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The US Global Leadership Role After the 2004 Election

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*“The Policeman’s lot is not a happy one.”
(Gilbert & Sullivan)*

The coming presidential election will be one of the most important in recent history for the United States – and for the world – because it will define America’s role in a globalising world during the critical four-year period that lies ahead.

How should the United States – as the world’s last surviving super-power – exercise its leadership role in a globalising world? Throughout its history America has oscillated between isolation and active involvement in the world. At present, it is in a phase of active engagement in global affairs. If the world has become a globalised village, there can be little doubt that the United States is its Mayor and – its Chief of Police. America’s role as *de facto* global leader bears with it heavy burdens and responsibilities:

- It is spending enormous sums on the upkeep of its global military capability; it currently has 500 000 troops stationed overseas and has so far committed \$ 200 billion dollars to the war in Iraq.
- America’s pre-eminence makes it a target for disaffected groups all over the world.
- America must endure the jealousy of some of its oldest allies, many of whom delight in taking pot-shots at her policies, while sheltering beneath her strategic umbrella;
- The United States is likely to be criticised, whatever it does. If it acts to enforce United Nations resolutions on Iraq, it is accused of imperialism. If it fails to intervene in crises in Africa – it is slated for being insensitive.

As Gilbert and Sullivan observed over a hundred years ago “the Policeman’s lot is not a happy one”.

There might –under these circumstances – be a temptation for America to withdraw once again into a new period of isolation – particularly if things do not go well in Iraq.

However, one of the central realities of globalisation is that no country – and particularly no leading power – can ignore developments in the rest of the world. In a globalised world the problems of one region will inevitably become the problems of other regions:

- Diseases like AIDS do not observe international boundaries.
- Economic crises in emerging markets can have serious negative consequences for the whole global economy.

- Conflicts in distant societies can reverberate throughout the whole international community. Who would have thought before 11 September 2001 that religious fanatics hiding in caves in distant Afghanistan could possibly pose a threat to the hi-tech nerve centre of the world's most powerful economy in down-town New York?
- Whether we live in the first world or the third world, we all share the same fragile global environment. The decimation of tropical forests and the extinction of animal and plant species will have long-term consequences for the whole planet.

Problems confronting a globalised world can no longer be dealt with unilaterally by any single country – regardless of how powerful or rich that country might be. Global development, global security and the protection of the global environment can be dealt with only if the international community works in concert. The United States can – and must - play a pivotal leadership role in this process – but it cannot achieve success alone.

When the United States first ascended the stage of world power at the beginning of the last century, President Teddy Roosevelt's approach was to 'speak softly and carry a big stick.'

After the terrorist outrage of 11 September 2001 it was essential for the United States to use its big stick against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and against Al Qaeda and its allies all over the world. It is also true that had the United States not invaded Iraq, Saddam Hussein would still be conniving to outwit the United Nations weapons inspectors; he would still be circumventing UN sanctions; and worst of all, he would still be repressing and brutalising his own population.

But it is equally important to remember Teddy Roosevelt's advice 'to speak softly'. Military force has an essential place in international affairs – but it involves immense risks. It is much easier to start wars than to end them and they seldom turn out the way they are planned.

The 'Speaking softly' option recognises that long term solutions can be achieved only by addressing the root causes of conflict – which are, more often than not, poverty; repression; ignorance; and fanaticism .

It is not by accident that the country that Osama bin Laden chose as his refuge was also one of the poorest, most tyrannical and conflict-ridden societies in the world.

The United States – acting in concert with the international community - should develop the policies, the resources and the will to tackle the root causes of conflict.

In the economic sphere, the developed countries must ensure that developing countries are treated fairly in the globalisation process:

- They must address the debt burden of the world's most highly indebted poor countries - most of which are in Africa.
- They should help to increase the third world's share in global trade. Africa, with almost one-sixth the world's population accounts for only one fiftieth of global trade.
- First world countries should remove unfair obstacles to trade. They currently spend US\$ 350 billion on subsidies to their own farmers that make it almost impossible for developing countries to compete in global agricultural markets.

The international community also needs to strengthen its efforts to promote democracy and the rule of law throughout the world:

- It should do more to encourage democratic reforms and the protection of basic human rights.
- It should act more resolutely against regimes – like the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe - that grossly violate human rights and that subvert democracy.
- It needs to adopt a much more proactive stance in defusing conflicts – most of which now have their roots in ethnic, religious and cultural issues.

In particular, the United States and the international community cannot allow the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to spiral further out of control. Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, peace in the Middle East is too important to the key interests of whole international community to be left solely to the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Israelis and the Palestinians are simply going to have to find some way of learning to live together. This means that both sides will have to take risks; both sides will have to make painful compromises; both sides will have to accept that military force and suicide terrorist bombings will only accelerate their downward spiral into deepening conflict.

For strategic, economic and ecological reasons it would also be prudent for the United States, its global allies and multinational energy companies to embark on a major initiative to develop alternatives to oil.

The United States can, perhaps, best play its global leadership role by remaining true to the values of freedom, democracy, free enterprise and fundamental human rights on which it was founded and which have enabled it to attain its present leadership role. If it works with the international community to promote these values there will ultimately be no place for the terrorists to hide.

A return to isolationism is simply not an option in a globalising world: The question is not whether, but how, the United States should carry out its historic global leadership role. This is the question that the voters of America will have to decide when they cast their ballots next Tuesday.

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