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Americans Should Reject Bipartisan Warmongering: Base Foreign Policy On Reluctance To Go To War

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After 9/11, President George W. Bush abandoned his campaign pledge of a “humble” foreign policy and instead unleashed America’s military throughout the Middle East, with disastrous results.

Fifteen years and another administration later, the U.S. is more entangled in violent conflicts throughout the world than ever before, and there’s no end in sight. The American people understandably have rejected a foreign policy driven by regime change and nation building.

Even so, Republicans have routinely attacked President Obama for allegedly withdrawing from the world. Yet he twice increased U.S. force levels in Afghanistan and later repudiated his own withdrawal plan, maintaining troop levels for his successor. Led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the administration launched its own war in Libya.

President Obama made drones a new military front, ramping up deadly campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen. He later made Saudi Arabia’s aggressive war in Yemen America’s own. The administration also increased military support for laggard Europeans against Russia.

None of these has worked out well. The toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq created a continuing sectarian war which generated ISIS. Obama’s battle against the Islamic State brought U.S. forces back to Iraq, led to a renewal of bombing in Libya, and for the first time entangled U.S. forces in Syria.

Taking over the anti-ISIS campaign thrust Washington into the vortex of largely unmanageable sectarian and geopolitical conflict, while relieving the countries most at risk of responsibility for their own defense. Moreover, America placed itself alongside the Mideast nations as a primary target of Islamic State terrorism.

The Libyan intervention created another failed state, offered ISIS another target, and loosed weapons throughout the region. The bipartisan Afghan occupation swallowed American and allied lives and money for no good result. Finally, Obama's heavy-handed drone campaigns inflamed hostility against the U.S. and risked creating more terrorists.

In short, while the Obama presidency differed from the Bush administration in tactics, the former continued the same general policies with cascading negative consequences.

America desperately needs a new foreign policy approach. Unfortunately, Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton's only criticism of the Obama administration is that it has not done enough. For instance, she would actively intervene in the Syrian civil war, a tragic conflict involving Iran, Turkey, and Syria but of no direct interest to America. The possibilities for disaster are many.

As for Donald Trump, he criticized the Iraq war, a significant departure for Republican candidates, and challenged the presumption that the U.S. must forever subsidize prosperous and populous allies in Asia and Europe, a change from past Democrats and Republicans. In a major foreign policy address on Monday, Trump called for an end to the sort of nation-building engaged in by both Presidents Bush and Obama.

However, Trump suggested using greater military force against the Islamic State, including nuclear weapons—a departure of historic proportions. He suggested ordering Beijing to deal with North Korea, a nonstarter for a rising nationalist power, and promised to launch a trade war against China, which would sharply raise Asian tensions.

The responsible alternative is an America highly involved economically, politically, and culturally in the world, but reluctant to go to war. Such military restraint characterized the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who observed: “Do not mistake our reluctance for war for a lack of resolve.”

As is oft said, the U.S. should lead. But real leadership requires discernment, prudence, and restraint. It is as important to know when to stay out as when to get involved. The American people desperately need such a foreign policy in coming years.

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