

# The American Conservative

## The Blob Bleeds

*America will survive whatever comes. But the country's ruling class, foreign policy establishment, and imperial pretensions will not.*

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The Biden administration continues to issue directives to international friends and foes alike. However, even close allies have tired of Washington's sanctimonious lectures. America's foreign policy establishment imagines that it is still 1989, with the Soviet empire spontaneously combusting.

For most of its history Uncle Sam's international ambitions were bound. However, a century ago, the sanctimonious and self-infatuated Woodrow Wilson ostentatiously flouted George Washington's warning against joining the old world's fratricidal conflicts and involved us in World War I. Then World War II left the U.S. as the only shield against an invigorated Soviet Union, later joined by a radical revolutionary Chinese regime. At significant cost—permanent enfeeblement of Europe militarily, major conventional wars in Korea and Vietnam, near nuclear conflagration over Cuba, and manifold proxy conflicts throughout the Third World—Washington ultimately won the not-always-so-cool Cold War.

Although the disappearance of Soviet communism was an unmitigated good, the process spurred a fearsome growth in American hubris. U.S. policymakers came to believe that America was the essential nation. Other countries were but undistinguished mountains of clay waiting to be molded by perspicacious Washingtonians. The beneficiaries of American tutelage were expected to hold hands and sing Kumbaya in a chorus directed from the U.S. Those who didn't listen were disciplined by the ever-patient American colossus.

Even the usually sober President George H.W. Bush exclaimed: "What we say goes." Underlying almost every U.S. policy was fervent insistence on American primacy. In Europe, Washington would defend the continent no matter how inadequate the latter's efforts, more insistent on preserving European dependency than promoting European security. This approach was mirrored by U.S. determination, through unashamed election interference and military expansion, to enforce Russian subservience in the aftermath of the Soviet breakup.

In effect, Washington internationalized and inverted the Monroe Doctrine, turning it into an offensive instrument justifying the expansion of U.S. influence and power up to every other nation's border. When this policy fueled Europe's first major conventional war in seven decades, a nearly unanimous D.C. commentariat favored running a ruthless proxy war, using Ukraine to weaken Russia for American purposes, largely indifferent to the horrendous human consequences.

In Asia, Washington pursued much the same approach with even greater potential long-term consequences. The U.S. kept Japan and South Korea dependent militarily even as they developed economically. America's policy of "extended deterrence" for those nations made the U.S. homeland the ultimate target of expanding Chinese and North Korean nuclear arsenals. Domestic political demands for a formal military commitment to Taiwan grew, threatening a reverse Cuban missile crisis over a land of significant nationalist and security interest to the People's Republic of China. Yet many Washington policymakers assumed that the mere threat of U.S. intervention would keep Beijing at bay and, if not, of course America would emerge victorious in any resulting hostilities.

Today, politically avaricious officials are seeking to extend their power over not only trans-Pacific economic relations, but also domestic *and foreign* industries considered to be technologically significant. The result is a haphazard but growing industrial policy mixing abundant subsidies with equally generous wokeish dictates. Washington is pressing hard to impose its rules on industrialized allies, testing the complex interplay between economic interest and political affinity.

Although the Biden administration mercifully ended 20 years of nation-building and democracy-spreading in Central Asia that ravaged Afghanistan, it is determined to keep America entangled in the Middle East. U.S. forces remain at risk in Syria, illegally occupying another nation's territory and stealing its oil. Acting on behalf of Riyadh and Jerusalem, Washington continues its policy of reckless confrontation with Iran, pirating the latter's tankers and threatening military action in the face of Iranian retaliation.

President Joe Biden flipped from criticism of the Saudi royal dictatorship to obsequious submission, begging for increased oil production. The administration is now pushing formal defense guarantees which would turn U.S. military personnel into bodyguards for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his family. At the same time, the Biden administration has employed only minimal rhetorical separation from the government in Israel, continuing de facto American support for its treatment of Palestinians as second-class human beings. Even the murder of U.S. citizens by Israeli occupation forces draws only scant notice in Washington.

Although these policies collectively preserve America's facade of international dominance, the United States of 2023 is not the same as that of 1990. U.S. policymakers who imagine that "what we say goes" continues to reflect the world are inadvertently speeding creation of a new order which they will rue. Several factors are in play.

First, despite its evident military strength, the U.S. has only limited ability to coerce its major potential adversaries. Russia so far has withstood a brutal proxy war-plus backed by far-reaching economic sanctions. Indeed, America and Europe have been exposed as anything but modern arsenals of democracy, with Russia outproducing the entire NATO alliance in artillery ammunition and other war materiel. And despite complaints from Washington's war lobby, the administration has refused to join a conflict with a nuclear-armed power over peripheral geopolitical stakes.

China now has a larger navy than America, though of less tonnage and lesser combat capabilities, and a vastly greater ship-building capability. War games over Taiwan uniformly show massive American losses and the majority suggest the U.S. would lose. Washington's Asian allies voice approval of American support for Taiwan but refuse to commit to going to war with Washington,

which would ensure the PRC's enduring enmity. If hostilities erupt, the U.S. is likely to find itself fighting alone thousands of miles from home.

North Korea is nearing acquisition of its own deterrent, expanding its nuclear arsenal while developing ICBMs capable of targeting the U.S. Washington's attempt to "restore deterrence" by regularly sending ships and planes to threaten the North almost certainly backfire, strengthening the latter's determination to prevent any American administration from ever using its forces against the North. Iran is demonstrating a non-nuclear deterrent, including missile attacks on nearby U.S. bases and Saudi oil facilities. Tehran's pursuit of detente with Riyadh also has undermined Washington's fanatical anti-Iran campaign.

Second, other nations are less willing to defer to the U.S. and its allies. There was shock and incomprehension in Washington and Brussels when the rest of the world did not heed their call to arms over Ukraine. The American brand has been scorched by recent misbehavior—stupid wars around the world with neither apology given nor accountability held. Washington officials denounce aggression against Ukraine, yet America launched illegal attacks on Yugoslavia and Iraq. Even as Washington demands that Vladimir Putin face justice for war crimes, George W. Bush avoids responsibility for his bloody and illegal invasion of Iraq.

Resistance also is growing to Washington's abuse of America's financial dominance. Although an expanded BRICS is still unlikely to wield great geopolitical power, these nations may further weaken Washington's economic stranglehold. Even the Europeans have shown less tolerance when sanctioned by their erstwhile ally.

Third, American policymakers have perversely encouraged adversaries to cooperate. There are important differences between Moscow and Beijing, but growing animus toward the U.S. draws them together. As China's ties with America have deteriorated the PRC has increased its support for North Korea. So has Russia, which until recently played only a bit role in the Korean peninsula. Iran has provided drones to Moscow for use against Ukraine despite sharp U.S. disapproval.

Such relationships might not endure forever. However, their end is not inevitable, especially so long as Washington provides abundant glue to hold them together. Unfortunately, America's inherent goodness is not always obvious to other nations. Indeed, foreign peoples commonly dislike, even loath, Washington and its policies. The greatest threat to Americans overseas comes from hostility toward the U.S. government. As long as Washington treats other nations and peoples as enemies, they are likely to respond accordingly.

Fourth, friends and allies no longer believe they must sacrifice important economic interests to deal with Washington. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are expanding economic cooperation with China while relying less on America for their security. Southeast Asia maintains strong and growing commercial ties with Beijing despite being uneasy about its aggressive maritime policies. European governments are increasingly disturbed by Chinese human rights violations but still emphasize mutual economic relations over American security concerns. The more Washington demands, the less even its friends are likely to comply.

Finally, the U.S. is anything but a paragon of domestic stability. America's divisions run deep, with fundamental disagreements over the very nature of our lives together. There no longer is a

consensus about the nature and legitimacy of American democracy. Equally fundamental is the country's looming fiscal and potential financial crises.

This year's federal deficit will run about \$1.6 trillion—without a pandemic, economic crisis, or major war. America's (publicly held) debt to GDP ratio is 100 percent, which is approaching the record set after World War II, the worst conflict in human history. Interest rates and federal interest payments are rocketing upward. As the population ages, social outlays will also race ahead. As Americans demand benefits without paying for them, the U.S. may hit nearly *twice* the current debt-to-GDP level by mid-century. However, an economic crisis before that seems inevitable. With fiscal feet of clay, how will Washington afford to run the world?

America will survive whatever comes. But the country's ruling class, foreign policy establishment, and imperial pretensions will not. For this we can thank the much-maligned Blob. Hubris unbridled along with accountability spurned combine powerfully. The world desperately needs U.S. leadership, but restrained and nuanced, reflecting the sort of "humble" foreign policy that candidate George W. Bush once advocated. Such a change would be in America's as well as the world's interest.

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