

ELECTION 2008: Voting the Common Good

Since world unity seems daily more operative it must allow all peoples, to use the phrase, to be the architects of their own fortune. International relations, far more than is right, have thus far been based on force and this, alas, has been as it were the chief characteristic of the past. May the joyous era be reached when international relations will bear only this hallmark, that is, regard and friendship to be expressed in assistance with mutual respect and collaboration based on it, that individual nations accepting with full conviction their obligation and duty to promote the improvement of all.

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International Relations for the Global Common Good

The war in Iraq, and now Pakistan and Afghanistan, are the predominant foreign policy foci of the debates among the Presidential Candidates, both Republican and Democratic. Even these debates focus on a narrow range of issues, primarily the timing of U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq and how to keep Pakistan from disintegrating. However, U.S. international reach has a much wider breadth and global impact than what will eventually happen in Iraq. It is often said by non-U.S. citizens, that everyone in the world should vote for the President of the United States because U.S. policy has such a pervasive effect on the whole world.

Most Americans believe that the U.S. has a unique responsibility in world affairs, arising from a sense of manifest destiny that runs through our history and deep in our psyche. But there is a basic irony. Despite this belief, the majority of Americans pay little attention to U.S. foreign policy unless the nation is directly affected by it, such as the war in Iraq or the loss of jobs related to globalization. They have a simple trust that our elected leaders will do the right thing in the international context.

Moreover, the country is not well served by the media in its coverage of often complex issues in this globalizing world. This lack of attention is most visible during election seasons, both presidential and congressional, where domestic issues dominate the debate and questions of the integral global dimensions of domestic issues and our international relations are seldom raised. This is a serious omission on the part of the candidates, the media and the citizens at large who generally ignore the global issues. Today global issues are multiple and grave: nuclear proliferation, global terrorism, torture and other gross violations of human rights, failed states, the Israel/Palestine conflict, failure of diplomacy, global warming, global poverty, to name a few. We cannot hope for security and peace at home in the midst of conflict and deprivation across the world.

U.S. citizens in general also have a positive and benign image of the role of the U.S. government in world affairs – an image not shared by people in many parts of the world. Many U.S. citizens were perplexed or defiant in the face of rising anti-Americanism that accompanied the decision to go to war with Iraq and critical of the United Nations Security Council which was not convinced that U.S. arguments for war were sufficient to endorse a preemptive invasion of another country. They assumed that we had been attacked and it is our right to protect our national security. While it is indisputable that a nation has the right to defend itself, its people and its values, it is equally clear that a nation must do so in a way consistent with internationally recognized ethical and moral values or it risks losing its moral authority and leadership. If we had listened to and cooperated with the UN Security Council – which was, after all, right to be skeptical of U.S. claims – the world would not be in the volatile and destructive situation we have today.

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Events of recent years—9/11, global terrorism, the cold war, the specter of Vietnam, the flood of migrants globally and domestically and the rhetoric of fear that pervades our political discourse—have dulled our moral imagination for envisioning a world shaped by the global common good. This failing is a fatal flaw.

Our times demand a fresh and creative look at how the U.S. conducts international relations. The U.S. is the major world power, politically, economically and militarily. This preeminence brings with it the preeminent responsibility to promote the global common good in the quest for a more peace-filled and just world order.

The Global Common Good

Every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result the common good, that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family. (Gaudium et Spes, article 26)

The concept of the global common good is rooted in some of the most basic principles of our faith tradition: that every human person has intrinsic dignity and is of equal value before God; that we are called into right relationship with each other and with all of creation. The good of one person or nation cannot be guaranteed while ignoring or undermining the well-being of other people in the global community.

It is essential that U.S. foreign policy reflect our highest ideals as a nation. The most pressing challenges before us, including terrorism, weapons proliferation, hunger, global warming, resource depletion, migration and disease, especially HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, transcend national boundaries and require cooperative action.

The U.S. Catholic bishops write about “loving our neighbors in a shrinking world.” Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson (2007) describes the global common good as the awareness of being bound together — of loving our neighbor as ourselves regardless of national origin and asks if we can as a nation embrace a politics of global community and compassion?¹

Obstacles and Anxieties

Our efforts to act for the global common good in our international relations are threatened by twin fears that globalization regularly inspires: fears of competition and conflict. It is natural to be protective of our own people and nation. But in the Biblical and the Christian tradition, patriotism is always bal-

anced by a deeper obligation to all humankind. God wills the good of all, and so must we.

In the modern era, we have turned to national governments for safety and well-being. We have developed an understanding of the common good marked by many nations seeing to their domestic needs, and working together for the international common good. Globalization has profoundly stressed the ability of governments to live up to this ideal so deeply etched in our collective psyche.

In the Economy . . . Economic globalization has severely limited governments' ability to protect citizens from economic upheaval. Free trade agreements place workers around the world in direct competition. Workers feel increasingly vulnerable as stable jobs disappear to distant lands undermining livelihoods and local communities. These economic changes tempt us to view our relationship with others as one of unavoidable competition—causing us to shrink from collective action for the common good into competition and disregard.

On Immigration . . . Immigrants are made the focus of our economic anxieties, despite evidence that they pose little threat to most workers. They are caught in a double bind—fleeing the economic disruptions in their own countries caused by the same free trade agreements that trouble us, they are made the scapegoats for our anxieties when they arrive here.

On Security . . . The attacks of 9/11 bore a much deeper threat beneath the horrific loss of innocent life. A minuscule group armed with nothing more than fundamentalism and box cutters attacked the strongest military and economic power in human history.

The combined challenges of economic vulnerability and fear of terrorism bear a message that strikes to the core of our collective psyche — *the government can't protect us anymore.*

Our certainties in question, we react to these challenges out of fear rather than from the best lights of our religious and constitutional traditions. In our anxiety to fight new kinds of non-state terrorist enemies, we forfeit our moral, legal and political principles, we imprison people without charge or trial, dismiss the 4th Amendment of the Constitution which protects us from unwarranted search and seizure, in the name of national security and ignore the Geneva Conventions by turning to torture in spite of evidence it doesn't work. Frightened people demand extreme measures and extreme measures reinforce their fear.

The anxieties of the present moment require us to step back from fearful, knee-jerk reactions, and draw upon the deepest wisdom of our religious and constitutional traditions.

¹ Introduction. Pursuing the Global Common Good. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, p 2.

From conflict to community

We live in a conflicted, fragmented world that needs to be replaced by an authentic world community. We need to call all the nations of the world to work together to solve our looming problems at home and across the globe and to work for the global common good. We seek a global common good in which each person and each nation state shares the opportunity to achieve their highest potential and to contribute to supporting and improving the common goods we share, the peace and security we desire.

The hope for such a community resides in a renewed and courageous approach to international relations. The U.S. Catholic community as a part of the Church universal has a vision to bring to that renewal, a vision rooted in the experience of being part of a global community and the centuries-old tradition of Catholic Social teaching:

- An uncompromising insistence on the dignity of each and every person;
- A social balance that includes the rights and responsibilities of the individual and the rights and responsibilities of the community—the common good;
- The principle of subsidiarity which demands participation of people in decisions that directly affect them; this principle also applies to the right of nations to full participation in global decision-making.
- Economic justice with special attention to those in poverty;
- The promotion of peace and non-violence;
- The care of creation;
- Global solidarity.

Where do we begin?

During this campaign season, both presidential and congressional, we need to challenge the candidates on their global vision, international processes and primary issues they identify. We in the Catholic community also need to examine our positions and attitudes relative to the U.S. presence and role in the global community. Are the positions reflective of the best of Catholic Social Teaching? The following questions may enable you to examine the candidates' approach to international relations more critically.

Does he/she view the world as primarily hostile and competitive or as a large and diverse, sometimes troublesome, even dangerous, community that needs to move toward cooperation, sharing, and at times intervention, if the human family is not only to survive but to flourish? How do you view the world?

What does he/she believe are the **key processes** for engaging the world community in moving toward the global common good?

- How should the U.S. engage in diplomatic relations? What steps would he/she take to restore the value of diplomacy, a diplomatic culture and diplomatic discourse in international relations?
- How should the U.S. engage in multilateralism? Is multilateralism primarily a tool for the U.S. agenda or a tool for solving international issues through international consensus and cooperation?
- How will he/she relate to the United Nations? To the World Bank? To the International Monetary Fund? To the World Trade Organization? Does he/she have a reform agenda for the global institutions? If so, what are some of his/her ideas for reform? Are they shaped by a commitment to the global common good or a narrow sense of U.S. self-interest?
- What are your thoughts on these issues?

How will he/she relate to **international treaties**, both those we have signed and those we have not signed? In the promotion of peace will he/she

- renew our obligations with respect to the Non-Proliferation Treaty? Will he/she promote the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical and biological) through diplomatic (not military) channels? Will he/she advance the case to ban the use of cluster bombs in civilian populated areas? Will he/she start with a U.S. non-proliferation policy?
- review the U.S. refusal to sign the Landmines Treaty, the International Criminal Court Treaty and other outstanding treaties?
- restore U.S. adherence to the Geneva Accords and respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights covenants and protocols?
- enter into meaningful negotiations on a climate change treaty?
- support the ratification of the Law of the Sea?
- What are your thoughts on these issues?

The concepts of **national sovereignty and national self-interest** govern U.S. decisions in international relations. Both of those concepts need reevaluation.

- How do the candidates define U.S. self-interest? And who decides what is in our self-interest? Is the question of self-interest approached only through a national lens? Or are there some issues of self-interest that should be determined with a global lens. What are they?

- How do the candidates define national sovereignty? Is it absolute or are there instances where intervention is required? How do the candidates relate to the evolving understanding that national sovereignty is both a right and a responsibility? When a nation state fails to protect its citizens, then the international community has the “Responsibility to Protect” through appropriate intervention. What situations would call for the “Responsibility to Protect”?
- International treaties and trade agreements are instances when a nation state willingly invests some of its sovereignty in a process which, while restricting its future options, has the potential to lead to a greater global common good. How would the candidates lead the U.S. public to understand that working in multilateral settings for the global common good is not against our national sovereignty but actually in U.S. self interest?
- What do you think about U.S. sovereignty and self-interest?

The wealth and opportunities of the earth are not evenly distributed among peoples. While some live in comfort, even affluence, millions and millions of people live in desperate poverty, lacking even the essentials of life. Such poverty and underdevelopment are not only humanly degrading they are also breeding grounds for social unrest and in some cases for terrorism.

What approaches do the candidates think the U.S. should take to address the problem of **poverty in the world**?

- What ideas does he/she have for debt reduction?
- What kind of trade policy will open the door to development among the poorest economies in the world?
- What is the role of development aid? How does he/she evaluate current U.S. aid policy, both in the amount and purpose of aid given and its distribution among developing countries?
- What kind of leadership will he/she exhibit within the G8 leading industrialized nations (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom and the U.S.), at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization to direct those bodies towards effective poverty elimination?
- What role do you think the U.S. should take in addressing poverty?

What other directions and issues would you raise?

We urge you to reflect on these issues and bring them to the larger nomination and election discussions. Our baptismal call to the mission of fostering the reign of God in our times now has become global if the human and earth community is to flourish.

“If you want peace, work for justice.”

Pope Paul VI

This issue brief has been developed by Maria Riley, OP of the Center of Concern in collaboration with Marie Dennis, Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns, and Vincent Miller, Theology Department, Georgetown University. For more information see www.Maryknollogc.org.