



## George Washington Tried To Warn Americans About Foreign Policy Today

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July 13, 2020

Ben Rhodes, Barack Obama's deputy national security adviser, unkindly characterized the foreign policy establishment in Washington, D.C., as "the Blob." Although policymakers sometimes disagree on peripheral subjects, membership requires an absolute commitment to U.S. "leadership," which means a determination to micro-manage the world.

Reliance on persuasion is not enough. Vital is the willingness to bomb, invade, and, if necessary, occupy other nations to impose the Blob's dictates on other peoples. If foreigners die, as they often do, remember the saying about eggs and omelets oft repeated by communism's apologists. "Stuff happens" with the best-intentioned policies.

One might be inclined to forgive Blob members if their misguided activism actually benefited the American people. However, all too often the Blob's policies instead aid other governments and interests. Washington is overrun by the representatives of and lobbyists for other nations, which constantly seek to take control of US policy for their own advantage. The result are foreign interventions in which Americans do the paying and, all too often, the dying for others.

The problem is primarily one of power. Other governments don't spend a lot of time attempting to take over Montenegro's foreign policy because, well, who cares? Exactly what would you do after taking over Fiji's foreign ministry other than enjoy a permanent vacation? Seize control of international relations in Barbados and you might gain a great tax shelter.

Subvert American democracy and manipulate US foreign policy, and you can loot America's treasury, turn the US military into your personal bodyguard, and gain Washington's support for reckless war-mongering. And given the natural inclination of key American policymakers to intervene promiscuously abroad for the most frivolous reasons, it's surprisingly easy for foreign interests to convince Uncle Sam that their causes are somehow "vital" and therefore require America's attention. Indeed, it is usually easier to persuade Americans than foreign peoples in their home countries to back one or another international misadventure.

The culprits are not just autocratic regimes. Friendly democratic governments are equally ready to conspiratorially whisper in Uncle Sam's ear. Even nominally classical liberal officials, who believe in limiting their own governments, argue that Americans are obligated to sacrifice wealth and life for everyone else. The mantra seems to be liberty, prosperity, and peace for all – except

those living in the superpower tasked by heaven with protecting everyone else's liberty, prosperity, and peace.

Although the problem has burgeoned in modern times, it is not new. Two centuries ago fans of Greek independence wanted Americans to challenge the Ottoman Empire, a fantastic bit of foolishness. Exactly how to effect an international Balkans rescue was not clear, since the president then commanded no aircraft carriers, air wings, or nuclear-tipped missiles. Still, the issue divided Americans and influenced John Quincy Adams' famous 1821 Independence Day address.

Warned Adams:

*"Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom."*

*"The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.... [America's] glory is not dominion, but liberty. Her march is the march of the mind. She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is, Freedom, Independence, Peace. This has been her Declaration: this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice."*

Powerful words, yet Adams was merely following in the footsteps of another great American, George Washington. Obviously, the latter was flawed as a person, general, and president. Nevertheless, his willingness to set a critical precedent by walking away from power left an extraordinary legacy. As did his insistence that the Constitution tasked Congress with deciding when America would go to war. And his warning against turning US policy over to foreign influences.

Concern over obsequious subservience to other governments and interests pervaded his famous 1796 Farewell Address. Applied today, his message indicts most of the policy currently made in the city ironically named after him. He would be appalled by what presidents and Congresses today do, supposedly for America.

Obviously, the US was very different 224 years ago. The new country was fragile, sharing the Western hemisphere with its old colonial master, which still ruled Canada and much of the Caribbean, as well as Spain and France. When later dragged into the maritime fringes of the Napoleonic wars the US could huff and puff but do no more than inconvenience France and Britain. The vastness of the American continent, not overweening national power, again frustrated London when it sought to subjugate its former colonists.

Indeed, when George Washington spoke the disparate states were not yet firmly knit into a nation. Only after the Civil War, when the national government waged four years of brutal combat, which ravaged much of the country and killed upwards of 750,000 people in the name of

"union," did people uniformly say the United States "is" rather than "are." However, the transformation was much more than rhetorical. The federal system that originally emerged in the name of individual liberty spawned a high tax centralized government that employed one of the world's largest militaries to kill on a mass scale to enforce the regime's dictates. The modern American "republic" was born. It acted overseas only inconsistently until World War II, after which imperial America was a constant, adding resonance to George Washington's message.

Today Washington, D.C.'s elites have almost uniformly decided that Russia is an enemy, irrespective of American behavior that contributed to Moscow's hostility. And that Ukraine, a country never important for American security, is a de facto military ally, appropriately armed by the US for combat against a nuclear-armed rival. A reelection-minded president seems determined to turn China into a new Cold War adversary, an enemy for all things perhaps for all time. America remains ever entangled in the Middle East, with successive administrations in permanent thrall of Israel and Saudi Arabia, allowing foreign leaders to set US Mideast policy. Indeed, both states have avidly pressed the administration to make their enemy, Iran, America's enemy. The resulting fixation caused the Trump administration to launch economic war against the rest of the world to essentially prevent everyone on earth from having any commercial dealing of any kind with anyone in Tehran.

Under Democrats and Republicans alike the federal government views nations that resist its dictates as adversaries at best, appropriate targets of criticism, always, sanctions, often, and even bombs and invasions, occasionally. No wonder foreign governments lobby hard to be designated as allies, partners, and special relationships. Many of these ties have become essentially permanent, unshakeable even when supposed friends act like enemies and supposed enemies are incapable of hurting America. US foreign policy increasingly has been captured and manipulated for the benefit of other governments and interests.

George Washington recognized the problem even in his day, after revolutionary France sought to win America's support against Great Britain. He warned: "nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated. The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest."

Is there a better description of US foreign policy today? Even when a favored nation is clearly, ostentatiously, murderously on the wrong side – consider Saudi Arabia's unprovoked aggression against Yemen – many American policymakers refuse to allow a single word of criticism to escape their lips. The US has indeed become "a slave," as George Washington warned.

The consequences for the US and the world are highly negative. He observed that "likewise, a passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification."

This is an almost perfect description of the current US approach. American colonists revolted against what they believed had become ever more "foreign" control, yet the US backs Israel's occupation and mistreatment of millions of Palestinians. American policymakers parade the

globe spouting the rhetoric of freedom yet subsidize Egypt as it imprisons tens of thousands and oppresses millions of people. Washington decries Chinese aggressiveness, yet provides planes, munitions, and intelligence to aid Riyadh in the slaughter of Yemeni civilians and destruction of Yemeni homes, businesses, and hospitals. In such cases, policymakers have betrayed America "into a participation in the quarrels and wars ... without adequate inducement or justification."

On the other side are the targets of "inveterate antipathies." This also characterizes US Middle East policy. So hated are Iran and Syria that Washington, DC is making every effort to destroy their economies, ruin their people's livelihoods, wreck their hospitals, and starve their population. The respective governments are bad, to be sure, but do not threaten the US. Yet, as the nation's first president explained to Americans, "Antipathy in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable, when accidental or trifling occasions of dispute occur. Hence, frequent collisions, obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests. The nation, prompted by ill-will and resentment, sometimes impels to war the government, contrary to the best calculations of policy."

Consider how close the US has come to foolish, unnecessary wars against both nations. There were manifold demands that the US enter the Syrian civil war, in which Americans have no stake. Short of combat the Obama administration indirectly aided the local affiliate of al-Qaeda, the terrorist group which staged 9/11 and supposedly was America's enemy. Moreover, there was constant pressure on America to attack Iran, targeted by the US since 1953, when the CIA helped replace Tehran's democracy with a brutal tyrant, whose rule was highlighted by corruption, torture, and a nuclear program – which then was taken over by Iran's Islamic revolutionaries, to America's horror.

Read George Washington and you would think he had gained a supernatural glimpse into today's policy debates. He worried about the result when the national government "adopts through passion what reason would reject; at other times it makes the animosity of the nation subservient to projects of hostility instigated by pride, ambition, and other sinister and pernicious motives. The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations has been the victim."

What better describes US policy toward China and Russia? To be sure, these are nasty regimes. Yet that has rarely bothered Uncle Sam's relations with other states. Saudi Arabia, a corrupt and totalitarian theocracy, has been sheltered, protected, and reassured by the US even after invading its poor neighbor. Among Washington's other best friends: Bahrain, Turkey, Egypt, and United Arab Emirates, tyrannies all.

The US now is pushing toward a Cold War redux with Russia, after successive administrations treated Moscow as if it was of no account, lying about plans to expand NATO and acting in other ways that the US would never tolerate. Imagine the Soviet Union helping to overthrow an elected, pro-American government in Mexico City, seeking to redirect all commerce to Soviet allies in South America, and proposing that Mexico join the Warsaw Pact. US policymakers would be threatening war.

Washington, DC also is treating China as a near-enemy, claiming the right to control China along its own borders – essentially attempting to apply America's Monroe Doctrine to Asia. This is something Americans would never allow another nation, especially China, to do to the US. Imagine the response if Beijing sent its navy up the East Coast, told the US how to treat Cuba,

and constantly talked of the possibility of war. America's consistently hostile, aggressive policy is the result of "projects of pride, ambition, and other sinister and pernicious motives."

This kind of foreign policy also corrupts the American political system. It encourages officials and people to put foreign interests before that of America. As George Washington observed, this mindset: "gives to ambitious, corrupted, or deluded citizens (who devote themselves to the favorite nation), facility to betray or sacrifice the interests of their own country, without odium, sometimes even with popularity; guiding, with the appearances of a virtuous sense of obligation, a commendable deference for public opinion, or a laudable zeal for public good, the base or foolish compliances of ambition, corruption, or infatuation."

For instance, Woodrow Wilson and America's Anglophile establishment backed Great Britain over the interests of the American people, dragging the US into World War I, a mindless imperial slugfest that this nation should have avoided. After the Cold War's end Americans with ties to Central and Eastern Europe pushed to expand NATO to their ancestral homes, which created new defense obligations for America while inflaming Russian hostility. Ethnic Greeks and Turks constantly battle over policy toward their ethnic homelands. Taiwan has developed enduring ties with congressional Republicans, especially, ensuring US government support against Beijing. Many evangelical Christians, especially those who hold a particularly bizarre eschatology (basically, Jews must gather together in their national homeland to be slaughtered before Jesus can return), back Israel in whatever it does to assist the apparently helpless God of creation finish his job. The policies that result from such campaigns inevitably are shaped to benefit foreign interests, not Americans.

Regarding the impact of such a system on the political system George Washington also was prescient: "As avenues to foreign influence in innumerable ways, such attachments are particularly alarming to the truly enlightened and independent patriot. How many opportunities do they afford to tamper with domestic factions, to practice the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public council. Such an attachment of a small or weak towards a great and powerful nation dooms the former to be the satellite of the latter."

In different ways many US policies illustrate the problem caused by "passionate attachments" – the almost routine and sometimes substantial sacrifice of US economic and security interests to benefit other governments. For instance, hysteria swept Washington at the president's recent proposal to simply reduce troop levels in Germany, which along with so many other European nations sees little reason to do much to defend itself. There are even those who demand American subservience to the Philippines, a semi-failed state of no significant security importance to the US Saudi Arabia is a rare case where the attachment is mostly cash and lobbyists. In most instances cultural, ethnic, religious, and historical ties provide a firmer foundation for foreign political influence and manipulation.

What to do about such a long-standing problem? George Washington was neither naïf nor isolationist. He believed in what passed for globalism in those days: a commercial republic should trade widely. He didn't oppose alliances, for limited purposes and durations. After all, support from France was necessary for the colonies to win independence.

He proposed a practical policy tied to ongoing realities. The authorities should "steer clear of permanent alliances," have with other states "as little political connection as possible," and not "entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils" of other nations' "ambition, rivalry, interest,

humor or caprice." Most important, the object of US foreign policy was to serve the interests of the American people. In practice it was a matter of prudence, to be adapted to circumstance and interest. He would not necessarily foreclose defense of Israel, Saudi Arabia, or Germany, but would insist that such proposals reflect a serious analysis of current realities and be decided based on what is best for Americans. He would recognize that what might have been true a few decades ago likely isn't true today. In reality, little of current US foreign policy would have survived his critical review.

George Washington was an eminently practical man who managed to speak through the ages. America's recently disastrous experience of playing officious, obnoxious hegemon highlights his good judgment. The US, he argued, should "observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all."

America may still formally be a republic, but its foreign policy long ago became imperial. As John Quincy Adams warned, the US is "no longer the ruler of her own spirit." Americans have learned at great cost that international affairs are too important to be left to the Blob and foreign policy professionals, handed off to international relations scholars, or, worst of all, subcontracted to other nations and their lobbyists. The American people should insist on their nation's return to a true republican foreign policy.

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