

The Blob Is Addicted To Overseas Interventions

Doug Bandow

January 25, 2021

Since the end of the Cold War there have been few external constraints on U.S. foreign policy. The Soviet Union's collapse left America as the unipower. "What we say goes," declared President George H.W. Bush. Washington's foreign policy establishment, later termed "the Blob," saw an opportunity to transform the world.

The 1990s featured military interventions in the Balkans, Somalia, Haiti, Panama, and Iraq. All were unnecessary wars of choice, though Panama was close geographically and hosted the important Panama Canal. Iraq's conquest of Kuwait unsettled the Mideast, but less than had other conflicts, such as the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Overall, these interventions had only modest consequences for the U.S. All were limited, imposed minimal direct costs, and came to an expeditious end. No one spoke of "endless wars."

However, the 9/11 attacks triggered a dramatic transformation of U.S. foreign policy. Although President George W. Bush had campaigned for a "humble foreign policy," he delivered a toxic mix of arrogance, hypocrisy, sanctimony, and incompetence. In Afghanistan he turned a counterterrorism mission against al-Qaeda and the Taliban into endless nation-building.

Much worse, he invaded Iraq—which had no WMDs, as he had falsely claimed—triggering a devastating sectarian war. Thousands of allied troops were killed; tens of thousands were injured; hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were killed; millions were displaced; trillions of dollars were wasted. Religious cleansing destroyed the indigenous Christian community and was followed by devastating attacks on other faith minorities, such as the Yazidis. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was loosed, mutating into the even more destructive Islamic State.

Popular dissatisfaction with the Iraq imbroglio spurred Barack Obama's victory over John McCain, who never found a war he did not want Americans to fight. The neoconservative coterie, which had expected Iraq to be but the first step in a plan for

regional social engineering, sought to avoid blame by attributing Iraq's failure to President Obama because he withdrew U.S. forces—*while following Bush's withdrawal plan*.

Obama was restrained in temperament, but not in action. In Libya he turned a supposed effort at humanitarian protection into regime change, sparking nearly a decade of civil war that has yet to end. In Syria he initiated half-hearted interventions which discouraged a negotiated settlement, promoted the growth of Islamic radicalism, and spurred Iranian and Russian intervention on behalf of the Assad regime. He pushed aside Mideast governments and acted against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In Yemen he backed Saudi and Emirati aggression, creating a humanitarian catastrophe. Finally, in Afghanistan he twice doubled down in attempting to create a stable, effective central government in a country where one had never existed.

These conflicts continued throughout the Trump administration.

Although President Donald Trump popularized antagonism toward “endless wars,” he halted none of them. He initially increased troop levels in Afghanistan and turned America's presence in both Iraq and Syria into anti-Iran operations, even though the U.S. was not formally at war with Tehran. He unreservedly backed Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's campaign to restore to office a puppet regime in Yemen.

The consequences of these seemingly endless wars—few, if any benefits against significant, continuing costs—led to increasing calls for foreign policy “restraint.” This shocked the Blob, whose members never expected to be held accountable for committing even the most grievous policy malpractice.

For instance, Samantha Power, appointed by Obama because of her vocal advocacy for humanitarian military intervention, was upset when Iraq's catastrophic failure created resistance to promiscuous war-making outside the Beltway. She opined: “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, what are hundreds of thousands of lives lost and trillions of dollars squandered compared to the thrill of engaging in global social engineering? How dare the ungrateful public interfere with the grand ambitions of Blob members?

However, the latter reject claims that the system is biased toward war.

According to Hal Brands (Johns Hopkins), Peter Feaver (Duke), and William Inboden (University of Texas), “Discussion over American foreign policy is loud, contentious, diverse, and generally pragmatic.”

Loud and contentious, surely, and very partisan. However, diversity is limited, dominated by demands for intensive intervention to transform other nations and

micromanage the globe. And pragmatic only in the desire to cause the most damage to others at the least cost to Americans.

Indeed, Blob members' virtual unanimity on many issues is striking. For instance, Republican and Democratic presidents alike backed both sanctions and threats of war against Iran. Trump and the GOP disagreed with Joe Biden and most Democrats only over whether Obama's deal was a good one.

Trump's proposals to withdraw from Afghanistan and Syria generated a nearly united—and often hysterical—opposition from Blob members across the political spectrum. Trump's criticism of alliances, especially NATO and South Korea, resulted in a similarly frenzied reaction.

Republicans and Democrats moved almost in tandem toward confrontation and a possible new cold war against China. Even proposals that risk conflict, such as guaranteeing Taiwan's security, gained currency throughout the policy community.

In most cases ends are widely shared. Differences usually are partisan and mostly over means. Observed Kelley Vlahos of the Quincy Institute: "there is a narrow spectrum of technical and ideological disagreement in all these cases." Yet it is the fundamental objectives of today's foreign policy which should be questioned.

Daniel Drezner of Tufts criticized the notion that there is "a restricted shop" because dissidents such as Andrew Bacevich and Stephen Walt are now heard and even run "conference panels and academic journals." Yet they remain a decided and distinct minority.

Listen to a sampling of the webinars from Washington's large, established think tanks and you will hear near unanimity on a range of military and alliance issues. Differences tend toward fine distinctions, with true dissidents rarely heard on panels other than those that they personally organize. The problem is not that gatekeepers consciously bar particular people or viewpoints. Rather, outlying opinions are simply viewed as unserious, beyond the pale, even unthinkable, so they are rarely considered.

Promiscuous interventionists also point out that they do not bomb and invade *everywhere*. Brands, et al. cheerfully noted that Washington eschewed "interventions in Rwanda, the African Great Lakes, Sudan, the Caucasus, Ukraine, Myanmar and other potential cases." The Rand Corporation's Michael Mazarr made a related claim: "Broadly speaking, then, the default setting of U.S. foreign policy is hardly one of fervent interventionism. In terms of actual military policies and spending, if the United States had truly embraced hegemonic policies, there would be a trajectory of continually rising commitments, military spending, and interventions since 1945."

These arguments fall short. The U.S. is dramatically, even shockingly, outside of the international mainstream. Great power conflict was a constant prior to World War I

and still common afterwards. Today it is extraordinarily rare—except by America. The U.S. is far more warlike than *any other nation*. Washington uses the military more often than its most noted authoritarian adversaries combined: Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, and any other plausible candidates.

As for the cases cited by Brands, et al., Washington continues to back Kiev with lethal military aid and through sanctions on Russia and insist that Ukraine (and Georgia) eventually be admitted to NATO. In Myanmar policymakers debated coercive intervention in the aftermath of a devastating typhoon. After Rwanda a number of U.S. officials, including President Bill Clinton, indicated that they wished they had responded militarily. The U.S. put devastating financial sanctions on Sudan and kept them in place even after Khartoum allowed the secession of what became South Sudan.

Mazarr ignored the fact that shortly after 1945 the U.S. established the most important alliances with the most important countries, which persist to this day, setting an interventionist agenda for decades. Moreover, Washington dramatically expanded NATO after the alliance's chief enemy had imploded. Modest military retrenchment came only after the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact had disappeared and Europeans had radically cut back their militaries. The failure of Washington to drop a single alliance or security guarantee in an increasingly benign security environment—the world might seem dangerous, but not for the globe's hyperpower—testifies to the strength of the Blob's determination to dominate the globe.

Moreover, the rate of intervention has been increasing. According to Monica Duffy Toft of Tufts, the U.S. used military force 46 times between 1948 and 1991 and 188 times between 1992 and 2017. If Washington policymakers were restrained before, it was primarily due to the Cold War, which focused U.S. attention on serious security concerns. Moreover, interventions which went awry could escalate into a U.S.-Soviet confrontation with potentially catastrophic consequences. Any supposed “moderation” and “pragmatism” claimed by the Blob's defenders ended along with the Cold War.

Nor does the fact that Blob members lean toward intervention mean they are entirely bereft of any sense of limits, especially regarding public support. The failure to act in every possible circumstance does not mean intervention is not promiscuous. After all, America has been constantly at war, mostly for no obvious benefit, for the last two decades. And there is no sign that these wars will end anytime soon, despite Biden's anemic promises to do so.

Perhaps the most dubious claim is that “the nation gets the opportunity to learn from its mistakes, build on its successes, and improve its performance over time.” Where? Certainly not in the Middle East, the epicenter of intervention over the last two decades; none of the interventions since 2001 look successful or worthwhile. Attempts to lead from behind (Libya), back allied wars (Yemen), and rely on a mix of tools (Syria) have done little better than invading.

Yet what member of the Blob has been held accountable for his or her failures? Who has lost anything professionally? Which failed policy analyst has been denied media attention? And who does not remain a respected member of the Blob irrespective of how many people have been murdered, raped, injured, and displaced as a result of policies he or she advocated? Certainly, the new president and his top aides remain undisturbed, despite sharing responsibility for every conflict in which America remains ensnared.

Without question the Blob dominates U.S. foreign policy. And intervention dominates the foreign policy promoted by the Blob. That doesn't mean there is no opposition and that no dissident voices are heard. However, there has been an extraordinary consistency in the post-Cold War foreign policies—Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, Obama, and even Trump—which almost certainly will continue through the incoming Biden administration.

Nor is there any presidential candidate on the horizon for 2024 who seems likely to diverge in any serious way from the ongoing establishment consensus. Nothing is likely to change. Until then, Americans and foreigners will continue paying a high price in lives and money as the Blob simply moves on to its next disastrous war, certain that even grotesque failure will not threaten its policy-making primacy.

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