

America's Hard Sell

For more than half a century, the United States ensured that five Big Ideas shaped international politics. Now, as the Big Ideas of the 21st century are formed, just who will corner the new global market of ideology is anyone's guess. One thing is certain, though: If the United States wants to remain a player, it's going to have to refine its sales pitch. | **By Bruce W. Jentleson and Steven Weber**

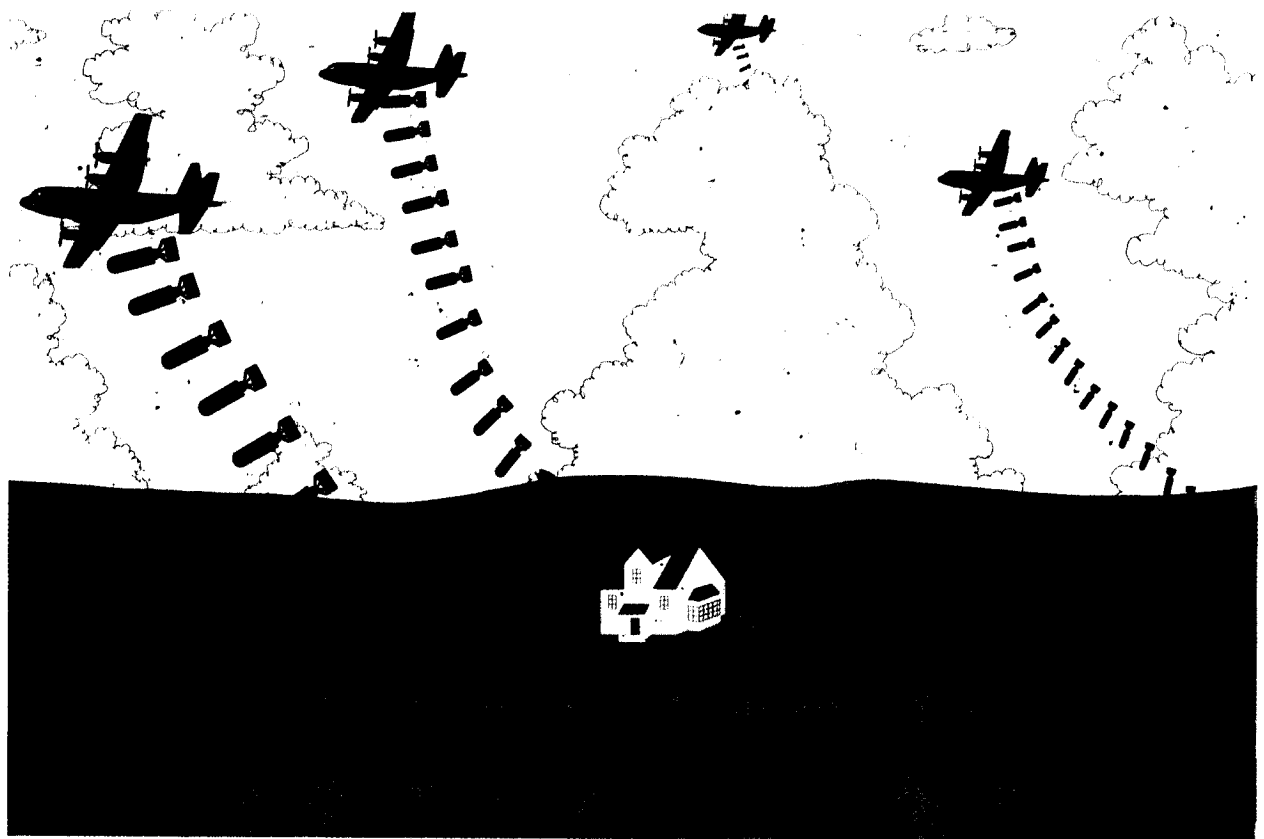
Although their presidencies had little in common, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush all spoke about the world from essentially the same starting point. In a time of sole-superpower dominance, most of the world had seemingly come to understand that the utility of military force was on the decline. Free markets were ascendant, creating wealth and contributing to the growing sense that a wave of democratic transition was inevitable. Mobile phones and the Internet were spreading elements of Western culture and behavior to a global population that was ready, even eager, to receive and assimilate them.

Bruce W. Jentleson is professor of public policy studies and political science at Duke University. Steven Weber is professor of political science and director of the Institute of International Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

These presidents basically had it right. For most of the second half of the 20th century, five Big Ideas shaped world politics:

- 1) PEACE IS BETTER THAN WAR.
- 2) HEGEMONY, AT LEAST THE BENIGN SORT, IS BETTER THAN A BALANCE OF POWER.
- 3) CAPITALISM IS BETTER THAN SOCIALISM.
- 4) DEMOCRACY IS BETTER THAN DICTATORSHIP.
- 5) WESTERN CULTURE IS BETTER THAN ALL THE REST.

On all five counts, the United States was widely seen as paragon and guarantor. American power brought peace through a combination of Cold War containment and deterrence. A United Nations was constructed largely according to American designs. American hegemony brought relative security and laid the foundation for progressively more open trade and capital markets.



American capitalism taught the world how to create unprecedented wealth. American democracy inspired people around the world to change their relationships with political authority. And American culture became a magnet for the world's youth.

Today, the prevailing consensus in the United States is that these five Big Ideas still hold. A variety of intellectual formulations have sprung up—the end of history, the democratic peace, the indispensable nation, the Rome-like empire—which, despite their differences, share the core belief that these fundamentals have not changed. Even the latest spate of books about the second or post-American world end up in the same place, accepting that the same five assumptions will still form the basis for the present and future world order.

Unfortunately, they will not. The five Big Ideas of the past century are no longer the sound and sturdy guides they once were. The challenge runs far deeper than the bad atmospherics created by the Bush

administration. Nor is it the case that our international institutions are simply in need of remodeling or refurbishment to reflect the shift in power and wealth across the globe. Rather, the rules have changed, and the biggest and most basic questions of world politics are open for debate once again.

Of course, peace is still better than war. Unless, as some governments will profess, war is wielded as an instrument of national policy, as was the case with the United States in Iraq, Russia in Georgia, Ethiopia in Somalia, Israel in Lebanon, and others to come. But does peace remain superior if states want to prevent the killing of people in Darfur, end the malign neglect in the aftermath of a natural disaster in Burma, or head off a pandemic incubating within someone else's borders? With authority more contested and power more diffuse, what are the rules for going to war and keeping the peace?

And who makes them? Hegemony, benign or otherwise, is no longer an option—not for the United States, not for China, not for anyone. A 21st-century version of a 19th-century multipolar world is hardly possible, either. There are too many players at too many tables for counting and balancing poles of power. Although some players still matter more than others, more players matter more deeply than ever before. Nonstate actors—from the Gates Foundation to

Ask the Author

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Google to Bono—are autonomous global players on the front lines of international affairs. Who holds sway over the decisions made in a world more networked than hierarchical?

Capitalism decisively beat socialism. But it has now split into distinctive and competing forms, with governments owning and directing large parts of the economy in some of the most critical states and sectors. Take energy—where, in a radical reversal from just 15 years ago, national oil companies now own more than three quarters of the world's known oil reserves. Take finance—a supposed pillar of American strength, now bailed out and backstopped by U.S. government debt. Has the market come to need the state as much as the state needs the market?

Democracy has brought freer societies. But is it as effective in efficiently creating just and peaceful ones? That China, a nondemocratic state, has had the greatest success meeting the basic human needs of its people and pulling them out of poverty in the past 20 years speaks volumes to this point. It is now hardly an acceptance of repression to recognize the simple fact that in many societies political legitimacy is a function of performance, not just process.

And while the most raw and visceral expressions of anti-Americanism may very well subside when the Bush administration leaves office, the “be like us” era (about which some Americans will always wax nostalgic) will never return. Modernization did not bring homogenization; culture and identity are powerful, enduring forces between and within societies.

The foreign-policy community isn't blind to these questions—at least not when they are asked one at a time. In fact, the notion that each Big Idea is subject to debate has become so mainstream that most supposedly new contributions to the debate are really just attempts to state more eloquently what are by now familiar arguments. But the challenges to the five Big Ideas of the 20th century—when taken together—create a different and much more difficult reality. The United States has not confronted, either intellectually or politically, the profound consequences of that reality. The 21st century will not be an ideological rerun of the past 100 years. The United States must reenter the competition to answer the most fundamental questions about how the 21st-century world should be ordered. Indeed, it has already begun. Welcome to the new age of ideology.

THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

In the United States, it is popular to declare war on a problem. So, for example, American political leaders, whether liberal or conservative, consistently appeal for a “war of ideas” to defeat international terrorism. The metaphor is crisp, actionable, and morally compelling. It's also wrong. Ideas don't fight wars, and any policy that follows from that formulation won't work. Ideas don't go to combat; they vie for the commitment of individuals in an arena that is less like a battlefield and more like a marketplace. The United States is facing a global competition of ideas, and the rules of engagement are much closer to those set out by Milton Friedman than Carl von Clausewitz.

Who dominates in such a marketplace? To start, markets are places where leaders need followers more than the other way around. Presumptive leaders don't issue orders; they make offers. Eventually,

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it is the followers who decide whose leadership they find most attractive at that moment. Market leaders don't depend heavily on private deals and subterfuge to hold their bargains in place; there's too much transparency to offer inconsistent options to different constituencies. And market leaders don't ever relax or lose their edge because they know that their competitors will be relentless.

Put simply: In a marketplace of ideas, we offer and they choose. One does not win a marketplace; one outcompetes for market share. And it doesn't last unless you make it last.

It's worth asking why it's so hard for the United States, a country that understands market competition in so many other respects, to countenance a global competition of ideas. It would appear that, when it comes to international issues, the United States prefers not to acknowledge it competes on an even playing field with others.

It took almost the entire decade of the 1980s for the American economic and business elite to come to grips with what it meant to compete with Japan, in particular when it seemed to play the capitalism and trade game by a different set of rules. For the United States, it was a long and hard learning curve,

which along the way included many dysfunctional policies and self-inflicted wounds through import quotas, talk of trade wars, and near panic over purchases by Japanese investors of iconic real estate in New York and California. There was even a small avalanche of books demanding that the Japanese change their business practices, laws, and culture so that the competition would be more “fair”—that is, played according to Washington’s rules.

It took the decade of the 1990s to come to grips with similar kinds of geopolitical competition. Stuck for an embarrassingly long period in a peculiar debate about the dynamics of “unipolarity,” American policymakers fundamentally overestimated U.S. control over international events. More important, they underestimated the capabilities and creativity of those whose interests really were at odds with their own. Lesser, even nonstate, powers might not have been able to confront the United States directly, but they had obvious alternatives: to go nuclear, to go underground, to bypass American power with their own initiatives, to disrupt whatever they could in the U.S.-led plan for the world. Perhaps if the United States recognized the reality of the competitive environment in which we live—and thus understood the creative options others invent as they develop their strategies for competing—it would have been easier, for example, for Washington to have seen the “red lights” flashing around al Qaeda in the summer of 2001.

Everyone competes. Today, they compete around ideas as much as or more than anything else. The notion of a single sustainable model for national success—the American model—does not resonate with the majority of people on this planet. The 300 million Chinese who lifted themselves out of poverty in a single generation have a different narrative, one that emphasizes state control of economic growth at the expense of political freedoms. The Russians subscribe to a narrative of “sovereign democracy,” which says an efficient autocrat can bring economic recovery, stability, basic security, and pride to a nation much more quickly and effectively than any rulebound institution. The hundreds of millions in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia who experimented with freedom, democracy, and free enterprise but are poorer, sicker, and more likely to die in violent conflict than they were 30 years ago have their own narratives.

None of these alternatives is simply a retrograde version of liberalism, and none of them depends on naiveté or false consciousness on the part of those who hold them. They are vibrant competitors in a global marketplace.

THE NEW ERA HAS ARRIVED

It would be best for the United States to get serious about how to compete most effectively in the bubbling, energetic, creative, and occasionally infuriating marketplace of ideas that is contemporary global politics. To gain a solid footing, there are three central rules that must be understood:

1) Ideology is now the most important, yet most uncertain and fastest-changing, component of national power.

The new age of ideology remains an age of power. Consider, though, where the score card of power can change most significantly. Military and economic power are crucial, but they are also largely predictable. Even after Iraq and the current financial crisis, the United States’ strengths in both areas will only be somewhat eroded. These are “slow-burn” phenomena. But the ideological components of power can change much more radically. The

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rate of change is faster for ideology because the barriers to entry are so much lower. The costs of, say, building a navy are tremendous while the costs of disseminating a new set of ideas about how the world works are now trivial.

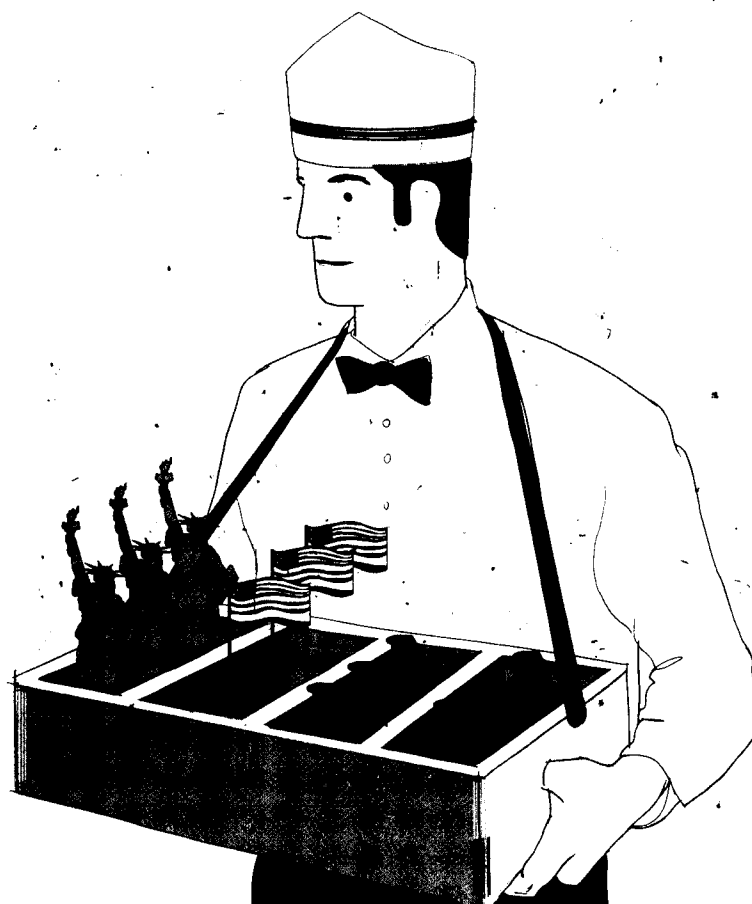
In this fast-paced and unpredictable setting, the five Big Ideas of American ideology were never immutable. Outside the United States, people no longer believe that the alternative to Washington-led order is chaos. State-led economies that consciously rid themselves of democratic freedom are no longer assumed incapable of producing great wealth. Charismatic autocrats are no longer necessarily believed to be corrupt and dysfunctional. The optimal model for a just society, one that offers dignity to people, is no longer synonymous with

American democracy. The most fundamental questions of what counts for a legitimate order, progress, human dignity, and meaning are open—and the rest of the world has no fear about experimenting with alternatives.

2) *Technology massively multiplies soft power—particularly video technology, and particularly in the hands of nonstate actors.*

The new marketplace of ideas is powered by technology. One of the most crucial changes is that governments and other “official” sources of information have lost their role as key brokers of credibility. The Internet radically boosts soft-power capability, while distributing those capabilities more broadly. The power and distinction of a government’s voice is lost in the competing chatter, and in some ways, it becomes the least compelling simply because it’s the least novel.

It’s not just voices that are engaged—or more precisely, not just words competing against words. Images are now competing against images. People are visual creatures, and they tend to respond to videos and pictures on a much less rational and much more visceral level. Al Qaeda’s recruiting videos are set to rap music, and the emotional impact of cellphone photos showing monks being shot by security forces is far more poignant than a government white paper or even a colorless text message. Does anyone not remember the image of the hooded Abu Ghraib prisoner standing on a box with wires connected to his arms? YouTube (and whatever follows it) will soon have greater global influence over narratives about international events (if it doesn’t already) than any government information source could hope to have.



3) *Each player represents a single ideology, so “domestic values” and “international values” must be consistent.*

The new marketplace of ideas is not bound by borders. In the past, foreign-policymakers typically brushed off concerns that contradictory policies would be seen as hypocritical because pragmatic decision-making warranted this necessary but manageable cost. However, a presumptive leader can no longer claim the legitimacy of one principle or policy for people on one side of a border, while denying the same to others on the other side. Everything is visible to everyone. If Americans want to make their own choices about family planning and contraception, they can’t deny foreign aid to countries that give their citizens the same right. If Moscow says that oil is a global commodity that anyone should be able to purchase openly on global markets, then it can’t undermine the rights of foreign oil companies to invest fairly and transparently in its energy assets.

Consistency in policymaking is now a fundamental necessity, not a luxury. And it's constant, because the demands of soft power follow the 24/7 news and argument cycle on the Internet. It's harder to buy time and deceive others about ideology than it is about almost anything else. Militarily weak states have long built Potemkin villages to hoodwink their adversaries about how capable they really are. There are no Potemkin villages for soft power.

PLAYING A NEW GREAT GAME

The 21st-century global marketplace of ideas has its own dynamic. As the Big Ideas of the 20th century seem increasingly inadequate for meeting the challenges and choices that define this new age of ideology, a new set of leaders will compete to rise to the fore. And those successful players will be the states, companies, individuals, and nongovernmental organizations that are capable of articulating and implementing the new Big Ideas necessary for societal survival in the 21st century. The four central areas of competition during at least the next decade will be: mutuality, a just society, a healthy planet, and societal heterogeneity.

First, amid the proliferation of different forms of nationalism and other narrow self-interests, who will commit to the mutuality essential to a global era? The second half of the 20th century left a legacy of unbalanced bargains—often clearly favoring the United States—on issues such as nonproliferation and arms control, intellectual property, agricultural trade, and the right to use military force. Russia seems bent on reclaiming some of the Soviet Union's position of power. Parts of Africa and Latin America are open to the attractive terms of trade China offers but not simply to trading Western dominance for Chinese. Indian pharmaceutical firms seek asymmetric rights to distribute generic drugs. Leadership will come in rebalancing such bargains. They not only hurt others substantively; they grate symbolically. In a global age, it is more essential than ever to have a credible claim that one uses power more for shared benefits than selfish interests.

Mutuality also requires greater sharing of decision-making responsibilities around global issues. Some changes will be obvious, including the reform of the major international institutions that reflect a post-World War II-era nostalgia. The bargain between the

World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that guarantees by default an American president for the bank and a European managing director for the fund will end. The U.N. Security Council will expand. A new operational definition of multilateralism will emerge that enhances the effectiveness of action, while being candid about its limitations. The United States could lead in this direction, but so could many others, without the intellectual and emotional burdens of incumbency.

The second area of competition will be a notion of a just society that balances individual rights and social equity. It must make the provision for basic human needs—food, water, and health—an explicit and direct component of social justice. In countries plagued with mass poverty and endemic injustice, “freedom from” is not enough; it also must be about the “capacity to.” People are looking not just to be protected from government but also to be protected by government. That

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means that any ideology that overprivileges process—even democratic process—but fails to deliver on basic human needs will lose. Beijing understands this point, and so do some major global megaphilanthropies.

The third area is the health of the planet as a motivating vision that both inspires hope and provides strategic direction. The environmental movement is now a global phenomenon and no longer simply about the environment. It's equally about security, economics, social stability, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises. It is a long-term goal—the most vital legacy to be left to future generations. It is also increasingly in the here and now, as the effects of global climate change begin to be felt and the critical junctures for policy action grow nearer. There are no more “externalities”; the system no longer has that kind of slack. A healthy planet is the ultimate global public good. Systems of wealth creation that ignore pollution won't attract and hold followers for long. Brussels understands this point, and, increasingly, so do many large multinational firms.

The final challenge is societal heterogeneity, learning to live together amid differences of individual and

group identities that breed fear of “the other.” The migration of peoples has combined with technologies of travel and communications to produce increasingly extreme combinations of nationalities, races, ethnicities, and religions within societies. Yet few communities exist harmoniously with heterogeneity. In some cases—Bosnia, Iraq, Rwanda, Sudan—the tensions reached extremes and the politics of identity have been about “who I am,” “who you are,” and that “I need to kill you before you kill me.” In other instances—think China and Tibet, Muslims in Western Europe, Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir—consistent episodes of violence overlap with systematic discrimination to create a poisonous atmosphere. The United States has its immigration demagoguery and persistent racial inequalities. No major global player has really yet articulated a compelling vision for how to manage this kind of heterogeneity—and that is a huge opportunity for leadership.

Mutuality, a just society, a healthy planet, and societal heterogeneity. They don’t add up to neatly packed “isms.” But that’s not what the people of the world are shopping for. Smart players will beware doctrinal rigidity as well as any tired claims that history moves inevitably toward one conclusion or another, whether

it be liberal internationalism, Salafi jihadism, proletarian solidarity, or “sustainability”—because it won’t.

Let’s assume the United States wants to be a real competitor for leadership in this new era. The most important thing for Americans to recognize is that it really is a new game and that the challenge is fundamentally different from containing communism or defeating terrorism. Other international players—countries, global corporations, religious movements, Internet communities—have their own strengths and shortcomings, but they will compete with Americans on a level playing field. The only real certainty is that the new age of ideology will not end in victory and defeat. It might not “end” in any meaningful way at all. “Equilibrium” and “stability,” the intellectual obsessions of so-called status quo powers, are going to be very tenuous states of being, and mostly illusory.

Here’s another certainty: The next decade will probably have its “end of ideology” prophets, just as past ones did. Beware those trying to corner the market with vaguely familiar talking points that brand the coming “new” ideas with a shinier version of the same old American-centered stamp. They will be just as wrong. And, chances are, the new crop of buyers won’t be interested in what they’re selling. ■■

[Want to Know More?]

Bruce W. Jentleson surveys the United States’ changing role in the world in *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000). Steven Weber’s *The Success of Open Source* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) explores the political and economic implications of one of the most promising new developments in IT.

In *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), Fareed Zakaria argues that even as other countries are rising to a U.S. level of growth and prosperity, they do not yet threaten America’s premier role in the global community. For a look at why the international order needs the United States at the helm, read Michael Mandelbaum’s *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World’s Government in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

Parag Khanna claims that globalization has negated “Americanization” in *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order* (New York: Random House, 2008). In “Fading Superpower?” (*Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 9, 2007), David Rieff challenges the assumption that the United States is “the guarantor of international security and global trade, for the foreseeable future.”

In “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow” (*FOREIGN POLICY*, September/October 2005), a selection of thinkers, journalists, scientists, and policymakers name the world’s most endangered ideas and institutions. “How Globalization Went Bad” (*FOREIGN POLICY*, January/February 2007), coauthored by Weber, argues that a unipolar world breeds threats unlike those of any other system.

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