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The Need to Readopt the More Humble Foreign Policy of the Nation's Founders

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Since World War II, the United States has adopted an interventionist foreign policy, straying from the founding father's more humble policy of nonintervention.

Adopting a more restrained, less militaristic U.S. foreign policy is likely to dramatically reduce anti-U.S. terrorism at home and abroad and would comport better with the principles of our republic.



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Since World War II, the United States has adopted an interventionist foreign policy, straying from the founding father's more humble policy of nonintervention. Returning to this original republican ideal of the nation's founders would protect the country from future terrorist attacks and prevent it from suffering the same consequences as other nations in history that overextended their territories.

Bi-partisan U.S. Foreign Policy: Interventionism

Most foreign policy analysts, whether Democratic or Republican, think alike. The same goes for presidential administrations. Although the Republicans generally tend to be more unilateral in their overseas interventions and Democrats tend to be more multilateral, they end up at basically the same place: a globalist foreign policy with an overemphasis on the use of military power to achieve U.S. objectives. The controversy over the Iraq war is illustrative.

In the face of worldwide opposition to a U.S. invasion, a more unilateralist Republican President George W. Bush grudgingly agreed to make his case for war

before the United Nations, but then refused to go back for a second Security Council resolution before he attacked. During the 2000 presidential campaign, the Democratic candidate John Kerry, who is more of a multilateralist, supported the war but criticized the president for not winning the support of more countries before the invasion began. Very few members of either party raised the more significant question of whether the invasion should have been undertaken at all. The restricted debate over the Iraq war is indicative of the interventionist consensus in U.S. foreign policy, even after the end of the cold war. Although the Democrats criticize President Bush's use of "preemptive war" in an attempt to distinguish their policy from his, Bush's approach is not preemptive and it is certainly not new.

Preemptive war is usually defined as attacking the enemy when warned that the opponent is about to attack first. Few would criticize a country that attacked in the face of such an imminent threat. The invasion of Iraq, however, was a preventive, rather than a preemptive, strike. The Bush administration implied

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vaguely that Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat, but the reality was that the administration hoped to take out Saddam before he could field nuclear weapons. (Of course, even in the worst-case scenario of Saddam possessing a few nuclear weapons, the massive U.S. nuclear arsenal would have most likely deterred an Iraqi nuclear attack on the United States.) But, George W. Bush did not invent the preventive attack. In the early 1990s, Bill Clinton threatened preventive war if North Korea did not freeze its program to develop nuclear weapons. Even Bush's father, George H. W. Bush, invaded Panama to prevent a future threat, the nature of which was never clear.

The Democrats tend to be more astute at marketing than the more hard-nosed Republicans, better cloaking their imperial foreign adventures with the idealistic terms of spreading democracy or fostering humanitarian ends. For example, in 1995, Bill Clinton sent an armada to the coast of Haiti and threatened to invade the country unless the dictator Raoul Cedras abdicated and restored the democratically elected president Jean Bertrand Aristide. Although the U.S. threat was justified in terms of restoring democracy to one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere, the real impetus for the military action was the flood of unwanted Haitian refugees washing up on the shores of Florida, a key state come election time.

George W. Bush's impending invasion of Iraq garnered more opposition, both domestically and abroad, than the imperial excursions of Bill Clinton and Bush's father because the younger Bush minimized the use of idealistic rhetoric in justifying his war. Only after the invasion was complete and no Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or Saddam-al Qaeda links were found did

George W. Bush, out of desperation, hang his hat on the "democratizing Iraq and the Middle East" justification. Presidents do learn while in office.

Democrats would protest that differences exist between what George W. Bush did in Iraq and what Bill Clinton did in Kosovo, for example. That argument is true, but those differences are of degree rather than kind.

Ostensibly, Clinton launched air attacks against the sovereign nation of Serbia to stop ethnic cleansing of Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo. Like Bush, he could not get approval for his military adventure from the United Nations Security Council. Unlike Bush, he could not get congressional approval for the intervention. In reality, initial attacks by the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) against the Serbs prompted Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to begin the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in the first place. Once it had started, U.S. bombing made the situation worse. In addition to killing many innocents, the bombing caused Milosevic, now with nothing to lose, to escalate the ethnic cleansing. Despite the humanitarian rhetoric, Clinton undertook the military action, as he did in Bosnia, to preserve U.S. dominance in Europe, a region of perceived political and economic significance to the United States.

In terms of the number of overseas military excursions, Clinton is the modern day champion and was adept at dressing up geopolitical interventions in humanitarian garb. Although he intervened in Kosovo, Bosnia, Haiti, and Somalia, only Somalia could be genuinely justified as humanitarian in purpose.

Although so far Bush is behind Clinton in numbers of military excursions, he wins the prize for interventions of scale

and consequence. Bush cynically took advantage of the September 11 terrorist attacks to justify a massive ground invasion of an unrelated, sovereign Islamic nation. The large-scale and now open-ended war in Iraq will probably have many more ill effects than any of Clinton's small wars. The quagmire in which the United States is currently entangled massively drains the governmental resources and attention desperately needed to fight al Qaeda, one of the few strategic threats to the U.S. homeland since the origin of the republic. In addition, the invasion of Iraq will most likely make that strategic threat worse by inflaming the radical Islamist world, similar to the effect of the invasion of Islamic Afghanistan by another "infidel" nation, the Soviet Union. Although Clinton also could have done more to combat al Qaeda, he avoided ground attacks in the Islamic world that could have turned into inflammatory quagmires (after his small-scale failure in Somalia).

In addition, Bush's increased support for Taiwan vis-à-vis China could ensnare the United States in conflict with a nuclear-armed power. The consequences to the U.S. homeland of a closer informal U.S. alliance with Taiwan may be as serious as Bush's stoking of the fires in the Islamic world unnecessarily. Although Taiwan should be lauded for its move from autocracy to democracy, the island has little strategic value for the United States. Although the United States has a much greater and more capable nuclear arsenal than China, the Chinese are much more emotional about the Taiwan issue than are the Americans because they regard the island as part of China. So, no guarantee exists that China would back down during a Taiwan Straits crisis in the face of U.S. nuclear dominance. Should the United States give up Los Angeles to save Taipei? The answer to

this question should be a resounding "no".

Although Bush's foreign policy adventures are more ambitious and dangerous than his father's or Clinton's interventions, the differences are in shades of gray rather than black and white. The aforementioned examples illustrate a post-World War II bipartisan consensus for a military-centered, interventionist U.S. foreign policy.

A History of U.S. Interventionism

The consensus between both parties to meddle in the affairs of nations anywhere and everywhere did not always exist. In fact, considering the history of U.S. foreign policy, what now seems like the norm is actually an anomaly. At the time of the nation's founding, the vast majority of the United States' leaders, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, believed in conducting commerce with all nations but avoiding meddling in their business. The founders had an aversive reaction to European kings who fought wars of aggrandizement, squandering the blood and treasure of their people. The founding generation believed in staying out of foreign wars and was wary that the large standing armies necessary to prosecute them could be turned inward to usurp the liberties of the American people. More important yet, the founders realized that the United States had an advantaged location far away from the centers of the world's conflict, allowing it the luxury of staying out of most foreign wars.

How far the United States has strayed from that astute original vision! For most of the country's history, with a few exceptions, the nation's leaders eschewed overseas meddling. At the turn of the twentieth century and the first couple of subsequent decades,

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however, the United States began to intervene militarily in its own Latin American sphere of influence — including in the Spanish-American War and in military excursions scattered across the Caribbean and Central America. But even that was controversial and had tapered off by the end of the 1920s.

It was only during the cold war — the first time that the United States had a large standing army during peacetime — that this country began a strategy of global military intervention to maintain an informal empire. Unlike more formal empires, such as the Roman or British empires, that used their militaries to conquer and annex territories, the informal U.S. empire consists of one-sided alliances, military bases worldwide, and profligate intrusion into the affairs of nations in all parts of the world. Ostensibly, this U.S. empire was created to counter the influence of the competing Soviet empire. But belying this rhetoric was the U.S. empire's expansion after the Soviet Union collapsed.

The United States expanded the NATO alliance twice, both in mission and in territory; strengthened its alliances in East Asia; created numerous bases in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia; and increased influence in many small, out-of-the-way countries, such as Pakistan, Yemen, Georgia, and the Philippines, in the name of fighting terrorism. Besides, if the United States' main purpose had really been to facilitate the collapse of the Soviet Union, instead of fighting over obscure, non-strategic places, such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Korea, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan, it should have let the Soviets have them. The Soviet Union would have then traveled faster down the road of all empires throughout history, becoming financially overextended and collapsing more quickly than it did.

Time to Return to the More Humble, Traditional U.S. Foreign Policy

Of course, the cold war ended a decade and a half ago, but the unsustainable U.S. imperial foreign policy is still on autopilot. If the United States does not adopt a more restrained foreign policy, it could go the way of the Soviet Union and all other empires. All of those empires shrank dramatically or collapsed because their realms exceeded what their resource bases could support as a result of overexpansion, excessive administrative expenses, or costly wars. And, in recent times, empires have been declining more rapidly. High-level British officials would have laughed had they been told in 1913, at the height of British power, that in just over 30 years their empire would be on its knees. That, however, is exactly what happened. Britain was dragged into two costly world wars and was rendered financially unable to maintain its expansive global realm.

Although the United States has a large economy, imperial overstretch is possible and may already be occurring. The United States accounts for about 40 percent of the world's military spending, but only about 30 percent of global economic output (gross domestic product). Formal allies, such as the nations of NATO, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia, and informal friends, such as Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and New Zealand, all depend on U.S. security guarantees in one form or another. The U.S. military would be severely stretched if more than one of those IOUs were redeemed simultaneously. The U.S. armed forces already have been stretched to the breaking point by brushfire wars in two small developing countries — Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. security commitments vastly exceed the military forces that would be needed to fulfill them, which, in turn, exceed the

budgetary resources allocated to equip them and make them ready to fight. Even so, the U.S. budget for national defense is massive — equivalent to what the next thirteen nations combined spend on security.

The Soviet Union collapsed because its weak economy could not support profligate military spending. The United States has a much larger economy than the Soviet Union, making an outright U.S. collapse unlikely. Yet Japan, China, India, and the European Union spend a much smaller fraction of their economic output on defense than the United States does. Resources that are not spent on nonproductive military items could alternatively be channeled into productive civilian uses. Thus, if

be plowed back into the economy. As a result, U.S. citizens would become more prosperous and the country would be more able to compete against future rising powers whose economies are not encumbered by such profligate security expenditures. Besides, most of the U.S. weapons now getting ready for production will become obsolete over the twenty to thirty years needed for a peer competitor to arise. Thus, the current bloated defense budgets provide excess security in the short term but undermine the nation's economic base on which long-term security depends.

The U.S. government should take advantage of the threat interregnum, cutting its defense spending and plowing the money back into the

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these countries are able to free up their economies from state control, they could easily become economic peer competitors of the United States. China and India have very high economic growth rates, and the European Union already has a greater GDP than the United States. A large and productive economy underpins all other types of national power — military and cultural, among others— because those instruments of power depend on resources.

The imperial U.S. foreign policy does not fit the times or U.S. geography. After the fall of the Soviet Union, threats to the United States from competing nation-states are low. Yet, the United States continues to waste resources on excessive defense spending that could

economy to ensure that the nation is competitive with the rising powers of the future. The government can always re-inflate the defense budget in the future if one of those nations becomes an active and direct military threat to the United States. Large-scale threats from rising great power do not materialize overnight.

At this point, no one can predict whether Japan, China, India, or the European Union will become an imminent military threat to the United States. But the United States should avoid the nearly fatal mistakes of Britain and France prior to World War II. Those two nations devoted so much attention and so many resources to maintaining their global empires that they failed to pay enough attention to the rising threat of Nazi

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Germany closer to home. The United States would be well-advised to keep its powder dry to counter any future threat from a rising great power. The U.S. government should retract its unnecessary and far-flung global empire by abrogating outdated cold war alliances; abandoning costly overseas military bases; and ending wanton military, political, and economic interventions in the affairs of nations worldwide.

The founders of the United States realized the nation's advantageous geographical position, with two great oceans as moats buffering it from the centers of the world's conflicts. In addition, the modern-day United States has weak and friendly neighbors as well as the world's most potent nuclear arsenal. Thus, an invasion is almost impossible, and an attack from the air or with nuclear weapons is very unlikely. Because of its secure position against attacks from other great powers, the United States has the luxury of avoiding meddling in other nations' affairs.

But, what of the threat of anti-U.S. terrorism? Many Americans, without much thought, accept the U.S. foreign policy establishment's argument that anti-American terrorism will always be around, no matter what policy the United States pursues. According to President Bush, the head of that establishment, radical anti-U.S. Islamists hate the United States because of its freedoms.

Yet Osama bin Laden's beef with the United States does not focus on the U.S. domestic political and economic system or even the permissive U.S. culture. He has been fairly consistent in criticizing the United States for its support of corrupt and autocratic governments in the Middle East, its military presence on Islamic holy lands, and its one-sided support for Israel.

Similarly, poll after poll in the Islamic world indicate that U.S. political freedom, wealth, technology, and culture are all seen in favorable terms; on the other hand, U.S. foreign policy toward Muslim nations garners an extremely unfavorable reaction. If they knew about it, most Americans would be shocked at the extent of U.S. meddling in the affairs of those nations and others around the world. The United States is the only nation on the globe that intervenes outside its own region — and it does so regularly.

This interventionist foreign policy is a holdover from the cold war and is outdated and dangerous. During the cold war, a reasonable argument was made for overseas interventions to blunt inroads by the rival Soviet empire. (Even then, as noted earlier, a better argument could have been made: Let the Soviets take over unimportant countries and overextend themselves more rapidly by piling mounting costs of administration on an already dysfunctional economy.) Any advantages of that meddling, however, have long since diminished with the collapse of the rival superpower. In contrast, the growing disadvantages of an interventionist U.S. foreign policy on autopilot became evident on September 11, 2001. All empires have experienced blowback, but such repercussions in modern times have a greater potential to be catastrophic. Now, small groups, when armed with modern technology, can wreak more havoc on the American homeland than foreign armies, both past and present.

After September 11, the U.S. government needed to destroy al Qaeda. But, to remove the motivation for similar groups to attack the United States in the future, it should quietly reassess the maintenance of its global empire and the concomitant intrusion

into the affairs of other nations worldwide. The luxury of security from attacks by other nation-states, which either cannot reach the United States with their weaponry or can be deterred by the vulnerability of their territories to the potent, long-range U.S. conventional and nuclear arsenals, should actually help this country avoid attacks from less deterrable non-state terrorist groups that do not have a home address to hold hostage. Given the secure geographic position of the United States, there is no need for profligate overseas meddling that makes state and non-state enemies and leads to terrorism against U.S. targets at home and abroad.

This change in worldview does not mean appeasing any remaining terrorist groups that continue to target a United States that pursues a more restrained foreign policy. These groups should be dealt with swiftly, decisively, and quietly. Neutralizing them without fanfare would avoid inflaming anti-U.S. passions across the world, which merely recruits more terrorists hostile to the United States. The most desirable approach is to do the opposite of what President Bush did after the September 11 attacks. Regrettably, instead of initiating a quiet campaign against al Qaeda, he cynically used those attacks to build public support for a wider, hyped war on terror and an invasion of Iraq. Neither of those distractions has had anything to do with effectively and quietly destroying

al Qaeda, and both have inflamed the Islamic world and most likely recruited many more terrorists. Similar to what the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan wrought, the U.S. invasion of Iraq has been a magnet for radical jihadists all over the world to come and expel the "infidel." Bush's slogan that the United States is fighting terrorists in Iraq so that U.S. citizens do not have to fight them at home is based on the assumption that the universe of terrorists worldwide has stayed constant. That assumption is very questionable.

But, if today's leaders readopted the traditional U.S. foreign policy of military restraint, which the founders and subsequent generations practiced for the most part until 1950, the number of terrorists motivated to attack the United States would most likely decline dramatically. If this outcome is doubted, one need only examine what happened in Lebanon in the 1980s. The Reagan administration intervened in the Lebanese civil war on behalf of the Christians. Hezbollah, a radical Shiite Islamist group, launched many attacks against U.S. targets, notably the U.S. embassy and the Marine barracks, killing 241 U.S. Marines. After the U.S. withdrew from Lebanon, attacks by Lebanese Hezbollah against U.S. targets virtually disappeared. Terrorists many times use reprehensible tactics, but they attack their targets because of specific reasons, not out of an irrational

desire to kill for the sake of killing. To get rid of terrorism, the motivation for it must first be removed. In many cases, the interventionist U.S. foreign policy is the motivating force behind anti-U.S. terrorism.

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The new policy also would be a lot less expensive, both in terms of American lives and taxpayer dollars wasted. It would also help stanch the erosion of the Constitution in favor of the excessively powerful imperial presidency. War causes power to flow to the executive branch, which erodes the original system of checks and balances created by the nation's founders. Fewer military interventions would hopefully allow a reversal of this distressing trend. Finally, exporting democracy at gunpoint has never been very successful, and merely undermines the natural spread of a vibrant political system by associating it with a foreign invader.

Ultimately, a more restrained U.S. foreign policy would comport better with the principles of a republic. Thus, the nation must choose between two alternatives: being an empire and being a republic.

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