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## ***Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy***

by Leslie H. Gelb

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In *Power Rules*, Leslie Gelb, President Emeritus and Board Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, sets out to bring back “common sense” to the US government’s exercise of power and its foreign policy decisionmaking. Gelb believes that, with a few modifications, American leaders can utilize the fundamentals of power as described by Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Gelb’s advice is that by rethinking Machiavelli, American power can be restored and effectively used to pursue US national interests.

The author asserts that the problem for American policy makers today is that the fundamental definition of power has been lost. According to Gelb, the definition of power has been hijacked by the ideological debate between liberals and conservatives and that whichever side wins this debate will control American foreign policy and its future. As such, the rewards for winning the battle over the definition of power are critical to each political party.

From the beginning of the book, Gelb refutes the ideas of other international affairs authors—Joseph Nye (smart power), Fareed Zakaria (the post-American world), and Thomas Friedman (the world is flat)—and asserts that power is power. Gelb sees no value in what he implies is faddish thinking about smart power, a flat world, or America’s decline in world politics. In Gelb’s mind, there is only one kind of power, which is the capacity to get people to do things that they normally would not want to do in the first place. In the case of foreign policy, he portrays American power as the capacity to get other states to follow the US lead and secure American strategic interests. The best way to do this then is to simply use plain old American common sense. It is here that one begins to see an inherent problem with Gelb’s overall argument.

The essential criticism is how can one create linkages between complex issues and common sense? What would common sense look like in the 21st century context, with American policy makers facing issues such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons, terrorism, cyber warfare, regional and ethnic conflict, environmental and economic security, transnational crime, and so on?

To use one of Gelb’s examples of foreign policy driven by common sense leaves the reader asking how “commonsensical” was Nixon and Kissinger’s handling of Asia post-Vietnam. As Vietnam drew to an end, in a period of American decline according to the then-conventional wisdom, Gelb argues that Nixon and Kissinger correctly saw that an American defeat would potentially cause America’s international power to atrophy. In order to prevent this, even

with military defeat inevitable, Nixon and Kissinger developed a three-step approach to preserve and even strengthen American power. First, Nixon and Kissinger dramatically opened diplomatic channels with China. Second, they signed an arms control treaty with the Soviet Union. Third, Nixon and Kissinger negotiated the Yom Kippur War settlement between Israel and Egypt. This three-step approach, far from what common sense or the conventional wisdom would dictate, set the conditions internationally for the United States to retain its influence as the only nation most adversaries were willing to work with. Within Asia, most Asian countries became more dependent on the United States because of their fear of a strong China. If this type of broad-ranging and transformative approach is highlighted as effective foreign policymaking by Gelb's own assessment, then no wonder common sense has appeared to be lacking within the American foreign policy establishment (in all the Administrations since Nixon in Gelb's view).

Despite this clashing dichotomy between common sense and complex 21st century issues, Gelb does provide policy analyst and strategist a good starting point for thinking about foreign policy. The author's approach is similar to that of the Army War College in which students are encouraged to analyze the "ends, ways, and means" as they develop their strategic thinking skills. Gelb describes his approach as a similar thought process for setting achievable goals, clarifying appropriate priorities, knowing one's power sources, and sequencing one's "moves so as to effectively achieve one's goals and priorities." He also advises that American policy makers must cease the following—denying there are any limits to American power and assuming omnipotence (conservatives) or embracing all the limits to American power and assuming impotence (liberals). Again, as War College graduates first learned from Professor Lykke, this type of approach is an excellent place to start. But it is a necessary but not sufficient process for seeking to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of 21st Century world politics and policymaking.

Readers of *Parameters* can profitably utilize Gelb's approach in their reviews of the strengths and weaknesses of the Obama Administration's current National Security Strategy (NSS). Gelb's framework is particularly useful for its near-term insight. Does the current NSS set achievable goals? Are the priorities appropriate for the international environment? Are the power sources identified? Do the expected sequences of activities appear likely to achieve the administration's goals? In the end, strategic thinking should follow a logical pattern and, certainly, strategies require continual tuning.

Gelb's foundational thinking about Machiavelli's classic provides one way to assess the utility and effectiveness of power as an instrument of statecraft. However well intentioned, calls for "common sense" by single-mindedly focusing on power is simply too easy an approach for global leadership in foreign and defense policy and strategy making in the complex and problem-filled post 9/11 world.