

How We Might Build Better Coalitions

It's as Simple as "A,A,A"

By NADJA Y. WEST

When answering the question "How might we better build coalitions?" some observations and recommendations appear so fundamental that, given the intended audience, it seems almost insolent to discuss them. However, when it is apparent that these basic tenets are forgotten or for some reason not exercised, a review is not entirely unreasonable.

A vital but somewhat neglected point is that building a coalition actually starts long before one is needed. Fellow world leaders can detect disingenuous gestures as well as our leaders in the United States can. Colin Gray commented that "strategic behavior that offends the sense of justice of key constituencies will meet with more resistance than will behavior that is not ethically so challenged."¹ Though this insight was offered in the context of strategy, it can apply just as well to coalitions. Last-minute courting of previously neglected nation-states can breed suspicion, resentment, and, ultimately, refusal of support if intended partners perceive that they are being treated disrespectfully. In the same vein, a senior official recently suggested that "if you take the time to be inclusive day to day, then when you act unilaterally, allies understand." Analogously, if you treat other recognized sovereign entities with dignity and respect day to day, they will feel more like bona fide stakeholders in a common cause and thus be more amenable to cooperating when their collaboration is needed. In this setting, the alliance will truly be a coalition of the *willing*, not a coalition of the *compelled*.

A second obvious but important point is to determine whether building a coalition

is truly the desired outcome and not merely a hollow act to provide cover. Acting for the latter reason severely damages our credibility, especially since U.S. security strategy has closely linked our values to our interests, and cooperative action is a prominent pillar. Parity on some level is implicit among the entities that form coalitions to achieve common goals. One premise is

that in the unique role as a hyperpower, we do not really need anyone. If this is what we truly believe, we must indicate that position explicitly and act in a unilateral way. If not, then we must act in a manner that indicates a genuine desire for multilateral participation. The mark of a benevolent hyperpower is to be neither apologetic nor haughty about its ascendancy. Military hierarchy offers an example of this. Commanders do not have the luxury of being "one of the troops." Such a position of authority and responsibility requires that every word and deed be carefully measured to ensure the proper message and example are sent to those entrusted to the commander's care, and to ensure that credibility as a leader is maintained. As a hyperpower, the United States is in a similar position. If we say we want to build coalitions, then we must sincerely want it and do it.

In summary, we might better build coalitions by remembering the three "A's" of *acknowledge*, *appreciate*, and *accept*.

Acknowledge that other prospective members of a coalition may not enjoy hyperpower status, but they still have pride, history, intelligence, and the potential to contribute, and they deserve to be treated

with dignity and respect.

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Appreciate that possible participants may have laws, conflicting interests, or differing

opinions that may not allow them to become affiliated with the gathering coalition. They may have other agreements or relationships on which they depend that would be compromised if they committed to the suggested partnership.

Most importantly, graciously *accept* that the offer to align with the forming coalition may be declined—a choice that democracy may require. The "play my way or I will take my marbles and go home" mentality is irritating on the playground; when demonstrated by a great power, it is unbecoming indeed.

Fellow world leaders should not be subject to consequences if they do not appear "willing" to support our interests when they legitimately conflict with their own. An eye injury caused by a well-placed thumb is painful, may cause permanent injury, and is not soon forgotten. A similar effect may be seen between allies. We might better build coalitions by adopting the same principles we apply in being good citizens: treating others with dignity and respect. The Golden Rule remains relevant. **JFQ**

NOTE

¹ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

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