

OPINION/EDITORIAL

“A Decent Respect for the Opinions of Mankind”

What exactly did John Kerry mean in the first presidential debate by saying American foreign policy decisions need to meet a “global test?” What seems clear is that Kerry did *not* mean what President Bush would like us to infer: that Kerry would treat international popularity as a prerequisite for any military move. Indeed, in the debate, Kerry said explicitly, “I’ll never give a veto to any country over our security.”

What then did Kerry mean by the controversial phrase? The context sheds some light: “No President, through all of American history, has ever ceded, and nor would I, the right to preempt in any way necessary to protect the United States of America. But if and when you do it, Jim, you have to do it in a way that passes the test, that passes the global test where your countrymen, your people understand fully *why* you’re doing what you’re doing and you can prove to the world that you did it for legitimate reasons.”

Instead of a global veto, then, Kerry was invoking a test of global *justifiability*. In order to take military action, Kerry was suggesting, America should justify that action openly and honestly by offering reasons the world should respect, even if they disagree with them.

By invoking the idea of justifiability, Kerry was hardly introducing a new doctrine. Our nation itself was born in such an act of justification by our Founders: the Declaration of Independence provides reasons for our break with Britain, not because other nations possess a veto over our national existence, but rather because human beings always owe, in Jefferson’s words, “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.”

Jefferson also knew that meeting this duty of respect was the best way to win others to our cause.

Was Kerry right to suggest that the U.S. failed to justify adequately its action in Iraq? This is more controversial, but there are powerful reasons to believe that neither the international community nor the American public ultimately got the candid and convincing rationale they deserved from the President. Eighteen months ago, the Bush Administration laid great stress on the urgent cause impelling us to war in Iraq, insisting that preventive war was warranted by suspicions that Saddam Hussein had WMD's. This was a significant departure from a thousand years of just war theory, which distinguishes preventive war from preemptive war, in which only a concrete and imminent threat could justify military aggression.

Today, we know that there was nothing concrete, nor imminent, nor even particularly threatening about Iraq (relative to Iran, North Korea, and Al Queda). The evidence for WMD's was always far shakier than we were led to believe, and now we know definitively that such weapons have been absent from Iraq for years. Yet the President now argues that the lack of WMD's makes no difference to America's justification for attacking. In place of a rationale we have a rationalization.

Consequently the Bush administration will hardly be able to blame its allies – or its citizens, for that matter – for reacting with skepticism when it offers arguments for meeting future threats.

A justifiability test makes sense only if you care enough about other people's opinions to submit your own judgments to criticism and questioning. By inviting others to scrutinize our reasoning, we signal that we have carefully probed our own conscience

and logic. The President often talks as though his judgment is the final word on what policies are right and on what keeps America safe. Eighteen months ago our allies had no leverage with which to insist that the President provide a stronger justification than mere assertion for his decision to invade. But unlike the international community, American voters do have the opportunity to scrutinize the President's conscience and logic. On November 2, they will decide whether the administration has indeed shown "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind."

Michael A. Neblo and John M. Parrish are Assistant Professors of Political Science at the Ohio State University.

Corresponding Author:
Michael Neblo
154 N. Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210-1373
(614) 292-7839
neblo.1@osu.edu