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Why the State Still Matters

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IN DEFENCE OF THE STATE

as the source of nearly all modern public goods, and why better leaders must be brave enough to use it again for this century’s problems

BY JEREMI SURI

The paradox of the American presidential campaign season is that candidates are competing for the most powerful office in the world, just as they assert the limits of state power. Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney criticizes the harmful consequences of government efforts to regulate a global economy. He points to high corporate taxes and excessive federal regulation of innovation as major American problems. Democratic President Barack Obama demands fairness and protection for citizens whom the state cannot promote to full participation in the overall wealth of a rich, but very unequal, society (see the One Pager by Dan Vexler at p. 5). Obama does not defend a more vibrant social welfare state. Instead, he demands that federal and state governments rescind their preferences for wealthy and connected groups through measures like the ‘Buffett Rule’ in order to ensure that millionaires do not exploit tax loopholes.

Republicans and Democrats agree on the limits of state power abroad; none of the candidates has articulated a vision of global change led by Washington. Both Romney and Obama are skeptical of big ideas, like ‘democratization’ and ‘development.’ Both also favour a gradual reduction of America’s presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are foreign policy realists who affirm American power, but also acknowledge very severe limits on Washington’s global leverage.

These candidate positions represent a historical departure from the post-WW2 faith in the progressive capabilities of state power – especially when wielded by a strong, centralized government bureaucracy. The focus for both Republicans and Democrats is on the challenges of the moment and the failures of traditional government institutions. The debate centres on pragmatic and ideological responses to political and economic crises that accept the fundamental weakness of government – betraying the fact that we are living in an anti-institutional moment. We are living in a moment that plainly undervalues
the vital things that states must do. And yet such disparagement of the state and its bureaucratic arms – just as we struggle to address our current problems – will, sadly, constrain the future possibilities for policy improvement. For rhetoric about state failure is, in fact, self-fulfilling.

This focus on the person – on the image, character and ideology of the American president and his foreign counterparts is a symptom of this phenomenon. It exemplifies the prospects for positive change through established institutions, voters are looking to individuals who promise to transcend their government bureaucracies. They are looking for the Weberian charisma.

The great German sociologist of the late 19th century defined charisma as the prophetic ‘magic’ of an individual who promises to break through the barriers of institutions and traditions in order to create new solutions to inherited and seemingly intractable problems. In a period when governments have struggled to manage economic turbulence, demographic imbalances and strategic threats, and accountability for actions – the hallmarks of government bureaucracy – we hear only talk of ‘scaling back’, ‘deregulating’ and ‘cutting costs’. These are all virtues, but they assume a false horizon for the purposes and aims of the modern social welfare state. These approaches reject the post-war promise of shared social insurance, security, fairness and equality. Even past Republicans like Ronald Reagan and conservatives like Helmut Kohl would not have been able to build upon their rhetorical statements about skepticism about state investments in economic growth, education and democratization. The Cold War ended, after all, with major American and West German governments committed to peace and security, universal higher education and European unification (see the Tête à Tête interview with Huert Widrner at p. 8). The collapse of communism marked the success of the post-war welfare state, triumphantly on display in Western Europe. Twenty years later, all of this seems like ancient history – at least judging by the political rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic.

Barack Obama, Stephen Harper, David Cameron and Angela Merkel have all run away from many inherited government commitments to public welfare, equality and social justice. They have substituted individual rights and national competitiveness for prior attention to the ‘public good’. It is not striking how little leaders use that last phrase in today’s world!

Public figures frequently invoke the phrase ‘national interest’ in order to ensure that states, but they claim to transcend their states. They are strong leaders acting in many parts of the world – often because of their interdependent phenomena or systems. Capitalism needs state intervention as much as it needs money and markets. They are all deeply ambitious figures, but their ambitions are not building and creating.

THE REALITY OF OUR WORLD

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charismatic alternatives to traditional patterns of behaviour appear attractive – perhaps necessary. Of course, charismatic figures are set up for failure if they cannot use government institutions in ways that both challenge and are supportive of their power. Effective presidents and prime ministers need well-functioning and legitimate bureaucracies.

Every major leader in North America and Europe, however, and through critical institutions for present problems. Each one promises to create new solutions through different combinations of the ‘market’ and the ‘state’, both in the institutions that support their power. Effective presidents and prime ministers need well-functioning and legitimate bureaucracies.

various functions – terrorist attacks, nuclear proliferation, job losses, and even tax increases – from happening, not on providing a positive, kinesthetic and emotional experience. They are the self-defeating element of charisma that Weber also anticipated – when leaders de-trust government bureaucracy – we hear only talk of ‘scaling back’, ‘deregulating’ and ‘cutting costs’. This was the story of the Great Depression that lasted from 1929 to 1939. It was the pattern repeated in the years before 2008. The salvation from crisis in both periods – to be sure – has involved a return to more direct government loans, investments and extensive attention to government institutions and extensive attention to government institutions and extensive attention to government institutions. The greater good achieved by the great crisis of 1930s – the EU. The EU.

national security is also global security. For the US, Canada, Western Europe and societies in every other region of the world, one cannot assure stability, safety and openness in one state, without a corresponding effort to ensure that other places from exporting violence. Failed states are indeed a threat to everyone (see the Tête à Tête interview with Loyola de and others on the agencies of the EU and the UK). This is also the obvious route to budget-cutting in a time of austerity: slash the bureaucracy and demand that citizens do more for themselves. Instead of rational management of resources, and to train supporters to use them effectively. In parts of Pakistan and Yemen – to take just two examples – non-state actors dominate local society with impunity, and with arms. Weapons and money are evident in more stable societies too, including Israel, Italy and the US. And so modern governments do not have anything close to Weber’s monopoly of sanctioned force.

These conditions provide one of the most important arguments for continued attention to the legitimate and necessary role of state intervention.

Security is not simply a matter of protecting borders and preventing terrorist attacks. It involves creating conditions for the basic functions of a healthy, safe and predictable transportation, to access to crucial commercial resources, and assistance in times of disaster and threat. A secure society is safe, predictable and open. The elements of security that include more than brute police power are crucially important in a context in which there are many groups that can threaten daily livelihoods. Security is an essential state function that requires not only resources, but also effective management, regulation and accountability. Too little security imperils freedom and prosperity. Too much security, of course, has the identical effect. Finding the right balance is the most difficult and important task of every leader. It requires careful and extensive attention to government institutions and their correct functioning. Cutting government is not a solution. Managing government security for the public good is the only appropriate way in which to think about security.

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of security. Successful NATO efforts to unseat Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 are a case in point. Military deployments are, however, only one part of this dynamic: Aid transfers, loans, weapons sales, economic sanctions and concerted exercises in rhetorical pressure are all tools of non-military force – deployed by every large society in different mixes in order to assert influence and prevent potential threats. The speed and range of global change have contributed to this dynamic – encouraging more state intervention abroad, not less. For long-term security, government institutions and effective leadership are more indispensable than ever before.

But what should the 21st century state do? The contemporary debate about how much or how little state power we need is misguided. Campaigns for president on platforms of ‘limited government’ are dishonest and demagogical. For the reality of our world is that government is vital to all elements of personal freedom. It is good government that distinguishes free and wealthy societies from countries that appear stuck in poverty, instability and civil war. The man-

agreement of state institutions and the use for citizen empowerment is the crucial variable distinguishing ‘developed’ from ‘developing’ nations. Comparisons between South and North Korea, or between India and Pakistan, make this point very clear.

A similar argument applies to our contemporary discussion of foreign policy. Debates about whether or not to intervene abroad, and whether or not to ‘nation-build,’ are unhelpful. Security in a global context invariably requires some efforts at targeted foreign intervention and nation-building. Large states cannot assure their peace, stability and prosperity without reach beyond their borders. The real questions are, of course: where, when and how? Which large states – like the US – focus their overseas efforts? When is the right time to act against an emerging threat? How should a large state allocate its military and non-military resources for the greatest effect?

These are questions that turn on deploying the power of government institutions in the international system – rather than fleeting to simple condemnations of such power. Although NGOs and inter-governmental organizations (including the UN) help, they do not substitute for the strategic use of state resources for international security. Non-state actors remain deeply constrained in their resources, their influence and, indeed, their legitimacy.

The global system of nation-states is alive and well. Contemporary rhetoric is saturated with condemnations of bureaucracy and longings for alternatives on the political left and the political right. These claims are not only premature; they exaggerate. They are also historically narrow-minded.

As a constellation of ideas and institutions, the modern nation-state has created numerous wars and other forms of suffering. It has also provided a foundation for the greatest growth in human peace and prosperity. Human beings live in a dynamic, cooperative, orderly and predictable world thanks to the system of nation-states (see the 9/11 & 7/7 interviews with Steven Pinker in GB’s Fall 2011 issue). They can travel globally and live locally with unprecedented resource access because of trade and security between nation-states. They can think well beyond their own horizons because of nation-state institutions that educate, protect and cure their ills. In short, the nation-state is far from perfect, but it furnishes public goods that no other set of institutions is prepared to provide with comparable consistency.

The biggest hindrance to human prosperity in many parts of today’s world is too little government, not too much. The most pressing source of insecurity is too little nation-state building in violent regions, not too much. The US has tried to address these problems by diminishing its own state power – even as the White House sends more soldiers across the globe. This contradiction has contributed to more frustration at home and abroad. The juxtaposition of the recent war in Iraq and the 2008 economic crash is evidence of this troubling dynamic: Americans, in particular, expect too much with too little collective effort. They demand the benefits of government without the concomitant costs and sacrifices.

The solution is not to continue to diminish state power, or to renounce efforts to improve the world. Low expectations only encourage more suffering and decline. The challenge of the times is once again to think big – working to rebuild and reallocate state power for better purposes in backyards and distant neighbourhoods alike.

The nation-state is the best hinge for a new-century community of peaceful and prosperous peoples. What the world needs most of all is a new set of creative, cosmopolitan state leaders, willing to redesign the modern machinery of bureaucracy for beneficial ends. Instead of trashing the state, there ought to be sober thought and talk about how to use it in bolder and better ways. | GB