



ANALYSIS

MORALITY, ETHICS, AND NATIONAL POWER¹

John Mark Mattox

Introduction

That states have only a finite number of tools at their disposal to make their influence felt in the world is a well-established concept. These tools are regularly referred to as the elements of national power. These elements include ways or methods broadly characterizable as diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement. Each of these ways or methods can be realized through the exercise of corresponding instruments—means or resources—such as the armed forces for the military, international police organizations for law enforcement, the banking system for finance, etc. All of these elements and instruments play significant—and in many cases essential—roles in the life of the state.

By their very nature, tools are designed to perform specific functions, within certain limits. Their proper application produces constructive results: the hammer for the builder, the scalpel for the surgeon, the knife for the butcher, and so on. Conversely, their improper application can result in destructive—even disastrous—results. The tools of national power are no different. The well-ordered state consistently observes the boundaries of proper and constructive use associated with the tools at its disposal, with the understanding that their misuse can be expected to produce destructive (and in the case of the case of the state, even grave and enduring) consequences. Implicit in this understanding is the role of morality and ethics in the life of the state and in its power-wielding actions. Properly understood, morality is as much an element of national power, and ethics as much an instrument of nation power, as any of the other, more commonly acknowledged elements and instruments, even if their critical role often receives only implicit acknowledgment.

Implicit understandings are adequate for states when general agreement exists among the body politic concerning the state's organizing principles, its basic set of values, etc. However, when basic understandings become fractured—or worse, are no longer shared, that which previously was implicit must be made consciously explicit. As the United States approaches the 250th anniversary of its experiment in democracy, it may be that the time has come to make explicit the role of morality and ethics in the exercise of national power.

American Exceptionalism

Although the term “American exceptionalism” has been much politicized in recent decades—and not always in a positive way, the idea of American exceptionalism is unmistakably rooted

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or the U. S. Government.



in the founding of the republic. The reverse side of the Great Seal of the United States (practically unnoticed in the teaching of American history but visible for inspection by anyone who has ever looked at the back-side of a one-dollar bill) contains two Latin phrases that clearly herald this claim. The first is, *Annuī cœptis*—“Providence has favored our undertakings”, the unmistakable claim by the nation’s Founders that no less than God Himself paved the path for America’s rise. The second is “*Novus ordo seclorum*”—“New order of the ages”, the equally unmistakable claim that the rise of the United States signaled a fundamental conceptual change in human political affairs. These claims are strong medicine; but regardless of where one stands in terms of personal belief with respect to the literal embrace of them, that these and similar claims provide the bedrock upon which the idea of America was conceived by its Founders is an established fact of history. Even before the birth of the nation, the continent’s earliest European immigrants sensed something exceptional about their undertakings. As John Winthrop, Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for 12 of its first 20 years, famously observed in 1630: “[W]e must consider that we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”² Implicit in this conceptualization was the understanding that—if not from the perspective of heaven, then certainly from the perspective of onlookers in other nations—American “power” ultimately resided in the good ends of its stated purposes and in the good lives of its citizens. As George Washington aptly summarized, “[V]irtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.”³ For, “Without virtue, and without integrity, the finest talents and the most brilliant accomplishments can never gain respect, and conciliate the esteem, of the truly valuable part of mankind.”⁴ Hence, “The foundations of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality; and the pre-eminence of free government, be exemplified by all the attributes which can win the affections of its citizens, and command the respect of the world.”⁵ In other words, the acknowledgment by the political world at large that America occupies a commanding place in the world would flow from the world’s recognition of America’s moral virtue.

While this sentiment is readily discerned in the writings of many of the nation’s Founders, perhaps nowhere is it clearer than in those of John Adams: “The happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue.”⁶ “If there is a form of government, then, whose principle and foundation is virtue, will not every sober man acknowledge it better calculated

² John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, written on board the *Arbella*, on the Atlantic Ocean, 1630, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Boston, 1838), 3rd series 7:31–48, available at <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

³ George Washington, *Maxims of Washington: Political, Social, Moral, and Religious*, collected and arranged by John Frederick Schroeder (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1855) p. 308.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The speeches, addresses and messages, of the several Presidents of the United States, at the openings of Congress and at their respective inaugurations: Also, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and Washington's farewell address to his fellow-citizens* (Philadelphia: Robert Desilver, publisher; Thomas Town, printer, 1825), p. 32.

⁶ John Adams, *Letters, Addressed to His Wife*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1841), Vol. 1, p.277.

to promote the general happiness than any other form?”⁷ “[H]ave you ever found in history one single example of a Nation thoroughly Corrupted—that was afterwards restored to Virtue—and without Virtue, there can be no political Liberty.”⁸

Public Virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private [Virtue], and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics. There must be a positive Passion for the public good, the public Interest, Honour, Power and Glory, established in the Minds of the People, or there can be no Republican Government, nor any real Liberty: and this public passion must be superiour to all private passions.”⁹ For, “When public Virtue is gone, when the national Spirit is fled, ... the Republic is lost in Essence, though it may still exist in form.”¹⁰

Conversely, the implication is, that America’s success on the stage of history will flow from its being viewed as a place of virtue; and this essence will be the inward, motivating and empowering force of the political form. Hence, Adams asks rhetorically, “If the people are capable of understanding, seeing and feeling the differences between true and false, right and wrong, virtue and vice, to what better principle can the friends of mankind apply than to the sense of this difference[?]”¹¹ And thus, as America becomes *empowered*, through its recognizability as a place of moral commitment and standard, it becomes a friend of mankind—in other words, the “city on a hill” that John Winthrop prophesied that it would be. When the world sees America in that light, that vision confers *power*. When that power informs the other elements of national power, the instruments by which the nation exerts its political will receive an inject of power that can come in no other way. As America’s friends and adversaries alike take note of the wellsprings of the nation’s power, they form opinions concerning where foundational commitment ends and rhetorical flourish begins; and it is they, not Americans themselves, that assign to America the only meaningful ascription of national power.

⁷ John Adams, “III. Thoughts on Government, April 1776,” Founders Online, National Archives, available at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0026-0004>.

⁸ “From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 21 December 1819,” Founders Online, National Archives, available at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7287>.

⁹ “From John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 16 April 1776,” Founders Online, National Archives, available at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0044>.

¹⁰ “From John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 27 September 1808,” Founders Online, National Archives, available at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5258>.

¹¹ John Adams, “Addressed To the Inhabitants of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay”, January 23, 1775, in John Adams et al., *Novanglus and Massachusettensis; or, Political Essays, Published in the Years 1774 and 1775, on the Principal Points of Controversy, between Great Britain and her Colonies; the Former by John Adams, Late President of the United States; The latter by Jonathan Sewall, Then King’s Attorney General of the Province of Massachusetts Bay. To which are added a number of letters lately written by President Adams to the Honourable William Tudor; Some of which were never before published* (Boston: Hews & Goss, 1819), p. 11.

Virtue, Morality, and Ethics

As noted above, George Washington, equated “virtue” with “morality.” Others of the Founders expressed a close relationship between the two in similar ways. The precise relationship between the two has been a matter of learned discourse since at least the time of Plato and Aristotle. What has never been in serious dispute is the claim that there exists an important and positive relationship between the two. That relationship is apparent in the ancient Greek conception captured in the word *ἀρετή* (*areté*), which is frequently rendered in English as “virtue” or “excellence”; and while both renderings can be broadly applied, at the core of their relationship, one finds morality—*moral* virtue and *moral* excellence, morality itself standing as a clear acknowledgement that some human choices are good, and some are evil. “Morality” is perhaps best understood as the claim that there exists such a thing as objective right and wrong, and that virtue is evidenced in good and right choices.

For a committed realist of the ilk that recognizes nothing beyond that which is expedient, the conversation can stop right here. However, America has never fundamentally embraced the idea that genuine “goodness” is nothing more than window dressing for political advantage, even if the deeds of some of its leaders and citizens have suggested the contrary—sometimes dramatically so. America’s fundamental operating premises have always included the notion that there is such a thing as “virtue” and hence, that there is such a thing as “the moral.” “Ethics” is perhaps best understood as the rational procedures by which the quest for virtue and “the moral”—two sides of the same coin—is operationalized. Ethics consists of decision procedures, rationally deduced throughout the development of the Western intellectual tradition, for adjudicating cases where claims of what counts as good or what counts as the “greater” good, come into conflict.

The need for such adjudication is obvious in matters of private conduct, but it is no less essential in the course of decision making that affects the larger body politic. As international political theorist Martha Finnemore notes,

Any policy decision of consequence is taken within a dense web of normative claims that often conflict with one another and create serious ethical dilemmas for decision makers. After all, if the prescriptions of norms and values were always clear or if they never conflicted with one another, we would not have to make any decisions; we would just follow the prescriptions. In this sense, normative conflict is what creates decisions since, absent conflicting normative claims, there would be nothing to decide.¹²

Thus, while many bureaucratic decisions are accomplished as the routine, work-a-day business of government, those requiring adjudication—including ethical adjudication—are a special province of strategic leaders. Thus, ethics, and its subject matter, morality, must be

¹² Martha Finnemore, “Paradoxes in Humanitarian Intervention,” in *Moral Limit and Possibility in World Politics*, ed. Richard M. Price (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 198.

seen as belonging to the finite set of tools that states can bring to bear in their interactions with the world.

(Mis)understanding the Role and Place of Morality and Ethics in Strategy

America's contemporary strategic policy documents invoke endless references to the nation's "values." Indeed, taken together, the list of things so designated is so long as to leave the thoughtful observer to wonder how the nation prioritizes its stated goals; for, if *everything* is valuable, then *nothing* is valuable—merely a list of fungibles that change with the time and with political administration. Indeed, one of the fundamental characteristics of fungibles is the malleability of their valuation. Perhaps that is why the nation's Founders did not speak in terms of values; they spoke in terms of *virtues*—*moral virtues*. Values change. Values rise and fall. Values come into vogue and then pass from popular favor. Virtues, on the other hand, have an enduring quality—another point that philosophers have recognized since the dawn of the Western intellectual tradition. America's friends and adversaries know that any avowed commitment merely to "values" is tantamount to a commitment to hold a puff of smoke in one's hand. They know this, because they observe the same phenomenon in their own countries; and the less stable either their form of governance or their actual government, the more ethereal the whole idea of "values" becomes: nothing more than political fiat or dictatorial whim. Perhaps that is why that states on the autocratic end of the "value" spectrum have an emigration problem—*not* an immigration problem. The problem of immigration belongs to states, like America, that are perceived to have committed themselves to the practice, even though imperfectly, of virtue such that, even if the nation's challenges are significant and its contradictions large, its most fundamental commitments are seen to embody a quest for "the Good" rather than merely for the expedient; and that perception gives a nation thus committed access to a kind of *power* that can be obtained in no other way.

It follows, then, that a great deal hinges on the degree to which morality (and its implementing system of tools, ethics) factor into calculations of national interest. When this nexus becomes clear, chimerical concepts like "values" become more profitably supplanted by concepts like morality and ethics. But how do these concepts fit into larger conceptual schemes for wielding national power?

Morality as Element, Ethics as Instrument

For as long as the concept of nation-state has existed, there has coexisted at least the tacit recognition that the state has only a finite set of ways (methods) and means (resources) for exercising power. The former are largely conceptual (for example, power exercised via diplomacy, intelligence, armed force, or the economy, etc.) while the latter tend toward the tangible (for example, a diplomatic corps, intelligence services, actual armed forces, the

producers of goods and services, etc.). In the current century, recognition has been accorded to a larger set of tools,¹³ to include finance (as manifested, for example, in the state's ability to modulate the transfer of funds), information (as manifested, for example, in the state's ability to modulate the flow of data), and law enforcement (as manifested, for example, in the state's ability to pursue criminals through cooperative international networks). The well-ordered state is cognizant of all these ways and means, understands their intricate interrelationships, and is able to apply them to realize its national interests.

Note that each of the elements of national power identified above is associable with government institutions: Specific bureaucratic departments and agencies exist to serve as the locus or loci for the operationalization of each element of national power. In this respect, ethics is different. There simply exists no granite building with the words "Department of Ethics" engraved over the entrance. However, that does not mean that ethics is any less instrumental (or morality any less elemental) than any of the other elements and instruments of national power—far from it. Indeed, in order for America to achieve the high purposes it claims for itself, these are things that must supervene upon and permeate how all other elements of power are conceived and all other instruments of power are applied. Indeed, for a nation to be guided by virtue in the way contemplated by the Founders, every strategic calculation of national power must be inseparably wedded to the ethical question, "Do the ways and means associated with politically acceptable policy X comport with the ends of morality *as well as* the ends of political interest? If the answer is "yes," then the policy deserves serious consideration. If the answer is "no," the policy requires substantive review. In either case, the question must be asked; and it is the fact that the question must be asked in the first instance that identifies morality as an element and ethics as an instrument of national power.

In the Eyes of the World

In the final analysis, what counts as national power is far more dependent upon the perception of the external observer than it is upon self-admiring view of the state that claims the power. For example, a state might claim to possess great military prowess; but unless a potential military adversary views the claim with trepidation if not awe, the claim of prowess does not actually generate much power. The same can be said with respect to all attempted displays of national power. However, when such displays are ethically informed in a way that resonates with onlooking, external powers, the need for trepidation and awe can, in some instances at least, give way to mutual respect and cooperation. Of course, some actors in the anarchic international world will always resort to brute force and intimidation and will have it no other way. However, that present reality does not mean that America's policy choices—

¹³ Cesar Augusto Rodriguez, Timothy Charles Walton, and Hyong Chu, "Putting the 'FIL' into 'DIME': Growing Joint Understanding of the Instruments of Power," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 97, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2106566/putting-the-fil-into-dime-growing-joint-understanding-of-the-instruments-of-pow>.

even the ones that appropriate brute force and intimidation—cannot or should not be ethically informed. Indeed, if America is to assert itself in the world without laying aside its claim to be “a city upon a hill,”¹⁴ those policy choices *must* be so informed.

Examples can be found throughout American history—and for that matter, throughout the history of humanity—both of leaders who rationalized ethical demands to suit their own ends and those who made difficult ethical choices for which they risked paying a high political price. When faced with the constitutionally unprecedented exigencies of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln found himself confronted with ethical dilemmas unparalleled in the history of the nation up to that time and was forced to settle for imperfect solutions subject to criticisms from multiple vantage points. However, he sought to resolve those vexing conundrums “with malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God [gave him] to see the right”¹⁵—all toward the end of “achiev[ing] and cherish[ing] a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”¹⁶ Clearly, Lincoln possessed a clear understanding of the conscious and conscientious application of ethical principles to meet the ends of morality in the enduring service of the state.

Perhaps no 20th-century example of this same conscious weighing of moral considerations is more prominent than that of President Harry S Truman as he weighed the consequences of dropping the world’s first atomic bomb. The literature on the rightness or wrongness of Truman’s decision is a cottage industry all its own; and whether or not a nuclear weapon is ever again detonated in anger, his deliberations will continue to be the touchstone case for ethical inquiry. Not surprisingly, hindsight assessments of Truman’s decision are far from uniform, spanning the entire spectrum from strong condemnation to high praise. As with all political decisions of great moment, his decision involved world-altering tradeoffs, both with substantial, negative consequences; but such is the nature, as Finnemore reminds us above, of ethical dilemmas. What is beyond dispute is that Truman was not oblivious to the ethical dilemma, and he made his decision in light of the dilemma, attempting to weigh all moral considerations bearing on the question and successfully balancing at least some of them. As this example illustrates, it was not the *end* alone—important as that was—that Truman’s decision yielded but also his *ways* and *means* that incorporated morality and ethics in his final determination of that end. One may disagree with the decision of a President in whose shoes he or she did not have to walk, but one cannot dismiss out of hand the claim that Truman understood morality and ethics as included among the elements and instruments of national power, respectively.

¹⁴ John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, written on board the *Arbella*, on the Atlantic Ocean, 1630, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Boston, 1838), 3rd series 7:31–48, available at <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

¹⁵ Image 8 of Abraham Lincoln papers: Series 3. General Correspondence. 1837-1897: Abraham Lincoln, [March 4, 1865] (Second Inaugural Address; endorsed by Lincoln, April 10, 1865), manuscript copy, including Lincoln’s emendations, available at Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mal.4361300/?sp=8&st=image&r=-0.439,0.406,1.739,1.032,0>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In the depths of the Cold War, President Ronald Reagan (who not infrequently invoked the “city upon a hill” metaphor¹⁷) found himself in ideological combat with an adversary whose world view diametrically opposed that of his own, but concerning which he was able to ease the tensions built up over multiple decades with a rapprochement that included an appeal to his adversary’s foundational human sensibilities. In a toast to General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev at the conclusion of a 1987 summit in Washington, Reagan recounted a story from V-E Day, reported by a U.S. diplomat, who was deeply moved by the words of a Red Army major standing near him: “Now it’s time to live.”¹⁸ Of those words, Reagan said,

I’m convinced that history will ultimately judge this summit and its participants not on missile count but on how far we moved together to the fulfillment of that soldier’s hopes.

We have prided ourselves, Mr. General Secretary, on our realism, that we’ve come to this summit without illusions, with no attempts to gloss over the deep differences that divide us, differences that reach to the core values upon which our political systems are based. But we said, even so, we can make progress; even so, we can find areas of agreement and cooperation.

But perhaps . . . we should look at an even deeper and more enduring realism. It is a reality that precedes states and governments, that precedes and surpasses the temporary realities of ideology and politics. It is the reality that binds each of us as individual souls, the bond that united Soviets and Americans in exultation and thanksgiving on that day of peace, 42 years ago.¹⁹

For Reagan, the best and most productive kind of realism—the common currency of most politics—was a realism informed by morality and ethics. While Reagan was well known for his commitment to the principle of “peace through strength,”²⁰ he understood too that the elements and instruments of national power, shorn of morality and ethics, would not yield the kind of peace to which democracies rightly aspire. That he succeeded in communicating this vision to General Secretary Gorbachev is evident from Gorbachev’s post-summit report “to the Politburo that the people he dealt with in Washington were ‘guided by the most

¹⁷ The author is indebted to an anonymous peer reviewer for this observation.

¹⁸ Ronald Reagan, “Toast at a Dinner Hosted by Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev” December 9, 1987, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, available at <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/toast-dinner-hosted-soviet-general-secretary-mikhail-gorbachev>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See, for example, Keeghan Sweeney and Roger I. Zakheim, eds., *Peace Through Strength: Reflections on President Reagan’s Guiding Principle for our National Defense* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, 2018), available at https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/356470/peace_through_strength_booklet.pdf.

natural human motives and feelings.’²¹ He no longer spoke of political dinosaurs and cavemen.”²²

America neither possesses any element of power nor exercises any instrument of power in perfect measure. However, the degree to which its elements of power are viewed as understood, and instruments of power are viewed as being exercised, in ethical ways that yield truly moral ends, those elements and instruments become endowed with greater *power* in the eyes of those viewing America from the outside. The reverse is also true: When America’s elements and instruments of power are viewed as being understood or exercised by the state in other than virtuous ways, the elements become diluted, and the instruments become blunted. For example, promises made by America’s diplomats but not honored in practice diminish American power. Intelligence misused by America for devious ends diminishes American power. Military deployments that leave far-flung places in a state of impoverishment and ruin rather than improved and flourishing diminish American power. American economic ventures that exploit and suck the livelihood or even life out of vulnerable populations diminish American power. Law enforcement apparatuses that employ techniques like extraordinary rendition or endless detention without trial diminish American power. Information organs that propagandize but do not inform diminish American power. Financial penalties levied on leaders of adversary states, but which actually do untold harm to the lives of the innocent and powerless, diminish American power. In sum, the very fact that diminution of national power occurs when the element of morality and the instrument of ethics are omitted—or worse, flouted—is likely the surest evidence of their indispensable role as element and instrument of national power respectively.

Wide divergences of view exist as to which national ends should be pursued and how these ends should be sought. However, the fact that both morality and ethics occupy a place in the American psyche and factor into its political equations, even though imperfectly, is the fact that principally distinguishes American governance from the kind found in tyrannical or illiberal regimes. This fact serves as a beacon of hope for peoples of the world who find their most basic rights denied; and the fact that these same peoples turn to the American model rather than to alternative totalitarian models confers *power* on America. It follows, therefore, that when America blurs, of its own policy volition, distinction between itself and less desirable alternatives, the answer is almost always a result of its having ignored the supervening role of morality and ethics.

Conclusion

Not only are ways and means important, but the ends are important as well. Policies that are morally well-founded and ethically coherent in ways and means that are aimed at morally

²¹ Anatoly S. Chernyaev, *My Six :Years with Gorbachev* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), p. 142, quoted in Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005), p. 282.

²² Matlock, p. 282.

well-founded and ethically coherent ends will be more influential both domestically and abroad and far more likely to endure the test of time²³—no small consideration for a nation that seeks to be a “city on a hill”. When the elemental concept of moral virtue and the instrumental tools of ethics by which virtue is sought to be realized in the public sphere become properly acknowledged, not only as elements and instruments but indeed the very *wellsprings* of national power, there will be no need to announce to other nations that America is prioritizing itself before other nations; for other nations will recognize for themselves the advantages that accrue from those wellsprings of power. America’s exercise of its other instruments will become, in some measure at least, viewed by others with a less jaundiced eye and possibly even with a more welcoming one. Adversaries will be more likely to fear America’s strengths because they see them as founded upon solid moral principle rather than on shifting sands of partisan expediency. Friends will be more likely to embrace America with greater confidence because they understand that virtue has a more enduring quality than will ever derive from espousing any value *du jour*.

Is America a land of moral virtue? Does it actually embrace a commitment to ethically informed public conduct that gives vitality to principle, without which, principle would become mere political pretense? Those are important questions, but they are questions that lie beyond the scope of the present essay. For now, it is sufficient to understand, as Winthrop did, as Washington did, as Adams did, and as many others who have hoped for the durability of America have understood, that morality is so deeply woven into the fabric of national power and ethics into the successful employment of the associated instruments of national power that morality and ethics themselves become inseparable from these elements and instruments. A nation may, for example, exercise its diplomatic instruments without exercising its military ones, or exercise its informational instruments without exercising its economic ones, but any exercise will be diminished or augmented by the way in which it exercises, in tandem, the elemental concepts of morality and the instrumental tools of ethics in pursuit of its national aims.

John Mark Mattox is an Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy at the National War College, National Defense University, and the College’s inaugural Chair in Leadership, Character, and Ethics.

²³ The author is indebted to an anonymous peer reviewer for this incisive observation, which appropriates many of the reviewer’s own words.