

What Does America Stand For?

HERE'S A QUESTION: WHAT ROLE does President Barack Obama believe the U.S. should play in the world? His words and his actions tell different stories. Obama's speeches often detail a vision as grand as anything Ronald Reagan ever offered about America's timeless greatness and its leadership in the world. At other times, Obama focuses on pragmatism and the need to set hard priorities. At still other times, he stresses the burdensome costs of an ambitious foreign policy with an urgency we haven't heard from Washington since the 1930s.

Words aside, Obama's deeds suggest that he's not acting in the world so much as reacting to crises as they appear. The eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011, for example, caught the White House flat-footed. Eventual support for pro-democracy demonstrators in Egypt only opened a rift with Saudi Arabia, America's closest Arab ally, that Obama is still scrambling to manage. In Syria, Obama threatened "enormous consequences" if President Bashar Assad employed chemical weapons on his country's battlefields, only to back down and accept a Russian-brokered compromise when Assad went ahead and used those weapons on his own people. A crisis in Ukraine drew the President into a confrontation with Russia that stoked real conflict with little potential reward, beyond the satisfaction of defending a principle—and not even defending it very well.

But the U.S.'s foreign policy incoherence didn't begin with Barack Obama. The intellectual drift and the growing gap between words and deeds dates back to the Cold War's end. George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton's joint misadventure in Somalia, George W. Bush's ill-considered wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the near constant mishandling of relations with Russia and the halfhearted efforts to both engage and contain a rising China have taken a heavy toll on America's treasury, credibility and self-confidence.

That toll will keep rising. The best-funded, most heavily armed terrorist group in history still occupies large sections of Iraq and Syria—capturing the Iraqi city of Ramadi on May 17—and now inspires followers from West Africa to Southeast Asia. Russia's defiant leader will likely up the ante in Ukraine. The Prime Minister of Israel—one of America's

closest allies—will continue to fight the White House over Iran. China is challenging U.S. naval supremacy in the South China Sea and its economic dominance everywhere else.

At the same time, the U.S. itself has changed. The next President will have fewer options than Clinton, George W. Bush or even Obama, because the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have left the American public deeply reluctant to support any military action that might require a long-term U.S. troop presence. Without the credible threat of military commitment, the rest of our foreign policy tools become much less effective.

The world has changed too. Powerful allies like Britain, Germany, Japan and South Korea still care about what America wants, but they can't create jobs and grow their economies without broader and deeper commercial relations with China. Emerging countries are not strong enough to overthrow U.S. dominance, but they have more than enough strength and self-confidence to refuse to follow Washington's lead. The U.S. remains the world's sole superpower, the only country able to project military power in every region of the world. Its cutting-edge industries and universities are second to none. But China is now the only country in the world with a carefully considered global strategy.

Listen to the next wave of presidential candidates, though, and you might think nothing has changed. "We have to use all of America's strengths to build a world with more partners and fewer adversaries," says Hillary Clinton. "If we withdraw from the defense of liberty anywhere," warns Jeb Bush, "the battle eventually comes to us." Marco Rubio tops them both: "The free nations of the world still look to America to champion our shared ideals. Vulnerable nations still depend on us to deter aggression from their larger neighbors. And oppressed people still turn their eyes toward our shores wondering if we hear their cries, wondering if we notice their afflictions."

These and the other candidates rattle off long lists of foreign policy priorities, but they avoid any mention of the costs and the risks. They speak as if successful foreign policy depends mainly on faith in the country's greatness and the will to use American power, with barely a nod to what the American public wants. They tell us America must

lead—but they don't tell us why or how.

Except in 1940 and 1968, presidential campaigns have rarely been fought over foreign policy. But in this election, Americans need to know how each of the would-be Presidents would act in the world, because the next 25 years are likely to be extraordinarily volatile. It's time to make a choice on foreign policy, and my new book, *Superpower*, offers three distinctly different directions for America's future.

Indispensable America

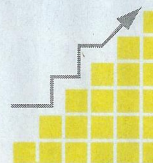
DESPITE THE REVERSALS OF THE PAST DECADE, some still argue that the U.S. remains the world's indispensable leader, able to do things no other nation can. This view persuaded Bill Clinton that NATO could be expanded to Russia's doorstep without consequence and that economic engagement with China would turn that country into an American-style democracy. It persuaded George W. Bush, a man who had campaigned against "nation building," to

THREE CHOICES A POLL OF MORE THAN



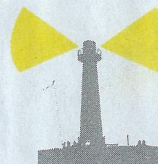
INDISPENSABLE AMERICA

No other nation can provide the leadership that the world desperately needs



MONEYBALL AMERICA

We can't do everything, but we must defend U.S. political and economic interests where they're most threatened



INDEPENDENT AMERICA

We must rid ourselves of international burdens and focus on improving the country from within

Respondents as a whole are almost evenly split, which offers the next President a chance to take a new tack on foreign policy

28%

Indispensable

36%

Moneyball

36%

Independent

launch two of the most ambitious nation-building projects in U.S. history.

The failures in Iraq and Afghanistan have cast a shadow over the notion of American indispensability, yet the idea's proponents still make some strong points. They warn that there's no way to isolate ourselves from today's threats, which hurtle through cyberspace and cross borders in a single suitcase. They insist that the U.S. will be safer only if others live in peace, and that it will be prosperous only if other countries produce middle classes that can afford to buy the products we make. Americans can be secure only in a world where democracy, rule of law, access to information, freedom of speech and human rights are universally recognized, they say, because these values create lasting strength, security and wealth in the societies that establish and protect them. And only America, they assert, has the power and the will to bring that world about—and the responsibility to do it.

Moneyball America

THEN THERE ARE THOSE WHO SUPPORT what I call Moneyball America, an idea inspired by author Michael Lewis' account of how baseball's Oakland A's used a rigorous, hyperrational approach to build a winning team on the cheap. Moneyballers would redefine U.S. foreign policy to maximize return on the taxpayers' investment. The trick is to set intelligent priorities based on America's strengths and limitations. As President George H.W. Bush understood, removing Saddam Hussein from Kuwait required care and commitment, but it was doable and it fit the national interest. Removing Saddam from Baghdad would have come with a profoundly different set of costs and risks. That was a gamble that the elder Bush—prudently—chose not to take.

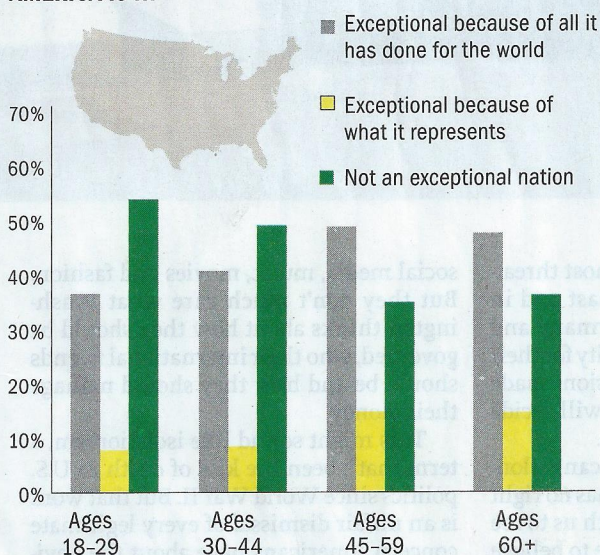
Moneyballers believe that the President should safeguard American interests, not export American values, and that the only nation we should rebuild is our own. The

President should never send Americans into harm's way simply to spread democracy or defend a principle. But Moneyballers also believe that Washington must lead coalitions of the willing, able and like-minded to block the proliferation of the world's most dangerous weapons and to deny terrorists the tools they need for a catastrophic attack on the U.S. homeland. Since the fate of the U.S. economy now depends on the world economy, they believe that American foreign policy must promote and protect global growth, both by minimizing the risk of war and by giving as many powerful countries as possible a stake in stability through commerce and investment.

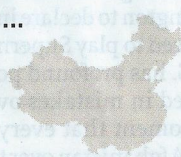
The Obama Administration's pivot to Asia is a Moneyball idea—provided doing more in Asia means acknowledging the need to do less in other regions. Europe can take the lead on managing frictions with Russia, given that country's deeper economic ties with Germany, Britain, France

1,000 AMERICANS FOUND A GENERATIONAL DIVIDE ON FOREIGN POLICY

AMERICA IS ...



CHINA IS ...



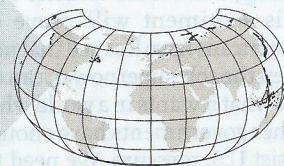
All age groups believe China is America's greatest challenge and its greatest opportunity

Ages 18-29:
America's international reputation

Ages 30-44 and 45-59:
America's economy

Ages 60+:
The respect of our leaders for America's founding principles

WHICH IS MOST AT RISK?



THE BIGGEST PROBLEM IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS ...



Respondents overwhelmingly in all age groups said:

Washington believes it can manage an unmanageable region



Generation gap



39%

of voters 60 and over believe that Indispensable is the best choice for American foreign policy

While ...

41%

of voters 44 and below prefer the Independent path

SOURCES: SURVEYMONKEY; EURASIA GROUP, POLL OF 1,044 RESPONDENTS CONDUCTED OVER 69 DAYS IN MARCH 2015 WITH A MARGIN OF ERROR OF +/-3 PERCENTAGE POINTS

and Italy. With respect to the Middle East, Moneyballers believe that the U.S. should help bolster the security of Israel but need not back every Israeli action against the Palestinians. And no U.S. President should be reluctant to negotiate with our enemies if there is something valuable to be gained—in every region of the world. Everywhere possible, we must shed costly burdens in favor of opportunities, and we must insist that our elected leaders enhance America's value, not our values. For Moneyballers, that's the way to win.

Independent America

THOSE WHO CHAMPION THE INDISPENSABLE and Moneyball options have good arguments, and both choices are better than the incoherence that has characterized the past 25 years of U.S. foreign policy. But I don't believe these are the best options, because I don't think support for either path can be maintained over time. Instead, my opinions are more closely aligned with what I call Independent America—a nation that declares its independence from the responsibility to fix the world.

The American people simply will not support costly interference in countries they don't care about, and whatever our presidential candidates tell voters on the stump, there is no credible evidence that this sentiment will prove short-lived. Americans have learned that no nation, not even the sole superpower, can consistently get what it wants in a world where so many other governments have enough power to resist U.S. pressure. We need to stop issuing promises we know we can't keep and threats we know we won't carry out.

What was the true lesson of the war in Vietnam? Or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? No matter how powerful you are, it's hard to defeat an enemy that cares much more about the outcome than you do. Don't escalate the fight with Russia over Ukraine, a nation that will always matter much more to Moscow than to Washington. Instead of boosting Vladimir Putin's popularity by feeding anti-American fury in his country, let Europe lead. This is not a new Cold War. The American people don't care. Why continue this fight?

Independents know the U.S. shouldn't try to push Israelis and Palestinians toward a peace deal that neither side really wants. It shouldn't defend Middle East dictators while claiming to defend freedom

and human rights. Let those most threatened by ISIS, in the Middle East and in Europe, take the lead. Let Germany and Japan finally accept responsibility for their own security. Accept that decisions made in Beijing, not in Washington, will decide whether China sinks or swims.

It's not simply that America can no longer police the world. It's that it has no right to force those who disagree with us to see things our way. Americans like to believe that democracy is so undeniably attractive and our commitment to it so obvious that others should simply trust us to create it for them within their borders. That's just not the case. Some countries still want American leadership, but many around the world want less U.S. interference, not more. They love American technology,

social media, music, movies and fashion. But they don't much care what Washington thinks about how they should be governed, who their international friends should be and how they should manage their money.

This might sound like isolationism, a term that's been the kiss of death in U.S. politics since World War II. But that word is an unfair dismissal of every legitimate concern Americans have about the obvious foreign policy excesses and costly miscalculations of their government. Those who want Washington to declare independence from the need to play Superman believe that the U.S. has profound potential that's been wasted in mistakes overseas. Imagine for a moment that every dollar spent in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past





Left behind Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan, which housed 40,000 allied military and civilian personnel at the peak of the Afghan war

the cause of making human rights a reality for millions of oppressed people,” don’t forget to ask them how much their plans would cost. Ask the same of Jeb Bush, who says that “nothing and no one can replace strong American leadership,” and Marco Rubio, who insists that only America is “capable of rallying and bringing together the free people on this planet to stand up to the threat of totalitarianism.”

Americans can’t ignore threats from abroad, particularly from terrorists. We must share information and costs with others threatened by ISIS, even as we avoid entering wars we can’t sustain. But our leaders continue to tell us that U.S. troops are “defending our freedom” in places overseas where American freedom is not at risk. It’s an unfortunate truth, but the fall of Ramadi to ISIS—and whichever city is unlucky enough to be next—has very little bearing on U.S. security.

I believe it’s time for a new declaration of independence from the responsibility to solve everyone else’s problems, and I’m not the only one who thinks so. Working with SurveyMonkey, my firm Eurasia Group polled more than 1,000 Americans about their foreign policy preferences. While respondents as a whole roughly split their support among the three choices I’ve outlined above, those over 60 were nearly twice as likely (40%) to choose Indispensable America as those ages 18 to 29 (20%) or 30 to 44 (20%). Those younger age groups generally preferred the Independent path. The poll underscores the fact that the next generation of American voters doesn’t share the values of their parents and grandparents. They don’t accept that the world needs American leadership, or that Americans have been specially ordained to provide it. Politicians ignore this emerging reality at their peril.

It won’t be easy for future Presidents to withstand the inevitable pressure from hawks at home and friends abroad to entangle the U.S. in fresh foreign conflicts. But America’s true promise—for its people and for the world—depends now on Washington’s willingness to lead by example at home. To champion the Indispensable approach is to pretend the world hasn’t changed. To select Moneyball is to cope

with that change by sacrificing our values. But to embrace Independent America is to find a new purpose for those values. Democracy is a process, and the best way to persuade the citizens of other countries to demand democracy is to make it work more effectively at home. Don’t just tell the world that democracy is best. Show it, and build an America that others believe is too important to fail.

These are not isolationist values. The U.S. should continue to export and import goods and ideas, and welcome the citizens of other countries who would come to America legally, as millions have done since our founding. The U.S. should also accept more of the world’s refugees, whose numbers are now at the highest level since the end of World War II. The civil war in Syria has forced up to 4 million people to flee their country, yet the U.S. has so far accepted fewer than 1,000 of them. “Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” That’s a principle, inscribed in the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, that Americans can be proud of—and one on which we’ve too often fallen short.

Trade, including megadeals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, is crucial for the continuing strength of alliances that can no longer depend on our military might. But Washington must set an exceptionally high bar for political and especially military intervention in other countries. For the past 25 years, America’s leaders have acted as if the U.S. were becoming stronger in the world. That simply isn’t the case—the rest of the planet is catching up—and U.S. foreign policy should reflect that fact.

But this is my choice, not the only choice. Moneyball and Indispensable each have much to recommend them if our leaders build the needed public support. With another election on the horizon, Americans have a decision to make, one that will define their country’s role in the world. The worst choice of all is to continue to refuse to choose. ■

dozen years had been spent instead to empower Americans and their economy. Redirect the attention, energy and resources we now squander on a failed superhero foreign policy toward building the America we imagine, one that empowers all its people to realize their human potential.

The Choice

AS THE NEXT WAVE OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES takes the stage, listen to what they say about America’s role in the world. Beware those who talk of responsibilities but never of price tags. Reject those who claim that America can afford to do it all. When Ted Cruz says the President must stand “unapologetically, emphatically for freedom,” and when Hillary Clinton insists that the U.S. has a “deep commitment to



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