

Idealist vs. Realist Foreign Policy

By Haviland Smith

American Diplomacy: April 2011

Haviland Smith is a retired CIA station chief. A graduate of Dartmouth, he served in the Army Security Agency, undertook Russian regional studies at London University, and then joined the CIA. He served in Prague, Berlin, Langley, Beirut, Tehran, and Washington. During those 25 years, he worked primarily in Soviet and East European operations. He was also chief of the counterterrorism staff and executive assistant to Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Frank Carlucci.

What we are seeing today in the Arab World is at least partly the result of underlying ambivalence in US foreign policy since World War II. During that period we have vacillated between a “realist” foreign policy that purports to reflect our national interests and an “idealist” policy that purports to reflect our higher values. Changes in administrations, and thus policy, have resulted in a practical, observable ambivalence.

The success of any country’s foreign policy lies at least partly in its consistency and in the ability of other nations to “read” that policy on a long-term basis. In that regard, an ambivalent policy is absolutely the hardest to read and deal with.

During the Cold War, there was little misunderstanding between America and the Soviet Union. Both sides understood the other’s policies. The Soviets understood that we were committed to containment and that Mutually Assured Destruction was an absolute. We both believed that if we were to get too aggressive, those policies would go into effect, resulting in a nuclear holocaust.

It’s a pretty straightforward issue for a country to identify its national interests both at home and abroad. Those reflect the country’s economic, cultural, political and social goals. In short, they represent the reason for the existence of the state.

Foreign policy in any given country at any time is a reflection of either the national interests of that country, or the values of its peoples. It is where the two are combined or conflated that troubles begin. In a purely logical way how can you have a consistent foreign policy that is based on national interests and on higher values when changing from a liberal to a conservative administration? The two are far too often in conflict!

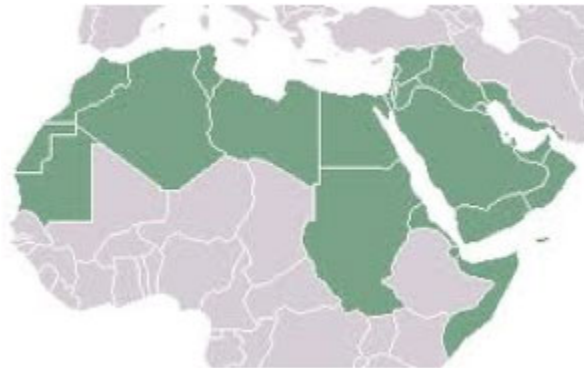
There are essentially two distinct approaches to foreign policy. First, a “realist” foreign policy places national interests and security above ideology, ethics and morality. The second or “idealist” school posits that foreign policy must reflect the ethical, moral and philosophical values of the country.

Under Woodrow Wilson, “Idealist” foreign policy did not accomplish what it was designed to do which was to eliminate wars in Europe after WWI. As a result, there

have been modifications, which have approached the problem by creating international mechanisms like NATO, the UN, and GATT. That seems to be working a bit better as we have not had a third world war in Europe.

Since the Second World War, the United States has bragged increasingly about American “exceptionalism” – the notion that our system is superior to any other in the world. The backbone of that claim lies in our liberal democracy where “liberal” is defined, inter alia, as “favorable to or in accord with concepts of maximum individual freedom possible, especially as guaranteed by law and secured by governmental protection of civil liberties.” Exceptionalism has been the basis of our “idealist” foreign policies. We have had a foreign policy that sporadically has been based on our own principles, but also on our national interests. Unfortunately, foreign policy is at its worst when it vacillates between “realist” and “idealist.”

One of the biggest complaints that Arabs have about US policy is the fact that we have traditionally supported, or at best turned a blind eye to some of the most brutal dictatorships in the world. Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, Iran, the list goes on and on. The history of the post-WWII Arab world is littered with dictators or autocrats. Did we support them because we liked the stability they provided? Or was it their oil, or their support for us in the Cold War, or their grudging tolerance of our Palestine policy? Never mind that it was at the cost of freedom for their peoples.



The Arab League

So there we were, supporting and selling the ideals of liberal democracy while at the same time doing everything undemocratic that we possibly could. We were in the throes of the most “realist” period of foreign policy imaginable. We did what was in our national interest, but not what we said we were all about morally, ethically and philosophically. And we did that for an Arab world that did not fail to see just how hypocritical we really were.

Then, the “Arab Spring” hit Tunisia. Faced with mounting evidence of Arab discontent, we have turned 180 degrees to a new “idealist” foreign policy in which we have sought to support all of those peoples in Islam on whom we had turned our back

during our “realist” period. We also turned on all those undemocratic leaders we had supported for 75 years!

Are we offended that so many states in the Arab World are upset with us; or that they are apparently going their own way without our counsel; or that we have almost zero credibility and less than zero influence in the region?

We are paying the price for the vagaries of foreign policy inconsistency. Over the decades, we have tried to sell Arabs a bill of goods. Claiming an “idealist” foreign policy, we have said that we represent an exceptional, liberal democracy that should be the envy of the world and a model for its further development. At the same time, we employed a “realist” foreign policy that, in our ongoing reaction to emerging Arab yearnings for self-determination, is being show to have supported every evil thing in Arab life that we have claimed to oppose.

We have been playing both ends shamelessly against the middle and we have now been caught. There are good and bad things about both the “idealist” and “realist” schools of foreign policy. If we were as powerful and macho as we like to think we are, the “realist” policy might be an option. Given today’s world, it is not and for a power on the wane, “idealist” has its advantages. The true “shining city on the hill” requires no aggressiveness, no hypocrisy, only that we look and behave like a liberal democracy!

Obama’s “idealist” foreign policy in the Arab World now stands in direct contradistinction to the “realist” policies of George W. Bush and we are accused of hypocrisy. It would appear that our Obama foreign policy has completely replaced that of Bush. The question of which of those policies has the greater chance of success is not the pragmatic issue today. That issue is pretty straightforward: What will be the practical effect of this changeover from “pragmatic” to “idealist”?

Much of the Arab World is what it is today because of its exposure to western Imperialism during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. During those times, western imperial powers created “states” to suit their own needs. Consciously or unconsciously, they bunched inherently hostile tribal, ethnic and religious groups into single states. That resulted in the creation of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, to mention only those now actively bedeviling us, states that contained within them enough hostility to remain perpetually in a precarious state of instability and thus, perhaps more easily governed. In some of those states, leadership was taken over by minority groups that could only govern repressively.

Incidentally, those are precisely the kinds of states to which Al Qaida is attracted.

So, the Arab World is composed of many “states” that up until now have been governable only through repression. That is the region into which we have so naively intruded. Apparently, we have either been disinterested in the realities of the region, or contemptuous of them. With American political leadership that believed so strongly in our exceptionalism, we thought we could be successful despite those realities!

Of course, the verdict is not yet known. Perhaps Arab self-determination will lead to some sort of governance that will be acceptable to such diverse and hostile local groupings. Or Perhaps ancient animosities will prevail.

What we can safely say right now is that it is the United States that has let this genie out of the bottle. With that genie has gone the old stability that was maintained, to our net advantage, without the consent of the governed. And stability is a primary requirement for progress.

In a country governed by idealism, that was almost certainly the right thing to have done. However, the world under discussion here is neither idealistic nor democratic. If history offers wisdom, it is difficult to see how things will improve, either for us, or for the peoples of the Arab world.

If one eliminates repressive rule, as we are now so fervently advocating, the only way to stability lies in consensus and self-determination, neither of which seems like a logical winner in the religiously, ethnically and tribally divided and hostile Arab world.

Finally, what does our new “idealist” foreign policy portend for the future? Will we broaden our humanitarian mission to other countries where the citizens are threatened by their governments? There certainly are a lot of them around the world. How does China fit into that? North Korea? Syria? And what about all similar countries in Africa?

Just what will our criteria for involvement be? Precisely what will cause us to intervene? Will we say it has to be something important, like oil or the end of a hateful dictatorship we really don't like? Or will we stay flexible and only intervene when it suits us politically?