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For Veterans Day Next Year: Let's Stay Out of Unnecessary Foreign Wars

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Another Veterans Day, another celebration of those who served in America's military. The holiday began as Armistice Day after World War I, marking the end of that horrific conflict. In 1954 Congress renamed the day to honor all of America's military personnel.

Memorial Day typically is more somber, since it commemorates those who died while serving. But Veterans Day reaches far more people, covering all whose lives were touched by military service -- many wounded, some grievously; others mentally scarred by the horrors of combat; large numbers conscripted into other nations' conflicts. Of which there have been far too many.

Veterans Day is a holiday filled with public rhapsodies about the bravery and sacrifice of military personnel. For the vast majority of veterans such accolades are justified. Some pay with their lives. Others are injured, often suffering from mismanaged health care at home. Even away from combat life can be tough, with government controlling one's future. For everyone serving there is arbitrary bureaucracy; they pay as even their families endure constant moves and much more. (As a military brat I simultaneously enjoyed and suffered from a lifestyle bizarre by most Americans' standards.)

Veterans have become an important lobby. The Civil War spawned the Grand Army of the Republic, a fraternal organization drawn from the North's armies. The Veterans of Foreign Wars was established in 1899 by men who served in the Spanish-American War and sought health care and pensions. Membership increased with those who fought to suppress Filipino independence fighters. The VFW dramatically expanded after World War I and especially World War II, during which 16 million Americans served in the military. A series of smaller conflicts added new members in recent years.

Unfortunately, that process continues. Despite the end of the Cold War Americans have been constantly in combat. The Nobel Peace Prize-winning U.S. president expanded and extended the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, intervened in Libya, reentered Iraq, and crashed Syria's civil war. The latter two commitments remain small, but hint of expanded combat to come. Indeed, the

U.S. experience is that no Middle East intervention actually ever ends. Rather, every new war creates unintended consequences, generating conflict and chaos, causing Washington to intervene again.

Of course, every Veterans Day ostentatious political patriots attempt to outdo each other to win votes. Many never got close to a uniform, like Dick "I had other priorities" Cheney, who avoided serving in Vietnam but today plots multiple wars. Those who studiously avoided service even more loudly praise those they send into combat for bravely defending America's security and Americans' freedom.

The U.S. was born in war. Sometimes military action is necessary. But not often. Indeed, virtually never these days. Almost all of the conflicts so often initiated or joined by Washington implicate no important, let alone vital, interests. Most are far more likely to undermine than advance liberty and peace.

In short, military personnel usually do not in fact fight -- and die -- for Americans' freedoms. Rather, veterans are employed to advance whatever policies, preferences, desires, or fantasies dominate the denizens of Washington. Alas, only rarely do those objectives reflect Americans' interests.

To criticize the wars in which veterans fought is not to blame those in uniform. They believe in their nation; they desire to serve those around them. They believe their political leaders. Unfortunately, the latter have routinely abused veterans' trust. Too many officials treat military personnel as gambit pawns in a never-ending global chess game. Of course, the ultimate responsibility lies with the American people, who elect and reelect irresponsible presidents and congressmen, who treat war like any another program, say a pork barrel project for a campaign contributor.

Which of America's recent wars was necessary? The Islamic State is a nasty creature, wreaking havoc in the Sunni territories of Iraq and Syria, but does not threaten the U.S. Indeed, unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS/ISIL avoided terrorism until attacked, preferring to create a geographically bounded state (or "caliphate"). Targeting America or Americans, other than those who were captured traveling to the region, would inevitably have drawn in the U.S., threatening the Islamic State's larger objective. The movement is evil, but challenges virtually every nation in the region; collectively they are capable of defeating ISIS/ISIL, but most have little incentive to act so long as Washington is determined to do the job for them. In fact, the Arab members of the administration's much-celebrated international coalition have largely gone home.

There is no security justification for intervening in Syria's civil war, whether by arming insurgents, establishing no-fly zones, or anything else. The Assad regime is horrid, but many of its opponents are worse. Ousting the regime likely would loose even more vicious forces -- as happened in Libya and Iraq. Most U.S. analysts realize that getting involved in Libya's civil war

was a mistake; today weapons, violence, chaos, refugees, and terrorism radiate from the failed state across North Africa into Europe.

Invading Iraq was one of the worst foreign policy decisions ever: thousands of Americans died, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were killed, trillions of dollars were wasted, Iranian influence was enhanced, and both al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State were spawned. While Washington had little choice but to invade Afghanistan to strike al-Qaeda and punish the Taliban for hosting terrorist training camps, sticking around for 14 years attempting to create a liberal Western democracy in Central Asia proved a fool's errand.

Wars against the Bosnians Serbs and Yugoslavia were equally senseless. The Balkans matters to Europe, not America. The West allowed every ethnic group to break away from Serb-dominated territories, but opposed allowing Serbs to break away from any ethnic Albanian-, Bosnian-, or Croatian-dominated territory. The U.S. ignored atrocities and terrorism against Serbs in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo, and mass ethnic cleansing in Croatia and Kosovo. The latter turned into a gangster state while Bosnia remains an artificial, unstable nation.

Vietnam was a foolish diversion. The only domino to fall was Cambodia, and Vietnam soon ousted the brutal Khmer Rouge. Not much later Vietnam -- united and communist -- turned to the U.S. against China. Fourteen years after South Vietnam's collapse the Berlin Wall had fallen. For what did hundreds of thousands of Americans serve and tens of thousands die?

The Korean War can be defended as an aspect of the Cold War, after the U.S. divided the Korean peninsula with the Soviet Union, helping set the conditions for war. World War II was caused by others, as Japan attacked and Germany declared war on the U.S. But this conflict grew out of World War I, a foolish imperial slugfest. America's involvement in that horrid human charnel house was even dumber than the invasion of Iraq. Washington destroyed the possibility of a negotiated peace and allowed imposition of the irresponsible Versailles Treaty. The "peace" unleashed communism, fascism, and Nazism, and left a miasma of unfinished business, out of which developed World War II.

The Spanish-American War, the country's first overseas conflict, was little better. Washington attacked decrepit Spain, seizing Cuba and Philippines. In the latter Americans conducted a vicious three-year campaign to prevent the archipelago's independence. About 200,000 Filipinos died in a conflict far deadlier than the much criticized Spanish fight against Cuban insurgents which helped spark America's attack on Spain.

In short, most of America's foreign wars were stupid, dumb, and unnecessary, conflicts which U.S. political leaders could and should have avoided. The one with the greatest justification for entering, World War II, was a logical, even inevitable outgrowth of the one which least warranted America's involvement, World War I. As a result, many of America's veterans have served, and a large number have died, unnecessarily, even in vain. The fault, of course, lies with others -- U.S. policymakers, backed by the people who elected them.

The best way for Americans to celebrate Veterans Day and honor America's veterans would be to pledge to make the battle against the Islamic State America's last foreign war. Of course, other nations could take that decision away from Washington by attacking America. But the last time the U.S. was struck was 2001. Before that was 1941. And before that was 1812. No state today -- China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, or any other -- has either the ability or desire to battle America. Very likely war will remain a choice rather than necessity for Washington, a choice that should not be made in any likely circumstance.

America's veterans deserve respect and honor. But not the conflicts in which they served. U.S. policymakers should make foreign wars a thing of the past, choosing peace whenever possible. Then Americans really could celebrate future Veterans Days.

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