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Supranationalism and Mythologies of American Power

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By Joyce Appleby

The Iraq war has produced more ironies than successes. The greatest of them is that an attack designed to demonstrate the preeminent power of the United States has ended up making clear that we now live in an era of supranationalism.

The United States stands poised between wanting to write its own ticket and wishing to speed efforts to solve the world's problems. Conspicuously first among equals, it is going to have to get used to the idea that national sovereignty belongs to the past.

Before the invasion of Iraq, it was possible to imagine American power as unbounded. Today the United States evokes images of Gulliver tied down by hundreds of Lilliputian concerns. Whether subduing Iraq and Afghanistan, combating sex trafficking, restricting nuclear weaponry or establishing order in the Middle East, it's obvious that the United States can't go it alone. Despite such an obvious reality, the Bush administration, intent on demonstrating hegemonic power, is unlikely to grapple with supranationalism in its remaining two years in office.

Gulliver ensnared

Examples of supranationalism abound. Nigeria accedes to a ruling of the World Court and agrees to vacate oil-rich Bakassi. Turkey wants to enter the European Union and accepts intense surveillance and hectoring questions about its internal practices. Great Britain, Russia, China, Germany, America and France cooperate to persuade Iran to limit its nuclear development through the United Nations, the grandest of all supranational bodies. A contested child custody case in Chile will be decided by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

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Formal international associations -- NATO, the European Union, the World Court, the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and security blocs for every continent -- now reach inside the borders of sovereign nations to monitor actions, influence decisions and allocate admissions and permissions. Whether it's a question of negotiating international trade agreements or raising the bar on human rights, supranational bodies loom large in the domestic affairs of the world's countries.

The camel's nose in the tent of national sovereignty appeared in 1975 when 35 nations gathered in Helsinki and signed a set of accords that promised respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

Spanish Judge Baltazar Garzon made the implications of these accords clear in 1999 when he issued an arrest warrant for Chile's former dictator Augusto Pinochet, who was visiting London for medical attention. Now a foreign official could take action against a leader of another country who abused human rights. If ever evidence of the reality of supranationalism was wanted, this was it.

When contemplating an era of supranationalism, it is well to remember that the nationalism it is replacing is scarcely more than two hundred years old. Nations rose on the footprints of kingdoms whose monarchs had suppressed local privileges. Modern economic and communication systems did the heavy lifting of unification.

Shared languages and sentiments helped generate pride in the new, centralized, authoritative states. By the end of the 19th century, the last of medieval Europe's principalities and city-states had coalesced into the nations of Germany and Italy.

Japan's defeat of the Russian navy in 1905 roused powerful, nationalist sentiments across Asia. Then the victorious Allies of World War I, with their cry of self-determination, created nations out of the old Hapsburg and Ottoman empires. Even though the Communist Revolution in Russia in 1917 carried the banner for universal workers' rights, it ended up turning Czarist Russia into a powerful nation of united soviet republics.

The full flowering of nationalism came in its twilight years after World War II. Wars of national liberation stripped Europe of its colonies, adding dozens of new nations in Africa and Asia. The Communist revolution in China turned the largest country in the world into a reinvigorated nation.

The devastations of two world wars demonstrated the inherent weakness of a global system based on autonomous nations and militarized rivals. Yet in a world where power still trumps authority and secrecy holds an advantage, the rules and transparency of international bodies remain at a disadvantage. They would probably remain a minor force in world affairs were the need for cooperation not so critical in combating hunger, global warming, epidemics, illegal immigration and terrorist attacks -- everything that ails the planet.

More legalistic than pragmatic, international bodies are easily scoffed at. They carry the burden of novelty and reform. Just as the United States has found it taxing to live up to the promises expressed in its Declaration of Independence, so have the members of the United Nations and signers of the Helsinki Accords struggled to subordinate powerful interests to their charter ideals.

Mired in conflicts, the world does not appear hospitable to supranational institutions. But it’s not the moment that counts; it's the momentum. And that lies with cooperative, international initiatives. Considering the

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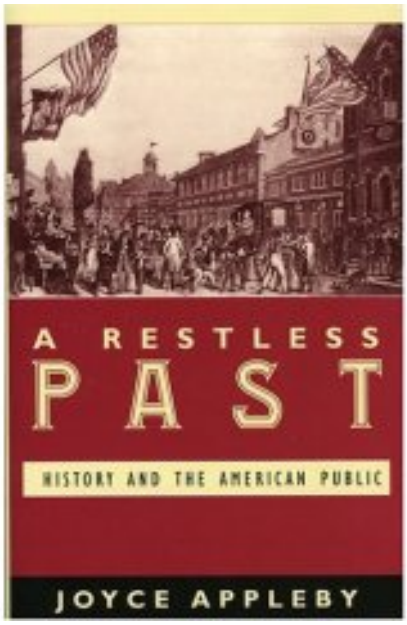
alternatives, even the world's most ardent go-it-aloners will have to yield.



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