

PURSUING THE
GLOBAL
COMMON GOOD

Principle and Practice in U.S. Foreign Policy

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Michael H. Fuchs and David Buckley

Is there not, whatever the nature of one's particular God, an element of sacrilege involved in the placing of all this at stake just for the sake of the comforts, the fears, and the national rivalries of a single generation? Is there not a moral obligation to recognize in this very uniqueness of the habitat and nature of man the greatest of our moral responsibilities, and to make of ourselves, in our national personification, its guardians and protectors rather than its destroyers?²¹ –George Kennan

The threats facing the global community have changed dramatically since George Kennan wrote these words in the closing years of the Cold War, and yet his basic observation that nations have moral obligations to work together as protectors and guardians of humanity is more important than ever. Both ethical responsibility and the reality of today's global challenges require U.S. foreign policymakers to work together across divides of geography and belief in pursuit of the global common good.

The challenges, however, are formidable. The precarious global balance of power maintained by “mutual assured destruction” in Kennan's day has passed. From genocide to environmental degradation to nuclear terrorism, the threats to U.S. national security and international peace remain grave.

It is often the fear of external threats that cause nations to abandon their freedoms and morals. Far too often the conduct of a moral U.S. foreign policy has been subsumed to unscrupulous policies in the pursuit of the national interest. This narrow conception of the national interest often excludes moral considerations, and we are led to believe that morals must be left at our borders in order to defend national security. And though protecting the freedoms of Americans is an integral part of the national interest, U.S. foreign policy in recent years has succumbed to demagoguery that exploits foreign threats in order to dispense with the very freedoms at home that an interest-based foreign policy is supposed to secure.

Determining the role of states in tackling global challenges and garnering the will to act will test the very definition of the national interest. Since the time of the ancients, philosophers, prophets, and political leaders have struggled to relate individual moral obligations to the duties of the state. If the state is the sum of its people, do individual people's values transfer to the activity of the state on the international scene? Foreign policy experts often express motives of state policy in terms of vaguely defined national interests, avoiding at all cost the language of moral obligation. The self-interest and the values of individuals and states, however, are not divorced.

It was the magnitude of global challenges that compelled even the realist foreign policy thinker Kennan to argue that the need to combat such threats was more than a question of the national interest. These are questions of morality. There is indeed “an element of sacrilege” in placing

our very earth in peril “for the sake of the comforts, the fears, and the national rivalries of a single generation.”

The global common good bridges ethical obligation and policy practice. It challenges leaders, whether of religious organizations or secular governments, to translate their deepest principles into pragmatic action. It also challenges governments to engage with partners around the globe in the firm belief that our shared humanity provides grounding for common solutions to the greatest threats facing the world today.

Each of the essays in this collection demonstrates the unique potential of the global common good to reconcile our empirical realities and our ethical responsibilities. As the writers of these essays make clear, morality is not the only concern of U.S. foreign policy, but it is without question a paramount one, inextricably intertwined with policy. How humanity reached this new moral plateau, and what it will take to secure our footing here, is the appropriate place to begin our explication of the global common good.

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A Common Humanity

The evolution of human rights protections in the 20th century illustrates some of the challenges, as well as the great potential of the global common good. Today, even as some people question the commitment of states to live up to their obligations to protect human rights, it is clear that the growing worldwide embrace of fundamental human rights is a cause for hope.

In 1947, just two years after the conclusion of the most devastating war the world had ever experienced, representatives from a variety of the world's religions and peoples gathered in Paris to discuss humanity's common ties. The indiscriminate killing of World War II, when mass murder cut across lines of East and West, religion and ethnicity, compelled the world to come together to draft a Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Declaration's drafting committee employed the services of a separate group, UNESCO's Committee on the Theoretical Bases of Human Rights, to gather human rights perspectives from the world's diverse religious, philosophical, and legal traditions. The committee was chaired by the eminent historian E.H. Carr and included luminaries such as philosophers Richard McKeon and Jacques Maritain. Respondents to the committee's survey included Mohandas Ghandi, author

Aldous Huxley, Confucian philosopher Chung-Shu Lo, Bengali Muslim poet and philosopher Humayin Kabir, and Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce.

These representatives did not necessarily agree on political or religious ideology. They struggled to agree even on terminology. But there was something fundamental they shared that crossed the barriers of religion, ethnicity, geographical origins, and language. Ghandi, a British-educated Indian who fought for civil rights in South Africa and India, was uniquely placed to speak of the common beliefs of East and West. He noted during this process that “the very right to live accrues to us only when we do the duty of citizenship of the world.”²

Looking back on the accomplishments of this group in building unity out of diversity, Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon observes:

No one has yet improved on the answer of the UNESCO philosophers: Where basic human values are concerned, cultural diversity has been exaggerated. The group found, after consulting with Confucian, Hindu, Muslim, and European thinkers, that a core of fundamental principles was widely shared in countries that had not yet adopted rights instruments and in cultures that had not embraced the language of rights. Their survey persuaded them that basic human rights rest on “common convictions,” even though those convictions “are stated in terms of different philosophic principles and on the background of divergent political and economic systems.” The philosophers concluded that even people who seem to be far apart in theory can agree that certain things are so terrible in practice that no one will publicly approve them and that certain things are so good in practice that no one will publicly oppose them.³

The U.N. General Assembly unanimously adopted the Declaration on December 10, 1948. According to Glendon, on that night “the moral terrain of international relations was forever altered.”⁴

Alas, in the decades that followed, states acquired checkered records of abiding by the Declaration they had signed. Millions of people experienced the freedom of democratic governance for the first time, and millions more were lifted out of poverty. But the Cold War and the hot ones that flared up in between consistently caused human rights to be subordinated to the “national interest.”

Nor did the end of the Cold War stem the bloodshed. The pledge of “never again” was forgotten in Rwanda in 1994, as 800,000 Tutsis were slaughtered in a matter of months with machetes and other gruesome tools of genocide. The wars of dissolution in the former Yugoslavia and the accompanying ethnic cleansing drew a slow international reaction until Kosovo became the center of attention in 1999.

During that conflict, British Prime Minister Tony Blair gave a speech to the Economic Club in Chicago. He challenged the notion of non-intervention in the internal matters of states, speaking specifically about genocide, but also more broadly about threats to international

security emanating from repression within states. He spoke of Kosovo as a “just war, based not on any territorial ambitions, but on values.” Another change was stirring in the international moral terrain.

In 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, sponsored by the Canadian government, further challenged the traditional notion of sovereignty. It endorsed the idea of the “responsibility to protect” humans under direct threat of violence and recognized the commitment of nations to prevent conflict.⁵ In 2004, the U.N. Secretary General’s High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change reported its findings and explicitly supported the responsibility to protect. Then-U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan recommended that heads of state adopt the responsibility to protect at the U.N. Summit in September 2005.⁶ On September 15, 2005, the nations of the world committed themselves to “help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.”⁷ The world had recognized their elimination as an imperative so crucial to moral and security concerns as to merit the responsibility of the international community to intervene.

And yet, after enshrining this norm, the international community responded with horrendous apathy to the genocide in Darfur. The still-inadequate response to state-sponsored crimes against humanity is unfortunately a telling reminder that states rarely undertake humanitarian interventions unless they perceive there to be a direct national interest at stake. Without leadership from global powers and the international institutions they form, humanitarian agreements will never move from paper compacts to concrete reality.

That is why a global leader such as the United States has the unique capability, and obligation, to urge the international community to see that its moral interests and its security interests may very well be one and the same. Tony Blair concluded his speech in Chicago by touching on this theme: “As with the parable of the individuals and the talents, so those nations which have the power, have the responsibility.”⁸

U.S. foreign policy can have no higher principle than acting on the recognition that the fates of people around the world and those of the American people are linked. As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote while jailed in Birmingham, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Given the global scale of today’s greatest moral challenges, King’s words are more apt today than ever.

Genealogy of the Common Good

The common good is an old idea with new-found vitality in American public discourse. Its direct lineage includes philosophers, theologians, and statesmen from various ethical traditions. Debates about the common good allow participation by diverse schools of thought and provide a unique opportunity to build the broad political will necessary to meet today’s international moral obligations. Even where the term itself has not appeared, the underlying values of universal human dignity and a collective approach to our greatest human challenges resonate throughout ethical traditions. The global common good challenges individual traditions to work across boundaries of faith and geography to arrive at a shared moral vision for our highly interconnected world.

Aristotle was the philosophical father of the common good. In his quest to set out the ethical precepts for developing virtuous citizens and building just societies, he developed the idea that both individuals and governments ought to work for the same virtuous goals. By bringing humanity back to its shared common good, he developed an ethical system that attempts to address the shared interests of diverse societies.

Aristotle could not conceive of just government as divorced from this pursuit of the common good. He writes in Book I of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, “For though this good is the same for the individual and the state, yet the good of the state seems a grander and more perfect thing both to attain and to secure; and glad as one would be to do this service for a single individual, to do it for a people and for a number of states is nobler and more divine.”⁹ Such governments could not merely protect the interests of powerful individuals, but instead must work for nobler ends: “The good is justice, in other words, the common interest.”¹⁰

St. Thomas Aquinas played a critical role in wedding Aristotle’s concept to the Christian tradition. In addition to building on the biblical idea that one should “not seek that which is profitable to myself, but to many, that they may be saved,” Aquinas makes the important point that the common good and the good of individuals are not in opposition. In fact, “He that seeks the good of the many seeks in consequence his own good.”¹¹

Contemporary Christian sources, both Catholic and Protestant, have built on this long tradition of advocating government for the common good. *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the central documents of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II, speaks of “the increasingly universal complexion” of the common good, given our growing human interdependence, and argues that we have duties not just to our countrymen but “with respect to the whole human race.”

In Protestant traditions the concept of the common good rests on similar foundations of universal human dignity and a shared responsibility to build just political systems. Old Testament injunctions to “Let justice roll down like waters” and New Testament reminders that “Whatsoever you do unto the least of these you do unto me” exemplify religious commands to work for the common good. As contemporary Evangelical ethicist Ronald J. Sider argues, there is an undeniable positive role for government to play in this work—to be what Paul calls “God’s servant for your good.”¹²

The common good resonates beyond Christian traditions as well. The term has rich resonance in the history of Jewish thought and in contemporary Jewish practice. The Jewish tradition of working for justice and the common good within the covenantal community is extensive: Among the 613 commandments laid out in the covenant with Moses are injunctions to protect the disempowered, especially the poor, widows, orphans, and children. By acts of *tzedakah* (doing justice) the people act in accordance with God’s will and fulfil their obligations to the covenant. The related concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) is also prominent within the contemporary Jewish community.

These obligations to work for the common good apply not only within the Jewish community, but also in relationships with the broader world. Mainstream rabbinic theology today sees

humanity universally being made *tselem elohim* (in the image of God) and thus worthy of respect and ethical care. The Jewish tradition may provide the most direct path to God, but as the great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides argued, Jews should “Accept the truth, whatever its source.” Maimonides and Jewish thinkers since have actively sought out the common good in pluralistic settings.

Like its two Abrahamic cousins, Islam is rich in ethical injunctions grounded in the idea of the common good. The presence of *zakat* (almsgiving) as one of the five pillars of Islam, and sometimes referred to as one of two cardinal obligations, makes it clear that an ethic of mutual support is at the core of the Islamic faith. There is a strong sense that good government is one that can provide for the poor and needy. The idea of *maslaha*, translated as either “public interest” or “common good,” guides governmental responsibility to provide for public needs. It has featured heavily in the writings of modern Muslim reformers throughout the Islamic world.

Just as essential to the common good as this charitable ethic is Islam’s capacity to show respect for pluralism and its insistence on universal human dignity. Humans share a *fitra* (noble nature) even outside of the Islamic community, and thus have access to God’s truth. Prophets are sent outside the Islamic community “so that humankind might have no argument against God” for excluding one tribe. Our human diversity is the express will of God, and as such, working together for the common good seems a natural outcome: “For every one of you, We have appointed a path and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you but one community; but that [He has not done in order that] He may try you in what has come to you. So compete with one another in good works.”¹³

Conceptions of the common good abound in Eastern traditions as well. Mencius, one of the most influential Confucian thinkers, lived during the same era that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were creating the bases of Western thought. Thousands of miles to the east, Mencius was building on Confucius’ foundations and laying out the bases of much of Eastern thought:

I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others knowing that any of our contemporaries, seeing a child about to fall into a well, will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not so as to gain the favor of the child’s parents, nor so as to seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor from dislike of the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing...¹⁴

Irene Bloom, a scholar of Eastern thought, has remarked that, “Mencius does not need to tell us what the person who sees the child teetering on the edge of a well will do. We ourselves fill this in out of our own humanity. We recognize that all human beings can be counted on, insofar as they retain their humanity, to act on the spontaneous impulse to save the child by pulling it from danger.”¹⁵

Mahayana, one of the two major strains of Buddhism, emphasizes the need of those who have attained enlightenment to help others reach that goal. And contemporary Buddhism has produced one of the most eloquent proponents of the global common good in the Dalai Lama.

His tireless advocacy for social justice applies the millennia of Buddhist tradition to today's pressing ethical problems.

Ultimately, humanity is one and this small planet is our only home. If we are to protect this home of ours, each of us needs to experience a vivid sense of universal altruism... I believe that at every level of society—familial, tribal, national, and international—the key to a happier and more successful world is the growth of compassion. We do not need to become religious, nor do we need to believe in an ideology. All that is necessary is for each of us to develop our good human qualities.¹⁶

These rich traditions of religious and philosophical thought have pervaded societies throughout the world, establishing the foundations for civilizations and governments.

In addition to its religious roots, the concept of the global common good is based in American civic values that unite our nation and, at our best, guide our actions in the world. The Enlightenment ideal of universal human dignity drove Thomas Jefferson to write of self-evident truths, which today unites American policymakers with their counterparts working for human rights around the world.

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Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant expressed similar truths when developing his cosmopolitan ideal of the international community. “Since the narrower or wider community of the peoples of the earth has developed so far that a violation of rights in one place is felt throughout the world, the idea of a cosmopolitan right is not a fantastical, high-flown or exaggerated notion.”¹⁷

In more recent times, the American dedication to social responsibility has animated progressive initiatives from the New Deal to the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Contemporary progressive thinkers such as Michael Tomasky, John Halpin, and Ruy Teixeira have advanced the common good as a moral precept and governing philosophy that can revitalize progressive thought.¹⁸

A Need for Consensus and Leadership

Discovering common ties among varying belief systems is hardly the most arduous part of bridging religious, ethnic, and geographical divides. The greater challenge is to apply the ideas of the global common good to practical problems and forge common solutions. Translating the contentions of philosophers and religious scholars into agreement between policymakers and nations is the task of statesmen and citizens.

Contemporary thinkers in the foreign policy world have vigorously taken up the issue of values in America's foreign policy. Given the disastrous neoconservative approach to the mix of values with policy so far this century, how can we protect ethics from politicization and preserve the idea of a values-driven international order? How can we avoid falling back into the purely self-interested calculations that lose sight of our nation's ideals and responsibilities?

Policymakers can realize that principle and pragmatism need not be in total conflict. Leslie Gelb argued in 2003 that "ideals and self-interests are both generally considered necessary ingredients of the national interest,"¹⁹ and that values and realistic policymaking can find common ground. As Madeleine Albright put it, "A successful foreign policy must begin with the world as it is but also work for what we would like it to be."²⁰

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Only by engaging international partners in building this vision can America live up to its highest values. Challenges like war, pandemic disease, and climate change threaten the very things we cherish most—they do not discriminate based on ethnicity or religion and are not confined by national boundaries. When war sends refugees and violence across borders, when disease spreads, and when clouds of pollution infect the earth's atmosphere, seemingly local problems become universal threats.

Nor are these problems equally distributed. Climate change, war, and disease affect certain peoples more intensely, based on geographical location and levels of prosperity and development. For instance, Bangladesh alone cannot stem the tide of global carbon emissions, and yet it will be one of the first countries to drown when climate change raises sea levels. Concerted multilateral efforts are essential to curing these global ills.

The burden of responsibility is also uneven. At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States occupies a unique role as the world's lone superpower. The United States must translate

that power into leadership. Toward the end of his country's struggle for independence, Vaclav Havel said,

Without a global revolution in the sphere of the human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being.... We still do not know how to put morality ahead of politics, science, and economy. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility—responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my company, my success.²¹

Politics, science, and economics must be used for moral ends in order for the United States to fulfil its responsibilities to mankind. And once we begin to build policies based on our common values, even if we cannot bring about a full “global revolution in the sphere of the human consciousness,” we can surely try to bring about “change for the better in the sphere of our being.”

Obstacles to Action

At this moment when the global common good is so needed, there are serious obstacles facing leaders, both religious and secular, to building a more just world. Each of these obstacles must be faced in order to translate the global common good from principle to action.

First, the perceived threat of a clash of civilizations predicted by Samuel Huntington in his seminal 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article has not disappeared. Indeed, the influence of Islamist terrorist organizations and the ill-conceived United States-led invasion of Iraq have stoked fears that the boundaries of civilizations may be more impermeable than ever. Those who advocate for the global common good must rededicate themselves to working with partners from diverse corners of the world to demonstrate that a clash of civilizations is not the world's inevitable future.

Second, weak and failing states make working for the global common good more difficult. Such states lack the leadership structures that enable multinational cooperation, as well as dedication to democracy and human rights. As the world learned from Afghanistan's recent history, such states also provide safe havens for terrorist networks. The fact that Iraq is rapidly disintegrating is a sobering challenge to policymakers and faith leaders alike. Managing threats and promoting internal reforms while dedicating the resources of the international community to building the capacity for good governance in such states is an important task in pursuing the global common good.

Third, international institutions continue to struggle from lack of dedication to the common cause from their members and internal management challenges. Even so, such institutions must play active roles in distributing aid, providing military intervention at times, and, perhaps most importantly, giving concrete proof that pursuing the global common good requires participation from more than just traditional great powers.

Fourth, economic globalization is an unavoidable force that requires careful moral consideration. Both in the United States and the developing world, market forces can provide millions with an

improved quality of life or can violate basic human rights and degrade communities. By moving beyond the tired dichotomy between the interests of labor and those of free trade, policymakers can harness international market forces in ways that increase prosperity, promote decent work, and live up to America's moral obligations as an economic leader.

Finally, there is an undeniable need to build political will for action in order to confront these great challenges. Summoning the will to act requires bridging divides, both within the United States and with international partners. When it comes to crafting U.S. foreign policy, building bipartisan consensus is a Herculean task. That said, many of the issues at the core of the global common good have increasingly brought together diverse sectors within this country. Evangelicals and progressive activists, Republican and Democratic policymakers, corporations, and state regulators are coming to realize that failing to muster such political will would threaten our security, economic growth, and especially our nation's deepest moral values.

How might today's leaders and crafters of American foreign policy arrive at similar successes when addressing obstacles to the global common good? The authors in this volume consider these challenges and the potential for the global common good to address them when applied to a number of distinct policy areas. For instance, private and public organizations and governments spanning the globe have funded the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. Religious groups have mobilized communities to advocate for intervention in Darfur. But more is needed. U.S. leadership is indispensable.

Conclusion

After the lights went out across Europe and Asia amid the horrors of World War II, the United States eventually dedicated its entire being—military, industrial, and human—to save those under the jackboot of fascism. During the Cold War, the United States recognized the foreign policy errors that contributed to the rise of fascism, sparking our country's dedication to the prevention of future conflict by helping rebuild nations and shelter those faced with the threat of Soviet expansion.

Today, U.S. leaders must recognize that the special role the United States plays in world affairs does not merely derive from its unmatched military might or economic heft but also from its moral stature. Much of our moral authority abroad rests on our moral authority at home, and there is work to be done here as well. But America must remain a beacon for the global common good, aiding those struggling for freedom and trying to rise out of poverty. And in order to fulfil the global common good, the United States will need to call upon all the facets of its power. We must arm our ambassadors of aid and ideas with the necessary languages, resources, and support to, as President Kennedy put it, help those “struggling to break the bonds of mass misery.” Our leaders must urge the international community to tackle those global issues that cannot be combated without U.S. involvement, such as global warming, alleviating poverty, and fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS.

It is an undeniable challenge to balance the ethical traditions that resonate with the global common good with national security interests. Working for these goals, however, is a recurring

theme of American foreign policy, from Woodrow Wilson arguing that matters of global affairs are “shot through with the principles of life” to John Kennedy pledging aid to “those in huts and villages of half the world...not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right.” As examples from the Universal Declaration to the Responsibility to Protect demonstrate, we know that we can build consensus. We now must learn to practice what we preach.

Endnotes

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“Many often deride the influence of values and religious beliefs in the making of U.S. foreign policy as irrelevant or not in the ‘national interest.’ This couldn’t be further from the truth. *Pursuing the Global Common Good* tells us why.”

Madeleine K. Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State
and author of *The Mighty and the Almighty*

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