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*A review of social and political trends and events
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EVIL AXIS: BEYOND REALPOLITIK

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Well, talk about a skunk at a picnic, good ol' George W. sure stirred up a lot of people when he referred to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea in his State of the Union speech as an "axis of evil."

Americans, for the most part, overlooked the reference in the immediate aftermath of the speech, concentrating their attention instead on Bush's "style," on a host of rhetorical flourishes related to patriotism, and on the "bread and butter" economic issues.

But much of the rest of the world, borrowing a thought from Aristotle's essays on metaphysics, concluded that "words have meaning," and, over the past two weeks, jumped on the phrase like a duck on a June bug.

Generally, complaints so far have centered around three points of view. Iran, Iraq, and North Korea each argued, in its own way, that the United States has no right to call anyone evil, being, as it is, the embodiment of all evil itself. North Korea's somewhat intemperate response was, I think it is fair to say, representative of the trio's feelings. That nation's official media described President Bush as "crazy," referred to his administration as having "moral leprosy," and charged that the United States is an "empire of the devil."

China, which does a considerable amount of business with the troubled trio, was more reserved in its direct comments on the "axis of evil" remark, having good reason not to get into too detailed a public discussion of the Western definition of evil. Taking the eminently diplomatic position that, even if true, it isn't polite to go around saying such things, the Chinese foreign ministry simply noted that "the Chinese side does not advocate using this kind of language in international relations."

But on the topic of Bush's approach to geopolitics generally, the Chinese leadership has been extremely critical of late, and one can only assume that the "axis of evil" remark reinforced its reservations. According to *The Washington Times*, the government's official journal, *Beijing*

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Liaowang, in its year-end review, described Bush's foreign policy as "overbearing and extremely supercilious," arguing that it "smacks of unilateralism, and obviously betrays the desire for exclusive domination."

And, finally, the Europeans, some of whom have fairly close commercial ties with both Iran and Iraq, appeared to be flummoxed by the whole thing. Their principal complaint was twofold: first, that Bush absolutely should have consulted with them before leveling such a charge. And, second, that if he had consulted with them, they could have prevented him from making such a stupid mistake.

Chris Patten, the E.U. commissioner in charge of Europe's international relations, called the statement "absolutist and simplistic," as well as "unhelpful." He said it was hard to believe that it was a "thought-through policy," and argued that his fellow Europeans should do something about it before Bush went into "unilateralist overdrive." "Gulliver can't go it alone," he said, "and I don't think it's helpful if we regard ourselves as so Lilliputian that we can't speak up and say it"

Not to be outdone, French Foreign Minister Humbert Vedrine, whom *The Wall Street Journal* recently described as having "made a career out of uttering inflammatory statements about the U.S. 'hyperpower,'" called the Bush statement "simplistic and not well thought out." Then he got down to the meat of the European argument, charging that the United States is "taking decisions based on its own view of the world and its own interests."

Now, frankly, I am not surprised that any of these nations are upset about the Bush position. In fact, I expect that each of them, as well as a host of other like-minded countries, will become even more distressed in the not-too-distant future, as it becomes increasingly clear that President Bush's "axis of evil" remark was not only "thought through," but was a studied statement that marked a substantive change in the U.S. approach to foreign policy.

As can be construed from the remarks mentioned above, as well as from similar statements from other foreign governments, many observers suspect that such a sweeping change is in the works. But it looks to me as though the thought is so threatening to the comfortable, see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil geopolitical status quo that officials from Europe to China to the Middle East appear to be exceedingly reluctant to recognize the nature of this change and define it.

I have no such reservations, so this week I take a stab at it myself. For editorial purposes, I will forego the phrases, "I believe," "I think," and "In my opinion," and just say right here that what follows is all my opinion on what is driving President Bush's foreign policy decisions in the wake of September 11.

For starters, I would simply note that the foreign policy change that I believe was signaled decisively by Bush's "axis of evil" comment has both practical and philosophical roots.

On the practical side, Bush's actions and rhetoric reflect his belief that the United States is today the primary, indeed one might say the sole, target of a kind of warfare that is capable of killing tens of thousands of its citizens, crippling its commerce worldwide, and in fact, threatening the very foundations of its democratic system of government.

While some people might argue that this threat is exaggerated, Bush is not willing to take that chance. Nor do the American people want him to. Thus, from his perspective, he has no choice but to, in his words, "go it alone if necessary."

If this injures commercial and political relations between America's enemies, its rivals, and some of its dearest allies, then, so be it. War is hell. President Bush would argue that it is foolish for any nation, especially one that considers itself to be a major player on the world stage, to think that it can avoid suffering at least some negative consequences from the momentous events of September 11.

As to the evil axis designation, Bush believes that, from a practical standpoint, the fight to protect Americans against this threat will be a long, drawn-out affair marked by periods of seeming normalcy.

These periods could prompt dangerous public complacency, so he, as the nation's leader, must do two things. The first is to impress upon the public that the threat is consequential, an organized effort supported by a host of nations that have the collective wherewithal to sustain it over a period of time. The second is to establish that their grievance with the United States is not one that might dissipate with time, but is fundamental, eternal in fact. And what is more eternal than evil? Hence, the evil axis.

To critics who say, as Europe's Patten did, that "however mighty you are, even if you're the greatest superpower in the world, you cannot do it all on your own," Bush's practical response is twofold.

First, as Colin Powell put it, "We believe in multilateralism, but we do not shrink from doing that which we think is right, which is in our interest even if some of our friends disagree with us."

Second, whether Patten knows it or not, the United States will not, in fact, be alone in this endeavor. It may not have the backing of some European political leaders, and even of some European nations, but it will have other support around the world when and if it is needed.

Among others, depending on the circumstances, Bush may well expect assistance from all or some of the following nations: Great Britain, Russia, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Israel, Japan, most of Latin America, and a host of smaller countries around the world, all of which enjoy the fruits of an economically robust United States and value the benefits of its friendship.

Up to this point, this is pretty standard stuff. Indeed, one could argue that it is comfortably in line with classic *realpolitik*, as outlined by August Ludwig von Rochau in his 1853 essay entitled *Grundzüge der Realpolitik*, and as subsequently adopted by Bismarck. It is practical. It is calculated. It is divorced from religious, ethical, and emotional considerations.

In fact, a close look at President Bush's foreign policy actions since September 11 reveals that they are fully in line with the modern-day adaptation of *realpolitik*; that is, they are characterized by formalized diplomatic relations, elaborate coalition building, multilateral consultation, balance of power considerations, and considerable effort to assure that things don't spin out of control due to some mistake made in anger.

But, as I said earlier, there is a philosophical, or shall we say metaphysical, side to Bush's foreign policy that augments the practical and, in fact, has the potential for supplanting it, should the United States suffer another grand and costly terrorist attack.

This element reflects President Bush's Christian belief that "good" and "evil" and "truth" are not, to borrow a phrase from the great American moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, simply "expressions of preference" but are concrete concepts that find their roots and definitions in the principle of original sin, the Decalogue, and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

This element has always been present in American foreign policy, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the time and the president. It was largely quiescent during most of the Cold War, because a strict adherence to *realpolitik* was considered to be the only safe course to take during that time of "mutually assured destruction."

It emerged onto the stage briefly during the Reagan presidency, when he shocked the world by describing the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," thus changing the very nature of the Cold War rivalry by forcing people worldwide to view it in moral, rather than practical, terms.

Bush's recent use of the word "evil" brought the philosophical element to the forefront once again, adding, just as it did when Reagan used the term, a strong religious and ethical factor to the ongoing debate. It is the very thing von Rochau inveighed against in his essay on behalf of "practicality" in international relations in place of the hot, emotion-laden rhetoric that had led to the revolutions that wracked Europe in 1830 and 1848.

This new, shall we say "emotional" factor, adds a theological reason to the practical ones listed above for calling Iran, Iraq, and North Korea an evil axis.

This factor also enables President Bush, a born-again Christian, to meet Bin Laden on his own turf. "Your God says America is evil. My God says you are."

And, finally, this factor provides a third answer to Patten's charge that America cannot fight this battle alone. This answer is the observation that, as a Christian, President Bush never believes himself to be alone, and this is most especially true when he is engaged on the right side of the ancient, ceaseless war between good and evil.

The Wall Street Journal Europe recently ran an editorial on Bush's use of the term "axis of evil," with the headline "Beyond Good and Evil?" It was a cute touch, but it missed the point. Bush's approach to this war is not Nietzschean. Indeed, it is the antithesis of the idea that God is dead, that such terms as "good" and "evil" and "truth" are contrivances introduced by powerful persons to intimidate the weak from asserting their "will to power."

Bush's actions and rhetoric are pre-Nietzschean. In fact, they not only pre-date the Nietzschean, post-modern view of morality but also the modern, Enlightenment view. Not only do they reflect the belief that "good" and "evil" and "truth" are absolutes, but more important, as regards Bush's "axis of evil" comment, they reflect the Christian belief that to compromise with "evil" is evil and that evil, when encountered, must be confronted, defeated.

All of this, of course, makes Europe, China, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and virtually all the rest of the world nervous, because it is beyond the *realpolitik* to which they and the rest of the world have become so accustomed for the past half a century or more.

It introduces a highly volatile wild card into the new, post September 11, 21st century "great game" of geopolitics.

And it means Bush has little time for Patten's proposed "constructive engagement" solution to America's problem with Iran and North Korea, and even less time for a similar proposal put forth by him in a recent article in *The Guardian*, that "frankly, smart bombs have their place but smart development assistance seems to me even more significant"

In fact, if Europe or China or any other nation truly believes that diplomacy can solve America's differences with the evil axis nations, then I would humbly advise them to act unilaterally on their idea, beginning their efforts in Baghdad, Tehran, and Pyongyang, for the storm clouds are forming, and when the tempest begins, no one will be able to say that President Bush didn't warn of its coming.

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