

The National Interest *online*

Lobbyists

by Doug Bandow

03.08.2010

U.S. foreign policy matters, especially to other countries. Just ask the citizens of nations invaded or bombed by Washington, or suffering under American sanctions, or simply annoyed by our tendency to hector, pester and insist regarding all manner of issues, big and small.

Today Washington is deeply involved in a war in Afghanistan and ongoing civil strife in Iraq. The United States continues to threaten Iran with military action. Washington has promiscuously issued security guarantees throughout Asia and Europe. American bases and troops circle the globe; American ships and aircraft dominate the oceans and atmosphere. The price for this presence is high: at a time of budget crisis, the United States spends more, adjusted for inflation, on the military than at any point since World War II and accounts for nearly half the globe's military spending.

So what issue is roiling Congress today? Whether the Ottoman Empire committed genocide against its Armenian subjects during World War I. It is a bizarre question. And it is being asked only because foreign policy has become yet another battlefield for influential interest groups. Americans now are routinely held hostage by ethnic groups determined to use the U.S. government to aid their families, friends, and co-ethnics abroad. Policy toward Cuba, Eastern Europe, Haiti, Israel, Turkey and more has been deformed by domestic politics.

Consider the Armenian genocide resolution, approved by one-vote margin by the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Why are American congressmen judging the character of mass killings which occurred nearly a century ago halfway around the world?

The nation accused of committing genocide no longer exists. Every government official who plotted the murders and almost certainly every soldier or civilian who committed a murder is dead. Whether or not the actions technically constituted "genocide" does not affect the obvious brutality and inhumanity of the killings.

And the pronouncement of Congress will not matter. American legislators can neither make a genocide where none existed nor eliminate one that did occur. No historian will care one whit how a majority of American lawmakers opine.

Indeed, if U.S. policy makers are entitled to judge the Ottoman Empire, why stop there? Perhaps Congress should charge Great Britain with committing genocide through the Irish potato famine. Even more bloody was London's partition of its Indian colony.

Certainly much should be said about the casualties caused when Attila the Hun and his hordes ravaged Eurasia. Rome could be charged with genocide in the destruction of Carthage; even the Nazis did not sow with salt the lands which they conquered. And who can forget the death, destruction and rapine set off by the French Revolution continuing on through the Napoleonic Wars?

Obviously, the resolution on genocide against Armenians has nothing to do with genocide against Armenians. Instead, the measure has everything to do with criticizing Turkey. Members of the 80,000 member Armenian-American community are in the lead, aided by many Greek-Americans who have their own reasons for disliking Ankara (the invasion and occupation of Cyprus, mistreatment of the Orthodox Church in Turkey, threats of war against Greece over border issues,

and more). Turkish-Americans, backed by the Turkish government, are on the other side.

There are plenty of genuine policy issues at stake with Turkey. Whether American policy makers really should view it as a security bulwark for the United States increasingly is in doubt. Turkish policy towards Cyprus and the Kurds in particular raise important issues for Washington. None of these have anything to do with Armenian genocide, however. Getting Congress to vote on this “issue” won’t encourage sensible policy formation elsewhere.

Another ethnic immigrant group similarly holds U.S. policy towards Cuba hostage. It is easy to understand the anger within Florida’s large Cuban-American community toward the prolonged Castro dictatorship. That anger, however, offers no justification for the continuing trade embargo against Cuba.

Sanctions made sense during the Cold War; at least one could imagine war between the United States and Soviet Union, with Cuba as an advanced base for Moscow. But the Cold War is over and the embargo has manifestly failed. Today Fidel Castro & Co., apparently as secure in power as ever, is facing its tenth American president. All Washington has managed to do is turn the petty dictator of a small, impoverished island penal colony into a celebrated symbol of international resistance to Yanqui imperialism—while offering him an excuse for his own manifest economic failures.

America’s large Eastern European ethnic diaspora long has played a role in U.S. policy towards that region. Much of its work was laudable: reminding the world of the brutality of Soviet rule in the “Captive Nations.”

However, once the Berlin Wall fell, the Warsaw Pact dissolved and the Soviet Union disintegrated, there was no longer any need for NATO, or at least a U.S.-dominated NATO. Yet Eastern Europeans applied their considerable political clout towards speedily expanding the alliance eastward to nations never thought to be important let alone critical for American security.

The result was to make conflict between Moscow and Washington more likely, hardly a good result from America’s standpoint. While the United States has no interest to justify war with nuclear-armed Russia over the status the newly independent Eastern European states, their conviction that Washington stands behind them encourages them to behave more provocatively. Nowhere was that more evident than when NATO-aspirant Georgia fired the first shot in a war with Moscow over disputed territories seeking independence. U.S. policy makers should offer their thanks that Germany and other European states blocked Tbilisi’s path to NATO membership.

Similarly foolish has been pressure on Washington to intervene openly in Ukrainian politics. Ukrainian-Americans tended to back the so-called Orange Revolution and 2004 election triumph of Viktor Yushchenko; their pressure encouraged the U.S. government to do likewise. Admittedly, Yushchenko seemed like the better choice from America’s standpoint. But his opponent, Viktor Yanukovich, appeared committed to a pragmatic course, even if one tilted slightly towards Moscow. And since America had prospered even when Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, such a tilt should have been of little policy concern in Washington.

The result of U.S. policy has not been pretty. Yushchenko managed five years of divisive, petty, and at times even crackpot, incompetence, and was turned out of office in December after receiving less than six percent of the vote. Yanukovich won the run-off and now Uncle Sam has nothing to show for his efforts, other than ample egg on his red face.

Ethnic Americans also helped craft a Balkan policy which can only be described as the Serbs always lose. Many ethnic Croatians supported Croatia’s brutal ethnic cleansing of the minority Serb population in the Krajina. Washington trained the Croat military and refused to call ethnic cleansing by its name when hundreds of thousands of Serbs were the victims.

Similarly, the Albanian-American lobby actively pushed for U.S. intervention in what amounted to a civil war in Kosovo. That territory’s status barely concerned Europe and was irrelevant to America.

True, the ruling Serbs often acted as thugs—just like other governments in similar circumstances, including most recently NATO member Turkey in Kurdistan. Once America and its allies defenestrated the Serb authorities, the newly ascendant ethnic Albanians conducted their own campaign of ethnic cleansing against Serbs, gypsies and others. Now Washington and Brussels have a potentially permanent dependent, economically poor and politically unstable nation on their hands, one denied recognition by most countries and UN membership by a Russian Security Council veto.

Even Haiti has suffered from the tyranny of interest group politics. The target of multiple military interventions by the United States, this island nation has suffered through brutal authoritarianism and violent instability, while remaining mired in poverty. Although there was no reason to expect a better result from yet another American invasion, in 1994 the Clinton administration forcibly restored to power Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a violent demagogue. A number of influential African-Americans, including members of the Congressional Black Caucus, pushed the president to act. A decade later the Bush administration sent in troops to force the very same Aristide into exile. Even before the recent earthquake, Haiti remained perhaps the most tragic spot in the Western Hemisphere.

Then there is Israel. There's much to say for the democratic state which, despite its flaws, takes human rights more seriously than does its authoritarian neighbors. Nevertheless, as a regional military superpower, Israel doesn't need American support. And Israel's continued military rule over millions of Palestinians creates anger against not just Israel but also Israel's most steadfast and important foreign patron, the United States.

There would always be good reasons for both nations to cooperate on issues of mutual interest. However, under normal circumstances Washington would not generously subsidize and routinely endorse a nation which is, in practice today, a security negative. But circumstances are not normal, given the domestic backing of Israel by many Jews and (particularly evangelical) Christians. Their rationales are different—many of the latter believe that Jews must be gathered together in Israel and killed in conflict before Jesus Christ can return—but their policy prescriptions are similar. The result is good for Israel, but not the United States.

There's nothing wrong with interested groups lobbying on foreign as well as domestic affairs. But policy makers should be skeptical of self-serving arguments and citizens should demand that legislators put America's interest first. This is not to vilify advocates as suffering from a dual loyalty, but to highlight that foreign-policy advocates—no less than their domestic counterparts—are often willing to sacrifice the national and public interest for narrower parochial concerns. Consider farm subsidies, corporate welfare, political pork, Wall Street bailouts and much more. Unfortunately, with international issues the consequences of special interest policy-making run far beyond America's shores.

Most Americans care little about the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. However, foreign policy often has expensive and even deadly results at home. It is time for American citizens to demand that policy makers treat matters of war and peace as something more than just another battle among special interests.

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The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center
1615 L Street, Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
www.nixoncenter.org