



## Can Even a GOP Hawk Like Jeff Sessions Learn Some Hard Foreign Policy Lessons?

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During his long years in the U.S. Senate, Jeff Sessions (who also later served as attorney general in Donald Trump's administration) behaved like the overwhelming majority of his GOP colleagues; he consistently favored US military interventions around the world. There were subtle signs that his views might be shifting when he became an early supporter of Trump's presidential bid in 2016. During that campaign, Trump sharply criticized the thicket of military alliances that Washington had created since World War II and was especially hostile to the stumbling US regime-change wars and nation-building crusades.

Sessions' own disenchantment with such missions was on full display during an address that he delivered at a recent conference sponsored by the *American Conservative* magazine. His apparent conversion to a more restrained foreign policy also raises the possibility that at least a few other interventionist addicts in both major parties might be capable of learning some appropriate policy lessons.

The most interesting part of Sessions' address was the portion sending a message to his fellow conservatives regarding Washington's approach to world affairs. "People are rightly concerned about the endless wars that produce tremendous human and financial costs. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the stated mission transformed from protecting American interests – which I supported – to some sort of vague democratic vision, revealing a Wilsonian naïveté about the nature of the world we live in. It's been a tremendously painful thing for me to watch."

However, Sessions expressed a surprising degree of contrition and even a willingness to accept some personal responsibility for the Afghanistan debacle. "I, and other members of the Congress, did not think deeply about what we were doing. As conservatives, we should have asked, 'Are you sure this is going to work? How does it end? What's your goal? How much is it going to cost?' Not enough of those questions were asked effectively. Solid answers were not demanded." He stated flatly: "This must never happen again." Although giving a perfunctory nod to the need for America to have "high ideals" and play a positive "leadership role," Sessions emphasized a very different point. "[W]e can't be the world's policemen. We can't fix every problem in every place around the globe."

He was unmercifully harsh on Washington's policy in Syria. Granted, taking that approach also served partisan purposes, since his primary target was Barack Obama's administration. "I remember the Obama administration somehow got it in their head that the 'democratic'

revolution that was ongoing in Syria, which Assad was about to crush, could win if we supported it, and that Assad could be removed." Sessions could scarcely contain his scorn. "We started supporting the so-called 'democratic revolutionaries.' They were quickly taken over by the terrorists, not democratic warriors."

His indictment of Washington's policy was devastatingly accurate. Before the U.S.-led regime-change campaign, "the country had a functioning economy. Christians and other minority religions were given a measure of protection by the regime. One could just not cross Assad. So, what is Syria like today? How did our dream to make Syria a democracy turn out? More than 500,000 Syrians are dead. Millions displaced. They poured into Europe, causing all kinds of turmoil there. Ancient cities are in rubble."

Sessions' concluding passage echoed the argument that proponents of realism and restraint have made for years. "'Good intentions' is (sic) not enough. A great nation needs leaders and members of Congress who are realistic, whom you can depend on to make good judgments, and who do not commit us, first of all, to actions that do more harm than good."

One must not make too much of Jeff Sessions' apparent conversion regarding foreign policy. There is no sign in his address to the *American Conservative*, or anywhere else, that he now advocates terminating Washington's dangerous security commitments to NATO or the collection of treaty allies in East Asia. He certainly has not given any indication that he supports even partially defunding the bloated military budget. His fresh thinking on foreign policy seems confined, at least for the moment, to a rejection of regime-change wars and nation-building ventures. It's progress, albeit decidedly limited progress.

Nevertheless, people advocating a sane role for the United States in the world should be glad about even partial converts, given the suffocating dominance that the pro-war foreign policy blob continues to exercise. We can hope that Sessions' apostasy may influence at least a few current and former members of Congress to reconsider some of their faulty assumptions and positions. An initial phase of disillusionment also can lead to a deeper, more comprehensive rejection of the foreign policy status quo. It's worth noting that former State Department official Peter Van Buren became a caustic critic of Washington's promiscuous global military interventionism. Syndicated columnist Pat Buchanan was a reliable interventionist in the 1970s and 1980s, but he emerged as a consistent opponent of that approach in the post-Cold War era.

It would be wildly premature to include Jeff Sessions in the ranks of anti-interventionists. However, we should keep the welcome mat out for him or any other once-rabid interventionists who demonstrate a willingness to embrace a more sober approach to world affairs.

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