



THE SNOWDEN EFFECT: CAN WE UNDO THE DAMAGE TO AMERICAN POWER?

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Political scientists and military strategists have tried to define a new grand strategy for America since the end of the Cold War. Despite repeated efforts, the results have not been compelling, perhaps because they start from the wrong premise about America's continued global role. The chaotic global politic situation we face now, with clashing values and interests, is not the same as a military threat to freedom from hostile totalitarian regimes against whom we could lead and defend. In the current situation, we are just another contender for power, one whose ideas, no matter how exceptional, are often greeted with suspicions that Edward Snowden's leaks have only reinforced.

The damage done by the leaks to intelligence collection will be short lived, but the damage to American influence could easily endure. The leaks have done more harm than we recognize. Snowden is the latest in a long line of American naïfs—gullible, self-righteous, with a dislike for America that blinds them to the world’s larger dangers. Like the unfortunate Bradley Manning, Snowden was exploited by those whose intent is to damage American influence and power. We are used to applauding those who use the internet against authoritarian regimes, but the tool has now been turned against democracies. Individuals who use the global internet for political effect are a new and potent force in international politics, and the internet lets them reach an expanded audience for a counter-narrative that casts American action in the harsh light of self-interest.

The United States is unique in defining its self-interest as best served by promoting a stable international order based on the rule of law, open and equitable arrangements for trade, and a commitment to democratic government and human rights. Its record is not perfect, but is better than any other nation in pursuing such ideals. But most nations now believe that legitimacy in international affairs comes from the United Nations, not from an inherited exceptionalism. The reaction to the leaks shows that much of the world questions exceptionalism as a justification for our actions.

American exceptionalism is a historical artifact from a world that no longer exists. Seventy years ago, the United States led an alliance of democracies to defeat fascism. Twenty-five years ago, with the same Western alliance, it overcame a massive totalitarian regime. But most of the world’s population was not alive for these events and they find them unpersuasive in explaining that we are not just another great power or hegemon

pursuing narrow self-interest. The invocation of the right of self-defense is unpersuasive because most nations believe self-defense is only justified when a nation’s territorial integrity or political independence is threatened, and the United States faces no such threat. Elites in countries as disparate as Germany and Brazil question American conduct as contrary to the norms of state behavior. The disparity between America’s historic message and its current actions, and the ambiguous nature of conflict today where

good and evil are not clearly demarcated, undercuts legitimacy and influence.

This is not an argument about whether American actions since 2003 were necessary or correct. What counts for a new grand strategy

is how they are perceived by others and how this perception affects American power. When Brazil’s president tells the UN General Assembly that Snowden’s revelations “caused indignation and repudiation in public opinion around the world,” and were “a breach of international law and an affront to the principles that must guide relations among [states],” she reflects a growing unwillingness to accept American leadership.

Brazil takes a conservative approach to international relations that reflects narrowly defined interests. If Brazil itself is not directly threatened, it takes no action. The chief purpose of international relations is commercial benefit or, for larger powers, to assert regional dominance. These concepts could describe American foreign policy in the nineteenth century and probably still guide the foreign policy of many countries. But in Brazil and elsewhere, there is also a reactive element, stimulated by discomfort with the unipolar moment and the perceived excesses of the war on terror. Becoming the sole global power

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produced antibodies to American authority and created a concern in many countries that no single state, no matter how pure its motives, should dominate world affairs.

This concern damages both the credibility and the legitimacy of America's leadership. The situation resembles the post-Vietnam era. Like then, there is an element of lost respect—the 10-year adventure in Iraq and Afghanistan did not enhance the credibility of American power or ideas. There is a strong reaction to abuses both perceived and real (often by those already disposed to be hostile). But after Vietnam, democratic nations still faced a common opponent, and needed American leadership for collective defense. This helped the United States regain leadership and influence. That is not the case today. Moreover, America's domestic political crisis can make our exceptionalism something to avoid rather than admire - government shutdowns and budget impasses do not inspire confidence abroad. The state of world affairs does not favor a return to global influence as easily as it did thirty years ago.

The unipolar moment is long gone but the contest for democracy that appeared to end with the Soviets' demise is not over. There are direct challenges to the principles and institutions created after 1945, from the crumbling of the World Trade Organization to the questioning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this new struggle of ideas we face an agile and diffuse set of opponents. They believe or at least they use with great effect the argument that America is an empire and that the motive behind its global presence is to preserve control. This counter-narrative to exceptionalism has won broad acceptance; the leaks reinforce it even though the ultimate effect of the leaks is to strengthen authoritarianism and injure human rights.

We are again in a contest of ideas and values. It is not a military contest. A new grand strategy cannot rely on military preeminence, since force and coercion are counterproductive when pursuing political goals that require winning agreement from nations with whom we are unlikely to ever find ourselves at war. Nor can defeating terrorism serve as an organizing principle. While only the United States has the means or the ideas to pursue a world ruled by law rather than force, being irreplaceable does not guarantee leadership, particularly when we face a skeptical global audience that includes powerful nations eager to challenge American ideas on how international relations should work and ready to assert regional authority against the global power.

One response to the leaks would be to wait, do nothing, and hope that the Snowden effect will simply go away. But inaction guarantees damage. An apology would be ludicrous, given the behavior of other countries. A recitation of slogans is inadequate. The best response to the leaks and those who trumpet them is that the justification for our actions is not exceptionalism (or hegemony) but the continued pursuit of peaceful international relations based on the beliefs that have shaped American policy since it became a global power. A world in which America is less capable or steps back will be neither pleasant nor safe (a point that escapes both European leftists and Congressional isolationists). The applause that greeted the leaks from a not overly astute audience obscures this danger. The Snowden effect is a warning of how our influence has been damaged—and provides an opportunity to rebuild it. ►