

Can a New Think Tank Put a Stop to Endless War?

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July 29, 2019

John Quincy Adams doesn't get a lot of respect. There are no monuments to the sixth president on the National Mall, his face adorns no paper currency, and history mainly remembers him for losing reelection to Andrew Jackson. But before Adams became president, he was an accomplished diplomat, representing the US government in multiple European capitals. On July 4, 1821, while serving as secretary of state, he gave a speech in which he declared that although the United States would always be sympathetic to national liberation struggles, "she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy."

This early warning against an interventionist foreign policy has echoed into the present. Adams's middle name has been adopted by a newly formed think tank in Washington, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, which states that its mission is to "move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward vigorous diplomacy in the pursuit of international peace." The group is still raising money, but with a projected second-year budget of \$5 million to 6 million, enough to support 20 to 30 staffers, it aims to match the scale of more established think tanks and to disrupt the foreign policy consensus in Washington.

The Quincy Institute's founders plan to attack that consensus on multiple fronts. That includes publishing op-eds and making TV appearances, writing white papers, hosting seminars and panels, and briefing policy-makers. Ultimately, it would mean creating a pipeline of young talent that can staff up congressional offices and in the future maybe even the White House, thus enabling advocates of noninterventionism to counter aggressive pushes for regime change in countries like Iran and Venezuela.

As first reported by Stephen Kinzer in *The Boston Globe*, the Quincy Institute includes the unlikely duo of Charles Koch and George Soros among its founding donors—each has committed half a million dollars—and is intended to serve as a counterweight to the Blob, as the bipartisan national security establishment dedicated to endless war has come to be known.

Trita Parsi, Quincy's executive vice president and the founder of the National Iranian American Council, says he's proud to have the support of both the Charles Koch Foundation and Soros's Open Society Foundations. To explain Quincy's ideological orientation, Parsi emphasizes "transpartisanship," which he distinguishes from the much-derided term "bipartisanship." Bipartisanship, he says, is when "you have two sides, they disagree, and then they come to an agreement with some sort of a compromise that neither side is really happy with." Transpartisanship, on the other hand, means "you have two sides, they disagree on a whole bunch of issues, but they have overlapping views. Neither side compromises. They're just

collaborating on issues they already are in agreement over.” He argues that the Blob’s status quo is maintained by the mainstream policy-makers in both parties who support military intervention and that challenging it will require an alliance of politicians on the left and right who agree on the need for restraint, even if they do so for different reasons.

“What we want to see is something that is consonant with American tradition,” says Stephen Wertheim, one of the institute’s five cofounders (and, full disclosure, a friend). In other words, this is not an inherently radical project, even if it may be received as such by some in Washington. For instance, in response to Kinzer’s article, neoconservative éminence grise and Iraq War architect Bill Kristol [tweeted](#), “75 years of a US-led liberal international order, based on a US forward presence and backed by US might, with regional and bilateral alliances and relatively free trade, has enabled remarkable peace and prosperity. But let’s go back to the 1920’s and 30’s!”

Eli Clifton, another cofounder, says he was encouraged by Kristol’s attack. “I welcome him being the face of the effort to criticize us. I think Bill Kristol’s track record speaks for itself,” he says. That record, which includes enthusiastic support for open-ended US military involvement in more than a dozen countries since 9/11, isn’t Kristol’s alone; the most powerful figures in the Democratic and Republican parties are just as responsible, and with a handful of exceptions, few of them have shown any inclination to change course.

Quincy’s founding mandate is centered on two regional programs, the Middle East and East Asia (where the US has its most significant military commitments), though other areas could fall under its purview if its budget expands, and two additional programs: Ending Endless War, which will be run by Wertheim, and Democratizing Foreign Policy, which will be run by Clifton.

Wertheim, a former academic historian, broadly belongs to the realist school of foreign policy, which sees sovereign powers as being motivated by rational interests and encourages stability in international relations. But his realism is not the cold-blooded realpolitik of Henry Kissinger; Wertheim identifies as progressive. “Force ends human life, displaces people, devastates communities, and damages the environment,” reads Quincy’s statement of purpose. As Wertheim puts it, advocates of humanitarian interventionism tend to overlook how “pushing these agendas can be used to create a prolonged conflict. And when that happens, we don’t see human rights advance. Quite the opposite.” This is a critique not only of neoconservatives like Kristol but also of liberal interventionists like Samantha Power, Barack Obama’s UN ambassador, who see a responsibility to protect vulnerable communities by the use of military force as a core principle of US foreign policy.

Clifton, meanwhile, is more focused on the Blob itself and on the way money is used to reinforce its pro-war consensus. His emphasis will be on domestic strategies for reducing interventionism—from reasserting Congress’s constitutional authority over the president’s ability to make war to doing outreach to communities of color that are traditionally marginalized in Washington foreign policy debates. The Quincy founders believe that the existing foreign policy elite is out of step with the American public, which is far more skeptical of military adventurism, and they plan to invite underrepresented communities to participate in the institute’s events and recruit people from nonelite backgrounds into the foreign policy profession. They are also interested in including military veterans; a [recent Pew poll](#) shows large majorities of service members who did tours in Iraq or Afghanistan said they believe neither war was worth fighting.

Clifton said his experience working for *ThinkProgress*, a liberal website affiliated with the Democratic Party–aligned Center for American Progress, showed him that “the supposed institutional Democratic Party’s foreign policy space was very tightly constrained.” While CAP has always maintained that its research is independent, Clifton speculates that the funding the organization received from the government of the United Arab Emirates may have created pressure to support status quo policies in the Middle East. In 2012, when Clifton and several of his colleagues came under fire from pro-Israel and conservative groups for writing critically about Israel and in support of diplomacy with Iran, CAP tried to restrict what they could write about, prompting his voluntary departure.

When it comes to foreign policy, Clifton says, there’s little difference between CAP and Republican-aligned think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and the Hudson Institute. One way Quincy will distinguish itself from its better-established rivals will be to refuse money from foreign governments.

“There’s almost no progressive foreign policy infrastructure in Washington,” says Matt Duss, Bernie Sanders’s foreign policy adviser and a former colleague of Clifton’s at *ThinkProgress* who has been informally consulting with the Quincy founders. Duss says that the organization’s launch is “one of the most encouraging things to happen in the US foreign policy debate in a long time.”

He adds, “You have a number of groups—such as the Center for Economic and Policy Research, the Institute for Policy Studies, the Center for International Policy, a few others—putting out good, progressive-oriented work and a coalition of advocacy organizations like Win Without War, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, and others who punch far above their weight...but the amount of resources they’re up against is pretty staggering.”

Keane Bhatt, a communications director for Sanders and a former policy director for the Congressional Progressive Caucus, says he hopes Quincy “can lend intellectual capacity” to an alliance of progressive and conservative lawmakers who share noninterventionist principles. Besides his boss, Bhatt lists Democratic Representatives Tulsi Gabbard, Pramila Jayapal, Ro Khanna, and Mark Pocan; Republican Senators Mike Lee and Rand Paul and Representatives Ken Buck, Matt Gaetz, and Thomas Massie; and independent Representative Justin Amash.

“The Washington foreign policy consensus is badly broken and captured by a revolving door of corruption that keeps foreign policy elites in power despite the mistakes of the past and is fueled by arms dealers, special interests, and foreign governments,” says Kate Kizer, the policy director of Win Without War. “The Quincy Institute has the chance to be a welcome breath of fresh air.”

So far, Quincy’s soft launch “has exceeded our expectations,” Clifton says. “We’re getting so many e-mails as well as positive responses on social media—people saying, ‘Hey, yeah, this is filling a gap.’” Even the more critical feedback has been energizing; in response to an article in *Foreign Policy* by James Traub, “Billionaires Can’t Buy World Peace,” that labels the new organization a threat to American exceptionalism, Wertheim boasts, “People are having to defend endless war. We have switched the terms of debate.”

At the same time, potential allies likely have a few initial concerns. The most obvious is the group’s support from the Charles Koch Foundation, the mere mention of which is a red flag for progressives. Brothers Charles and David Koch, after all, are the leading bankrollers of

conservative intellectual infrastructure in the US and have underwritten the Republican Party's dominance of Washington, the judiciary, and statehouses across the country.

Parsi notes that the Kochs also fund groups like the Cato Institute that have advocated for diplomacy by, for instance, supporting the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran, which was strenuously opposed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful pro-Israel lobbying group, and by major figures in both parties. He argues that the Kochs have been better allies to the anti-war movement than many prominent Democratic institutions and donors. In some ways, the bigger surprise is that Soros, who has traditionally supported the Blob's hegemonic liberal world order, is also funding Quincy. "There clearly is a recognition among folks in Open Society that many of the past interventions have been unsuccessful, if not disastrous," says Parsi, whereas the Kochs are "a little more decided on what they think is the right foreign policy and are only funding institutions geared to less military involvement." (This isn't quite true; the Kochs have also donated to the pro-war American Enterprise Institute as well as many Republican politicians who have hawkish foreign policy positions.)

This isn't the first time the Kochs have worked with progressives to effect change. In recent years the aggressive carceral policies supported by both parties since the 1990s have been challenged by a coalition that includes left-leaning racial justice activists and libertarians supported by the Kochs. "If restraint in foreign policy can become like criminal justice reform, I think that would be a major step," says Wertheim. "Even during an administration that ran on racist law and order tropes, we see criminal justice reform moving forward."

Still, it's important to recognize what Quincy is not: It is not a left-wing foreign policy institution, something that will remain scarce in Washington. Some of the boldest proposals coming from progressive candidates like Sanders and Elizabeth Warren—for addressing climate change, reducing global poverty and inequality, and combating transnational corruption and money laundering—are not Quincy's top priorities, even if some of the founders are sympathetic to such an agenda.

"Once we significantly reduce the military budget, we can argue about how to use the money," says Wertheim—that is, whether the savings from a slashed Pentagon budget should be invested in social programs or used to pay for tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

"I would be concerned if there are strings attached to any funding," he adds. While Quincy's founders expect to hire an ideologically diverse staff, that isn't a condition imposed on it by the Kochs; rather, it's intended to make a transpartisan political strategy more effective. Wertheim acknowledges Quincy's narrow focus on the use of military force, but he attributes this to a desire to avoid overextension at the outset, suggesting that if the organization grows big enough, it can eventually expand its mandate to issues like climate change and human rights.

Wertheim and the other founders do take the climate crisis seriously. "Militarism in US foreign policy contributes to climate change," he says, "and impedes the international cooperation that will be needed to address it. Very few institutions confront this issue. The Quincy Institute will." He notes that the US military is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases of all institutions in the world—more than entire countries—and points to his recent *New York Times* op-ed in which he argues that a US-China cold war would be a climate disaster.

In a field that has been traditionally dominated by men, Quincy is searching for a woman to serve as its president. Suzanne DiMaggio, the only woman among the founders, will serve as chair of Quincy's board of directors. A senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and an expert on the Middle East and East Asia, she grew up in a half-Japanese, half-Italian family in New Jersey. "I remember going on a field trip to the United Nations as a girl and feeling very at home there," she says, and she ended up working there during John Bolton's tenure as George W. Bush's UN ambassador. "I don't think there's anyone in the field of international relations that I disagree with more than John Bolton," she adds, a week after it appeared that the Trump administration, following Bolton's advice, might start a war with Iran.

The interim president of Quincy is Andrew Bacevich, a Massachusetts-based retired academic and regular *Nation* contributor who identifies as conservative. "The Quincy Institute is premised on the notion that there is a potential for forging a coalition between people on the right who don't like the direction of US policy and people on the left," he says. "We don't have to agree with one another on issues not related to America's role in the world, but there's plenty of room for agreement with regard to America's role in the world."

Bacevich, a former army colonel who served in Vietnam, admits he was slow to recognize the alignment between parts of the left and the right on foreign policy. "I had a bias against progressives with regard to foreign policy that I hadn't really bothered to examine," he says. "It was only after the Cold War went away and after this pattern of ill-advised behavior on our part began to take shape that I began to realize that the critique that came from the left had far greater merit than I had been willing to concede."

He is referring, above all, to the post-9/11 wars: the catastrophic 2003 invasion of Iraq and the nearly 18-year quagmire in Afghanistan, as well as the smaller, more clandestine operations everywhere from Niger to Yemen. Quincy's founding members say again and again that 9/11 and the Iraq War were turning points in their careers.

Parsi, who was born in Iran and raised in Sweden, moved to Washington in September 2001 to pursue a PhD in international affairs, intending to write a dissertation about Afghanistan. But then, he says, "the week after school started, 9/11 happened and Washington, overnight, was saturated with Afghan experts." So instead, he turned his attention to the regional struggle between Israel and Iran. He says he founded the National Iranian American Council to give Iranian Americans a voice in Washington and eventually used it to support Obama's Iran deal, which he and other founders cite as a model for diplomacy that avoids war.

Clifton, a college freshman at the time of the attacks, became a protégé of Jim Lobe, the Washington bureau chief of Inter Press Service, whose long-running, progressive realist foreign policy website *LobeLog* will soon be renamed and absorbed into Quincy. Under Lobe's tutelage, Clifton came to understand the rush to war as a product of deeply entrenched moneyed interests. And Wertheim, who was in high school in the suburbs of Washington during 9/11, says the Iraq War run-up spurred his academic interest in US foreign policy. This eventually led to a dissertation on the debates over internationalism during World War II that were resolved in favor of the US-led global order that he now wants to see rolled back.

Parsi, Clifton, and Wertheim are all representative of a generation of experts who have built their careers in the long aftermath of 9/11 and for whom witnessing the subsequent failure of

bipartisan national security policy has been formative. Clifton says he has spoken with academics who have watched their anti-interventionist dissertation advisees move to Washington and embrace the Blob's logic or stay in academia and maintain their skepticism, "as if there wasn't a home for those views in Washington." Quincy, he hopes, will be that home.

But no one involved has been more affected by the post-9/11 wars than Bacevich, whose son, First Lt. Andrew J. Bacevich, was killed by a bomb while serving in Iraq in 2007. He was 27 years old. Knowing this, I asked Bacevich if and how his personal tragedy has influenced his views on foreign policy. At first he declined to comment, but then without further prompting, he changed his mind.

"In a small way, I'm trying to honor his sacrifice," he told me. "I personally think the thousands of lives we've lost have been wasted. But if an effort can be made to learn from our mistakes so that we don't repeat them, then perhaps we can say that there was some value to the sacrifices made by our soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. I'll just leave it at that."