

Reality check: Common interests and mutual goals

From the Editors in the [December 12, 2006](#) issue

The nomination of Robert M. Gates to replace Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense may be as close as George Bush will come to acknowledging that the Iraq incursion has been misguided. Gates, who served in the administration of the first President Bush, and who has been a member of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, is expected to bring pragmatic realism to the job—a perspective quite different from the messianic idealism that sent U.S. troops into Iraq in the belief that the U.S. could bestow Western-style freedom and democracy on the region.

Gates has indicated, for example, his openness to negotiating with Iran and Syria for the sake of gaining their help in stabilizing Iraq. Bush's approach thus far has been to refuse talks with those nations (one of them a charter member of Bush's "axis of evil") unless they first meet U.S. demands. Can Iran and Syria help the U.S. in Iraq? Perhaps it's too late for that. But the flexibility that would consider such options is exactly what is needed.

U.S. foreign policy could use an injection of the sort of realism that directed U.S. policy in the cold war era. Realists in that tradition were willing to engage ideological enemies like the U.S.S.R. and China, acknowledging that even one's enemies have legitimate national interests. Realists recognize that a stable world is generally achieved not by demanding others' submission but by accommodating others' interests insofar as that can be done without sacrificing one's own vital interests. (In the cold war, realists had to make this case against the anticommunist idealists who thought communism could be "rolled back" by force.)

In their new book *Ethical Realism*, Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman suggest that realists in this tradition would have recognized after 9/11 that virtually every government in the world has an interest in curbing terrorism. Realists would have worked patiently to develop that consensus. Believing that foreign policy is not about converting people to the right point of view but about finding common

interests and pursuing mutual goals, realists find it unhelpful and misleading to divide the world into good and evil parties.

Realism in foreign policy can descend into cynicism or moral indifference—a willingness to “go along to get along, ” even if that means getting along with oppressive dictators. But we’ve seen the dangers of complacent moralizing—the havoc created when grandiose notions about America’s ability to define the world come into contact with the intractable realities of other people’s convictions.

Lieven and Hulsman quote Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Irony of American History*: “Nations . . . that are completely innocent in their self-esteem are insufferable in their human contacts.” Niebuhr understood that no nation is entirely innocent. These days, that kind of realism looks like a fount of wisdom.