

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

LESS IS MORE:

HOW A REDUCED FOREIGN POLICY CAN ENHANCE

AMERICA'S NATIONAL SECURITY

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We barely stopped to celebrate the end of the Cold War.

First, the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. Two years later the Soviet Union dissolved. But our national security strategists took no time off to party. Instead, they issued dour warnings about the new, more dangerous and complicated world before us. The new threats included uncontrolled nuclear weapons in the Ukraine and Kazakhstan, weapons of mass destruction hidden somewhere in Iraq, anarchy and starvation in Somalia, continued support of terrorism from Iran, thwarting of the people's will in Haiti and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. The same grim and pessimistic realism that won the Cold War, we were told, would be more necessary than ever in this dangerous new era.

Realistic pessimism has tended to be the prevailing attitude and philosophy for national security strategists in the 20th century.

Idealists and optimists have not fared well: Wilson and the League of Nations, the disarmament conferences of the 1920s, British pacifists and America Firsters in the run-up to World War II, "Ban the Bomb" activists in the 1950s, Jimmy Carter in the 1970s. All have been ridiculed for naive and ineffectual idealism and/or optimism.

But is it foolish to be an optimist as we close out this century? Not at all. The most striking feature of the world in recent times has been the demise of the dictator. This was most clearly articulated by Francis Fukuyama in his landmark 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*.[□] He said the worldwide trend towards liberal, capitalist democracies is no fluke or passing phenomenon. Drawing on the works of Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, Fukuyama postulated that history is

neither a series of random events nor endlessly repeating cycles, but rather a straight line evolution in the direction of capitalism and democracy. In short, there is a direction to history and it is going our way.

The collapse of communism was just another step in this progression, albeit a very big and noticeable one. It did not represent any collapse of the world order as we knew it and there is no need for the United States to attempt to invent some form of new world order.

According to G. John Ikenberry, "The end of the Cold War was less the end of a world order than the collapse of the communist world into an expanding Western order."□ He added, "America is not adrift in uncharted seas. It is at the center of a world of its own making."□

This means that we are missing the point if we follow the media and focus on today's hot spots and the handful of out-of-step rogue dictators who are still clinging to power. We should approach the task of developing national security strategy with a basic philosophy that tells us the world is becoming an ever more hospitable place for our views on democracy, capitalism and the worth and dignity of every citizen. Fukuyama's case for optimism has been strengthened further in the seven years since he wrote his book, as long-time, strong-arm, personalist rulers continued to fall from power, in such countries as Nigeria, Zaire and Indonesia. As this global consensus emerges and the ideological battles of old fade into the history books, we are in Fukuyama's judgment approaching the end of history as we have known it. Yes, a few old-style dictators will hang on for a while longer. Yes, their closed and repressive regimes will limp along and defy our will for a while longer but eventually they will change. Traditional state versus state rivalries simply do not threaten us anywhere in the world. Think of Albania, which up until the mid-1980s was as closed,

mysterious and vaguely threatening as North Korea appears now. Today it is open and democratic, its English-speaking foreign minister appeared live on CNN and BBC during the Kosovo war and its diplomats are trained at the U.S. State Department's National Foreign Affairs Training Center. All this happened in little over one decade!

The often discussed information revolution is also working in our favor. The proliferation of internet service providers, fax, e-mail, cellular phones and satellite television has meant quite simply that dictators have lost their monopoly on information, and with it a crucial tool for manipulating public opinion to their advantage. It is true, as James N. Rosenau wrote in *Current History* that these developments "have rendered national boundaries more porous and world politics more vulnerable to cascading demands."□ For the United States and other open, democratic societies this has been a positive development, while authoritarian rulers are the losers, because they are the ones who bear the brunt of these "cascading demands," from an increasingly sophisticated and well-informed public. For example, English language newspaper accounts in the Middle East have reported that many Iranians play a cat-and-mouse game with authorities, seeking to circumvent a government ban on satellite television receiver dishes by setting them up to catch a foreign program they especially want to see and then taking them down before the authorities spot them. We should not have been so surprised when moderate Mohammed Khatemi scored his dramatic election victory there in May 1997.

In addition to the clear, worldwide march towards capitalist democracy pushed along by the accelerating information revolution, the United States benefits from its impregnable geographic position and the complete absence of any conventional military threat from a foreign power. Ronald Steel wrote in an article entitled, "A New Realism":

There have been no wars between great powers for more than 50 years.

If the United States and the Soviet Union, for a variety of good reasons, did not choose to fight each other, what major states can now imagine doing so -- and for what stakes? What possible victory is worth the cost? And what society, democratic or not, would be willing to pay for it?□

Not only is the conventional military threat to the United States virtually non-existent, but we also have artfully vanquished the fear of nuclear attack from the former Soviet Union, which loomed so large for so long. Under the little noticed Nunn-Lugar legislation and the resulting Cooperative Threat Reduction program, U.S. experts have worked closely with counterparts in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan to remove all nuclear weapons from the latter three former Soviet republics, compensate them and even offer immigration to America for nuclear scientists who have been put out of work by this disarmament. This program receives little media attention, because it doesn't have the spicy appeal of the steady diet of mafia, murder and mayhem stories churned out of the Western media's Moscow bureaus. Nonetheless this work has been one of the most positive developments there since the fall of communism, and one that clearly has served our national interests and still further diminished our national security threat level.

This leads us to the curious paradox of America's foreign policy today. Although we are basking in peace and (for the moment at least) prosperity, our leaders are acting as if the wolf is at the door. A cynical person might even say that our foreign policy practitioners developed such a craving for confrontation and crisis during the Cold

War that now, a decade later, they still have not been able to kick the habit.

A May 1998 policy analysis by Ivan Eland of the Cato Institute noted that, seemingly oblivious to the end of the Cold War, "America's foreign policy remains on autopilot."□ Eland added:

The U.S. military is now busier than it was during the Cold War, even though no superpower rival exists to capitalize on 'instability' anywhere in the world. The operations tempo of the armed forces is at an all-time high in peacetime, with deployments substantially larger, more frequent and of longer length than during the 1980s.□

The reach of our military might in this no-threat environment has taken many forms, in pursuit of a variety of elusive goals. There have been the well known interventions in Panama, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and perhaps next in East Timor and/or Colombia. Less noticed has been a truly astonishing array of missions all around the world by special operations forces. Billed as training missions under the 1991 Joint Combined Exchange Training Act, American military personnel are on the ground in a wide variety of troubled countries, providing training that may some day be used to put down demonstrations by people demanding the democracy and human rights we seek to promote.

What this amounts to is a troubling inclination to view military action as the first rather than last resort in our dealings with other countries, and especially those that defy our will. Andrew J. Bacevich put it succinctly in his recent article in The National Interest. He noted, "The deployment of U.S. forces into harm's way, once thought to be fraught with hazard and certain to generate controversy, has become commonplace."□

Of course, these troops are not deployed, except around Iraq, with even a remote possibility of fighting a conventional war. "The object of the exercise," Bacevich continued, "is rarely to defeat an enemy. Rather, it is to convey disapproval, change attitudes and dictate behavior."□ Absent a major strategic threat, the United States still feels compelled to involve itself in messy, complex, civil actions, "myriad experiments in peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace enforcement,"□ as Bacevich puts it.

Proponents of this approach, most notably Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, argue this relentless global activism is necessary to enlarge democracy and promote capitalism. But, to go back to Fukuyama's premise, democracy is enlarging itself and capitalism is promoting itself. Our advocacy of both objectives sounds right and makes us feel good, but U.S. government activism here is not as critically important as its proponents maintain. Private initiatives are now far more effective. Human rights groups in China or Burma can use internet web sites to flash information about abuses instantly around the world and rally support from other like-minded private organizations. Private sector and multilateral organization investment in the developing world do far more to promote capitalism and growth than the relative pittance provided by bilateral U.S. aid programs.

Our openness to visitors and immigrants also promotes democracy and development around the world. The huge number of young people from around the world who study at American colleges and universities on student visas absorb our democratic and open way of life at this formative stage of their lives and carry that with them back to their native culture. Chinese young people who went to college in America have been called "time bombs for democracy" and played key roles in the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989. Similarly, many immigrants who come

here through petitions filed by a relative or employer faithfully send remittances from their American earnings to family members back in their home country. This has to be one of the most efficient and cost effective foreign aid programs in the world. There is no government administration or overhead -- just cash, going directly from people in the United States who have it to people overseas who need it. So, whenever we hear government officials bemoan their lack of funding for promoting democracy and economic development, it is important to keep in mind that these goals are being promoted and advanced quietly, privately, and relentlessly every day, apart from any government program.

The advocates of American global activism do more than gloss over the extent to which the goals they advocate are being carried out more effectively in the private sector. They also overlook two drawbacks to America's disturbing pattern of confrontational interventionism -- cost and backlash. The Kosovo intervention taught us that arms-length, high-tech, zero-casualty warfare is expensive indeed. With no foreign donors footing the bill, as in the Persian Gulf war, the administration was forced to seek a multi-billion dollar supplemental appropriations bill. This huge amount of money, ironically, would have been enough to cover all the shortfalls in foreign affairs, foreign aid and U.N. dues bemoaned by the same officials who most strenuously advocated the Kosovo air campaign. When you stop to consider that this immense expenditure was used just to force a relatively minor ground retreat by a second-rate Army after it had essentially finished its grisly ethnic cleansing business, it is clear that the cost far outweighed the benefits. Such a policy of massive, expensive military engagement to achieve minor reversals on the ground simply cannot be sustained economically, even by the United States.

More ominous, however, is the reaction on the ground of those who find themselves on the receiving end of America's latest high-tech military bludgeoning. Clearly, Iraq or Serbia have no conventional military countermeasures to shoot down high flying American planes or to intercept incoming cruise missiles. But, since the bombing of another nation's capital city is more than likely to stir up rage and a lust for revenge, the only alternative for persons so motivated is an asymmetrical response in the form of unconventional warfare -- chemical and biological weapons and disruption of computer systems. By pursuing high-tech military mismatches we create a grave risk of attack on Americans abroad or here in the United States by unconventional means. It may also be that our air assault on Yugoslavia provoked more savage attacks on Kosovars by Serbs than otherwise would have taken place -- in other words, a particularly gruesome asymmetrical response strategy. Unfortunately, American officials have been reluctant to make this connection and draw the appropriate conclusions. The Cato Institute, however, has done just that, asserting, "The activist foreign policy itself is the problem."□ Its report continues:

To avoid catastrophic terrorist attacks on the American homeland in this new and dangerous strategic environment, the United States must abandon its policy of being a military nanny in every area of the world. The nation must adopt a policy of military restraint. The foremost objective of the national security policy of any nation should be to protect its territory and the lives and well-being of its citizens. Instead, Washington's excessively interventionist foreign policy undermines that objective in order to reap amorphous gains by 'enhancing stability' or 'promoting democracy' in faraway places. U.S. foreign policy invites consequences equivalent to a major

military conflict on U.S. soil without any compelling need to do so.□

We have reached the point in our relations with the rest of the world in which less is more. Less confrontational interventionism abroad translates into more security at home. This, however, is not an argument for withdrawal from all matters beyond our shores because they create risks, or a call for complacency because the world is moving with its own momentum towards universal liberal democracy and capitalism. We still need to remain engaged in the complex multilateral diplomacy which surrounds such transnational issues as chemical and biological warfare and terrorism practiced by non-state actors, organized crime and environmental degradation. In addition, foreign policy must continually be referenced back to our domestic situation. A national security strategist ignores the home front at his or her peril. Our present budget surpluses are destined to disappear when the Baby Boom generation retires and begins to draw out in benefits the money it is now shipping off to the government in taxes from its peak earning years. The return of budget deficits will greatly restrict our ability to mount high cost military expeditions. Our dependence on imported oil from the Middle East is sure to increase, as we continue our wild consumption binge with less fuel efficient cars and our present Western Hemisphere supplies run down. Instead of tying ourselves down in a costly and seemingly endless military commitment in the Persian Gulf region, we could better spend that money on development of alternative, non-fossil fuels. This would also reduce the pollution problem that threatens the whole world with global warming and the pollution-induced greenhouse effect.

Much has changed in America since its founding but our geography has not. We still are set apart from the rest of the world by two oceans, and bordered on land by just two, non-threatening neighbors. As a result, in the words of the Cato Institute report, the nation's founders developed a foreign policy which avoided intervention abroad so as not to invite intervention in our affairs. "That restrained foreign policy served the country well for more than a century and a half, and it should be reinstated."□

This will not be easy. Intervention means action, and action brings recognition and promotions. However, anyone who works on national security strategy and policy should operate from a philosophy that places national interests ahead of personal interests. If we do the opposite, is it any wonder that the American public shows so little interest in "our" foreign policy?

□ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. (New York: The Free Press. 1992

□ G. John Ikenberry, "The Myth of Post-Cold War Chaos," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 75 no. 3 (1996): 79-91.

□ Ibid.

□ James N. Rosenau, "Security in a Turbulent World," *Current History* 94, no. 592 (1995): 193-200.

□ Ronald Steel, "A New Realism," *World Policy Journal*, Summer 1997 [journal on line]; available from <http://www.worldpolicy.org/steel/html>: Internet; accessed 7 May 1998.

□ Ivan Eland, "Protecting the Homeland, The Best Defense is to Give No Offense" (Washington: The Cato Institute), May 5, 1998

□ Ibid.

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