

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Donald Trump Challenges Washington's Bipartisan War Lobby: Developing a Foreign Policy for America

Doug Bandow

April 11, 2016

Donald Trump has become this season's campaign phenomenon. He's broken all the rules. Yet he could become the Republican presidential nominee and maybe even president.

GOP elites are in a frenzy. The Neoconservatives and ultra-hawks who have dominated Republican foreign policy for more than a decade are considering political treason. For instance, dedicated interventionists Max Boot and William Kristol have proposed voting for Hillary Clinton or starting a third party if Trump wins the GOP nomination.

Exactly what Trump as president would do is hard to predict. He can seamlessly contradict himself, denouncing the nuclear agreement with Iran while promising to implement it. He can make no sense, criticizing the disastrous interventions in Iraq and Libya while proposing to put up to 30,000 American troops into Iraq and Syria.

He can promise to make America great again while rejecting the principle forms of peaceful engagement, trade and immigration, which helped turn the U.S. into a global colossus. He can sacrifice his boldest stands for the worst kowtowing, promising neutrality between Israelis and Palestinians before groveling at the AIPAC conference, telling attendees that he, like every other presidential candidate, wholeheartedly embraces Israel's extremist Likud-dominated government.

Still, Trump, to a degree previously matched only by such outlier presidential candidates as Ron Paul and Dennis Kucinich, is challenging Washington's conventional wisdom that America must dominate the globe. The "usual suspects" who manage foreign policy in every administration, Republican and Democrat, believe that the U.S. must cow every adversary, fight every war, defend every ally, enforce every peace, settle every conflict, pay every bill, and otherwise ensure that the lion lies down with the lamb at the end of time, if not before.

But not Donald Trump. He recently shocked polite war-making society in the nation's capital when he criticized NATO, essentially a welfare agency for Europeans determined to safeguard their generous social benefits. Before the *Washington Post* editorial board he made the obvious point that "NATO was set up at a different time." Moreover, Ukraine "affects us far less than it affects other countries in NATO, and yet we're doing all of the lifting." Why, he wondered? It's a good question.

His view that foreign policy should change along with the world scandalized Washington policymakers, who embody Public Choice economics, which teaches that government officials and agencies are self-interested and dedicated to self-preservation. In foreign policy that means what has ever been must ever be and everything is more important today than in the past, no matter how much circumstances have changed.

Trump expressed skepticism about American defense subsidies for other wealthy allies, such as South Korea and Saudi Arabia as well as military deployments in Asia. "We spent billions of dollars on Saudi Arabia and they have nothing but money" Similarly, he contended, "South Korea is very rich, great industrial country, and yet we're not reimbursed fairly for what we do." He also criticized nation-building. "We have a country that's in bad shape," he reasonably allowed: "I just think we have to rebuild our country."

Unlike presidents dating back at least to George H.W. Bush, Trump appears reluctant to go to war. He opposed sending tens of thousands of troops to fight the Islamic State: "I would put tremendous pressure on other countries that are over there to use their troops." Equally sensibly, he warned against starting World War III over Crimea or useless rocks in East Asian seas. He made a point that should be obvious at a time of budget crisis: "We certainly can't afford to do this anymore."

That these views have been condemned as ignorant, outrageous, and beyond the pale demonstrates just how deranged and isolated Washington's foreign policy establishment has become. Ideological self-fulfillment has replaced protection of the American people as the objective of U.S. foreign policy. Constant war over the last 15 years has resulted only in more death, conflict, instability, and war. Every new intervention has created more problems than solutions. But the leaders of the Republican Party continue to demand more, more!

Trump's foreign policy views are inconsistent and ill-formed, but they offer the basis for a more coherent strategic approach which emphasizes American security and allied self-sufficiency. Consider a few principles for a new foreign policy of strategic independence and military nonintervention.

First, Washington's principal responsibility is to protect the U.S.—its citizens, territory, constitutional system, and prosperity. The federal government is to promote the common defense of America, not the world. There is no warrant for international crusades organized by ivory tower warriors who would treat U.S. military personnel as gambit pawns in a grand global chess

game. The fortunes, futures, and lives of Americans should be risked only when their own political community has something substantial at stake.

Second, war is a last resort, not just another policy tool. The consequences often are deadly, grievous, and unpredictable. Blowback is real and threatens the innocent and the homeland. Washington also is responsible for harm caused others, such as the 200,000 or so Iraqi civilians who died in the sectarian war unleashed by the U.S. invasion.

Third, allies are a means, not an end. That is, Washington should not collect defense clients like Facebook friends, but form military relationships which augment American security. Yet such NATO candidates as Georgia and Ukraine are security black holes, threatening to trigger conflict with nuclear-armed Russia. However sympathetic Americans may be to Kiev's claim to, say, Crimea, the Europeans have much more at stake in the controversy—and enjoy a GDP and population larger than the U.S. and far bigger than Russia.

Fourth, nation-building is a fool's errand. Social engineering is hard enough in America. Attempting to transform other societies while transcending often massive gulfs in culture, history, tradition, religion, geography, ethnicity, and more is hubris defined. Sending American personnel to die planting faux democracy in, say, Central Asia is bloody elitism.

Fifth, foreign policy is ultimately about domestic policy. "War is the health of the state," Randolph Bourne presciently declared a century ago. There is no bigger big government program war, no graver threat to civil liberties than perpetual conflict with the homeland the battlefield, no greater danger to daily life than blowback from military overreach.

War is sometimes, but rarely, an ugly necessity. What justifies war is protecting domestic life in all its often mundane and boring aspects—raising families, enjoying friends, going to parks, attending theaters, visiting museums, attending school, following hobbies, eating out, helping neighbors, attending church, and doing everything else that human beings naturally do. Living, working, and playing together. Cooperating to create a better society. These are our objectives, how we gain meaning for our lives. Foreign policy should be used to protect rather than disrupt this process.

There is much about Donald Trump which deserves to be criticized. On foreign policy, however, his at times unsophisticated formulations reflect far greater common sense than possessed by his political opponents and establishment critics. He alone among the remaining contenders appears ready to put U.S. interests at the forefront. And that's the only way to develop a foreign policy which serves the American people rather than Washington's warrior wannabes.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author and editor of several books, including "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire."