

## **George Washington Warned Us About Saudi Arabia**

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President Donald Trump wants to outsource U.S. policy to Riyadh. After the recent attack on Saudi Arabia's oil fields, he tweeted that his administration was "locked and loaded," but was "waiting to hear from the Kingdom as to who they believe was the cause of this attack, and under what terms we would proceed!" He later ordered American forces to Saudi Arabia to garrison the Middle East's most brutally repressive and dangerously aggressive state.

Since he himself ventured to Riyadh in 2017—his first foreign trip—Trump has consistently sacrificed America's national interests in catering to the preferences of the Saudi royal family. His administration backed the regime's brutal attack on Yemen, ignored Riyadh's continuing support for Islamic radicalism, and said little about their mounting human rights violations. Now he is acting as if American armed forces constitute the royals' personal bodyguards, at the crown prince's beck and call.

It was fear of precisely this kind of obsequious subservience to foreign nations and interests that prompted President George Washington to issue his famous 1796 Farewell Address. Obviously America's position in the world was very different then. The former colonies were still forging their disparate communities into a nation. The United States was a weak, marginal player in a world dominated by empires. Great Britain and Spain retained interests in and forces on the North American continent, while France maintained Caribbean colonies.

Centuries later, however, Washington's words still resonate. His message was clear: "nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated. The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest."

Tragically the Trump administration's Middle East policy illustrates both sides of the equation. The president exhibits just such "permanent, inveterate antipathies" against Iran and Syria and "passionate attachments" to Saudi Arabia and Israel. The result has been to badly distort U.S. policy and harm American interests.

As Washington presciently explained more than two centuries ago, "Antipathy in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable, when accidental or trifling occasions of dispute occur. Hence, frequent collisions, obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests. The nation,

prompted by ill-will and resentment, sometimes impels to war the government, contrary to the best calculations of policy.”

“Haughty and intractable” surely describes American policy toward Iran. As does the first president’s warning of when the national government “adopts through passion what reason would reject; at other times it makes the animosity of the nation subservient to projects of hostility instigated by pride, ambition, and other sinister and pernicious motives. The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations has been the victim.”

Iran is a bad actor, along with Syria. So are many other nations, including China, Cuba, North Korea, and Russia. But adopting “through passion what reason would reject” as policy has harmed the U.S. as much as it has those other nations. Constant confrontation and conflict have sacrificed American lives, wealth, and interests for no compelling reason.

The other side of the equation has had an equally distorting impact on U.S. policy. Indeed, America’s “passionate attachments” have helped determine the foregoing enemies’ list. After all, Washington observed, “likewise, a passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification.”

Perhaps the most immediate and obvious consequence of this are “concessions to the favorite nation”—such as arming the Saudis, aiding their murderous campaign against Yemeni civilians, and whitewashing their odious oppressions.

However, the dangers go beyond simple policy. This sort of “passionate attachment” also threatens American democracy. Said Washington: “it gives to ambitious, corrupted, or deluded citizens (who devote themselves to the favorite nation), facility to betray or sacrifice the interests of their own country, without odium, sometimes even with popularity; guiding, with the appearances of a virtuous sense of obligation, a commendable deference for public opinion, or a laudable zeal for public good, the base or foolish compliances of ambition, corruption, or infatuation.”

Riyadh appears to buy its friends directly and openly, as does its ally the United Arab Emirates. A different and more enduring foreign loyalty often emerges among those who retain ties to their ancestors’ homelands, such as Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Greece and Turkey. Israel is sui generis, with its most zealous backers Christian believers who hold a unique (and uniquely dubious) eschatology.

While people can, and some do, advocate support for foreign regimes as necessary for American prosperity and/or security, others appear to assume that their favored nation’s interests are automatically America’s interests. Particularly shocking were Republican Party presidential candidates in 2016 who demanded reflexive support for the Saudis and other “allies” and insisted there should not be the slightest margin of difference between American and Israeli policy

despite our many manifest divergences in interests. Which, in practice, would mean conforming to foreign positions irrespective of what our own imperatives are.

Washington also warned of the potential danger such entanglements could pose to domestic institutions: “As avenues to foreign influence in innumerable ways, such attachments are particularly alarming to the truly enlightened and independent patriot. How many opportunities do they afford to tamper with domestic factions, to practice the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public council. Such an attachment of a small or weak towards a great and powerful nation dooms the former to be the satellite of the latter.”

Could there be a better description of America’s current policy toward the Middle East? Our supposed friends have entangled us and turned us into their catspaw. Perhaps most shocking is how Saudi Arabia, which shares neither our values nor our interests, has gained effective control over our foreign policy.

Riyadh’s influence in Washington, D.C. may be nonpareil—the only other nation that comes close is Israel. But there are other countries that seek to gain favor through lobbying. Advocates for Greece and Turkey routinely battle each other, often with inconclusive results, though the latter has won particularly important victories, such as American acquiescence to and sometimes approval of often ruthless policies against internal opponents and other nations, including Cyprus and Syria.

Activists with ties to Central and Eastern Europe have backed the liberation of their “captive nations” during the Cold War and pushed for the rapid expansion of NATO afterwards, despite America’s and Europe’s contrary assurances to Russia. Today’s confrontation between the West and Moscow in part grows out of what Russians see as a calculated betrayal. South Korea, meanwhile, looks to Korean Americans for support, though they lack the organization and clout of other groups.

In different ways, all of these cases illustrate the problem caused by “passionate attachments”—the almost routine and sometimes substantial sacrifice of U.S. economic and security interests to benefit other governments. In most instances, cultural, ethnic, and historical ties provide the foundation for foreign political influence. Saudi Arabia is the rare case where the means is mostly cash and lobbyists.

What to do? George Washington was no isolationist. Like his contemporaries, he expected America to prosper as a commercial republic. Rather, he advocated that the new government “steer clear of permanent alliances,” have with other states “as little political connection as possible,” and not “entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils” of other nations’ “ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice.” That is, cooperation in any form should be based on circumstance and focused on advancing the interests of the American people. He wouldn’t necessarily oppose defending Saudi Arabia, but he would expect the determination to be made by Washington, D.C. and not Riyadh.

Some Americans have lost interest in the Founders, who seem exiled by the mists of time. Yet George Washington and his contemporaries confronted the eternal challenges of power and principle. In his Farewell Address, Washington melded theory with practice and offered lessons which U.S. presidents and other policymakers should learn for today, including to “observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all.”

Today’s presidents would be wise to learn the lessons he teaches—especially those who think we need to subordinate ourselves to a remote desert kingdom.

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