

Morality and Foreign Policy Realpolitik Revisited

Kenneth M. Jensen and Elizabeth P. Faulkner
Editors



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Preface

Is there an ethical vacuum in Washington? This subject, raised at a spring 1989 public workshop in Atlanta, Georgia, cosponsored by the United States Institute of Peace and the Carter Center of Emory University, was frankly meant to be provocative. The panel on Morality and Foreign Policy was asked to consider the moral implications of three decisions, each of which had adversely affected U.S. friends abroad.

In the 1950s, the panel was reminded, American politicians and the Voice of America encouraged Eastern Europeans to "roll back the Iron Curtain." But when the Hungarians rose against their Communist regime, the U.S. administration, fearful of starting World War III, watched the rebellion die under the tracks of Soviet tanks. Two decades later, the United States and Iran encouraged another popular uprising by covertly pouring arms and money into the Kurdish brushfire war against Iraq. This policy lasted until the Shah of Iran decided to mend his fences with Baghdad. Washington promptly abandoned the Kurdish independence struggle. More recently American foreign policymakers downplayed the malevolent Syrian role in the mayhem in Lebanon, a friendly Arab country, on the grounds that it did not pose a "direct threat" to U.S. security. What, the panel was asked, did these decisions say about the moral content of U.S. foreign policy?

Somewhat surprisingly, the scholars, human rights advocates, and foreign policy experts participating in the workshop responded with little more than an exasperated shrug of their shoulders. However, Dayle E. Powell, director of the Conflict Resolution Program at the Carter Center, faulted Washington for leaving “complex moral analysis” out of its decision making. Washington seems to operate on the assumption that “the world is our chessboard,” and most foreign countries are “pawns in a larger game,” she complained.

Lack of animation about this question did not carry over to the rest of the discussion. The workshop, in fact, overflowed with indignation—but its primary target was the intellectual architect of U.S. foreign policy after World War II. Former career diplomat George Kennan has been widely praised for articulating the containment strategy that checked the spread of Stalinism in the 1950s. However, according to David Little, a former Institute distinguished fellow and now its senior scholar, Kennan concurrently persuaded the American foreign policy establishment that ethics play no proper role in national security considerations. Kennan’s hardnosed *realpolitik* is even now “enormously influential” in Washington, Little told the workshop.

Giving an example of what he sees as Kennan’s amoral guidelines, Little quoted from a 1947 policy paper in which Kennan argued that huge economic and political disparities between the United States and much of postwar Asia were unavoidable. “We should stop putting ourselves in the position of being our brother’s keeper and refrain from offering moral and ideological advice,” Kennan wrote. “We should cease to talk about vague and—for the Far East—unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are hampered by idealistic slogans, the better off we are.”

The Japanese success story—not only economic but political—and recent calls for democracy in other Asian

countries demonstrate the fallacy of Kennan's belief that American values would not flourish elsewhere, Little maintained. In his view, Kennan also failed to recognize that the American dedication to democratic principles lends U.S. security interests an inseparable moral dimension. "The heart of Kennan's problem," Little charged, was his overemphasis on the so-called "necessity defense," a time-honored but rarely applied principle that places survival above ethical considerations. "For George Kennan, international relations are really nothing but a long dismal series of 'necessity' situations," in which morality goes by the wayside, Little summed up.

Kennan's sole defender on the panel, Professor Theodore Weber from the theological faculty at Emory, vigorously denied that he was a "consistent political amoralist." Kennan spoke "mainly about the ends of foreign policy, not the means," but he would react with a "great deal of outrage" to behavior unbecoming a democracy, Weber insisted. The reason Kennan wanted U.S. foreign policy to "proceed in terms of power relations and national interests and not in terms of democratization and human rights," Weber held, was his conviction that any other course would be rejected by other nations and peoples. According to Weber, Kennan regarded as "presumptuous" Americans' trying to tell other societies, of which they know little, that democracy is best for them; moreover, he believed that these societies would distrust the U.S. motives. "They would say, 'Oh come on, [the Americans] can't really mean [their enthusiasm for democracy]. The U.S. must be carving out its spheres of influence, and this is just window dressing,'" Weber paraphrased Kennan's arguments.

But Kennan's critics were not mollified. A severe critic of the purported U.S. penchant for realpolitik was Richard Joseph, a fellow at the Carter Center and director of its Governance in Africa Program. Locked in the cold war, the United States automatically opposed Third World governments that were supported by the Soviet Union, Joseph

charged. The strategy was the apex of the “nonethical approach of foreign policy” and, in Joseph’s view, was “highly destructive to the emerging African nations.” Yet when it suited vested American interests, Joseph complained, Washington could urge other countries to elect a “morally based” government, as it did not long ago in Panama. “We are very selective about it,” Joseph said. The Noriega regime, he added, was “not the only one which has been involved in drugs and falsified elections,” but the others have not come under U.S. pressure.

Former Sudanese Foreign Minister Francis Deng, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and, at the time of the workshop, a distinguished fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, countered the claim—which Little had attributed to Kennan—that nations do not share the same moral values. Using several folktales and other anecdotes from the Dinka culture, Deng asserted that while each society has particular “values around which it structures its social relationships and the whole purpose of life,” all recognize the same fundamental principles of human dignity. These principles may be expressed in a variety of disparate ways and may be realized in varying degrees, but they are universal. He went on to tell a story about trying to get his editors to understand that his use of the word *gentleman* in describing a Dinka with certain values was not merely an attempt to make him seem like an Englishman. To Deng’s mind, the word expressed human values that transcend culture.

Kennan’s injunctions have been eroding for some time, according to Powell. The debate over whether U.S. advocacy of human rights is good foreign policy “has been won,” she pointed out, and—at least with respect to the Soviet Union—defense of humanitarian concerns has been “an area of continuity” between the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Powell suggested two reasons for the evolution of the new moral environment. One was an “equal necessity” for peace that has been imposed on all nations, big and small, by the atomic age. The fact that “humanity can no

longer accept the existence of war as preordained," Powell suggested, has spurred such nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution as the Aquino revolution in the Philippines and the Solidarity movement in Poland.

The other key element in the new climate, in Powell's analysis, is the U.S. defense of human rights everywhere, which placed new responsibility on the executive. "Jimmy Carter . . . had the view that the U.S. president was not in office to simply serve the needs of U.S. citizens," but was also duty-bound to "compare U.S. interests with [the] interests of other countries," Powell argued. Since then, she said, "the human rights discussion has really begun to alter the [traditional] moral equation" in international affairs. Weber summed up the evolving American ethos in similar terms. The U.S. president, he said, "has moral responsibility to look after [American] interests, but that's not the whole of it. At a minimum, there are responsibilities to those who are affected by our exercise of power. To decide that our own people have more value than others—that is a religious decision."

Changing expectations in the U.S. policy-making community have been accompanied by unsettling questions. For instance, one of the participants asked, would the East-West thaw wipe out American foreign aid to Third World countries, which Congress has traditionally authorized as a defense against communism? Whatever the future brings, the panel agreed, the answers are not to be found in the old arsenal of postwar policy. "Kennan reflected his era, which was dominated by the cold war," Joseph concluded. "We are entering a new era, and we need new Kennans."

The political transformations that have occurred in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the past few years do, indeed, call for a reevaluation of the relationship between morality and U.S. foreign policy. The cold war landscape that Kennan surveyed is now almost unrecognizable, and his caution against America's talking to other nations about such "vague" objectives as "human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization" no longer seems

appropriate. As the number of democratic nations grows, so too does the likelihood that foreign policies will be expected to display ethical as well as realpolitik considerations. In short, the issues raised at this public workshop have never been more relevant than today.

This publication contains the text of the discussion at the Morality and Foreign Policy Public Workshop. It begins with David Little's extended remarks on the question; continues with commentary by Francis Deng, Theodore Weber, Richard Joseph, and Dayle E. Powell; and then moves to a general discussion. Included as an appendix is a pertinent article by George F. Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," which first appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in its Winter 1985/86 issue.

The Institute is especially grateful to the staff of the Carter Center for hosting the event and for making important contributions to this lively debate about the proper place of moral considerations in American statecraft.

Samuel W. Lewis, President
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