

Joe Biden Needs A Pivot To A Humbler Foreign Policy

Doug Bandow

December 17, 2020

Joe Biden is officially the president-elect. He will set U.S. foreign policy for at least the next four years. If he is to achieve better results than his predecessors, he should adopt a new approach: humility. The idea goes back to President George W. Bush.

After the Clinton years, which featured raids on Somali warlords, NATO's unprovoked attack on Yugoslavia, and nation-building in the Balkans, Bush ran for president advocating for a "humble foreign policy."

He was expected to ground that policy in reality, unlike his predecessor. Unfortunately, foreshadowing President Donald Trump's experience, Bush filled his administration with wannabe field marshals and conquerors like Dick Cheney, who avoided service in Vietnam but decades later pushed wars for others to fight. After 9/11, Bush became an open door, who, once fortified by administration deceptions, abandoned any pretense of limits, caution, and restraint.

Bush's original conceit was the assumption that America was attacked because it was so free and virtuous, an innocent vestal virgin assaulted in an evil world. Forgotten was Washington's sustained support for oppressive Middle Eastern governments; its assault on Iranian democracy; its military presence in Saudi Arabia, host of Islam's holiest sites; its decades of subsidies and weapons for Israel, underwriting the occupation over millions of Palestinians; and its military attacks on Muslim communities, including the bombardment of Shiites and Druze during the Lebanese Civil War.

Bush's simplistic and uncomprehending understanding of terrorism led to a response of hubris redoubled and social engineering writ large. Bush decided to remake both the Middle East and Central Asia. Evil would be eradicated, good would be enshrined, and America would be glorified, transforming reality itself as the lion lay down with the

lamb. Or so went the fantasy that Bush and his neoconservative Greek Chorus called the global war on terrorism.

For Bush, the American purpose was served by pouring lives and money into fantastic foreign social engineering projects with no end—which Trump rightly described as endless wars. Bush gave the U.S. two decades, so far, of fighting in Afghanistan. What was initially intended to destroy al-Qaeda and oust the Taliban turned into a fantasy expedition to create a liberal democracy and a strong central government in an artificial country that had experience with neither.

Bush's more skeptical successors were frustrated at every turn by members of the war party—generals promising progress, analysts warning of regional instability, politicians predicting al-Qaeda strikes in America. Even presidential appointees favored staying forever, or longer if necessary, such as Trump's second national security adviser H.R. McMaster, now touting a book and insisting the U.S. turn Afghanistan into a Central Asian garden spot of sorts.

However, Bush's far greater debacle was Iraq. Proving himself to be ignorant, credulous, and incompetent, the perfect trifecta for a supposed statesman, he relied on carefully crafted lies promoted by the well-funded neoconservative lobby to sell an aggressive war against a onetime U.S. partner that had nothing to do with 9/11. The invasion of Iraq was a tribute to the Republican Party's arrogant insularity, fanatical commitment to war, and perverse belief in global social engineering.

During the 1980s, the U.S. backed Saddam Hussein in his aggressive and brutal war against Iran, which ended in a draw after causing a million or more casualties and contributed to Saddam's miscalculation in invading Kuwait. Iraq was wrecked by President George H.W. Bush's assault and years of economic sanctions. Then the Washington war party decided that conquering Iraq was the key to American domination of the Middle East. A CIA-funded shill, Ahmed Chalabi, would be installed as president. He would provide Washington with military bases for a subsequent attack on Iran. The swamp would be drained. The Middle East would become an American suburb, docile and dutiful. Its residents, Shiites, Jews, Christians, and Sunnis, would gather nightly to hold hands, sing Kumbaya, and praise America.

What could possibly go wrong?

Bush's misadventure easily ousted Saddam from power but triggered a sectarian conflict that resulted in hundreds of thousands of, and perhaps even a million, deaths. Millions of people were displaced. Minority religious communities, including the substantial Christian population, were ravaged. The fighting spawned al-Qaeda in Iraq, which morphed into the Islamic State. In 2014, ISIS conquered much of Iraq and Syria. The resulting "caliphate" was ultimately destroyed by U.S. airpower and a mix of local ground forces, but years of combat caused tens of thousands of additional casualties. And ISIS still exists, though it's largely bereft of territory.

Yet two, soon to be three, presidents later, the U.S. remains trapped in forever wars with ever more expansive objectives. In Iraq, American troops are nominally committed to eradicating the very thought of the Islamic State, but are really directed at Iran as part of the Trump administration's failed "maximum pressure" strategy, which caused Tehran to accelerate its nuclear activities, increase its efforts at regional destabilization, and spur multiple attacks on U.S. bases and America's embassy in Iraq.

In Syria, Washington deployed troops, who remained after the Islamic State's demise, tasked with seizing Syrian oilfields, guarding Syrian Kurds from Turkish forces and its radical proxies, ousting the Assad government, forcing Iranian and Russian forces from the country, and guarding against an ISIS revival. About the only thing left off Washington's agenda is finding and restoring the original Garden of Eden.

Two decades of murder and mayhem triggered by Bush's wars have resulted in no accountability. Those responsible for gross policy malpractice still ply their trade, writing studies for prestigious think tanks, penning op-eds for influential newspapers, and offering advice to presidential candidates, while being promoted to better and higher-paying positions from which they eagerly await their next administration job and chance to plot newer, bigger, and grander wars.

So many countries to bomb, invade, occupy, and transform. So little time and public support.

Unfortunately, Joe Biden has surrounded himself with these people, though not specifically from the Bush administration, thankfully. Four years of Trump have reinforced partisanship and the demand of Democratic Party faithful for political spoils is overwhelming. So there appears to be little room at the inn, at least involving top appointments, for members of the neoconservative cabal that did America so much harm. Most will be left churning out paeans to permanent war that double as policy studies and op-eds. The only imaginable case for Trump in 2024 would be that he'll perform a final burial of an entire generation of GOP warrior wannabes.

However, there are more than enough Democratic social engineers from the Obama years to go around. So far Biden's leading appointees include the worst of President Barack Obama's hawkish aides, aside from Hillary Clinton—and even she still could come back, since the president-elect has more positions to fill. Antony Blinken, Jake Sullivan, Susan Rice, Samantha Power, and John Kerry collectively gave the U.S. new wars to fight in Yemen, Libya, and Iraq/Syria, as well as a double troop bump in Afghanistan, conflicts that all continue today. Yemen is approaching its sixth year. The civil war in Libya has raged for more than nine years. U.S. troops have been stuck in Iraq and Syria for six years and counting. Most incredibly, Afghanistan has passed 19 years.

Alas, social engineers on both right and left promise much but deliver little—or more accurately, deliver way too much of all the wrong things. The crew being selected by Biden now risks doing the same. Observed author Robert Wright: "in recent years, naïve idealism has been responsible for much death and suffering and dislocation. And

a lot of that happened on the watch of the Obama administration, where Blinken and Sullivan were top aides.”

More of the same would guarantee a bad end for the Biden presidency, whether one term or two. And more importantly, a bad end for many Americans and even more foreigners. What is desperately needed is the “humble foreign policy” that Bush promised but abandoned. That means a foreign policy governed by results, not intentions. Yes, one may truly hope to—and believe one can—create utopia on earth. But if the actual results are hundreds of thousands of dead, millions of refugees, trillions of dollars spent, ruined nations, empowered adversaries, and years more of the same, one should stop. Good intentions cannot make up for so much damage done to so many.

The U.S. government’s primary responsibility is to secure the interests of the American people, and most importantly to protect their lives, homes, liberties, and prosperity. The means as well as the ends should be moral, limiting how Washington acts when the lives and interests of others are at stake. But theoretical humanitarianism cannot become the driving force of U.S. foreign policy. The American people, including those in uniform, are not gambit pawns to be sacrificed in a global chess game by their betters, a clique of far-seeing, all-knowing, and supreme-feeling ivory tower warriors.

This duty can be best achieved by those with realistic aims, knowledgeable about history as well as modern circumstances, aware of their own limitations, willing to listen and learn, concerned about consequences, and ready to adjust. To achieve the best, American policymakers must understand how other peoples think, what other governments perceive, and how other nations are likely to respond. This includes exiling the worst forms of American exceptionalism—the belief that only Americans are moral, good, brave, prescient, tough, resilient, and determined. What the U.S. is unlikely to do, such as concede its sovereignty to another nation, other nations also are unlikely to do in response to U.S. threats.

Donald Trump’s foreign policy deserved much of the criticism directed its way. However, credit is due for reducing Washington’s ambitions. If his approach was not humble, and it was not, it still reflected a greater awareness of past mistakes and disasters. That would be a good legacy for a soon-to-be President Joe Biden to build on: recognizing that what he cannot achieve is as important, if not more, than what he desires to do.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.