

## **A Too Big Nation Becomes A Too Ambitious Empire**

Perhaps the only way Americans can become a better people is to become a less powerful people.

Doug Bandow

October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021

As American political divisions have widened, talk of secession has increased. Indeed, “civil war” trended on Twitter after Donald Trump’s weekend Iowa rally.

Still, the idea remains farfetched. Few people really imagine tearing apart a nation now more than 230 years old. And no government leaders of note are talking disunion, unlike the lead up to the Civil War. There were years of debate about secession, and manifold threats of secession, before America split apart after Abraham Lincoln’s election.

Moreover, the greatest divisions today are within, not between, states. Upstate New York and New York City. Fresno and San Francisco in California. Rural midwestern states and college towns within. Virginia’s northern suburbs and most everywhere else in Old Dominion. The overall state majority doesn’t much matter. Many states contain very sharp divisions, so simple geographic secession would leave the same bitter disputes, only broken into smaller jurisdictions.

America’s original secession crisis had a similar though more limited problem. Kentucky and Missouri suffered through their own extraordinarily bitter civil wars. Appalachia yielded sizable unionist territories in the Confederate states of Tennessee, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia. In the latter, opponents of national secession split off into West Virginia and joined the Union. Still, the two competing regions were much more uniform than today.

The better argument for secession is size. America is too big. Far too big. The U.S. became a globe-spanning power only after becoming a continent-spanning nation. And once Washington started exercising its abnormal influence abroad, its propensity to intervene only increased.

Even today, amid economic and political crises at home and after suffering through a gaggle of failed wars abroad, Washington’s governing elite is unable to restrain itself. After causing carnage, death, and disaster in a half dozen countries over the last two decades, the Blob, as the

foreign policy governing elite has been called, is desperately threatening more wars, including a big one, indeed, the biggest, against China.

However, these warrior wannabes insist, there is nothing to worry about. In the case of Beijing, it either will give way when it realizes that we are serious, or we will kick a little you know what. Trust the Blob. After all, it did so well in Iraq. And Afghanistan.

It sounds like great fun, as long as you won't be doing any of the fighting or catching any bullets, bombs, or missiles when they start flying. However, members of the Blob won't be in harm's way and care little about what happens to those the hotelier Leona Helmsley infamously referred to as "little people," who always pay the highest price of conflict.

There are many reasons why the U.S. is the most militaristic country today, going to war far more often than any one or group of other nations—not even the Soviet Union or People's Republic of China racked up so many interventions in so little time. These days ideology drives neoconservative and liberal interventionists. A sense of mission, the notion of American Exceptionalism, long motivated advocates of an activist foreign policy in the past; a modern sense of "manifest destiny" still infuses Washington. The desire for material gain, including access to resources, protection of trade, and support for allies also were common on both left and right. Echoes of these considerations are heard in talk of protecting Mideast oil and trade elsewhere.

Yet underlying almost all of America's wars after the colonists won independence from Great Britain was the new republic's growing size and power. As the U.S. expanded, its foreign policy changed accordingly—and not for the better.

By mid-century President James Knox Polk's desire for California caused him to foment an aggressive war of conquest against Mexico. A still young America grabbed half of that country. By the end of the century the U.S. had moved to the first rank of nations and joined the rest in "saltwater imperialism," seizing the Philippines from Spain and killing a couple hundred thousand Filipinos for resisting their new imperial rulers. As many of the soldiers who did the fighting and killing noted, it was the America's brutal "Indian wars" all over again, only in the Pacific.

Another couple decades brought World War I, in which the vainglorious Woodrow Wilson attempted to use ever-growing U.S. military power to reorder the globe, with disastrous consequences. A smaller, more modest America would not have elected Wilson, filled with hubris and sanctimony, nor allowed him to force a decisive treaty, rather than compromise peace, on Europe, and then botch the job of designing a peaceful future. After which his flawed handiwork gave us the even more destructive World War II.

Washington's eventual role as a superpower proved useful in confronting its counterpart, the Soviet Union, during the Cold War. But the latter's dissolution ended that conflict. Reborn as the Russian Federation, Moscow is a serious regional power with global influence rather than global ambitions. Russia's legions no longer range the world far and wide nor wreak the sort of death

and destruction which has become the norm for America in such calamitous conflicts as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.

The point bears repeating. Vladimir Putin is a corrupt dictator willing to assert claimed Russian interests at gunpoint. However, the harms abroad that he has so far caused don't come close to the neocon/liberal interventionist toll over the last two decades: hundreds of thousands dead, more hundreds of thousands wounded, millions displaced, entire societies ravaged. And the culprits, both political and military, uniformly promoted rather than disciplined, living large even after causing so much harm to so many. Are Russia's economic oligarchs any worse than Washington's policy plutocrats?

Americans have tired of endless wars, proving to be cautious internationalists, supporting involvement in the world but opposing the new imperialism. Unfortunately, the Blob continues with its mission of fighting endless wars with other people's money and lives while complaining when those doing the paying and fighting speak of endless wars.

Endless wars are possible first because the U.S. is too strong. America's extraordinary power enables social engineers who can't stand the thought of not taking advantage of the country's status to remake the world. They have stepped into Wilson's role, with his odious sense of moral superiority (though, thankfully, without his virulent racism). As long as the U.S. deploys endless weapons, Wilson's successors will create a large, expeditionary military to bomb, invade, and occupy nations far and wide.

Second, America is too wealthy. Although Washington has left country after country in smoking rubble, the U.S. has little felt the result. Americans continue to live reasonably prosperous and secure lives. Uncle Sam's missteps would be devastating if carried out by the small societies upon which he practices social engineering. For instance, the Watson Center at Brown University estimated the cost of the 9/11 wars to be roughly \$8 trillion. Even the endless warriors admit that this is real money, but many Americans have barely noticed. If any other country had botched its military and foreign policies for so long, it would have felt the consequences. The U.S. is rich enough that it can squander money prodigiously and remain reasonably prosperous. Like the spoiled child with a trust fund, Uncle Sam is insulated from the harm that he causes and is never held accountable.

Finally, the U.S. is too secure. With oceans east and west and pacific neighbors north and south, Washington feels free to roam the world playing a game of thrones afar whenever the impulse strikes. Two centuries ago John Quincy Adams warned Americans against going abroad "in search of monsters to destroy." That was a matter of necessity as well as philosophy. The American republic was still young and shared the continent with indigenous warrior peoples and European powers. Foreign adventures were imprudent at best. However, overspreading the continent, destroying native opposition, and eliminating the European presence left Washington free to wreak havoc elsewhere. The U.S. hasn't had to garrison its own borders since the mid-1800s, an advantage over every other major power. Indeed, America demonstrated the impact of long ignoring domestic defense when it created the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11.

The best solution to Washington's arrogant war making would be to adopt a more restrained, even humble, foreign policy, as candidate George W. Bush advocated. However, if self-restraint has permanently disappeared from the Blob's character, more radical solutions might be necessary—such as the voluntary dissolution of the inadvertent behemoth, the United States of America. Not because Americans, red and blue, disagree on what they want the country to be. Such arguments have been going on from the new republic's creation.

Tragically, however, America's enormous wealth and power are now undermining its moral understanding and sense of restraint. It would be an enormous irony if the only way we can become a better people is to become a less powerful people.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire*.*