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## The Abolition of Foreign Policy

By Justin Raimondo  
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What explains the behavior of nations on the world stage? There is no science to guide us, no psychology of nation-states to elucidate the secrets of the national Ego, Super-Ego, and Id. Oh, there are theories galore: the realists, the structuralists, the Marxists, and more. Yet these are thin gruel these days, when all claims of predictability are open to challenge, and one cannot tell the exceptions from the rule. In today's world, it often seems that there are no rules.

Or are there?

Let us look at the current madness, and its antecedents, and see if we can discern a pattern.

For all the years of the cold war – roughly, from Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech to the fall of the Berlin Wall – American liberals (and the far left) told us that the Soviet threat was largely a figment of the right's imagination.

Oh, yes, there were cold war liberals, of the sort who gathered around *Encounter* magazine and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, that CIA front that sought to recruit the "soft" left to the cold war cause. Yet these were swimmers against an ideological tide that finally culminated in the tumult of the 1960s, the antiwar movement, and the rise of a form of "left"-isolationism that abjured US intervention abroad and urged America – in George McGovern's phrase – to "come home."

On the right, conservatives railed against the alleged threat posed by “international Communism,” which they characterized as a worldwide conspiracy headquartered in the Kremlin and implacably dedicated to the destruction of the West. The threat, they averred, had to be confronted, and not with mere containment: no, the only way forward was to roll back the Communists with direct military confrontation, in Vietnam and around the world.

This was a complete reversal of their earlier “isolationist” stance in regard to the alleged threat posed by the Axis powers – just as the left-isolationism of the McGovernites stood the interventionist “arsenal of democracy” rhetoric of Franklin Delano Roosevelt on its head. In the run up to Pearl Harbor, it was the conservatives who were the Peace Party; it was they who invoked Washington’s Farewell Address and warned against the dangers of entangling alliances. It was they who insisted on neutrality, and organized the America First Committee – the biggest and most effective antiwar organization in the country’s history – and countered every move by FDR to get us into the war with the cry of “It isn’t our fight!”

When war finally came, FDR was vengeful, and American liberals and their far left allies were positively savage: they unleashed a barrage of political and legal assaults that characterized conservatives as traitors: wartime censorship was imposed, and enforced. A sedition trial was organized, targeting the anti-interventionist right, and although it was ultimately thrown out of court, the effect was to intimidate anyone who opposed the war to shut up and hunker down for the duration. FDR’s enemies paid a high political price for their opposition to the war: the “isolationists” were driven from office, and, in the media and academia, were driven out of public life.

The cold war gave conservatives a means to get back at their persecutors. The wartime alliance with “Uncle” Joe Stalin had not only handed the Soviets half of Europe and a foothold in Eastasia, it had also led to the penetration of the government by Soviet moles – yes, right up into FDR’s inner circle. With the coming of the cold war, the conservatives took full advantage of the sudden shift in the political winds by dishing out the same bitter medicine they had been subjected to: the liberals, they averred, were but “fellow travelers” of the Communists, who had infiltrated not only the government but also the Democratic party, academia, and the woof and warp of American political life. McCarthyism made its debut, and this movement – which at first focused on the alleged internal threat – soon morphed into the “New Right” of William F. Buckley, Jr., and *National Review*, which transformed the foreign policy of the old “isolationist” right into its complete opposite: a policy of global intervention.

This inversion was something different, however, and in order to understand how and why it was we have to step back and look at what motivated these swings from “isolationism” to interventionism in the past.

The conservatives who opposed FDR’s march to war were convinced that the fight against fascism abroad would deliver us into the waiting arms of fascism on the home front. On the other side of the barricades, the New Deal liberals, who dreamed of a planned economy and the end of laissez-faire, saw war as the perfect instrument of a social transformation. The same fervor had imbued the liberal intellectuals who supported the progressivism of the Woodrow Wilson

administration, and who saw World War I as the augur of a new society in which government would uplift humanity both at home and abroad.

In these cases, the foreign policy of the right – anti-interventionism – and that of the left – making the world “safe for democracy” – served some domestic ideological end. For conservatives, it meant preserving their decentralist vision of a government constrained by the Constitution and the natural limits imposed by both tradition and common sense. For the liberals and their far left allies, it meant advancing their agenda of centralized authority and wealth redistribution on the home front by imposing the sort of controls Americans would only tolerate in wartime. These very different foreign policy visions were motivated, then, by rival *ideological projects*: small government- anti-interventionism-“America First” versus big government-interventionism-globalism.

Yet the transformation of the American conservative movement from its earlier “isolationist” incarnation into the militant anti-Communist crusade it was to become marked a break in this pattern. Prior to founding *National Review*, Buckley penned a piece for *Commonweal* in which he described the credo that was to energize his “New Right.”

While claiming to acknowledge the libertarian analysis of the state as “begotten of aggression and by aggression,” this principle was relegated by Buckley to the realm of pure theory. In practice, the Soviet “threat” necessitated “the extensive and productive tax laws that are needed to support a vigorous anti-communist foreign policy.” The “thus far invincible aggressiveness of the Soviet Union” meant that “we have to accept Big Government for the duration—for neither an offensive nor a defensive war can be waged . . . except through the instrument of a totalitarian bureaucracy within our shores.” Forget the domestic program conservatives had fought for during the dark days of the New Deal, that was all old hat anyway: conservatives, Buckley opined, must give fulsome support to “large armies and air forces, atomic energy, central intelligence, war production boards and the attendant centralization of power in Washington.” And, digging the knife in deeper, he added: “Even with Truman at the reins of it all”!

So here we have the conservatives’ ideological project abandoned, wrecked on the rocky shores of the cold war. What had been a body of ideas with a purely domestic focus had now been internationalized – globalized, if you will – and subordinated to the overriding “necessity” of fighting the Communist Menace in the rice paddies of Vietnam. “America First” had become “Everybody Else First.”

The practical effect of this was to decouple conservatism from its past, and its traditional constituency of Midwestern farmers, small and medium businessmen, and defenders of traditional mores. In their place arose a new coalition based largely on the Eastern seaboard: urban Catholics, neoconservative dropouts from the left, multinational businesses with global interests, and of course what Eisenhower decried as the “military-industrial complex.”

In short, “movement” conservatism, having abandoned its longstanding ideology, became an instrument of pure politics: the libertarian critique of the New Deal became the demagoguery of demanding “Who lost China?” Decoupled from its original governing principle of individual

liberty, “conservatism” became simply a tribal signifier that identified a group of people out to seize and hold power.

On the left, this process was less marked, at least at this point, but essentially similar: the foreign policy of the liberals was simply a reaction to the ascendant cold war mentality that dominated the right. Conservatives were for massive military spending, confronting the Communists on every continent, and using the FBI to root out “subversives” on the home front, and so liberals called for less military spending, touted the virtues of diplomacy over confrontation, and took up the cudgels on behalf of civil liberties. All of this, by the way, was a complete turnaround from their heyday during the New Deal era: the right and the left had switched polarities, each becoming that which they had opposed.

The transformation of American liberalism represented a decoupling of ideology from the historic foreign policy stance of the New Deal. FDR and his supporters – and, before them, Wilson and *his* supporters – had recognized that wartime is springtime for governmental gigantism. As long as federal bureaucrats could mobilize the nation’s resources in the name of “national security,” then the centralizing egalitarian project that is the heart of the liberal program could be snuck in through the back door – or, once the conservative opposition was sufficiently chastened, pushed through the front door. Yes, liberals could mask their ideological apostasy by claiming that money spent on overseas adventurism was better spent on welfare programs for the poor at home, but this dualistic myth was busted by the “Great Society” of Lyndon Baines Johnson, who pushed through his program of “guns *and* butter” at the height of the Vietnam war.

One result of this decoupling was an ideological convergence. While there was still a fair amount of rhetorical devotion to “conservatism” and “liberalism,” in practice this was merely a debate that took place around the margins of the Welfare-Warfare State. The victory of one party over another really made little difference as far as domestic and foreign policy were concerned: elections became a struggle for power over a system frozen in near-perfect stasis.

In the foreign policy realm, the differences between “right” and “left” were determined, not by any broad principles, but by purely political considerations. To take a recent example: the “debate” leading up to the invasion and occupation of Iraq didn’t involve any real contention over the goals or rationale for the war, and the subsequent partisan divide didn’t reveal any principled divisions between the two parties, or between the “left” and the “right.” Both sides endorsed the essential premise of the war, which was that it is America’s duty to police the world – the debate was merely over the means, not the ends. The liberal Democrats insisted on a “multi-lateral” approach, while the neoconservative-dominated GOP averred that unilateral aggression was the way to go. Barack Obama campaigned against “stupid wars,” i.e. the Iraq war, while insisting the real battle was to be fought in Afghanistan.

And so the dance of the rival tribes continued. Mitt Romney insisted that the number one threat to world peace is Russia, while President Obama – and his journalistic fan club – mocked him by jeering that “The 1980s are calling and they want their foreign policy back.” And yet as soon as it became politically convenient to demonize Russia, this was all forgotten.

Today we are looking at the spectacle of a new cold war unfolding before our eyes: “liberals” are screaming that President-elect Donald Trump is a “Russian puppet,” as President Obama makes his last act as chief executive the expulsion of Russian diplomats from the US on the grounds that Vladimir Putin plotted to put Trump in the White House.

This underscores the fact that foreign policy is, today, simply political posturing. Whatever foreign policy serves the interests of those in power – that is, whatever serves to *maintain and extend their hold on power and delegitimize their enemies* – is the policy they choose to pursue. This, and this alone, explains the actions of states on the world stage. If a given action grants the ruling elite an advantage – political, financial, psychological, or some combination of these – then it gets the green light. Ideology has little if anything to do with it. Neither do events overseas: the US is safely ensconced between two very large oceans, and faces no real threats to its territorial integrity. We can therefore safely ignore, say, Putin’s annexation of Crimea – unless, that is, our rulers decide that there’s some political advantage in drawing attention to it.

If we define foreign policy as the relations between states, then we can see that, for all intents and purposes, it has simply ceased to exist. The formulation and execution of American foreign policy is purely an internal, self-referential affair. Ironically, our foreign policy has become truly “isolationist” in the sense that it has no real relation to anything that occurs outside our borders: it revolves entirely around the axis of domestic politics. Nor does it have anything to do with pursuing American interests, which are not always – or even usually — congruent with the interests of those who hold office.

What sets the course of our nation in the world is nothing less than the pure caprice of our rulers. There are no rules, no principles, no overriding visions of America’s proper role – when you’re a global empire, with no credible rivals, and no constitutional restraints on the exercise of military power, it’s deuces wild. Anything can happen.

Is it even necessary to point out how dangerous this is?

As far as the incoming administration is concerned, this parlous condition presents us with a few alarming portents, and also a glimmer of hope.

We should be alarmed that a desire to appear “strong” in comparison to the supposedly “weak” Obama administration may drive Trump into a series of impulsive moves that could end quite badly. This is all too possible.

And yet there is also the hope that this President, despite the apparent lack any ideological lodestar, will reconnect American foreign policy with a domestic agenda that precludes large scale interventions overseas. This is precisely the promise of his “America First” program: he may be so preoccupied with reindustrializing America that any thought of revitalizing a US-enforced “world order” we can no longer afford and that the voters don’t want is lost in the shuffle.

I tend to be optimistic, but that may just be a character flaw. Trump’s public pronouncements have been encouraging, but then again when policy is unmoored from principle and you have the

entire national security apparatus against you – well, let’s just say the next few months are going to be quite interesting. One can only hope, however, that they aren’t *too* interesting.....