

Has American foreign policy been good for America?

At the end of World War II, the United States was by far the dominant power on the planet. How well has the foreign policy / military establishment used that power for the benefit of Americans? Almost three quarters of a century is enough time to assess the consequences of the principles that have guided American actions.

There have been successes. Americans have been spared annihilation from nuclear weapons. The United States:

- helped rebuild a devastated Europe and Japan after World War II on the idea it is better to trade with vanquished nations than rule them;
- aided and abetted the entry of China into the world economy;
- in a halting, inconsistent manner generally promoted individual liberty, inalienable human rights, and free trade.

These successes have one element in common. They were initiated decades ago. More recent initiatives have sapped American strength and authority. Since 1945, the United States has engaged in a seemingly endless cavalcade of wars: Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan. To what end? Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent and, more important, tens of thousands of American lives have been lost or terribly damaged.

American soldiers fought in Korea to keep the country from going to the “reds” as Harry Truman put it. The more antiseptic term, “containment” was used to justify the disastrous, failed US intervention in Vietnam, but the basic idea was the same: if the United States did not stop the communists in Vietnam, the next thing you know they would overrun San Francisco. [Some might argue they didn’t have to bother because the Democratic left has already done the job for them]. Americans fought in Iraq to rid the world of an evil dictator and to bring freedom and democracy to the middle east. So far it hasn’t worked out that way. Ditto for Afghanistan and Syria. The US still provides a protective shield for nations in Europe and Asia that decades ago regained enough wealth to protect themselves. Time and again the American fighting man has risen to the call with courage, competence, honor, and valor. They deserve all the gratitude, respect, and care we can muster.

But, were their sacrifices and those of their families and taxpayers worth it? I don’t like my own conclusion, but I have to say “No”. Except for Sunni Islamic terrorists to whom our Saudi

“allies” seem to have turned a blind eye, none of the wars America has fought in the last seventy-three years has been against adversaries who threatened our physical security. The claim that they threatened our economic security doesn’t stand up either. For example, the rationale of our fighting in the middle east to protect our oil ignores the fact that if oil exporters don’t sell their oil, they lose the revenue they need to live. Oil benefits no one if it remains in the ground.

If there was no immediate threat to our physical security, why has the United States become embroiled in one war after another? Think of how much better off the American people would be had the lives and treasure spent on warfighting been devoted more beneficial purposes at home? No one would argue against the necessity of a robust **defense** and **deterrence** against those who wish us harm. But, the explanation for the gross excess American interventions abroad lies not in necessity, but in the toxic effect of a combination of mutually reinforcing, malign factors: obsession with abstractions, lack of decision-maker and policy analyst skin in the game, hubris, and mission creep.

Since World War II, American foreign and “defense” policy has become hugely influenced by academics - professional policy analysts - whose primary exposure to the world has been through books and other academics. These types tend to be very bright and conceptually facile, but they live in a world of abstractions, e.g., “containment”, “spreading freedom and democracy”. Most of them don’t get it that the world is much messier and intractable than they can imagine. Mistaking their flawed, primitive perceptual maps of reality for the actual, complex, opaque territory has gotten a lot of people killed for nothing. Unfortunately, these highly credentialed, articulate “experts” have ready access to the mainstream media who turn to them for “explanation”.

With a very few honorable exceptions, the people who have gotten us into wars have had little or nothing to lose. No family members were in harm’s way, and if things went wrong, they could always write a book about how they really were right but other people thwarted their will; or, they could say they are sorry, and spend the rest of their days riding around in black limos spending taxpayer money as penance. Robert McNamara is a particularly disgusting example.

A third contributor to our endless wars is just plain old hubris. The best and the brightest of an era, who have risen through the ranks via sheer intellectual horsepower and networking (political) skill, can’t bring themselves to admit that their efforts may be futile, counter-productive, and hugely costly in American lives and treasure. And, they don’t have to because of the fourth contributor, mission creep.

There is big, big money in “defense”. Since there is no such thing as perfect security, an argument can always be made for more, and there is always some set of policy “experts” available to make the case. Stanley Kubrick in his magnificent *Dr. Strangelove*” caught the absurdity of mission creep perfectly when he has his character, General Buck Turgidson, passionately urge the President not to let America fall behind:

[Mr. President] we must...increasingly be on the alert to prevent them [the Russkies] from taking over other mineshaft space, in order to breed more prodigiously than we do, thus knocking us out in superior numbers when we emerge! Mr. President, we must not allow...a mineshaft gap.!

The madness must stop, but how? There is no single, compelling answer, but a good place to start is to rethink the first principles of American policy toward the rest of the world. We can do no better than to embrace a policy of non-interventionism, as expressed by John Quincy Adams:

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will recommend the general cause, by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself, beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force. The frontlet upon her brows would no longer beam with the ineffable splendor of freedom and independence; but in its stead would soon be substituted an imperial diadem, flashing in false and tarnished lustre the murky radiance of dominion and power. She might become the dictatress of the world: she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.