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# THE CASE FOR SOVEREIGNTY

## Why the World Should Welcome American Independence

Jeremy A. Rabkin

The value and meaning of American sovereignty is emerging as a key issue in the electoral debates this year. Democrats have denounced the “unilateral” policies of the Bush administration and urged greater reliance on international institutions. The Bush administration, while seeking particular coalitions for particular policies (as in Iraq), has stressed the underlying need to safeguard American independence and freedom of action.

If we move away from sovereignty as the basic organizing principle in international affairs, what would be the likely consequences? A timely new book informs the public debate about sovereignty and explains why it is the likeliest path to peace. In ***THE CASE FOR SOVEREIGNTY: Why the World Should Welcome American Independence*** (AEI Press, June 24, 2004), Jeremy A. Rabkin argues that sovereignty is the indispensable precondition for constitutional government. Without a strong notion of sovereignty, the powers of governments are determined only by the shifting winds of international negotiations between nations that differ a great deal on how to secure peace.

Continuing debate over the war in Iraq displays in sharp relief how far apart Democrats and Republicans have drifted on matters of international law and security. Rabkin, a professor of government at Cornell University, explains why global governance is fundamentally at odds with the American idea. He traces the basis for America’s concept of sovereignty and self-government to the Constitution. Traditional notions of sovereignty were, as he shows, central to the outlook of the American Founders. In contrast, global governance draws on a postmodern philosophy imported from the European Union and informed by pre-modern and illiberal ideas, along with impulses that fueled extremist political visions in the twentieth century.

Sovereignty, although inextricably linked to the American idea, is not just good for the United States; it is good for the world. Rabkin warns that a “post-sovereign” world would:

- embolden terrorists and rogue states by inhibiting adequate or timely responses to genuine security threats;
- destabilize fragile new democracies, as international bureaucrats launch impetuous prosecutions to satisfy outsiders’ notions about how to punish past abuses;

- burden trade agreements with unrelated impositions—depressing economic development in the short term and risking all-out trade wars in the long term;
- exacerbate conflicts, as different sides are encouraged to frame their claims in the absolutist rhetoric of international rights;
- undermine respect for law within nations, as national constitutions come to be seen as merely provisional standards, subject to override by international directives; and
- erode national loyalties and political identities, as governments share governing responsibilities with supranational organizations and constituencies within nations seek to bypass their own governments in direct appeals to outside patrons.

While some charge that American sovereignty is a license for arbitrary power, Rabkin concludes just the opposite: sovereignty's moral claims rest on an underlying recognition of human limitations and remain the best way to reconcile peace with human freedom.

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