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Rising generation rejects 'Globocop' role

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Should we get involved in another civil war in the Middle East? Sure! What could possibly go wrong? That seems to be the way the Libya debate's trending here in D.C. Ever generous with other Americans' blood and treasure, Beltway pols and pundits are lining up behind a "no-fly zone" (for starters) and busily decrying President Obama's "weakness."

Rarely is the question asked, is our political class learning? (Probably because the answer's always "no.")

And yet, "the children" may have learned something from coming of age during two seemingly interminable and fruitless wars. That's what's suggested by a new survey from the Brookings Institution: "D.C.'s New Guard: What Does the Next Generation of American Leaders Think?"

Most polling on Millennials -- roughly speaking, the generation born after 1979 -- has focused on the general population. "D.C.'s New Guard" took a different approach, polling more than 1,000 "future leaders" of the sort who attend National Student Leadership Conference programs.

"It's a survey of the type of kids who run for student government and choose to spend their summer vacations working in Washington," the authors explain, "youth who already have the 'Washington bug' and have set themselves towards a career in politics and policy." In other words ... creeps!

If you're the rare bird who favors limited government at home and abroad, you can hardly expect good news from a poll of this generation's Tracy Flicks. After all, aren't these just the sort of model U.N. types who've always wanted to run the world?

Maybe not: The Brookings study contains some surprisingly encouraging findings about the attitudes of our future policy elites.

When given a list of possible foreign policy actions and asked to prioritize them, our precocious politicians put "build a stronger military force to ensure deterrence" near the bottom. Moreover, nearly 58 percent of these "young leaders" agreed with the statement that "the U.S. is too involved in global affairs and should focus on more issues at home."

Only 10 percent "thought that the United States should be more globally proactive." "This

isolationist sentiment," the authors note, contrasts starkly with the views of older Americans, 67 percent of whom favored a more active U.S. role in the world, according to a 2010 poll.

But the kids are right: Our defense budget is nearly half what the rest of the world spends combined and larger than at the height of the Cold War. As my colleague Ben Friedman puts it, we "defend allies that can defend themselves, fight in other people's civil wars in a vain effort to 'fix' their states and burn tax dollars to serve the hubristic notion that U.S. military hegemony is what keeps the world safe."

Changing those policies would hardly constitute "isolationism" -- a particularly odd charge, given that the Brookings survey shows that GenY's No. 1 foreign policy priority is to "strengthen the international economic system."

In an unguarded moment recently, New Hampshire state House Speaker William O'Brien explained why he favored restricting college students' ability to vote in-state: "Voting as a liberal: That's what kids do."

Whatever you think of his methods, O'Brien was right about GenY's tendencies. In a 2009 report, the Center for American Progress called Millennials "the Progressive Generation," backing up the claim with polls showing that GenY is substantially more likely to support universal health care, labor unions and education spending than older voters.

But there's at least one aspect of progressivism that GenY has soured on. That's the crusading Wilsonian notion that it's America's duty to remake the world by force. In this case, at least, they're far wiser than their elders.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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