



Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris — How Misleading Beliefs and Assumptions Distort U.S. Foreign Policy

Christopher Fettweis, Tulane University

An unwilling and unprepared United States has, on occasion, found itself pulled into war. But this has been the exception, not the rule, because the United States has usually gone to war by choice rather than necessity, following a period of public debate. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, for example, was widely discussed in advance. For months leading up to the invasion, talking-head programs and op-ed pages were filled with arguments from people with all manner of foreign policy qualifications, or lack thereof. The possibility of regime change in Baghdad was easily at the top of the U.S. political agenda in 2002. The Iraq venture was not under-considered – yet it was nevertheless disastrous. As with many other questionable decisions in U.S. foreign policy, the debates that led to this war invoked distorting beliefs and sentiments involving fear, honor, glory, and hubris.

Common Beliefs and Their Role in Foreign Policy Blunders

The national debate about Iraq should have produced a good outcome in theory. In a free society, the “marketplace of ideas” and wide-ranging debates ought to allow arguments to rise to the surface on the basis of superior logic and evidence, while weaker arguments lose the day. As John Stuart Mill argued centuries ago, vigorous public debate should be the ally of truth and wisdom, producing the best policy outcomes. How, then, was the Iraq invasion launched on false premises and end up going so terribly wrong?

Foreign policy blunders are usually not too difficult to explain, once historians have had a chance to dig into archives and understand what policymakers believed at the time. States are typically led into disasters by leaders convinced they were making correct, even necessary, choices – doing their best under impossibly difficult circumstances. George W. Bush believed that Saddam Hussein posed a real threat to the United States, and thought that removing him would be rather simple. A generation earlier, Lyndon Johnson believed that it was important to preserve credibility in Vietnam, and certainly did not want to be remembered as the first president to lose a war. John F. Kennedy believed that the Fidel Castro regime in Cuba was not only a threat but fragile, vulnerable to collapse with the slightest superpower push.

Foreign policies, like all other human actions, are motivated by beliefs about how the world works. The key to understanding foreign policy failures, therefore, lies not in the actions themselves but in the beliefs that gave rise to them. Where do incorrect – pathologically incorrect – foreign policy beliefs come from? Or, to be blunt, why do so many American leaders hold under-examined views of the world that inspire foolish, counterproductive actions?

Misleading Orientations

My research suggests that a series of underlying, often unstated and unsupported beliefs undergird much of U.S. foreign policy, as follows: At times the United States is inspired to act because it is frightened of the dangers that seem to lurk behind the world's every corner. It struggles hard to maintain credibility, because it believes that by doing so it will be able to affect future the decisions of its many enemies. Whatever it does, however, the United States is secure in the knowledge that it is a unique country, blessed by God to bring about a better world by spreading freedom and fighting the evil of tyranny. As part of its mission, it is also important for the United States to remain not only the world's moral paragon but also its political, military, economic, scientific, educational, and cultural leader. Fortunately, pursuit of its lofty goals will be easier than it would be for other countries, since it is blindingly obvious to all that the United States can be trusted for, even if it errs at times, at least its intentions are beyond reproach.

In the realm of political ideas, ancient thinkers would recognize these beliefs and place them into familiar primal categories: fear, honor, glory and hubris. Modern leaders may be reluctant to admit that they are susceptible to such primal beliefs, yet such outlooks – simultaneously pervasive, influential, and under-examined – help account for some of the worst foreign policy decisions that the United States has made in recent years, from the Bay of Pigs to Vietnam and Iraq.

Outlooks	Associated Beliefs
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The world is a very dangerous place.• The United States will always be the target of evil actors.
Honor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Healthy credibility makes the achievement of foreign policy goals easier.• Cooperation is weakness that encourages challenges from other states.
Glory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Competition, among people and states, is healthy and always leads to the best possible outcomes.• In international affairs, it is important to be the best.
Hubris	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The United States is a unique, exceptional country.• The people of the United States can accomplish anything they set their mind to.

Every one of these orientations is demonstrably pathological. In the past they have worked together to bring about disaster after disaster in U.S. foreign policy. If uncorrected, they will certainly do so again.

The Need for Critical Reflection

Critical reflection needs to begin among leaders and, in time, propel new directions in broader public debates about war and foreign affairs. In order to improve the quality of their foreign policy choices, leaders should periodically examine the underlying beliefs that motivate their behavior, with the goal of minimizing the influence of the beliefs that are likely to produce low quality results, or those based upon thin reasoning and evidence. Consistently strong foreign policy cannot be built upon an irrational foundation. Rationality in decision making should be thought of as a minimum requirement for policymakers, for their own good as well as that of their country and the international system as a whole.

The sixteen-month-long pre-Iraq debate exposed just how deeply misleading beliefs about America in the world are embedded in the thinking of U.S. leaders and the general public. False assumptions have not disappeared and will again encourage poor, even disastrous, choices about war and international relations unless they are brought to light, questioned, and modified. Americans need to learn to see the world and their place in it in ways less distorted by fear and myths about honor, glory, and hubris.

Read more in Christopher J. Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).