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How to Rescue 'America First'

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Only Donald Trump would attempt to rescue the phrase "America First" from its slightly discreditable heritage. Unfortunately, his sales job has been unconvincing. Now someone needs to rescue the same phrase from his crabbed, negative meaning.

The dominant foreign policy vision animating left and right in recent years has been promiscuous intervention. While elites disagreed on tactics and targets, both major political parties shared a belief that Washington should micro-manage the world.

God knows when a single sparrow falls to earth, declared Jesus, and so does Uncle Sam. When the president and his advisers are sufficiently irritated, they turn to economic sanctions military action.

Of course, most politicians glibly cite "vital national interests" whenever they act. In the years after the grand U.S. triumph in the Cold War, Americans found themselves fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, the Balkans, Libya, Iraq again, and Syria, conducting large-scale drone campaigns in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, hunting down insurgents in Africa, enabling war in Yemen, and considering action against Iran, North Korea, Russia, and now, it appears from the Trump administration's rhetoric, even China.

Even more inexplicable is Washington's defense of prosperous and populous states well able to protect themselves. The Europeans enjoy a larger economy and population than America, let alone Russia. South Korea vastly outranges the North. Japan has skimped on defense spending despite long possessing the world's second largest economy.

One can justify back-stopping such nations against serious though unlikely crises which could dangerously upset the global balance of power. But there's no reason highly developed industrial democracies should turn to Washington to solve the slightest problem.

Moreover, when acting America's objective should be security and stability, not perfect harmony. For instance, Russia's aggressive treatment of Ukraine is unjustified, but does not

threaten Europe. To the extent that Moscow's misbehavior should be treated as a warning of potential future harms, the Europeans should be spending not just a smidgen more, but a lot more, on the military.

In his Inaugural Address the president set forth the essence of sensible "America First" foreign policy: "We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world, but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interest first. We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone but rather to let it shine as an example. We will shine for everyone to follow."

Ultimately, the U.S. government is created, funded, staffed, and defended by the American people. Its first and overwhelming obligation is to those it represents. It has no cause to squander the wealth and risk the lives of its own citizens unless they have something serious at stake.

Washington is at its worst when ivory tower warriors propose grand humanitarian crusades to be paid with other people's blood and money. Americans' willingness to sacrifice should not be abused by the social and political elites which dominate the making of foreign policy.

However, national interest is not enough. America's approach should be enlightened, with concern for others tempering Washington's global role. A world that is freer and more prosperous is better, not just for Americans, but for others.

For instance, a good society welcomes those fleeing oppression abroad. Concern for "the least of these," as Jesus termed them, should inform Washington's pursuit of its people's interests.

The best way to do that is to recognize the power of private action. America's best ambassadors are Americans.

So long as Washington engages in policies which disproportionately kill Muslims and favor Israel, no amount of PR and spin will salvage Uncle Sam's image in the Middle East. But polls still show that Americans—along with their values and products—are viewed favorably.

NGOs assist with development and aid. Trade and investment spur economic growth and create international bridges. So do immigration and travel.

Security is vital, but so is building human relationships across different cultures. A wall, whether physical or legal, risks national interests in both very practical and more enlightened ways.

U.S. government officials should put America First. Their failure to do so in recent years has resulted in high costs to the American people: thousands of deaths, tens of thousands of serious injuries, destructive blowback including terrorism, and massive debt.

But the president and his aides should not ignore the needs, desires, and interests of others. The world is sometimes dangerous and threatening, but always fascinating and instructive, and occasionally enriching and even ennobling. U.S. interests are best served by engaging other nations and peoples around the globe.

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