

“America: World Police”

Honorary lecture given at Krosno College: Krosno, Poland, May 19, 2005.

First, I would like to preface my talk with two very important disclaimers. One, if I use any term or idiomatic expression that you are not familiar with, please raise your hand so that I may clarify what I mean. I ask my American students to do the same, and they usually do. And most of my students are native English speakers, so do not feel bad if you do not understand me: I talk very fast and use big words, even for native English speakers. Secondly, I also have to say that I am a professor of English and Holocaust Studies. I read, study, teach, and write about American literature, when I am not doing the same about the holocaust. Therefore, my comments about American foreign policy should not be taken as authoritative in the strict academic sense. I have read far too few academic debates about US politics. However, I suppose that I am as qualified to talk about American politics just as much as every other American citizen. There is not a day that goes by in America when our first amendment right to the freedom to say what we want, when we want to, and without fear of government censorship is not a significant part of our lives in one way or another. However, living alongside the religious right espousing the human rights of an embryonic fetus, while denying the human rights of homosexuals who want to legally marry; neo-Nazi gangs who have expanded the original Nazi program of extermination to include blacks, Hispanics, homosexuals, and even Catholics; and, progressive liberals who want that we should dismantle our military and return to an isolationist policy of staying out of every country's business, including those who support terrorism is a bit hard to swallow for even Americans, let alone non-Americans. Our first amendment rights, as I am sure most of you know, has created a

double-edge to the sword we call freedom. And it is this double-edgedness of the sword of freedom that I would like to talk about today with respect to contemporary American foreign policy, specifically over the last fifteen years. I think it is vitally important that people like you—outside observers to American culture, hear a voice that is so often silent both in America and abroad: that of the moderate. As I see it, there are but two kinds of voices in contemporary American politics, which do not correspond to republicans or democrats, conservatives or liberals. These two voices are the extremists and the moderates. But as you may guess, given the nature of each voice, one almost always silences the other. However, do not take this silence as a sign that one side has weaker arguments, makes less money, or worships another divine being. The only difference between extremists and moderates is that extremists expend so much time, money, and energy into whatever cause they support, while moderates, as Jon Stewart has recently said, simply “have too much shit to do.” The Terry Shiavo case is a perfect example of this difference. For those of you who do not know, Terry Shiavo was recently euthanized after the courts declared her to be in a “persistent vegetative state.” After her breathing tube was removed, it took over a week for her to slowly starve to death. Now aside from the fact that this may seem like some experiment conducted by Dr. Megele, what received the most attention in the media were the politicians on the news every night debating the ethical implications of such a decision, and the protestors: both for and against the state-sponsored euthanasia, who spent weeks camped outside of the hospital where Terry Shiavo had resided for fifteen years. Everyone involved in this non-groundbreaking case (one need only recall the equally infamous Dr. Kevorkian and the string of court decisions that stated exactly the same verdict ruled in the Shiavo case)

were for the most part extremists for either side of the debate, which represents such a small portion of American opinion so as to be statistically insignificant. Moderates, what you Europeans might call the working class or Americans the middle class, were the ones who witnessed this fiasco from the outside by choice. Moderates are simply put, most of us. They are the Americans who have to get up every morning and go to school or to work. They are the ones who get only the equivalent of fourteen days of holiday each year. They are the ones who take off of work to take their children to the dentist and the doctor, soccer practice, and a baseball game. They are the ones who work an average of 60 hours a week and pay 75 % of all annual income taxes. They are the ones who spend their Saturdays mowing their yard or working in their meager gardens, before barbequing on their back porch with a Budweiser in their hands. And these are the 51 percent of American who do not vote. These moderates are the Americans who have no time to read political debates or newsmagazines. They barely have enough time to watch a half hour news program before they go to bed. And these are the mainstream Americans, not the extremists. The moderates are those Americans who live their freedoms rather than argue over who should have them and who should not.

This primal, even biological sense of freedom we Americans take from our first amendment is the one that guarantees the most freedoms, while at the same time, causing strife because freedom for all comes at such a dangerous price. Because if we want to live by this freedom to speak our minds, then we have to accept other Americans' rights to do the same, even when that other opinion proposes ignorance, racism, and violence. This is the side of the freedom of speech coin that many in America today have such a

problem with, and the side that also fosters and perpetuates America's policy of what so many have called "world policing."

This notion of world police predates George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan. In fact, it can be traced back to the very foundations of our republic. The first manifestation of America's world policing policy was born in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Drafted by then Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, rather than its namesake president James Monroe, the Monroe Doctrine was the first time America openly and officially drew a political line between itself and the Old World. But what was curious in Adam's document was that not only were the contiguous American states off limits to the colonial powers of the Old World, specifically England, France, and Spain, but that all of the Americas: Central and South included, were off limits to these former Empires as well. Since 1823, any attack on the American half of the globe, Monroe insisted, would be "the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States." In return, though, Monroe reciprocated by assuring the Old World Powers of America's intention to stay out of European affairs. In fact, he is very careful to qualify that this position applies only to Europe when he claims: "our policy towards Europe [...] nevertheless remains the same, which is not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers." With a few notable exceptions (Hitler comes to mind), America has maintained this position in Europe. This seemed simple enough: if America stayed out of Europe, then Europe should stay out of America. The problem, of course, is that no one colonial power claimed to speak for all of Europe. Likewise, it should sound equally preposterous that the United States could speak for Central and South America, even when they were populated by indigenous, traditional cultures, only recently invested with European

imperialism. So as early as 1823, the United States had taken on the role of big brother for the rest of the Americas, without their knowledge, and certainly without their consent. But it is easy to chalk-up this stance to the vestiges of the Enlightenment attitude toward the noble savage. As long as uncivilized, that is to say indigenous peoples, were willing to accept Jesus Christ and the cultivated civilization of Christianity he envisioned, then they were granted the same freedoms we granted ourselves. If, on the other hand, they refused, then it was America's duty to teach the noble savage the ways of Western culture, by force if necessary.

By the twentieth century, the United States would add to the Monroe Doctrine thanks to Theodore Roosevelt's overly masculine sense of "righteousness," that a youth spent fighting Native Americans engendered. In his annual message to Congress on December 6, 1904, Roosevelt outlined what has since been called the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. In this speech, Roosevelt broadens Monroe's stance towards Europe to include the entire world. He couches America's experiment with freedom and democracy as a test for "mankind." In Roosevelt, we have a full-blown sense of America's "duty" and "responsibility" to secure and protect the very foundations of democracy in all countries and all governments. This will ensure peace, according to him, but his idea of peace comes at a price. In his March 4, 1905 inaugural address, he claims that, "we wish peace, but we wish the peace of justice, the peace of righteousness. We wish it because we think it is right and not because we are afraid." While the danger in making such a claim was not so obvious one hundred years ago, it only took Hitler some thirty years later to show why such a stance is fundamentally flawed.

Righteousness and justice are not absolute concepts, independent of historical positioning. Power not only predetermines who is able to have an opinion about righteousness, but who gets to define it as well. Hitler and the Nazis proved that those with enough power re-define concepts as they please: from concepts such as Jewishness to righteousness and duty. The trials of Nazi war criminals that continued well into the 1970's show over and over that when absolute authority declares an act to not only be acceptable, but vitally necessary to a nation's existence, like the systematic destruction of an entire race of people, then individual choice, individual belief is irrelevant. The principle overrides the individual.

When Roosevelt was awarded a Nobel Peace prize, of all awards, in 1910, his speech still emphasized this almost genetic, American sense of "righteousness," without ever defining what he means by this, other than it is justified because "we" believe it. It should be obvious that by "we" he meant "him". And as the sociological theories of Walter Lippmann would reveal only ten years later, it is precisely this kind of thinking that creates stereotypes. Following in the tradition of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Lippmann in his famous study *Public Policy*, stresses that our social stereotypes come to preclude our ability to experience the world, coating all that we see in terms of these stereotypes. A simple analogy for us today would be the way our societies view political concepts. Prior to any experience with liberalism or conservatism, everyone starts out with such stereotypes in their minds, which come from various sources, though the most obvious is the family. This engrained sense of social stereotypes comes to form a lens through which we actually experience the world, such that it becomes very difficult, even impossible some philosophers say, to experience the world any other way.

So if everyone is guilty of this same sin, it should cease to function as such, as a sin that can be absolved by powers outside of us. Human beings cannot help but view the world through their own point of view. Stereotyping is the natural order of human perception, whether that be through the eyes of a simple child or a well educated professor. The error, phenomenology says, is in thinking about this relationship backwards where we assume we perceive the world as it actually is.

When Professor Witalisz' wife was giving me a tour of Kazimierz two days ago in Krakow, I asked her about the political system of Poland. She explained that current situation in parliament between the socialists, liberals, and communists, which I found very interesting. However, I only understood what she was saying to me about the Polish political machine in terms of my own sense of the American political machine, since I have no direct knowledge of the Polish system. We have liberals, socialists, and communists in America, too, but would it be fair to assume that because Polish liberals and American liberals share the same name that they share the same opinions about the same issues? I hope not. But I have a secret for you: I do. I *have* to use the stereotypes I have in my head about American liberals, socialists, and communists to make any sense of the Polish parliament, which necessarily assumes way too much about the Polish system on my part. Over time, as I begin to read more about your government, my opinion about Polish socialists, for example, will continue to change and evolve—hopefully towards a more “Polish” view, but this view will always be filtered through my own point of view as an outsider to your culture. In this way, Lippmann says that we define before we see. I define Polish socialism long before I actually perceive or

experience it. And with this in mind, we can now see why President Roosevelt's claim about righteousness is so dangerous.

Before American's can think about what righteousness means for them, they are told what it means for them by Roosevelt, the man with all the power in 1905 America. Likewise, if President Bush tells America that Iraq is the enemy on television, then they are to most Americans. If Saddam Hussein is declared an evil dictator who must be stopped, then whether he is evil or not, the imperative to stop him precedes his actual character. Whether Saddam Hussein is evil or not is irrelevant because we perceive him through our American lens that says he is evil. And as Lippmann says, getting the order right in this kind of situation is crucial. Taking this assumption one step further shows why American's committed acts of violence towards American citizens of Middle Eastern origin just after 9/11.

Creating a stereotype based on his own upbringing as a rough rider—a sort of proto-boy scout organization, Roosevelt defined the sole distinction between legitimate nationhood and a tyrannical state, as one of masculine virtues, whatever those may be. Equating sentimentality, sloth, and materialism with the very tyrannies he despises, Roosevelt actually declares that “no nation deserves to exist if it permits itself to lose the stern and virile virtues; and this without regard to whether the loss is due to the growth of a heartless and all-absorbing commercialism, to prolonged indulgence in luxury and soft, effortless ease, or to the deification of a warped and twisted sentimentality.” Aside from the fact that Roosevelt could as easily be describing America of the 1990's as he was Spain or England in 1910, he actually makes a statement about the right for a nation to exist, independent of its traditional demarcated territory, common language, or even

shared cultural values. Without psychoanalyzing Roosevelt's overt and professed masculinity, which exists in almost violent opposition to feminized virtues, he makes it clear that America will not stand by as "backwards" societies "bully" others into submission. He claims that no one likes "the bully, the bawler, the oppressor, whether in private or public life." The irony, of course, is that the seasoned bully the world contends with today was no less a bully one hundred years ago when Roosevelt gave his Nobel speech. Bullies, as America has shown the world in the last fifteen years, are bullies regardless of whether or not their reasons for bullying are justified or not.

However, Roosevelt's masculine claims to nationhood aside, he still maintains the reciprocal nature, at least on paper, that Monroe and Adams maintained one hundred years prior to him. For example, he also claims in his Nobel speech that countries that enter into treaty relations with each other "will respect the other's territory, and its absolute sovereignty within that territory." Stalin was the case that forced America to change its mind about this particular caveat in its slowly evolving foreign policy because such a stance forced us to intervene against Hitler, but precluded our involvement against Stalin. Hitler crossed every border around Germany. Stalin did not. While Roosevelt thought of treaties as simply gentlemen's agreements to fight against each other fairly, he inadvertently allowed policy to trump human rights. And the critical issue for America's policy of World Police today hinges on the way this issue is interpreted.

On the one hand, it seems fair, at least rational, to grant each country rights of sovereignty. What could be more basic than allowing a country to run itself as they see fit? Most of the world functions with this principle tacitly in mind every day. We have many historical examples that show the danger in acting otherwise, such as forcing

Germany to adopt democracy in the Treaty of Versailles. Yet, on the other hand, we have the case of Stalin, which seems to justify the more feminine sensibilities such as human rights trumping the more masculine virtues of sovereignty and collective freedom. When human rights are violated, we feel justified in walking all over a country's sovereignty to stop them. Therefore, we seem at a logical impasse in America. Our eternal commitments to freedom and self-determination seem to collide with our equally eternal senses of justice and morality.

And this impasse is what justifies both sides of the argument over America's policy to act as the world's police. Defending the American sense of morality, Max Boot, a well-know columnist for the *Financial Times* recently published an article in which he claims that it is America's "destiny" to police the world. In his article, he points out the failure of the League of Nations, and the relative ineffectiveness of the UN. He says, for example that, "it is hard to take seriously a body whose human rights commission is chaired by Libya and whose disarmament commission will soon be chaired by Iraq." He also deflates the alternatives like NATO, with its failed committee to investigate crimes against humanity in Kosovo and the EU's insubstantial military force and multidirectional foreign policy. But his answer is no less simplistic than his arguments against NATO. Harkening back to Roosevelt's Corollary, he states that the "US is obliged to stop 'chronic wrongdoing,' for the simple reason that no one else will the job."

However, Mark Weisbrot, the co-director for the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington D.C. spearheads the challenge to Boot's remarks through recourse to the American sense of freedom. He takes the admittedly "progressive"

approach to America as the World Police by undercutting the last fifty years of foreign policy aimed at “saving the world from communism.” While he is correct to point out the misapprehension that America was actually fighting the spread of communism by overthrowing democratically elected governments one after the other and replacing them with blood-thirsty nepotistic regimes, the horrors of which we now refer to as the other genocides of the Twentieth century, he too simplifies the answer by suggesting that the best way to stop future incidents against America is to “stop looking for trouble all over the world.” In a sense, he feels America should mind its own business and let other countries handle their own problems.

What both of these extremes fail to consider is the position of the moderate, which is, on the surface, even more simplistic than their answers: change is the way of life. Ever since we began to close our own frontier in the west at the end of the nineteenth century, America has grown fearful, rabidly fearful of the necessary historical and particularly territorial change that has occurred since man began to write history down. For the last 4900 years, the map of the surface of the world has never stayed the same. Even before the great conquerors of the West like Alexander the great, Hannibal, and Octavius Caesar, and Attila the Hun, cultural borders were as fluid as the sea. But for only the last one hundred years, America has demonstrated a violent denial of this necessary change, by refusing every country who challenges their borders to a battle to the death. We see that the extremist’s foreign policies over the last one hundred years have been designed to prevent historico-territorial change at all cost, from Iraq to Vietnam, from Nazi Germany to the Spanish-American war, and whether or not such change is justified or even beneficial.

Our attitude to countries that challenge the borders of other countries is painfully obvious. However, we have a slightly different approach when the issue is internal territorial change, or more simply territorial redistribution within a country. While we may be inclined to agree with Boot that America has been saving the world from Communism (as opposed to some one like Pope John Paul II, for example), we need only look at the results to see that America actually had little to do with it. America's greatest enemy for fifty years was soviet Russia, but in the end, it was not America that toppled the Red giant, but its own internal meltdown. In fact, the Soviet Union ceased being a priority for American foreign policy when Regan ended his second term in 1988. George Bush senior made it clear that his attention, and thus our attention should be focused on the Middle East, rather than the U.S.S.R. When the revolving door of Premier in the 1980's ceased with the appointment of Gorbachev, America hoped that the Soviet Union would collapse on its own. It is no accident that America spent less on Russian foreign intelligence gathering than they did in 1991, the year that the U.S.S.R. ceased to be. Likewise, America remained largely out of the Balkan war, in as much as we provided UN peacekeeping troops. The Balkan war, like the collapse of the Soviet Union was an internal territorial redistribution. America's policy with regard to this seems ambivalent at best. When North Korea or North Vietnam crossed the borders into their respective southern partners, then America's foreign policy demanded that America step-in like the world mother and push the two fighting children back to their respective corners. This is even how we can justify our non-involvement with other communist countries like Cuba. Since Cuba—the longest running communistic dictatorship, remains content on their

island, the United States just keeps a suspicious eye on them, imposing a thirty year old trade ban—the political equivalent of the occasional slap on the wrist.

American foreign policy since Roosevelt explains why we stormed the beaches of Normandy and Omaha, but never raised a finger to Stalin. But our stance today, as shown through both Boot and Weinbrot shows that we are at a crossroads where we must defend both the freedom to self-determination and human rights: we must fight both Stalin and Hitler, metaphorically speaking. But the problem today is that the two sides of this debate are not at all equal. We have kept up the America ideal to defend freedom at all costs, but we have fallen horribly short with respect to human rights. We intervened in Panama, Grenada, and Kuwait, but we did nothing in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Dharfur. So the question seems to be, do we continue to allow mass genocide when borders are not crossed? Our foreign policy seems to be suggesting that the answer is: yes.

If we align America's policy of intervention with respect to human rights violations, then we see a dangerous pattern. When physical borders are compromised, as with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait or Hitler's march toward Moscow, then America acts, swiftly and decisively. After the fact, that is after we have already committed our troops, we often find that the perpetrating countries involved are committing gross human rights violations. This allows us to take the credit for putting an end to something we did not even know existed. However, we have never sent troops to intervene in strictly human rights violations. When borders disintegrate from within, as with the old Soviet Republics and the former Yugoslavia, then our policy is to send only what troops we can spare to the UN for peacekeeping missions, even when these internal disintegrations

often include human rights violations. But let human rights violations abound, sometimes for decades (as in the Soviet Union and China), and America never commits the first troop.

The problem for either of these scenarios is that they fall squarely within each of the two political parties in America. The conservative republicans want to defend America's sense of freedom all over the world, which translates to border crossings and since the fifties, at least, economic interests. Likewise, they are little concerned with defending America's principle of morality abroad (though they are vehemently defending it domestically). However, the liberal democrats want to defend America's sense of morality by stopping human rights violations even when borders are not compromised. Yet, they have never been supporters of defending America's principle of freedom abroad (again, though they do so in abundance domestically). As you may notice, what is missing is a party that defends them both. This absent, or rather present but silent third party, I want to suggest, is the moderates. But until the conditions of the American middle class change, I do not see this silent voice ever speaking up, much less voting, since their opinion is not one that either of the extremists can accept: change is not always a bad thing. As Americans, we cannot be choosy when it comes to which of our virtues or principles we want to defend. To remain consistent, at least, we must defend them all. If we do not, then the ones we cease defending will cease being parts of our definition of American. Likewise, the ones we stop defending, like human rights, will be the very same ones, as Al-Qaeda showed on 9/11, that are returned on us.