

## **Morality and Foreign Policy**

**By Owen Harries**  
**Occasional Paper 94**

**This is an extended version of the first George Shipp Memorial Lecture, delivered at a Workers' Education Association meeting in Sydney on 29th October, 2004. Mr Shipp was an old and very close friend of the author. Owen Harries is a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies.**

Introducing a collection of essays by John Stuart Mill, the distinguished American historian, Gertrude Himmelfarb, remarks of one essay, 'It is on a subject much wanting in thought: foreign policy and international morality'. The essay in question is about the currently contentious subject of intervention by a state in the internal affairs of another state, and I shall return to it later. But I begin by quoting Himmelfarb's remark because, though it was written nearly half a century ago and much has happened since, it is still true: the connection between foreign policy and morality remains 'a subject much wanting in thought'.

It is not, of course, wanting in words or assertions. The intense debate about Iraq and American foreign policy over the last three years has mainly been a moral debate. We have read and heard millions of words on such matters as a 'Manichean' global contest between good and evil, the impropriety of trying to remain neutral in that conflict, the moral authority of the United Nations and 'the international community', the right and wrong of the pre-emptive use of force and intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, 'exporting democracy' and democratic governments deliberately misleading—that is lying to—their citizens. But there has been little attempt to spell out coherent positions on these questions, to relate particular circumstances to general principles, or to acknowledge and confront the difficulty of discussing moral issues in the peculiar conditions and circumstances of international politics. What follows is a very tentative attempt to do so some of those things.

### **Two Contrasting Traditions**

I'll begin by looking at two widely held and sharply contrasting views on the subject, views that one is likely to hear expressed in any bar, common room, board room or dinner party.

The first, in its extreme version, is that morality in foreign policy is like snakes in Iceland: there ain't any. A slightly more moderate version allows for a minor role at the margins. But essentially foreign policy and international politics are seen as necessarily amoral—not immoral but amoral—activities. This view of things is often accompanied in the popular mind by a good deal of resignation or cynicism, and with the assertion that 'they are all the same'. In intellectual and academic circles it is associated with the realist school.

The second widely held belief is that there is only one morality and it applies in all circumstances. There is no distinction between the standards that states should be held to and those that apply to individuals, or between those that apply in domestic politics and those that apply in international politics. This view is often held by small-l liberals, which is why they tend to spend much of their political energy expressing anger, indignation and disappointment at the failure of governments in general, and especially their own, to live up to accepted moral standards

in their international behaviour—to be, among other things, compassionate, generous, forgiving, humane, honest, tolerant and, not least, consistent in their treatment of others. But, as we have been witnessing recently, it is a view of things that can also be found among conservative and religious groups who believe that, as the values they hold are the only valid ones, they should prevail universally, and that their government's foreign policy should be dedicated to ensuring that they do.

Now in beginning with these two popular (and polar) positions, you may think that I am just setting up straw men to be knocked down. If so, you are wrong. These are not straw men. Each has a long and distinguished intellectual pedigree, representing in simplified form a central tradition of thought about the behaviour of states in their relationship with each other.

Those who maintain that international politics is essentially an amoral activity can look back two and a half thousand years and quote Thucydides to the effect that in relationships between states, 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must', and that is the beginning and end of the matter. They can quote Machiavelli in the 16th century, they can quote Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century.

If those seem too remote in time, they can quote the University of Chicago realist, Hans Morgenthau, the most influential teacher in the field of international politics in the last century:

. . . man's aspiration for power over other men, which is of the very essence of politics, implies the denial of what is the very core of Judeo-Christian morality—respect for man as an end in himself. The power relation is the very denial of that respect; for it seeks to use man as a means to the end of another man. This denial is particularly flagrant in foreign policy; for the civilizing influence of law, morality, and mores are less effective here than they are in the domestic political scene.

Or they might turn to George Kennan, America's pre-eminent diplomat/scholar in the last half century and the author of the Cold War policy of containment:

Let me explain. The interests of the national society for which government has to concern itself are basically those of its military security, the integrity of its political life and the well-being of its people. These needs have no moral quality . . . They are the unavoidable necessities of a national existence and therefore not subject to classification as either 'good' or 'bad'.

The essence of the realist argument is simple: International politics is, of necessity and in a special sense, power politics. There being no international government, no enforceable law or authority, and hardly any sense of community or common identity, anarchy in the strict sense prevails. That being so, when push comes to shove, as it often does in this game, there is no arbiter, no umpire, except power. As Hobbes laconically observed, when there is no agreement as to which suit is trumps, clubs are always trumps. In the absence of legitimate and effective authority, a human nature that is basically selfish, aggressive and suspicious will assert itself. Power and self-interest: these constitute the essence of international politics, and ultimately everything else must yield to them. Morality is an unaffordable luxury in such circumstances, one that can only be indulged in small doses and at the margins.

The second view—that there is, or should be, no serious problem in passing judgment on the behaviour of states, because the same moral standards apply to them as to individuals—also has a long and distinguished ancestry. It is to be found in the work of Immanuel Kant at the end of the eighteenth century. It was strongly represented by the Dissenting Radicals and Liberal Free Traders of Victorian England, men like Richard Cobden and John Bright. It was a strong (though not exclusive) component in the make up of that great and complicated Liberal statesman, William

Ewart Gladstone. As Bright expressed it, ‘the moral law was not written for men alone in their individual character.... it was written as well for nations’. And that was (and is) a fundamental belief of American Wilsonian liberals. When he took the United States into World War I in 1917, Woodrow Wilson made that explicit in words that echoed Bright’s:

We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and responsibility for wrong shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states.

Hedley Bull, Australia’s (and one of Oxford’s) most distinguished scholar of these problems, summed up the views of this school in terms which bring out the fundamental assumption:

For the Kantians it was only at a superficial and transient level that international politics was about relations among states at all; at a deeper level it was about relations among human beings of which states were composed. The ultimate reality is the community of mankind, which existed potentially, even if it did not exist actually . . .

But the problem remained: how to get from here to there, from the existing selfish power politics to the pacific and enlightened order in which morality in its full sense would prevail? Nineteenth century liberals put their faith in two processes: at home a gradual reform of the state, giving a progressively greater democratic voice to the people, at the expense of the vested, selfish and bellicose interests that currently dominated politics; and abroad the establishment of international free trade, whereby intercourse between the peoples of the world would increase, ignorance would be dispelled, and interdependence would create strong bonds. As Richard Cobden summed it up, ‘the progress of freedom depends more upon the maintenance of peace, the spread of commerce, the diffusion of education, than upon the labour of cabinets and foreign offices’. And again: ‘as little intercourse as possible between governments, as much connection as possible between the nations of the world’. This is a belief that is still alive and well, one that provides the core assumption of many NGOs today.

In the meantime, to reduce the danger and damage caused by the existing state, liberals for the most part—with some striking exceptions driven by moral outrage—advocated a minimalist foreign policy, almost a kind of British isolationism—and this when Britain was the dominant state in the world system. For an active policy, it was believed, would inevitably lead to imperialism and war.

But such a minimalist approach to bringing about a moral transformation of international affairs—waiting patiently for democracy, education and trade to do their work—has not been the only response of those who hold this view of morality. Others have believed that a determined effort of will should be made by democratic states to speed up the process, using not only ‘world opinion’ but their political power to do so: that is, in effect, using power politics to put an end to power politics. This is what Woodrow Wilson attempted to do in 1919, by committing the authority and power of the victorious democracies to install a new international moral order. It is what George Bush claims to be attempting today. As Paul Wolfowitz was at pains to insist in a recent interview, American power is being used to ‘release basic human desires to be free and prosperous and live in peace’.

### **The Limits of Realism**

In a brief compass, I have tried to describe fairly two major opposing views—popular as well as intellectual—of the role of morality in foreign policy and international affairs. I believe that they are both seriously flawed.

As for the first—that foreign policy is essentially an amoral activity—the realist analysis that underpins it has been indispensable in countering illusions and maintaining a sharp distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, at a time when many have been concerned to obscure or ignore it. But realists often go further than that and make two related assumptions that seem to me to be false.

The first is that, since in a state of international anarchy the foreign policies of all states are necessarily dominated by a concern with security, those policies are essentially similar in moral terms. The second is that, since it is the state of anarchy that is the crucial determinant, the internal conditions of states—and therefore any change in those conditions—are essentially irrelevant to the shaping of foreign policy. Hence the well-known ‘billiard ball’ analogy, whereby states are taken to interact according to the laws of a kind of political physics or geometry, and in which the internal composition of each ‘ball’ is taken to be the same and therefore irrelevant.

The first of these assumptions receives its popular echo in the worldly-wise cynicism that ‘they’re all the same’, all selfishly pursuing their own interest. Well, yes, they do all pursue what they understand to be their interests, and when they believe these interests to be seriously endangered they will all show considerable ruthlessness in defending them. In World War II, to take a disconcerting example, the British killed many more civilians with their bombing of German cities that were ever killed by the German blitz on Britain; and in the last five months of the war in the Pacific alone, American bombing raids killed more than 900,000 Japanese civilians—and that was *before* the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But when those terrible truths are acknowledged, it is still true that the moral stakes in that war were enormous. For the difference between a world dominated by a victorious Nazi Germany and one dominated by the United States and Britain—the *moral* difference—would have been huge.

Similarly in the Cold War it is true that each superpower—the United States and the Soviet Union—was pursuing its own national interest. But again, after all the flaws in the former had been given their due weight, the moral difference between the interest of an imperfect democracy and a repressive Stalinist dictatorship was enormous. There was not, as was often claimed by Western anti-anti-communists, a ‘moral equivalence’ between the two sides. In other words, even though it is true that all states are concerned to protect and further their own interests, those interests often differ in morally relevant (and crucial) ways. They are not morally ‘all the same’. (It is perhaps worth adding that both in the case of World War II and the Cold War the difference between the parties turned less on the outstanding and pristine virtues of the democracies than on the exceptional vileness of their totalitarian opponents.)

As for the second realist assumption—that the internal conditions of states, and any change in these conditions, are irrelevant to their international behaviour—its falsity was surely exposed conclusively by the experience of dealing with two totalitarian regimes in the last century. It was precisely the assumption made by Neville Chamberlain (a conservative realist, not a sentimental liberal) that there was an essential continuity in German foreign policy—that the foreign policy of the Weimar Republic and that of Nazi Germany were basically similar and that, despite his histrionics, Adolf Hitler was a compromising politician with whom one could cut a deal—which led British policy astray.

More recently we have seen the same assumption of continuity at work in relation to Soviet and post-Soviet Russian policy, in the utterances of leading realists like Henry Kissinger (‘the fateful rhythm of Russian history’), and Zbigniew Brzezinski (‘the imperial impulse . . . remains strong and even appears to be strengthening’) In other words, Russia is Russia is Russia, regardless of changes in regime or ideology. It was this assumption, more than anything else, that underlay the eastward expansion of NATO in the 1990s. It leaves one wondering what exactly, in that case, was the point of working so hard to bring about the downfall of the Soviet system. The

fact is, of course, that while there are constant elements in the foreign policy of Russia, as there are in the policy of any great power, those are also very significant differences between the policies of a Stolypin, a Stalin and a Putin.

### **Limited Moral Liabilities**

The second of the two positions maintains that the same morality applies, and applies in the same way, to states as to individuals.

It is true that in thinking of states we normally personify them and treat them as what Hobbes called 'Artificial Men', and as moral actors. We speak of 'France' doing this or 'Indonesia' doing that, and pass moral judgments on their actions. But in this respect states are not unique. We do the same with other collective entities—other Artificial Men—such as public companies, banks, churches, parties and clubs. We expect certain standards of behaviour for such entities—law abidingness, honesty, fairness, respect for competitors etc. We might even expect a certain level of generosity and compassion from them in some circumstances. But there are limits to what we expect. These entities exist for certain purposes, and these purposes set limits on the extent of their virtue. If compassion and generosity were to become the guiding principles of a bank, it would soon go out of business.

States exist essentially to promote and protect their own interests and those of their citizens. Their morality is limited to what is compatible and consistent with that purpose. The standard is different and lower than it is for individuals. Cavour, the statesman who brought about the unification of Italy in the 19th century, once remarked that, 'If we were to do for ourselves what we are doing for Italy, we should be great rogues'. As it was, he was seen as a great man.

A related point, or perhaps the same point expressed in different terms, is that those who conduct foreign policy are in the position of agents or trustees, not principals. As in the case of trustees, their first and overriding responsibility is not to give expression to their own moral views or preferences, but to secure the interests of those they serve. If they feel that the two conflict and that they are morally constrained from subordinating their own values to their duty as trustees, their proper course is not to insist on giving preference to the former but to resign. This is the force of Martin Wight's blunt dictum: 'A foreign minister is chosen and paid to look after the interests of his country, and not to be a delegate for the human race'.

Also bearing on this is the by now well-known distinction made by the sociologist, Max Weber, in his essay on 'Politics as a Vocation', between two fundamentally different maxims concerning ethical conduct. There is, first, what he terms 'the ethic of ultimate ends' which decrees absolute and unconditional fidelity to principle (in Christian terms, 'The Christian does right and leaves the result to the Lord'; in secular terms, 'One must be faithful to the principles dictated by morality, regardless of consequences'). In this view it is purity of motive, of intent, which is crucial. At its extreme, this is the ethic of the martyr or the saint. It often requires great courage and devotion, and attracts much admiration. Then there is, second, the more mundane 'ethic of responsibility', which decrees that one has a responsibility to take into account, as best one can, the foreseeable circumstances and consequences of one's actions and to adjust one's sails accordingly. The ethic of responsibility, Weber maintained, is the one appropriate to political life. The responsibility of a political leader is to the well-being of his people and the health of his state, not to the purity of his own soul, and the two do not necessarily always coincide.

As a general rule, the ethic of ultimate ends appeals more to politicians well removed—practically, psychologically, or both—from office and power: to the populist Gladstone of the Midlothian campaign rather than to Prime Minister Gladstone who annexed Egypt; to the Christian-pacifist Labour leader, George Lansbury, rather than to the pragmatic trade union boss,

Ernest Bevin; and to Aneurin Bevan the leader of the *Tribune* rebels in the British Labour Party who demanded unilateral nuclear disarmament, rather than to the later Aneurin Bevan, the Shadow Foreign Minister who was not prepared to be sent ‘naked into the conference chamber’.

The danger implicit in an approach to foreign policy based on the ‘ethic of ultimate ends’, one which insists on the existence of only one valid and universal moral code which must always be adhered to, is that, by ruling out compromise and flexibility, it will either immobilise, or, if an actor feels powerful enough, lead to a messianic, crusading policy to ensure that the one true good prevails. In the name of untainted virtue, it will tend to rule out—as either cynical or feeble—a tolerant, compromising approach to different interests, values and institutions. And, again as we have witnessed recently, when such an approach is adopted by some actors it will tend to produce its mirror image in others and harden the whole climate of international affairs.

### **‘The God of this Lower World’**

Where, then, does all this leave the matter? In my view it leads to the conclusion that the morality that is appropriate to, and that can be sustained in, the soiled, selfish and dangerous world of power politics is a modest one, whose goal is not perfection—not utopian bliss—but decency. It is, more often than not, a morality of the lesser evil, of prudence. Edmund Burke said of prudence that it is ‘not only the first in rank of the virtues political and moral, but . . . is the director, the regulator, the standard of them all’. He referred to it as ‘the god of this lower world’—the world, that is, of public business and affairs—and he was right.

Prudence does not mean timidity. In some circumstances it demands firmness, even boldness, in dealing with problems early, while they are still manageable (in 1936, for example, rather than in 1939). But in a system composed of a large number of independent and conflicting wills, uncertain intelligence, deadly weapons, different cultures and no universally recognised and enforceable authority, it does require modesty—modesty of ends, of means, and—not least—of rhetoric. Strident and extravagant rhetoric—and we have heard a fair amount of it recently—not only raises the international temperature, but the fact that it cannot be lived up to is one of the main causes of public cynicism about foreign policy. A more careful, qualified and intellectually responsible rhetoric might be less inspirational, but it would have a longer shelf-life and avoid a great deal of disillusion and embarrassment. Partly for this reason, but also because it envisions politics as an ongoing activity rather than one with a designated final destination, prudence is suspicious of the grand claims of ‘vision’-driven policies.

A prudential ethic places importance on those most mundane of virtues—order and stability. These do not, of course, guarantee a satisfactory state of affairs. They do not constitute a *sufficient* condition for anything. But they are a *necessary* condition for everything whose achievement and smooth functioning require a degree of predictability and continuity: a system of justice, for example, or sustainable commercial relations.

Prudence requires that one is often prepared to settle for half a loaf, rather than making the best the enemy of the good. Compromise is usually an *intellectual* vice, muddle masquerading as tolerance; but, except in the most extreme of cases of dealing with evil, it is a *political* necessity and virtue, especially in conditions in which the alternative is usually a resort to force.

Prudence requires doing everything one can to anticipate the possibility of unintended consequences in a complex environment of autonomous actors and imperfect intelligence. And the more ambitious one’s policies, the greater the scope for unintended consequences, as, again, we have recently been witnessing. Prudence requires care in the setting of precedents that may come home to haunt one (as when, perhaps, in twenty or thirty years’ time, a rampant China will be quoting those now being set to justify its behaviour), and an appreciation of why some rules and

conventions have withstood the test of time so well (for example, those forbidding intervention in the internal affairs of other sovereign states, even for the best of humanitarian motives).

Prudence requires resisting the impulse to claim the right to double standards—one for other people, a different and more premissive one for oneself, usually on the ground that one represents higher values or has special responsibilities. This is especially so if one claims to be the setter of standards for others, for how can one expect others to obey standards that one violates oneself, and how in such circumstances can one expect them to accept one's moral authority? There is something intrinsically nutty about using one's claimed moral superiority to justify one's adoption of lower ethical standards. To insist on the right to double standards—as American neo-conservatives like Robert Kagan are explicitly doing today—or to operate blatantly in terms of them, is to undermine one's own moral position and to store up trouble in the form of cumulating resentment and lack of credibility.

The China specialist, Robert Ross of Boston College, has put it well:

No moral equivalence is intended or required. But the United States should avoid the conceit that a given mode of behaviour can be wrong for every country in the world but still be right for the United States because of the purity of its motives. Obviously, when other countries develop similar policies to pursue similar objectives, interests rather than morality is the appropriate standard of judgement.

'Moral equivalence' is a charge that has to be resorted to with great care if it is not to become simply a device for deflecting criticism and stifling debate.

That said, it is also true that prudential ethics requires that, in making policy, discrimination takes precedence over consistency. This for two reasons. First, a country pursues a number of goals which have moral worth: among them justice, peace, freedom, security, prosperity, stability. Unless one believes that all these ends are necessarily and always in harmony with each other, that there is a unity of goods, with each always reinforcing the others in all circumstances—and that is surely a false belief—choices have to be made concerning priorities and balance among goals. They have to be organised into a hierarchy.

Second, the order of that hierarchy, the position of any one goal in it, will vary from occasion to occasion as circumstances change. To quote Burke again, 'circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind' and 'circumstances are infinite, and infinitely combined, are variable and transient; he who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous but stark mad'. Or as John Maynard Keynes once tartly responded to an accusation of inconsistency, 'When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do sir?'

In any set of circumstances, what is gained in terms of one goal has to be measured in terms of what is endangered or sacrificed in terms of another. In other words, *judgment* is involved, not merely the automatic application of a general principle. The point—and it is a crucial one—can be made in various ways. Here is Dean Acheson, one of America's greatest Secretaries of State, on the subject:

I am not the slightest bit worried because someone can say, 'Well, you said so and so about Greece, why isn't that true about China?' I will be polite, I will be patient, and I will try to explain why Greece is not China. But my heart will not be in the battle.

And, more somberly, here is Isaiah Berlin:

If, as I believe, the ends of men are many and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never be wholly eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.

Not hypocrisy, note, not double standards, but ‘an inescapable characteristic of the human condition’. I believe that the problem is particularly acute in the realms of international politics.

One last word on the prudential ethic. It should not be confused or equated with moral relativism. There is no contradiction involved in, on the one hand, holding firm beliefs concerning what constitutes the good and believing that it is a quality that exists independently of the mind of an observer, while, on the other hand, believing that promoting and protecting what is good may in some circumstances require tolerance, patience and compromise in dealing with those who have different views on the matter.

### **Prudence in Practice**

I appreciate that all this will strike many as very general, and some as platitudinous. I therefore end with three specific examples of the prudential ethic at work.

The first is the Catholic tradition of just-war theory, which stretches from Augustine in the 5th century, through Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, to the present. It is a tradition that proceeds on the assumption that war is inherent in a system of international politics of sovereign states, that it is futile to assume that it can be abolished. Just war theory has been concerned with the more modest goal of making war less frequent, by laying down conditions concerning when it is and is not legitimate to resort to it (*jus ad bellum*); and to make it less savage, by establishing rules concerning what it is right to do when conducting warfare (*jus in bello*). Thus resorting to force must have a just cause, in that it is resorted to in response to injustice; is authorised by a competent authority; and is motivated by right intention. It must meet four prudential tests in that it must be expected to produce a preponderance of good over evil, have a reasonable chance of success, be a last resort, and be expected to result in a state of peace. The requirements of *jus in bello* are that when force is resorted to, it must be discriminate (distinguishing between justifiable target and the innocent) and proportional (that is, limited to what is necessary and not gratuitous).

Given the frequency and ferocity of war in the Christian world over the centuries, it has to be conceded that the influence of just-war theory has been limited. How limited we really do not know, since it is impossible to tell whether, and to what extent, matters would have been even worse in its absence. It is extremely improbable however that such a doctrine, backed by the considerable authority (and, at times, temporal power) of the Roman Catholic Church, has had *no* effect on the behaviour of governments and individuals through the ages. And as Robert Skidelsky has pointed out in a recent article on the subject (*Prospect*, December 2004), ‘the legacy of this tradition is today enshrined in the Geneva Convention, specifying treatment of prisoners, casualties of war and civilians in war zones’. In my judgment, however, Skidelsky pushes the argument too far when he goes on to say that ‘if the political will were there, it would not be too difficult to convert the present incomplete patchwork of voluntary renunciations into a binding and effective political regime’. For if such a political will was a real possibility, the problem would be different from and much less formidable than what it really is.

A condition for having an effect has been the recognition of the inevitability of war as an institution, and a willingness to settle for mitigating its effects. If the beast can not be slain, it is best to focus on taming it as best one can.

My second example involves the liberal approach to the central question of power. The most quoted maxim concerning power, one that has been particularly favoured by liberals, is Lord Acton’s dictum: ‘Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’. The trouble is that Acton never said that. What he said was the ‘Power *tends* to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’.[emphasis added] The difference is vital. If power necessarily corrupts, then the only

way to avoid being corrupted is to have nothing to do with it—which will leave one untainted but also ineffective. This has been the choice made by many liberals in our time (those opting for the purity of the impotent). If on the other hand power only *tends* to corrupt, then one can work to reduce and minimise that tendency while still retaining the means to effective action.

That is what classical liberalism—the liberalism of Locke and the American Founding Fathers—was concerned to do: to constitutionalise power, to distribute and separate it, to balance it. Liberals did so recognising that what threatens liberty is not power as such, but an undue and unbalanced concentration of it in one place.

In the international arena, the concept of the ‘balance of power’ represents the same concern, in this case to ensure the security and independence of states. One of the curious and interesting features of the current crisis has been the inability of some very smart Americans to appreciate that it is the same concern that animated the authors of their constitution—whom they revere—that today leads other governments to attempt to balance American power. Just as those authors were unwilling to give even their elected fellow-citizens unlimited power, so other states—even those with a long record of friendship to the United States—are concerned to find ways of limiting and balancing American power today. The suspicion and hostility is directed, not so much at America as a country or culture, as at America as an unbalanced power, which, if unchecked, will be a corrupted and corrupting force.

My third and last example of the prudential ethic applied brings me back to the essay by John Stuart Mill that I mentioned in the first paragraph of this piece. The title of the essay that Gertrude Himmelfarb was referring to is ‘A Few Words on Non-Intervention’, the ‘few words’, in the Victorian manner, covering sixteen and a half densely printed pages in my copy.

In the opening paragraphs, Mill reflects on Britain’s reputation as the dominant power of his day in terms which anticipate much of what is said about the United States today. Thus:

. . . it is this nation which finds itself, in respect of its foreign policy, held up to an obloquy as the type of egoism and selfishness; as a nation which thinks nothing but of out-witting and out-generalling its neighbours . . . they believe that we have always other objects than those we avow; and the most far-fetched and implausible suggestion of selfish purpose appears to them better entitled to credence than anything so utterly incredible as our disinterestedness.

Mill believes that this hostility and suspicion is unjustified, but he goes on:

It is foolish attempting to despise all this—persuading ourselves that it is not our fault . . . Nations, like individuals, ought to suspect some fault in themselves when they find that they are generally worse thought of than they deserve.

He moves on to discuss the use of force for ideological purposes, again in terms which have a striking relevance to the current debate (and to the views expressed by Wolfowitz in his interview with Sikorski):

We have heard something lately about being willing to go to war for an idea. To go to war for an idea, if the war is aggressive, not defensive, is as criminal as to go to war for territory or revenue; for it is as little justified to force our ideas on other people, as to compel them to submit to our will in other respects.

This brings Mill to his main concern, the matter of intervention in the affairs of other sovereign states. He begins by making a distinction between ‘civilized nations’ and ‘barbarians’—a distinction few would have the confidence to make today—and insisting that different rules apply

to the two: 'the rules of ordinary international morality imply reciprocity. But barbarians will not reciprocate. They cannot be depended on for observing the rules'.

The more interesting and difficult case is that involving intervention in the affairs of 'civilized' states. Here a crucial distinction, Mill insists, is whether the intervention is made to end a tyranny imposed from without by a foreign government, or by a one imposed from within by a native government. In the former case of 'a people struggling against a foreign yoke, or against a native tyranny upheld by foreign arms', outside intervention can be justified. For 'a government which needs foreign support to enforce obedience from its own citizens, is one which ought not to exist'.

In the latter case of a purely native tyranny, on the other hand, Mill believes that outside intervention is very rarely justified. Why? Because 'there can seldom be anything approaching to assurance that intervention, even if successful, would be for the good of people themselves. The only test possessing any real value, of people's having become fit for popular institutions, is that they, or a sufficient portion of them to prevail in the contest, are willing to brave labour and danger for their liberation'.

I have discussed Mill's essay at some length not only because it bears so directly on the current debate on American (and Australian) foreign policy, but because it is an example of the prudential ethic at work—making important distinctions and qualifications, taking careful account of circumstances, weighing costs and benefits, principles and interests, in ways that have rarely been matched in the current debate, despite the millions of words invested in it. It is a depressing thought that in today's argument many would dismiss Mill as an anti-American for making the points he does in this essay.

The characteristic fault of realism is that it believes the application of a morality to foreign policy to be negligible, if not entirely irrelevant. The characteristic fault of contemporary liberalism is that it considers the application of morality to foreign policy to be easy. In fact it is both necessary and difficult. And as the balance between a world vertically divided into sovereign states and a world horizontally connected by interdependence changes, it is likely to become even more necessary and even more difficult.