

What Is Power?

by William F. May

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Political realists have chiefly equated the state's power with military and police power, a monopoly on the use of force, which the state exercises to thwart invasion, theft, and murder. The ensuing stability afforded by this monopoly on the use of force allows secondarily for the development of economic power. In the eyes of the world, and certainly in the eyes of the 9/11 terrorists, these two kinds of powers are linked. The terrorists struck simultaneously both the Pentagon and the towering symbols of American economic ascendancy, "the commanding heights" at the foot of Wall Street.

There are other kinds of power. In the 1950's, the moralist Albert Camus responded to Stalin (who dismissively asked, how many armies does the Pope command?), by observing, power includes not only the force of a tornado but sap in the tree. The violence of shock and awe is one thing; the surge of organic growth, another.

Recently and less vividly, Joseph S. Nye distinguished hard from soft power. The hard power of sticks and carrots (military and economic), while basic, does not of itself enable a country such as the United States to sustain its influence or command. The country depends also upon its soft power, which often operates indirectly through respect for its laws and its law-abidingness, the attractiveness of its educational and cultural institutions, its support for international institutions and enduring alliances, and, for better or for worse, the world-wide addictiveness of its technologies and the penetration of its mass media.

(The distinction between hard and soft is not hard and fast. Ordinarily, economic power beats down like sticks when poor people and nations have few carrots and little or no bargaining power in dealing with the mighty. However, money can also fertilize the fields of poor nations under more forgiving conditions of loans and investments. Ordinarily, education functions as soft power; however, sometimes it imposes itself on a minority like forced feeding. It gags rather than nourishes; and it produces in a minority what Franz Fanon once called a "spiritual lockjaw.")

Ascendant power depends upon a material base from below and a kind of legitimacy from above or from its surround. The successive "empires" of the West — Dutch, British, and American — have depended upon the power of wind (the Dutch), steam (the British), and oil (the Americans) to drive them militarily and economically. But they have also depended, in varying degrees, upon a kind of legitimacy bestowed upon them by the communicability of their economic and soft powers. Ascendant powers fail when they have depleted (or failed to adapt or replace) their outmatched material base and when their economic and soft powers seem unshareable or undesirable.

No monopoly on the use of force can provide a nation and its citizens with absolute security. The U.S. seemed an exception. The accident of ocean barriers and a prodigal natural environment spared the ascendant U.S., until the last 60 years, the ordinary military and economic insecurities that other nations faced. However, after World War II, the U.S. (and the West in general) faced political anxiety in two successive waves: first, the threat of the Soviets; and second, the more recent threat

of failed states and terrorism. Political anxiety has shifted in the West from “the Russians Are Coming” to “the Coming Anarchy.”

This shift in anxiety can be expressed religiously. First, Americans on the Religious Right were prone to see the world through the prism of religious dualism; the kingdom of God pitted against the kingdom of Satan, order vs. malevolent order (the evil empire).

However, the year 1989 marked the collapse of this binary world in which two superpowers, with WMD at the ready, could either by accident or malice aforethought destroy one another. Thereafter, a second religious vision supplied a different narrative account of the political scene, not order vs. arbitrary, malevolent order (the political term for which is tyranny), but order vs. chaos (the political term for which is anarchy). The break-up of the Soviet Union, the disintegration of the Balkans, the implosions in Africa, and, most spectacularly on a clear, blue, telegenic day, called 9/11, the symbols of order in the U.S.A., the “commanding heights,” as it were, fell to the ground, ground zero.

Scriptures, older than the book of Genesis, supplied this second scenario, the ancient Babylonian Creation Myth, with its account of a cosmic struggle between two rival gods, Marduk, a kind of sheriff deity, symbol of law and order, and Tiamat, symbol of primordial chaos, a formless monster, issuing from the turbulent sea that engulfs and confounds all boundaries.

President Bush still operates rhetorically (and acts on) the old dualist vision of order vs. malevolent order — the evil empire, the axis of evil, evil-doers — but his reckless military reaction, against Iraq, let loose the confusion of anarchy (General Zinni complained that Bush hit a beehive with a baseball bat; we commonly speak of Iraq as a quagmire). The ancient Babylonian symbol for chaos was watery. Tiamat roils in the flood waters. We have experienced the shudder of chaos in Babylon itself and on our own Gulf Shores in Katrina.

America under-reacted to the devastation of Katrina. The floods exposed FEMA to be a Potemkin Agency, concerned with its own PR looks, while New Orleans and the Gulf Coast drowned — and continue to drown economically and psychologically. At the same time, America over-reacted to the external threat of anarchy, thus becoming itself the source of destabilizing power in the Middle East and the world at large. In over-reacting, the sheriff god broke down various boundaries between justice and injustice, order and chaos. The reasons for going to war proved groundless; the conduct of the war and the treatment of prisoners flouted the rules of war; the Justice Department suspended the normal protections due its citizens on surveillance: the doctrine of unitary executive authority poached on legislative and judicial powers; the burdens of the war in taxes and blood fell unequally on U.S. citizens; and the goal posts for terminating the war kept moving.

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Unquestionably, the U.S.A. wields preeminent power in the world today — hard power certainly — and soft power, more precariously, given the damage the Iraq war has exacted on the country’s standing in the world. How then should the country conceive itself as power-wielder in its relationship to others? First above others? First apart from others? Or, first among equals?

The Bush administration aggressively affirmed the doctrine of *first above others*. Its defense policy called for a military prowess exceeding that of all other nations combined; it replaced the stricter standard of a preemptive war (justified only in the case of an imminent threat) with the looser standard of a preventive war (justified on the grounds of a merely gathering threat). It rejected the constraints of the Kyoto treaty; it exempted the U.S.A. from the jurisdiction of a World Criminal Court; and it passed off some provisions of the Geneva Convention as “quaint” and “obsolete.” It appeared before the UN in the run-up to the Iraq War only grudgingly and tactically. It substituted a ragtag coalition of the willing for the stability of enduring alliances in its declaration and conduct of the war; and it patronizingly dismissed the warnings of its partners in those alliances as offering the counsel of “old Europe.”

In reaction to the imperialist misadventures of policies based upon first above others, some may be tempted to resort to an isolationist withdrawal from the world and embrace a policy of *first apart from others*. But such a path is no longer available strategically to a country that has demolished, through its transportation, economic, and communication systems, to say nothing of its addiction to oil, the capacity to survive alone. The path of isolationism is also dubious morally. It neither repairs the damages wrought by American hegemony nor discharges the responsibilities that fall upon a nation of ranking power.

The third self-conception, *first among equals* would recognize America’s current, prominent power as a fact of life but propose the course of leading rather than dominating or withdrawing from the world. This strategy would entail, Zbigniew Brzezynski has argued, building a global community of shared interests and enduring alliances, rather than hustling client states to trail after our unilateral sorties. The former National Security Advisor envisages particularly a core community of “politically energetic America, economically unifying Europe, and commercially dynamic East Asia,” a coalition which does not disenfranchise but empowers poor countries. Brzezynski insufficiently attends to the continuing services and promise of the UN, despite the irregular and sometimes surly treatment the organization and its professionals have received at the hands of both American realists and neo-conservatives.

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Whatever the particulars, any such strategy calls for a theology, at once humbler and more confident, than the religious outlook that has shaped American foreign policy in recent years. Although no theologian, Brzezynski touches on the larger scheme of things. There are no immortal nations or empires. “America’s global dominance” in the course of time “will fade.” (That fact should be religiously bearable on the grounds that God, not America is the beginning and end of all things.) However, this powerful but mortal country and its institutions can also leave a legacy in the course of its continuance under wise leadership. Wisdom, however, requires keeping the country’s fears and anxieties under control.

Biblical realism addresses the issue of fear and anxiety. Monotheism affirms that God, not Satan, not Tiamat, is the ultimate. Creaturely goods should be honored, nourished, and protected; but they are not God. The evils of injustice and chaos are *real*; but not *ultimate*. The obsessive struggle against evil does not exhaustively define human life. We misinterpret our lives, our politics, and much else when we split the world asunder into two gods, whether order vs. malevolent order or order vs. chaos. Religious dualists tend to be religiously grim and blind.

Dualists are grim in that they take the devil too seriously. They make the devil coequal to God. Down that road lies a foreign policy of runaway fear, either the fear of tyranny (the cold war fear of the USSR) or of anarchy (the current dread of terrorism). Extreme fear generates the drive for absolute security, which, in turn, justifies the unilateral presumption to empire. Meanwhile, imperialists in their isolation are prey to the fear that every challenge, every limit, undercuts their control. Thus their insecurity spreads unabated. Presumption and anxiety feed one another; and politics starves. Religiously grim people tend to rely exclusively on hard power. They prefer the total control of unilateral and often military confrontation to the untidiness of political compromise.

Dualists are also blind. They mistakenly identify absolute evil with those whom they oppose and absolute good with themselves. Thus for a second reason, they collapse the arena of politics and diplomacy. Dualists recoil from talking or bargaining with those whom they have identified without remainder with the devil. They forget that all fall short of the glory of God. Blinded by their own glory, they specifically overlook their complicity in the evils they oppose. Jittery leaders jump at every conceivable “gathering threat” as delivering the society into the grip of a tyrant or plunging the world into the abyss of anarchy. Therewith the country behaves like a loose cannon on the global scene aggravating the turmoil it seeks to thwart.

Monotheists should seek to support a foreign policy steadied by confidence rather than driven by the wild oscillations of presumption and fear. In general direction, an American foreign policy should be multi-lateral rather than unilateral, befitting a world leader not a world bully. It should address the deeper causes of global unrest, not simply their violent manifestations, broaden shared interests rather than press without limit American economic and military interests, and point toward long-range strategic alliances rather than tactical advantages pursued at any price morally.

These policies are hardly unique or distinctive to Christians. They are shareable across a broad spectrum of beliefs, secular and religious. Monotheists need not always feel obliged to forge distinctive policies on any and all issues to prove God’s uniqueness, as a country goes about the awesome business of wielding power.

At the same time, just policies call for a measure of sacrifice, however the nation conceives of itself and the power it exercises. An air of unreality haunts the current administration that rings the alarum on a world-historical struggle, yet refuses to increase taxes to pay for the war and relies on those with the humblest of resources to fight it. Such policies seem not only unjust but imprudent, unless leaders are invoking a religious vision to which they themselves do not subscribe, their hearts being set on other matters. The poet once warned of:

“...the snarl of the abyss
That always lies just underneath
Our jolly picnic on the heath
Of the agreeable...”

W.H. Auden