



The War Lobby Believes Washington Should Represent Everyone Except Americans

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David Brooks, a onetime conservative editor at *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal*, long ago joined the Pretorian Guard for American progressive internationalism and backed its advance around the globe through war. "For most of the past century, human dignity had a friend – the United States of America," he argued last week.

In his view, the U.S. selflessly promoted peace, prosperity, and democracy throughout the world. But tragically, he related, "then came Iraq and Afghanistan, and America lost faith in itself and its global role – like a pitcher who has been shelled and no longer has confidence in his own stuff." Apparently, it was nothing that Washington did. A little miscue or two, a few snide comments from critics, a tragic loss of self-confidence, and the US gave up its divine mission to move humankind ever forward to nirvana.

If only the world had recognized George W. Bush's inherent genius, the latter might have stayed "on the field," as Brooks put it. Presumably first to invade Syria and Iran as Bush's most fervent supporters wished. Said Neocon propagandists at the time, "real men go to Tehran."

However, there would have been no reason to halt there. The plan was "to "create our own reality," one unnamed Bush aide – suspected to be Karl Rove – explained, which lesser beings could later study. By then "history's actors," as the Bushies viewed themselves, would have moved on to create new realities – perhaps by overthrowing the Gulf monarchies, converting the rest of Central Asia to progressive constitutionalism, solving the Turkish problem, and bringing real democracy to India.

Indeed, why not dream? Awed by the march of history, perhaps Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping would have accepted the inevitable and declared their adherence to everything "intertwined in a progressive package that puts individual dignity at the center." By now peace might reign around the world, with the final victory for post-modern humanity as the lion lay down with the lamb.

What a lost opportunity! Lamented Brooks: "We're never going back to the Bush doctrine. But we're probably not going to do well in battle for hearts and minds if we see ourselves abandoning our allies in places like Afghanistan. We're probably not going to do well if our own behavior begins to resemble the realpolitik of autocrats. We probably won't do well if we can't look ourselves in the mirror without a twinge of shame."

He professed to understand why retrograde Trumpers refused to battle the "reactionary forces abroad." But not the progressives. As Madeleine Albright asked Colin Powell a very long three decades ago: "What's the use of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" So many foreign countries to bomb, foreign lands to occupy, and foreign peoples to kill. Why doesn't the Left board the Pentagon express, Brooks wanted to know!

He closed with a clarion call for endless war: "If we're going to fight Trumpian authoritarianism at home, we have to fight the more venomous brands of authoritarianism that thrive around the world." Thus declared yet another ivory tower warrior so enthusiastic about sending other people off to fight – like Dick Cheney, who famously proclaimed that he had "other priorities" to serving his country when his opportunity came during the Vietnam War, but proved full of grand military plans after his draft eligibility expired.

There is much to say about Brooks' many claims, starting with how he framed the issue. He acted as if everything everywhere is about the US and the reason why America's grand mission failed is but one of confidence.

Over time many Americans have viewed themselves as having a unique mission abroad. That vision grew as US power expanded. Alas, the number of bodies left by the wayside increased as Americans acted to fulfill their "manifest destiny," first across the North American continent and then around the world.

Overspreading what became the United States was brutal business for indigenous peoples, fueled by broken US government treaties and promises. The Mexican-American War was imperialism at its most ruthless, with fraudulent justifications, claiming contested territory as America's own, paired with malicious designs, to seize land that amounted to half of Mexico.

The Spanish-American War testified to the power of the Yellow Press, highlighting Americans' unique mix of hypocrisy and sanctimony. Washington spoke of liberation while conquering a distant land for geopolitical advantage, employing military tactics more savage than those used by the defeated Spanish and killing an estimated 200,000 Filipinos.

Focused on commercial advantage, the US joined the Europeans in carving up the decrepit Chinese empire, insisting on "the Open Door" that allowed Americans the same opportunities to exploit the vulnerable enjoyed by other imperial powers. Of concern was the profit for US

merchants, not the rights of Chinese peasants. Proving that the Monroe Doctrine was for America's, not Latin America's, advantage, Washington routinely invaded and occupied its closest neighbors, including the ever-tragic nation of Haiti, for commercial and political advantage.

Arrogance, callousness, and sanctimony came together with rare intensity in the Pharisaic Woodrow Wilson, who sacrificed 116,000 American lives in a war not America's own to give him a seat at the victors' table in World War I. Else he could not attempt to reshape the world, a task which he and his cohorts bungled disastrously. His "crusade for democracy" rested upon a bloc which included Serbia, whose act of state terrorism triggered the conflict; Russia, the anti-Semitic empire ruled by an absolute monarch determined not to share power irrespective of the cost; Belgium, the most brutal of the colonial powers, which had engaged in horrendous murder and pillage in the Congo; Italy, which joined the coalition only when promised territorial booty from the defeated powers; and France and Great Britain, vast colonial powers which posed as liberal exemplars while exploiting hundreds of millions of people of color.

The Versailles Treaty was written accordingly, featuring shameless plundering of the lands of the losers and arbitrary border-drawing that continues to generate wars today. Defeated populations were inconvenient adjuncts to territories bartered among the "Big Four" and later the "Big Three" victorious leaders. Rudely dismissed were non-Western demands – from the Chinese and Japanese, among others – for equal treatment. Wilson, a virulent racist, joined his colleagues in rejecting such unwelcome intrusions, seen as beyond outrageous by the representatives of Western civilization who had done so much to destroy their inheritance.

World War II ended up a moral cause, more incidentally than intentionally. America did not join to do good. The Roosevelt administration's attitude was clear when it refused to accept Jewish refugees – the tragic fate of the MS St. Louis, known as the "voyage of the damned" after its passengers were denied entry to the US in June 1939 and forced to return to Europe, was merely the most shocking example. The US entered the war only after Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor and Germany had declared war. Even then, the American partnership with Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China aided regimes noteworthy for their brutality and ruthlessness. Prudence undoubtedly required compromise and coalition, but the outcome of the war left much of Europe and elsewhere under decades of repression and poverty.

The Cold War featured a Washington that articulated eternal verities while helping defeat communism, as Brooks observed, but segregated America acted with extreme callousness and disregard for anyone caught in between. As the Third World became a geopolitical battlefield the US backed some of the worst regimes and excused some of their worst behaviors. The choices might not have been easy, but Washington officials often averted their eyes to avoid seeing the usually terrible and sometimes murderous practices that they were aiding and abetting.

Rarely was there much interest in protecting those wonderful progressive values of which Brooks is so fond. Oil, not democracy, was on the minds of US officials in supporting the 1953 coup in Iran; with little concern for the Iranian people they also provided fulsome backing for the Shah's oppressive and corrupt reign. Nor was he alone among autocrats receiving praise and aid from Washington.

Ronald Reagan offered eloquent backing for human life and dignity, yet supported Saddam Hussein's aggressive war against Iran, which included use of chemical weapons constructed with America's aid. Sometimes Washington consciously chose injustice for reasons of politics at home and abroad. For instance, the US government endorsed Israeli treatment of Palestinians that today, [contends Human Rights Watch](#), amounts to apartheid.

Then there is Iraq. Brooks mentions it *only once* and alongside Afghanistan, never to be cited again. No wonder. He wants to sell America as radiating "a set of vital ideals" – which is hard to square with George W. Bush's murderous misadventure. The war was orchestrated by a flock of chickenhawks led by Cheney, far more enthusiastic about sending others off to fight than to enter combat themselves. Officials manufactured evidence, lied with aplomb, manipulated public fears, ignored contrary evidence, prioritized ideological fantasies, relied on crooks and con-men as allies, sullied America's reputation, and spread death and destruction far and wide.

The consequences were hellish: an insurgency and sectarian conflict that resulted in thousands of dead Americans, tens of thousands wounded Americans, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis, and millions of displaced Iraqis. The country was ravaged, terrorism was normalized, suicide terrorists were spawned, minority faiths were dispersed, the vulnerable were murdered, democracy was eviscerated, and Iran was empowered. The foundations of additional rounds of conflict, this time expanding to Syria and involving the Islamic State, were set. Thousands more died, religious minorities were more viciously targeted, and Iran enjoyed even more influence.

Brooks apparently viewed such results as incidental and not worth mentioning. After all, which policymakers have been held accountable for his criminal negligence? Which pundits have been dismissed for advocating policy so reckless, so counterproductive, so destructive – and been so wrong in their predictions?

Yet all Brooks could say was that "America lost confidence in itself."

He preferred to emphasize Afghanistan, seemingly shocked that angry crowds have not turned out across America demanding continuation of the war. The public realizes what Brooks could not comprehend, that Washington's attempt at nation building has failed. The Afghans have been fighting a civil war for four decades. America became just one more participant.

After attacking in September 2001, the U.S. soon fulfilled its basic objectives, to break al-Qaeda in retaliation for the 9/11 attacks and oust the Taliban, as punishment for hosting al-Qaeda. Then George W. Bush, followed by Barack Obama and Donald Trump, decided to play Woodrow Wilson and promote liberal Western-style democracy and create a centralized nation state where neither had ever been. Sadly, and apparently contrary Brooks' expectations, that plan crashed and burned.

Brooks summed up his entire case for promiscuous war-making with the claim that "a small force of American troops has helped prevent some of the worst people on earth from taking over a nation of more than 38 million – with relatively few casualties." Alas, the claim is disconnected from reality.

First, the Taliban already controls much of the country, which always has been ruled at the valley and village level. And the situation has been steadily worsening in recent years with almost all indicators heading in the wrong direction, with some statistics so bad that the Trump administration simply stopped publishing them.

Second, the relative dearth of US casualties reflects Taliban forbearance in hopes of an American departure. Attempting to stick around would revive the fight, with the cost borne by those tasked to fight the wars concocted and promoted by America's prestigious ivory tower warriors.

Third, the people who should be doing the defending in what is a civil war are the Afghans. This is not a case of the outside communist power promoting an internal insurgency. The Taliban believe and advance a terrible ideology and theology. However, they are Afghans and receive strong support from other Afghans who oppose foreign rule.

In contrast, the people on America's side, at least some acting more for pay than principle, have constructed a Potemkin state for which few seem willing to fight. When I visited Afghanistan a decade ago at the height of US involvement, I couldn't find a single Afghan who had anything good to say about his or her government, at least anyone not working for that government. In recent weeks security forces have been melting away, refusing to fight for what Brooks apparently views as a grand progressive project. This after Americans devoted thousands of lives and trillions of dollars to Afghanistan's defense. If that country is to be saved from the Taliban, it will be by traditional warlords who share none of Brooks' progressive fantasies. That may be a tragic outcome, but Americans have no obligation to wander the globe, fighting forever wars to protect those who will not defend themselves.

Deciding that there is a limit of the obligations of Americans – those doing the fighting and dying for pampered political elites who prefer to play masters of the universe and attempt to reorder the globe – is not "abandoning our allies," as Brooks claimed. If it truly is the American purpose to arm its youth and send them abroad to impose the new progressive order on the rest of the world, then America will never be at peace.

There is the rest of Central Asia to conquer and remake. The wretched Middle East, where America's allies, such as Saudi Arabia, are more repressive than America's adversaries, such as Iran. Africa, despite some welcome democratic and economic reforms, remains in desperate need of a progressive renewal – think Zimbabwe, Nigeria, South Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, and so many more. Southeast Asia surely warrants Brooks' eager attention. Even a few Latin American states, starting with Cuba, Venezuela, and Haiti, need a little Pentagon TLC. And then the big challenges: China, North Korea, and Russia. That is an awfully big field to "stay on," as Brooks advocates for those not lucky enough to make their living far from the battle lines writing on the need for endless war.

America should be a friend of human dignity. But it also should be a friend of peace. And the denizens of Washington should recognize that America has the greatest responsibility to its own people, those who live here – and who shape it, rely on it, support it, and sacrifice the most, sometimes everything, to defend it. Their lives, their dignity, and their future should be the priority. Any truly progressive vision requires that America first be responsible for Americans.

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