

# THE MEANING OF KOSOVO

## Introduction: American Power and Responsibility in a New Century

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Never before in its history has the United States enjoyed such a favorable strategic environment as it does today. There are few deadly enemies anywhere in sight. The U.S. military budget surpasses that of China, Russia, and the five Western European powers combined, and U.S. military capabilities are well ahead of those of any ally or potential adversary. America's booming economy and domestic social arrangements—with crime and unemployment down to the levels of thirty years ago—are a puzzle to those who, as recently as a decade ago, were predicting inexorable American decline. Such a surfeit of U.S. power and prestige, and the apparent absence of any significant obstacles to it, have prompted many to argue that this is a unique historic opportunity for the United States to fulfill the Wilsonian dream of remaking the world in America's image. Among conservatives, the argument has been made most forcefully by William Kristol and Robert Kagan of the Project for the New American Century; among liberals, by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Tony Smith, whose essay follows.

In probing this question, however, one also needs to raise an equally important, albeit more uncomfortable one: assuming that this is, indeed, a historic opportunity for the United States to exercise its power on behalf of liberal, democratic values, how can it do so in a morally responsible fashion? Thucydides' *Histories of the Peloponnesian War* poignantly reminds us of the follies and hubris of which even the greatest, most exalted democracies are capable in peace and war. Like Athens in its golden heyday of the Periclean era, the United States at the dawn of the twenty-first century faces great opportunities as well as great dangers. The opportunities to use its power to accomplish much good are matched by the dangers that it will wield its power irresponsibly, thereby

diminishing its credibility and undermining the long-term viability of the very values it seeks to spread.

Tony Smith makes a compelling case for seizing the moment in Wilson's name. As he sees it, the United States and its allies are strong, the enemies of liberalism are on the defensive, and there are plenty of opportunities for a limited investment of American resources to make a substantial difference. The world may never again be so pliable, and action now may help to move at least some regions of the world in directions congruent with long-term American interests and values. The burden of proof, as Smith sees it, is on those opposed to active Wilsonian engagement to show that it would be harmful.

As sympathetic as one may be to the moral arguments for a muscular Wilsonianism, several qualifications are in order. First, a proper sense of modesty in the projection of America's rhetoric is necessary. There is no escaping that the United States, exceptional as it is in some ways, is still a fallen, sinful society, to use the language of classical Christian realism with which readers of Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield are familiar. We are as eager to put our interests at the center of our international agenda as any other state, and as easily able as anyone else to deceive ourselves about the extent to which our interests correspond with those of the rest of the world. One problem with Wilsonianism is that its proponents tend to forget this and take their rhetoric far more seriously than is fitting. Our allies and friends are prepared to respect us when we make a case for policies that benefit us as well as them, but our sanctimoniousness erodes our credibility and elicits their resentment when we speak as if our actions are guided by disinterestedness. A great power's rhetoric, as Theodore Roosevelt well understood, is central to its leadership. More often than not, Wilsonian rhetoric weakens rather than enhances our leadership through its hubris and self-righteousness, though this is far more obvious to the rest of the world than it is to us. A sense of modesty would help to counteract this weakness.

Second, a sense of measure would also be healthy with regard to our strategic aims. Smith hints at this when he acknowledges that a humanitarian intervention on behalf of Tibet would make no sense given the risks of war with China. Similar prudential restraints would rule out an American rescue effort on behalf of the beleaguered Chechens, or a "prodemocracy campaign" in Saudi Arabia, which would destabilize a key ally. Selectivity is essential, once again calling for a greater sense of modesty and a willingness to lower the decibels of the rhetoric.

Finally, a pursuit of muscular Wilsonianism must come to terms with a dangerous paradox in which U.S. foreign policy is presently trapped. The United States is first and foremost a status quo power. Our global financial, commercial, and political interests require order, predictability, and a strong preference for gradual evolution over radical transformation. A casual reading of the latest version of President Bill Clinton's National Security Strategy reveals countless references to the need for "stability" and "order." Yet at its core, America was founded on a revolutionary ideology, and for better or for worse, the pursuit of Wilsonianism leads to radical change, instability, and the transformation of the status quo. One can agree with Smith that over the long term the spread of liberal values will be in the United States' interest, but in the short term the consequences in places such as Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the former Soviet Union are likely to be chaotic and even harmful to international stability. To say this is not to argue against jumping through the present Wilsonian window of opportunity, but it is to recognize realistically the costs and risks of this opportunity. Bereft of such recognition, Wilsonianism becomes irresponsible and hence ultimately immoral.

While humanitarian intervention is only one of several instruments available to Wilsonianism, it garnered considerable attention during the last decade as a result of the events in Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Richard Caplan raises the vital question of what international standards might be available for determining the appropriateness of such interventions, instead of leaving them to the mere play of chance and state self-interest. The key issue is whether states legitimately can carry out a forcible humanitarian intervention absent a mandate from the United Nations Security Council.

As Caplan points out, there is no clear consensus on this question. The older, almost absolute ban on humanitarian intervention that dominated international law throughout the twentieth century crumbled over the last decade. There were two main reasons for this. First, there was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an international system in which the United States and its allies hold a preeminent position, together with great freedom of action to carry out such interventions whenever their interests dictate it or their publics demand it. Second, the conceptions of state sovereignty on which the older absolutist position was based are no longer credible. In our crowded, highly interdependent planet, certain human rights outrages that decades ago could be coldly disposed of as a state's domestic concern no longer are truly domestic because they affect the stability and welfare of neighboring countries,

as well as the normative fabric of international society. But the collapse of the old consensus has not been followed with a new one.

International opinion today ranges widely on the issue, depending on both the circumstances of the particular case and the strategic interests of each state. At one end of the spectrum are the United States and Tony Blair's United Kingdom, eager to reserve as much freedom of action as possible for future NATO interventions. Strategically, the United States sees itself as the upholder of international order of last resort, as the great power that must be ready to intervene anywhere, anytime, when others cannot or will not do so. A muscular Wilsonianism demands this freedom of action, as also does a calculating *realpolitik*. Meanwhile, Great Britain sees its strategic interests as closely bound with those of the United States and with an activist NATO role that enables the British to play one of their strongest cards in Europe: their robust military capabilities relative to those of other European states. Next on the intervention spectrum are states such as France and Gerhard Schröder's Germany. The French are suspicious of excessively elastic *prointervention* criteria that might legitimize what they see as American hegemonial pretensions. For their part, the Germans want to avoid situations in which Germany will act militarily outside its borders without a clear international mandate.

At the other end of the spectrum are the most vocal opponents of the looser humanitarian intervention criteria. As one might expect, these include some of the weakest states in today's international system or those that have the most to lose from a resurgent American Wilsonianism. Cuba fits the first category, China and Russia the latter. For the Cubans, NATO's intervention in Kosovo, devoid as it was of a Security Council mandate, opened the door for bolder U.S. action around the world, including the Western hemisphere and someday, possibly, even Cuba. Russia and China have large minorities in their midst, such as the Chechens and Tibetans, against whom they are prepared to use force on a massive scale in order to keep them as part of their territories. They have nothing to gain and much to lose from more flexible standards for humanitarian intervention.

Thus, in the end, the arguments for or against a broader concept of humanitarian intervention are dictated not by their legal or moral persuasiveness, but by the strategic perspective and self-interest of each state. This also means that no solid consensus is likely to emerge. For the foreseeable future, the five permanent Security Council members will remain divided, with the Western powers far more willing to countenance a more activist position than either Russia or China will support. Like the other four powers on the council, the

United States will focus first on its specific strategic responsibilities as it decides which interpretation of the rules to support, rather than on its responsibilities to international law in the abstract.

While Wilsonianism and humanitarian intervention seem attractive options for a powerful United States, their practical application can be carried out in a morally irresponsible fashion, as argued by Carl Cavanagh Hodge with regard to NATO's intervention in Kosovo. Regardless of how lofty the motives were, Hodge makes the case that NATO's intervention served "neither human rights nor peace and security particularly well." The advanced military technologies associated with the "revolution in military affairs" gave NATO the unusual option of fighting the war solely from the air without having to put combat troops on the ground. This had several disastrous consequences. First, because NATO was not incurring any significant risks or losses, it was difficult for the public to appreciate what was really at stake in the conflict. The public, in fact, was prepared to "cut and run" at any moment if the military operations did not go well. There was a morally absurd contrast between the heightened rhetoric of Western leaders about the mission's lofty goals and what their governments and public opinion actually were prepared to risk to attain these goals.

Second, the alluring prospect of fighting without casualties meant that NATO was willing to take its time, thereby encouraging the Serbs to speed up their timetable for ethnic cleansing. The record shows that during the weeks of the air campaign, the Serbs moved ruthlessly to uproot as many Albanian Kosovars as possible. Along with the ethnic cleansing went an unprecedented degree of rape, looting, and murder. In initiating force against Serbia, NATO had to contemplate the possibility that, with their backs against the wall and little to lose, the Serbs would be tempted to destroy the Albanian presence in Kosovo once and for all so as to make an Albanian-free Kosovo an irreversible fait accompli. NATO's failure to anticipate this development, and even worse, its failure to act once it became apparent that it was happening, was morally irresponsible.

Third, the seemingly "cheap" option of fighting a war without casualties may have profound long-term systemic consequences, as Hodge persuasively argues. It has helped to chip away at the firewall laboriously built up throughout the twentieth century against the casual use of military force. In the aftermath of Kosovo, political leaders may come to view the use of force through air power as a sanitized instrument of statecraft requiring few moral scruples and no international sanctioning. Already, the Russians seem to have applied this lesson in their military strategy to subdue the Chechens.

The breakdown of the firewall poses long-term dangers to the stability of the international system beyond those pointed out by Hodge. Any use of force, no matter how sanitized, carries a high risk of escalation. It was Carl von Clausewitz who, almost two centuries ago, recognized that even limited wars, those conflicts in which “the statesman seeks to turn the terrible two-handed sword that is war into the lightest rapier, fit only for thrusts and parries,” can degenerate into bitter, all-out general war as the passions of the people are aroused and outside parties intervene. While the risk of such escalation may have been low in Kosovo, and will likely remain low in Chechnya, it will not always be so. Inevitably, as the use of “casual war” spreads, some statesman somewhere is bound to miscalculate its consequences, and what was conceived initially as a self-contained conflict could escalate and draw in great-power antagonists. The Viennese statesmen who contemplated a limited punitive strike against Serbia in 1914 had no idea of the global conflagration they were about to kindle.

In his essay on ethical dilemmas in U.S. peacekeeping and peacemaking, Martin L. Cook sheds considerable light on the hierarchy of moral values according to which the United States is likely to interpret its responsibilities in what he calls “immaculate wars.” On the one hand, as Cook argues, its historical traditions drive the United States to embark on humanitarian interventions to redress various evils around the world. But such concern for humanity does not go far or deep. In carrying out the operations themselves, the U.S. government is willing to adopt indiscriminate military strategies, such as attacks against civilian infrastructure, and to refrain from ground operations to stop ethnic cleansing, so as to reduce the risks to American soldiers. When push comes to shove, the United States believes that its primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of its own soldiers, and then secondarily the lives of those foreigners on behalf of whom it has launched a humanitarian intervention.

While this ordering of responsibilities may please the American public and reduce the political friction an administration may encounter from a democratically elected Congress, it is not responsible statecraft on the part of NATO’s leader. In the Kosovo operation, the consequences included a sharp increase in Serbian outrages against the Albanians, an unseemly prolongation of human suffering, and the destruction of much Serbian infrastructure with considerable collateral damage to innocent Serbian civilians. For this author, one of the most notable incoherencies in NATO policy and strategy was the contrast between our Wilsonian calls to the Serbs to overthrow Milosevic and establish a liberal democratic regime and our air campaign that punished Serbia’s population far more severely than its political or military leadership.

The lofty hopes of Smith regarding the Wilsonian moment notwithstanding, one comes face to face with a sad reality. The exercise of power in this broken world, even for the noblest values, is bound to be a messy affair, full of paradoxes, unintended consequences, and ample doses of inconsistency and hypocrisy, and ultimately falling considerably short of expectations. In this context, a greater regard for rhetorical modesty, measured expectations, and the exercise of responsibility on the part of the United States as it wields its power would be most welcome and salutary.

The exercise of greater responsibility by the United States should mean, at a minimum, several things. First, American policymakers need to reflect much more carefully and soberly than they do now on the destabilizing consequences of Wilsonianism in some parts of the world, and on whether the United States is really prepared to bear responsibility for those consequences. Encouraging the Kurds and Shiites to rise up against Saddam Hussein and then leaving them in the lurch when they revolted was highly irresponsible. Preaching greater democracy to East Asian and African countries without also thinking through what America's financial and political responsibilities would be in the event of instability and civil war breaking out during the transition to more pluralistic regimes is morally unacceptable and strategically dangerous behavior.

Second, the United States needs to own up to its responsibilities for the broader international legal regime within which it operates and from which it derives enormous benefits as the mightiest status quo power in the world. American leaders and politicians must desist from the present schizophrenic behavior in which they routinely call for greater UN action to deal with complex humanitarian emergencies, while belittling the organization's importance and prestige and making an unseemly spectacle every time the United States pays its dues. If we are going to push for more elastic criteria for humanitarian intervention, and at the same time elicit UN support for such interventions in Bosnia and elsewhere, we must treat the United Nations not uncritically but certainly with less contempt than we seem to do now. This, too, is implicit in the notion of the United States' acting and speaking responsibly.

Finally, as the coalition leader and chief force provider for such interventions, the United States needs to wrestle with its responsibilities in conducting the military operations at the heart of humanitarian interventions. Do we make the avoidance of casualties such a high priority that we refuse to use ground troops and resort to air strategies in ways that increase civilian suffering? Is it responsible for the United States to announce in advance what it will do and will not do? As Senator John McCain and British Prime Minister Tony Blair asked,

once the decision to use force is made, is it not our responsibility to ensure that the operation is carried out as expeditiously as possible to prevent the rogue regime in question from bringing about a greater recrudescence of the evils it is perpetrating? Do we not have a moral responsibility to do some careful, clear strategic thinking before we become involved in these interventions? Clausewitz reminds us that at the heart of war is the principle of interactivity. The use of force involves at least two clashing wills. A responsible strategist will not assume that his opponent will react to his moves exactly as he would wish. One must be prepared for the likelihood that in the interaction of wills and force at the core of war an adversary will respond in totally unexpected ways, even irrationally. The moral responsibilities of political leadership and military command include the obligation to prepare, as far as humanly possible, for such “irrational” or “unforeseeable” responses. In Kosovo, American political leaders and military planners had a moral obligation to reflect more carefully than they did on how the Serbs might respond to an attack, and to prepare for a range of eventualities, including an intensification of the campaign of terror against the ethnic Albanians. We will face similar responsibilities to do our strategic homework more thoroughly before we act in future interventions.