

# THE WEEK

## Can this new think tank clean up America's flabby foreign policy?

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The Blob's days may finally be numbered.

"The Blob," of course, is an epithet that critics apply to the gaseous, ideologically stultifying consensus in favor of foreign policy hawkishness that prevails in the leadership of both parties, on Capitol Hill, in the Pentagon and intelligence agencies, at defense contractors, and especially among staffers at most Washington think tanks.

Even if you've never heard the term, you know the bromides that define it: The United States is the indispensable nation. Our role is to lead and defend the "liberal international order," often by using force, which requires us to maintain overwhelming military supremacy over every other country in the world. Without this leadership and supremacy, the world would soon (perhaps instantly) succumb to chaos, as various evildoing bad actors plunder the globe, prey on the weak, and imperil the United States and its allies.

Hence the need to project American power virtually everywhere. This includes the maintenance of hundreds of military bases, the extension of security guarantees into the near abroad of long-established and rising powers on the other side of the world, the prosecuting of an interminable war against vaguely defined "terrorists," and the prodigious issuing of threats to use military force on which we must always follow through in order to maintain our all-important "credibility."

There are lots of bad things about Washington during the Trump era. But one very good thing about it is that this flabby, uncritical way of thinking about the country and the world has at long last begun to be potently challenged. There are several reasons why: There is, to begin with, President Trump, whose transactional and amoral view of international affairs, skepticism about promises of quick and easy wars, and willingness to seek deals with dictators (like North Korea's Kim Jong Un) have pushed the bipartisan foreign policy establishment back on its heels. Suddenly a much wider range of policies seem possible.

Then there is public opinion. Trump never would have won the presidency in the first place if a significant number of voters, disgusted by the crashing disaster of the Iraq War, were not at least open to trying something unorthodox in foreign policy. (The more anti-interventionist candidate has prevailed in all three presidential elections since 2008.)

But when it comes to the culture of Washington, the biggest sign of change yet may be the founding of a new think tank that promises to crack foreign policy debate in the nation's capital

wide open. The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft — named after John Quincy Adams, who famously warned back in the early 19th century about the dangers of Americans going abroad "in search of monsters to destroy" — has received a lot of press over the past week. That's because of its bipartisan pledge to "bring together like-minded progressives and conservatives," and because that intent seems to be confirmed by news that liberal philanthropist George Soros and libertarian donor Charles Koch each contributed half a million dollars to launch it. Early staff announcements reinforce this non-partisan intent, with Andrew J. Bacevich, a conservative critic of American policy in the Middle East, working alongside the Carnegie Endowment's Suzanne DiMaggio, historian Stephen Wertheim of Columbia University, Georgetown University's Trita Parsi, and journalist Eli Clifton of the Nation Institute.

The Quincy Institute won't be the first D.C. think tank to challenge The Blob. Defense Priorities has helped open space for freer discussion and debate about American foreign policy, building on the Cato Institute's own longstanding efforts to do the same. But the Quincy Institute promises to go further, directly challenging the stale consensus that prevails at a long list of organizations, including the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, the Security Studies Group, the Center for Security Policy, the Heritage Foundation, the Hudson Institute, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Brookings Institution, and even the most prestigious international affairs think tank of all, the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City.

The kind of thinking the Quincy Institute hopes to foster was on display in a recent Bacevich op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*. There he praised Trump's reluctance to bomb foreign countries, calling it "a strength, not a weakness." Those who favor bombing point to the importance of American threats for preserving our credibility and standing in the world. Accordingly, in the past 33 years, U.S. bombs have targeted a long list of countries — Libya, Panama, Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Serbia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen. As Bacevich points out, "No nation in recent memory has dropped more pieces of ordnance on more different countries than has the United States. Indeed, no other nation comes close."

Yet over those same years, "America's standing as a global leader has declined."

It turns out in practice that credibility is less a function of using force than of demonstrating prudence. Yet somewhere between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, those charged with formulating U.S. policy decided that the dictates of prudence need not apply to the actions of the world's one-and-only indispensable nation. In recent decades, the abiding feature of American statecraft has been grandiosity, with military activism camouflaging a loss of strategic realism. [Andrew J. Bacevich, the *Los Angeles Times*]

William Ruger, vice president for foreign policy at the Koch-funded Stand Together Foundation and a veteran of the Afghanistan War, made a similar point when I asked him about the aims of the Quincy Institute. The goal is to foster "greater realism and restraint in U.S. foreign policy," as well as to encourage "wider and more vigorous debate about America's proper role in the world," Ruger says. "Given that our country's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War hasn't been working at making us safer or more prosperous, it is heartening to see more and more people open to rethinking America's approach."

As a smart piece on the Quincy Institute in *The National Interest* pointed out, in the near-term this may well involve creating a group of policy experts on which Trump could draw in

attempting to break further from standard approaches to dealing with different regions of the world. After Trump leaves office, it could mean working closely with a Democratic administration to accomplish the same thing. Regardless of the party or the president, the point, says Ruger, will be to "advance an alternative to the failed policies of the past and challenge the establishment who want us to stay on a disastrous autopilot."

What will American foreign policy look like when it isn't run on autopilot? We have no way to know in advance. Though we have reason to expect it could only be a strategic and moral improvement on the misguided policies that have emanated from The Blob since the early 1990s.