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Inadequacies of Dogmatic Realism

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It is above all to the drumbeat of Wilsonian idealism that American foreign policy has marched since his watershed presidency, and continues to march to this day
Henry Kissinger¹

Most Americans find the concept of an amoral political philosophy highly repugnant. Yet, while Henry Kissinger may be correct that Wilson set the cadence of American foreign policy, the direction of march has been largely set by Realists. United States foreign policy has been framed in the language of Wilsonian Idealism for the past 80 years, but its practitioners have been driven almost exclusively by considerations of *Realpolitik*.² This dichotomy between America's innate political Idealism and its operational pragmatism has plagued U S foreign policy since it emerged as a world power at the turn of the century and has often resulted in inconsistent and self-defeating policies.³ The tension is greatest where the normative assumptions of political Idealism⁴ conflict most directly with the relativistic materialist considerations of *Realpolitik*. Today that strain is exacerbated by interdependencies that blur the distinction between domestic and foreign policy.⁵ The fundamental split between these two approaches had led to substantial disagreement over how or whether to integrate our idealistic impulses into the framework of our national interests.

FAILURES OF IDEALISM

Twentieth-century history testifies that efforts to blend morality and politics have not only often failed, but also have caused perverse effects which have aggravated the problems they sought to ameliorate. Wilsonian idealistic "self-determination" has left a legacy of failed and marginal post-colonial states and virulent, divisive ethnic strife which threaten the traditional nation-state. Naïve Idealism, such as that manifested in the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1924 outlawing war, contributed to the military unpreparedness, pacifism, popular complacency, and political impotence that led to World War II. Truman's rejection of Franklin Roosevelt's (FDR's) accommodation of Soviet balance of power concerns and ideological hardening of United States policy towards the Soviet Union after

FDR's death in April 1945, accelerated the breakdown of the Grand Alliance after World War II and contributed to the emergence of the Cold War⁶

The inclusion of a vague, ill-defined notion of "national values" into our political discourse has significantly complicated American international relations. Kissinger notes that "to foreign leaders imbued with less elevated maxims, America's claim to altruism evokes a certain aura of unpredictability, whereas the national interest can be calculated, altruism depends on the definition of its practitioner"⁷ The uncertainty generated by U.S. idealistic rhetoric, compounded by faulty Realism by our adversaries, mistrust, and cultural differences that are particularly acute between America and Asian nations, has contributed to costly miscalculations of American strength and resolve on the part of such aggressors as Japan in 1941, Korea in 1950, the Soviet Union in 1962, and Iraq in 1990.

Even where it has not led to war, excessive moralizing has blunted the effectiveness of some policies by injecting an additional source of confusion into the political equation already complicated by competing domestic, transnational, and international interests. The U.S. inability to integrate human rights goals in China with our economic agenda is a case in point. In March 1994, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights John Shattuck traveled to Beijing to condemn the Chinese government for its human rights violations and threaten revocation of China's most favored nation trading status unless it significantly improved its human rights performance. The same day that he was threatening to cut off trade benefits, Jeffery Garten, a senior Commerce Department official, was in Beijing cordially arranging for a trade meeting involving more than 100 Chinese officials to be held in Washington the following month.⁸ Unfortunately, not only has our inconsistent policy proven politically embarrassing, but the United States' vocal policy on human rights in China has arguably worsened the lot of many Chinese, exemplified by China's deliberately provocative arrest of several leading dissidents just before Secretary of State Christopher's visit to Beijing to discuss human rights issues in February 1994.⁹

Idealism has led to United States involvement in places where we had no vital interests at significant political and economic cost, such as Somalia. It is likely to do so again, diverting national treasure into efforts that do not advance vital U S interests, or do so only marginally. Finally, it has resulted in glaringly inconsistent foreign policies which have confused allies, frustrated prospective friends, and damaged budding relationships with former enemies.

The catalogue of failures attributed to idealistic crusading has prompted some to question to what extent national policy should be based on moral principles. Critics of Idealism argue that Realism should govern the formulation of U S foreign policy, noting that the resulting policies are frequently identical to those derived from Idealism, without involving the confusion of the latter¹⁰. There are few Wilsonian policies that cannot be defended on the basis of national survival, enlightened self-interest, or balance of power arguments. Similarly, it is not difficult to clothe a policy born out of self-interest in moralistic rhetoric, intimating some degree of moral equivalency between the two. Given the complications arising from the mixture of Idealism and Realism in foreign policy, if even the most idealistic policy can be developed and carried out on the basis of its pragmatic merits, what then does the moralist contribute to the formulation of policy that cannot be derived independently from principles of *Realpolitik*?

Much of the current discussion has approached this question from the standpoint of reconciling Idealism to the requirements of *Realpolitik*. Proposals include attempting to integrate morality more effectively into politics, to find some normative standard that will fit into *Realpolitik*, or to reduce conflict by simply minimizing idealistic excursions into the proper realm of the Realist. One is sometimes left with the impression that, if only international issues were not complicated by intrusion of gratuitous idealistic values, the questions would be simpler and our policies much more consistent.

But, in fact, would the Realist actually be able to frame and execute a more consistent foreign policy if only crusading moralists would cease interfering?

This essay focuses on limitations of Realism that are often overlooked in the current debate over integrating Idealism into national policy. The paper discusses the two related issues of Realism's role in the problems of international relations and the unique positive contributions of Idealism. It begins with some historical examples where Realism contributed to political failure. This is followed by a description of Realism and an examination of some internal contradictions arising, not from any conflict with Idealism, but directly out of its own characteristics. Finally, the paper looks at the unique contributions of Idealism to international policy.

FAILURES OF REALISM

Every American president since Wilson has advanced variations of Wilson's theme. Domestic debates have more often dealt with the failure to fulfill Wilson's ideals than with whether they were in fact lending adequate guidance in meeting the occasionally brutal challenges of a turbulent world. For three generations, critics have savaged Wilson's analysis and conclusions; and yet, in all this time, Wilson's principles have remained the bedrock of American foreign policy thinking.

Henry Kissinger¹¹

Henry Kissinger's assertion that Idealism has dominated U.S. foreign policy since the Wilson Administration may be true with respect to political theory and rhetoric, but twentieth-century history marshals ample evidence to the contrary regarding political action.¹² The instances of policy conceived and executed chiefly out of Wilsonian ideals are fairly limited, while the counter-examples where *Realpolitik* has trumped moralistic ideals are numerous and significant and undermine claims that Idealism has dominated the conduct of American foreign policy.

Although the United States has not engaged in the depredations of the more notorious regimes, it has, on occasion, knowingly acquiesced to them. As early as November 1942, President Roosevelt knew that the Germans were systematically exterminating European Jews and had already killed as

many as two million. But in deference to British concerns about complicating the Palestine issue, and to avoid domestic political problems, his Administration not only did nothing to help, but actually obstructed the flow of additional information to the public and restricted immigration of Jews attempting to flee to one-tenth of the number of Jewish immigrants authorized by Congress¹³. There was also the brutality of Stalin and Mao Tse Tung in which tens of millions were killed, as well as Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Vietnam and Cambodia after 1975, Rwanda 1994, Bosnia through 1995, and various repressions under the Shah in Iran, Ferdinand Marcos, and other dictators and despots who shared our balance of power concerns or capitalized on them.¹⁴

There were, of course, notable instances of apparent Idealism and selflessness. Yet even some of the most ostensibly altruistic, such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1924 forswearing the use of war, involved a great deal of cynical political maneuvering in order to manipulate public opinion, defuse domestic pressure from peace groups, and reap other forms of political profit¹⁵. Even one of the greatest foreign relations successes in U S history, the Marshall Plan, was founded as much on pragmatic concern for stability as it was on magnanimity¹⁶. The most recent instance of a U S action motivated by genuine, unalloyed Idealism was the initial American intervention in Somalia, but its success is still under debate and it is unlikely to be followed soon by another similarly altruistic mission.

The utility of Idealism as window-dressing for policies based on enlightened self-interest continues today. The principle guiding document of current U S foreign policy, the 1996 *National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, makes moralistic appeals for various policies, but does not, in the end, rest on appeal to any transcendent value. Even the most ostensibly idealistic interests are defended on Realist grounds. For example, assistance to poor, underdeveloped countries is advocated on the basis that the "continuing poverty of a quarter of the world's people leads to hunger, malnutrition, economic migration and political unrest ..[and] threaten[s] to overwhelm the

health facilities of developing countries, disrupt societies and stop economic growth"¹⁷ The overall strategy to "promote democracy and democratic institutions" (mentioned over 150 times) and "free markets" is defended as a practical necessity "This is not a democratic crusade, it is a pragmatic commitment to see freedom take hold where that will help us the most Thus, we must target our effort to assist states that affect our strategic interests"¹⁸ Of course, the articulation of a national policy on a foundation of moral imperatives and buttressed by arguments showing the convergence of *Realpolitik's* external demands with the innate strength of national values is admirable The point is that current U S. policy is heavily imbued with Realism, and illustrates the principle that "ideal goals are not obtained in the real world of conflicting national purposes by moral fervor alone but only by a pragmatic calculation of the means to an end, by a rational anticipation of the actual consequences of a given action"¹⁹

The consistent transparency of self-interest in even the most idealistic policies, combined with the previously cited examples of U S inaction in cases of ongoing, well-documented atrocities, most recently in Rwanda and Bosnia, make Kissinger's comment on Wilsonian Idealism sound like an observation on a mere superficial phenomenon It would be far easier to demonstrate a national willingness to surrender principle to power for the sake of security or national interest than to show a historical commitment to Wilsonianism.

This brings to mind the Melian dialogue, which has profound relevance to U S policy today Thucydides records how Pericles, in his Funeral Oration, extols Athenian Idealism. "We alone do good to our neighbors not upon a calculation of interest, but in the confidence of freedom and in a frank and fearless spirit"²⁰ Despite statements of noble intentions, however, the Athenian attempt to expand their democratic values in a "great movement of liberation" during the Peloponnesian War degenerated into a "mere struggle for power" which led them to the gates of Melos²¹ Finally, when the Melian

magistrates appealed for justice, the Athenians gave their famous cynical retort, "[T]he strong exact what they can, and the weak give what they must," and then proceeded to kill them.²² The powerful irony in the Athenians' fall from Idealism is particularly poignant in light of the current U S National Security Strategy's goal of "enlarging democracy " We are, perhaps, far more like the Athenians than our national conceit will permit us to believe. There is probably less danger today of excessive sincere belief in our ideals than that we might use them as a cloak for some selfish goal that would betray the values we purport to hold

If we maintain our values only as long as they are relatively painless, cheap, and convenient, then Idealism becomes a luxury of the strong and wealthy, not a refuge for the weak and poor. America's idealistic rhetoric too often exaggerates its commitment, which then proves to be "a mile wide and an inch deep," drying up in the heat of a crisis when the cost gets too high or a few casualties are taken²³ Thus, our policies are intrinsically inconsistent and untrustworthy because the strength of our commitment, while defended on the basis of moral imperatives, is actually based on the security and integrity of our interests, not only our vital ones, but our peripheral ones as well. If "the determined pursuit of moral aims is an unaffordable luxury"²⁴, then we might do less damage to the credibility of our values by not even mentioning them.

REALISM: DESCRIPTION AND DILEMMAS

Regardless of our rhetoric, it appears that the dominant activating principle of U S foreign policy today is Realism. In order to understand the forces which drive that understanding of international relations, we will now examine Realism's nature, its assumptions about the international system, its ethics, and some implications flowing from those characteristics

Many varieties of Realism have evolved over time, but all of them share certain common characteristics. Realism views the international system as an anarchic struggle for survival. It regards

conflict as inevitable, power as the currency of relations between nations, and force as the final arbiter of disputes²⁵. While not rejecting outright the validity of personal moral absolutes, Realism denies the applicability of individual moral standards to the state. In their place, Realism substitutes national survival as the ultimate ethical value and self-interest as the guide to action.

Realism asserts that it rests on a scientific foundation of rational analysis of historical evidence concerning the behavior of individuals and nation states. Oswald Spengler, the influential historical philosopher whose writings were studied by Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger and other leading Realists²⁶, writes that Realism "proceeds from the facts of real life and attempts to obtain the quintessence of historical experience from the historical praxis of advanced humanity"²⁷. Realism is concerned with what is, not what ought to be. As such, it is materialistic and treats absolute moral values as cultural and sociological phenomena that affect the political environment, rather than as essentially epistemological issues.

Realism is founded on the assumption of an anarchic international political system. The current system of nation states is a relatively modern convention, developed by some of the states, imposed on some, and voluntarily adopted by others. The state's current form is maintained by historical inertia, institutional convention, and the interest and actions of its participating members to preserve the institutions and conventions surrounding it. There is no external agent or authority directing or sustaining the system of nation states, and no enforcement mechanism for its standards or decisions outside of the international system itself. Nation states can and must act in their own self-interest to ensure their own survival. Hence, conflict is inevitable, power in all its forms (military, political, economic, and cultural) is the agent of both stability and change, force is the determining argument, and survival is the ultimate measure of success²⁸.

ETHICAL STANDARDS OF REALISM

REJECTION OF ABSOLUTE MORAL STANDARDS

Realism rejects the application of normative, idealistic standards to international behavior. There are no absolute values in the political realm of the Realist. Each nation, culture, and society determines its own values, based on its interests, and acts accordingly. Thomas Hobbes, the patriarch of Realism, maintained that "morality and normative considerations have no application or significance in international relations"²⁹. This same sentiment was expressed by all of the classical Realists³⁰ through Hans Morgenthau, who wrote, "The state has no right to let its moral disapprobation get in the way of successful political action."³¹ Spengler had "no room for morality," and wrote that "statecraft *par excellence* paradoxically demands that one liberates oneself as much as necessary from moral illusions and restrictions"³²

Realism subordinates Idealism's various claims on the purpose of government to the fundamental goal of national survival. According to Spengler, the only immutably valid measure of ultimate success is survival³³. Morgenthau calls national survival "the moral principle" that defines successful political action³⁴.

The guiding ethic of national self-interest flows from this direct and relatively simple standard. "Because of the crucial importance of national security, national egoism enjoys a rational and moral justification which renders the primacy of self-interest, among national ends an indisputable and unavoidable reality of international politics"³⁵. Kissinger identifies this as the crucial element in his definition of *Realpolitik*: "foreign policy based on calculations of power and the national interest"³⁶.

One problem with this philosophy is that it fails to define survival and survival's object. Robert Osgood states that

basic to all kinds of national self-interest is survival or self-preservation, for upon national survival depends the achievement of all other self-interested ends. The exact nature of the national self that must be preserved at all costs is open to various interpretations, but, above all, it is the nation's territorial integrity, political independence, and fundamental governmental institutions³⁷

A political party which is temporarily in power may define "survival" differently than one concerned more with the basic form of government. Does "survival" refer to the governmental institutions, the people, national infrastructure, or some other embodiment of the nation state? Did "Poland" and "France" survive the German invasions of 1939 and 1940, and if so, who or what represented those entities? How much treasure and blood must be spilt to ensure the preservation of a people -- or a government? When should one embodiment of a nation be destroyed in order to save another?

SOURCES OF ETHICAL VALUE. INAPPLICABILITY OF INDIVIDUAL MORAL STANDARDS TO THE STATE

For the Realist, "morality" is defined by *raison d'état*. Referring to another pillar of the Realist school, John Farrenkopf writes, "In Hegel's conception of interstate relations, there is no room for the operation of moral or international law. [M]oral behavior for the state consists in its own self-assertion, unencumbered by moral and legal norms"³⁸. Charles Kegley writes that the "nihilist perspective as represented by Machiavelli, Hobbes, Nietzsche, or Meinicke allows 'the national interest [to prescribe] its own morality'"³⁹

While Realists acknowledge the occasional expediency of adherence to international norms, sometimes even for protracted periods of time, such observance is temporal, situationally conditional, and never obligatory. Some "neo-idealists" allow for the existence of certain rules reflecting human nature, but these proceed from the sociological dynamic of human interaction, not from some authoritative, external source⁴⁰

Realism's rejection of normative idealistic values and assertion of its right to define national self-interest on its own terms are justifiable only if the state is exempt from the moral requirements laid on individuals. Therefore, Realism denies the Jeffersonian claim that there is "but one system of ethics for men and for nations"⁴¹. According to the Realist, individual standards of normative morality do not apply to the state. Reinhold Niebuhr argues that "because of the dynamic of collective interest, selfish behavior is expected of groups to protect the interests of the group"⁴². Robert Osgood contends that the nature of the contract between individuals and states produces a special, almost familial, relationship which cannot be governed by the same restraints and values as individuals⁴³.

The problem here is two-fold. First, "self-interest is not the same as selfish"⁴⁴. Short-term selfishness often leads to consequences which are not in the self-interest of either groups or individuals. "Selfish behavior" is no more justified for groups under that rationale than for individuals. Admittedly, states will "do what they can," but rationalizing a completely separate standard of conduct for states is unjustified and removes an element of caution which protects them from confusing national self-interest with mere selfishness. Neither guarantees increased happiness for the nation, but selfishness ensures misery for some. Even if we cannot prevent it, we should not encourage selfishness to be practiced with a sense of moral diffidence.

There is another problem with Realism's defense of a separate moral standard. Osgood is correct insofar as the requirement for an individual to practice self-sacrifice does not automatically transfer to a group, since burdens are unequally borne in groups. Thus, it is quite often meaningless to speak of nations "sacrificing" as though they carried a uniform share of costs across all their members. In practice, some suffer more than others, while still others may even profit from a particular policy. However, instead of freeing the state from the moral constraints incumbent upon individuals, the inequities which arise within the nation overlay *additional* moral responsibility on the leadership.

This new layer of obligation under the "social contract" is one justification for state encouragement -- and enforcement -- of ethical standards and imperatives. Although the interaction of competing interests within the nation adds another dimension of complexity to the moral questions, there is no merit to the Realist claim that it relieves the state of the requirement to act morally or liberates it to form its own concept of morality. If anything, this clash of interests increases the burden of responsibility of the state, and binds it more closely to the values of the individuals who collectively make up the nation and whose collective interests the state exists to serve. Osgood writes that

recognition of the moral complexities and incongruities of international existence does not imply a relativistic or nihilistic view of human conduct. On the contrary, it implies a firm allegiance to ultimate principles of moral perfection, even though these principles remain forever beyond human attainment, for how can a man know the moral imperfection of his actions unless he has an ideal standard of judgment? In this sense, the ultimate ideals of the Christian-liberal-humanitarian tradition are an indispensable source of that humility and critical self-appraisal which is the lifeblood of true Idealism and the only antidote to national self-righteousness.⁴⁵

MORAL NEUTRALITY AND RELATIVISM

Closely linked to Realism's claim to the right to form its own standard of conduct is its claim to lie, if not above, then at least outside, the realm of normative moral standards. Not all realists, as individuals, deny the existence of an absolute personal morality, but Realism rejects the binding authority of such values in the arena of international relations.⁴⁶ This rejection is based on the primacy of national survival and national interest, which is its derivative. In order to protect the supremacy of that "moral" value within its own realm, Realism denies the claims of normative morality, except as a local, culturally dependent guide to suggest national goals and assist in policy formulation.

The concept of national interest is infinitely elastic. Its definition depends upon values, whose claim is, *a priori*, subordinated to the presumed claims of interest. Because of Realism's moral neutrality, there is no arbiter between normative standards of value. Their relative claims, therefore, cannot be adjudicated within Realism, which merely provides a framework for political action.

Furthermore, since in the hierarchy of Realism, national interest's claim, once determined, is superior to individual moral values, national interest renders the claims of morality relativistic by denying their transcendence

The Realist makes no claim to judge the relative merit of normative systems applied to it, other than to deny the claims of any which asserts superiority to its principal value of national interest. To the Realist, morality's relevance to the international environment must flow from its force as a cultural, social and political phenomenon rather than from the validity of its moral assertions⁴⁷. In doing so, Realism marginalizes moral imperatives and establishes a pluralism of irrelevance where all moral values have equally weak claims to Truth and utility is the basic unit of measure. As C. S. Lewis writes, "If nothing is obligatory for its own sake, nothing is obligatory at all"⁴⁸. Realism, therefore, is intrinsically and unalterably relativistic.

There is no such thing as moral neutrality in policy matters. In 1859, Abraham Lincoln argued that Stephen Douglas's claim to be "personally opposed" to slavery while resisting its prohibition in new states was meaningless. Douglas's support of the extension of slavery *de facto* denied the fundamental moral and legal basis for opposition to slavery, that the slave possessed the "God-given" rights referred to in the Declaration of Independence and deserved the full Constitutional protection of "personhood"⁴⁹. Acceptance of the moral arguments against slavery demands opposition to its extension everywhere, denial of the moral arguments against slavery removes justification for any opposition anywhere. Whether it be issues of human rights, decisions on war, or the allocation of national resources, moral neutrality is usually not an option for the policy maker.

The contradictions inherent in neutrality have caused some Realists to make a logical extension to condescension or open hostility toward Idealism. While ostensibly neutral regarding individual morality, Realism views morality's claims to a directive role in setting national goals as an intrusion into

its area of responsibility. Against the measure of survival, concepts such as justice, guilt, right, and wrong are chimeras and have no place on the scales of the leader⁵⁰. Spengler believed that "the pursuit of lofty moral goals in international politics .interferes with the formulation and implementation of a statecraft unswervingly committed to the interests of state"⁵¹. As quoted by Kegley, John Mueller writes that "the misguided application of ethical concerns to international affairs 'has helped to facilitate the sacrificial, uncertain, masochistic, improbable, and fundamentally absurd activity known as warfare'"⁵².

One consequence of its rejection of Idealism is that Realism lacks a normative mechanism for generating the vision to determine goals proactively beyond the horizon of its materialist needs. Kennan suggests that the principles for guiding the formation of nation's policy arise from that country's "predominant collective sense of itself -- what sort of a country it conceives itself or would like itself to be"⁵³. This standard is operationally adequate as long as the culturally based values of the national "collective sense" do not demand something that conflicts with perceived "national interest ". However, when the moral imperatives of individual cultural values conflict with the more readily identifiable issues of national interest, such as the current case between U S human rights and business interest in China, the chief dogma of Realism is invoked and Idealism is expected to yield, or else the battle between Idealism and Realism is once again joined.

By removing the question of immutable values from the equation, Realism makes national goals situational in a way that is fundamentally different from Idealism. Whereas the Idealist weighs competing values and applies them within specific situations, the Realist has only the situation itself. Any value which is applied to that situation is contextually dependent on the cultural and political biases of the actors. Therefore, since the interests and values of the actors evolve over time and change with circumstance, the Realist has nothing definitive to bequeath to the future beyond the empty

criterion of survival⁵⁴ Kissinger writes that "Reason without moral purpose is incapable of resisting the tendency of national self-interest to become an end in itself, since only moral purpose can hold man's incurable egoism subordinate to the universal values which give self-interest meaning"⁵⁵ In that respect, Realism forfeits any dynamic role in the future and abdicates its responsibility to inform and shape the future to the blind decisions of competing selfish actors. It leaves no statement or witness because it is morally bankrupt.

Furthermore, Realism is unable to generate on its own the virtues necessary to maintain a civic society. It must depend on personal beliefs to supply the virtues necessary for social cohesion and execution of its policies, but denies any role for them in policy formulation. This, in turn, denies the motivating force empowering the culture in which it operates. The dilemma for the Realist is laid out by C. S. Lewis, who writes of normative values as contained in Natural Law:

Those [who reject Natural Law], if they are logical, must regard all sentiments as equally non-rational, as mere mists between us and the real objects. As a result, they must either decide to remove all sentiments, as far as possible, from the [public]'s mind or else to encourage some sentiments for reasons that have nothing to do with their intrinsic "justness" or "ordinacy." The latter course involves them in the questionable process of creating in others by "suggestion" or incantation a mirage which their own reason has successfully dissipated.⁵⁶

Citing as an example the virtue of self-sacrifice, he continues,

Either [the Realist] must go the whole way and debunk this sentiment like any other, or must set [himself] to work to produce, from the outside, a sentiment which [he believes] to be of no value to the [individual] and which may cost him his life, because it is useful to us (the survivors) that our young men should feel it. The difference between [Idealist and Realist] education will be an important one. The [Idealist] dealt with its [citizens] as grown birds deal with young birds when they teach them to fly; the [Realist] deals with them more as the poultry-keeper deals with young birds--making them thus or thus for purposes of which the birds know nothing.⁵⁷

The Realist must depend on religion and other civic institutions to instill in individuals the values which it cannot. But its inherent relativism is in a constant state of tension with those values, because it must deny their claim to applicability in its realm. By undermining normative values' claim to

transcendence and validity, the nation-state may find itself at psychological war with the people who compose it unless it can reconcile its policies to their beliefs. Most wise leaders do that, including most American Presidents. But it is insufficient for the state to look on moral values as a mere cultural or psychological phenomenon to be "dealt with"⁵⁸, and in the long run, it undermines the claims it makes under their banner.

One additional problem for the Realist is that the claim to moral neutrality forces on the individual Realist practitioner a choice between rejecting morality's demands and living with a cognitive dissonance that ignores the contradictions caused by neutrality. According to Osgood, the Realist may personally believe in moral absolutes, but holds to their inapplicability to foreign relations⁵⁹. The difficulty arises because Realism operationally repudiates any normative personal beliefs by denying the applicability of those individual beliefs. If the practitioner avoids conflict, it is only through fortuitously benign circumstances that do not confront him with unpalatable choices.

DANGER OF NIHILISM

In the absence of transcendent normative values, what is to prevent the international system from degenerating into a ruthless pursuit of self-interest? Operationally, the Realist can point to the restraining action of other states, or the principle of "reciprocity"⁶⁰. But this does not always work, and its failures, such as the cases of Napoleon and Hitler, are too costly to leave the question there. Unfortunately, the philosophical answer is much more difficult for the Realist, and the answers that have been offered are as diverse as the personalities of the authors.

Kegley contends that "in fact, it is only the nihilist version of realism that endorses the beliefs that under anarchy, like beasts in a jungle, states must fight for survival and that no norms should limit their sovereign right to choose any self-help action capable of enhancing their preservation"⁶¹. While

this may be true, it begs the question of how to restrain the tendency, since the cost of nihilism can be so high

Realists have defined various mechanisms for preventing degeneracy into a sub-human doctrine of raw survival, all of which contain "a significant, normative element"⁶² Hegel, for example, suggested that history is divided into epochs in which a dominant state "represents the mouthpiece of the progressive, rational, World Spirit"⁶³ Ranke, who founded the German historical school, relied on "a salubrious balance-of-power system and the further development of national cultures it facilitated"⁶⁴ Spengler denied the "capacity of diplomacy and balance-of-power politics to keep within tolerable bounds the tragic, conflictual nature of international politics"⁶⁵ In its place, he espoused the "universal, traditional, aristocratic ethics of toughness and heroism"⁶⁶ as the antidote to nihilism. As Kegley quotes Morgenthau, "in order to be worthy of our lasting sympathy, a nation must pursue its interests for the sake of a transcendent [moral] purpose that gives meaning to the day-to-day operations of its foreign policy [because] 'the Machiavellian "invitation to immorality" counter-productively reduces "the conduct of good men to the standards of the worst"' "⁶⁷ However, Morgenthau does not suggest what the nature of that purpose might be, nor how a good purpose might be distinguished from a bad one

Some of these responses to the threat of nihilistic Realism seem as strongly idealistic as any Wilsonian vision, but they lack the philosophical foundation of the more traditional restraints such as Natural Law or theological formulations Other Realists, recognizing the fundamentally existential nature of Realism, admit of no protection against the danger of nihilism. There have been "Dark Ages" before and there may well be again

IDEALISM'S CONTRIBUTION

Fortunately, Idealism offers an antidote to some of the problems arising from Realism. There are three principal contributions that Idealism can make which cannot be derived by the logic of *Realpolitik* (1) to make policy assumptions more explicit, (2) to define and sustain civic virtues that the state cannot on its own, and (3) to provide a moral compass for setting short- and long-term policy direction and a yardstick for comparing the relative value of alternatives

MAKING ASSUMPTIONS EXPLICIT

First, Idealism makes more explicit the assumptions underlying choices in international policies. The various Realist assurances against nihilism highlight the strong dependence of many Realists upon unstated assumptions. The assumptions of Natural Law and Enlightenment concepts of government are much better defined and broadly accepted than the hidden hopes in "heroism," "national cultures," or some undefined "transcendent purpose," which undergird Realist security assurances against the danger of nihilism and support its claim to merit the trust of nations. The problem of hidden assumptions is inherent in Realism's claim to moral neutrality. Realism's arrogation of presumed objectivity and rationality despises the implication that it may be just as dependent on insupportable assumptions concerning the nature of man and the purpose of government as any Idealistic system. All political decisions necessarily involve value-based tradeoffs. Realism's subordination of moral values to national interest ignores the normative role that values necessarily play in the definition of national interest. In contrast, Idealism's claims on policy are linked to philosophical principles, which are much more clearly defined. Even those who disagreed most vehemently with Wilsonian Idealism could at least attack its assumptions because they were explicit.

ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING CIVIC VIRTUE

Second, Idealism defines and sustains the civic virtues which are necessary and useful for the internal order of society, and attempts to broaden their application across international borders. The moralist affirms values, such as self-sacrifice, dedication, endurance, and temperance, which transcend the basic "natural" survival needs and which the state is unable to instill in its populace on its own. Without these values, the state cannot regulate human behavior without coercion. Thus, ironically, the Realist must acknowledge the legitimacy of morality to protect his own legitimacy and preserve the fabric of society, even if he doesn't believe in any absolute moral truth himself. The dilemma for the Realist is how to uphold his end of this alliance of necessity with the moralist, while denying the applicability of moral imperatives, manifested as Idealism, to foreign relations.

The state can export only those values that it possesses, and it derives those values from the underlying culture of the people of that state. If it rejects the applicability of those values to international relationships, it limits its own ability to shape world political and social climate when it is not engaged in a decisive struggle for survival. Without a well-spring of values to provide long-range vision and to guide the shaping of national goals, state policies must eventually run off the values the state reflects back to the people. If those values are based solely on self-interest, and if the state does not augment its Machiavellian values with some that incite higher virtue, it will eventually undermine the moral mechanisms of self-restraint which hold together its own society. Thus, the production of virtue is important for both internal and external reasons.

PROVIDING A MORAL COMPASS

Third, Idealism provides the moral framework within which to prioritize short- and long-term choices. Realism can speak only of "national interest," but does not provide the unit of currency for comparing the value of competing national interests. Once survival is assured, the state must begin to

look to the more immediate interests of its constituents. Even for the Realist, the existence of interests which are subordinate to survival demands some hierarchy of values to arbitrate the competition for national resources. Any such hierarchy must be based on assumptions about what is "best" for the state. Idealism provides the philosophical basis for discussing the necessary compromises, because it contains assumptions about the purpose of the state and its goals. Idealism provides vision and guidance beyond mere reaction to competitors, and enables a nation to look beyond its present circumstances.

One of Realism's weaknesses is an inability to set goals once it has achieved "success" in the absence of a threat. This partly accounts for the confusion in U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War. Idealism, however, can answer questions about what a nation wants to become, not merely what it wants to overcome.

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FOR AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS

The problems in U.S. foreign relations today are not due to the incompatibility of Realism and Idealism, nor would the situation be mitigated by attempting to remove Idealistic considerations. Rather, the difficulty is due, at least in part, to the lack of a comprehensive theory that acknowledges Idealism's legitimate role and integrates it in a manner that compensates for the inherent problems in both Realism and Idealism. "Classical" Realists deny Idealism's role, and modern versions, such as neo-Realism and Pragmatism, admit to Idealism's necessity and usefulness, but implicitly deny its transcendency and ignore the possibility or relevance of determining the relative merits of competing Idealisms.

Carl von Clausewitz writes that "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument carried on with other means"⁶⁸, and argued that the military leader cannot ignore the underlying forces that lead to war or determine its object. Just as there are military leaders who would

like to be "left alone" by politicians so they could simply "fight the war" without worrying about political considerations, so most politicians would prefer to be left alone by philosophers and theologians to "run the world" without messy questions about truth or moral absolutes⁶⁹. But like the military leader whose impolitic handling of one war can lead to the next one, so international leaders should not be content to deal simply with the resulting conflict between ideas without considering the rectitude of those ideas. The politician can no more ignore the values that energize the dynamics of national interest and motivate policy than the general can ignore the dynamics that determine the objects of war or the forces that bring it about. Forms of government and political institutions are merely the frameworks and mechanisms for formulating policies and do not intrinsically contain policy themselves. Theories which treat Idealistic principles as nothing more than inconvenient phenomena which complicate the operation of international relations and ignore the foundational questions of Truth, are like the sailors who keep bailing out the boat without plugging the leak.

CONCLUSION

Realists such as Kissinger warn that the greatest danger in the post-Cold War era lies in excessive reliance on Idealism⁷⁰. But an even greater danger lies in rejecting Idealism's role. There is a power in Idealism which cannot be harnessed by the logic of Realism. Realism contains contradictions which can be cured only by the application of a practical Idealism to the challenges of today. Nonetheless, the problems that have flowed from Idealism's excesses argue for maintaining a balance that recognizes the value of both. "The real moral task facing the American people," writes Osgood, "is to fix their eyes on the ultimate ideals without losing their footing on the solid ground of reality"⁷¹. He provides a clear picture of the tension between Idealism and Realism.

Although it is morally imperative that men should not minimize the contradictions between national self-interest and universal ideals, it is equally imperative that they should not exaggerate the contradictions by positing a rigid antithesis between these two ends. In very few situations are statesmen faced with a clear choice between ideals and national interest, in almost all situations they are faced

with the task of reconciling the two. If they succeed in reconciling them so as to maximize ideal values, they will come as near to moral perfection as anyone can reasonably hope. But they will surely fail unless the nation as a whole understands the wisdom of combining realism with Idealism.⁷²

Every age is unique, but not quite so different as we would like to think. There is a strong temptation to look at some aspect of the current international situation as justification for abandoning the values and standards of conduct that have been developed over the thousands of years since people began to gather together in the communities which became villages, cities, and states. However, it would be wrong to imagine that the earlier days of civilization were somehow simpler and more idyllic. If there ever existed a world where *Realpolitik* were justified by the anarchy between states, it was in the past. The men who wrote about the need for virtue and Idealism were not mere academics living in some "kinder, gentler" era where their views were widely accepted. They lived in the same kind of world that we live in today, where ideals were seldom observed at all and never observed perfectly. Idealists have never been particularly popular. Socrates and Cicero were assassinated for their views, and the Emperor Domitian banished philosophers from Rome in A.D. 89⁷³. Yet, their views endure.

Neither Idealism nor Realism is adequate of itself to fulfill all the requirements of government. America and the world need leadership with the skill and character to blend the two together. The process will involve much debate, but no lasting progress is possible without an acknowledgment of Realism's inadequacies and Idealism's unique contribution to the debate.

Notes

- ¹ Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York Simon & Schuster, 1994) 30
- ² George F Kennan, American Diplomacy 1900-1950 (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1951) 42, cited in Charles W Kegley, Jr, "The New Global Order The Power of Principle in a Pluralistic World," Ethics & International Affairs 6 (1994) 22
- ³ Robert Endicott Osgood, Ideals and Self Interest in America's Foreign Relations The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century (Chicago Phoenix Books/University of Chicago Press, 1965) contains an excellent discussion of the emergence of the modern debate, beginning with the Administration of Teddy Roosevelt
- ⁴ "By normative standards we mean the prescriptive principles of desirable behavior to which most nations can and do agree Normative standards embody the ideals and principles by which a community-even a world community-defines itself " Editor's note, Ethics and International Affairs 6 (1994) np
- ⁵ Kissinger 39
- ⁶ Martin J Sherwin, A World Destroyed (New York Vintage Books, 1977) 193-219
- ⁷ Kissinger 46
- ⁸ Robert S Greenberger, "Cacophony of Voices Drowns Out Message From U S to China," Wall Street Journal March 22, 1994 1
- ⁹ In January 1994, Assistant Secretary of State John Shattuck flouted Chinese government sensitivities when he met with Wei Jingsheng, a prominent Chinese dissident, in the open in the coffee garden of the China World Hotel in Beijing On February 4, the Chinese arrested a number of dissidents, including Wei, just before Secretary Christopher's arrival on February 11, 1994 Greenberger 1
- ¹⁰ Steve Brinkoetter, "The Role for Ethics in Bush's New World Order," Ethics & International Affairs, 6 (1994) 71 Brinkoetter states, "It may be that prudence and morality dictate some of the same conduct "
- ¹¹ Kissinger 52
- ¹² Osgood notes with irony "It may be an indication of the strength of the logic of geography and strategic interest that this moral-minded administration [of Woodrow Wilson], largely out of solicitude for the security of the Panama Canal, found it necessary to carry out more armed interventions in Latin America than any of its predecessors, to impose upon Haiti and the Dominican Republic prolonged military occupations without treaty sanction and against the protests of the native governments, and almost, but for the Senate's refusal, to convert Nicaragua into a protectorate " Osgood 105
- ¹³ David S Wyman, The Abandonment of the Jews America and the Holocaust 1941-1945 (New York Pantheon Books, 1984) 103 According to Wyman, by November, 1942, "there was authenticated information that the Nazis were systematically exterminating European Jewry "
- ¹⁴ Kegley cites Jimmy Carter's rejection of Realpolitik "This interventionist approach to the world was fueled by an intoxicating sense of power, and ethnocentric belief in the inherent ethical virtue of American motives and what Jimmy Carter in 1977 called 'an inordinate fear of communism which once led the US to embrace any dictator that joined [the US] in [its] fear '" Kegley 37
- ¹⁵ Osgood 349-350 Although approved by the Senate 85-1, Senator Carter Glass (VA) wrote that the Pact

wasn't worth a postage stamp in the direction of accomplishing permanent international peace I say that all the people all the time for nearly the last ten years have been fooled They are going to be fooled now by a so-called peace pact that, in the last analysis, is one of the many devices that have been contrived to solace the awakened conscience of some people who kept the U S out of the League of Nations and confuse[d] the minds of many good and pious people who think that peace may be secured by polite professions of brotherly love Osgood 349

The treaty provided absolutely no enforcement mechanism, nor even any requirement for any of the 15 signatories to do anything, and was based on "understandings" by all major parties which permitted them to do as they pleased, even resort to war, to protect their regional or colonial interests

¹⁶ It is worthy of note that even such apparent triumphs of selflessness as food aid to India in the 1950's and intervention in Somalia in 1992 were driven by strong elements of public opinion and did not originate from within government circles Moreover, aid to India involved the shipment of nearly 40% of U S grain crop in some years

¹⁷ The White House, A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (NSS) (Washington DC The White House, February 1996) 30

¹⁸ NSS 32

¹⁹ Osgood 437

²⁰ Thucydides The Peloponnesian Wars 11 40 Cited in Osgood 1

²¹ Osgood 1

²² Osgood 1 Stanley Hoffman, Duties Beyond Borders, (Syracuse, NY Syracuse University Press, 1981) 11 translates the reply "The strong do what they can, the weak do what they must "

²³ The United States precipitous withdrawal from Somalia after suffering less than a score of deaths is a case in point

²⁴ John Farrenkopf, "Christ and Caesar Spengler and the Ethical Dilemma of Statecraft," Ethics & International Affairs 6 (1992) 138

²⁵ Osgood 13

²⁶ Farrenkopf 120

²⁷ Farrenkopf 120

²⁸ Spengler writes, "When in the world of truths the proof decides everything, so does success in the world of facts Success, that means the triumph of one stream of existence over another " Farrenkopf 125

²⁹ Rachel M McCleary ed., Seeking Justice Ethics and International Affairs (Boulder CO Westview Press, 1992) 6

³⁰ See William Ebenstein, Great Political Thinkers Plato to the Present (Hinsdale, IL Dryden Press, 1969) 362-387, 602-628 See also Farrenkopf 12

³¹ Hans J Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations (New York Knopf, 1958) 9, cited by Kegley 23 Kegley wrote that, to "nihilist Realists, the conduct of nations is, and should be, guided and judged exclusively by the amoral requirements of the national interest, and ethics should be made subservient to those national interests "

³² Farrenkopf 133

³³ Spengler wrote, "When in the world of truths the proof decides everything, so does success in the world of facts " Farrenkopf 125

³⁴ Cited by Kegley 23 Hoffman laconically notes that "Survival is not an unambiguous goal " Hoffman 14

³⁵ Osgood 13

³⁶ Kissinger 137

³⁷ Osgood 3

³⁸ Farrenkopf 128

³⁹ Kegley 23 The suggestion is not at all new In The Republic, Thrasymachus challenges Plato's assertion of the existence of an absolute Truth for states by saying that "'just' or 'right' means nothing but what is to the interest of the stronger party " Cited in William Ebenstein, ed , Great Political Thinkers Plato to the Present, Hinsdale, IL, Dryden Press, 1969 43

⁴⁰ Kegley 30

⁴¹ Kegley, p 23 Jefferson's sentiment reflects the traditional Idealist position Plato wrote, " Does it not follow at once that state and individual will be wise or brave by virtue of the same element in each and in the same way? Both will possess in the same manner any quality that makes for excellence Then it applies to justice we shall conclude that a man is just in the same way that a state was just Ebenstein 43

⁴² Hoffman 16

⁴³ Osgood states, "A citizen's dependence upon his nation assumes a distinct intimacy because he confers upon the object of his allegiance the attribute of a person so closely identified with his own personality that he virtually acquires a second self, in whose behalf he can feel friendly, hostile, generous, selfish, confident, afraid, proud, or humiliated almost as poignantly as he would feel these emotions for himself in his relations with other individuals However, the conscience of this vicarious personality, unlike the private conscience, is relieved by the sanction of patriotism, so that a citizen can manage with a sense of complete moral consistency to combine lofty Idealism toward his own nation with extreme egoism toward other nations and thereby actively support a standard of ethics in foreign relations which he would not dream of tolerating in his private dealings " Osgood 11

⁴⁴ Hoffman 16

⁴⁵ Osgood 23

⁴⁶ For an excellent exegesis of this distinction, see Osgood pp 9-15

⁴⁷ Spengler writes "An abstract ideal of justice pervades the minds and writings of all men whose intellects are noble and strong and whose blood is weak, pervades all religions and all philosophies, but the fact-world of history knows only success, which turns the law of the stronger into the law for all " Farrenkopf 126

⁴⁸ C S Lewis, The Abolition of Man, (New York MacMillan Co , 1970) 52-53 Kegley adds "If there are no immutable moral truths independent of human authority, and every rule of right and wrong is presumed to be circumstantial, then all action becomes permissible There are eternal classical ethical precepts " Kegley 25

⁴⁹ Abraham Lincoln, Speeches and Letters of Abraham Lincoln 1832-1865, (New York E P Dutton & Co , 1912) 133-139 From a speech at Columbus Ohio given on September 16, 1859 See also pp 122-129

⁵⁰ Farrenkopf 125 Spengler writes "An abstract ideal of justice pervades the minds and writings of all men whose intellects are noble and strong and whose blood is weak, pervades all religions and all philosophies, but the fact-world of history knows only success, which turns the law of the stronger into the law for all" Farrenkopf contrasts this with Nietzsche who wrote, "Greatness should not depend on success, and Demosthenes had greatness, although he didn't have any success " Kegley 25

⁵¹ Farrenkopf 125

⁵² Kegley 23-24 Osgood adds, "As long as the effective means to a national end remains, essentially, the exercise of independent national power, it is folly to expect national selflessness or sheer impulse, however high-minded, to promote ideal goals On the contrary, selflessness or impulsiveness, by blinding reason to the practical consequences of national actions, may work untold international mischief and even jeopardize a nation's survival " Osgood 14

⁵³ George F Kennan, "On American Principles," Foreign Affairs 74 2 (March/April 1995) 120

⁵⁴ C S Lewis discusses the "survival" rationale in a passage that merits presentation at some length

From propositions about fact alone, no practical conclusion can ever be drawn "This will preserve society" cannot lead to "do this" except by the mediation of "society ought to be preserved We grasp at useless words we call [survival] the "basic," or "fundamental," or "primal," or "deepest" instinct It is of no avail Either these words conceal a value judgment passed upon the instinct and therefore not derivable from it, or else they merely record its felt intensity, the frequency of its operation, and its wide distribution The desperate expedients to which a man can be driven if he attempts to base value on fact are well illustrated by Dr C H Waddington's Science and Ethics Dr Waddington here explains that "existence is its own justification" (p 14) and writes 'An existence which is essentially evolutionary is itself the justification for an evolution towards a more comprehensive existence" (p 17) If Evolution is praised on the ground of any properties it exhibits, then we are using an external standard and the attempt to make existence its own justification has been abandoned If that attempt is maintained, why does Dr Waddington concentrate on evolution i e , on a temporary phase of organic existence in one planet? This is "geocentric " If Good="whatever Nature happens to be doing," then surely we should notice what Nature is doing as a whole, and Nature as a whole, I understand, is working steadily and irreversibly towards the final extinction of all life in every part of the universe Even this, I confess, seems to me a lesser objection than the discrepancy between Dr Waddington's first principle and the value judgments men actually make To value anything simply because it occurs is in fact to worship success, like Quislings or men of Vichy Other philosophies more wicked have been devised none more vulgar " Lewis 48-50

⁵⁵ Kissinger 446

⁵⁶ Lewis 32-33

⁵⁷ Lewis 31-33

⁵⁸ In the face of this, Kissinger asserts, that "The state has no right to claim a separate morality for itself Kissinger 46

⁵⁹ Osgood 11-20

⁶⁰ Kegley offered "reciprocity" as a fundamental normative principle for international relations and compares various forms of the "Golden Rule" quoting Diogenes, Plato, Hillel, Jesus, Kant, and others Based on his argument, reciprocity could be equally adopted by the Realist as by the Idealist However, a commitment to reciprocity based on self-interest will be far less permanent than one based on a moral imperative enforced from without the international political system by an

imperative "Ought" In the short run, the two principles may appear indistinguishable But as the transitory, temporal conditions change, the former will prove less reliable than the latter Kegley 30

⁶¹ Kegley 30

⁶² Farrenkopf 128

⁶³ Farrenkopf 131

⁶⁴ Farrenkopf 132

⁶⁵ Farrenkopf 126

⁶⁶ Farrenkopf 128

⁶⁷ Kegley 24

⁶⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press, 1989) 87

⁶⁹ The most famous example may be Pontius Pilate When Jesus said that "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice," Pilate replied, "What is truth?" Jn 18 37-38

⁷⁰ "In the twentieth century, America has tried twice to create a world order based almost exclusively on its values It represents a heroic effort responsible for much of what is good in the contemporary world But Wilsonianism cannot be the sole basis for the post-Cold War era " Kissinger 811

⁷¹ Osgood 21

⁷² Osgood 23

⁷³ Ebenstein 121