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The Atlantic

How Perpetual War Became U.S. Ideology

By James Joyner

May 11, 2011

The United States has found itself in a seemingly endless series of wars over the past two decades. Despite frequent opposition by the party not controlling the presidency and often that of the American public, the foreign policy elite operates on a consensus that routinely leads to the use of military power to solve international crises.

Ideological Domination

Neoconservatives of both parties urge war to spread American ideals, seeing it as the duty of a great nation. Liberal interventionists see individuals, not states, as the key global actor and have deemed a Responsibility to Protect those in danger from their own governments, particularly when an international consensus to intervene can be forged. Traditional Realists, meanwhile, initially reject most interventions but are frequently drawn in by arguments that the national interest will be put at risk if the situation spirals out of control.

In a widely discussed March essay, Harvard international relations professor [Stephen Walt](#) wrote of a "neocon-liberal alliance" in support of war, contending, "The only important intellectual difference between neoconservatives and liberal interventionists is that the former have disdain for international institutions (which they see as constraints on U.S. power), and the latter see them as a useful way to legitimate American dominance."

The Progressive Policy Institute's [Jim Arkedis](#), who describes himself as a "progressive internationalist," calls this notion of a neocon-liberal alliance "bunk." Neocons, according to Arkedis, "disdain multilateral diplomacy and overestimate the efficacy of military force" in a way that "saps the economic, political, and moral sources of American influence." He adds, "Though our ends are similar, our thresholds for intervention, our military methodology, and our justifications for action could not be more different."

Both ideologies satisfy an emotional hunger dating from the emotion-laden days of the Cold War

But are neoconservatives and liberal interventionists really so different? Neoconservative bastions like the *Weekly Standard*, *Commentary*, and the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies are passionate advocates of spreading American values. In Iraq, the toppling of Saddam Hussein and discovery that there was no WMD program to speak of were both accomplished in the first weeks of the war and with a relative handful of American casualties. If these had been our chief concerns we would have left immediately; the apparent U.S. goals in staying on so many years were democracy promotion and nation-building, both ideals the neoconservative White House leadership shared with liberal interventionists.

Further, while neocons are doubtless less patient than liberal interventionists when it comes to exhausting diplomatic options and achieving international consensus, what does it really matter if the end result is the same either way: military action.

Neocons and liberal interventionists may have dominated American foreign policymaking since 1993, but what about the realists? During the Cold War, there was a bipartisan elite consensus against the U.S. involving itself in wars not believed to be directly tied to protecting vital American interests. This included two major hot wars in Korea and Vietnam and more than a dozen quick strikes and proxy conflicts aimed at stopping the spread of Soviet Communism, ranging from Cuba to Afghanistan to El Salvador. And there were a handful of interventions in the Middle East to protect Israel and retaliate for terrorist attacks.

Starting with the 1991 Gulf War, however, despite the end of the Cold War, we've had two decades of non-stop fighting: Somalia in 1992, Haiti in 1994, Bosnia in 1995, Serbia-Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan starting in 2001, and Iraq again from 2003. With Libya, we've added another U.S. war.

Ideologically, the George H.W. Bush administration should not have been inclined toward military intervention. Bush senior was a reluctant intervener, the National Security Council was guided by eminent realist Brent Scowcroft, and Colin Powell, the author of an eponymous doctrine that urges extreme caution in going to war, headed up the Joint Chiefs. And yet the administration launched three major military operations in its four-year term: the Panama invasion (derided by many as Operation Just 'Cause), the first Gulf War, and the Somalia intervention.

But all three of those missions were at least ostensibly tied to U.S. national interests. As odd as the Panama invasion seems in hindsight, earning the derisive nickname "Operation Just 'Cause," at the time, it was justified within the realist goals of safeguarding U.S. personnel in country,

combating drug trafficking, and protecting the Panama Canal. The first Gulf War was, at its heart, about preventing Saddam Hussein from gaining control of more than half the world's oil supply. And Bush envisioned Somalia as a purely humanitarian relief mission; it morphed into warlord hunting and nation building under his successor.

Clinton may well have been the first full-throated liberal interventionist since the days of Woodrow Wilson. During the 1992 campaign, he declared, "The continuing attacks by Serbian elements in Bosnia threaten the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian aid, jeopardize the safety of U.N. personnel and put at risk the lives of thousands of citizens." He added, in what could have been a textbook definition of liberal interventionism, "The United States should take the lead in seeking U.N. Security Council authorization for air strikes against those who are attacking the relief effort. The United States should be prepared to lend appropriate military support to that operation. Air and naval forces adequate to carry out these operations should be visibly in position."

Clinton followed through on these policies as president, committing American forces to military action in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Haiti for reasons almost exclusively framed in humanitarian and international legal terms. More importantly, perhaps, he committed to long-term nation-building operations after each conflict. He also greatly expanded the Somalia operation, turning it into a warlord hunting exercise that led to the infamous Black Hawk down incident.

While most mainstream Republicans in Congress and the commentariat bitterly opposed these interventions, Clinton had strong neoconservative allies in Bob Dole, John McCain, Charles Krauthammer, Bill Kristol, and Robert Kagan. While realist Republicans were criticizing Clinton for the follies of nation-building, a bipartisan neoconservative group calling itself the Project for a New American Century issued a statement of principles in June 1997 calling for significant increases in defense spending in order to promote "a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad; and national leadership that accepts the United States' global responsibilities." Among the Republican signatories were Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz.

In the 2000 campaign, George W. Bush, leveraging public frustration with Clinton's long string of interventions, declared that he would pursue a more "humble foreign policy" that eschewed "nation-building" and had as its "guiding question, 'Is it in our nation's interests?'" In other words, he pledged to be a realist president.

But, few readers will need reminding, he took us to war in Afghanistan -- a retaliation for a direct attack on the country and supported by virtually everyone -- but almost immediately turned it into the nation-building exercise in which we are still mired. And, of course, there was Iraq, ostensibly a preemptive strike at a rogue regime building weapons of mass destruction that instead became a years-long nation-building mission.

During his own 2008 campaign, President Obama gave every indication of a realist foreign policy, keeping Robert Gates on at Defense, reversing policies favored by our Eastern and Central European allies in order to improve relations with the increasingly important Russian state, and eschewing unhelpfully aggressive rhetoric about Iran. But the arguments of the liberal

interventionists on his vaunted team of rivals -- notably Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice, and Samantha Power -- ultimately won the day on Libya debate, overwhelming the more realist caution of Gates and the intelligence leadership.

How Did We Get Here?

While neoconservatives and liberal interventionists have led post-Cold War U.S. foreign policymaking, traditional realists continue to dominate the academic study of security policy and even the rank-and-file military and intelligence communities. But their more ideological brethren are better positioned to win the day politically.

The Cold War not only provided a neat national grand strategy, the prospect that superpower competition could lead to global nuclear annihilation greatly restrained the inclination for adventurism. That may be why, for example, no one seriously suggested a Responsibility to Protect Ugandan innocents from the atrocities of military dictator Idi Amin; Uganda was a Soviet client state. Similarly, a U.S. invasion of Libya to affect regime change after Muammar Gaddafi's 1980s terrorist strikes against our citizens would have been unthinkable. There was simply too much risk of escalating U.S.-Soviet tension.

Those days are gone. Bush senior proclaimed a "new world order" after the quick and decisive victory in the 1991 Gulf War, thinking that a permanent international consensus to enforce norms of decency had been forged. Though that grand vision never came to pass, the notion that the United States and its allies were now free to project power to "do good" has remained intact.

This has coincided with a still-ongoing revolution in global communications technology. With the rise of network news channels that can broadcast far-away violence into American living rooms, and more recently of social media technologies that give voice to oppressed peoples in all corners of the globe, this environment has made it much easier for advocates of humanitarian intervention to make their case.

Realist arguments about national interests, unknown risks, and post-conflict reconstruction have proven far less able to sway Americans than are television images of humans being slaughtered. Whereas the victims of Idi Amin were statistics, those dying in the Arab Spring have faces, names, and Facebook accounts.

The passionate zeal of the liberal interventionists and neoconservatives satisfies an emotional hunger that has been a part of our political system since the emotion-laden days of the Cold War, when the public first came to view U.S. foreign policy as a tool of good to be deployed against evil. Both ideologies use the language of morality and appeal to our shared humanity. People want to do something about tragedy and it's easy to persuade them that doing the right thing will be worthwhile. Realists may often be right, but they are rarely convincing.