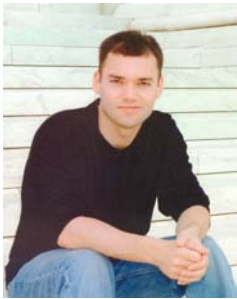


International Affairs Forum Interviews – Peter Beinart and Scott McConnell

November 13, 2006
By Jason Miks



Peter Beinart is editor-at-large of the New Republic. He was the editor of the magazine from November 1999 until March 2006 and is the author of “The Good Fight: Why Liberals - and Only Liberals - Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again”

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By Jason Miks



Scott McConnell is a journalist and the current editor of *The American Conservative*. He co-founded the magazine in 2002 with Pat Buchanan and Taki Theodoracopulos .

International Affairs Forum: John Bolton's days look numbered as America's UN ambassador. What qualities would you like to see in his replacement?

Peter Beinart: What I would like to see in a UN ambassador would be someone who has some belief in international institutions and international law, unlike John Bolton who essentially has said over the years that he sees international law and the power of international institutions as a threat to American sovereignty and American interests. I think what I would like to see is an ambassador that recognizes that unless America is willing to grant international institutions some influence over our decisions, we have little chance of having those institutions be effective or of solving global problems.

Scott McConnell: The main priority of the next ambassador should be to repair America's image as a nation that can work constructively with other countries - particularly with other great powers and our traditional

allies, but also with countries which are not necessarily allies, though who are not necessarily hostile. Under President Bush's foreign policy, of which Bolton is a symptom and exponent, it almost seems as if we have been going out of our way not to find common ground. Of course it is not always easy to find common ground. But the United States now has an image of unilateralism - as if it's our way or the highway. Bolton is more a symptom of this than a cause, but if there is going to be a change in policy there will need to be change here as well.

IA-Forum: And are there any particular changes you would like to see at the UN itself?

Scott McConnell: I haven't thought about this a lot, though it seems it is unsustainable in the long run for the Security Council to be dominated by, unfortunately, shrinking Western powers. Great Britain and France are important countries but they are not necessarily global powers. There should probably therefore be some effort at making the Security Council more representative.

There are various strains of thought about the UN in the US. Some believe it is still man's best hope for peace and international cooperation, while others dismiss it as an empty talking shop. It is very possible to follow international politics and to not necessarily know which of those schools of thought you fall into, or to think they are both correct on alternating weeks. I think I probably fall into that category.

Unfortunately the UN can get railroaded in certain directions. I remember in the 1970s there was a lot of talk about a new international economic order and at the time it did seem to a lot of Americans that those were slogans that masked socialist redistribution of wealth rather than economic growth, and government censorship of the media - neither of which I approve of. At the same time the US seems to have gone too far in the other direction, treating the UN as a body we can just override or manipulate or ignore.

This isn't a very precise answer, but the point I am making is that these two ideas of the UN probably coexist in the minds of a lot of Americans.

Peter Beinart: I think over the long run there are enormous things that need to be changed. It won't be easy. It may take a long time, but I think you must start with the Security Council. You would want a Security Council that more effectively reflects the realities of today rather than the power realities of the past, of 1945. So you would obviously want some greater influence for India, Germany, Japan and also some developing countries like Brazil and Indonesia, and less power for Britain and

France. You would also want some agreement not to veto when it comes to questions of genocide. And I think you would want a UN that does not treat democracies and non-democracies the same way. There should be a special standing for governments that represent their people as opposed to governments that don't represent their people.

IA-Forum: Polls have consistently shown a decline in the image of the US abroad. Do you think that there is anything the current administration can do to salvage America's image, or will it have to wait for new leadership?

Peter Beinart: I don't think it is going to be possible to make significant improvements. I think all we can do is stop it getting worse, and when we have a new administration then work on making things better. I just think that the administration is going to be too internally divided to make the kind of moves necessary – the dramatic moves – on global warming, international public health, American accordance with international human rights treaties, which are the kind of things that would ultimately show a new face to the world. I think for those things we are going to have to wait for a new president.

Scott McConnell: I tend to think it is going to have to wait for a new president in that people tend to associate certain leaders with countries. Bush may make some changes in his policy that will make a difference - though I'm not sure that he will - but it will not change popular sentiment around the globe. I would also add that I think there is remaining in the world a lot of latent good will towards the United States, and many of the clichés that are used about the world needing American leadership, well I think there is actually some truth in them. I think there are many people in the world who would like to look to American leadership, and an America that is wiser and more willing to listen.

IA-Forum: Do you believe the US should be getting involved militarily in humanitarian crises such as that in Darfur?

Scott McConnell: I don't, though I am not really proud of my reasons for not. I know that many, many people point to Darfur as a catastrophe, that the United States could do something to stem it. And I think in the short term it could. But I also think it is beyond America's capacity to do this kind of thing well or in a lasting way. I think that America can do fairly important things, and it can set an example of good governance domestically. But many of these humanitarian problems are ethnically driven or territorial conflicts, and I think that if we were trying to put out every fire it would exhaust us and prevent us from doing the other things

we need to do. And I suspect that this is a common view among Americans - that we can't try to right every situation.

Peter Beinart: Where it is possible for the government itself to stop the humanitarian crisis with the aid of outside nations... that would obviously be the best answer. The problem comes when you have a government that is either unable to do that, or in fact if the government itself is the source of the problem as in the case of Sudan. In that case, it seems to me, you need some sort of ability to override that government. In order to do that, you need different kinds of connections between different international institutions.

For instance, you have an AU peacekeeping force. But the AU lacks the logistical capability to really be effective on the ground. So in the long term you might want to think about how you can strengthen an organization like the AU, by tying it to groups like the UN and NATO to give it greater logistical capacity. But you also need to think about using the threat of NATO coercion into encouraging action, so that you have a real threat. Hopefully you won't need to do that, but it might be the only way of getting for example the Sudanese to accept a strengthened AU force.

IA-Forum: What would you say has been the biggest foreign policy success for the Bush administration?

Peter Beinart: I think that they have increased funding for Aids. They may not have done it exactly as one may have wanted, but I think they have increased funding for Aids and to some degree they have increased foreign aid spending. I think that the emerging American alliance with India, which started under Clinton but which has been continued under Bush, is probably a good idea. I think that America's relationship with Japan has generally been good. And we have not had a great crisis over China and Taiwan, which is something one always worry about, but which hasn't happened. So it seems to me you can say that on the Bush administration's behalf.

Scott McConnell: I'm sure there have been some, but they have been so far removed from the front burner that it is difficult to really think of a good example. I suppose that there has been some de-escalation of tensions with China from the first year of the Bush administration, which I suppose is positive. But we've done nothing about global warming, which I think is a problem. We've created a great deal of antagonism between the United States and the Islamic world - 80 percent of which is unnecessary and probably about 20 percent of which is unavoidable. And I am sure there are people in the Mexican

establishment who share President Bush's idea that the border between the two countries is an anachronism and warrants much greater, freer movement of people between the United States and Mexico. This is a common capitalist mindset, but I disapprove of it and I think most Americans do too.

IA-Forum: The war on terror has been the centerpiece of the Bush administration's foreign policy. Do you think the term is useful or a hindrance?

Scott McConnell: I think it is a dreadful term. Terror is a political tactic used by different groups at different times. Obviously those groups need to be dealt with by some combination of force and negotiation depending on the circumstances. But it is so broad and all encompassing that it is a recipe for a limitless, endless war, one in which the United States is likely to create more enemies than it eliminates because the war against terrorism, and the communities that spawn terrorists, have fathers, mothers, sons, and these people then become your enemy. Obviously the government should protect against groups such as Al Qaeda. but if you make this the centerpiece of your foreign policy it just doesn't seem to work very well. I am sure that there is a greater reservoir of young Muslims that would contemplate getting involved in terrorist activity against the West than there 5 years ago.

Peter Beinart: It depends what you mean by war on terror. If you mean a primarily military conflict then the term is a hindrance, because it isn't primarily about the military. To me it is more about law enforcement and a struggle of ideas. However, because of the influence of the Cold War, there is now this idea in American public discourse that there is this kind of national mobilization, rather than military conflict alone. In that sense I think the word war is OK. Of course we are not fighting terror per se, we are not fighting against the IRA or the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka - we are struggling against a particular ideology. And so I think in that sense it is understandable why the term war on terror was used, but it is misleading in the sense that we are struggling against a particular ideology that you could call the Jihadist, Salafist ideology.

IA-Forum: What should the foreign policy priorities be for the Bush administration's final two years in office?

Peter Beinart: Obviously Iraq is going to be the biggest single question, and I think that the great, perhaps the impossible challenge, for the Bush administration, is going to be for the United States to create an Iraq that is stable and does not present a threat to the rest of the world

and its neighbours. If the Bush administration could pull that off, given how utterly horrible things in Iraq are today, that would be a great accomplishment. I do though think the chances of that are slim.

Scott McConnell: I think getting out of Iraq in a way that does the least harm to American interests, and that probably means talking or negotiating not just with Iraq's leaders, but also Syria and Iran. And it also means making it clear to the Arab world, and to ourselves, that we are interested in a fair resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, because it may be off the radar screen of most Americans. But in the age of Al Jazzier, many see a really uneven combat between the Palestinian people and this regional superpower that Israel is. It means there is a constant source of rage against Israel and America, and it is not in Israel's interests, it's not in America's interests and it is clearly not in Palestinian interests.

IA-Forum: Thank you very much for this interview.

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