

Great Decisions #1
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Great Decisions Television 2004 Election Year Special
Topic 1: Unilateralism vs. Multilateralism

Male announcer: American foreign policy in an age of terror and weapons of mass destruction is scrambling to find its feet. Where should we go from here?

Coming up next on a Great Decisions special 2004. Great Decisions is produced by the Foreign Policy Association. Funding for Great Decisions is provided by the Citigroup Private Bank, one of the largest private banking businesses in the world. The Citigroup Private Bank provides personalized wealth management services for clients globally. Captioning and audio description provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

And now in our New York studio, here is Peter Krogh.

Krogh: Our country today is unusually preoccupied with its standing in the world, the security of our homeland, the scope of our liberties, and the strength of our economy. These special editions of Great Decisions we now bring to you address these subjects from diverse perspectives.

We take you first to the crucible of American foreign policy. Two traditions emanate from that crucible. One is unilateral. The other is multilateral.

The unilateral approach--America as Lone Ranger--historically trumps multilateralism. For most of our history, we have acted unilaterally, from our Declaration of Independence to the rounding out of the American continent, to our construction of the Panama Canal, to our entry into World War I as an associated, not an Allied power. It was only after World War II that multilateralism gained the upper hand. Multilateralism, institutionalized, for example, in the United Nations and in NATO, has had a brief and arguably productive 60-year history. It helped mightily to win the Cold War. Recently, that brief history was overtaken by a reversion to unilateralism, showcased in the country's invasion of Iraq and enshrined in what is now called the Bush Doctrine, a doctrine which asserts America's predominance in the world and claims a right to wage preemptive or preventive war. When is unilateralism the best, perhaps the only way to go? What do we gain by it? What price do we pay for it? Is a doctrine of preventive war sustainable? Or does it lead to global anarchy? How best can we reserve our country's privileged position in the world?

Joining me to discuss these questions are Richard Holbrooke, former assistant secretary of state and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; and John Whitehead, former deputy secretary of state. Gentlemen, welcome to this special edition of Great Decisions 2004. Richard and

John, our good friend Henry Kissinger once said he sold his books by the pound, but recently, he wrote a very short book that was entitled Does America Need A Foreign Policy? Of course he answered it in the affirmative because he does foreign policy. It would have to be a yes answer. But the title raises a rather significant question, which is, what should be our purposes in the world? What should we be attempting to achieve in our conduct of foreign affairs? What are its highest goals? Richard?

>> There's no single answer, Peter, to that question because our nation is so large, has so many different interests that one has to take into a large number of issues. First of all, obviously, any president, any administration has to protect and defend the United States. And since September 11, 2001, that obligation has taken on an extraordinary new dimension. They call it the war on terror, but it's much more complicated than that. Secondly, one has to promote and protect American values, and in my view, it is a valid American objective to promote those values internationally. Although that was a long-standing debate, as you well remember when you were dean at Georgetown, between the so-called Realpolitik school and what was then the liberal school that promoted human rights. That debate is over, and the Realpolitik school has been largely dumped. Third, you have economic interests. Fourth, you have strategic interests. To maintain a balance of power in the world is in our own national interest. It's a very multigauged goal.

>> Krogh: John, what would be your response?

>> Well, I'm a multilateralist and not a unilateralist. We are the most powerful nation in the world. We are the only superpower. We're the strongest in military power, the strongest in economic power, and we can do, more or less, whatever we want to do in the world. But it seems to me, that's an opportunity to be--to look more broadly beyond just the interests of the United States, because if other countries fail, if there's terror in the world, we lose too. And so we've got to think in terms of the world rather than in terms of just what's good for America, it seems to me.

>> Krogh: As you say, John, it's clear that we are the superpower, the unipower. The French believe we're a hyperpower. And we can do, well, almost all we want to do, and we are faced with a combination of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction that pose monumental challenges to us, but do we need to announce that we're number one as we have done?

>> No.

>> Krogh: Do we need to announce that, or should we simply let our actions speak for themselves?

>> It's--it doesn't make much sense to go around saying you're number one. You either are, or you aren't. It's a perceptual issue. I agree with completely with John Whitehead that multilateral international positions are almost always the best. There are times--and it has to be admitted--when any president's obligation is to do something even though the rest of the world does not necessarily support it. But to go back to your introduction, I think the fundamental difference between

the current foreign policy and the traditional American foreign policy that existed from Franklin Roosevelt through Bill Clinton for every president, including Ronald Reagan, was that in the traditional American foreign policy since 1941, the basic mantra was, "Multilateral when we can; unilateral only when we must." And in the last few years, this has been completely flipped on its head. It's, "Unilateral when we can; multilateral only when, gosh, darn it, damn it, we have no other choice." And this is most--best illustrated by the issue of the United Nations. The U.N. is a flawed organization. There are problems with it bureaucratically and structurally. We all know that. So every administration faces a fundamental question on the U.N.: do you want to strengthen it, or do you want to weaken it? John and I both feel strongly that U.N.--American interests are best served, global interests best served when we try to strengthen the U.N. This administration has undermined, underfunded, and weakened the U.N., and in my view, to our own detriment.

>> Krogh: What circumstances, though, do you believe would justify a unilateral action on our part? Let's take it up to the top and say, what would justify, in your view, a preemptive or preventive strike against another country?

>> I can see occasions when the United States is threatened and immediate action needs to be taken, but hardly ever, and I would exhaust every peaceful effort before I would ever believe that we should make a move that leads to war. The prospect--Pearl Harbor. If you'd known that the Japanese were coming, you would have acted preemptively. That's--and under Article 51 of the U.N. charter, that's a legitimate action.

>> Krogh: Well, once again, we've always had preemption in our quiver. It's always been quietly there. Does it make a lot of sense to bruit it about and to adopt it as a doctrine?

>> The problem in Iraq--and we have to be very clear on this--we have a tremendous number of issues in the world today: terrorism, HIV/AIDS, issues all the over the world, the Mideast, but Iraq is now at a level as serious as Vietnam was 30, 35 years ago. The problem in Iraq was that even if you supported the goal of getting rid of Saddam Hussein, which I did--I thought Saddam Hussein was the worst conceivable leader and very dangerous--the decision to go to war at that time in that way created a crisis for the United States. We created our own crisis. We predicated the war on intelligence, which was wrong. Now, if we knew that he actually had nuclear weapons and he was a direct threat to us, that would've been different, but the intelligence was wrong, and the result was that we've gotten ourselves into a situation where exercising a doctrine which, as you said in your introduction, is part of American tradition has gotten us into an extraordinarily isolated and dangerous position, and in Iraq itself, the situation is deteriorating as we speak with tremendous risks for us.

>> Krogh: Former Secretary of State George Schulz has argued that we really walked the last mile with the United Nations, that there were all these resolutions out there. They were being flaunted by Saddam Hussein. Someone had to call him to account, and what we did was basically what the United Nations should have done. What do you think about that?

>> Well, I think we should do more to support the United Nations and not to disagree with it. It is the only hope for world peace for the long run, it seems to me, or something like it, and we need to support it and believe in it and lead it. It's in our interests to lead it rather than to let it flounder, and it flounders because its member states don't support--sufficiently support it, and we should be taking the lead. I think that would be the road to more lasting peace.

>> Krogh: Richard, I want to make sure that you don't get a stolen base here on the export of our values to the world. You've felt we ought to be doing that. We ought to be promoting our values in the world. You may recall that John Quincy Adams, one of our wisest secretaries of state, advised against that. He said that we should wish well the liberty of others but be the champion and vindicator only of our own and that we should not, in addition, go abroad in search of dragons to slay. Is it essential for us to achieve our goals in foreign policy to export democracy?

>> Well, first of all, he said that in 1823, and the world has changed a lot since then. And that quote, which is both eloquent and important--

>> Krogh: That's why I remembered it, Richard.

>> You--I just don't agree with the way it has been misapplied by so many people, including people I greatly respect at times, to current issues. Let's take--let's take Darfur. Here you have an extraordinary situation going on. Secretary Colin Powell has called the situation Darfur genocide. That is the first time since the Genocide Convention was signed by the United Nations in 1948 that the United States' secretary of state has termed an event genocide. I was in Darfur just a few days ago and in western Sudan. Darfur is an area the size of France. 1 1/2 million to 2 million people are in enormous danger of starvation. They're being raped. They're being driven out of their villages. We're not going abroad to search for dragons to slay, but we should be doing more, and in fact, I am glad Powell said what he said, but I think we ought to be doing more on that issue, not less, and I don't think that violates--that is not interventionism; that is American leadership, and it goes back to what John said earlier. America did not have, when Quincy Adams made that statement, the same role in the world it has today, and with that great leadership comes, in my view, responsibility.

>> I agree. We've said we are a superpower. We are the superpower. But my experience is that power is something that should be harbored and not used, to have it, but not to use it, because when you use your power, you begin to lose it. The more you use it, the more people resent it, and pretty soon, there builds up an opposition that it becomes stronger than you think. If you look back to other empires in the world, back to the Roman Empire, for example, they--Romans controlled the world or controlled a good part of the world with their power, and they lost that. They crumbled and they fell because people opposed them all over where their reign was taking place. And so I think we've got to be very careful. The fact that we have the power is an asset, but that doesn't compel us to use it, and it should make us use it very cautiously. Everybody knows we have it and that we could do things, but that's the time when we can really be influential with

others and persuade them to become democracies instead of ordering-- ordering them to become democracies.

>> And, you know, in a certain sense, Peter, John's comment brings us right back to Iraq. You asked--you quoted George Schulz as saying we'd exhausted every other means before we used force. That's a debatable proposition. I don't think so. I think that the inspectors were in there, and as it turns out, they were looking for something that, in fact, was not there. And had they continued to look, and had the world begun to realize that there weren't weapons of mass destruction, I think the events would have turned out very differently.

>> Krogh: Well, this is water over the dam, but what do you think its impact is for the future conduct of our foreign policy?

>> Iraq?

>> Krogh: Yeah, obviously we've gotten burned there.

>> There's been great damage, perhaps irreparable damage, to the very thesis under which it was conducted. That is that preemption is going to be virtually impossible next time around, that the intelligence of the United States which was always believed--when Adlai Stevenson went to the U.N. in October of '62 and said, "Here are the missile photographs," everyone believed him. When Colin Powell went in February of 2003, showed photographs, people sort of believed him. Next time around, since those photographs were not correct, what's going to happen? So it has damaged the very thing it was trying to assert.

>> Krogh: The United States is now at its zenith as a world power, but our international standing is at its lowest level, historically, really unprecedented. Was this inevitable, John, just because we're so powerful, people don't like us, and they fear us, or have we tripped up along the way?

>> Well, I think we've been too--we've confronted our friends in a way that has turned them against us, and the hatred that exists towards the United States these days around the world, as a former diplomat, it's horrifying to me to see it exist. The State Department should be--its target should be to make friends, not to make enemies, and we have been creating enemies. On the question of Iraq, I think it is a terrible dilemma, and the violence seems to be getting greater, but I would point out that it's not violence directed against the United States any longer. It's violence against the temporary government that we have set up, and therefore, it has become a civil war, not a war against the United States. And I think, therefore, our mission there is to protect--to hope that the civil war subsides as civil wars sometimes do. And I hope that that will happen, that the majority of Iraqis like it better without a Saddam Hussein than they would with a Saddam Hussein and that eventually, that view will prevail and for us to not take such a strong position ourselves that we try to influence the situation and therefore turn all Iraqis against us and become the problem rather than the potential solution.

>> Krogh: Richard, if you were secretary of state--and it's been bruited about that you might have an interest in that position-- what would be your top priorities? What would be your top

foreign policy priorities?

>> Aside from Iraq and the Arab-Israeli issue, which require attention on day one of the next administration, I would put at the top of the list HIV/AIDS. It is killing 12,000 to 15,000 people a day worldwide, spreading at that same rate. President Bush put forward some highly commendable programs, and America has taken the kind of leadership role which, in fact, in this case, is consistent with our values, and that needs to be accelerated, and I would put that at the top of the agenda. And I want to underscore, it's not just an African problem. It's spreading in south Asia very rapidly, and the countries of greatest growth in the world on a population basis are Ukraine, Russia, Estonia, and it's spreading back into Western Europe. So that would be at the top of the list. Africa as a general issue is--gets so much neglect, and it requires so much attention. We cannot go on seeing one of the continents--the cradle of civilization being destroyed. Then there are all the traditional issues. Our bilateral relationships with China remain of the utmost importance, and they have to be micromanaged. We need to strengthen our alliances after the period of strain, which you alluded to earlier. And there's a--what I would call the traditional panoply of issues. But I would single out HIV/AIDS as the one that requires the greatest attention of the--what you might call the global issues.

>> Krogh: John, what would be your priorities?

>> I'd like to carry on Dick's comments about China. We agree. We disagree on a number of things, Dick and I, but we agree completely, I think, on China. If we can establish excellent relationships with China for the future of the kind that we have had with other nations in the past, I think we sort of guarantee the dominance in the world that the United States now has. The two economies fit together beautifully. We can help them. They can help us. The military fit together I think any new administration will be very wise, looking ahead 20, 25, 50 years, that a liaison between China and the United States will be able to solve together a great many problems in the world that will come up.

>> Krogh: Leadership is another word that's frequently invoked now, laying out our foreign policy. We got to lead here. We've got to lead here--leadership. Is that important, or can we pass the baton and have some other people do some leading?

>> Leadership is terribly important, and I hope we have our share of it in America in the years ahead. It seems to me the world cries out for leadership. Where are the great leaders of the past that existed 50 years ago around the world? We don't see them. We don't seem them in the United States, and we don't seem them around the world. I think most people would agree with that. We've got to encourage people to take leadership positions. We've got to challenge younger people to aspire to leadership.

>> Krogh: And maybe other countries.

>> And all over the world--all over the world, we've got to get people to aspire to leadership. I think people find the leadership offices politically in the political world so difficult and so personally

damaging or potentially damaging to reputations and to--and in so many ways that they simply don't aspire to it. Remember the era 50 years ago when every mother wanted her son to be president someday? And every son was told to aspire to be president. Well, now I don't think you find every mother telling her son to aspire to be president. It's a very tough job, and so are all kinds of other leadership positions, not only in the political world but in business and in every walk of life.

>> You know, look, I remember in 1993, '95, when Bosnia was the critical issue in the world. And the Clinton administration had just begun office. In 1993, '94, Clinton and the administration were criticized for not exercising enough leadership. Then after the Dayton Peace Agreements, after we bombed in Bosnia and then in Kosovo and ended that war, we were criticized for too much leadership. We're going to get criticized either way. I would rather be criticized for too much leadership than too little leadership, but leadership means people have to follow you, which goes right back to the beginning. If you do things unilaterally and you don't have enough followers, you'll pay a price. The other point to underscore is what John alluded to. American leadership is an indispensable ingredient in the world because of our strength, our resources, the values of our ideas. We must be that beacon of liberty and freedom that has attracted people from all over the world for several centuries. But local leadership is also critical. On the level of corruption, the bad management of some of the world's most difficult countries from Latin America to Africa to south Asia and into east Asia is a serious problem, and American leadership cannot make up for that problem.

>> Krogh: We're almost out of time here, but a lot of this seems to get back to style. How do you translate power into consensus? That involves a certain diplomatic style. Do you think we've been wanting there?

>> You have to listen more to other people to begin with, and you have to be ready--you have to choose between doing things exactly the way you want to do them and having no one do them with you, just like--just like kids in school, or getting together with people and saying, "What's our common goal?" You can't be--you can't just say, "This is the way we're gonna do it," and expect people to automatically follow you.

>> I pointed out the Cold War as an example of what diplomacy and the careful use of power can accomplish. For 45 years, bipartisan--both parties kept the Cold War cold. It was a remarkable achievement. Remember, during the peak of the Cold War, we had thousands of Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles pointed at sites in the United States 20 minutes in flight away from a massive explosion, and we still kept that war cold. Think of the Cuban Missile Crisis where we had Cuban missiles--or thought we had--pointed at the United States. The--and the fact that, for 45 years, that war kept cold. And we finally basically won it because the Russians sort of threw in the towel and admitted that their system simply wasn't working for their people and wouldn't be able to work. So that--to me, that was a great accomplishment for diplomacy. And when you compare that to the process of entering Iraq, for example, it seems to me, we weren't patient enough. And we must be very patient. We must try diplomacy until the very end, and that's what will bring world peace and a better world for all nations.

>> Krogh: I'm afraid, gentlemen, we've run out of time. Thank you for your wise counsel, Richard Holbrooke and John Whitehead. Thank you, our audience, for this special edition of Great Decisions 2004. I'm Peter Krogh.

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>> Krogh: Join me and my guests, Richard Holbrooke and John Whitehead, for a discussion of American foreign policy. What are we trying to achieve and what combination of unilateralism and multilateralism will work best? On a special edition of Great Decisions 2004.