NEW DIRECTIONS FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY:
CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AS A GUIDE

By Stephen M. Krason

The author argues that there are serious problems from the standpoint of Catholic social teaching (as well as traditional Western thought and simple prudence) in making the forcible spreading of democracy an objective of U.S. foreign policy. He argues that U.S. policy, in light of Catholic social teaching, should be prudently interventionist—but not primarily in a military sense—in promoting human rights, diffusing international tensions, and peacekeeping. Also, the author discusses such questions as shaping U.S. foreign policy in conjunction with allies and foreign aid, in light of Catholic social teaching.

The controversy ignited by the Iraq War calls us to a renewed reflection about the principles that should govern our foreign policy. Such questions as the legitimacy of preventive or preemptive war, how a war against a shadowy and brutal terrorist enemy must be conducted, when and what kinds of American overseas intervention should be undertaken, and whether the spreading of democracy should be an animating principle for our foreign policy have presented themselves in bold relief. What should a pragmatic but moral U.S. foreign policy look like, particularly in light of the many teachings of the Catholic Church about international questions?

The Vatican criticized the notion of preventive war in early 2003 as the U.S. was gearing up for the Iraqi intervention. Traditional just war criteria, now widely accepted in the international community, do not require that a nation has to actually be attacked before it can take action. So long as there is moral certainty that a nation’s basic rights are threatened, it can rightfully attack. The danger cannot be speculative or remote, however; it must also be serious. Even in this situation, however, war must be a last resort. There is a genuine obligation to utilize any other means that are realistically available to settle a dispute or deal with the imminent aggressor. The attacking nation, as justified as it may be, also has to weigh whether the good to be gained from the conflict is likely to outweigh the evil. It is easy to see why the pending Iraq War troubled the Holy See: Was Saddam Hussein tied in sufficiently with
international terrorists to justify war? Did he pose a reasonable, genuine threat to the U.S., or was it speculative (i.e., if he had the power, could he or terrorist agents harm U.S. interests)? Was military action likely to leave the Iraqi people better or worse off—the answer to this is in doubt two years later—and would the Middle East and international terrorist situations actually deteriorate because of it?

It is clear that, while nations have rights of self-determination and nonintervention, they are not absolute. A rising aggressor, one that threatens its neighbors, or a nation that has exhibited a long pattern of tyranny over its people can be a rightful target of intervention. So, should U.S. foreign policy be pro-intervention? If so, in what circumstances? Is protection of human rights a valid reason? Is the spreading of “democracy”?

From the standpoint of Catholic social teaching, political philosophy, international ethics, American tradition, and prudence, aggressively promoting democracy—as seems to be the objective for the Islamic world of some top Bush advisors—is a very questionable policy strategy. First of all, let us remember the thought of both Aristotle and Burke: there can be different “good” governmental forms—i.e., those that promote the common good, and many factors dictate which one will be best for a particular people. Second, recall that a nation has a right of nonintervention; to impose a particular form of government on it undermines that right. Next, we need to remember that the Founding Fathers believed that the way republican government—they eschewed the term “democracy”—would spread by our good example. Usually, when we have gone on moral crusades on its behalf (e.g., Woodrow Wilson’s war to “make the world safe for democracy”), it has brought disaster.

Moreover, pushing democracy on a people—and “nation-building” in general—fails on two obvious prudential points: democratic republics require many long-standing, deep-seated cultural factors to succeed, and the singular effort to push it on one country—about the most we can do at one time—leaves the U.S. susceptible to the usual charges of inconsistency or, more, hypocrisy. On the first point, once the tyrant is gone from a nation there are often innumerable others waiting in the wings to take his place, and little changes except for the particular face—and the degree of severity of his rule (the Ayetollah Khomeini’s regime supplanting the Shah’s in Iran was a good case in point). On the second point, if we topple one tyrannical regime, what about the other 100 or so around the world that we are leaving alone? We know that we cannot possibly tackle them all—we simply do not have the manpower, resources, and will—and the rest of the world knows it, too.
The Church squarely promotes human rights, and it is right that American policy makes this a central objective. Both the just war criteria and all of the uncertainties caused by military action, however, suggest that war should be the means used to protect human rights only in the most critical cases. Even if so used, it must always be with prudent calculation (like all things in international politics). The 1994 genocide in Rwanda, when the U.S. did not intervene, would at once have been one of the most clearly justified, prudent in terms of likely results weighed against consequences, and popular American military interventions. Perhaps most of the time, however, human rights must be promoted by other means: diplomacy, economic and other pressure, the bully pulpit, quiet or open support for regime opponents, and rallying the international community.

Even using American military forces for peacekeeping missions should be approached cautiously. It sometimes could be merited and understood as a work of national charity. The Church has commended it. A great power will occasionally have to play a policing role, which is effectively what peacekeeping involves. Still, our policymakers must keep in mind that the American public is wary and impatient with military commitments where our interests are unclear and whose duration is left open-ended. Also, peacekeepers have sometimes been easy targets in tense regions, such as the U.S. Marines in Lebanon in 1983.

Perhaps the major “interventionist” role that a superpower like the U.S. should routinely play in the world is to use its position, power, and prestige to seek to try to diffuse tensions where it can, to stimulate negotiation among adversaries, and to patiently employ political, economic, and cultural initiatives—mostly encouraging, helping, motivating, but sometimes pressuring—to try to ameliorate even the most intransigent international conflicts. Nations, like individuals, must take to heart the Gospel admonition of “blessed are the peacemakers.” Achieving peace, of course, sometimes requires the threat or use of force. While we must not hesitate to use force if genuinely needed (recall that the 1930’s perception of the U.S. as a “paper tiger” possibly invited Pearl Harbor), we must keep in mind that war signals a failure not only of international ideals, but of power. As the late great international relations scholar Hans Morgenthau pointed out, Imperial Britain was so powerful in the nineteenth century because its standing and prestige enabled it to achieve its objectives without war.

In this “new interventionism,” the U.S. would be the world’s major diplomatic power. As such, while it must stand for sound, true
principles and accept the realities of situations as they are, it must be
careful to be as impartial and patient—not always an American
virtue—as possible in trying to negotiate international conflicts.
We should respect and rely upon traditional American allies and
international organizations like the UN in doing this, but not be driven
by them or uncritically accept their assessments of the situation. We
should also not hesitate to use the Vatican as a partner in this effort,
with the advantages of its international prestige, highly reliable
information network, and position outside the state system (which
means it is not encumbered by self-serving national interest
concerns).

What about assisting other nations by means of the foreign aid
program? Clearly, the Church holds that well-off nations have a
responsibility to help needy ones; our human brotherhood and the
universal common good demand it. Still, American policymakers need
to be careful. While nations do little that does not seek to further their
interests, the aid effort must also truly evince motives of international
charity and solidarity. If not, even the interests supposedly being
furthered will be undermined (i.e., currying favor with another nation
to extend our influence will fail if its people think we are manipulating
them). Further, many Americans are skeptical about the federal
treasury subsidizing other nations. Our record, also, has not always
been good in getting the best “bang for the buck,” or even aiming at
good objectives. Sometimes, insufficiently monitored aid funds have
fallen into the hands of corrupt foreign officials. The worst cases
have involved American aid helping to directly assault human rights
in the underdeveloped world, by such means as population-control
campaigns. One wonders if a better approach for most long-term aid
arrangements would be for American leaders to make strong efforts to
motivate the private sector to provide it. The easiest aid decisions
concern natural disaster relief, like the December 2004 Asian
earthquake and tidal wave (although even these need monitoring to
insure the aid is properly delivered). The most difficult involve
military aid. Of all forms of aid, military aid presents the most risks
and must be approached the most prudently. Probably, it should be
considered only when virtually the same just war criteria as govern
decisions about military intervention can be met, and with a clear,
sober-minded understanding of the governmental and national
situation in question and awareness of the full range of likely
consequences.

The above suggests a glimpse of a foreign policy that is at once
moral, prudent, and realistic for a great power in the contemporary
world, such as the United States. It would be interventionist, but not necessarily or primarily in the military sense. It would follow just war principles carefully, eschewing a preventive war doctrine that is driven by a fear of speculative instead of likely harm. It would not be hesitant to use military force when clearly indicated. It would promote human rights, but avoid moral crusades. It would make a point of highlighting the good example of our republican regime but would always be cognizant of the need to improve itself (as any role model should be) and never try to impose its governmental form on others. To be a good republican example means to uphold our constitutional principles, which suggests that major or continuing military actions require a declaration of war. As a general rule, such a foreign policy would be wary of nation-building. It would understand America’s international charitable obligations, but would be cautious about how they are undertaken and not necessarily see them as carried out by government. Finally, while we speak of a foreign policy, policies are shaped and implemented by people. Obviously, a good and effective foreign policy demands capable, prudent, and morally directed statesmen and diplomats.

The author initially wrote this article for the Catholic Social Commentary Service (CSC), which features op-ed type articles that are posted on the web site of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists.