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Foreign Policy Failure Everywhere

by Sheldon Richman

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If one tried to design a foreign policy to embroil Americans in endless conflicts that would otherwise be quite remote, one could hardly do better than recent presidents of the United States. What could you do that these men have not done to keep Americans mired in distant turmoil?

Signs of apparent failure abound while the ruling elite feigns ignorance of the connection between U.S. intervention abroad and widening regional wars. Despite President Obama's assurances that America's combat role in the unceasingly violent Afghanistan is over, we know it is not. ISIS expands under American and allied airstrikes, the best recruiting program the Islamists could want. There was no ISIS in Iraq or Syria before America invaded the former and called open season on the regime in the latter. In response, Obama seeks unlimited war power.

ISIS franchises are emerging throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Libya, which America and NATO "liberated" from Col. Gaddafi after prodding by then-secretary of state Hillary Clinton, is in militia-ridden hell and is now a haven for ISIS sympathizers. Obama can't make up his mind about what his war on ISIS means for his opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who also opposes ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Meanwhile in Europe, the U.S.-instigated coup in Ukraine, following the in-your-face expansion of NATO to the Russian border, has not had the intended effect of making Russian President Putin skulk to his corner in fear of the global hegemon. Instead, Putin capitalized on the explicit

provocation to engineer the dubious annexation of Crimea and to aid separatists (or perhaps federalists) in eastern Ukraine, who are fighting neo-Nazis among others. Despite the current ceasefire, a war between nuclear powers Russia and the United States is not impossible.

Well done, Messrs. Obama, Bush, Clinton, Bush, Reagan, Carter, and on back. Each faithfully pursued the geopolitical and economic interests embodied in the idea of American hegemony. We see the results: slaughter and incineration abroad (often by remote control), humanitarian catastrophe for homeless survivors, and American deaths and injuries far outnumbering those of the 9/11 attacks — themselves a response to decades of U.S.-inflicted and -sponsored killing and upheaval in the Muslim world. And then there are the fiscal costs to Americans.

Unsurprisingly, the ruling elite has no incentive to reconsider the premise of U.S. foreign policy, namely, that America can and should run the world. It is “our” manifest destiny and not to be questioned. Obama occasionally looks like the reluctant emperor, but whenever he appears to waver, someone — Mrs. Clinton or Samantha Power or Susan Rice — keeps him from “going wobbly” (as Mrs. Thatcher did with George H. W. Bush in 1990 after Iraq’s Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.)

We must acknowledge, of course, that what looks like failure to us Americans outside the privileged elite may not actually be failure for our overlords. After all, turmoil is integral to the ingenious political perpetual-motion machine. Turmoil furnishes the “threats” that then can be called on to justify the very policies that manufactured those threats in the first place. How clever! We’ll hear no more talk of a “peace dividend,” that dangerous idea — dangerous, that is, to Pentagon and intelligence budgets and government-contractor bottom lines — that nearly ran amok when the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact alliance imploded, 1989–1991. That was indeed a close one. Imagine the world’s only superpower without an enemy. People might wonder what’s the point of it all. Thank goodness there were years of intervention in the Muslim world in the bank, compound interest accruing.

While failure may in fact be success for the empire’s custodians and profiteers, the victimized foreign populations and American people have not been so fortunate, and there’s no end in sight.

If those populations and the American people are to get any relief, U.S. foreign policy will need deep rethinking from outside elite circles. That won’t be easy. As over two centuries show, American hegemony — “exceptionalism” — is in the nation’s political DNA. Even the opening of foreign markets to American producers was always seen as a government program backed by a navy with global reach.

It’s well past time for us to think about what horrifies our rulers: nonintervention.