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SHORT TAKE

Good Reasons to Be Humble

A FOREIGN-POLICY AGENDA FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT

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In matters of foreign policy, the next president faces a tall order in a short time. Within days of taking office in January 2009, he or she must take a series of actions to restore America's moral authority in the world and our confidence in ourselves. Within the first year of taking office, he or she must launch a set of major initiatives, with as many partners as possible, on climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and the reform of global institutions. Through all this, the new president will continue to wrestle with Iraq, and with the ongoing crises of Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea, not to mention new ones.

The best place to start is the inaugural address. Begin with the tone. The new president must capture the pride and strength of the nation, but he or she must also recover the virtue of humility. It is time to restore the full meaning of the "city on a hill" passage so beloved of politicians. In his famous 1630 address, John Winthrop, the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, did indeed exhort his fellow colonists to think of themselves as a "city upon a hill," with the eyes of the world upon them. But too many of our leaders stop there. Winthrop went on to warn the colonists that if they did not live up to the teachings of their faith they would be shipwrecked, shamed before the world. To avoid this, Winthrop continued, the colonists must strive "to doe Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God." He was quoting the book of Micah in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Ironically, George W. Bush may have had this text in mind when he campaigned in 2000 on his view of America as "the humble superpower," or when he spoke to the naval cadets at the 2001 Annapolis graduation of the "humility of true greatness." Regardless, eight years on, it will be time for a new president to show humility rather than just talk about it. The president must ask Americans to acknowledge to ourselves and to the world that we have made serious, even tragic, mistakes in the aftermath of September 11-in invading Iraq, in condoning torture and flouting international law, and in denying the very existence of global warming until a hurricane destroyed one of our most beloved cities. The president must then announce a series of steps to return to the path we should never have left: the closing of Guantánamo, with a plan for trial or the release of every detainee there; a renewed commitment to our treaty obligations under the Geneva Conventions and to the Torture Convention vis-à-vis U.S. interrogations of all prisoners under our control; and a pledge to uphold the rule of law in international affairs. Finally, the president should convene a bipartisan commission on how the United States should cooperate with the International Criminal Court.

Announcing these actions will not be enough. We must take responsibility for what we have done if we expect others to believe that we will do better from now on. We do not need to grovel. But we should make clear that our hubris, as in the old Greek myths, has diminished us and led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths. It is now time to work with the United Nations, the European Union, Russia, and all directly affected countries to develop not only a plan for the stabilization and withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, but also a plan for the entire region, from India to Israel. It may take one year or five years to leave Iraq; what is vital is to have a strategy to ensure that Iraq remains stable and guarantees basic human rights.

After the inauguration, the president must charge the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the director of the Environmental Protection Agency, and the leaders of all the relevant committees in Congress to get to work on three major initiatives.

The first would be to create an E-8, a group like the G-8 but consisting of the countries responsible for over 80 percent of the world's carbon emissions: the United States, the EU, Japan, China, Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa. This group would be charged with negotiating the outlines of an agreement on climate change, one that sets actual emissions targets as early as possible. Such an agreement should also include both developed and developing countries, with appropriate recognition of their different needs, and with provisions for the development and transfer of green technologies from the developed to the developing world. Finally, the agreement must be both monitored and enforced. If these eight countries can agree, they can break the political logjam on global warming. The United States should take the lead in creating the E-8, but to avoid dominating the proceedings the United States should invite another country, like Canada, to host it and chair the first meeting.

The second initiative would be to tighten the rules against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and to live up to our part of the bargain in the original Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. This means that we must begin to move toward abolishing our own nuclear weapons. Article VI of the Nonproliferation Treaty requires the five nuclear-armed signatories "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear-arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control." Former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former Senator Sam Nunn have written a public appeal explaining that we cannot expect states to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons if we are not willing to give up our own. Unless we take dramatic and visible steps with the other nuclear powers to reduce our arsenals, we will be facing a nuclear Middle East and then a world in which acquiring nuclear weapons becomes a proof of power and prestige.

The third initiative would make room for more countries at the global table of power. We are asking a world of 191 countries to live with a decision-making system designed for a world of just over 50 countries in 1945. We are asking countries like Japan, Germany, India, China, Brazil, Mexico, all of Africa and all of the Muslim world to accept decisions made at the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, and other institutions where they have almost no representation. It is not surprising that our talk of democracy often rings hollow. The next president must demonstrate that the United States is not like other great powers, even imperial powers, of the past. We must be willing to make room for other countries in the councils of decision on principle because we know it is both the right and the smart thing to do. In practice that means expanding the UN Security Council and adopting a different system of voting at the IMF and the World Bank. But it will also mean creating new informal groupings of nations, like the E-8 on climate change. The place to start is the G-8, currently composed of the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia. We should expand it to a G-12, a G-15, or a G-20 to reflect important regional powers around the world. The actual number and composition matter less than the principle; the final result is bound to involve a certain amount of horse-trading. But the sooner we get started the better, and the United States must take the lead.

A tall order indeed. The good news is that this agenda is a plan of positive action. It is a plan for a can-do America, rather than the can't-do America we seem to have become. To succeed in changing our image in the world, the next president must first change our image of ourselves: rally our spirits, rebuild our confidence, and restore our faith. Not in America, as such, but rather in the idea of America, the idea of a nation founded on a set of universal values-self-evident truths-that come not from blood or soil or skin color or wealth, but from the fact of humanity. It is the idea of a nation bound together not by territory or religion or ethnicity but by a self-conscious commitment to shared values, for ourselves and for all peoples. We cannot be that nation unless we are prepared to live up to those values, especially in times of danger, when we are most tempted to compromise.

If the next president can reaffirm that idea, without hubris and with the humility to recognize how often we fall short of our own aspirations, he or she can create the foundation for a new beginning. We can meet other nations on new terms, willing to acknowledge the beam in our own eye before pointing out the faults of others. As a German friend of mine often tells me, behind every America-hater is a disappointed America-lover. Many people in many countries are willing to work with us once again, even to follow us some of the time, if they can be convinced that we are trying to follow our own principles. It is up to the new president to lead the way.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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