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Uncle Sam's Long Trail of Wreckage

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The leaders and most of the news media in the U.S. seem to believe that Washington's foreign policy over the past several decades has been a success and benefitted both the United States and the world. That assumption wasn't really true even during the Cold War, although that confrontation eventually resulted in the peaceful demise of America's nasty totalitarian adversary. There was plenty of collateral damage along the way, with the suffering caused by Washington's conduct in Vietnam and Afghanistan being the most glaring examples.

The performance of U.S. leaders after the Cold War has been even worse. An array of disruptive, bloody tragedies—most notably those in the Balkans, Afghanistan (again), Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen—mark Uncle Sam's global trail of wreckage. The Biden administration's decision to use Ukraine as a pawn in Washington's power struggle with Russia is fast becoming the latest example.

Very few policymakers even concede that Washington's overseas military adventures often have not turned out as planned. The news media, which is supposed to serve as the public's watchdog, have routinely ignored or excused America's foreign-policy disasters. Instead, when one intervention fails, they simply move on to lobby for the next crusade pushed by U.S. leaders. Consider how few news accounts now deal with the ongoing violence and chaos in places such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, even though Washington was a major contributor to all of those tragedies. Paul Poast, a scholar with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, aptly describes the conflict in Syria as America's "forgotten war." "That the war in Syria has become the "forgotten war," he observes, "points to a more disturbing trend in U.S. foreign policy: The United States is so engaged in wars and interventions around the world that a conflict involving the U.S. military that has killed hundreds of thousands of civilians does not even register with the American public anymore."

Daniel Larison, in a post on his Eunomia Substack, likewise notes that the pattern in Syria has been replicated in many other places, including Somalia. Despite the extensive human suffering caused by Washington's long war in Afghanistan, that episode is already fading in prominence now that U.S. troops are no longer in the country. Ukraine is the new center of attention, and the conflict there is portrayed in the same, simplistic, melodramatic fashion that has characterized Washington's previous crusades.

The elites' post-Cold War track record is not a pretty one. Even the cases touted as successes fail to stand up to scrutiny. Interventionists emphasize that NATO's use of military force ended both Bosnia's civil war and fighting in Kosovo. Although that can be considered a success, it is a partial one at best. Despite the passage of 27 years, Bosnia is no closer to being a viable, united country today than it was in the mid-1990s. The three antagonistic ethnic groups still refuse to cooperate, and the Serbs even periodically threaten to secede. By all measures, Bosnia is utterly dysfunctional, both economically and politically. Indeed, NATO's military intervention merely may have postponed the day of reckoning.

The outcome in Kosovo was not much better. Tensions between the Serbian and Kosovar governments are sufficiently acute that NATO intends to increase its "peacekeeping" troop presence and take direct action if the situation gets worse. Belgrade still is unwilling to recognize Kosovo's independence, a position shared by approximately half of the countries in the international system. The regime in Pristina and its NATO backers stubbornly refuse to let the

predominantly Serbian northeast be governed by Belgrade, even though that concession might resolve the ongoing diplomatic impasse. As in the case of Bosnia, Kosovo remains a powder keg that could cause major problems for the United States and NATO. Yet the Balkan interventions are considered Washington's great success story.

Matters are even worse following the U.S. crusades in other countries. The fighting between Syria's "coalition of religions" government and the Sunni jihadists trying to unseat Bashar al-Assad continues, despite its absence in U.S.-government statements and Western news accounts. Washington also continues to support Kurdish separatists in northeastern Syria and has effective control over that area's oil production. The country, though, may be shattered beyond repair from the years of fighting facilitated by U.S. leaders.

The turmoil in Iraq is less severe, but is still damaging the country. Political disputes and mass demonstrations against the current government regularly surface in Iraq. Pro-Iranian militias continue to play a prominent role in the country's government, and the three-way split among Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, and Kurds is becoming ever more contentious. Political violence among rival factions shows no signs of subsiding, nor does public resentment against the presence of U.S. troops. Washington so lacks trust in its "ally" that officials once threatened to seize the country's bank reserves if Iraqi leaders continued to press for the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

The level of human tragedy in Libya and Yemen is horrifying. Washington and its NATO allies bear almost exclusive responsibility for the situation in Libya. U.S. and NATO air strikes played a decisive role in overthrowing Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. Libya thereafter became an arena of chaos as a multitude of militias vied for power, displacing more than a million residents. There were even credible reports of open-air slave markets for immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa. In the past few years, the fighting has coalesced into a contest for political dominance between a government that the United States supports and an insurgent army led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who was once a CIA asset. Scheduled national elections have been postponed numerous times, and fighting continues to periodically erupt.

Washington bears less direct, but still significant, responsibility for the suffering in Yemen. The Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations have all supported the war of aggression that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and their Gulf allies have waged against the nominally Shiite Houthis. The result has been appalling suffering by civilians, including widespread disease and famine conditions.

The latest application of Washington's meddling policy is in Ukraine. U.S. leaders ignored repeated Russian warnings that making Ukraine a NATO member or even an unofficial NATO military asset would cross a line that threatened Russia's security. When Moscow finally responded to the provocations with an invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden administration opted to use Ukraine in a Western proxy war against Russia. The conflict has already done enormous damage to Ukraine's infrastructure and taken thousands of lives. Worse, Washington and London appear to have sabotaged a possible peace accord between Moscow and Kiev.

The U.S. foreign-policy record over the past three decades could hardly be worse. It is crucial not to let policymakers and their media mouthpieces get away with convenient collective amnesia and imitations of Pontius Pilate. Instead, they need to be held fully accountable for their blunders and deception.

Future U.S. policymakers also need to avoid repeating the faulty performance of their predecessors. To do so, they must make three significant changes to U.S. foreign policy.

First, Washington should utterly renounce nation-building. Trying to remake alien societies by force and impose Western political, economic, and social values is the essence of folly. Even when the United States has not yet been drawn into a new war to enforce crumbling nation-building goals, as in Bosnia and Kosovo, such armed social experiments are an exercise in futility and frustration. Worse, nation-building missions frequently worsen conditions in the targeted country, and the predictable failure of U.S. objectives even can lead to Washington's outright humiliation. The debacle in Afghanistan is a stark reminder of that danger.

Second, the United States must avoid the temptation to engage in regime-change wars. Such offensives often are a prelude to disastrous nation-building ventures. That was the case in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. Those wars not only made matters worse for the populations in the three countries, but worsened the security situation for neighboring states and even the United States. In both Iraq and Libya, U.S. actions toppled secular dictators, paving the way for chaos that strengthened the position of Islamic jihadists. Granted, the secular dictators were brutal and sometimes caused problems for the United States, but Washington's "solution" clearly made matters worse, not better.

Third, U.S. leaders must do a much better job of distinguishing vital national interests from secondary or peripheral ones. Washington's current policy of using Ukraine as a proxy for a war against Russia is a troubling example of the failure to make such basic distinctions. The Biden administration is risking nuclear war with Russia to assist a corrupt, authoritarian regime in a country of little importance to the United States. Until the early 1990s, Ukraine wasn't even an independent country, much less a U.S. vital interest. To accept the risks the Biden administration

is incurring is irresponsible and violates the U.S. government's responsibility to the American people.

Unless these policy changes are made, it is just a matter of time until a new set of officials repeat the disastrous blunders of their predecessors. If they do, the consequences to America and the world will be equally damaging. Indeed, the Ukraine adventure reveals that the consequences could be even worse than the wreckage already wrought by Uncle Sam.

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