The Myth of the Indispensable Nation

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In 1996, political journalist Sidney Blumenthal and foreign policy historian James Chace struggled to come up with a memorable phrase to describe America’s post-Cold War role in the world. "Finally, together, we hit on it: 'indispensable nation.' Eureka! I passed it on first to Madeleine Albright," Blumenthal recalled.

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1 Myth: noun: 1 a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events; 2 a widely held but false belief or idea
Which of the definitions best relates to the meaning of the article?

2 indispensable: adjective: absolutely necessary

3 Sidney Blumenthal. When was he born? To whom was he a former aid and confidant? Identify the title of his multivolume book. Identify both the phrase that Blumenthal popularized and what the phrase describes. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sidney_Blumenthal

4 James Chace. 1931-2004. Identify Mr. Chace’s profession and the subjects of his writing.
In his memoir of the Clinton presidency, *The Clinton Wars*, Blumenthal elaborated on what the phrase was intended to represent: "Only the United States had the power to guarantee global security: without our presence or support, multilateral endeavors would fail." Albright, then secretary of state, began using the phrase often, and most prominently in February 1998, while defending the policy of coercive diplomacy against Iraq over its limited cooperation with U.N. weapons inspectors when, during an interview on the "Today Show," she said: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us."

Over the last six months, the notion of American indispensability has resurfaced in a big way. U.S. President Barack Obama has emphasized this point repeatedly, and most expansively in May while giving a commencement address to West Point cadets: "When a typhoon hits the Philippines or schoolgirls are kidnapped in Nigeria or masked men occupy a building in Ukraine, it is America that the world looks to for help. So the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century past and it will be true for the century to come." Beyond the White House, this assertion has recently been made by Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Chris Christie, Jeb Bush, Bobby Jindal, Marco Rubio, and Michelle Bachman. This bipartisan group may not agree on much, but they are all proudly "Indispensables."

Like many foreign policy concepts overwhelmingly endorsed by officials and policymakers, this one has little basis in reality. If you consider everything encompassing global affairs — from state-to-state diplomatic relations, to growing cross-border flows of goods, money, people, and data — there are actually very few activities where America's role is truly indispensable, defined by Webster's as "absolutely necessary." Nevertheless, the notion clearly has political salience, and has even become something of a mandatory mantra for current and prospective commanders-in-chief. The problem with allowing this classification of

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5 multilateral: adjective: agreed upon or participated in by three or more parties, especially the governments of different countries: *multilateral negotiations | multilateral nuclear disarmament.*

6 endeavor: noun: an attempt to achieve a goal

7 coercive: adjective: relating to or using force or threats: *coercive measures*

8 diplomacy: noun: the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country's representatives abroad

9 What is “Today Show”?

10 foreign policy: noun: a government's strategy in dealing with other nations

11 salience: noun: the quality of being particularly noticeable or important; prominence

12 mantra: noun: (originally in Hinduism and Buddhism) a word or sound repeated to aid concentration in meditation; a statement or slogan repeated frequently: *the environmental mantra that energy has for too long been to cheap.*
America’s global role to persist\textsuperscript{13} is that it is so patently\textsuperscript{14} false, and thus an illogical\textsuperscript{15} basis upon which to base and prescribe\textsuperscript{16} U.S. grand strategy.

When Indispensables provide specifics to support their claim, they almost exclusively highlight some use of the U.S. military, whether for humanitarian purposes, coercion, or war fighting. More than any other country, the United States retains a far greater capacity to send troops, disaster response professionals, or bombs virtually anywhere in the world in a short time frame. Today, the U.S. Navy has 102 ships deployed around the world, the Air Force 659 strategic airlifters, 456 air refuelers, and 159 long-range bombers, and the Air Force and Navy combined some 3,407 fighter and attack aircraft. Not to mention the over 300,000 active-duty and reserve Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines deployed to warzones or stationed at America’s 576 active military facilities worldwide.

These unmatched global military capabilities provide U.S. officials with an unmatched spectrum\textsuperscript{17} of policy options. However, these can be used for benign\textsuperscript{18} and relatively judicious missions, like responding to typhoons, or for profoundly destabilizing and dumb ones, such as invading a distant country to topple its leader with minimal support from other countries and a totally implausible transition strategy [i.e. Iraq]. These damaging and tremendously costly missions conveniently tend to be forgotten by Indispensables, yet they are partially a direct result of their crusading\textsuperscript{19} mindset.

Indispensables also cite recent U.S. foreign policy activities as evidence to support their hypothesis, but do so in an extremely selective manner. For example, using Obama’s examples, nearly all of the more than 200 Nigerian schoolgirls remain in the clutches of Boko Haram, and clandestine Russian security forces continue to operate with impunity\textsuperscript{20} in Ukraine. Abuja and Kiev looked to the United States for help, which it provided to the extent that their governments were willing to accept it. But in both countries the help was insufficient to achieve the intended objectives. Again, the reason is, as a senior administration official declared in March: "The American people are not going to war with Russia over Ukraine, full stop."

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\textsuperscript{13} persist: verb: continue firmly or obstinately in an opinion or a course of action in spite of difficulty, opposition, or failure: the minority of drivers who persist in drinking | we are persisting with policies that will create jobs for the future.

\textsuperscript{14} patently: adverb: clearly; without doubt: these claims were patently false

\textsuperscript{15} illogical: adjective: lacking sense or clear, sound reasoning: an illogical fear of the supernatural

\textsuperscript{16} prescribe: verb: recommend an action as something beneficial

\textsuperscript{17} spectrum: noun: a wide range; also a band of colors, as seen in a rainbow; (the spectrum) the entire range of wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation

\textsuperscript{18} benign: adjective: not harmful

\textsuperscript{19} crusading: adjective: promoting an organized campaign concerning a political, social, or religious issue, typically motivated by a strong desire for change

\textsuperscript{20} impunity: noun: exemption from punishment or freedom from consequences of an action that may cause harm
Similarly, even if Michelle Obama herself posts a Twitter photo holding a #BringBackOurGirls sign, U.S. forces will not unilaterally violate Nigerian sovereignty to openly intervene on behalf of the government in a complex civil war to attempt to retrieve them.

Relatedly, Indispensables also omit the vast number of instances where "the world" looks to America for help, and U.S. officials choose to do nothing. Earlier this year, as they have since 2011, mayors in Darfur, South Kordofan’s Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile, again requested a no-fly-zone to protect civilian populations from the indiscriminate airpower used by the regime in Khartoum. It was denied yet again. Similarly, in March, the Ukrainian defense chief asked the United States to impose a no-fly zone over his country’s 15 nuclear reactors "so that his troops could at least count on some zones of safety." This also did not happen. Finally, Syrian activists and rebels have asked Obama for no-fly zones, buffer zones, arms and training, and financial support for over three years. The Obama administration has largely rebuffed them, while providing arms, training, and salaries that seemingly all the moderate rebel leaders have denigrated for being wholly insufficient against the brutalities of the Assad regime and the Islamic State (IS).

Indispensables also hold an unrealistic faith in the latent power of leadership that flows from suppose it indispensable-ness. During a House hearing in September, Gerald Feierstein, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, declared: "When the United States stands up and demonstrates resolve and demonstrates a direction, the international community generally supports and falls into place behind." Really? This hypothesis would surprise anyone who tracks multilateral fora where U.S. officials state their policy positions and then repeatedly fail to compel other leaders to get in line — see, for example, the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009, and the WTO trade talks since the Doha Round opened in 2001.

And if Feierstein is referring only to warfare, then why do so few countries with deployable military assets participate in U.S.-led campaigns in a meaningful way? The United States provided the majority of the actual combat forces and airpower in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, and is doing so again in the air campaign to counter the Islamic State (IS). Most countries that could participate have either declined to do so, or are taking part by providing such limited and constrained capabilities that they are not significantly enhancing the coalition’s capabilities. In each of these military interventions, the United States decried unilateralism, attempted to form a large coalition, and then found itself paying most of the

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21 denigrate: verb: criticize unfairly; disparage: there is a tendency to denigrate the poor

22 latent: adjective: (of a quality or state) existing but not yet developed or manifest; hidden; concealed: the latent potential of teenagers is rarely covered by beards

23 fora: plural of forum: a place, meeting, or medium where ideas and views on a particular issue can be exchanged

24 coalition: noun: an alliance for combined action

25 unilateralism: noun: the process of acting, reaching a decision, or espousing a principle unilaterally; unilateral: adjective: (of an action or decision) performed by or affecting only one person, group, or country involved in a particular situation, without the agreement of another or the others
costs, dropping most of the bombs, sacrificing the most soldiers, and losing most of his credibility.

Whether it is multilateral talks or military operations, other governments do not do as Washington demands because, quite simply, it is not in their national interests to do so. Moreover, the United States refuses to employ the political will or coercive leverage to force them to. The point being is that few, if any, substantive and enduring foreign-policy activities can be done unilaterally, and asserting one’s indispensability does nothing to alter others’ interests. It is often stated that countries in the Middle East or East Asia are looking for America "to lead," but they actually want U.S. leadership on their terms, and in support of their own narrow objectives. The moment that leadership conflicts with the visions and objectives those countries hold, they cease or severely limit their partnerships with the United States.

Finally, the Indispensables belief that America’s role in the world is "absolutely necessary" in all areas is simply arrogant. It discounts the tremendous and essential contributions from non-U.S. countries, international non-governmental organizations, and civil society. This includes the 128 countries contributing 104,184 troops and police forces currently deployed in support of sixteen U.N. peacekeeping operations worldwide. The United States provides only 113 troops to U.N. peacekeeping operations, but, importantly, foots 27 percent of the bill and provides logistics support. Or, consider the billions of dollars from the Gates Foundation, Norwegian Refugee Council, Mercy Corps, International Red Cross and Red Crescent, and countless others, which improve the lives of the poorest and most in need. Each of these public health, humanitarian, and development organizations offer the deep pockets and political neutrality that allows them access to areas where the United States simply cannot or will not go.

The reason that the United States is not the indispensable nation is simple: the human and financial costs, the tremendous risks, and degree of political commitment required to do so are thankfully lacking in Washington. Moreover, the structure and dynamics of the international system would reject or resist it, as it does in so many ways that frustrate the United States from achieving its foreign policy objectives. The United States can be truly indispensable in a few discrete domains, such as for military operations, which as pointed out above has proven disastrous recently. But overall there is no indispensable nation now, nor has there been in modern history. Indispensables may feel compelled to repeat this feel-good myth, but nobody should believe them.

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26 arrogant: adjective: having or revealing an exaggerated sense of one’s own importance or abilities