

Ambassador Chas Freeman on US Foreign Policy, June 23, 2008

Please see below for text of a speech delivered on Monday by former Ambassador Chas Freeman entitled, " America in the World: Magoo at the Helm." It is also online at: <http://www.mepc.org/whats/cwf080623.asp>.

It should be noted that Magoo is cited as a metaphor for the unique blend of myopia, blundering, and self-congratulation that has characterized US foreign policy in the post Cold War era. It is not intended as a representation of any particular administration or individual.

America In the World: Magoo at the Helm

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In the last days of the last century, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described the United States as "the indispensable nation." "We stand tall," she claimed, "and we see further than other countries into the future." She did not seek the views of any foreigners on either point. It is not recorded that many, if indeed any, agreed with her. What she said was, of course, music to American ears. But what we and non-Americans thought at the time of her smugly bumptious articulation of our self-regard is now moot. The policies the United States adopted in the first decade of this century have thoroughly refuted her theses.

A great many governments abroad now fear that Washington will behave like the ever-self-congratulatory Mr. Magoo – wandering destructively through a reality he misperceives and wreaking havoc he determinedly misinterprets as success. Few believe that our country can still combine realism with statesmanship. More tellingly, a lot have concluded that, far from involving the United States, dispensing with a role for Washington is the only way to solve problems.

Take the Middle East, for example. This is the region that, in one way or another, has been the principal focus of American foreign policy in recent years. It is also the region in which the United States has most consistently shown a preference for bluster, boycotts, and bombs and a concomitant disdain for diplomacy. I am not speaking here simply of Iraq or Iran. We have refused dialog and attempted to dissuade Israel from negotiating with Syria. We have done the same even more adamantly with Hezbollah (which, as a consequence of the US-sponsored Israeli bombing campaign of 2006, emerged as the leading force in Lebanese politics). Meanwhile, in the name of bolstering Lebanese independence from political interference by Syrian and Iranian outsiders, we have vigorously interfered in Lebanon ourselves. We have repeatedly proclaimed that it would be a sin to talk with Hamas (which, thanks to elections we insisted take place, is now the democratically empowered governing authority in all areas of Palestine not directly occupied by Israel). We have tried hard to congeal Sunni Arab antagonism to Shiite Persians into an Arab bloc we hope will join us in ostracizing and punishing Iran, which the Israelis and we repeatedly threaten to assault from the air. Our domestic politics are venomously anti-Muslim; our government has made no effort to form alliances with Islamic authorities who might articulate a credible rebuttal to Muslim extremists.

These US policies have not gone over well. Recent developments strongly suggest that they have resulted in decisions by all concerned in the Middle East to work around the United States rather than with us or through us. Consider Israel's resort to Turkey (rather than US "shuttle diplomacy") to manage proximity talks with Syria. Or Lebanon's turn to Qatar to broker the peaceful realignment of its politics, notwithstanding our investment in them. Or Israel's reliance on Egypt to mediate a cease-fire agreement with Hamas. Or the Palestinian president's decision to enlist Arab conciliators to work out Fatah's differences with Hamas, rather than concentrating on an American-proclaimed "peace process" that most in the region have come to view as a cruel fraud. Or Israel's recourse to Germany to reach understandings with Hezbollah. Or Saudi Arabia's effort to reach a modus vivendi with Iran, to align the Muslim mainstream against extremism, and to broker renewed peace between Sunnis and Shiites in preparation for interfaith dialog with Jews and Christians. All these political openings touch on interests that Washington sees as vital. All of them are taking place notwithstanding longstanding American objections to them, and all of them are unfolding in our diplomatic absence.

This is not just because Mr. Magoo has seemingly succeeded Uncle Sam at the helm. In some measure, it's because the United States has taken sides in disputes with respect to which we had traditionally maintained at least a pretense of evenhandedness. We are therefore seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. It is because promiscuous efforts by the United States to impose military solutions on problems that force cannot resolve have left no room for American diplomacy. The resulting default on reality-based problem-solving by the US has created a diplomatic void that others are now filling. This trend toward working around the United States has been aggravated by widespread distaste for the arrogant and insulting phrasing of some US policy pronouncements. The undisguised disdain of some American envoys for the United Nations, the World Court, and regional organizations, and their open contempt for the views of the international communities these represent has also disinclined others to work with us if they can avoid it. Washington's political marginalization in the Middle East is a predictable result of such "diplomacy-free foreign policies."

What could not have been predicted is the reputation for incompetence our country has acquired. This has touched even our armed forces, despite their well-deserved reputation as the most professional and lethal practitioners of the arts of war on the planet. Our interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were meant to showcase this element of American power, underscore our omnipotence, and intimidate anyone tempted to resist our hegemony. Instead, these military campaigns have had the paradoxical effect of demonstrating the strategic limitations of the use of force, eroding the deterrent value of our unmatched military prowess, and proving the efficacy of asymmetric warfare as a counter to our strength. Despite the Magoo-like mutterings of the "neoconservatives" ("you've done it again, Magoo!"), when we leave Afghanistan and Iraq, we will do so much more chastened than exuberant about the potential of military power, however great, to transform the world to our advantage.

Scofflaw US behavior, the ill-considered uses of military power in wars of unilateral choice, and the contraction of freedom in the American homeland have indeed transformed our relationship with the world – but to our grave disadvantage. Abu Ghraib, Bagram, and Guantánamo and the practice of "extraordinary rendition" have dishonored our traditions and defiled our international reputation. Militarism has debilitated our alliances, friendships, and partnerships and corroded our ability to lead. The belligerently surly, unwelcoming face we present to would-be visitors in our embassies and at our

borders puts off even the most determined admirers of our society. The elements of a garrison state we have put in place at home have enfeebled our ability to inspire others with our ideas while depriving us of theirs. Much of the world is now seriously disenchanted with the United States. Most (though not all) of these self-inflicted wounds derive from our response to the atrocities of 9/11 and our policies toward the Middle East . We have shown not only that we can shoot ourselves in the foot, but that we can reload with exceptional speed and do it again and again.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice famously predicted in 2006, as Israel rained American-supplied bombs on Beirut, that Lebanon 's pain represented the birth pangs of "a new Middle East ." She was right, but the Middle East now emerging seems to be one in which the United States no longer has convening power, political credibility, or persuasiveness. It is a region in which all countries fear our military might but in which no country – not even Israel, despite its dependence on American subventions – defers to our leadership.

In our own hemisphere too, without many noticing, a major ebb in U.S. influence has taken place. Latin America's governments may have little in common beyond a commitment to some form of democracy and social justice, but they share a determination to assert greater autonomy from the United States. To this end, they are courting investment from China, opening markets in Europe, stalling the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, dissenting from the "Washington consensus," and crafting regional institutions and forming partnerships that not only exclude the United States but are sometimes openly antagonistic to it. Political Washington's apparent disinterest in a region it long commanded and its ideologically induced inability to respond to opportunities there (like those in a changing Cuba) have facilitated these trends. The Council on Foreign Relations' recent declaration that "the era of the United States as the dominant influence in Latin America is over" may be overstated, but it is not easily rebutted. The regional agenda in Latin America is increasingly set there, without reference to the United States.

This is true in Africa as well, where the United States has mounted a very significant continent-wide effort against HIV-AIDS but is, in most respects, substantially less engaged than China , Europe, and India . Africans have taken the lead – so far not very effectively, to be sure – in crisis management of issues on their continent like the mayhem in the Congo, the genocidal warfare in Sudan, and the collapse of democracy and decency in Zimbabwe. In doing so, they have largely sidelined the United States and other outside powers. In response, and to upgrade our capabilities in Africa, Washington unilaterally decided to create a US military combatant commander for the African continent and to station him and his staff there. Logic and precedent supported this initiative.

American flag officers now sit at the head of combatant commands in most other regions of the globe. The prominent role of such uniformed American proconsuls abroad reflects the extent to which our foreign relations have become skewed toward reliance on military instruments of influence. The forward presence of American generals and admirals with transnational responsibilities, unmatched fiscal resources, and wide authority to draw on the immense capabilities of our armed forces makes them the most active and visible face of our country abroad. Since they are on the spot, moreover, they tend to be more in touch with regional trends and realities than officials in Washington . That's one reason most American ambassadors are so fond of them.

As the United States saw it, the establishment of an Africa Command would elevate Africa's symbolic importance in our foreign policy. But Africans have reacted badly to the idea. They see it as an attempt to reestablish a non-African military presence on their newly decolonized continent and as an indication that American military adventurism might soon extend there. For the time being, at least, USAFRICOM remains in Stuttgart rather than within its area of operational responsibility.

The United States' strongest international ties, of course, have been with Europe, where continent-wide integration is in the final stages of erasing the divisions of the Cold War. The European Union is less than the sum of its parts, but it has emerged as the dominant factor in its region and adjacent areas. Increasingly, Europeans are charting their own course even on issues of great importance to the United States, like membership in NATO or how to deal with the return of Russia to assertive nationalism and China and India to wealth and power. The United States is, however, now valued as a participant in the Eurasian balance of power rather than as the protector of Europe against a credible external security threat. (This is so even though we have taken a second look into Putin's eyes and seen his role: he is a KGB guy playing a Tsar with post-Soviet characteristics.) There are no longer many compelling reasons for Europeans to defer to Americans even if we had not given them cause to doubt our wisdom. For the first time in the five decades since they embraced American leadership of the Atlantic community, they seem comfortable ignoring Washington's views or rejecting them outright.

This is in part because the extraordinary transatlantic solidarity of 9/11 has given way to sharp differences over international law and comity, privacy and due process of law, and the desirability of multilateral approaches to transnational issues like climate change. Very few in Europe have any sympathy for claims by American politicians that 9/11 changed everything, justifying the suspension of individual rights and the separation of powers insisted upon by Enlightenment thinkers like America's founding fathers. To a distressing extent, therefore, the Atlantic community is no longer united by shared ideals but ominously divided by emerging differences over them. Transatlantic disagreement on core values bodes ill for the prospect that these values will prevail in a world in which the center of gravity is migrating to the Asian ends of the Eurasian landmass.

Paradoxically, given the much ballyhooed shift of global wealth and power to Asia, the trend toward regional assertiveness and the decline of American influence is in some ways least obvious in the Asia-Pacific region. This reflects the realities of Chinese and Indian power in relation to the nations on their periphery. With the notable exception of Pakistan, India's neighbors have reconciled themselves to its hegemony in South Asia. The United States has recognized India's primacy there and does not seek to undermine or thwart it.

In East and Central Asia, however, Chinese hegemony remains an unwelcome conjecture, not a reality. China has repeatedly assured its neighbors that it does not and will not seek to dominate them, but none is inclined to self-insure against the risk that it might do so. In this context, the safe and easy course for most has been a carefully calibrated measure of continued association, including military cooperation, with the United States. Much of the Cold War pattern of East Asian alliances with the United States, with Japan as its lynchpin, therefore persists. From the point of view of the Asian participants in these alliances, their purpose is not, as in the past, to contain China but to

insure that China will fit unthreateningly into a regional balance bolstered by American power. Meanwhile, China itself is firmly focused on its own economic and social development. It very much wishes to avoid needless confrontations with the United States. As a result, in comparison with other regions, East Asia remains relatively disinclined to challenge American views and prone to accommodate them when possible.

This deferential stance has not, however, precluded disagreements with the United States over issues like how to deal with Myanmar [Burma] and north Korea or the development of regional groupings or institutions that exclude Washington . Such groupings are a growing phenomenon, largely centered on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Some of them involve various Asian-only combinations; some involve Europe . Some include Australia or India while others exclude one or both. Washington has inadvertently accelerated the trend toward exclusion of the United States from regional groupings in the Asia-Pacific region by erratic participation in key meetings and sometimes tediously insisting that they focus on terrorism or various Middle East-related issues with respect to which Asians do not share American perspectives or obsessions. Meanwhile, China and India have taken out their own insurance against American hegemony, in the form of regular trilateral meetings with Russia devoted to promoting multi-polarity, respect for the United Nations Charter, and other offsets to US efforts to dictate and dominate the world order.

The fact that other countries are willing to take greater responsibility for managing the affairs of their own regions, even if they have been moved to do so mainly in reaction to perceived US errors of commission and omission, should probably be seen as a positive development. But it is certainly not a good thing for our government to be excluded from conversations on major regional or global issues. The risk is that our interests will be misunderstood or ignored when actions are taken that affect us. US policies since the end of the Cold War – especially over the eight years of the G. W. Bush Administration – have tended to isolate the United States, take us out of the diplomatic game, and leave us at the mercy of decisions and arrangements that others increasingly craft in our absence. Rediscovering the diplomatic arts of persuasion is key to recovering the role and standing we have lost.

One can learn more from catastrophe and failure than from victory or success. Students of US foreign policy since the catastrophe of 9/11, rejoice! There is a lot of material from which to extract lessons for future foreign policy.

A good place to start might be 9/11 itself. Among other things, the shocking attack on our homeland that day showed that, in the post-Cold War world, if the United States launches or sponsors military operations in other people's homelands, we should expect them to find a way to retaliate against ours. This caution remains relevant. Without intending to do so, we have installed a lot of incubators and created a lot of training opportunities for terrorists in Iraq , Gaza , the West Bank, and Lebanon as well as in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan .

Meanwhile, we have repeatedly adjusted our military campaign plans in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have yet to adjust our diplomacy. And we have not come up with a strategy to overcome the appeal of anti-American terrorism, turn its adherents against it, slash the numbers of its recruits, or even capture its most notorious spokesmen.

Those best qualified to accomplish these tasks are mainstream Muslims, acting out of their own self-interest and in concert with us. Cultivating support in the Islamic world should therefore be a principal focus of US foreign policy. The struggle to outlaw and suppress terrorism cannot succeed without the full cooperation of allies and friends around the world too. Reinvigorating our alliances and partnerships is as essential to this task as it is to the renewal of foreign respect for American leadership in general..

In this regard, a few of the lessons that might be drawn from the global and regional trends of recent years stand out. Three have to do with rediscovering diplomacy as an alternative to militarism. Two are more substantive.

First, Woody Allen was right. "Eighty percent of success is [indeed] showing up." At the moment, the US military shows up a lot more than anyone else at the regional level. We need diplomatic counterparts to our regional combatant commanders. They should be forward-deployed and endowed with the resources and authority to address regional as well as bilateral interests. They should have a mandate to implement strategies that integrate the political, economic, cultural and informational, intelligence, and military elements of our national influence.

Second, our leaders at all levels and in all branches of government need to rediscover the art of listening. Listening is essential to successful relationship management. If we don't pay attention to the opinions of others, they will be – as we have seen – less likely to find our views persuasive. If we don't attend to their interests, they are unlikely to buy into ours. Diplomacy is not preaching to others about what they must do. This does not build partnership or elicit cooperation. Diplomacy is persuading others that they should serve our interests because their interests coincide with ours.

Third, as that consummate realist, Otto von Bismarck advised, "Be polite. Write diplomatically. Even in a declaration of war one observes the rules of politeness." Only small boys, hicks, and clueless speech writers think it clever to call foreign leaders or countries names. Statesmen understand that insults just deepen the commitment of those they target to the error of their ways. Sometimes negotiated solutions are the only solutions available at an affordable price. Discourtesy closes the door to negotiated solutions and locks it shut. Getting others to do things our way is difficult. Denigrating their character or putting derogatory labels on them can make it impossible.

Fourth, we need to clear the foreign policy decks as rapidly as we can. Our plunge into the quicksand of endless warfare abroad has already done great damage to our prestige and influence abroad and considerable injury at home. These wars are not sustainable. They cannot be conducted as we have been fighting them without destroying the very ideals we believe in and are fighting to preserve. We are corroding our civil liberties and mortgaging our posterity to foreign bankers. The money that might rebuild crumbling American infrastructure is being squandered on the destruction and botched reconstruction of vast areas of the Middle East. The wars there bring grief, pain, and uncertainty to America, as well as the places where they are fought. They confer no benefits. They divide Americans from each other and from the world. They divert us from urgent tasks of vital importance to our future. We have no plan for ending them, yet we cannot afford not to end them if we wish to recover our domestic tranquility and international standing.

Once we have relieved the myopic and deluded Mr. Magoo of his duties as helmsman,

we can take a realistic look at where we are and chart a new course. This will require us belatedly to develop strategies to deal with the many pressing issues we have left largely unattended in recent years. These involve classic foreign policy issues of great consequence. How to manage our relations with emerging regional orders. How to deal with rising powers like Brazil, China, India and Russia, reemerging countries like Germany and Japan, failing states like Pakistan, or angry, isolated nations like Iran, North Korea, and Myanmar. Among the neglected issues are also many of vital importance, such as reform of the global trade, investment and monetary systems to protect our prosperity and that of the many other countries that depend on the value of our currency. Beyond this, the issues we must address include the long-overdue formulation of effective multilateral responses to transnational issues like terrorism, pandemic disease, the environment, climate change and security of food, energy and natural resource supplies.

These are formidable challenges but there is no reason to doubt that we can meet them if we marshal the world's peoples and their resources behind a common effort. For decades, the world looked to the United States for solutions. We Americans were good at providing them. We have the capacity to do so again.

In the self-indulgent final decade of the last century, Americans saw little reason to focus on foreign affairs. In the first decade of this century we have been long on assertive patriotism but short on realism, vision, and statesmanship. These are qualities we have historically exemplified. They enabled us to create a new order of peace, progress, and prosperity after the Second World War. We have the talent and ability to define a world order for the 21st Century as well. There is no other country that can make that claim, nor is there another to which the world looks for leadership. As we prepare to enter this century's second decade, we have within us the potential to rise again to the challenge of global leadership. We have the duty to do so. If the United States leads, the world will follow.