

Thoughts about the US leadership

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In late 2001 and in early 2002 I have been quite depressed to find that I was amongst a minority of 3% who did not approve of the President. His approval rating astonishes and depresses me.

The US used to be a superpower, but it no longer acts like one. There has been a major lapse in leadership internationally and no attempt to be such a leader. Bush has led the way with statements about “good” vs “evil” and “you are either for us or you are against us”. Such polarization is not helpful in my view. We can oppose the actions of terrorists on 11 September 2001 but may not agree exactly on what should be done about them. It seems the administration is finding that dividing everyone into two camps in the Middle East is not easy, which one is good and which is evil? The whole way patriotism in the US is being portrayed, especially by the Attorney General Ashcroft and Trent Lott, leader Republican leader of the Senate, is truly scary. It is in fact anti-American. To question and debate is fundamental to freedom of speech yet such a freedom is being eroded, if not explicitly then certainly implicitly through a feeling that we can not even discuss these issues without being branded a traitor.

The problems are especially noticeable in international treaties, and this behavior was endemic long before September 11. The US withdrew from the international conference on racism and played no role in formulating the final statements (that were not as bad as once feared). It withdrew from the bio-terrorism treaty (long before September 11) (and so it was ironic to say the least to have all the anthrax problems). The US is largely responsible for the poor state of affairs in Argentina through taking away support. It has also withdrawn from the Kyoto Protocol treaty on climate change and has adopted energy policies that are not sustainable. It has taken no useful steps toward addressing issues related to global warming. The absence of a strong presence was a big factor in the Indian-Pakistani problems in Kashmir. Its absence in the Middle East has finally been rectified but too late. Leadership of the sort present under Clinton would very likely have prevented the escalation that has taken place, and this crisis lies at the door of a failed US policy, which is simply, “anything that Clinton did must be bad and we will do something else.” Then there is the nuclear test ban treaty that the Bush administration is thumbing its nose at and is likely to violate by developing a National Missile Defense program that has no chance of being useful. The latter is a scientific judgment of the American Physics Society. Then in May, the administration repudiated the International Criminal Court Treaty, which is a primary mechanism for international law. It perhaps relates to the treatment of the Afghanistan “detainees” in Cuba and violations of the Geneva Convention for prisoners of war. Instead of leading the way and promoting such a court and peaceful means of resolution, the administration sets a terrible example by saying if we do not like this treaty then we won’t abide by it. It makes a mockery of all international treaties and undermines the structure in place for a peaceful world.

Fundamentally, the approach of this administration is arrogant and irresponsible.

An example is the energy policy and climate change. There are some actions that can be taken to help alleviate the problem and satisfy Kyoto. But Kyoto is flawed. The real long-term problem is Carbon dioxide buildup. And so it is closely tied to energy and burning of fossil fuels. So what does the US propose? It proposes to drill in **ANWR** (the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge). This is an environmentally sensitive area on the north slope of Alaska.

Some facts: The US currently imports 62% of its oil. Only 13% of that is from the Middle East (most comes from Canada, Mexico, Venezuela etc). The US has only 3% of the world’s reserves. The oil that might be in ANWR would take 10 years to become available and would reduce the dependence on foreign oil to 60%. It does not solve the problem. The fundamental problem is that the US consumption of oil is not sustainable. The unstable Middle East is not as much of a problem as is sometimes thought in this regard, so the problem is more fundamental. It highlights the need to increase energy efficiency, reduce consumption, increase conservation, and develop renewable resources. We have to use less. And we have to cut emissions.

Let me touch on a couple of specific things we might do.

No doubt you have heard of the recent debate on the **CAFE** standards. CAFE is the Corporate Average Fuel Economy. Environmentalists are all in favor of legislating to insist on higher miles per gallon and imposing those on SUVs. It recently failed in the US Congress. There is something to be said for standards for SUVs. However, it seems to me that this puts the onus on the car companies: to build cars with lower mpg (presumably more efficient). What if consumers don’t buy those cars, as has been the case with the move to SUVs? Instead it seems to me the onus should be placed on consumers. One way to do that is with purchase fees that depend on mpg. E.g., say no fee for a vehicle with 25 mpg, but \$2000 fee for one with 15 mpg and \$2000 rebate for one with 35 mpg. For every mpg the fee changes by \$200. Then consumers clearly would buy vehicles with lower mpg and place demands on the car companies instead of through legislation.

Another example might be **gasoline taxes**, which can not even be rationally discussed. My proposal would be for a penny tax. One penny every month. You wouldn't even notice it. But after 10 years that is \$1.20. It can be made tax neutral by cutting other taxes. Then this inexorable increase means consumers think twice when they buy their next car. And they put pressure on car companies to have lower gas mileage vehicles.

I think it is important that whatever is done is done in a non-disruptive way (on right time frame).