

The Red and Blue

Agendas: How Bush could re-establish the American claim to global leadership by borrowing heavily from John Kerry.

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Issues 2005 - President Ronald Reagan used to say that America was a shining city on a hill. Former secretary of State Madeleine Albright called the United States the "indispensable nation." Such declarations are often mocked as arrogant exaggerations, but I believe they embody a lot of truth. Like many Americans, however, I think President Bush has undermined America's reputation in the world with his unilateral foreign policy and mounting deficits. It's a shame. But there is still no doubt in my mind that our assets still outweigh our liabilities. And as American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. recently wrote, "The great strength of democracy is its capacity for self-correction."

So here's a plan for self-correction in Bush's second term. Enough time has now passed since 9/11 for Americans to recalibrate their approach to the world, without letting up on the effort to combat terrorism. In its quest to lead other nations in a more enlightened way, the United States has formidable advantages: the world's strongest military by far, the most vibrant economy, the most innovative capital markets, the most widely used currency, the most flexible work force, the best system of higher education. America is the only country that is both a great Atlantic and Pacific power. It is the most multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual society, a huge advantage in a globalizing world. The guiding "American Dream" of opportunity for all has no counterpart anywhere.

President Bush should seize on ideas generated in the recent election that could form a bipartisan plan to help all advanced nations deal with global change. Among these is Bush's own call for an "ownership society"—by which he meant creating more opportunities for individuals to manage their professional training, possessions and health care. To be sure, the ideas are controversial even in our free-market society. But for many rich nations, including Germany and Japan, where populations are aging, government finances are strained and taxes are already high, the concept of less government and more individual responsibility is one whose time is coming.

A great innovation would be for Bush to combine the notion of an ownership society with Senator Kerry's vision of a 21st-century safety net—that is, government support for those whose livelihoods are threatened by globalization. The point is not to shore up the old welfare state, but to help workers obtain the training to find new jobs without losing their pensions or access to health care. The idea is for government and industry to cooperate in helping workers keep pace with technological change. It's an idea that is relevant to workers from Mexico City to Stuttgart, all of whom share a fear of job flight to India and China. It would help Bush reaffirm his claim to be a "compassionate conservative."

Another idea with the potential to unite the world relates to economic and social development. In his first term, President Bush established innovative aid programs. His new Millennium Challenge Account, for example, ties programs to measurable reform in areas such as corporate governance. It is a recipe for effectiveness. It is

the same principle used by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to help developing countries deal with infectious diseases. The foundation itself is an example of American genius. In the case of official U.S. aid, however, a big problem is that the programs are almost entirely bilateral. Here, too, Bush would be wise to borrow from Kerry, and move toward a multilateral approach by trying to persuade international agencies to take their cues from the Millennium Account.

A third way for America to reassert global leadership is in the environmental arena. Bush is a great supporter of free markets. Kerry supports global treaties such as the Kyoto pact. Without joining the treaty, Washington could focus one part of it—the development of a worldwide market for emissions trading—by talking it up, encouraging U.S. businesses to participate and helping to ensure that the right global regulatory structures are in place to enhance the markets' effectiveness.

Advancing ideas like these would realign America's assets with its global leadership capacity. Let's hope this happens, for if America doesn't lead the world toward peace and economic progress, it's hard to envision a viable second choice.

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