

Has the world's policeman retired?

Twenty years of keeping the peace, protecting the homeland from afar and an unsuccessful attempt at what some would call *nation-building* has finally come to an end. The United States has once again retreated from an overseas mission that was bound to end badly. Fraught with danger from day one, our occupation of Afghanistan proved that being the 'world's policeman' is neither easy nor beneficial in the long run. Or is it?

As usual, in the world of geopolitical big thinkers, there are (at least) two major schools of thought. You have the extremes: the isolationists that prefer to leave the rest of the world to solve its own problems without our interference (read: assistance), and you have the interventionists/nation-builders that believe that the U.S. has a responsibility to expose - some would say *impose* - democracy and the rule of Western law on any nation that doesn't already have it. I would call the latter 'missionary diplomacy.' This form for global action has gotten Christians in hot water over the centuries, but it's not limited to Christians or religious believers for that matter.

The attitude that one group of people has ALL the answers to other cultures' problems smacks of arrogance and self-righteousness and is not grounded in reality. It is, however, the textbook definition of dogmatists who believe in their right to 'go forth' and convince other nations that they are either morally inferior or hopelessly ignorant of certain great truths. One of the major differences between the two groups is one of action versus inaction. Isolationists prefer inaction and interventionists prefer action. Granted there are many other differences in the two viewpoints, but all can be troublesome and controversial.

Passivity based on bad information or wrong assessments of situations can be disastrous. Perhaps the most glaring of the last century is U.K. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's takeaway from his 1938 meeting with German Chancellor Adolf Hitler who assured him that Germany had no desire to attack England or to conquer more European territory. Less than a year later Hitler invaded Poland and an attack on Britons would soon follow. This is but one example of how national wishful thinking can be dangerous when we're dealing with other cultures. It also shows us that an ideology based on a belief of divine right can create war and death, and when it is coupled with the passivity of other nations can create massive death and destruction. To say that the history of the United States was greatly influenced by the actions of missionaries or true believers cannot be dismissed out of hand. The early settlers relied on the concept of 'manifest destiny' (the 19th-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the U.S. throughout the North American continent was both justified and inevitable). That belief in the 'God-given right' to conquer the West eventually became an integral part of our American culture. Over the years, manifest destiny was inextricably linked to our *indomitable pioneer spirit* and served as a backdrop for our larger national identity.

We are extremely proud of our democracy, and because it is based on certain "unalienable rights" that are given to Man by God as our Founding Fathers stated, we can point to this historical claim to justifiably and vigorously promote our system of self-government to other nations.

Here's the problem. Many of the forms of government and governing structures of the rest of the world are centuries older than our own and have for better or worse sunk their roots into their individual cultures over time. While many are, admittedly, corrupt and do not serve the needs of their people adequately (according to us) they are THEIR choices either through the ballot box or through powerful forces operating within those countries. After WWII we saw the re-drawing of borders occur in Europe, Africa and especially the Middle East. Western powers felt that by drawing new borders they could more easily nation-build just as some leaders were convinced that new countries (like Yugoslavia) could be role models for peaceful coexistence by eliminating old ethnic or 'tribal' differences. What they ended up doing, however, was simply creating NEW differences based on a NEW model.

I am sure that most Americans would agree that freedom of speech, mobility and assembly are basic *human rights*, but not all nations subscribe to our values. This has frustrated many globalists and proponents of interventionism and has presented us with a national conundrum: how, when or where do we intervene to protect these human rights? Moreover, do we even have the unilateral right to intervene in another country's physical territory or as some would say 'meddle' in their internal domestic society?

The 20-years war (or conflict if you prefer) in Afghanistan is a perfect case in point. Our justification for entering that country was to seek out terrorists responsible for attacks on the United States and to prevent that country from becoming a safe-haven for other terrorist groups. An additional reason was to protect vulnerable groups like women from persecution by the Taliban. Was this *nation-building*? Not in my book, just as the construction of hospitals and schools and infrastructure in impoverished countries on other continents is not nation-building. One could argue that these investments were part of a quid pro quo agreement to 'act responsibly' and emulate the U.S.' doctrine of democracy and liberty for the individual, but there is a big difference in forcing one's self on another and using soft diplomacy to achieve internationally agreed-upon goals that benefit human beings of ANY culture.

It's too soon to declare complete defeat in Afghanistan even though we are seeing a replay of Vietnam of 1975 on our television screens. It is not too soon, however, to take up the discussion on America's role in the 21st century as either bystander or international activist or somewhere in between when it comes to defending the twin principles of national sovereignty AND adherence to human rights. We had better have that conversation now before events overtake us and make it impossible.

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