

U. S. Foreign Policy and Military Interventions¹

John H. Johns

Professor Andrew J. Bacevich recently declared in the April 03, 2011 edition of Newsweek: “Despite the Libyan intervention, the era of Western meddling in the region is coming to an end.” Perhaps he has seen new evidence of a learning curve since he published his 2010 book, Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War. Let us hope that his latter view is correct. Otherwise, we may be writing the next chapter for a revised edition of Paul Kennedy’s The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers.

Historical Context

All great powers have had an element of imperialism in their foreign policies. More often than not, these policies have been cloaked in moralistic terms. Before I turn to our current policies in the Middle East, let me explain why many in the world may see our current policies as imperialism, or neo-colonialism.

In the case of United States imperialistic policies, the last hundred years has largely been under the ideology of “Wilsonian Idealism.” One can argue, however, that the history of American foreign policy during the period from the 1890s until the present has been one of economic and military imperialism. In a penetrating account of American intervention in foreign countries, Stephen Kinzer’s book, *Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (2006), summarizes the quest for worldwide economic and military hegemony, which began in 1893 with “regime change” in Hawaii. The fact that our first viceroy to Hawaii after the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani was Stephen Dole—and the establishment of Pearl Harbor—suggests the rationale for that intervention. During the following twenty years, the U.S. waged a concerted strategy to control the Caribbean and Central American regions for a combination of ideological, economic, and military purposes. In addition, the Philippines were added to the U.S. sphere of control. Reportedly, one of the major reasons for the Spanish-American War was to open markets for U.S. business, but one can argue that another goal was empire building. It is not easy to separate the two goals.

These activities were cloaked in moral terms of bringing the “blessings of freedoms” to the liberated people of these countries, but few or no nation-building activities were attempted in these liberated countries. Essentially, the U.S. engineered the regime changes to establish military bases and to gain economic access. In his book *All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup*. (2003), Kinzer describes how we are still suffering the consequences of the 1953 overthrow of the democratically-elected government of Iran in order to have access to cheap oil. Arguably, this act is an important ingredient leading to the terrorism in the Middle East today. In early 2008, I participated in a nation-wide tour with Kinzer titled “The Folly of attacking Iran.” This was a time when many “hawks” were beating the drums to attack Iran. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed.

The “Cold War” was largely framed in terms of a moral crusade against “Godless Communism” versus “The Free World.” This revived the passions of Wilsonian Idealism and

¹ This essay is a chapter in the book *Why Peace*, 2012, edited and Published by Marc Guttman.

provided the rationale for a series of military interventions through the 1970s. A few international experts warned against the moralistic tone of U.S. policies. In the late 1940s, the former ambassador to Russia, George Kennan, argued for a pragmatic approach toward Russia. More than 35 years later, he wrote:

“We must be careful about what might be called the histrionics of moralism at the expense of its substance. By that is meant the projection of attitudes, poses, and rhetoric that cause us to appear noble and altruistic in the mirror of our own vanity, but lack substance when related to the realities of international life.” *“Morality in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Affairs, 1985.*

Another pragmatist, Hans Morgenthau, wrote in similar terms.

“Nations no longer oppose each other...within a framework of shared beliefs and common values, which imposes effective limitations on the needs and means of their struggle for power. They oppose each other now as the standard bearers of ethical systems, each of them of national origin and each of them claiming and aspiring to provide a supranational framework of moral standards which all the other nations ought to accept and within which their foreign policies ought to operate...Thus the stage is set for a contest among nations whose stakes are no longer their relative positions within a political and moral system accepted by all, but the ability to impose upon the other contestants a new universal political and moral system recreated in the image of the victorious nation's political and moral convictions.” *Politics Among Nations*, New York, Knopf, 1978.

Vietnam as Prologue

I was first introduced to the subject of military intervention in 1960 when, fresh out of graduate study in psychology, I was assigned to the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, N.C. The focus at that time was the emerging conflict in Vietnam. It was apparent to many of us at the Center that the real problem was not primarily military, but the building of political support for the government of South Vietnam. Consequently, the Special Warfare School soon developed a new course, labeled “Counterinsurgency.” A central component of the concept of counterinsurgency was the requirement to build a sense of nationhood among the people. From this grew the concept of “nation building,” which involves the strengthening of political, economic, social, and judicial systems that bring stability to a country.

I must admit that I was rather naïve about the ability of U.S. military power to “build a nation.” I was assigned as the senior advisor to the Vietnamese Psychological Warfare School (later the Political Warfare School) in 1962. I quickly realized that it was rather presumptuous of my fellow advisors and me to be telling the Vietnamese officers how to build the institutions necessary to gain the allegiance of their people. As I gained some insight into the political dynamics of the situation, I concluded that we were, in essence, trying to export our value system to a culture that did not necessarily share the particular institutions that reflected those values. In short, our policies reflected “Wilsonian Idealism.”

When I returned from Vietnam and was assigned to the Army Staff, I had an opportunity to write several studies and work on ad hoc groups formulating doctrine for military interventions involving counterinsurgency and nation building activities. One of the major studies was *Nation*

Building: Contributions of the Army (NABUCA). That study, which was distributed by the Army Secretary as policy guidance for the development of doctrine and curricula in Army schools, recommended that we not attempt to export our political and economic systems to cultures that may not be compatible with the ideologies underlying those institutions. I later served on a committee that inserted that recommendation into the Civil Affairs manual. The study also suggested that large-scale U.S. combat forces were inappropriate for conducting counterinsurgency; our role should be limited to an advisory one.

During my tour on the Army Staff, I also served on a study group that led to the establishment of a career field now known as the Foreign Area Officers' (FAO) program. This career field built on the former Foreign Area Specialty Training (FAST) program that was focused on the intelligence function. The new program was designed to develop a cadre of officers educated in the functions of not only intelligence functions, counterinsurgency and Nation Building as well. Those officers would also be educated in the specific culture of areas in which they would operate. These specialists would be deployed as advisors to elements of the local military. The Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, said he envisioned a cadre of some 6,000 FAO members. Many of these would be in the reserves, where they could maintain their skills and be called up as needed.

It is interesting to note that when the Army Secretary wrote the letter of transmittal for NABUCA, he asked that it be "close hold" because other agencies such as State, AID, CIA, and USIA might accuse the Army of encroaching on their turf. The doctrine as outlined in NABUCA in fact cited the need for an integrated effort of all U.S. agencies in Vietnam, but focused on the U.S. Army's role. There were attempts in Vietnam to coordinate the roles of our military with civilian agencies, but the fact is that our civilian agencies have never developed a cadre of people trained to do the functions of counterinsurgency and nation building. This short coming still exists.

The less-than-total victory of the Vietnam conflict dampened the fervor of the more jingoistic and chauvinistic elements of our society. They were disappointed that the conflict had not produced "total victory." The War Powers Resolution of 1973 was an attempt to curb the power of future presidents to rush to war. As we know, that act has had no real effect on those powers. The backlash did, however, lead to the end of the military draft, which has had important implications—not all intended.

Revival of Imperialistic Policies.

The neo-conservative movement in the late 1970s and 1980s rekindled the lust of those who believed in the manifest destiny of America to transform the world in its image. In a general sense, the neoconservatives told the world that American/Western values are the values that should be adopted throughout the world. And, it must be admitted, these values are sacred to a majority of Americans. In fact, it is often considered unpatriotic to question the universality of individualism, liberal democracy, and free enterprise. This is sometimes referred to as "American Exceptionalism." Some went so far as to declare that these values represent "the end of history." Francis Fukuyama wrote in "The End of History," in *The National Interest*, Summer, 1989: "We may be witnessing . . . the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." He added capitalism to that list of values.

The quick and relatively painless 1991 Gulf War bolstered the stock of the neoconservative's Pax Americana approach, but some warned against this exuberant policy. In his 1996 book, *The*

Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order. Samuel P. Huntington warns those who assume the Western World values and doctrine represent a universal civilization "...generally share beliefs in individualism, market economies, and political democracy..." He rejects the notion that these beliefs are shared outside the West and warns, "only naïve arrogance can lead Westerners to assume that non-Westerners will become 'Westernized' by acquiring Western goods." Above all, he warns against the notion that the West can impose its values on the non-Western world: "...Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is **false**; it is **immoral**; and it is **dangerous**." That it is false is the central thesis of his book. It is immoral he says because what would be necessary to bring it about. It is dangerous because it could lead to a major intercivilizational war between core States that could lead to the defeat of the West. (Pp. 310-311).

Notwithstanding these warnings, we have continued to base our foreign policy on Wilsonian Idealism—recently aided by what some have called "muscular militarism." The leading paragraph to the 2002 National Security Strategy set the stage for our Iraq policy:

"The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise...These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society—and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages."

It is interesting to note that Fukuyama has had second thoughts after our Iraqi venture.

"Outside powers like the US can often help in this process by the example they set as politically and economically successful societies. They can also provide funding, advice, technical assistance, and yes, occasionally military force to help the process along. But coercive regime change was never the key to democratic transition." Francis Fukuyama, The History at the End of History, THE GUARDIAN (London), Apr. 3, 2007.

Current Policy

The United States is facing a threat unlike any we have faced in the past. We are sailing uncharted, perilous seas. There are indications that we may not have accurately identified the nature of this threat and may be solving the wrong problem. Indeed, the phrase "War on Terrorism" is a misnomer that could indicate that we are on the wrong path. As will be discussed below in more detail, terrorism is a means of violence for political ends; the ultimate purpose is to influence political decisions of adversaries. If we focus too narrowly on the violent acts—the symptoms—we will miss the target and exacerbate the problem.

The 9 September 2001 terrorist attacks arguably signaled the greatest threat to the United States' national security since World War II. It was important for the U.S. to correctly identify the threat and craft the appropriate foreign policy and national security strategies to counter that threat. I would argue that the U.S. neither defined the nature of the threat accurately, nor adopted the correct response to the actual threat. As a consequence, the U.S. has found itself mired in the wrong wars, in the wrong places, and at the wrong times. Moreover, the U.S. has become

engaged in a series of seemingly endless military ventures by conducting counterinsurgency operations, referring civil wars, and attempting to accomplish nation building all at once. In the name of the “war on terror,” these actions have increased the threat by abandoning the moral high ground, which is at the heart of the battle of ideas, as I will explain below.

“Support for the United States has plummeted. Polls taken in Islamic countries after 9-11 suggested that many or most people thought the United States was doing the right thing in its fight against terrorism; few people saw popular support for Al Qaeda...by 2003, polls showed that ‘the bottom has fallen out’ of support for America in most of the Muslim world.” 9-11 Report

President Bush had described the problem in rather simple moralistic terms: “They hate us because we are free”; it is a war of “good versus evil”. This simplistic answer appealed to Americans; it was less persuasive to the many other audiences. There is growing evidence that our use of military force around the world has done little to reduce the number of radicals who use terrorism as their weapon of choice. Indeed, the growing recruitment into the radical ranks reflects a losing battle for the hearts and minds of the population from which these recruits come, primarily, from the Islamic world. A June 2004 Zogby poll taken in Arab States found negative views of the United States as follows: Egypt 98 percent; Morocco 88 percent; Saudi Arabia 94 percent, UAE 73 percent. The major reasons cited all involved unfair foreign policy, e.g., support of Israel and the Iraq war. The same survey showed the most admired people to be: 1) Jacques Chirac; 2) Gamel Nasser, the martyred president of Egypt, 3) Hasan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader; and 4) Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden (tie). Other polls showed the unfavorable view of the United States existed throughout the world, including Europe.

I spent a good portion of my military career in what was then called “Psychological Operations.” In essence, the goal is to persuade a given audience that your side has the moral high ground. It seems obvious to me that the United States has failed to get its message across to many parts of the world. Part of the problem is our product. As Huntington argued, we cannot assume that the rest of the world wants our political and economic systems, especially if they are exported through the barrel of a gun. Raising the decibels on our message by moralizing based on a belief in “American Exceptionalism,” as Morgenthau and Kennan warned, is not effective. Assuming that our foes hate us because we are free buries our heads in the sand.

The first step we must take is to recognize that the so-called war on terrorism is a war of ideas more than it is a war to be solved by military force. I believe that our operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are counter productive for several reasons: 1) Counterinsurgency and nation building conducted by U.S. combat forces are impossible missions; those activities must be done by locals; 2) operations such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan are perceived as neo colonialism; and 3) there will inevitably be atrocities, to include torture. Consequently, these operations erode our moral authority.

Our fundamental strategies of counterinsurgency and nation-building activities undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan (and Vietnam several decades ago) are doomed to failure. The unfavorable conditions in all those situations put this kind of effort in the class of “mission impossible.” Nation-building efforts have the best chance of success in countries that have stable institutions and little or no active insurgency movements. In the wake of 9-11, our current rationale for intervention is to prevent havens for terrorists. While weak and failing States may be breeding grounds for insurgency movements and havens for terrorists, nation building is a long and difficult process, even under the most favorable conditions. The problem is magnified when that

process attempts to export the United States' values, e.g., democracy and market economies, through the barrel of a gun.

In addition to the fundamental flaws in our military strategy, equally important is the economic costs of conducting these operations. In the summer of 2008, the National Intelligence Estimate listed the economic situation, not terrorism, as the greatest threat to U.S. national security. Our military leaders have echoed that view. This poses the question: are we providing the material for a new chapter in Paul Kennedy's book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*? In that 1987 classic, Kennedy makes a persuasive case that all great powers have fallen because they went bankrupt trying to exercise hegemony over large portions of the world. One can easily conclude that the United States is repeating that mistake.

In his 2010 book, *Washington rules: America's Path to Permanent War*, Professor Andrew Bacevich makes a compelling case that the American political ethos has condemned the United States to a state of permanent war. He provides the background to this conclusion in a series of books focused on American Imperialism and the emphasis on military power as the principal element of foreign power. This dismal conclusion comes at a time when the country faces an economic crisis that threatens to bring the nation to its knees. It may be that the United States is now providing the material for the next chapter of Kennedy's book, or we can hope that Obama follows the proposal of Chalmers Johnson in his 2010 book *Dismantling the Empire*, to wit, Obama must begin to dismantle the empire before the Pentagon dismantles the American dream.

Morality and National Security.

One of the most underrated elements of national power is a nation's moral standing in the international community. Every country reserves the right to protect its physical security, even if it entails the violation of international norms. Flouting these norms, however, should be rare and only done after carefully weighing the costs. It has become popular in some circles to dismiss the United Nations and other international institutions as debating societies that serve irresponsible demands of Third World countries. Admittedly, working toward international moral order based on shared values requires a great deal of patience. It is difficult to achieve agreement on other than abstract values and rules that lend themselves to a wide variety of interpretations, but the effectiveness of these moral concepts depends to a large measure on the voluntary response to world opinion, usually expressed through the international institutions involved. By engaging in unilateral activities, the United States has gained the reputation of being arrogant.

In addition to unilateral policies, the commission of atrocities and torture by the U.S. military has eroded our moral stature. The revelation of widespread torture of prisoners in Cuba and Iraq justifiably shocked the world community, including the American people. The stark photos of the degradation of the prisoners left little need for words to convey the implications for world opinion. The damage to our moral standing in the world—and support for our “war against terrorism”—was profound. More damaging than the acts themselves was the revelation that officials at the highest levels had approved these acts as legitimate interrogation techniques.

Polls in 2004 showed that the American public shared the outrage of this moral breakdown and violation of the values we present to the world in our effort to promote human rights and dignity. Within a year however, the outrage had diminished considerably, and there was little public pressure to take action to remedy the conditions that had led to these acts. A 2005 poll showed that less than 40 percent were bothered a “great deal” by the use of torture.

It is inexcusable to ignore the role of the systemic climate established by the policy makers and the apparent acquiescence by the chain of command. When policy documents waive

international laws, the people on the ground have the burden to reject that policy. In my view, the behavior of these senior officials represents more serious violations than those at the end of the process. The recent resistance to closing Guantanamo Bay is an indication that we have forgotten the costs of these actions.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, a group of retired officers, led by General Joseph Hoar, USMC, Ret., and General Charles Krulak, USMC, Ret., conducted a “Campaign to Ban Torture.” The group met with most presidential candidates to recommend that torture be banned and that the facility at Guantanamo Bay be closed. All Democrats and two Republican candidates, Huckabee and McCain, agreed with these recommendations. With 19 of those officers in the Oval Office on 22 January 2011 in attendance, President Obama signed directives to accomplish those recommendations. Unfortunately, political reality has prevented the closure of Guantanamo.

The most critical aspect of this scandal, especially in terms of immediate implications for our national security, has to do with the international community. The conduct of torture itself, and the way we have handled it, has the potential for long-term damage to our war against those who are using terrorism as their primary means of violence. Terrorism is not new; nations as well as non-state actors have used it. When used by non-state groups such as those now confronting us, those groups depend on at least tacit support from the societies in which they operate. That support depends in large part on how those groups are perceived in regard to the justness of their cause, and that of their adversaries, rather than on the acts of terrorism themselves. In this sense, the war against terrorism is a war of ideas, with emphasis on who holds the moral high ground. From all accounts, we have been losing this war and the torture of prisoners was, and continues to be, a significant factor. How the international community perceives our reaction to it is critical in this war of ideas.

The fundamental flaw in our treatment of torture, it seems to me, is the clear disdain of some administrations, and elements of the public, for international norms of conduct. Unless our body politic, including the public, develops a greater respect for responsible membership in the international community, we will find it difficult to regain the moral high ground. Without that moral status, the war on terrorism will be unsuccessful. The rules regarding torture, like other international protocols, are a set of principles and norms designed to serve the interests of the entire world community. At times, conforming to these rules may cause inconveniences. To dismiss them in a cavalier manner, as the Bush administration—particularly Vice President Cheney—did, was a breach of trust. Trust is a precious commodity, hard to earn, easily squandered, and when lost, very difficult to regain.

Conclusions

The comments in this essay should not be taken to infer that I am an isolationist. The United States is still the most powerful nation in the world, economically and militarily. It has an obligation to use its influence to maintain a peaceful and just world community. Likewise, my criticisms of our conduct in global affairs should not be taken as “blame America first.” Some tend to label any introspection regarding our foreign policy and actions as unpatriotic. In my view, the refusal to make an honest examination of policies is unpatriotic. I consider myself to be a patriot who wants the best for my country and its people. While my moral compass includes the welfare of all people, present and future, my obligation is first to this country. However, I believe the best way to achieve this outcome is to adopt a pragmatist approach to foreign policy, one that tempers idealism with the realities of an interdependent world where conflicts must be

resolved by win-win strategies rather than win-lose where winner takes all. The latter strategy more often than not results in lose-lose consequences.

All great powers have practiced imperialistic policies and that is to be expected. One should not be too quick to judge such policies as selfish pursuits of hegemony. It is natural for nations to believe in the primacy of their particular values and conclude that policies that advance those values and interests are for benevolent reasons. Such beliefs in “exceptionalism,” however, can often stem from misguided notions and self-righteous arrogance. It is difficult to evade the sociocentric nature of viewing the world and respect the view of other participants in the international system. But pragmatism dictates that wise leaders do that. In a 14 January 2011 op-ed in the Washington Post, “Avoiding a U.S.-China cold war,” Henry Kissinger observed: “Each assumes its national values to be both unique and of a kind to which other peoples naturally aspire. Reconciling the two versions of exceptionalism is the deepest challenge of the Sino-American relationship.” He warned that if both China and the United States adopt policies based on a view of their own exceptionalism, it will lead to gridlock (and a lose-lose outcome?)

There are influential elements in our foreign-policy process who advocate some of the dysfunctional characteristics I have mentioned. The belief that our values are best for the all societies and that we have a moral duty to export those values seems to me to be rather arrogant. Even if we continue to espouse our values, from a pragmatic standpoint, we should seek better ways to export them. The over reliance on military power is, in my view, counter productive. For reasons that I explain above, repeated excursions to put down insurgencies and build nations are not only futile, but they end up alienating the world and draining economic resources that can be best used for other purposes.

In general terms, I suggest the United States foreign policy be based on the following principles:

1. Work through international institutions as much as possible in conducting foreign policy. This is a pragmatic necessity. No nation can exercise hegemony—economically, culturally, or militarily—and we need to recognize that. Sovereignty is no longer sacrosanct.
2. Emphasize “soft power,” rather than military muscle. “Militarism” must be curbed.
3. Limit interventions in troubled nations to the advisory role; avoid the use of U.S. military forces to attempt to do what only can be done by indigenous people, specifically counterinsurgency and nation building. Moreover, do so knowing that there will inevitably be “collateral damage” and atrocities regardless of how well-trained and well-led our troops are.
4. Develop a National Advisory Corps to deploy to aid nations in need of building institutions. This cadre could be patterned after the Army’s Foreign Area Officer program, with each agency focusing on its respective functional area.
5. Beware of self-righteous arrogance that blinds us to understanding how others in the world view our policies and actions. Jingoism and chauvinism are deadly enemies.
6. Abide by international norms except in dire situations. As some have argued, “the norm is mightier than the sword.”

Our leaders must understand the realities of today’s international system; the era of U.S. dominance that allowed a unilateral approach to foreign policy has ended. While it may be frustrating to work through international institutions to achieve our goals, it is a necessity. Surrendering any degree of sovereignty—military, economic, or political—is painful. It is best

done before it is forced on us. We are not alone in this process; Europe is wrestling with the same process. The history of mankind has been, out of existential necessity, the evolution of the establishment of common institutions to promote cooperation toward achieving common goals.

Brigadier General Johns served 26 years as a combat arms officer, retiring in 1978. He served in command positions up to Assistant Division Commander of the 1st Infantry Division and held numerous staff positions, including 8 years on the Army General Staff, culminating his career as Director, Human Resources Development.

After retirement, General Johns served for 14 years as a professor of political science at the National Defense University, where he taught core courses on National Security Strategy and National Security Decision-making. He also taught elective courses in Ethics, National Security Studies on Latin America, Leadership, and Government/Business Relations

General Johns is a graduate of the Army Command and General Staff College, the National War College, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. He has masters' degrees in psychology (Vanderbilt University) and international relations (George Washington University), and a doctorate in sociology (American University).