

**T H E E N D O F
A R R O G A N C E**

America in the Global Competition of Ideas

S T E V E N W E B E R
B R U C E W . J E N T L E S O N

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PREFACE

All the talk in the wake of 9-11 about the “war” of ideas just didn’t click with us. Ideas fighting wars: what does that look like? And should it have been defined so neatly as freedom versus fundamentalism at a time when so much else was in flux amid the ramifications of the end of the Cold War and the dynamics of globalization?

We felt that what all that talk did get right was the focus on ideas. Ideas matter. They always have, and they do especially now. It is our view that world politics has entered a new and distinctive age in which ideas and influence are linked in a vibrant and sometimes ferocious competition for ascendance. Core questions about how best to achieve world order and what constitutes just societies, seemingly settled at the end of the twentieth century, have been reopened in the twenty-first century. Yet America’s position in this global competition of ideas is

less robust than most Americans think—and weaker than we need.

Our sense was that neither aspect of this international landscape was being sufficiently recognized. Not by liberals who over-attributed the problems to George W. Bush and the solutions to retapping pre-Bush styles of global leadership. Nor by neoconservatives who were more dismissive of the critique and more assertive of what America could and should do. More fundamentally, we saw across the political spectrum a shared sense that America would still provide the ideological leadership the world needed, and that aside from some outliers, that was what the world wanted.

That's the arrogance that concerns us. Arrogance in a policy context is not a problem because feelings get hurt. It is a problem because it is a disposition counterproductive to competing effectively in this twenty-first-century global marketplace of ideas. Arrogance, as we use it in the title, refers to policies, not people. Arrogant policies carry with them a strong sense of entitlement—an embedded belief that others should listen, understand, agree (more or less), and act in ways that the policies suggest. When arrogance fades, real and meaningful influence grows.

Developing such new strategies is not only a foreign policy problem for those in Washington, but a business model problem for global corporations, philanthropies, and nongovernmental organizations that operate on a world stage. The global competition among ideas is much more a buyer's market than a seller's market, because leaders need followers more than the other way around.

And it is relentlessly energetic. This is a market that incessantly breeds new contenders, because barriers to entry are so much lower for ideological competition than for military or economic competition.

While it is powerful to look *inward* at traditional American values for guidance about what to do next, it is not powerful to look *backward* at what may have worked in the past, when the competition took different forms and was much less vibrant. A future leadership proposition has to be *adaptive, not restorative*; looking forward, not backward; and most important, it has to be designed first and foremost to appeal to the needs of the people abroad whose allegiance it is seeking to gain—not the people at home who want to feel good about their presence in the world.

We offer in this book a forward-looking leadership proposition that we believe can compete successfully in today's (and tomorrow's) global marketplace of ideas. The core ingredients are these: A strategy for world order that rests on mutuality, recognizing that in twenty-first-century world politics everyone bargains with everyone and no one is entitled to set the rules. A framework for just societies that better balances individual and societal rights, recognizing that in many global settings the legitimacy of institutions depends on their performance in meeting human needs as much or more than the processes they embed. And, all told, a vision for the future that inspires others with purpose, not just power; that positions not just America but anyone who wants to come with us for a decent shot at the primary global chal-

lenge: Can the lives of 7 or 8 billion people be improved without poisoning the planet and killing each other over energy, water, food, and ultimately the terms of human dignity?

When arrogance fades, the need to make hard choices among things we want and allocate our efforts accordingly comes into focus. This too is an opportunity, because it is in the act of making hard choices that presumptive leaders demonstrate to the market, in unequivocal and powerful ways, what their ideas and values truly represent. Real leaders don't hide from gut-wrenching choices and hope they will go away—they lean into them and set the terms by which others then choose. And so the final chapter of this book explains what it means to act strategically in this new world. This is where policy demonstrates what we stand for, not just what we say, and where the visible connections between rhetoric and reality are constantly tested by an audience that is global, technologically empowered, skeptical, and restless for change.

We have made a conscious decision in writing this book to leave out most of the short-term items on the American foreign policy agenda, as critical as those are. In our view there is simply no choice between dealing with today's crises and dealing with the longer-term global competition of ideas; it has to be both/and not either/or. We understand and are deeply sympathetic to the urgencies of government and corporate decision making, but we've yet to meet a strategist in either setting who is fully satisfied with the existing balance. We hope the arguments in this book contribute to the both/and, and to a

better balance between them, by providing some real options that decision makers can use to both short-term and longer-term advantage.

We have also made a conscious effort to get beyond partisan arguments. There are probably points in this book that will invigorate and infuriate Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, and beyond. That's okay with us, if our prompting and provocations lead to better and more relevant disagreements that in turn contribute to effective decisions and policies.

We have had a great deal of help and support in the discussions, arguments, and everything that led us to write this book. Our article "America's Hard Sell," the cover story in *Foreign Policy* 169 (Nov./Dec. 2008), was an initial opportunity to lay out some of our main arguments. We were pleased to be featured in a publication known for its innovative approach to global affairs, and are grateful to *Foreign Policy* editors and other staff.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York has generously supported our work on this book as well as related initiatives. Our appreciation to Vartan Gregorian, and especially to Stephen Del Rosso for his collegiality well beyond his formal foundation responsibilities. His ideas and insights have been of great intellectual and substantive value. We have also received support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, for which we thank Stephen Heintz and Priscilla Lewis, and from Duke University and the University of California, Berkeley. We've benefited enormously from an ongoing dialogue with an extraordinary group of colleagues including but not limited to

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We dedicate this book to our mentors with thanks for their guidance, colleagues from whom we've gained much, and students who continue to inspire.

I

BIG OPEN QUESTIONS

Five big ideas shaped world politics in the twentieth century:

Peace was better than war.

Hegemony, at least the benign sort, was better than balance of power.

Capitalism was better than socialism.

Democracy was better than dictatorship.

Western culture was 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 based largely on American design, and U.S.-buttressed European unity. It was American hegemony—"benign hegemony" we called it—that brought relative security and progressively more open trade and capital markets, explained as beneficial by

American development theory. American capitalism taught the world how to create unprecedented wealth as well as how to discover and deploy incredible technology. American democracy inspired publics around the world to upgrade their relationships with political authority. And with all its idiosyncrasies, American culture became a magnet in particular for much of the world's youth.

As we have moved into the twenty-first century, the prevailing consensus inside the United States is that these five big ideas carry over as the basis for present and future world order. There have been a variety of formulations—the end of history, the democratic peace, the indispensable nation, the Rome-like empire, a flat world—which despite their differences share the core belief that the fundamentals have not changed. Even the latest spate of slightly anxious books about the “second” or “post-American” world end up in this same place.¹ There are and will be other important actors on the world stage, these books argue. But those actors are still said to be reading from basically the same script. The players are doing some shifting, some structures and institutions need refurbishing—but though power and wealth will be rebalanced, there is no indication in these books that core ideologies will be reexamined and reopened. The big ideas, many think, still form the foundation for present and future international politics.

We're not so sure. The five big ideas of the last century are no longer the sound and sturdy guides they once were. That is why the challenge of leadership runs far deeper than the atmospherics created by any particular

policy or administration. And that is why today's international institutions are not simply in need of remodeling and refurbishing to reflect shifts in power and wealth across the globe. The rules have changed, and the biggest, most basic questions of world politics are now open for debate.

Consider the first big idea: "Peace is better than war." Of course it is when you like the status quo. If you don't, war is consistently wielded as an instrument of national policy—as was the case with the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia in Georgia, Ethiopia in Somalia, Israel in Lebanon, and lots of others to come. That's not a new thing. Now consider the supposed superiority of peace in light of the desire of at least some global actors to prevent the killing of civilians in Darfur, or to end the malign neglect in the aftermath of natural disaster in Burma, or to head off a pandemic incubating within sovereign borders. With authority more contested and power more diffuse, what are the rules for going to war and keeping the peace?

Further, who makes them? Hegemony (benign or otherwise) is no longer an option—not for the United States, not for China, not for anyone else. A twenty-first-century version of a nineteenth-century multipolar world is hardly possible either. This is no longer an 1800s-style game played among five sovereign states with shared religions, cultures, educational traditions, and intermarried royal families. Too many players sit at too many tables to allow for the counting and balancing of poles of power. More players and players of more types matter more

deeply than ever before. Is there a politically relevant distribution of power that doesn't include the Gates Foundation, Google, and Bono—each of which are autonomous global players on the front lines of international politics? Hegemony itself is becoming something of a quaint anachronism, along with traditional stories about the balance of power.

Capitalism, the bulwark of the third big idea, did decisively beat socialism. But capitalism has split into distinctive and, most important, competing forms, with governments owning and directing large and strategic parts of the economies of some of the most critical states and sectors. Consider the core of the energy sector, for example, where, in a radical reversal from fifteen years ago, national oil companies now own more than three-quarters of the world's known oil reserves. Take a look at finance, where openly state-owned banks in some countries now interact with massive financial institutions in others that as "private" institutions were nonetheless bailed out by states, are intimately regulated by states, and whose compensation of executives is overseen by states because they are "too big to fail." Are these really private institutions that respond solely to market signals when allocating capital? Are the negotiations among global money center banks now meaningfully separate from government policy? The "market," whatever it really is, has come to rely on the state as much or more than the state relies on the market.

Democracy has contributed to freer societies. But has democracy proven itself effective in creating just and

peaceful ones? That China, the world's most populous nondemocratic state, has had the greatest success meeting the basic human needs of its people and pulling hundreds of millions out of poverty in the past twenty years, presents a massive data point that speaks volumes to this claim. It is hardly a moral acceptance of repression to recognize and acknowledge a factual reality: In many societies political legitimacy is a function of performance, not just process.

Finally, consider culture. President Barack Obama's administration has masterfully reversed some of the most raw and visceral sentiments and expressions of anti-Americanism that were part and parcel of the G. W. Bush years. It will be a long time before another American president can claim an 80 percent increase in popularity over a previous president in a foreign country.² But make no mistake: popularity does not equal cultural predominance. The era of imitation, about which some Americans will always wax nostalgic, will not return. Modernization did not bring homogenization of culture in the twentieth century, nor will it in the twenty-first. The short period during which some parts of the world idolized American culture (never as much or as broadly as Americans liked to believe) was a nearly unique historical exception to that rule. Culture and identity are powerful, enduring forces between as much as within societies. How do we live with this heterogeneity, nationally as well as globally?

It's not that these twentieth-century big ideas were wrong. They were largely right for their era. And much about them still rings true. But human and societal prog-

ress depend on adaptation to new realities. It is in this sense that these particular ideas have run their historical course. They no longer sufficiently fit the realities people face. The big questions have been reopened—not just at the margins, and not just one at a time. The challenges to the five big ideas of the twentieth century—*when taken together*—create a profoundly different and much more challenging reality. The twenty-first century will not be an ideological rerun of the latter half of the twentieth. Welcome to the new age of ideology.

“Wait a minute,” you might say. We’re talking about human beings in politics, so what people think and think about surely matters. But in a world filled with very real threats to physical security and welfare, can ideology really matter all that much? There’s some scary stuff out there that is not just sitting in people’s minds. Global financial crises, swine flu, nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, the illegal narcotics economy, and growing levels of greenhouse gases dominate the media and capture our attention. There’s really no getting away from these bad things. They are the outward manifestations of secular trends that wax and wane from year to year but in no case simply go away. And these trends are connected—in some cases interconnected. Tightly coupled complex human systems often *appear* to be quite stable. People tell themselves reassuring stories about how these systems are diversified and robust. And they keep telling those stories up until the moment when they collapse—often catastrophically: modern technology and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill; modern city planning and Hurri-

cane Katrina in New Orleans; modern finance and the 2008 financial meltdown. There is very little slack in many of the systems, both natural and manmade, on which human beings depend to sustain their lives, economies, and political systems. That's why "tipping points," "black swans," and "tail risks" aren't rare at all. It should no longer be a surprise when so-called small causes have very large effects.³

So even though real, concrete problems seem to pile up faster than human beings can deal with them, leaving little time for ideology, in fact ideology is not so easily waylaid. E. H. Carr explained one reason why in his classic 1939 book *The Twenty Years Crisis*.⁴ Carr is generally remembered as a skeptic about the importance of ideology in the absence of power, but he was just as much a skeptic about the importance of power in the absence of ideology. It's not lofty rhetoric that makes a difference, but the capacity to define actionable principles of morality and meaning that motivates human beings to act. As Carr eloquently said, the realm of international politics lacks authoritative legal mechanisms for getting to and enforcing agreements. Which means it really is politics, not law, that influences the course of human events from start to finish. And in politics, ideas and ideology are a critical currency.

We should not necessarily expect a particular set of ideas to fill the void, nor should we anticipate that we have finally reached the endpoint of ideology, where human life is simply a pragmatic grab bag, and no one cares from whence a solution comes. Ideas still matter—a lot.

We can't conceive of a world lacking in ideas such as these: the core principles by which societies organize themselves; the rules by which states interact with each other and with their populations; the ways in which knowledge is structured, communicated, shared, and used; and the notion of legitimacy for any kind of political order, at whatever scale, from the authority of the village elder to the weight of a Supreme Court opinion or the power of a United Nations (UN) resolution. Even a claim that something is true or false gets settled most of the time not through objective study but in the realm of ideas. Philosophers with their paradigms, psychologists with their belief systems, and political consultants with their framing all stress the importance of the ideational frameworks within which people interpret and integrate the world around them.

It is because the questions about world politics are both so big and so open that the global competition of ideas is an essential ingredient of international politics, though an uncertain one. That's not a statement that sidesteps the traditional concerns of political realists, military strategists, and hard-headed statesmen and stateswomen. It's an honest recognition that ideological competition is a critical part of the international power politics game.

Some things about national power are relatively certain. Traditional foreign-policy realists think first of military and second of economic capabilities as the key vectors of national power, and they are probably right to do so. The general parameters of military and economic ca-

pability for the next decade are foreseeable with a reasonable level of confidence. Barring some extraordinary discontinuity, the United States will in 2020 still be the most capable military power and a predominant center of economic power. Of course there is variance in precisely how those vectors may play out. U.S. military power could decline in important ways relative to China and others, particularly if our current military investments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan turn sour. U.S. economic power could be meaningfully hurt if we mismanage our currency, our energy dependence, or the landing (soft or hard) from our massive deficits. But the terrain for these issues is pretty well understood. The U.S. advantage in military and economic power is sufficiently large that the general outcome is robust. It may be impossible to say exactly how far ahead of others the United States is in these areas, but it will still be ahead, and at least in the military realm, probably by quite a lot.

The situation is dramatically less clear when it comes to the ideological components of power. Ideas have become the most uncertain while critically important ingredient of national power calculations. For the United States to compete effectively in that game, government policy must reflect three truths.

It's a Copernican, not a Ptolemaic, world. The ancient philosopher Ptolemy believed Earth was at the center of the universe, with all the other planets, indeed the whole solar system, revolving around it. So too in the dominant twentieth-century view was the United States at the cen-

ter of the international political world. The United States was the wielder of power in the Cold War, the economic engine driving the international economy, and the bastion of free-world ideology. Indeed, with the demise and defeat of the Soviet Union, American centrality seemed even more assured. The United States was the sole surviving superpower. The American economy was branding globalization. Democracy was spreading the world over. The world at the end of the twentieth century, ironically, seemed even more Ptolemaic.

Not anymore. The twenty-first century is better represented by the discoveries of Copernicus, in which the United States (Earth in the astronomical version) is not at the center. Although our “gravitational pull” is still strong, it is not so strong that others orbit around us. We have seen this geopolitically as other powers have been rising (China), recovering (Russia), maturing (European Union), and emerging (India, Brazil, and others either emerging from a long colonial past or shaking off the lingering effects of superpower dominance). We see it economically every day now. It was the U.S. National Intelligence Council that indicated how globalization is losing its “Made in the USA” character, and it is IBM, the iconic technology company, whose executives choke if you mistakenly call IBM an “American” company. They will remind you continuously that theirs is and always will be a global firm. We see it scientifically as cutting-edge research in green technology, biotechnology, and other frontiers is globally sourced. We see it in so many other walks of life. A New York art dealer, after a recent auction

dominated by newly moneyed non-Western collectors, reflected that “for the first time in nearly two hundred years the Western world doesn’t make the decisions about our future.”⁵ Or setting the prices. Or controlling the outcomes. That’s the hallmark reality of a Copernican world order.

TINA is not enough. The “there is no alternative” (TINA) argument—that whatever the flaws of a global system led by the United States, there was in practice no substitute—was quite useful for many years. At times it was used cynically. Although it did bear out in some circumstances, in a Copernican world it has much less truth and much less purpose.

Most no longer believe that the alternative to a U.S. world order is chaos. The rules and norms of that order are subject to much more extensive and intensive debate than ever before. There also is visible a relatively new phenomenon of routing around it, marking a world without the West with its own distinctive set of rules, institutions, and relationships. It cannot be taken as a given that the optimal model for a just society is the American one. Among the many global public opinion polls that have upset Americans in the last decade, perhaps the one that should have been most disturbing asked this question: “Suppose a young person who wanted to leave this country asked you to recommend where to go to lead a good life; what country would you recommend?” In only one country was the United States the first choice.⁶ No single alternative model is on the verge of replacing an old one,

but TINA is giving way to THEMBA—“there must be an alternative.”

It's a marketplace not a war of ideas. Outside of the physical battlefields of interstate conflict, Americans in the second half of the twentieth century fought a war on poverty, a war on drugs, a war on cancer, and at least a few others. In late 2001 the federal government launched a self-proclaimed war of ideas against violent radical terrorist movements. The war metaphor is crisp, actionable, and morally compelling: what American doesn't want to win a war against fanaticism, hate, and intolerance? But it dangerously distorts the policy challenge. The global competition of ideas is not a war. It is not the domain of armies and generals. There are no shock-and-awe tactics, no decisive victories, no unconditional surrenders. You cannot achieve a final victory in a war of ideas, because it is not a war at all but a competition within a marketplace. The rules of engagement are much closer to those set out by social and economic thinkers such as John Stuart Mill and Milton Friedman than those set out by the Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz. This marketplace is built around an evolving digital infrastructure that increasingly connects everyone to everyone. To win is to gain market share among consumers; global publics pick and choose what most attracts them. A marketplace, unlike a battlefield, contains many competitors—a fully global competition of ideas.

There was a strong sense in 2008 and 2009, at least among a certain political swathe of the American elector-

ate and elite, that global systems would swing back to “normal” (with America at the center of the international political universe) after the presidency of George W. Bush. If Bush was the problem, then the election of 2008 was the solution. The United States would reset its foreign policy to a modified version of what worked in the Cold War against communism. We would reinvoke America’s historical legacy: the Founders’ vision of a “city on a Hille”; Lincoln’s “last best hope of mankind”; Wilson’s belief that the United States would “make the world safe for democracy.” While getting our groove back, we would tweak our public diplomacy to better disseminate America’s message.

It hasn’t worked out that way, which should come as no great surprise. There’s nothing wrong with a serious and thoughtful look backward toward historical legacies. It’s essential. Any plausible foreign policy strategy will tap traditional American values. But a competitive leadership proposition for today and tomorrow’s world fundamentally has to be *adaptive* not *restorative*, forward- not backward-looking, and capable of addressing those reopened big questions in ways that fit the present century, not the last one.

At the core of such an effort are new, more modern conceptions of world order and a just society that are embedded in a vision of the future which inspires and embraces global populations. We develop these ideas in Chapters 3 and 4. We begin this process in Chapter 2 by explaining more deeply the guiding logic of a global competition of ideas and the dynamics of that marketplace.

Chapter 5 builds on the notion of a revised vision of the future and puts the leadership proposition into practice by posing and framing four hard choices that together add up to an American strategy.

No single book can address all the important aspects of American foreign policy. This is a book that emphasizes how beliefs, ideologies, and ideas matter in the theory and practice of U.S. foreign policy. Our purpose is not to judge the big ideas of politics and society such as truth and justice, or to offer revolutionary new ones. Our objectives are fundamentally pragmatic and prescriptive, and so in this book we leave aside abstract political theory and philosophy. We want to explain how ideologies work in contemporary international politics and why foreign policy makers should pay very close attention. We want to put forward an argument about competition among ideologies that explains how that competition has become central to power and influence in world politics. And we want to suggest practical mindsets, strategies, and even some tactics for American foreign policy makers to multiply and maximize, for the good, America's capability and impact in that world.

Our message, though deeply challenging, is a profoundly optimistic one. To take our arguments seriously would mean to reconfigure how American policy makers think about and act upon core concepts like liberalism, soft power, democracy, and openness in the twenty-first century. The good news is that there really is no society or country on the planet better situated to playing and prevailing in this global competition of ideas. But policy

makers must see the game clearly for what it really is, and play it much more proficiently than they have thus far.

Some may try to pin on us the label of “declinists” when it comes to the United States or “apologists” when it comes to others. On the contrary, we push back against the culture of denial that really puts America’s global position at risk. Competing in this new age of ideology is among the most important strategic tasks for American foreign policy makers. Ideological competition is fundamentally a matter of power, which should make this book’s message amenable to foreign policy thinkers regardless of how they situate themselves on the political spectrum. We are not talking about power for the sake of power, but power for the sake of influence in world politics, which depends on national power, broadly conceived. It was Hans Morgenthau, the grand old man of modern American realism, who warned against the power-sapping effects of “residues of formerly adequate modes of thought and action now rendered obsolete by a new social reality.”⁷ It is not naive to pay attention to the importance of ideas, and it is utter blindness to ignore them altogether.

The U.S. role in the new world order should not be a strictly defensive one. Some governments and some ideologies will try to erect new barriers to entry as a way of protecting what they have to offer in this ideological competition. The United States could not do so and remain true to what is distinctively American. Instead, the United States could implement a new leadership strategy for a more global system rather than continuing

in the vein of older challenges of containing communism or defeating terrorism. A lot of other international players—other countries, global corporations, mega-philanthropies, religious movements, Internet communities—will try hard to beat the United States to it. And so the new age of ideology is going to be very interesting and very competitive.



We have no easy solutions to offer, nor reassurance that the United States can “have its cake and eat it too” in international politics. Competition and strategy, as ever, are about making thoughtful choices and assessing in a straightforward manner what can be achieved, what will work, and which risks are worth taking. The United States must base its future strategy on an assumption as basic and world-changing as that of Copernicus; it must “face the facts, as they say, with both eyes open.” There really is no better place to start.