

Wise Foreign Policy Begins at Home

Wise Foreign Policy Begins at Home

By Charles Strohmer

It's no secret that the United States faces critical policy choices at home and abroad and that a disabled political process in Washington lacks the skill to find wise ways ahead in either area. In addition, a widespread lack of understanding exists among the American public about the place of domestic life in foreign policy.

Perhaps this is because of a perceived dualism between the two areas (excepting rare moments of truth for the nation sent from afar). Or perhaps it is because foreign policy decision making is not particularly democratic; it is superintended by the President, Congressional activism, and a relatively small community of elite analysts and advisors, none of whom submit their policies to a direct popular vote. Only afterward, do we the people get to decide.

Lack of public understanding about the importance of the domestic to the foreign, and vice-versa, diminishes the ability of an American citizenry from recognizing when US foreign policy is not furthering the good of the international commons. Historically, when scholars have looked critically at this, their views have been cast as controversial. I'm thinking, here, of when Charles Beard and, after him, William Appleman Williams evaluated the Open Door Policy.

It's unlikely that any serious controversy will arise with the new book by the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, even though Richard Haass argues for a new American foreign policy that is zealous about domestic policy. *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order* recommends a Doctrine of Restoration, which rests on what Haass calls three pillars: it insists on a rebalancing of US foreign policy abroad, one that eschews a focus on the greater Middle East and pivots to Asia; it places less emphasis on military instruments and more on economic and diplomatic tools and capabilities for implementing US foreign policy; and it judges that the world for the foreseeable future is relatively unthreatening to the United States.

If the house is put in order, will the US practice a humble foreign policy or go seeking more monsters to destroy? It is because of the latter judgment ? no great rival threatening America directly ? that the country has a window of opportunity to focus on fixing its burgeoning deficit and debt, crumbling infrastructure, second-class schools, outdated immigrations system, and other pressing domestic ills. The necessity for tackling them has become imperative, Haass believes, for unless the economic foundations of American power are restored, US national security will be at stake, even if the other two foreign policy objectives are obtained.

Behind the short book's persuasive argument, which has received high marks from the highest levels, lies the organizing principle of American power and leadership in the world. One may be forgiven for wondering, however, if domestic restoration will not in the end, should it succeed, prove the truth of Mark Twain's witticism that history may not repeat itself but sometimes it sure does rhyme. Given that we have just gone through a decade in which the exercise of US power and leadership has begged deep, and still largely unanswered, moral and philosophical questions about American hegemony, what is then to prevent the reenabling of hubristic foreign policy objectives in the White House and Congress? That question Restoration ignores.

It's a hard question to make conscious, for it forces digging into the moral and philosophical ground of what US leadership has been and ought to be in the future. Ultimately, it surrounds the fact that there is but one world and one humanity. And today the far-reaching implications of that oneness are being recognized everywhere. As such, the challenge to all states, including the United States, is to pursue a normative statecraft. That, as Jim Skillen has aptly said, is what just international governance requires in a world in which norm-responsiveness is increasingly the pressing issue.

In *With or Against the World*, Skillen has written that ?the United States should persist in a long-term commitment to cooperation with other states to build stronger, more trustworthy and sustainable international institutions that can lead, demonstrably, to a more just ordering of the international commons.?

The question beyond Restoration, then, is how will US leadership respond to norm-responsiveness. If the house is put in order, will

the US practice a humble foreign policy or go seeking more monsters to destroy? It is in choosing between those two options that the controversy lies. How Washington handles that choice will determine the direction of US foreign policy should the country's economic life start humming along again.

Copyright. Permission to reprint required.

Follow @wagingwisdom

Comment on the review [here](#).