

PRAGMATISM V. IDEOLOGY: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

I've been meaning to write a post about process versus ideology in response to the hand-wringing about Obama's appointees. This post from Glenn Greenwald and this one from Daniel De Groot have pitched the issue in different terms, as pragmatism versus ideology. Both are fairly abstract posts, and both are, in my opinion, bad caricatures of the debate.

Here's Glenn, equating principle with ideology (and therefore presumably suggesting pragmatism lacks all principle).

Because as a matter of principle – of **ideology** – we believe that it is not just to do it, no matter how many benefits we might reap, no matter how much it might advance our "national self-interest" (just as we don't break into our neighbor's home and steal from them even if they have really valuable things to take and we're pretty sure we won't get caught).

And here he is suggesting that pragmatic calculations would primarily involve a measurement of material gain balanced against cost (this seems to contradict the suggestion that pragmatists have no principles, since the valuation of material gain is itself a principle, albeit not a very laudable one).

First, is foreign policy really nothing more than "pragmatic actions in defense of national self-interest?" If, on a pragmatic level, the consequences of attacking Iraq had been different than what they were – if we had been able to invade and occupy relatively quickly and

derive substantial material gain from doing so, including somehow making ourselves marginally "safer" – would that have made the Iraq War a just and desirable action?

Daniel picks up on Glenn's post, synthesizing that pragmatism equals *realpolitik* (apparently conflating Kissinger's ideological approach to diplomacy with Obama's pragmatism).

His point here is a great one, that "pragmatism" as applied to foreign policy is little more than another term for *realpolitik*, the amoral pursuit of national power in a competitive and adversarial nation-state environment.

De Groot then asks—but doesn't answer—what the goals of pragmatism are.

There is another fundamental problem with the ideology of pragmatism (yes, "I hate ideology" is an ideology too!) – that can be expressed as a question:

What goals do these pragmatic policies advance?

And all of this discussion and all of their weird confluences are divorced from any consideration of actual foreign policy ideologies in this country and from Obama's own statements.

Consider these excerpts from Obama's 2002 speech opposing the Iraq War.

What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war. **What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz and other arm-chair, weekend warriors in this Administration to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne.**

What I am opposed to is **the attempt by political hacks like Karl Rove to distract us from a rise in the uninsured, a rise in the poverty rate, a drop in the median income** – to distract us from corporate scandals and a stock market that has just gone through the worst month since the Great Depression.

That's what I'm opposed to. A dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics.

Now let me be clear – I suffer no illusions about Saddam Hussein. He is a brutal man. A ruthless man. A man who butchers his own people to secure his own power. He has repeatedly defied UN resolutions, thwarted UN inspection teams, developed chemical and biological weapons, and coveted nuclear capacity.

He's a bad guy. The world, and the Iraqi people, would be better off without him. But I also know that **Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States**, or to his neighbors, that the Iraqi economy is in shambles, that the Iraqi military a fraction of its former strength, and that **in concert with the international community he can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history.**

I know that **even a successful war against Iraq will require a US occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences.** I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support **will only fan the flames of the Middle East**, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaeda.

I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars.

So **for those of us who seek a more just and secure world for our children**, let us send a clear message to the president today. You want a fight, President Bush? Let's **finish the fight with Bin Laden and al-Qaeda**, through effective, coordinated intelligence, and a shutting down of the financial networks that support terrorism, and a homeland security program that involves more than color-coded warnings.

You want a fight, President Bush? Let's fight to make sure that the UN inspectors can do their work, and that we **vigorously enforce a non-proliferation treaty**, and that former enemies and current allies like Russia safeguard and ultimately eliminate their stores of nuclear material, and that nations like Pakistan and India never use the terrible weapons already in their possession, and that the arms merchants in our own country stop feeding the countless wars that rage across the globe.

You want a fight, President Bush? Let's fight to **make sure our so-called allies in the Middle East, the Saudis and the Egyptians, stop oppressing their own people**, and suppressing dissent, and tolerating corruption and inequality, and mismanaging their economies so that their youth grow up without education, without prospects, without hope, the ready recruits of terrorist cells.

You want a fight, President Bush? Let's fight to **wean ourselves off Middle East oil**, through an energy policy that doesn't simply serve the interests of Exxon and Mobil.

Those are the battles that we need to

fight. Those are the battles that we willingly join. The battles against ignorance and intolerance. Corruption and greed. Poverty and despair.

Note, first, that Obama definitely sees his perspective as a fight against ideology—but more importantly, an ideology forced on the country with no consideration in terms of "lives lost [or] hardships borne." That, in itself, is an utterly pragmatic critique: we should not execute ideological solutions without first measuring their cost, something ideologically-based decisions don't necessarily do. Obama then does that calculation: He argues that Saddam is no immediate threat and could be contained by the international community until he falls from power. And he measures that against an "occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences." Glenn's right—Obama's stance against the war was one of calculation. But whereas Glenn imagined that calculation in terms of material gain, Obama's calculation involved a measure of efficacy: given the certainty with which containment would work against Saddam, as compared to uncertainty, the painful human costs of war, and the inevitable blowback from it, war was clearly the worse alternative.

Now turn to Obama's second critique of the ideologies that favored war, an aspect of ideology that Glenn and Daniel ignore: ideology was used "to distract us from a rise in the uninsured, a rise in the poverty rate, a drop in the median income." This is the ugly flip-side to the notion that (as Daniel describes) "Ideology entails both a specific solution to a specific problem, but also a general approach to larger challenges." Ideology not only defines means to solutions, but it also defines what the problems are, and in so doing produces a narrative that focuses on some problems while ignoring others. It's important to acknowledge this point, because most dominant foreign policy ideologies start from the assumption that oil

equals power and that US hegemony is the goal, which leads logically to certain conclusions, including war with Iraq. (This is one of the problems underlying this discussion: while the progressives Glenn aligns with consistently support certain kinds of decisions, their views don't amount to a formal **foreign policy** ideology, which is why many national figures who opposed the war are pragmatists. We may be seeing the formulation of an alternative to US hegemony based on sustainability and solutions to climate change, but thus far there isn't the infrastructure for those ideas to amount to a formal ideology.)

That said, one could argue that Obama isn't so free from ideology himself. Here's the answer he gives to Daniel's question about his goals: he seeks "a more just and secure world for our children." At least in his own mind, Obama weighed his choices not against the materialist measure Glenn suggests a pragmatist would be guided by, but justice and security. Obama even names four policies that would support this principle:

- Finish the fight with Bin Laden and al-Qaeda
- Vigorously enforce a non-proliferation treaty
- Make sure our so-called allies in the Middle East, the Saudis and the Egyptians, stop oppressing their own people
- Wean ourselves off Middle East oil

Gosh. That's about as far from Kissinger's *realpolitik* as you get. It's also, with the call to wean ourselves off Middle Eastern oil, far outside the existing dominant ideologies inside the DC beltway. And note, with his comment that neocon ideology serves to distract us from

problems at home, Obama also implicitly ties what we do in the Middle East to economic justice within the US. Call that ideology or call it a pragmatic focus on governing as a whole, but by yoking domestic conditions to foreign policy, Obama's getting beyond the pigeonholes of both good and bad foreign policy ideology as it currently exists in DC.

To get at Glenn's real point then—why is someone who opposed the war appointing all these hawks to key foreign policy positions—it'd be useful to take Daniel at his word when he defines ideology as a heuristic tool, a process for making decisions, because that is where I think defenders of ideology misunderstand Obama's apparent goals with his selections (and while I'm more optimistic than Glenn and Daniel, I'm not pretending I can guarantee that Obama will succeed at achieving these goals). Keep in mind, we're not, primarily, talking about how Biden or Hillary or Rahm make decisions; they all (particularly Hillary and Rahm) are ideological creatures and we can be pretty sure how they'll make decisions and what those decisions might be. We're talking about how Obama makes decisions.

To get at how Obama intends to make decisions (accepting that Obama is making it up as he goes along and it may well not work out this way), there are two anecdotes about Biden's selection as VP that are useful, the first from this article. Ryan Lizza describes Obama's selection of Biden not to be about ideology, but about Biden's empathy, his ability to understand and respect how his political opponents arrive at a decision.

The official story behind Obama's Vice-Presidential choice is that Obama was won over by Biden's ability to get support from Republicans in the Senate. In Biden's telling, Obama liked his sense of empathy, a trait that Obama shares, to judge by the finely sketched characters in "Dreams from My Father,"

his 1995 memoir. Biden told me that Senator Mike Mansfield, of Montana—who persuaded him to stay in the Senate in 1973, when he was distraught over the deaths of his wife and child—taught him that, no matter how reprehensible another senator’s views, his job was to figure out what was good in that person, what voters back home saw in him. It may be a sentimental view of how senators treated each other in an earlier age, but Biden suggested to me that when he repeated that to Obama it helped to bring them closer—and he said that he and Obama would bring that approach to Washington.

[snip]

“I’m going to say something presumptuous,” Biden said to me. “The reason I’ve been relatively successful is that I have never questioned the motive of other senators, and that’s instinctively Barack. Barack doesn’t start off, ‘Well, you disagree, you must be a, you know, an S.O.B. or you must not care about the poor or you’re sexist or you’re racist or you’re a whatever.’ He doesn’t think that way.”

At least as Biden tells it, the chief characteristic that Obama liked about Biden was his ability to respectfully understand—but not necessarily agree with—the views of those he opposed. Empathy is, to my mind, a fundamentally pragmatic trait, the ability to listen to and understand other perspectives in good faith. Empathy doesn’t preclude a subsequent rational consideration and rejection of those other perspectives, but it increases the chances that you’ll understand the logic and potential value of a perspective (and what it would take to persuade someone holding the other perspective of the value of your own policy decisions).

The other anecdote (which I can’t find—I’ll

update the post when I do) comes from Biden's description of when he finally overcame his doubts whether Obama was prepared to be President. He described a meeting between Obama and his financial advisors just after the economic meltdown. Obama was late. He came in, and asked four questions of all these muckety-muck experts like Paul Volcker, and then was ready to engage about policy. To Biden, Obama's most important skill as a President is his ability to really draw on the expertise of his advisors, ask questions, yet always maintain an upper hand in those discussions.

That's what Obama the pragmatist is about: asking the right questions of experts whose prejudices and ideology he might not share, but drawing on their expertise to make sound decisions. From everything we've seen, Obama imagines he can surround himself with experts, draw on their expertise, but ultimately make the final policy decisions himself. The big question for me is whether, when surrounded by people who haven't even considered a particular question, he will think of that question himself.

Now, I realize and take seriously the axiom that personnel is policy—that Obama's choices for these positions will ultimately dictate whose views he gets to hear and as a result circumscribe the policies he chooses between. That is a valid concern—particularly as it relates to Rahm **in the domestic sphere** (I'll return to how I think process is going to work on domestic issues in a later post). But as regards to foreign policy decisions, we'd be a lot better off agonizing over Obama's choice for National Security Advisor than his choice for Secretary of State, since the latter is not one of those policy-gatekeeper positions. But we'd also do well to remember that there are people like Samantha Power lurking in the background, advising Obama, raising questions he might not otherwise ask, just as Hillary would be standing in the foreground doing so.

This post surely will not assuage those who are

horrified by Obama's selections thus far. But I hope it reminds them that pragmatism entails both a distance from existing ideology **and** a process for making decisions. It's in that process part where Obama has consistently made smart decisions—whether it was in opposing the war from the start or focusing on caucuses as a means to win the primary or declining public financing. And even Rahm's ideology (coupled with his key position as gatekeeper) will not change the way Obama has apparently always made decisions.