Have in Common

By Robert M. Cutler

Toward the end of President Bush's September 24 statement about freezing terrorists' assets, one finds the overlooked but no less remarkable assertion that the U.S. is "working closely with the United Nations, the EU and through the G-7/G-8 structure to limit the ability of terrorist organizations to take advantage of the international financial systems." Still more remarkably, he declared, "The United States has signed, but not yet ratified, two international conventions, one of which is designed to set international standards for freezing financial assets. I'll be asking members of the U.S. Senate to approve the UN convention on suppression of terrorist financing and a related convention on terrorist bombings and to work with me on implementing the legislation."

Of course, there is a big dose of *Realoekonomie* (the economic counterpart of *Realpolitik*) involved here, since the U.S. will freeze the American assets of any foreign financial institution that declines to follow the agreements that their home governments will work out with Washington. Yet it is in stark contrast to the administration's abrogation, earlier this year, of international cooperation against money laundering because of a mistaken belief that this would lead to the harmonization of national tax systems. Does it mean that the administration has suddenly abandoned the unilateralist solipsism that is the established foreign policy dogma of throwback ideologues whose vision of the twenty-first century is through a rearview mirror?

In November 1982, only a handful of weeks after the Soviets shot down the Korean Airlines plane, and in the midst of the first big push toward the Strategic Defense Initiative, the noted Harvard professor Stanley Hoffmann remarked of Ronald Reagan (at a seminar held

in the U.S. Embassy in the capital of the "evil empire"), that it was not a question of whether he would lose his ideology and become pragmatic, but rather—and because pragmatism is an ingrained aspect of the American national character—a question of when. The events of September 11 may be bringing about sea change in domestic U.S. discourse on foreign policy comparable to the one signaled by Eisenhower's defeat of Taft at the 1952 Republican presidential convention.

In the days following the bombing, Bush qualified the battle with terrorism as "war," but after several foreign ministries in Europe noted that the term "war" had a rather different connotation in the Old World, he was led to clarify what he meant. The Europeans had said that if what he meant was an intensive mobilization of efforts behind a wide scope of activities across the whole range of operations, then this was correct and called for. Despite a continuing emphasis on the emplacement of military instruments, awaiting a judgment as to their proper employment, it appears that this is in fact what Bush meant. He has found an issue, and there is no pretending it is not a vital issue, on which no foreign power will dare to disagree.

President Bush may well be focused into the foreseeable future on the terrorist threat to the United States. However, if one looks at the list of nationalities of individuals killed on September 11, it could be reasonably argued that the attacks constituted a threat to humanity at large. But can the U.S. summon up the necessary leadership to forge the international cooperation needed to meet this threat to humanity? That will be the true test of the administration's new multilateralism.

Global warming is an example of an environmental issue that is perhaps not as obviously vital to national interests as terrorism, but which—like terrorism—has the potential to affect the entire world and not just the United States. Yet such issues are more difficult to address. There is no easily defined (human) enemy against which to mobilize. A more radical shift of thinking in the administration is required to embrace this sort of issue, but nothing can be ruled out. After all, Richard Nixon went to Beijing and Ronald Reagan became a good friend of the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party.

Such a shift would have to be grounded and articulated in terms of the traditionally “constructed” national interest. Mikhail Gorbachev’s foreign policy initiative called “new political thinking” foundered for a number of reasons, but one of the important domestic reasons was his raising of the interests of humanity at large, at least in foreign policy doctrine, over the state interests of the Soviet Union. As laudable as this is—and indeed it is laudable—it overlooked the fundamental political need to

keep a domestic base of support in order to implement any policy.

Perhaps even the most stalwart of the “old political thinkers” in the U.S. foreign policy establishment will come to recognize that the national interest not only has economic and political components, but also includes more than a rhetorical invocation of universal interests. The tragic events of September 11 bring home the fact that matters affecting the fate of the whole of humanity also affect Americans, despite their genius for reinventing themselves and the world around them.

The lesson to be learned is not just that we need the rest of the world because we are inextricably entangled with it (whether by “entangling alliances” or not) and not just that the rest of the world needs us—which they do (because of the clout and leadership potential that the U.S. provides). Rather, the U.S. needs the rest of the world to need us; and, moreover, they need us to need them. Only after a reciprocal recognition of our mutual entanglement can we act together with them, and they with us. Only on this basis can

we achieve the objectives that benefit us all—the U.S. no less than any other. Indeed, that is a precise description of the dynamic that took form after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Concerning international environmental policy, the small move that is needed—no less great for its smallness—is to extend the logic of antiterrorist cooperation to nontraditional security issues. In principle, this may not be as difficult as it may seem. The terrorist threat and the threat of global warming share a surprising number of qualities. To mention only three, both are omnipresent, mainly visible in their effects, and impossible to eliminate only by monitoring state borders. In both a sociological and an ironic sense, the threats of international terrorism and global climate change are “post-modern” fraternal twins.

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