

# **DOES MIGHT MAKE RIGHT? INDIVIDUALS, ETHICS, AND EXCEPTIONALISM**

Francis J. Gavin

In his introductory essay for Vol. 3, Iss. 1 of TNSR, the chair of our editorial board, Francis J. Gavin, discusses the choices made by individual statesmen, how to evaluate their motives, and the role of ethics in making grand strategic choices.

**L**ike many new professors of international relations, my early career syllabi often included Thucydides' Melian dialogue from the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In the fifth century B.C., the great sea power Athens demanded that the small island of Melos, an ally of Sparta, lay down its arms and become a vassal of the Athenian empire. The Melians thought this both unjust and unwise — why not simply allow Melos to remain neutral? Wasn't it immoral to force a free people who posed no threat to relinquish their independence? The leaders of Athens were unmoved. "Since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." When the Melians refused to surrender, the Athenians conquered the island, and "put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and inhabited the place themselves."<sup>1</sup>

I taught this dialogue to demonstrate to young, presumably idealistic students that the world was a dangerous place, where military power was the critical variable, and the most important outcomes in the world, such as war and peace, were shaped by the structure of the international system. I would also give them a more modern example from the 1992 movie *Unforgiven*. The film takes place in Big Whiskey, Wyoming, where William Munny, the main character, played by Clint Eastwood, reluctantly joins with two others to claim a \$1,000 reward offered to avenge the mutilation of a prostitute. In the course of the story, a tyrannical and cruel town sheriff, Little Bill, has impeded justice and tortured and killed Munny's oldest friend. Toward the end of the film, Eastwood's character has the sheriff cornered. Bill begs for his life. "I don't deserve this. To die like this." Before shooting him, Munny replies: "Deserve's got nothing to do with it."<sup>2</sup> The universe is cold, unforgiving, and unfair.

The excellent articles in this issue caused me to

rethink the actual lessons of Thucydides' history, to say nothing of *Unforgiven*. A series of crucial questions tie them together: How do statesmen make choices about complex and consequential issues in the world? How do we evaluate both the motives and outcomes of these decisions? Are they driven by considerations of power and interest only, or do values and ethics come into play? What role does the political orientation of the regime, and the history and culture of a nation, play in decision-making?

It is important to remember that there is a perspective that sees placing an emphasis on ethics, individual choices, and regime type in international relations as misplaced. Athens was an enlightened, democratic society, led by intelligent, noble leaders who took civic justice in the *polis* seriously. In relations with their neighbors, however, Athenians believed that fear and power — not justice and mercy — shaped outcomes. This is, of course, the view of neorealism, perhaps the most dominant theoretical paradigm among international relations programs in American universities over the past half-century. For neorealists, the most important consideration when assessing global affairs is the anarchic structure of the international system.<sup>3</sup> With no sovereign authority to arbitrate disputes, the components of the system — states — are forced to compete ruthlessly for survival and dominance, a competition that, in a "self-help" system, is determined by the balance of military power. States are like billiard balls — neither the quirks of particular leaders nor the internal, domestic characteristics of nations count for very much in this struggle.

History provides stark examples of what happens when structural factors are ignored. At the start of the 18th century, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the largest country in Europe, possessing a higher degree of tolerance and liberal governance than any of its neighbors. By the end of the century, it no longer existed, swallowed up by its neighbors — Russia, Prussia, and Austria — in three partitions. This outcome was the inevitable

1 Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, chap. XVII, "Sixteenth Year of the War - The Melian Conference - Fate of Melos," accessed at, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/melian.htm>, on Feb 4, 2020.

2 *Unforgiven*, directed by Clint Eastwood (1992; USA: Warner Bros., Inc.).

3 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979).



product of power and national interest, and cannot be understood solely through an ethical lens, the choices of an individual, or the qualities of a particular regime. Poland disappeared because of the brutal realities of great-power politics shaped by international anarchy.

Whatever its merits, however, this kind of analysis can come at a cost. A singular focus on the balance of military power, with an emphasis on systemic forces that drives toward an almost law-like equilibrium, often underplays the role of choices and individual statecraft and grand strategy. As Peter Campbell and Richard Jordan remind us in their article in this issue, Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack argued in their seminal article, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,” that “political scientists most frequently have argued that they must set aside both *fortuna* and *virtú*, and instead focus only on impersonal forces as the causes of international events. ... many political scientists contend that individuals ultimately do not matter, or at least they count for little in the major events that shape international politics.” Byman and Pollack begin their article with the story of Frederick the Great’s Prussia, which nearly met a contemporaneous fate similar to that of Poland. It was saved only by the unexpected death of Czarina Elizabeth, who hated Prussia, and the (brief) rise of Czar Peter III, who worshipped Frederick. Chance, character, regime dynamics, and grand strategic leadership provided Frederick with the reprieve he needed to save Prussia’s place in the world, changing forever the trajectory of Prussian, German, European, and, ultimately, world history. “Had it not been for the idiosyncrasies of one man and one woman, European history would look very, very different.”<sup>4</sup>

Looking back, it is strange that this excellent article, which generated a lot of attention when published in 2001, even needed to be written. What policymaker or historian thinks one can understand world politics without assessing Napoleon, Hitler, or Mao? Imagine switching the vice presidents and presidents of the United States in 1954 and 1965: A President Richard Nixon in 1954 would have been more likely to use American military power in Southeast Asia than Dwight Eisenhower, just as a President Hubert Humphrey may have worked much harder to avoid Lyndon Johnson’s military escalation in Vietnam a decade later. Franklin D. Roosevelt was almost unable to replace Henry Wallace with Harry Truman as his vice president during the 1944 Democratic Party convention. Had he

failed, the world after 1945 would have been a much different place.

While there has been a welcome renaissance of scholarship analyzing the role of individual leaders in international relations — I am thinking here of the recent work by Michael Horowitz, Elizabeth Saunders, and Keren Yarhi-Milo — there is much more to be done.

The whole concept of grand strategy only makes sense if choices are available and actually matter. And choices can only be evaluated by comparing them to alternatives, or to choices *not* made. This is what James Steinberg does in his penetrating essay, “What Went Wrong? U.S.-China Relations from Tiananmen to Trump.” While some scholars find counterfactuals controversial, we lack better methods for evaluating the plausible *ex ante* options policymakers had in the face of an unknowable future. Looking at the poor state of contemporary U.S.-Chinese relations, Steinberg explores the alternatives during three critical junctures: U.S. policy after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the debate over China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, and the Obama administration’s response to the Scarborough Shoal dispute. People may argue both with how he characterizes and evaluates the choices that were made and with whether different ones would have led to better or worse outcomes for the United States. However, it is hard to disagree with Steinberg’s claim that these decisions, taken without knowing the future, were difficult and consequential, and that any assessment of them must grapple with the roads not taken.

What traits make for the kind of person who makes these choices well? In other words, what makes for a good grand strategist? The answer is not always obvious. Campbell and Jordan suggest that an excellent place to look is in the characters and narratives of great literature. As their analysis of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* demonstrates, good battlefield tacticians and strategists may be terrible at the larger, more complex task of statecraft. The qualities that make for a great military leader — fearlessness, iron will, indomitability — don’t easily translate into political success, where humility, adaptability, and subtlety are often required. Read the article to discover the surprise character whose adaptability and cunning reveals the most impressive, if ultimately tragic, grand strategist in the play. Campbell and Jordan make a compelling case that immersing ourselves in great books, especially Shakespeare, is ideal training for understanding the tradeoffs and complexity that come

4 Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 107, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092135>.

with making grand strategic choices. Great articles like this are precisely why *TNSR* exists — to provide a platform for the kind of innovative scholarly approach that boldly transcends narrow disciplinary concerns to look at important questions in a fresh, interesting way.

How much should ethics and morals shape these decisions? And if we think they should matter, what metrics should we use? Joseph Nye reminds us in his compelling essay that defining interests in simply material or military terms is misleading. “Access to oil, sales of military equipment, and regional stability are all national interests, but so too are values and principles that are attractive to others.” By the same token, complex considerations come into play when debating what *means* are used to achieve goals in the world. “Using hard power when soft power will do or using soft power alone when hard power is necessary to protect values raises serious ethical questions about means.” Nye offers a framework for how to think about and evaluate the role of ethics in both the ends and means of statecraft. C. Anthony Pfaff lays out how and why profound technological changes make these moral and ethical considerations more important than ever. Automation, machine learning, performance-enhancing technologies — they all move choices further away from individual decision-making, with unsettling consequences. “Moral autonomy is required for moral responsibility.” Pfaff lays out a series of conditions that should be considered, involving consent, risk-reward, individual well-being, proliferation, sustainable alternatives, and the larger effects on society, when evaluating the normative consequences of embracing a disruptive technology.

Do different kinds of regimes make different kinds of decisions? More to the point: Is there something about the United States — its history and culture, its national identity, its governance — that makes how it engages with the world different, or more *exceptional*, than a model based on structure and power would predict? The debate on whether the United States is or is not exceptional, and whether or not that is a good thing, either for itself or the world, is a debate as old as the nation itself. As both Ambassador Azita Raji and Hilde Eliassen Restad remind us in their articles, these arguments have a particular resonance since the election of Donald J. Trump. Trump has explicitly rejected the exceptionalist narrative, both in his words and deeds. Power, interest, nationalism, and sovereignty are what matters, not universalistic

ideals or ethics. As Trump told the United Nations General Assembly in 2018: “We will never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy. America is governed by Americans. We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism.”<sup>5</sup>

Restad highlights the Jacksonian roots of Trump’s nationalism. She argues that the strength of this type of worldview should not be underestimated, and that future American leaders will need “an updated story of ‘America’ in the world, a story that acknowledges the problems with the ‘liberal world order’ to address the concerns of the next generation of Americans, allies, and adversaries.” As Raji reminds us, America is a place “where hope compels us to believe that great things can still be done. That’s who Americans are. And if Americans are true to their values, then the United States will once again be a guiding light in the night for the world.”

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If grand strategic choices matter, then outcomes are not inevitable or shaped only by structural factors. We must then study the individuals who make decisions and understand what motivated their decisions. What do they value and why? What role does their culture, history, and nation play? And how do we evaluate those choices as right, wrong, or somewhere in between? As Nye writes, “The important question is how leaders choose to define and pursue that national interest under different circumstances.”

None of this is to say that the structure of the international system doesn’t matter enormously. Structure and agency always mix, but rarely in ways that remove the responsibility of choice. My own life is shaped by a number of factors I did not choose, from my gender to my height to the time and place in which I was born. That does not remove me from judgment concerning the choices I *do* make or free me from the consequences of picking among alternatives. Saying ethics or values are important is also not to claim that interest or power are not critical variables for understanding the world. Both terms, however — interest and power — suffer from what social scientists call under-specification. As Nye reminds us, “It is tautological, or at best trivial, to say that all states try to act in their national interest.” Neither term explains very much, in the same way that offense-defense theory, with its emphasis on ease of conquest and the military balance, tells us very little about

5 “Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, NY,” The White House, Sept. 25, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/>.



why the United States never conquered Canada. Nor is it clear what constitutes power in the 21st century: the country with the largest number of tanks and battleships, the most nuclear weapons, the largest coal and oil reserves, the best computer programmers, or the most attractive ideology? Too narrow a focus on any one factor can be dangerous. As Shakespeare reminds us, Coriolanus understood military strategy and power better than anyone — no one was better than he at winning on the battlefield. But that did not save him from grand strategic ruin.

At one point in Thucydides, the Melians point out the folly of so-called Athenian realism. “How can you avoid making enemies of all existing neutrals who shall look at our case and conclude from it that one day or another you will attack them? And what is this but to make greater the enemies that you have already, and to force others to become so who would otherwise have never thought of it?” Athens, of course, ultimately lost the war — more as a consequence of a public health crisis, we should remember, than by losses on the battlefield — and the island was eventually resettled by surviving Melians. Would Athens have prevailed if it had ignored the ritualistic platitudes of realism and offered a more compelling, appealing vision for its international leadership? Nye reminds us, “A moral leader must likewise consider the soft power of attraction and the importance of developing the trust of other countries.” This is not simply a matter of benevolence and charity. The United States, despite its complex and often problematic history, more often does well for itself when it does good. America’s history reveals surprising twists and turns, nothing like the other “billiard balls” in the system.

It is hard to recall during such troubling times, but American power and leadership in the world have often gone far beyond how many aircraft carriers or planes it possessed. There is some chance that the 2020 presidential election will feature two candidates who are dismissive of American exceptionalism, regardless of how it is defined. Is this a good thing — for the United States or the world? Is it possible that there is something different about the United States — both for good and for ill — which we forget at our own peril? Restad makes the case: “Leadership based on liberal ideals and institutions — rather than ascriptive characteristics — is also still the most attractive vision any great power in history has had to offer.”

Returning to the film *Unforgiven*: William Munny had lived, to put it lightly, a bad life. He had murdered for hire before turning away from his past life to raise a family. He returns to mercenary

killing reluctantly and out of a desire to provide a future for his motherless children. The Wild West, not unlike the international system, was an anarchic, violent, self-help world. As the film progresses, however, Munny changes. He has finished the job and collected the reward, which Munny gives to a partner. When he learns his friend has been killed, however, he decides he must act. Munny understands that Little Bill was a cruel tyrant who terrorized a town. Despite the long odds, despite his own reluctance, Munny pushes on to kill the sheriff out of a growing sense of justice. In the end, deserve had *everything* to do with it. With Little Bill out of the way, the town can return to a lawful, fair order and Munny can move to San Francisco to start a legitimate business, raise his family, and leave his life as a bounty hunter behind.

Where Munny falls on the ethical scale is open to debate. What is not in question is that his choices, born of his own history, circumstances, and values, were both consequential and not inevitable, a series of choices that would elude even the most sophisticated algorithm. Which is why we rewatch the movie, and reread the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and talk about both with our friends, drawing different lessons and insights every time, and try our best to understand how to make hard decisions about a complex world in the face of an unknowable future. ■

**Francis J. Gavin** is the chair of the editorial board of the Texas National Security Review. He is the Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor and the inaugural director of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University. His writings include *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958–1971* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2012). His latest book, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy*, will be published by Brookings Institution Press later this year.

