

Homeward Bound?

By Ivan Eland

BOTH U.S. political parties--the Democrats and the Republicans--compete to see who can be more interventionist in world affairs. Although many liberal Democrats emphasize working through international institutions and organizations, such as the United Nations, and many conservative Republicans focus more on unilaterally employing U.S. power, they all end up trying to meddle in the policies of other nations and peoples, often using military force. Both parties want to fix the Middle East and Afghanistan, aggressively advance democracy and human rights around the world, attempt to stop the drug trade and international crime, and so on. For example, the candidates of both parties would have the United States become more involved in the affairs of Myanmar, Pakistan, Iran, Georgia and Zimbabwe.

Neither party has shown much interest in returning to the original inclination of the nation's founders toward military restraint overseas, as epitomized in Washington's Farewell Address--and practiced, with a few exceptions, from the founding all the way up to the Korean War. The foreign-policy disaster in Iraq should have spurred a long-needed national debate that could lead to such an urgently needed policy switch--but so far, this has not been reflected in the 2008 presidential race.

Perhaps this is because elections are usually decided on the basis of domestic issues; foreign policy seems more remote to the daily concerns of the general public than do bread-and-butter issues at home. This maxim has been recently demonstrated even during wartime, when bad economic news pushed out the Iraq War as the dominant issue in the 2008 presidential-election campaign.

In addition, there have been far-fewer mass protests in the United States against the drawn-out Iraq War than its Vietnam counterpart because the domestic consequences are much lower. Although the monetary costs of the Iraq War have exceeded the Vietnam War, the cost in lives is much lower (forty-one hundred at this writing versus fifty-eight thousand in Vietnam) and those fatalities are volunteers, not people yanked off the street involuntarily and into a conflict by conscription. People do act in their self-interest, and young people and their parents are more apt to become active, rather than passive, opponents of a war in which they or their loved ones have a higher probability of fighting and dying.

But if the public--almost two-thirds of which believe that the Iraq War was not worth fighting--cannot stop the most-celebrated foreign-policy fiasco of our time, they are much less likely to stop, or even be inclined to stop, lesser-known interventions in foreign countries (for example, U.S. assistance to the Ethiopian invasion and continued occupation of Somalia) that don't seem to have much immediate impact on their daily lives.

Perhaps this could be explained because the average American believes that increased U.S. activism--especially maintaining a large military footprint in the greater Islamic world--is necessary to make the country safe by "promoting freedom" and waging the "war against terror." President Bush has echoed both of these sentiments. But let's disassociate slogans from empirical results.

First, Christopher Coyne, a professor of economics at West Virginia University, has studied U.S. efforts to bring liberal democracy to various countries around the world at gunpoint. He concluded that since the late 1800s, countries in which the United States has intervened militarily have achieved some semblance of an institutionalized democracy only 28 percent of the time ten years after the intervention, only 39 percent of the time after fifteen years and 36 percent of the time after twenty years. Moreover, Coyne uses a fairly low standard for achieving institutional democracy--a level slightly better than today's Iran. And

even these percentages may overstate the success rate because in some cases the U.S. intervention may have had little to do with the change for the better. Coyne noted that as the length of time passes between the U.S. intervention and progress toward the creation of a liberal democracy, the effect of the former on the latter becomes more cloudy. He uses the examples of Lebanon and the Dominican Republic achieving his modest threshold fifteen years after U.S. interventions in 1958 and 1965, respectively. In the case of Lebanon, the progress unraveled in a civil war, which began two years after the fifteen-year mark in the mid-1970s. (n1)

Second, the "offense is the best defense" strategy has been counterproductive for countering terrorism--international terrorism is up markedly since the United States invaded Iraq, and the number of suicide-bombing attacks has skyrocketed from 75 incidents in 2002 to 658 in 2007.(n2) In fact, invading, occupying and conducting nation-building operations in "failed states" (as the United States has done in Iraq or Afghanistan) or visibly supporting proxies to do the same (Ethiopia in Somalia) exacerbates the problem twofold; it not only creates new pools of recruits but also allows terrorist groups to hone their skills in direct combat with U.S. and allied forces. Moreover, continued U.S. interventions, particularly in the Arab and Islamic world, dissipate whatever favorable rating the United States receives for its political and economic freedoms in favor of highly negative reactions to the actual consequences of U.S. foreign policy.

So, if the most-important purpose of the U.S. government is to make its citizens and territory secure and U.S. interventionism overseas is making them less so, then the rational response, especially after 9/11, would have been to go after al-Qaeda in the shadows (as opposed to a wider and more-public general "war on terror") while reducing the U.S. footprint overseas and withdrawing from commitments that make little strategic sense in a post-cold-war environment.

But this runs up against the logic of what has been termed the military-industrial-congressional complex. After a crisis such as 9/11, politicians--both in Congress and in the executive branch--have to be seen as "doing something" to make America safer, even though their actions may have little effect, be too costly or cumbersome, or even be counterproductive. Meanwhile, a whole host of special interests found ways to hook their chariots to the desire of Americans to feel safe and protected.

Take this example. The government has overinvested in visible airport-security measures because many voters travel by air and want to see that the government is doing something to protect them. In contrast, much less has been spent on port security--even though this is where we remain vulnerable, maybe even to a nuclear terrorist attack--because few people go down to the docks to see their new Toyota unloaded.

The departments of Defense, State, Treasury and Homeland Security have an incentive to promote an interventionist foreign policy because their departments become more useful and they get more authority and money for their programs. For example, even though a fight against al-Qaeda in the shadows using law enforcement, intelligence, special forces and drones would have been relatively cheap, the Pentagon used 9/11 to justify buying more gold-plated weapons--such as expensive submarines, ships and fighter aircraft--that have little role in such a clandestine war. A wider war on terror against countries that sponsor terrorism was needed to justify purchasing such armaments.

And of course defense, homeland-security and university contractors, which research and build such big-ticket weapons technology and security systems, make huge amounts of money when military interventions burn equipment, justify increased spending on new high-tech weapons and cause the threat of blowback terrorism to increase. But the military-industrial-congressional complex is not the only special interest to benefit from the interventionist U.S. foreign policy. U.S. private nondefense companies operating overseas--for example, U.S. oil companies in the Middle East--get a hidden government subsidy by the U.S. military's efforts to "stabilize" the regions in which they operate. Even private U.S. citizens--

such as academic scholars, former politicians and bureaucrats, representatives from nonprofit organizations and think tanks, and U.S. lobbyists for foreign countries--get invited to conferences, appear on television and are consulted with reverence about happenings in the superpower. Thus, even they have an interest in an activist foreign policy.

Seemingly, the only group that doesn't really have an interest in a post-cold-war interventionist foreign policy is the general citizenry, who have to then pay the costs of the policy.

Costs of an Activist Foreign Policy

TO SUPPORT the informal worldwide network of alliances, overseas bases and deployed personnel, which are used to justify and conduct profligate military interventions, the United States spends vast sums on security compared to other countries. The United States spends more on defense than the combined security expenditures of the next sixteen highest-spending countries and accounts for 48 percent of the world's defense spending.(n3)

This comparison, along with the strain that the two small wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have imposed on U.S. forces, indicates that the U.S. superpower might be overextended. Many prior empires have declined because their security spending and overseas military commitments, bases, and interventions exceeded their ability to pay for them. Even the British and French Empires, on the winning side of both world wars, became financially exhausted--because of fighting those wars and maintaining their vast empires--and went into decline. More recently, the Soviet Union's empire, and even the country itself, collapsed because its giant military, Eastern European alliances and military interventions in the developing world became too much for its dysfunctional socialist economy to bear.

Many in the United States say that the U.S. economy is much larger than those of such failed empires and that decline cannot happen here. But other formerly dominant, but fallen, empires believed they were invincible too. Economic power is relative to that of other countries--with only about a quarter of the world's GDP, the United States may be a military superpower but is only an economic "first among equals." Furthermore, over time, small differences in economic growth rates between competing countries can lead to a reordering of great powers on the world scene. Some of the Washington's primary current and future economic competitors have far-less defense spending to drag their economies down.

And those who consider themselves conservatives, even those who label themselves "national greatness" conservatives, should be leery of too much defense spending, excessive military commitments and bases overseas, and unnecessary wars, such as Iraq, that sap national resources. Conservatives should also be worried that government activism and spending abroad (which many seem to support) leads to government activism and spending at home in nondefense matters (which many seem to oppose). Domestic government spending balloons as the price a president has to pay to generate continuing support for his overseas war or wars increases. For example, President George W. Bush has increased domestic spending drastically--the greatest increase by a president since Lyndon Johnson--at the same time he has fought wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. During wartime, the government usually intrudes more into the private sector to direct greater resources and productive capacity to the war effort. After the war is over, wartime precedents for government activism in private economic decisions often linger. Over history, war has been the biggest cause of government expansion.

Both liberals and conservatives should be concerned about the effects of repeated wars on domestic civil liberties, which make this country unique. The seemingly perpetual war on terror, like the long cold war, might be more injurious to such liberties than past conventional wars--usually of limited duration--because no end to hostilities terminates the government clampdown. Also, some of the adversaries'

attacks may be on the homeland, thus generating more fear--and pressure for a tightening of the domestic-security vise--than would a strictly foreign war.

All Americans should be concerned about an interventionist foreign policy because it endangers U.S. citizens, their property, and the system of checks and balances enshrined in the Constitution, which is supposed to prevent an excessive accumulation of power by any one branch of government. Taking advantage of the war on terror, President Bush has claimed breathtaking executive authority during wartime--including the right as commander in chief, and in signing statements, to ignore laws passed by Congress; by flagrantly violating the law and Constitution in authorizing domestic surveillance without a warrant; and by unilaterally suspending the writ of habeas corpus by which prisoners can challenge their incarceration. If a more-modest foreign policy is not adopted to reduce the likelihood of anti-U.S. terrorism, future presidents will also take advantage of the "war" against terrorists to expand their powers, much to the peril of the Republic.

Foreign military excursions led the Roman Republic to slowly transform into the autocratic Roman Empire; similarly, foreign intervention turned the French revolution into the "terror" at home. It is not out of the realm of possibility that the same could happen in the United States. We have already started down that path. Erosion of republican institutions is the most-important ill effect of war, but the one least mentioned.

Parameters of a New Policy of Global Restraint

THE COLLAPSE of the United States principal superpower rival, the Soviet Union, should have rendered many places in the world less strategic to vital U.S. interests (if they ever were). Potentially ascending powers--such as China, India or a resurgent Russia--will probably take decades to challenge the United States militarily, if they ever do.

Even if another potential hegemonic power arises, the United States might adopt a less-expensive and less-dangerous strategy than it did during the cold war vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Even assuming that Russia and China become more hostile in the future--the so-called Eurasian entente--the United States should be prepared to let its wealthy allies in Europe and East Asia be the first line of defense. The European Union now has a GDP that exceeds that of the United States and could do much more for its own defense. In East Asia, the now-wealthy nations of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Australia could band together to be the first line of defense against any turn by China toward militarism. In each of these two regions, the United States should act as a second line of defense--that is, as a balancer of last resort--intervening only if the balance of power was disrupted and an aggressive hegemonic power threatened to overrun either of them.

Other regions of the world are much less developed and therefore nonstrategic. If any other hegemonic power wants to conquer them, they will have to pay the exorbitant cost of securing, administering and aiding them--thus increasing the likelihood of imperial overstretch and decline. Learning from the overextension and demise of the Soviet Union, China--at least presently--does not seem willing to spend trillions of its own on such foreign adventures. Unfortunately, now it is the United States that is in danger of experiencing such overstretch as it tries futilely to police the world and convert countries to democracy.

But don't we need U.S. military power in the Persian Gulf to protect vital supplies of oil for the United States? Oil is a valuable commodity, and Persian Gulf countries are heavily dependent on it to earn foreign exchange because they export little else. Oil-producing countries often need to pump and sell the oil as much or more than Western nations need to buy it. Thus, the market will ensure that oil reaches the United States and its Western allies. The triumph of the market over ideology or political turmoil is

illustrated by the fact that even the radical Islamic government in Iran sells its oil to the hated West, and oil and other resources make it to market from parts of Africa--for example, from Nigeria--wracked by internal strife.

Even if instability in the Gulf or in other oil-producing countries makes the price go up, recent experience has shown that industrialized economies are very resilient to even high oil-price increases. For example, the oil price is high now by historical standards, but the U.S. economy hasn't collapsed and will likely adjust--just as the German economy did with continued economic growth and low unemployment and inflation while weathering a 211 percent oil-price increase during the 1998-2000 period. Contrary to popular belief, it is unlikely that inflation, a general rise in prices, will be triggered by even significant oil-price increases because economic actors will have less money to spend on other items, thus driving their prices down.

Furthermore, it is cheaper to just pay the occasionally higher prices for oil induced by instability or market factors--contingent expenses--than it is to annually pay to operate expensive military forces in the Gulf to defend oil that will flow anyway.

Nevertheless, if U.S. leaders insist on accepting the myth that the United States must have military power in the Persian Gulf to guard oil, they should at least withdraw U.S. land-based forces (the army, marines and air force) stationed in the Gulf and bring in such forces from offshore only if a major danger to the oil arises. This change in policy would eliminate the lightning rod of non-Muslim forces on Muslim lands, which drives radical Islamists into the ranks of anti-U.S. terrorists. The oil fields were successfully defended using over-the-horizon forces brought in as needed during Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1991, with only a U.S. naval presence there prior to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. At minimum, the United States should go back to this posture, minimize or eliminate much of its land-based military presence in the Persian Gulf and abroad, and rely on the American Navy overseas to deter anti-U.S. aggression and protect U.S. trade.

With this much-lighter footprint abroad, the United States also needs to change its mindset. The country's exhausted armed forces cannot withstand many more Iraqi quagmires. The good news is that, to ensure U.S. security, they don't have to do so. In the post-cold-war and post-9/11 era, only a few regions in the world are strategic to the United States. Thus, the United States is only endangering its homeland by meddling in other nonstrategic areas, thus generating the potential for blowback anti-U.S. terrorism. To reduce this risk, the United States should resist the unnecessary urge to control events in remote regions of the world. Instead, America can act as a balancer of last resort in Europe and East Asia and, if the United States needs limited strikes to destroy terrorist bases or camps, it can rely on the navy or air-force bombers flying from the United States. A smaller footprint abroad, especially in the Persian Gulf, and a policy of U.S. global military restraint would cost less in blood and treasure, allow wealthy U.S. allies to take more responsibility for their own defense, be less dangerous to the American public, and allow the U.S. government to better carry out its constitutional duty to defend U.S. citizens and property without destroying its republican system of government.

A meaningful debate on the U.S. role in the world is long overdue. If politicians don't want to engage the issue in the 2008 election campaign, the expensive and continuing quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan will likely force them to confront the hard reality of imperial overextension. If nothing else, the U.S. military's inclination to purchase evermore-expensive weapons for fighting large conventional wars--thus enabling it to afford fewer and fewer numbers of aircraft, ships, artillery, armored vehicles, etc.--will continue to shrink the quantities of military hardware available to police the entire world. This Herculean task is what the current interventionist foreign policy essentially requires. Therefore, difficult decisions need to be made about where on the globe America has truly vital interests and what the U.S. role in those regions should be. If reasoned debate does not lead to a more-sustainable strategic vision, the United States is

more likely to again be pulled off course into future Iraqs at the expense of the nation's real security interests. The election campaign is a good place for this vital national debate to begin.

Footnotes

(n1) Christopher J. Coyne, *After War: The Political Economy of Exporting Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 12-16.

(n2) The data on suicide bombings was leaked by U.S. government officials and published in Robin Wright, "Since 2001, a Dramatic Increase in Suicide Bombings," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2008, pp. A18.

(n3) Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "U.S. Military Spending vs. Rest of the World," February 22, 2008,
http://www.armscontrolcenter.org/policy/securityspending/articles/fy09_dod_request_global/

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