



# HOW TO FIX THE WORLD, NYPD STYLE

BRET STEPHENS

When it comes to U.S. foreign policy, Americans must sometimes feel like Goldilocks in the three bears' house.

The porridge that was President George W. Bush's "freedom agenda" -- promising democracy for everyone from Karachi to Casablanca -- was too hot. The mush constituting President Barack Obama's foreign policy -- deeply ambivalent about the uses of U.S. power -- is too cold.

How can the U.S. enforce basic global norms of decency, deter enemies, and reassure friends without losing sight of our national interests?

There is a proven model that has nothing to do with foreign policy. It has to do with policing our toughest inner cities.

In 1990, New York City had a homicide rate of more than 30 murders for every 100,000 people. By 2012, it had fallen to a rate of 5 per 100,000. A similar, if slightly less dramatic, story unfolded in every other major U.S. city -- despite the fact that many of the factors often cited to explain crime -- bad schools, broken homes, poverty, the prevalence of guns, unemployment -- remained largely the same.

What happened?

In 1982, George Kelling, a criminologist at Rutgers, and James Q. Wilson, a political scientist at Harvard, wrote an essay titled "Broken Windows." It had long been known that if one broken window wasn't replaced, it wouldn't be long before all the other windows were broken too. Why? Because, they wrote, "one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing."

Municipalities that adopted policing techniques based on the broken-windows theory -- the strict enforcement of laws against petty crimes and policing by foot patrols -- registered sharp drops in crime and major improvements in people's quality of life.

Could it be that this "broken windows" approach would work in our increasingly disorderly world?

Absolutely. But, of course, only if the approach is applied.

After the dictator of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, used sarin nerve gas to murder more than 1,000 people near Damascus in August 2013, President Obama warned that "if we fail to act, the

Assad regime will see no reason to stop using chemical weapons.”

And after Russia seized Crimea in 2014, he denounced the Kremlin for “challenging truths that only a few weeks ago seemed self-evident, that in the 21st century, the borders of Europe cannot be redrawn with force.”

Two broken windows. Two eloquent warnings.

Yet the warnings didn’t amount to much. Bashar Assad stayed in power, and continued to use chemical weapons. And Russia’s invasion of Ukraine carried on.

This is how we arrive at a broken-windows world: Rules are invoked but not enforced. And when rules aren’t enforced, more rules will be broken. One window breaks, then others.

How do we arrest the slide into a world of international disorder?

As I write in my book, *America in Retreat*, we do it by invoking a broken windows foreign policy that sharply punishes violations of basic geopolitical norms, such as the use of chemical weapons, by swiftly and precisely targeting the perpetrators of those attacks. The emphasis should be on short, mission-specific, punitive police actions, not on open-ended occupations with the goal of redeeming broken societies, as was tried in Iraq.

A broken-windows foreign policy doesn’t try to run every bad guy out of town. Nor does it demand that the U.S. put out every geopolitical fire.

But it does prevent big fires and it does punish the worst dictators.

Just one cruise-missile strike against just one radio tower in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide could have helped to prevent the Hutu killers from broadcasting instructions for murdering Tutsis, potentially saving tens of thousands of innocent lives – and at minimal cost.

Similarly, at a minimal cost to America, US led bomb strikes by NATO were decisive in lifting the siege of Sarajevo in 1995, turning the tide of the war in the former Yugoslavia against Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic.

Perhaps it is time for a strategy that enshrines the principle that preventing tragedy should enjoy greater moral legitimacy than reacting to it.

I’m Bret Stephens.