

The International Herald Tribune
<http://www.iht.com>

May 17, 2007, page 6

Reviving America's Ideals

Anne-Marie Slaughter

American foreign policy has lost its compass. Voters across the United States, increasingly opposed to the war in Iraq and increasingly certain that the country as a whole is going in the wrong direction, are uncertain about the role that America should play in the world.

Some argue not only for pulling out of Iraq but for pulling back more generally, concentrating on America's broken health care and educational systems rather than on building democracy half a world a way.

Others would forsake a values-based foreign policy altogether and return to Kissingerian realism, in which the nature of a particular foreign government is far less important than its power and its ability to help further U.S. national interests. History tells us, however, that neither of these approaches has much staying power with the American public.

Isolationism is a nonstarter in a 21st century world of intense economic and security interdependence. And it is the backlash against Kissingerian realism - against the very idea that U.S. foreign policy would not be guided in some way by American values - that fed the neoconservative movement in the first place.

A more sustainable approach must start with a different question. How do we stand for our values in the world in a way that is consistent with our values?

The first step is to agree on what those values are. If asked to list them, virtually all Americans would talk about the belief in liberty and democracy. Most would talk about equality; many would add justice. These core values have been enshrined in two centuries of civics classes, Fourth of July speeches, inaugural addresses, poems, anthems, pledges and creeds.

I would add three more: tolerance, humility and faith. Tolerance because liberty and democracy are impossible without it. Humility because it is deeply engrained in our founders' vision of the American mission in the world; because it is indispensable to good leadership; and because it is the flip side of our belief in progress. And faith because faith in our ideals and in the very idea of progress is at the core of what many other peoples see as a distinctively American optimism.

These values are not abstract concepts. They have taken on specific meanings through the stories that make up American history, stories of struggle and persistence against tall odds.

Stories of the Puritans, the Quakers, the Catholics, the Presbyterians, the Mennonites, the Moravians, the Lutherans, the Amish, as well as Jews, Muslims and countless other sects seeking religious freedom.

Stories of a relatively small number of propertied white men seeking to govern themselves in America's early days, and of white men of lesser means, black men, and women of all races and means determined to secure the right to vote in the years that followed.

Stories of tolerance, a necessary tool to weld a great multicultural nation together. Stories of humility, like the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony offering his shining vision of a city on a hill but telling its occupants to "walk humbly with their god." And stories of faith in our values, in our can-do spirit and in our belief that we can be a force for good in the world.

An American foreign policy that is conducted consistently with our values would look to our past not to glory in it, but rather to remind ourselves and the world at large of our imperfections, our mistakes and our struggles to live up to our own standards.

It would see the United States as a leading democracy, but hardly as the only model for new democracies. Instead, it would work with the European Union, Japan, India, South Africa, Mexico, Turkey, Indonesia, Brazil, Argentina, South Korea and countless other countries that are trying to achieve liberty, democracy, justice, equality and tolerance on their own terms.

It would remember our founders' creed: Our values are not only American values, but universal values.

Above all, a value-based foreign policy must move beyond rhetoric. It must meet the challenges of the 21st century in a host of very specific ways that themselves demonstrate how much we value liberty, democracy, justice, equality, tolerance, humility and faith.

It will be a long road back to the high ground, but our true values are still the best compass.