

# The homesick superpower

**T**here are two tragedies in life," George Bernard Shaw mused. "One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to gain it." This is America's problem in the year 3 A.C. (after the cold war). For the first time in this century, the United States is surrounded only by friends — if you subtract a few rogue states here and there. And the United States is the only remaining superpower.

But confusion is rising, and tragedy may yet be triumph's reward. The United States has done best when interest was bound to idealism and ideology. In their own minds, Americans never went to war for power, glory or booty. What really riled them in their first war was the "cruelty and perfidy" of George III — above and beyond his "plundering our seas [and] ravaging our coasts." In 1917 and 1941, America did not think about the European balance of power but about the evil of the kaiser and the fuhrer. Nor was Russian power the problem that galvanized the United States in the cold war. It was the *ideological* enemy as personalized by Stalin and successors.

The national interest no longer comes prepackaged. As a nasty, Saddam Hussein does not quite make it into the global Hall of Infamy, and most Americans have a hard time identifying the bad guy in a lineup of Messrs. Milosevic, Karadzic and Izetbegovic. Who is the good guy in Somalia or Abkhazia?

The year 3 A.C. is not a good year for crusades, but it does seem to be a good time for coming home. Indeed, for the first time since the 19th century, isolationism looks enticing again. With no world-class foe on the horizon, the United States does not need allies to ensure its security. And careless gambles made in the flush of victory have not paid off. Somalia looked easy a scant year ago (remember "doability"?); now America has begun to talk "extrication."

**Look before you leap.** Somalia spells out an enduring double warning "at a turning point in human history," as Bill Clinton put it before the United Nations. First, helicopter gunships do not a political order make. Second, look (at interests) before you leap (into intervention). Throughout the West, today's gung-ho interventionist can quickly become tomorrow's peace marcher. So unless there is a compelling interest as well as a reasonable chance of success at an acceptable cost, intervention ought to be viewed with the same fervor as unprotected intercourse in the shadow of AIDS.

But democracies, and least of all the United States, are not very good at calculating interest in the twilight zone

between crusading and coming home. George F. Kennan once compared America to a dinosaur lying in the "comfortable primeval mud," paying "little attention to his environment." Indeed, "you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed." A wiser animal, the dean of American diplomats concludes, would have "taken a little more interest" in events "at an earlier date. . . ." Today, *Democratosaurus rex*

is again turning inward and, to be sure, there are plenty of items on the repair list at home. But when everything is tallied, three foreign entries cannot be erased.

One is a familiar item: Russia as the heir of the Soviet Union. Even if Boris Yeltsin wins against the Yesterday Men (and we should wish him well), do not assume that democracy will win, too. The best we can hope for is an authoritarian system with a semifree economy. But with Yeltsin or without him, the process of "re-imperialization" has begun (look at the southern reaches), and Russia is not about to become a bloated Switzerland.

Second, there are the new challengers in East Asia, with China making a headlong dash for superpower status and Japan, though more hesitantly, taking steps in the same direction. Also keep in mind various lesser — and less responsible — states angling for missiles and nuclear weapons.

Third, there is the world economy, which neatly ties together diplomacy and domestic welfare. The United States, the largest exporter in the world, has built and

maintained the free-trade system that has multiplied riches beyond belief. That system, battered by the "Asianization" of the global economy, is now about as stable as Princess Di's marriage — and NAFTA (also in trouble) is no substitute for a global market.

What do these three problems have in common? None of them will go away if the United States does. China, Japan and Germany are rising powers, and a resurgent Russia would be, too, but only the United States has learned to identify its own well-being with global order beyond its borders. Unless America takes on the missile mongers and the protectionists, nobody else will.

Sure, in this "new era," as Clinton describes it, there is some safety in indifference, and not every crisis need be treated as a wholly-owned subsidiary of American diplomacy. But there is no one else to man the bridge, and it is always better to be at the helm than to hunker down in the hold. Those who shape the world most also gain most. ■



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