

Bringing the U.S. back into the international fold

Ali Gharib Inter Press Service Inter Press Service | Aug. 20, 2008



RE-ENGAGE! AMERICA AND THE WORLD AFTER BUSH: AN INFORMED

CITIZEN'S GUIDE by Helena Cobban, Paradigm Publishers (2008), 128 pages, \$69

Helena Cobban's new book, *Re-Engage! America and the World After Bush*, is not aimed at a target audience of officials, policy wonks and Washington elite think-tank types. So much is clear from a tagline running across the bottom of the cover: "An informed citizen's guide."

But that doesn't mean that all the politicians and policy-makers can't learn something from picking up a copy of Cobban's succinct, 120-page blueprint for bringing the United States back into the international fold -- and, in doing so, tackle some of the world's problems.

Relying on years of experience as a journalist and activist -- from both abroad and at home in the United States -- and informed by her Quaker congregation, Cobban has developed an eye for global strategic affairs. In her book, her insight lays out simple reasons for rejoining the world community and how to go about doing so.

Cobban is quick to dismiss many of the unilateral policies of the President George W. Bush administration as the folly of the world's "überpower" (a term borrowed from writer Josef Joffe). But the era of the überpower has passed, and the challenges of the future -- more than ever, says Cobban -- require cooperation.

She calls her alternative to the policies of unilateralism and U.S. exceptionalism "global inclusion," whereby the United States acts as an equal player in the world both in terms of the United States role and the interests of the globe as a whole -- which Cobban says will, in the interconnected, multi-polar world, no doubt serve long-term U.S. interests as well.

Concepts like global inclusion are explained through small and clear asides, demarcated by boxes, graphs and charts in the text. Global inclusion, itself, is laid out in six quick bullet points.

In even shorter form, inclusion would involve better relationships with the outside world, "recommitting" to

international institutions, restating a United States belief in human equality and building from it, supporting the principle of war avoidance, reframing strategic affairs through the people-centered lens of human security, and including marginalized voices in international decision-making.

Editor's Note: A video of Cobban discussing her book at the Miller Center of Public Affairs, the University of Virginia is available here: <http://millercenter.org/public/forum/detail/3952> [1].)

The first four of those ideas would not be unprecedented directions for United States foreign policy, as Cobban's language makes abundantly clear; the corresponding numbered items in her box -- repair, recommit, restate, and reaffirm -- all a start with re- for a reason. The notion is particularly true of reengagement with international institutions, such as the United Nations, which the United States was historically a key player in starting and leading.

Even the last two points, including marginalized voices and a human security-centered perspective, would not necessitate radical shifts in U.S. thinking -- both ideas have large followings both popularly and in policy circles both in the United States and abroad.

In fact, most of Cobban's ideas require only subtle paradigm shifts to make them viable policy options. Cobban is admittedly a pacifist (a Quaker perspective she easily defends in the preface: "[T]oday pacifism is a more realistic and necessary approach to world affairs than ever before ... raw military power is not able, on its own, to resolve the thorny international security challenges we face."). But that doesn't mean that she thinks the United States should sit back and let international terrorism run amok.

Instead, she suggests viewing terror -- as well as other world problems -- as challenges rather than as threats.

In general, if we look at something as a challenge rather than a threat, we can feel more self-confident about our ability to deal with it effectively, she writes in the first chapter. It helps, too, to recognize that this situation of feeling our persons and our communities are insecure is not one that is faced by America alone.

Her point is clear when she lays out some of humanity's biggest continuing and upcoming challenges: military security, global inequality, human rights abuse, climate change and environmental stability, and shifting power balances.

With terrorism, Cobban suggests another subtle shift from the idea of destroying terrorism, which she says gave the commanders of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan broad permission to destroy people and infrastructures that may or may not have constituted valid military targets, to defeating it.

She expands on the idea in another illuminating box where she states that terrorism was able to become entrenched and beyond the reach of the law...as Al-Qaeda did in Afghanistan in the 1990's and as many terror groups did in Iraq after [the U.S.-led invasion] in 2003.

In today's hyperlinked world, writes Cobban, state failure anywhere puts all of humanity at risk.

The connections between her challenges, as with human security and terrorism, only serve to strengthen Cobban's thesis that working together on a global level is imperative to easing all of the world's ills. And the connections are ever-present in Re-Engage!, with Cobban referring back and forwards to related concepts throughout.

Cobban connects, for example, human security, curbing human rights abuses, increased aid, reduced reliance on military force, and increased meaningful involvement in global institutions -- again, through increased aid and focusing military action through the U.N. and by way of increased and equal participation in its mandated actions -- in the book, particularly in the chapters on inequality and human rights.

The most readily understandable challenge of the interconnected world, however, is much simpler than that: climate change.

"Today, all of humanity is threatened by the consequences of global warming," writes Cobban. "The costs of global warming know no national boundaries."

During the Bush administration, U.S. exceptionalism in the realm of climate change has been particularly damning because, as Cobban points out, the United States has refused to do much on its own (until just recently, the U.S. led the world in carbon dioxide emissions) and has, at times, patently refused to lend its strength and credibility to the global effort by doing little on an international -- or even domestic -- level.

Speaking more broadly in her final chapter, "Rejoining the Rest of the World," Cobban states plainly, "We U.S. citizens and our leaders need to make the simple but profound mindset shift of seeing ourselves as truly -- and equally -- a part of global humanity, rather than as somehow standing aside from (or above?) the rest of the world's peoples."

"So now," Cobban continues, "we have a good basis on which to start building a foreign policy grounded more in a sense of hope and possibility than in a continuation of fear."

But her book is a citizen's guide, as she emphatically restates in her conclusion. Her book and its "good basis," she says, speaking directly to the citizen-reader, "will be effective only if you find some of the information and ideas here useful -- and then you go out and use them."

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Links:

[1] <http://millercenter.org/public/forum/detail/3952>