

America's Early Wars of Empire

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America's founding myths are often wielded like clubs to batter political rivals, especially today by well-funded Libertarians. One such myth treats the Founders as "[free market](#)" ideologues, while another portrays them as militarily non-aggressive and anti-imperialist, a pleasing but false narrative, says historian Jada Thacker.

By Jada Thacker

Polls show a majority of Americans no longer think the quagmire in Afghanistan is worth their tax dollars or their fellow citizens' lives. This is a welcome indication that, despite the tender ministrations of our corporate news media, Americans are still capable of common sense.

But there is a difference between possessing common sense and believing in a common myth, like the one favored by many Libertarians, Neo-Isolationists and Progressives that the United States deviated from its peaceful, non-imperialistic origins only in recent decades.

For instance, on April 23, *The Washington Examiner* published an opinion piece "Let's Not Broaden the 'War on Despair,'" by Gene Healy, an in-house columnist and a vice president at the Cato Institute. The article took issue with the Navy's new slogan: A Global Force for Good.

According to Healy, "Our Constitution envisions a narrower role for the U.S. military than one that would have it responding to 'trouble alerts' worldwide. U.S. armed forces exist for 'the common defence ... of the United States,' the better to secure the 'blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity,' as the Preamble puts it."

This view resonates with another libertarian essay advocating a return to the Golden Age of American military defense, summarized by the statement: "Changing America's military posture requires that Americans shift their thinking back to defensive American ideals that were current when the republic was born but were subsequently discarded in favor of offensive military ideals that supported America's growth into an empire."

Without a doubt, these sentiments are shared by many Progressives. But Neo-Isolationist views are based upon a popular false assumption – in fact, an overarching historical myth – that the U.S. was founded as a non-aggressive nation that only lately, and tragically, lost its pacifistic way.

In defense of this isolationist myth stands Washington's farewell address, especially his warning about entering into "permanent alliances" and Jefferson's similar caution about "entangling alliances" with foreign nations. These pronouncements are usually recalled to suggest the Founders had never made such alliances and that, ipso facto, they had never perpetrated aggressive, foreign war.

But let's set the historical account straight: America did not *grow into an empire*, and it has rarely used armed force solely "for the common defence" or to better secure the "blessings of liberty" against foreign bogeymen that finagled to steal it away from us. As a matter of fact, the United States of America was an empire on the first day of our internationally recognized existence. And so we have remained.

Acquiescing to American independence at Paris in 1783, the British Empire ceded to the new United States not only the territory then actually belonging to the several states, but also vast reaches of territory outside of the states' borders: the Old Northwest, the trans-Appalachian region, and ill-defined West Florida – much of the latter still claimed by Spain.

When any country claims sovereignty over territory outside of its national boundaries it is, *de facto*, an empire. Americans did make such claims on lands outside their state jurisdictions, and they had been making them for decades before the war for independence. The only substantive thing that changed after the Treaty of Paris was America's political sovereignty, not its imperial designs.

Of course, after gaining independence, we did not immediately send armies forth across the globe in search of foreign conquest and booty. We had no need to do so. We simply did our shopping for other folk's land at home. Consider the facts:

On paper, Americans had carved up the Old Northwest in the Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 even before we had a Constitution, or a national army, title, or even *physical possession* of the territory, for that matter.

George Washington's major "policy initiative" his freshman year in office was to send the first of three military invasions (under Harmar, St. Clair and Wayne, respectively) into the Ohio Territory (Old Northwest). After Americans had signed a non-aggression pact with the Indians, a binding law according to Article VI of the brand new Constitution, we invaded their territory practically before the ink had dried on the treaty. This would be America's first national, undeclared war.

John Adams then presided over our second formally undeclared war – with France in 1798 – during which U.S. armed forces invaded French territory in the Caribbean.

Jefferson prosecuted yet another undeclared war in North Africa, while (illegally) aiding the French in their war with Britain. Zebulon Pike also invaded the Spanish Southwest on Jefferson's watch, managing to get captured in the process.

Madison ultimately led us into our first-ever declared war – unnecessarily and without victory, as it turned out – with Britain, largely in an attempt to steal Canada. He also incorporated into the United States a portion of Spanish West Florida stolen at gunpoint by Anglo freebooters.

In sum, the first four Founding Fathers, acting as commanders-in-chief, planned and conducted nine invasions of foreign sovereign territory (three in Ohio, three in Canada, one in Africa, one in the Spanish Southwest, and one in the French Caribbean).

Collectively, they also precipitated three undeclared (thus unconstitutional) wars, committed a separate egregious illegal breach of neutrality in another, and sanctioned the outright theft of Floridian territory that belonged to an erstwhile ally – not to mention Captain David Porter's renegade "conquest" of the neutral Marquesas Islands during the War of 1812.

In addition, our supposedly peaceable Founders launched at least two armed campaigns against their own civilian population (Fries's Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion). Thus were secured "the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." All these events transpired within 25 years of George Washington's inauguration.

But this was just the beginning of a long, long list of military invasions and interventions. Apparently the U.S. in all its history has barely gone 24 months consecutively without some form of usually [foreign military aggression](#) against somebody, somewhere.

While most sane Americans today would presumably agree to a call for a more truly defensive military establishment than now exists, how many Americans understand their country never had a purely defensive, much less an isolationist, past to which we could now wish to return?

Of course, there is a reason for all the confusion. For the myth of an American pacifistic-isolationist past is embedded in a yet older myth that rhapsodizes over a kind, benign, and largely benevolent outfit now known as Western Civilization. It was, of course, the original New World Order.

So the New World Order, as it applies to what we call "America" today, did not first rear its ugly head when President George H.W. Bush let slip the term in 1988; it first took shape in corporate-owned Virginia under King James I in 1607. European colonialism, New Colonialism, and neocolonialism are continuing manifestations of the real New World Order, which has continued apace until the present moment.

When the same President Bush said, "The American way of life is not negotiable" in 1992, he was simply restating a deeply-rooted Western creed expressed most

conspicuously exactly 500 years earlier when Columbus claimed the New World, with all its people and vast resources, now belonged to a similarly non-negotiable European way of life.

America's European forbears didn't scour the globe in search of religious freedom and liberty or simply to indulge their idle curiosity. They went forth to abscond with the property of others, peaceably when convenient, violently when not. America, as a colony and as a nation, has enthusiastically and consistently followed this Western tradition to the present day.

It now appears the United States may well be the last Western empire to thrust greatness upon itself. For good or ill, we have cast ourselves essentially as the gatekeeper of the international asylum for criminally deranged worldwide military-industrial-financial complexes – of which we are, most unfortunately, a charter member.

Yet without our strategic center of gravity – as imperialistic as it may continue to be – peripheral, nuclear-armed inmates might well wander off into oblivion, dragging the rest of the world with them. Does this mean America is, or ought to be, the Policeman of the World? Hardly.

But nobody – not our allies, our people or even our adversaries – wants to see a globally powerless U.S. What everybody always wants, of course, is security, justice, respect and (except certain bankers and other parasitic corporations) peace. Although supplying the needs of the global community is beyond the scope of our Constitution, it is not beyond our cultural conscience.

Consider the words of Luke 12:48, whose wisdom transcends both nationality and religion: “For unto whomever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

If these words are just, no matter who wrote them, America owes humanity a gargantuan moral obligation in proportion to its vast power – military and otherwise – much of which has been accumulated at the exorbitant expense of others. (Those who disagree with this assessment should attempt to find a Comanche or a Passenger Pigeon to explain it to them.)

Unfortunately, and especially it seems since the end of WWII, the United States has shown – on balance – to be a conspicuous disappointment in realizing its moral obligations to the rest of the world through wise, disinterested and peaceable leadership. (If good examples of our behavior outweigh the bad, then perhaps the State Department, in conjunction with Defense and the CIA, should publish the list.)

Moreover, ours has not been a heroic failure, the result of striving mightily but ultimately falling tragically short of greatness. It has rather been a cynical failure, the result of aggrandizing American power and concentrating our wealth at the expense of others, foreign and domestic, while papering over the global process of military-industrial

exploitation with 18th century Founding Father platitudes. President Eisenhower warned of this in his farewell address.

So not only is it a wee bit late in the game for well-intentioned Americans to lobby for a return to their non-aggressive national roots, it is absurd for any informed American to believe the myth that any such roots exist.

That the United States is “a global force” has been an undeniable, historical fact since before our founding as a nation. Whether we now can be, as the Navy has it, “A Global Force for Good” depends upon whether we can repudiate our imperial, non-negotiable, manifest-destination of Exceptionalism – thereby to fulfill the moral obligations of greatness due “unto whomever much is given.”

But then, who really takes American slogans seriously nowadays?