

Can America stop being the world's policeman?

On September 19, 1796, our first president said goodbye to his country and offered his advice to any who would listen in a document known as "[Washington's Farewell Address](#)." In it, President Washington covered a wide variety of topics, including political parties, the importance of national unity, the need to uphold the Constitution and preserve republican liberty, the power of commerce, national debt, and even foreign policy.

With regard to the last item, it is clear that America has drifted far from our first President's recommendations. In the 1930s, the U.S. went from practically non-interventionist with a modest military to a superpower by the end of World War II in 1945. From then until the early 1990s we fought a global Cold War against the Soviets that became "hot" in places like Korea and Vietnam. In the 1990s we fought the first Gulf War, bombed Serbia, and were embarrassed in Somalia. And since 2001, we've been enmeshed in an unending war on terror.

The global War on Terror kicked off in 2001, as a result of 9/11. Since that time, America has invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq, waged a bombing war against Libya, targeted terrorists with drone attacks and Tomahawk missiles in several countries, and sent troops on innumerable missions into a significant number of countries – Niger being one of the latest.

According to [The Nation](#), America had over 800 bases across the world by 2015. A good deal of the growth in U.S. military bases now encircling the globe was admittedly driven first by the Cold War and then again by the War on Terror.

For Americans alive today, we have known nothing but an

America that could flex her military muscle almost anytime and anywhere across the world. It seems as though we've always been at war with some group or country. Add to that the occasional military interventions for good or bad reasons and it's hard to imagine what the world would look like if America were to pull back from her current role, if America quit being the world's policeman.

International terrorism by non-state actors certainly exasperates any desires for a reduced U.S. military presence on the global stage. We may say that American interventionism and Western imperialism are to blame, but that's not 100% true. We see Islamic terrorism happening quite often outside of the West. India, China, the Philippines, various African nations, Russia, etc. have all experienced degrees of Islamic terrorism. It is reasonable to assume that we will need to be on our guard perpetually in this new era.

These non-state, irregular military units or terrorists care little about national boundaries and issues of sovereignty. They will set up a base camp in one country and then cross international borders to strike somewhere else in the world. For America to hunt down and kill these terrorists requires chasing them wherever they go, even across national borders. That simple truth means we're either going to have to arrange for the freedom to move our military forces into other countries whenever we deem it necessary (no easy task) or we do it illegally, violating the national sovereignty of innumerable countries. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge that such actions require a military that can project power almost anywhere in the world. The hunt for Osama bin Laden is just one example of that need.

That inability to imagine a world without America's military projected across the globe is even harder to imagine in light of nuclear weapons. North Korea's saber rattling about nuclear weapons and its series of intercontinental, ballistic missile tests give one pause. Iran may already be starting

down the same path as North Korea, too.

So, what are we to do? Many Americans are tired of perpetual war and would like to see America reduce her military's activities.

- Recall that President George W. Bush argued against "nation building" and presented a desire for a reduction in foreign adventures during his 2000 campaign for president. But then 9/11 happened and he did quite the opposite of what he talked about during his campaign.
- Recall, too, that President Obama ran for office and won on the idea of getting America out of the Iraqi quagmire and reducing our global military footprint. But he continued the war, greatly expanded drone strikes, and even waged what can only be called war against Libya, toppling Muammar al-Gaddafi and further destabilizing the Middle East.
- And now we have President Trump, who also ran on the idea of "America First" and reducing our international military presence, involved in a variety of military situations, North Korea being the most dangerous.

In his *Farewell Address*, President George Washington had the following advice for America and her military:

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop. Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.

Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; **when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation;** when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.

Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice?

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements. I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat it, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.

Taking care always to keep ourselves by suitable establishments on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.

Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest.

Washington was quite right to note our peculiar geographic position. We have only two neighbors, Canada and Mexico, and neither are a military power. Furthermore, the United States

is separated by two great oceans from belligerents or military powers in the world.

To invade the United States requires a significant navy as well as a complex supply chain to maintain an army. At this point in time, there is not a single military power on the earth capable of invading the United States.

As a result, from a conventional military perspective there seems to be little need for the United States to involve itself in foreign wars or affairs. That does not mean that wars in other places won't take place and won't impact international trade. It merely means that we need not fear a military invasion and, therefore, should question anyone calling for American interventions.

In considering terrorism, one should keep in mind that our problems with Islamic terrorism, such as 9/11, occurred after significant changes in immigration and travel policies. Not a single one of the individuals who committed 9/11 were American citizens or legal permanent residents, they were each here on a visa. Other individuals associated with that group were detained for immigration violations. Omar Matteen, who committed the terrorist attack at the Pulse Nightclub, was the son of an immigrant. Tashfeen Malik, one of the two San Bernardino terrorists, was here on a visa, which some believe was "[sloppily](#)" approved. Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov, the man who killed eight individuals in New York in 2017, was also an immigrant.

Could changes in our immigration and visa policies greatly reduce potential terrorist threats? Quite possibly. Will that stop all terrorism in the United States? Certainly not. Indeed, the massacre in Las Vegas, which we still know very little about, would have probably still happened. The Oklahoma City bombing also points to domestic threats. But when considering the threat of Islamic terrorism and the War on Terror, we do have to admit that had it not been for

significant changes to immigration and travel policies, certain acts of terrorism wouldn't have happened.

Furthermore, as some would argue, if the U.S. had a less interventionist approach, particularly in the Middle East, there would be less cause for Muslims to strike at the United States. Again though, that doesn't mean that Islamic terrorism wouldn't happen – the Islamic terrorism occurring in non-Western nations is evidence of the continued threat. But if travel and immigration were to be limited or our policies were more restrictive, it would change the nature of the current Islamic terror threat, perhaps reducing our need to go chasing terrorists across the world.

Cyber attacks are also a reasonable concern, but they don't involve actual militaries physically attacking America. Such attacks require smart individuals on our side creating the best defenses and remaining eternally vigilant. Could a massive cyber attack do great damage to the United States? Some certainly think so. But does defending against such an attack require U.S. forces to be deployed across the globe? Most likely not.

There is, therefore, one remaining source of concern: nuclear weapons. With the advent of the atomic bomb in World War II and the coupling of such a weapon to missiles capable of striking targets on the other side of the world, defending one's country became much more challenging.

As noted above, a conventional military invasion against the U.S. seems quite remote at this time. But as anyone watching the news lately would recognize the threat of a nuclear attack as being quite possible, especially with North Korea's saber-rattling and the proliferation of missiles and nuclear weapons across the globe. Even a small country, unable to project conventional military power outside of its borders, can become a global power or threat if it acquires the ability to produce and deploy nuclear-armed missiles.

So, what are we to do?

In a nuclear world, is George Washington's advice still valid? Can we withdraw our forces from the global stage and simply create a "fortress America" while peacefully trading with most of the world? Or do we need the ability to project military power anywhere in the world in order to keep ourselves safe from a nuclear attack?

While the United States may have the capacity to knock out of the sky some missiles targeting the country or our installations, are we confident that we could stop a nuclear attack via intercontinental missiles armed with multiple reentry vehicles or nuclear bombs? It's one thing to shoot down a missile in a controlled test, it is another thing entirely to shoot down a nuclear attack involving many targets at one time.

If the world was free of nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, we would probably be wise to heed the advice of our first President, "extending our commercial relations" and having "as little political connection as possible." The only challenge in such a world would be the temptation to slay the dragons, to come to the aid of peoples who are being aggressed. Yes, we would have to grapple with the moral and ethical possibilities.

But unfortunately, we live in a nuclear age, one in which one country can destroy another country's city from thousands of miles away with just one blow.

To those who call for a reduced U.S. military presence in the world, what do we do about nuclear threats? Can we be non-interventionist or limit foreign adventures as much as possible while still capable of protecting the homeland? It seems somewhat possible. But is mutually assured destruction (MAD) and missile defense such as "Star Wars" sufficient? More specifically, do those policies seem sufficient when we look

at North Korea, a country we are still technically at war with?

It seems that we could strike a balance, intervening far less while still retaining some ability to project power. Of course, if we intervened less, would we be threatened less? And what happens in the vacuum left behind if we did pull back?

There really isn't an easy answer and, sadly, we haven't had a president like George Washington to help us chart the proper course.

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