
Fashioning a Realistic Strategy for the Twenty-First Century

A Conversation with Leslie H. Gelb

FLETCHER FORUM: *In your recent book, Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue Foreign Policy, you argue that the meaning and nature of global power has not changed, and that the United States needs to reclaim its power before it loses its influence in the world. Could you start off by elaborating on this and outlining some of your main arguments?*

LESLIE H. GELB: Power is what it always has been. It is the ability to get someone to do something they do not want to do by means of your resources and your position. It was always that. There is no such thing in my mind as “soft” power or “hard” power or “smart” power or “dumb” power. It is people who are hard or soft or smart or dumb. Power is power. And people use it wisely or poorly.

Now, what has changed is the composition of power in international affairs. For almost all of history, international power was achieved in the form of military power and military force. Now, particularly in the last fifty years or so, it has become more and more economic. So power consists of economic power, military power, and diplomatic power, but the emphasis has shifted from military power (for almost all of history) to now, more economic power. And, as President Obama said in his West Point speech several months ago, our economy is the basis of our international power in general and our military power in particular. That is where it all comes

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from. Whether other states listen to us and act on what we say depends a good deal on their perception of the strength of the American economy. A big problem for us in the last few years has been the perception that our economy is in decline.

FORUM: *Is fixing the U.S. economy therefore President Obama's most important foreign policy as well as domestic priority?*

GELB: Yes, I firmly believe that he needs to concentrate on restoring the American economy. That will require him to make very hard, very tough decisions. And the way to do it is to explain how dire the economic crisis is, again and again, clearly to the American people. I believe that the American people do not fully understand its seriousness and will appreciate the president speaking to them honestly about the situation. We will have to raise taxes, we will have to reduce spending in order to get the federal budget in motion and we will still have to figure out if we want to spend money on physical infrastructure, without it going to waste. You can not just say spend on infrastructure and bridges and roads and airports because there are two problems in doing it now: one is that all this money is spent through state legislatures, which are to put it nicely, "inefficient," and to put it correctly, "highly corrupt." Part of the money is just wasted. And you have to do something about the labor unions because they sold down the work to such a degree that it takes us forever to build or repair anything. We built the Empire State Building in thirteen months in the 1930s and now, it would take thirteen years even with all the improvements in modern technology. So, you have to fix these things—the United States is last among industrialized nations in infrastructure and infrastructure is the backbone of the economy. So, all those hard decisions need to be made if we are to do something about our economy. You also have to do something about the public school system because that's the basis of our democracy and our economic competitiveness. And, right now, American students rank at or near the bottom of every industrialized democracy in math and science. President Obama has to tackle all of these issues.

FORUM: *Obviously, these are hard decisions especially, at a time, when we are committed overseas and a lot of focus has been on the two current wars as well as tackling issues such as Iran's nuclear program. Does the Obama Administration in your view have a strategy for addressing these pressing challenges in a time of economic crisis?*

GELB: No; there is not much of a strategy behind what president Obama is doing. Again, as I said, the priority has to be fixing the economy. And

we are not taking the hard steps required to do it. He is doing better than Bush in those regards, but he is still not doing nearly enough. He needs to talk about the economy more consistently and convincingly because doing so will give him the political leverage he will need to support the hard decisions he must make.

In terms of what we are doing abroad, there is no doubt in my mind that America's strategic position will not be determined by what is happening in Afghanistan or Iraq or Iran. It will be determined by what we do with our economy. And as long as we stay tied to these massive land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the more we get ourselves in a frame of mind to take military action against Iran, the longer it will take to shore up our economy. All those wars and potential wars are a great drain on our economic wherewithal. So, you cannot walk away from these places but you can exercise American power in different ways. We do not need to protect our interests through massive land wars. Instead, we can use containment and deterrence and we can support those who are willing to fight for their own freedom. In the end, the lessons of the last century are very clear on that score: that the only time our help in an internal war really works is when the people we are trying to help are willing to fight for their own freedom and independence.

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FORUM: *Are there other challenges in the foreign policy arena that we are not focusing on?*

GELB: Well, I think we know what the challenges are. There are international economic challenges in trade and foreign investment, particularly with China as the Chinese write their investment laws and open up their country to competition. Of course, we know that there are climate change problems, and the problems with international terrorism. These are all very serious, but we will be in a much better position to deal with them when our economy is stronger. And that is the main way to be taken seriously.

FORUM: *Given the importance you ascribe to restoring the U.S. economy, is the United States relying enough on its allies to address global issues so that it can focus more on domestic issues?*

GELB: We have not done a good job in years in dealing with our western European and Japanese allies. They were the backbone of our containment strategy and our diplomacy in the Cold War and together, Europe, Japan and the United States still have a great predominance of power in the world. Now, it is true that Western Europeans in particular have become more focused internally and less willing to accept international obligations and that's a problem. But we have to work with them incessantly to make them a party to the resolution of these problems. Same with the Japanese. And we have to work with the new and emerging powers such as China, Russia, Brazil, and India. It is going to take more time because you do have to bring more nations on board to get things done who are not used to, and were not willing traditionally, to accept any serious international responsibility. So it will take longer. And part of the job of using American power around the world, is for the president to buy time at home to let us develop these coalitions and for these coalitions to have their positive effects. And right now, essentially what presidents have done is respond to the 24/7 news clock and you cannot make foreign policy and your power cannot work in that kind of time frame.

Answers are not rocket science but rather come from common sense. Right now, common sense requires us to focus on our economy, which is the basis of our international power and the basis of our military power. And it requires developing a strategy consistent with that economic priority. That means not fighting land wars in states that our peripheral to our core national interests and only fighting when there is absolutely no question about the consequences of failure to meet the threat where it is being posed.■