

Paying for the Neocon Moment: Sacrificing Lives, Liberty, and Wealth for Nothing

By Doug Bandow
November 24, 2014

With President Barack Obama further tarnishing his Nobel Peace Prize by starting yet another Middle Eastern war, exuberant Neoconservatives claim their moment has arrived. And that was before Chuck Hagel, long the Neocon *bête noire*, was tossed underfoot. In fact, their moment has arrived, though not in the way they believe. The spectacle of Washington using the military in Iraq to destroy equipment provided by Washington in its last Iraq war illustrates the absurdity of the Neocons' claim that war-mongering and nation-building serve America's interests.

In 2001 President George W. Bush initiated what was supposed to be The Neocon Moment, projecting a swaggering global presence in which the U.S. would bomb, invade, occupy, and otherwise intervene whenever and for whatever reason it chose. Autocrats would flee, candies would be tossed, enemies would be defeated, flowers would bloom, allies would comply, cakewalks would be held, democrats would flourish, and the lion would lie down with the lamb.

Alas, administration policy wrecked Iraq. Although President Bush never repudiated what he'd done, he appeared to lose his taste for war. Vice President Dick Cheney became a forlorn figure, pining for the old Bush. Washington still attempted to micro-manage the globe, but adopted a gentler tone and refrained from invading more countries.

Candidate Obama ran against the Bush presidency, but U.S. foreign policy little changed. President Obama followed his predecessor's exit plan from Iraq, pursued the Bush program in Afghanistan with additional troops, promised even greater support to populous and prosperous Asian and European allies, launched deadly drone campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen, increased military spending throughout his first term, promoted democracy in the Arab world (with similar results), and started two new wars. Rather like the chastened Bush, President Obama used a friendlier tone and seemed reluctant even when he was starting a war. But no one could mistake the latter as a peacenik libertarian.

Except, apparently, for the Neocons. Horrified by the isolationist backwater they believed America became under Obama, they now proclaim The Neocon Moment. Explained Matthew Continetti, "monsters [have been] brought forth by American retreat," and "the threat of those monsters requires unilateral deadly force wherever necessary to kill our enemies and deter our foes."

Retreat?

Admittedly, Obama could have done more from a Neoconservative standpoint. Bombing raids over Tehran and Damascus would have gladdened the hearts of ivory tower generalissimos everywhere. Deploying troops against the Russians in Ukraine would have been more fun than a collegiate game of Risk. Sending the 7th Fleet to safeguard Japan's claim to the Senkakus would have created an exciting confrontation with China. Threatening Beijing over Hong Kong's protests would have satisfied fans of sanctimonious chest-thumping.

Yet even Bush might not have obliged in these cases. He didn't choose war with Iran, refused to challenge Moscow in its conflict with Georgia, and adopted a cooperative attitude toward Beijing. His end-of-term caution looked a lot like Obama's approach today.

In fact, "The Neocon Moment" is distinguished by its failure. As evidence of the need for a return to swaggering interventionism Continetti offers a parade of horrors either created by Washington or well beyond its control. While we all know what John McCain & Co. would do in response to Continetti's examples—bomb someone, anyone!—doing so would solve nothing.

There's the Islamic State, which exists only because of the misguided Bush invasion of Iraq. Like modern liberals at home, neoconservatives use the ill consequences of their earlier wars to justify new wars. This one, argue Neoconservatives, justifies another round for ground troops.

There's also Ukraine, a testament to what happens when one encourages one's allies to be helpless dependents while facing an adversary with a far greater interest in the outcome of any confrontation. There are al-Qaeda affiliates in several countries, which arose in response to promiscuous U.S. meddling abroad and persisted in the midst of multiple wars even while under attack by Special Forces, drones, and more.

There's Hamas, now contained by Israel, which won an election demanded by the Bush administration. There's Iran, in which Islamists overthrew a U.S.-supported dictator who took power in a U.S.-supported coup. There's the Taliban, which survived more than a dozen years of Washington's efforts at nation-building. There's China, in which the Communist Party demonstrated its determination to preserve power during the first Bush administration.

Neocons have no answer to any of these. They imagine a world of immaculate intervention, in which foreigners welcome being killed and never strike back. Washington should just bomb, invade, and occupy, never mind the enemies created or hostilities engendered. If there is blowback, the U.S. should double down and bomb, invade, and occupy some more.

In fact, terrorism is a common political tool, long used by the weak against the strong. Two Russian Czars and an Austro-Hungarian Arch-Duke were felled in terrorist assaults. India, Sri Lanka, Israel, Russia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Spain, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and other states all suffered from terrorism. America was targeted for its actions, not its freedoms. Understanding consequences is to explain, not justify. The simple fact is the more Washington attempts to micro-manage the globe, the more likely it is to be attacked.

Neocons also imagine a world in which America automatically deters and only America deters. If the U.S. president raises his voice foreign autocrats will cringe. If he indicates his willingness to use military force Russia will retreat from Georgia and Ukraine. If his officials make a few appropriate threats China will abandon its claims to Taiwan and Pacific territories, and perhaps even Hong Kong. If American leaders offer the right incantations Iran and North Korea will abandon their nuke programs. No one would dare challenge Washington, at least if it exercises “leadership.”

In fact, countries with the most at stake will risk and spend more than their adversaries, as the U.S. demonstrated during the Cold War in Latin America. Russia and China are no different. Moreover, they are no less adept at playing the game of deterrence. Does the U.S. have anything at stake in Ukraine and the Senkakus which warrants the risk of war? Is Washington prepared to spend what is necessary to overcome Russian and Chinese deterrent capabilities? The answer is no in both cases.

Neocons imagine America is strongest when it keeps its allies dependent and weak. Of course, Washington wants them all to do more militarily, but only under its direction. Allies are not to speak unless spoken to, but always should feel reassured that America will do whatever is necessary to protect them. Thus, the U.S. must dominate whenever it is involved, which is always.

Yet governments, no less than individuals, respond to incentives. So long as Washington promises to defend allied states, irrespective of how prosperous or populous (for instance, South Korea enjoys a 40-1 economic and 2-1 population edge over North Korea), it discourages them from doing more on their own behalf. Indeed, even during the Cold War America’s Asian and European dependents routinely underinvested in defense and subsidized their adversaries while being shielded by the U.S. military. It is even worse today. Why should America be expected to risk Los Angeles to protect Seoul or Tokyo, Tallinn or Warsaw?

One doesn’t have to look far to see the wreckage left by today’s interventionist consensus, generally advanced by Neocons, nationalist hawks, and liberal interventionists. Washington has attempted to fix the Middle East and Central Asia for decades. The result? War, instability, autocracy, brutality, collapse. Which Neocon triumph is falling apart more spectacularly—Iraq, Libya, or Yemen? As the administration was upping its support for “moderate” Syrian rebels, an internal CIA study revealed that prior efforts to arm insurgents “had a minimal impact on the long-term outcome of a conflict.” The most successful program, in Afghanistan, resulted in bloody terrorist blowback against America on 9/11. U.S. officials consistently have demonstrated the reverse Midas touch, leaving Washington widely despised and American forces constantly at war responding to the unintended consequences of the previous military intervention.

The Balkans has turned out little better, with nationalist divisions still evident two decades after Washington imposed an artificial political settlement. Europe represents the globe’s greatest aggregation of economic power, but is not inclined to defend itself, preferring instead to rely on the U.S. while carping when Washington acts without the continent’s approval. European countries, including Germany, so long defended by American troops, refuse to place their own forces along Eastern Europe’s border with Russia. The Europeans were unwilling to act

forcefully in Ukraine, Georgia, or even the Balkans. Determined for war in Libya, the same countries lacked enough missiles to take on Moammar Qaddafi's military.

Every year the Vietnam War looks ever more foolish, as Hanoi moves toward America out of fear of China. Only now is Japan finally emerging from hiding behind the U.S.-imposed "peace constitution" to consider a more active military role. South Korea continues to subsidize the North even as American troops guarantee the former's security. The Philippines hopes Washington will make up for Manila's lack of a serious military in any confrontation with Beijing. With China's future at stake, Washington is pushing that nation and Russia together.

There are many reasons to be skeptical of "The Libertarian Moment" advanced by some. But not because libertarian policies have failed. Few have been tried domestically. None are evident in America's international relations. In fact, politicians of all partisan stripes naturally resist libertarian thinking. Almost all government officials like to use power. Especially overseas.

The world today is an unruly mess. But Neocons are more responsible than anyone else for America being stuck in the chaos. Embarrassed at the havoc they have wreaked, they blame President Obama for every problem big and small. However, he is a worthy successor to the Neocon-friendly Bush. If there's anyone who can't be blamed for the status quo, it is libertarians.

We are living in The Neocon Moment, a testament to the foolishness and arrogance of those who believe themselves to be engineers of peoples, societies, and nations. Yet Washington officials have yet to tire of America's permanent state of war. Only when the American people insist that politicians make peace, not war, will The Libertarian Moment finally arrive.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Reagan.