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I've often been asked by people outside of America to explain U.S. foreign policy. It's a challenging task. Americans know very little about the world. Their ignorance is almost charming.

In one sense, it's good that most people are more interested in spending time with family and friends and in earning a living than in plotting a coup in some faraway land, waging a war against an emerging power, or issuing foreign ultimatums over random economic and political demands.

Unfortunately, however, as a result, Americans have essentially delegated the power to do all of those things to a Washington-centered elite. When things go wrong, Americans get angry and policies sometimes change. But Washington's interventionist enthusiasm always quickly returns.

It's not a pretty spectacle. Most Americans are not ideologically committed to turning the United States into an imperial power. Few of them would like to spend months or years patrolling failed foreign states, such as Iraq. Most of them turn against needless conflicts when it becomes evident that they aren't going to be short and sweet.

Indeed, when wars go bad — like Iraq — the public eventually says enough! Anger over the Bush administration's Iraq war, dishonestly initiated and incompetently waged, led voters to transfer control of Congress to the Democrats. The president's continuing intransigence may lead voters to give the White House to the Democrats as well.

Yet in a perverse sense, the biggest foreign policy problem is when the costs seem low. Then the public simply ignores the issue, giving policy-makers wide discretion to continue advancing interventionist policies contrary to America's national interests.

How else to explain continuing American membership in NATO, especially a NATO that keeps expanding? Europe once needed defending from the Soviet Union. From whom is America defending Europe today, a continent with a population and gross domestic product larger than America's?

Moreover, what sense does it make to continue expanding NATO up to the borders of Russia,

absorbing countries with multiple disputes with Russia, an authoritarian, nuclear-armed power?

Does anyone seriously believe that bringing the countries of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO would do anything other than increase American insecurity?

Similarly misguided is America's continuing defense of South Korea. The South has upward of 40 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea. Most South Koreans no longer fear Pyongyang; in fact, they have been subsidizing North Korea for years.

Then there's Japan. The second- ranking economic power on Earth, Japan could do far more to protect itself and its region. Its neighbors prefer that Washington do the job, but so what? That doesn't make the policy in America's interest.

Foreign alliances are dangerous as well as expensive. They can act as transmission belts of war at a time when America should be building firebreaks to war. Admittedly, the likelihood of war in Asia and Europe is low, and advocates of scattering security guarantees around the globe argue that such commitments deter aggression, which undoubtedly is true to some degree.

But U.S. deployments also ensure American involvement in conflicts that would be little relevant to U.S. security. Moreover, guaranteeing the security of other nations creates an incentive for irresponsible behavior.

That is, so long as small countries believe Washington will rush to their defense in a conflict with a bigger power — China and Russia most obviously today — they are likely to act more aggressively.

American elites rather like the idea of the United States attempting to run the world. But the vast majority of Americans, who have to pay the bill, probably would be much less enthused if they thought about it.

The challenge for advocates of a new U.S. international approach is to break through the public's ignorance to build popular support for overturning elite opinion. It won't be easy.

However, without the emergence in both parties of real opposition to today's aggressive interventionism, America is doomed to continue following today's dangerous and expensive imperial foreign policy.

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Op Eds

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