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The American people must say no to war

By Doug Bandow

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American foreign policy is controlled by fools. What else can one conclude from the bipartisan demand that the U.S. intervene everywhere all the time, irrespective of consequence? No matter how disastrous the outcome, the War Lobby insists that the idea was sound. Any problems obviously result from execution, a matter of doing too little: too few troops engaged, too few foreigners killed, too few nations bombed, too few societies transformed, too few countries occupied, too few years involved, too few dollars spent.

As new conflicts rage across the Middle East, the interventionist caucus' dismal record has become increasingly embarrassing. Yet such shameless advocates of perpetual war as Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham continue to press for military intervention irrespective of country and circumstance. For instance, they led the Neoconservative mob clamoring for war against Libya less than two years after supping with Moammar Khadafy in Tripoli, when they discussed providing U.S. aid to reward his anti-terrorism efforts.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, another cheerleader for war in Libya, recently defended her actions after being chided on Twitter for being a war-monger. She had authored a celebratory Financial Times article entitled "Why Libya sceptics were proved badly wrong."

Even then intervention looked foolish since Libya was a conflict in which Americans had nothing at stake. Today, however, Washington's Mediterranean adventure looks a good deal less successful. But this experience has had no apparent impact on her support for promiscuously bombing, invading, and occupying other countries.

Slightly more abashed, perhaps, is Samantha Power, one of the Obama administration's chief Sirens of War. She recently pleaded with the public not to let constant failure get in the way of future wars: "I think there is too much of, 'Oh, look, this is what intervention has wrought' ... one has to be careful about overdrawing lessons." After all, just because the policy of constant war had been a constant bust, people shouldn't be more skeptical about a military "solution" for future international problems. What are a few bloody geopolitical catastrophes among friends?

President Barack Obama also appears to be a bit embarrassed by his behavior. The Nobel Peace Prize winner has been as active militarily as his much-maligned predecessor. The former increased real military outlays through most of his administration, twice hiked troop levels in Afghanistan, initiated intense drone campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen, joined war against Libya, planned to attack Syria over chemical weapons, and took the country into combat against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Yet he may owe his election to his 2002 speech against the Iraq invasion. In 2013 he admitted that “I was elected to end wars, not to start them.” He sounded like he was trying to convince himself when he added: “I’ve spent the last four and a half years doing everything I can to reduce our reliance on military power.”

Washington long has been a town in which past performance is irrelevant. Most celebrated political pundits are constantly and even ostentatiously wrong. Yet every year they make new predictions. Which again invariably end up in error.

So it is with foreign policy practitioners. The bipartisan consensus is constant intervention. There is disagreement around the edges—exactly who should get aid money and how much? What is the best way to meddle in another nation’s affairs? Should military action be unilateral or multilateral?

Every once in a while there even is a clash over substance, such as the Iraq War. But these differences almost always are partisan. Had President Bill Clinton proposed the Iraq invasion, most congressional Democrats would have signed on. Most Republican legislators opposing his earlier Balkans adventures would have backed that war had George W. Bush been president then.

On the issues of the day the two parties usually attempt to one-up each other when it comes to reckless overseas intervention. Confront the Russians over Ukraine! Bomb Syria over chemical weapons! Attack ISIL insurgents threatening Mideast countries! Oust Khadafy after he made a nuclear deal with the West! Invade Iraq to “drain the swamp”! Occupy Afghanistan to bring democracy to Central Asia! Attack Serbia to redraw Balkans’ borders!

Yet Uncle Sam has demonstrated that he possesses the reverse Midas Touch. Whatever he touches turns to mayhem. Whenever and wherever Washington gets involved, the situation worsens.

In the Balkans the U.S. replaced ethnic cleansing with ethnic cleansing and set a precedent for Russian intervention in Georgia and Ukraine. In Somalia America left chaos unchanged. In Afghanistan the U.S. rightly defenestrated the Taliban but then spent 13 years unsuccessfully attempting to remake that tribal nation. Invading Iraq to destroy nonexistent WMDs cost the lives of 4500 Americans and 200,000 Iraqis, wrecked Iraqi society, loosed radical furies now embodied in the Islamic State, and empowered Iran. The bombing of Libya prolonged a low-tech civil war killing thousands, released weapons throughout the region, triggered a prolonged power

struggle in the artificial state, and offered another home for ISIL killers. Yemen's pro-American government was overthrown despite persistent U.S. support, leading to the collapse of anti-terrorist cooperation, increased Iranian influence, and descent toward civil war. The only certain result of Washington's new war against the Islamic State is increased jihadist recruiting.

Not only has virtually every bombing, invasion, occupation, and other interference made problems worse. Almost every new intervention is an attempt to redress problems created by previous U.S. actions. And every new military step is likely, indeed, almost guaranteed, to create even bigger problems. Which will spark proposals for new interventions likely, indeed, almost guaranteed, to generate new problems, messes, crises, and catastrophes. Which then will yield another round of suggestions for wars, drone strikes, occupations, bombing campaigns, aid transfers, invasions, diplomatic pressure, and other forms of meddling.

Yet virtually never do foreign policy practitioners admit that things hadn't gone well. While the outcome in Iraq horrified the American people, few Neocons acknowledged that anything had gone awry or that their plan had the slightest flaw in conception. Slaughter is not the only war advocate to ignore the implications of the ongoing disaster in Libya. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) responded to criticism of his support for the Libyan misadventure that everything would have been fine had the U.S. "engaged fully and decisively."

Most of official Washington simply takes the Samantha Power position: "What, me worry?" There may have been a mistake or two, but one certainly wouldn't want to "overdraw" a lesson from these multiple and constant failures. No responsible policymaker would want to suggest that even one problem elsewhere was not America's responsibility. No self-respecting denizen of the nation's capital would admit that there was any problem Washington was incapable of solving. No patriotic believer in American Exceptionalism would suggest that there was anything the U.S. government should not demand of or impose on the rest of the world.

Academics spend their entire careers debating grand strategy. However, creating foreign policy in practice isn't difficult. Washington's elite might disagree about details, but believes with absolute certainty that Americans should do everything: Fight every war, remake every society, enter every conflict, pay every debt, defeat every adversary, solve every problem, and ignore every criticism. Unfortunately, over the last two decades this approach has proved to be an abysmal disaster.

There's an equally simple alternative. Indeed, the president came up with it: "don't do stupid" stuff. Too bad he failed to practice his own professed policy. Washington should stop doing stupid things.

But, as noted earlier, U.S. foreign policy is run by fools. Only the American people can change that. They must start electing leaders committed to not doing "stupid" stuff. Only then will Washington end the endless cycle of intervention, disaster, intervention, and disaster.

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