

**PERSPECTIVES**

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**IN PRAISE OF HYPOCRISY:  
THE ROLE OF “VALUES” IN FOREIGN  
POLICY**

**JAMES FALLOWS**

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## **In Praise of Hypocrisy: The Role of “Values” in Foreign Policy**

**James Fallows**

An American speaking about “values” outside his own country faces two difficulties. One involves the exceptional position of the United States. It was the first nation, and is still one of the very few, to be invented around a set of political principles and values, rather than simply evolving for geographic, ethnic, religious, or other reasons. For better and worse, its monopoly of force, relative to other nations, is unprecedented since the time of the Roman Empire. Because of its influence it is both tempted and obliged to get involved in international controversies, including those over values, that many of its allies can remain separate from. Therefore precepts and rules of operation that apply to America may not apply in the same way to even the most-similar other nations, from Australia to Canada to the United Kingdom.

The other awkwardness involves this exceptional moment in American history. At an intense level outside the country, and with almost as much ferocity within the American electorate, the question of whether America is living up to its founding principles, or on the contrary grossly violating them, is debated every day. The current Administration of George W. Bush contends that its strategy of preemptively attacking potential sources of disorder or terrorism, and in their place helping build new and (it is hoped) more democratic regimes, reflects not simply the nation’s security interests but also its founding ideals of a steady, eventual spread of liberty across the globe. Many people within the United States question the origins, costs, and effects of this policy. An even larger proportion around the world are suspicious of the policy’s basic intent. I realise that many people could take “In Praise of Hypocrisy” as merely a description of America’s current role in the world.

In fact, that’s not what I intend. With allowances for these points of awkwardness and others, my goal – as a long-time friend of Australia and numerous Australians – is to suggest some larger principles about the role of “values” in international relations. My purpose is to suggest some frame for thinking about a values-based foreign policy through the rest of this decade and beyond – and to offer at least one rough guideline for how such a policy might be developed.

Let me do so by offering three propositions, with brief follow-up explanations. One by one they may sound simple or obvious, but I think that following their logic leads to some less obvious implications for the direction of nations' foreign policies, including Australia's. I hope that some of the implications, contradictions – and yes, imperfections – of this scheme will be useful in a discussion about values and foreign policy.

My first proposition is this: *incorporating values into international policy is a particular obligation, indeed even a burden, for countries “like ours”.*

I am aware of, and half intentional about, the Kiplingesque overtones in speaking of a “burden”. By countries “like ours,” I mean nations that for historical, constitutional, social, religious, or other reasons feel compelled to test, buffer, or judge their international relations by something other than immediate national interest. I mentioned earlier that the United States has exceptional standing, and it does. In part that is because of its history; in even larger part, because of its disproportionate current strength. But it is part of a recognisable, broader group of countries, certainly including Australia, whose modern identities depend on something more than mere territory, blood, or power.

Some countries are so small, poor, beset, or otherwise preoccupied that their “policy” involves merely looking out for themselves. Think of Benin, or Laos.

Some are so inward-looking in their history and their national myths that they have very few outward ambitions. Thailand is one example; the United States during its isolationist episodes is another.

Others really do seem to be propelled by little more than blood and tribal interests in the most atavistic sense. We all have our favorite examples here; some of mine are in the Balkans.

But for a variety of reasons and in a wide variety of degrees, the self-concept and self-respect of most countries involves a mixture of *realpolitik*-style practical interests and “values” the country believes it represents. Therefore each country's relations with the outside world also reflect that mixture.

The burden of including values in foreign policy is highest on “invented” and revolutionary countries, a category that has included nations as diverse as Fidel Castro's Cuba, the permanently-revolutionary United States, the permanently-theoretical France, and for much of its time even the Soviet Union.

Clearly such countries have differed profoundly in the nature of their revolutions and the content of the “vision” and values they offered to the rest of the world – apart from differences in the basic legitimacy and decency of their social models. But at the core of each society was the idea that it had a lesson to teach the rest of the world (usually while advancing its practical interests at the same time). Their foreign policies are always tested against that standard, although never exactly aligned. Indeed, to me the most plausible explanation for the Bush Administration’s policy toward Iraq is a version of this revolutionary impulse.

Because the origins of America’s current engagement in Iraq are so fiercely debated within the United States and around the world, let me say a word more about why I claim this as a reflection of America’s values rather than its immediate interests.

One assumed motive – oil – does not suffice as a reason for the United States to have invaded Iraq. We must stipulate, of course, that almost everything involving the modern Middle East’s place in the world is affected by its role as the main supplier of oil. When the costs are all tallied, this will be the most expensive oil any nation has ever obtained. If the United States really – and mainly – wanted to buy more of Iraq’s oil, or get its own companies into the bidding, it could simply have removed the trade sanctions it applied to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Fear of imminent destruction by nuclear or biological weapons also can’t have fully justified the invasion. As long as Iraq was crawling with UN weapons inspectors from late 2002 onwards, nothing surprising was going to happen. Nor can a desire to retaliate against al Qaeda really have been the driving force – as it was behind the retaliatory invasion of Afghanistan late in 2001 – since Osama bin Laden had pledged to work against Saddam Hussein as well.

When out of government through the Clinton years of the 1990s, many people who came to power under George W. Bush expressed the argument to which they returned in 2004 and 2005, when no evidence of WMD could be found in Iraq. The argument was that removing Saddam Hussein, and allowing a democratic government to emerge in Iraq, could be the step that allowed the Arab-Islamic world as a whole to move toward free markets and democracy. This has so far proven to be a gross misjudgment of the operating realities in Iraq, and in my view may ultimately constitute the worst strategic misjudgment in the history of American foreign policy. But its origin was “idealistic.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This question is examined at greater length in my forthcoming book *Blind into Baghdad: America’s war in Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

A recent academic paper analysed the larger “Bush Doctrine,” including the war in Iraq, and emphasised its values-laden origin, but also its potential to undercut those same idealistic goals. “Despite its realpolitik stress on the importance of force, the Bush Doctrine also rests on idealistic foundations—the claim for the centrality of universal values represented by America, the expected power of positive example, the belief in the possibility of progress,” wrote Robert Jervis, of Columbia University. “[But] what is important is that these have power through their acceptance by others, not through their imposition by American might. They require that others change not only their behavior but their outlook, if not their values, as well. For this to happen, the United States has to be seen as well-motivated and exemplifying shared ideals.”<sup>2</sup>

For other countries that did not start out as revolutionary or invented states, particular values have become crucial parts of their modern identities and sensibilities. Post-war Germany has felt obliged to express peaceful values, in atonement for its pre-war nature. Many Scandinavian countries prize their image as peacemakers, rationalists, and builders rather than destroyers. Switzerland conveys a different, more detached (and self-interested) version of the same identity. Japan has embraced a combination of the German, Swiss, and Scandinavian role, albeit with less contrition or introspection about its wartime past than Germany displays. Modern New Zealand has often stood for a “Green” sensibility – including at some cost to its immediate national interest, in its long showdown with the United States over basing rights for America’s nuclear warships.

A great many members of the former British Empire and current British Commonwealth, led by Australia and Canada, have policies that stand for international “progress,” “decency,” and “fairness” in ways often as hazily defined as Britain’s own unwritten “constitution” but as unmistakable in their importance. For more than a century, Australia has expressed this tradition with its commitment of troops to battles that had little bearing on the country’s immediate interest. In the generation after World War II, it did so with its more open policy toward immigrants and refugees – notwithstanding the tensions that immigration creates in any modern society, which have for now led to a reversal of that policy in Australia’s stance toward asylum-seekers.

Other nations still have values drawn explicitly from ideology, or religion, or specific leaders’ views, or response to a historical trauma, or other sources. To bring this point home without continuing a catalogue, the first proposition comes to this: not just in the United States or the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Jervis, Why the Bush Doctrine cannot be sustained, *Political Science Quarterly*, Fall 2005.

United Kingdom but in a very large number of countries, foreign policy will always involve tensions between immediate interests and broader values that are important to each nation's identity. The tension will be most acute in the most developed countries that have the highest-flown ideas about their missions. And in those countries, among which is Australia, no policy will long endure if it cannot somehow be reconciled with those values.

Why? Because if a policy is too purely practical and obviously self-interested, sooner or later opposition parties will complain that the current leadership has lost sight of the nation's ideals and lost touch with the true values of its people. Rival politicians will see an opening in calling the nation to a "higher" purpose. This happened with neat symmetry in the United States in 1992, when candidate Bill Clinton criticised the incumbent president George H.W. Bush for kowtowing to China and failing to speak up for dissident rights there – and again in 2000, when candidate George W. Bush criticised the incumbent Clinton-Gore administration for exactly the same perceived failing. In democracies "like ours," a policy that neglects values will eventually run into a political market-correction.

This point leads to the next:

My second proposition is that *no country can afford to operate strictly according to "values" for very long.*

If the first argument was that today's advanced, democratic nations will feel pressure to base policy on values rather than pure hardheaded interests, the second is that they can't respond to that pressure for too long.

The extreme way to put this is that a policy based only on values eventually becomes a crusade, or a jihad. The more tempered statement of the problem arises from the simple hydraulic forces of democratic politics. By definition, a "values" stand will come at the cost of some other, tangible national interest. It will mean a sacrifice of trading opportunities; of government revenue; of diplomatic comity; even, possibly, the risk that soldiers or civilians might lose their lives. After all, if there were no cost, this would not be a stand on values; it would just be *Realpolitik*, with the fillip of looking good as well.

And because there is a cost, the same democratic forces that pushed the country toward a recognition of its basic values will eventually push them from too concentrated or sustained a focus on values, with all the attendant costs. The extreme way to put this point is the risk of backlash: that a country will swing from one extreme to another, from hyper-moralism to

complete practicality, as its public and politicians over-react to the excesses of each course. The more tempered statement involves “sustainability.” There is a cost to a country, to its partners, and to the international system as a whole when its policy veers and self-contradicts every few years. The more intently a country links its foreign policy to its values, the greater the risk that it will create an anti-values backlash.

In some realms of life – mathematics, engineering, academic philosophy – the pursuit of ideas to their logical extreme is admirable. In almost every case, the work of politics is the reverse. Within a nation or among nations, it usually involves the half-logical, compromising adjustment of ideals to the imperfections of a flawed world.

It is easy to tick off cases of “evil” values being pushed to an extreme, with inhuman consequences. The French Revolution; the Chinese Cultural Revolution; the “cleansing” of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge; and the obvious examples from the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

But even “good” values, pursued too relentlessly, often have lamentable consequences in the real, imperfect world. Woodrow Wilson had been the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s star example of this phenomenon. Having avoided involvement in the Great War during his first term and won re-election on the slogan “He kept us out of war,” Wilson in his second term brought the United States not just into war but into the Versailles Treaty and the effort to form a League of Nations. The eventual resistance to his idealistic rhetoric helped predispose America to its long period of isolation in the 1920s and 1930s. It is not hard to argue that Wilson’s high-minded embrace of Versailles helped bring on World War II in two ways: through the resentment it engendered in Germany, and through the resistance it created in America to the idea of further foreign entanglements.

A few years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Paul Wolfowitz is the leading contender to match Wilson’s achievement. As Donald Rumsfeld’s deputy in the Pentagon through George W. Bush’s first term, he was the main exponent of the “idealistic” case for invading Iraq. Three years after that war began, the American public indicated by a two-to-one margin, according to the latest opinion polls, that the war was a mistake and was not worth its costs. On past evidence, the likely next step is a backlash against even better-reasoned and more careful foreign engagements.

Can this backlash actually occur? Here are two dispiriting but, in my view, indisputable examples. As the Khmer Rouge was solidifying its awful power in Cambodia in 1975, the

United States was removing its last troops from Vietnam. Some people argue that the Khmer Rouge rose *because* of the U.S. involvement; that doesn't matter for the moment. The point is that over the next five years, as the Khmer Rouge declared "Year Zero" and murdered more than one quarter of their country's population, the United States simply could not intervene. It could not do so because the domestic backlash against its failure in Vietnam was so strong that no politician could have recommended *another* military commitment to Southeast Asia.

Something similar was true twenty years later. After the United States lost 18 soldiers in the "Black Hawk Down" episode in Somalia in 1993, the newly-installed President Bill Clinton ordered a withdrawal of U.S. troops. One year later, the slaughter of Tutsis and some Hutus began in Rwanda. Among the reasons the United States took years to respond was the backlash against the failure in Somalia. And from 2004 until the present, the United States and other nations do practically nothing about the slaughter in Darfur in part because of a backlash against the intervention in Iraq.

I am using examples from the United States in part because that is the history I know best myself and in part because they have had global effect. These are vivid examples, because the combination of modern America's great power and its great moralism means that it must often confront the tensions between values and practicality. But every nation "like ours," with an important values component in its national identity, will face choices like these. And the lessons from the United States apply to England, Japan, France, and Australia as well: a policy for these countries must be somewhat values-based, but if it goes too far in that direction, it risks a backlash in which the values count for little at all.

This brings me to the third proposition. It is this:

***A recognition of the likely failure of a "values" approach is paradoxically the surest way to advance a nation's values.***

I am referring here not to the Zen-like paradoxes of life we all contemplate: relaxed concentration, strength through weakness, success through failure, and so on. Instead I have in mind a practical measure of results. A nation will go farthest in representing values it cares about if its every discussion is coloured by a knowledge of how little it can actually do. At times the job of a leader is to rouse the public with an ideal vision no one believes will really be achieved. But year in and year out, the leaders, the electorate, and the various communicators who connect those two groups will do better if they remember how long, slow, imperfect, and sometimes doomed will be the prospects of a "values" agenda.

You could call the approach I am recommending “moderation.” You could refer to it more fancily as a sense of the tragic. For my purposes here I call it hypocrisy: advancing a nation’s values by recognising how little a nation can actually do. In part this point is in homage to Reinhold Niebuhr, one of 20th century America’s greatest theologians and philosophers. In a prescient essay for *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1930, he warned that as America came to world power it would need to cope with better and worse varieties of hypocrisy. For instance:

“We still maintain the fiction that nothing but the love of peace actuates our foreign policy. A certain amount of hypocrisy which varies between honest self-deception and conscious dishonesty characterises the life of every nation... We make simple moral judgments, remain unconscious of the self-interest which colors them, support them with an enthusiasm which derives from our waning but still influential evangelical piety, and are surprised that our contemporaries will not accept us as saviors of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Let me illustrate what I am talking about with two passages from American presidential rhetoric.

The first is by the 39<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, in a speech given in 1977. America has no achievement more glorious than that of being a two-term president, and few heartbreaks more ignominious than being defeated after one term. (“Pathetic one-termer” is the standard phrase for people disgraced in this way.) Because Jimmy Carter was routed by Ronald Reagan during his run for re-election in 1980, and because the American hostages who had been held in Iran through the final year of his presidency were released mere minutes after Reagan was sworn in as Carter’s successor, a retrospective air of failure surrounds everything associated with Carter in the White House. (His Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, his track record as a best-selling author, and his decades of good works at the Carter Center have cemented his reputation as perhaps the best *former* president America has ever had. But the glow has not carried back to his time in office.)

At least that is the conventional view. I am biased in Carter’s favour, having worked as his chief speechwriter during his first two years in the White House. And I am particularly biased in favor of the passage I’m about to quote, which occurred on my watch. But it fits exactly the theme I am expressing here.

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<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Awkward imperialists, *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1930.

In his inaugural address in January, 1977, Carter had struck several “values” themes. For instance, “Because we are free we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere.” And, “Our moral sense dictates a clear-cut preference for these societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights.” Four months later, in a commencement address at Notre Dame University, Carter delivered his signature speech on human rights policy. Given Carter’s reputation as a moralistic, even pietistic figure, what is striking about the speech is how measured, how realistic, and how patient it was. Carter said about his new emphasis on human rights:

“This does not mean that we can conduct our foreign policy by rigid moral maxims. We live in a world that is imperfect and which will always be imperfect -- a world that is complex and confused and which will always be complex and confused.”

And:

“I understand fully the limits of moral suasion. We have no illusion that changes will come easily or soon. But I also believe that it is a mistake to undervalue the power of words and of the ideas that words embody. In our own history, that power has ranged from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ‘I Have a Dream.’ ”

This is what Reinhold Niebuhr called an appreciation of tragic irony, and it is, again, what I am calling (with some contortions) “hypocrisy.” It also is a guideline for a policy that can be sustained – and that, on Carter’s watch, had significant effects especially in Latin America.

The second passage comes from the 43<sup>rd</sup> president, George W. Bush. His second inaugural address, delivered in January 2005, was understood to be about Iraq, although that country’s name appeared nowhere in the speech. It is hard to select passages from the speech, since it was essentially all of one theme. Or maybe it is easy to select representative passages, since almost any part of the speech represents the whole. But here are two important samples:

“America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our

fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.”

And:

“So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”

Note the sweep, the absolute nature of the pronouncements (“every nature and culture”), the confidence that the age-old tension between moral and practical interests has at last been resolved (“America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one”). Note the absence of anything resembling the caution, the awareness of imperfections, or the resolution to proceed in uncertain circumstances that characterised Carter’s speech. The reading of history is not yet in, but I offer my interim bet: that Carter’s limited, fallible, but determined approach will be judged to have done more good for more people than the millennial rhetoric of Bush – or any comparable language or policy from other leaders of countries like ours.

As I close, I offer no more propositions. Instead I suggest that the three points I’ve advanced add up to this one guideline for countries as similar in nature but different in scale as Australia and the United States: the challenge is sustainability, to equip our democratic societies for marathons not sprints, to keep including values in our foreign policy by being sure that we never lose sight of practicality.

Is this a bromide? Perhaps. But it is worth discussing the countless practical applications of this approach.

Our societies must devise ways to work: with the Islamic world, in the Middle East and elsewhere; with failed states; with narco states; with petro states; with rogue states, large and small. We will deal with kleptocracies, and tyrannies, and with the immigrants and refugees who flee those states. We will deal with countless other imperfections, always balancing our ideals with our practical constraints.

We must consider the question of China. One temptation, always strong in Australia, would be to take a purely realistic policy toward the system Deng Xiao Ping and his successor have created: they’re big, they’re getting richer, they’re a huge market, so let’s not rock the boat. Another temptation, often strong in the United States, would be to be purely moralistic.

They're oppressive, they can be brutal, they must be contained. The obvious implication of what I am saying is that the most sustainable policy, and the one likely to be truest to "our" values in the long run, will contain both elements. It will never lose sight of long-term values, but it will never pretend that they can prevail absolutely or overnight. As for the details – well, that is what we are here to discuss.

I mentioned at the beginning the awkwardness of discussing values as a visiting American. I'll close on a note that, if not entirely awkward, is at least unusual: that is, by repeating a quote from the under-appreciated 39<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. These two statements of Jimmy Carter's, and the balance between them, represent the balance that should guide our deliberations.

"We live in a world that is imperfect and which will always be imperfect," Carter said. But: "It is a mistake to undervalue the power of words and of the ideas that words embody."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**James Fallows** is *The Atlantic Monthly*'s National Correspondent, and has worked for the magazine for more than twenty years. His previous books include *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy*, *Looking at the Sun, More Like Us* and *National Defense*, which won the American Book Award for non-fiction. His article about the consequences of victory in Iraq, "The Fifty First State?", won the 2003 National Magazine Award.

Mr. Fallows has been an editor for the *Washington Monthly* and *Texas Monthly* magazines, and a columnist for the *Industry Standard*. He writes frequently for *Slate* and the *New York Review of Books* and is chairman of the board of the New America Foundation. He has worked on a software-design team at Microsoft and as chief speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter.

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