

The Socially Intelligent Superpower

AN INTERVIEW WITH
FOREIGN POLICY EXPERT

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“WORLD’S ONLY SUPERPOWER”—THAT’S the title bestowed on the United States for the last two decades. It has a nice ring to it, but what does it mean today?

“Measured by economic statistics and military might, our power is greater than ever,” writes foreign policy expert Anne-Marie Slaughter in her recent book, *The Idea That Is America*. “But measured by the commonsense measure of whether we can get others to do what we want them to do, we have clearly lost ground since the Cold War.”

For years, foreign policy experts like Slaughter, dean of Princeton University’s eminent Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, have warned that our unrivaled wealth and military power are not enough to tackle the kinds of problems we face today, from terrorism to climate change to the widening gaps between rich and poor around the world.

“These are issues that require the cooperation of, if not all 191 nations, then a good many of them,” Slaughter told *Greater Good*. “And for that, you have to be able to mobilize people; you have to be able to inspire them. That means we have to have a set of ideas that will be deeply attractive to other countries and will convince other countries that we are actually pulling together to fight a common threat.”

In *The Idea That Is America*, Slaughter identifies seven key principles—liberty, democracy, equality, justice, tolerance, humility, and faith—that she sees as central to America’s identity. She describes how a U.S. foreign policy grounded in these principles could offer a new model of American

power, one that inspires and mobilizes other nations to work with us.

The Idea That Is America has been endorsed by distinguished figures ranging from former Reagan secretary of state George Shultz to former Clinton secretary of state Madeline Albright (who called the book “brilliant ... deeply moving, exquisitely timed, authored by one of our country’s leading scholars”). Slaughter herself has been mentioned as a possible secretary of state should the Democrats win the White House.

Slaughter recently spoke with *Greater Good* during a brief trip back to the U.S. from China, where she’s on sabbatical for the year.

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Greater Good: If you were advising the next American president, how would you recommend he or she act to restore America’s moral and political standing in the world?

Anne-Marie Slaughter: I would start with humility. In my view, we need to start by acknowledging that we have made some real errors—that we were badly frightened after 9/11, and we overreacted in many ways. We’re not alone as a nation in doing that; many nations respond that way. But we have to own up to that. We have to take responsibility for our actions and acknowledge our errors, and acknowledge that in many cases we actually should have been listening to other countries. That kind of humility is needed to give us enough room to start to do some very positive things.

There are four concrete things we need to do right away. The first is to close Guantanamo and declare that we will not engage in torture or cruel, inhuman, and degrading

treatment. We must go back to the standards that we have always set and we continue to set for our military. We must embrace them across the board.

Second, we must withdraw our troops from Iraq in a way that leaves Iraq as stable as possible, while building regional institutions at the same time. It cannot be just a unilateral withdrawal. Rather it must be a declared policy of, “We are now withdrawing our troops and working to make that a safe and stable withdrawal,” rather than figuring out how to stay in.

Third, we need to work on leading a serious global effort to combat climate change. Our current nonchalant posture is probably the most important global symbol of how the United States effectively doesn’t care that the decisions we make affect others. You can’t be a leader if you’re that irresponsible. We’re going to have to ask other countries to make sacrifices, too, so we’re going to have to start.

And the fourth is to be really serious about nuclear nonproliferation, which means living up to our part of the bargain. It means cutting our nuclear weapons. In my view it means declaring that our ultimate aim is to go to zero, although it could take decades to get there.

GG: You talk about humility, but “humble superpower” seems like a contradiction in terms. I wonder if you could elaborate on how a humble foreign policy would differ from the Bush administration’s? For instance, when would a humble superpower use force?

AMS: Well, first, you have to define humility. Humility doesn’t mean you shouldn’t

be strong; it doesn't mean you shouldn't be bold; it doesn't mean you shouldn't be proud. The opposite of humility is hubris.

So the biggest changes would be, in making decisions, to genuinely consult and genuinely listen. Not just jump through diplomatic hoops, but genuinely listen to people who understand a particular region. We really need to be consulting with those powers and allowing them to lead in some cases, supporting them, and not always insisting that it's going to be done our way.

If you've got evidence that you are about to be attacked, you can act. That's consistent with the right of self-defense under the U.N. charter, under international law. The issue is: Can you act when a threat is not imminent, but you think it's building? And there, I think, humility says there are far too many questions to act unilaterally. That's exactly, in my view, where you want to have the value of multilateral deliberation, where you want a number of different opinions. And in my view, that means you would either get UN authorization or you'd at least get authorization from a representative regional body. And if you can't convince another 10 to 15 nations who would be equally threatened that this threat is imminent and that force is really essential, then I don't think you should act. But it's not because of some abstract devotion to multilateral process. It's because multilateral process is a safeguard that you use precisely when you know that you may see something exactly black, but somebody else may see it exactly white, and you better hear that view.

GG: It's interesting to hear you describe power in these terms because it resonates with research covered by my co-editor Dacher Keltner in this issue of *Greater Good*. That research shows when people practice social intelligence, when they're sensitive to the needs of others and able to empathize with them, they are entrusted with more power and are actually able to wield that power over a longer term, and more successfully, than when they just try to lead by force and coercion.

AMS: Very interesting. That is consistent with the view of John Ikenberry, who is my co-author on the Princeton Project on National Security, that the secret of our success after WWII was that we were willing to constrain ourselves by creating and participating in institutions such as the United Nations. By doing so, we were not only strengthening ourselves by creating alliances against our adversaries. We were reassuring our allies that we would not dominate them—that we would genuinely

take their views seriously and that we would accept these constraints in return for their participating in these institutions with us. And the whole point there is that constraint is a source of power.

GG: What you're articulating seems to be social intelligence on a global scale. On the other hand, there's another body of research showing that once people have power, despite what research shows is the best way to wield it, people are often corrupted by it and abuse power in pursuit of their own self-interest. And I can't help but wonder whether that might also be the case in the international arena. In other words, perhaps the U.S. should use its power in this socially intelligent, humble way. But do we have any reason to believe that it actually can? Is there any historical precedent for this kind of political humility?

AMS: Well, it's a great question, and I think you can answer it on multiple levels. One, there's the basic learning curve on the personal level. In my own experience as dean, and I think many leaders will say this, when you first become a leader, there's this overwhelming sense that you have to prove your strength and your resolution. And what you're going to do is just declare something and impose it. And you're going to act quickly and resolutely and firmly. And virtually all effective leaders then realize, "No, actually moving more slowly and consulting more widely is far more likely to help you reach your objective." It will be slower, it may be moderated in different ways—you're not going to get it exactly as you wanted—but it will be legitimate, and it will last.

So if you think about that globally, part of the answer is that there's a learning curve, right? The United States came out of the Cold War, and in 1995, after 40 years as one of two superpowers, we were only one superpower. And it's not surprising that it went to our head in various ways. And then we were also, as I said, badly frightened after 9/11. That combination means it's not at all surprising that at some point we said, "We have all this power and we're going to use it for what we think is good." But the lessons of how disastrous that's been, I think, are quite plain to see.

The other thing I would say is this is the first time ever that you have had a democracy in this role. I write in my book that our democracy does not presume we are better than other people. On the contrary, it presumes that we are totally human, and like all humans, we are corruptible and we are weak. Unlike the British Empire or the

Roman Empire or any other country that was once in this position, we are a country where when things go disastrously wrong, we have a system to kick that government out. That doesn't mean we're going to be great, just that we have real safeguards against the worst abuses.

And I think we will look back and see we've handled this period of being an unquestionable hyperpower quite badly, but that we then recovered and, first, recognized that the period of being a hyperpower was clearly limited. Because if you look 20 years down the road, you can see other powers—China, but also the EU—rising. You can see that the centers of power in the world are reconfiguring. Second, we'll see that the kinds of problems we faced were not susceptible to the unilateral use of our power, even for the period that we had it.

This has been a grievous learning curve. But I remain optimistic that we actually can come back.

GG: Looking ahead to the next administration and beyond, why are you optimistic that we can and will get back on this right path?

AMS: I am optimistic, although I'm not Pollyannaish. In other words, I really do think this is going to be a four-to-five year effort, because we really have eroded so much of what I think does make us strong.

But with the right administration, and the willingness to put in the work, not to have a quick fix, to accept constraints, and to really have a serious global agenda, not just a national agenda—I am convinced that we can do it, for a couple of reasons. The biggest one is the Churchillian argument about democracy: that we're the worst possible leader, but we're better than all the others. I don't see any other nations that can do this, and I think many nations in the world want leadership. I'm living in China this year, and the Chinese basically say, "We need you to be leading," at least for the next 20 years. After that, we'll see. So I think that's very important.

I'm also optimistic because the United States better represents the peoples of the world than any other nation. If we look at our own changing demographic face, I see a population that will be deeply connected to other countries in the world by blood and by continued travel. And I'm optimistic because I believe, in the end, that there are enough Americans who are plenty self-interested, but who also can't bear to see us so betray the things we say we stand for.

Jason Marsh is a co-editor of *Greater Good*.