

In defense of non-interventionism

The human and financial costs of the intervention-oriented policies of the American foreign policy establishment since the end of World War II have been staggering. They have dwarfed any conceivable benefits to the American people, if indeed they can be found at all beyond the assertions of sympathetic foreign policy “experts”. I have never seen an analysis of what could have been accomplished had the resources spent in pursuit of American control and dominance instead been spent on building *American* human and physical capital. I doubt that the Washington policy elites wish to inform the American people of what has been lost relative to whatever has been gained in terms of economic and physical security. It is time to consider that **non-interventionism** should be the default option for American participation in affairs outside our borders.

A presumption against intervention in other nations’ affairs – non-interventionism – is vehemently opposed by the powers-that-be in Washington. The case against intervention rests on the following pillars:

1. The United States cannot live in splendid isolation. The world will still be there even if we shut our eyes. Therefore, the United States has no choice but to try to exert maximum feasible influence.
2. The United States knows how to improve conditions wherever it intervenes.
3. The United States has the capability to exert its will for the better.
4. If the United States does not intervene in the affairs of others, interests who want to harm us will gain too much power; the USA will become dangerously vulnerable to their being able to impose their will on us.

None of these assertions bears scrutiny.

The first argument contains a non-sequitur. Non-interventionism is not isolationism; it does not imply disengagement in world affairs. In fact, quite the contrary. A non-interventionist such as myself also is a strong proponent of free trade and extensive interactions of American citizens with people around the world. The more Americans interact privately with other people, the less susceptible we will be to caricatures of them as “the enemy”. Non-interventionism goes hand in hand with citizen to citizen, company to company engagement.

The idea that the United States government has the knowledge and capability to “fix” problems around the world via vigorous intervention has been disproven by experience. The list of fiascoes

is impressive: the Vietnam war, the Iraq war, Afghanistan, Syria, foreign and military aid, too much of which has gone into pockets of corrupt host government politicians and bureaucrats.

The futility and absurdity of American government intervention can be illustrated in microcosm by looking at a typical mission of our magnificent Navy SEALs in Afghanistan. They go hunting for Taliban fighters. When they find them, they kill them, using the full panoply of American technology: Predator drones, C-130 gunships. Sometimes they get hurt or killed. The cost per Taliban killed must be huge.

What, however, do the exploits of our SEALs, Army Rangers, Delta Force, Marine recon, etc. ultimately accomplish? The best of America may be engaged in whack-a-mole. The Taliban and forces like them are fighting on their home ground. However medieval their practices, however much they want to impose their will on their fellow countrymen, however much Americans are repelled by their actions against their own people, the Taliban crowd and other savage groups like them will be there decades from now and are not going to be converted into people who share American values. The United States knows how to kill people who try to kill our fighters, but we do not know how to convert them to lovers of freedom and human rights as described in our Declaration of Independence.

American presence in conflict spots around the world may make matters worse. Every time our combat operations “take out” “collateral damage”, we foment candidates for future terrorists.

Non-interventionism is not just consistent with a strong defense of the physical and economic security of the American people, it is conducive to it. A rigorous culling of “defense” expenditures, or more aptly labelled “war fighting” expenditures not necessary for actual defense might yield tens, maybe hundreds of billions of dollars in savings, some of which could be used to bolster the defense against threats that truly threatened security, narrowly and carefully defined.

No non-interventionist would deny that a robust defense is necessary against states and/or groups and individuals that truly wish America harm. For example, while getting rid of a carrier group or two, which are mainly useful for offensive operations and are highly vulnerable to destruction by weapons costing a tiny fraction of a single carrier, it might be desirable to strengthen our cyber-defense capabilities, or our ability to deter and/or neutralize attacks on the US by small groups of hate-filled nihilists with access to weapons of mass death. The right trade-offs require a combination of great technical expertise and an acute sense that resources are limited and their use must be subjected to a brutal test of necessity and effectiveness. This is not being done, but eventually will have to be done when the American people realize we are no longer rich enough to fund operations world-wide that have little or nothing to do with basic security. Until that day comes, “defense” spending will be driven by the interests of the iron triangle of politicians wanting money spent in their state or district to secure re-election, civilian and military personnel seeking bigger budgets to enhance their power and authority, and the military-industrial complex

that the superb Dwight Eisenhower identified as a threat to American liberty and solvency – unless checked by a disciplined focus on what is truly necessary for defense and no more. I fear that only a financial crisis will induce the necessary clarity.