

# The Moral Liberal

## Washington Should Make Foreign Policy for Americans, Not Foreign Liberals

By Doug Bandow

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Washington's actions abroad affect the size and power of Washington at home. "War is the health of the state," declared social critic Randolph Bourne.

The more active America's foreign policy, the more the United States has to spend on the military: the "defense" budget is the price of Washington's foreign policy. American military personnel and contractors die. Enemies are created, some of whom become terrorists. A national security state develops.

Thus, Americans committed to limited government and individual liberty should support a foreign policy based on humility and restraint. An imperial foreign policy like that today inevitably inflates—indeed, requires—a Leviathan state.

Nor should anyone who understands government believe the American state to be capable of competently fulfilling more expansive foreign policy objectives. At times, war is an unfortunate necessity and government must rain down death and destruction on other peoples.

Far more often, however, policymakers turn the military into just another government tool intended to achieve complicated ends that often aren't even important, let alone vital. Attempts at so-called humanitarian intervention and nation-building, for instance, almost always turn out badly, even disastrously.

Yet domestic warrior wannabes often are not alone in promoting America's warfare state. So do foreign classical liberals who campaign in their home countries for limits on state power. While promoting smaller governments, many of these intellectuals and activists expect the American state, or at least the Pentagon, to be large to defend their nations.

This sentiment has grown particularly pronounced with the rise of Russia's Vladimir Putin. A number "liberals" (as Europeans typically call what Americans are more likely to term "libertarians") in those countries believe it is America's job to protect their nations.

Some appear almost mystified when their ideological compatriots in the United States object. **As I point out in the *National Interest***: "For an American classical liberal, confronting a nuclear-armed power over issues which the latter views as vital but which matter little to America would be foolish, even improper, a violation of the federal government's responsibility to the "common defense"—of this nation and its people."

Foreign policy, which ultimately controls use of the military, is uniquely national, practical, and circumstantial. First, foreign policies of nations naturally will differ since states' interests vary. Second, foreign policy is eminently practical since ideology cannot determine what actually will succeed in effecting a particular end. Third, foreign policy is circumstantial, depending on the particular facts and may change over time.

Taking these factors into account, Washington should act on behalf of the American people. The fact that Moscow, for instance, is beating up on Georgia or Ukraine matters in a geopolitical sense insofar as those actions may threaten the United States. But they don't.

There is much bad in the world, but most of it has little impact on America. Initiating hostilities against a nuclear-armed power sensitive to its borders would create far more geopolitical dangers than it would resolve.

Obviously, there are humanitarian issues of concern to all, but they usually offer a terrible justification for intervention and war. Loosing the dogs of war almost always results in costly and deadly unintended consequences. The debacle in Iraq demonstrated how initiating war allegedly to do good was a costly means of doing much bad.

Of course, as has often been pointed out, the early Americans sought foreign military assistance in their revolt against Great Britain from imperial France. And there's nothing wrong with liberals in other nations hoping for Washington to put their homelands' interests before that of Americans. But that's no reason for U.S. policymakers to do so.

Many modern American conservatives favor war as a matter of principle. Today these conservatives often join with foreign liberals who want the United States to act as bodyguard for their nations.

However, while the world is a messy place, most of the problems don't much matter to the United States. Rather, they won't so long as Washington does not make every other nations' conflict America's own.

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