

## *The Arrogance of Power*

By Jim Lobe

Two years after the passage by a unanimous House of Representatives and all but two senators of the August 7, 1964, Gulf of Tonkin resolution, and amid continuing escalation of the Vietnam War, then Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright published *The Arrogance of Power*, in which he attacked the war's justification, Congress' failure to set limits on it, and the dangerous and delusional impulses that gave rise to it. Fulbright's critique, to which he had already given voice in unprecedented hearings on the war, legitimized the growing anti-war movement in a way that had not been possible before the book's publication and shattered what until then had been an elite consensus that U.S. military intervention in Indochina was necessitated by cold war geopolitics.

Despite the cold war, Fulbright, who died in 1995, perceived already in 1966 that the United States, with unmatched military power, was taking on imperial attitudes, and that a unilateralist and war-like spirit had infected the nation in ways that it would live to regret. He especially noted how isolated Washington had become from its traditional allies in Europe.

His observations and warnings at the time appear deeply relevant to the United States under George W. Bush, particularly in the wake of the publication last week of the administration's sweeping National Security Strategy of the United States of America and its request that Congress authorize a war resolution arguably as broad and as unilateral as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution approved in the early stages of the Vietnam War.

### **On U.S. Foreign Policy:**

"Throughout our history two strands have coexisted uneasily; a dominant strand of democratic humanism and a lesser but durable strand of intolerant Puritanism. There has been a ten-

dency through the years for reason and moderation to prevail as long as things are going tolerably well or as long as our problems seem clear and finite and manageable. But... when some event or leader of opinion has aroused the people to a state of high emotion, our puritan spirit has tended to break through, leading us to look at the world through the distorting prism of a harsh and angry moralism."

### **On War Fever:**

"Past experience provides little basis for confidence that reason can prevail in an atmosphere of mounting war fever. In a contest between a hawk and dove, the hawk has a great advantage, not because it is a better bird but because it is a bigger bird with lethal talons and a highly developed will to use them."

### **On False Historical Analogies:**

"The second great advantage of free discussion to democratic policy-makers is its bringing to light of new ideas and the supplanting of old myths with new realities. We Americans are much in need of this benefit, because we are severely, if not uniquely afflicted with a habit of policymaking by analogy: North Vietnam's involvement in South Vietnam, for example, is equated with Hitler's invasion of Poland and a parley with the Viet Cong would represent "another Munich". The treatment of slight and superficial resemblances as if they were full-blooded analogies—as instances, as it were, of history 'repeating itself'—is a substitute for thinking and a misuse of history."

### **On The Responsibility of Congress:**

"Many Senators who accepted the Gulf of Tonkin resolution without question might well not have done so had they foreseen that it would subsequently be interpreted as a sweeping congressional endorsement for the conduct of a large-scale war in Asia."

“I, as one Senator, am unwilling to acquiesce, actively or tacitly, to a policy that I judge to be unwise as the price of putting the best possible face on that policy. To do so would be to surrender the limited ability I have to bring influence to bear for what I would judge to be a wiser policy, and would constitute a default on my constitutional responsibilities and on my responsibilities to the people of my state.”

### On The Arrogance of Power:

“Power tends to confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is particularly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God’s favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other nations—to make them richer and happier and wiser, to remake them, that is, in its own shining image. Power confuses itself with virtue and tends also to take itself for omnipotence. Once imbued with the idea of a mission, a great nation easily assumes that it has the means as well as the duty to do God’s work.”

“The more I puzzle over the great wars of history, the more I am inclined to the view that the causes attributed to them—territory, markets, resources, the defense or perpetuation of great principles—were not the root causes at all but rather explanations or excuses for certain unfathomable drives of human nature. For lack of a clear and precise understanding of exactly what these motives are, I refer to them as the “arrogance of power”—as a psychological need that nations seem to have in order to prove that they are bigger, better, or stronger than other nations. Implicit in this drive is the assumption, even on the part of normally peaceful nations, that force is the ultimate proof of superiority—that when a nation shows that it has the stronger army, it is also proving that it has bet-

ter people, better institutions, better principles, and in general, a better civilization.”

“[The arrogance of power is defined as] the tendency of great nations to equate power with virtue and major responsibilities with a universal mission. The dilemmas involved are pre-eminently American dilemmas, not because America has weaknesses that others do not have, but because America is powerful as no nation has ever been before, and the discrepancy between her power and the power of others appears to be increasing.”

### On Imperial Temptations:

“Despite its dangerous and unproductive consequences, the idea of being responsible for the whole world seems to be flattering to Americans and I am afraid it is turning our heads, just as the sense of universal responsibility turned the heads of ancient Romans and 19th century British.”

“It is a curiosity of human nature that lack of self-assurance seems to breed an exaggerated sense of power and mission. When a nation is very powerful but lacking self-confidence, it is likely to behave in a manner dangerous to itself and to others. Feeling the need to prove what is obvious to everyone else, it begins to confuse great power with unlimited power and great responsibility with total responsibility: It can admit of no error; it must win every argument, no matter how trivial. For lack of an appreciation of how truly powerful it is, the nation begins to lose wisdom and perspective and, with them, the strength and understanding that it takes to be magnanimous to smaller and weaker nations. Gradually but unmistakably, America is showing signs of that arrogance of power which has afflicted, weakened, and in some cases

destroyed great nations in the past. In so doing, we are not living up to our capacity and promise as a civilized example for the world. The measure of our falling short is the measure of the patriot’s duty of dissent.”

“If the war goes on and expands, if that fatal process continues to accelerate until America becomes what she is not now and never has been, a seeker after unlimited power and empire, then Vietnam will have had a might and tragic fallout indeed.”

### On The Dangers of Empire:

“Having done so much and succeeded so well, America is now at that historical point at which a great nation is in danger of losing its perspective on what exactly is within the realm of its power and what is beyond it. Other great nations, reaching this critical juncture, have aspired to too much, and by overextension of effort have declined and then fallen.”

“Lacking an appreciation of the dimensions of our own power, we fail to understand our enormous and disruptive impact on the world; we fail to understand that no matter how good our intentions—and they are, in most cases, decent enough—other nations are alarmed by the very existence of such great power, which, whatever its benevolence, cannot help but remind them of their own helplessness before it.”

### On Transforming Other Nations:

“We all like telling people what to do, which is perfectly all right except that most people do not like being told what to do.”

“Traditional rulers, institutions, and ways of life have crumbled under the fatal impact of American wealth and power but they have not been replaced by new institutions and new

ways of life, nor has their breakdown ushered in an era of democracy and development.”

“Bringing power without understanding, Americans as well as Europeans have had a devastating effect in less advanced areas of the world; without knowing they were doing it, they have shattered traditional societies, disrupted fragile economies and undermined peoples’ self-confidence by the invidious example of their own power and efficiency. They have done this in many instances simply by being big and strong, by giving good advice, by intruding on people who have not wanted them but could not resist them.”

“What I do question is the ability of the United States or any other Western nation to go into a small, alien, undeveloped Asian nation and create stability where there is chaos, the will to fight where there is defeatism, democracy where there is no tradition of it, and honest government where corruption is almost a way of life.”

### On Unilateralism and Support From Traditional Allies:

“One detects in Europe a growing uneasiness about American policy, a feeling that the United States is becoming unreliable and that it may be better—safer that is—to keep the Americans at a distance.”

“We have become... a one-issue participant in world affairs, hungering after a kind word or some token of support, for either of which we are more than willing to pay a handsome reward. Nevertheless, our major allies are not supporting us in Vietnam. A few countries do have strong words of encouragement for us; they see America doing its ‘duty’ as leader of the free world and, while their own young men go to school get jobs, and

raise families, they are quite reconciled to having American boys fight and die in the jungles of Southeast Asia, because if Americans were not fighting and dying in Vietnam, they tell us, America’s friends in other parts of the world—they themselves, for example—might lose ‘confidence’ in her. We are very grateful for this support. Other countries, dependent on the United States for their defense or for monetary support, for economic aid or for export markets, have found silence to be the better part of discretion; occasionally they have some mild praise for us, which makes us feel happy, and occasionally they have a mild reproach, which makes us feel angry and injured. Still others, who do not understand that they are supposed to feel “secure” because Americans are fighting in Vietnam, are regarded as “senile” or “eccentric” by American officials, who profess “sadness” and “puzzlement” but never—heaven forbid—anger in the face of such ingratitude and apostasy.”

“The United States is willing to defy allied opinion because of... an excess of pride born of power. Power has a way of undermining judgment, of planting delusions of grandeur in the minds of otherwise sensible people and otherwise sensible nations. As I have said earlier, the idea of being responsible for the whole world seems to have dazzled us, giving rise to what I call the arrogance of power, or what the French, perhaps more aptly, call *le vertige de puissance*, by which they mean a kind of dizziness or giddiness inspired by the possession of great power. If then, as I suspect, there is a relationship between the self-absorption of some of our allies and the American military involvement in Vietnam, it may have more to do with American vanity than with our friends’ complacency.”

### On International Law:

“Law is the essential foundation of stability and order both within societies and in international relations. As a conservative power, the United States has a vital interest in upholding and expanding the reign of law in international relations. Insofar as international law is observed, it provides us with stability and order and with a means of predicting the behavior of those with whom we have reciprocal legal obligations. When we violate the law ourselves, whatever short-term advantage may be gained, we are obviously encouraging others to violate the law; we thus encourage disorder and instability and thereby do incalculable damage to our own long-term interests.”

### On National Greatness:

“I do not think that America’s greatness is questioned in the world, and I certainly do not think that strident behavior is the best way for a nation to prove its greatness. Indeed, in nations—as in individuals—bellicosity is a mark of weakness and self-doubt rather than of strength and self-assurance.”

“In her relations with Asian nations, as indeed in her relations with all of the revolutionary or potentially revolutionary societies of the world, America has an opportunity to perform services of which no great nation has ever before been capable. To do so we must acquire wisdom to match our power and humility to match our pride. Perhaps the single word above all others that expresses America’s need is empathy.”

“The inconstancy of American foreign policy is not an accident but an expression of two distinct sides of the American character. Both are characterized by a kind of moralism, but one is the morality of decent instincts

tempered by the knowledge of human imperfection, and the other is the morality of absolute self-assurance fired by the crusading spirit... The [latter] is exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt, who in his Dec. 6, 1904, Annual Message to Congress, without question or doubt as to his own and his country's capacity to judge right and wrong, proclaimed the duty of the United States

to exercise an "internal police power" in the hemisphere on the ground that 'Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America... ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation....' After 25 years of world power, the United States must decide which of the two sides of its national character is to predominate—the

humanism of Lincoln, or the arrogance of those who would make America the world's policeman."

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