

NATIONAL CHARACTER VS. NATIONAL SECURITY: CONFLICT IN THE MAKING?

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by

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ABSTRACT

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From the very early years of the American Revolution, the Founding Fathers knew that the struggle to define and hold true to a national character would set the course of the future of the United States. Indeed, laid bare in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the conceiving documents of the Nation, are the seeds of conflict between the ideals of national character and national security. As a result, in pursuit of an ever-broadening definition of “national security,” the United States has steadily lost focus on its national character over the past 60 years in the pursuit of physical and economic security. The thesis of this paper is that the United States should determine national security interests as a function of the national character vice the current policy of promoting values as *just* one of the national interests. In response, four specific areas of national security are addressed—nuclear weapon posturing, “exporting” of democracy, forward military presence and geographic combatant commands— as a way ahead for current and future Administrations to consider as they establish future national security strategies.

NATIONAL CHARACTER VS. NATIONAL SECURITY: CONFLICT IN THE MAKING?

We now stand an Independent People, and have yet to learn political Tactics. We are placed among the Nations of the Earth, and have a character to establish; but how we shall acquit ourselves time must discover.

—George Washington¹

From the earliest years of the American Revolution, the Founding Fathers knew that the struggle to define and hold true to a national character would set the course of the future of the United States. Indeed, present in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the conceiving documents of the Nation, are the seeds of conflict between the ideals of national character and national security. Consider the definitive opening statement of the Declaration: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”² It was a bold, world-changing statement to be sure, but what are the implications? How far should a nation go to protect these ideals or to export these ideals? Arguments exist on both sides. Michael Novak, a philosopher and U.S. diplomat, once issued the reminder that “freedom in a republic is not feasible without virtue.”³ However, noted statesman Henry Kissinger warned that “we cannot abandon national security in pursuit of virtue.”⁴ So, has the United States been virtuous in its pursuit of national security and in the promulgation of its foreign policy? Is virtue even a consideration? To turn the question on its head, though, the answer must surely lie in your definition of “security.”

The answers to these questions are not trivial, nor are they purely philosophical banter. As the United States enters its third decade of post-Cold War geopolitics, issues of economic globalization, growing terrorist threats and looming worldwide financial

crises dominate the headlines and the attention of American policymakers. There is presumably no need to start from scratch on the solutions because the National Security Strategy is supposed to address these threats in a coherent manner.

Is that document up to the task? If so, and if national interests have been properly identified and prioritized, then the full support of the citizenry should be given to advance the causes of the Nation. If the wrong threats have been identified, though, or the priorities have been improperly prioritized, then the real possibility arises that military arsenals and budget dollars have been wrongly attuned to national interests. Moreover, if national character matters, then chasing physical and economic “security” might transform the pursuit of happiness into “the pursuit of freedom from unhappiness.”⁵

The thesis of this paper is that the United States should determine national security interests as a function of the national character vice the current policy of promoting values as *just* one of the national interests. I shall argue that to approach the issue in any other sequence undermines both the identity and the credibility of the U.S., at home and abroad. This case is built by first discussing whether a notion of national character is a valid concept and then by examining why it should influence the security interests of the Nation. In subsequent sections, I will identify the dangers of losing the internal compass of national character, to include both domestic and foreign policy implications. Finally, I will examine four specific areas of national security that need addressing—nuclear weapon posturing, “exporting” of democracy, forward military presence and geographic combatant commands— and present a way ahead for establishing future national security strategies.

Concept of National Character

Although many observers of modern international relations remark that World War II was the main impetus of national character studies, the concept has really been in existence since the days of antiquity.⁶ Professor Erik Aker noted the particular focus that has been put on identifying the “American character.” As he explains, “the list of observers is a long one: DeTocqueville, Frederic Jackson Turner, Margaret Mead, William Whyte and Gordon Allport have all tried explaining just what makes Americans who they are.”⁷ Moreover, as that task has passed over the years from political observers to anthropologists to modern-day bloggers, there is still no consensus in academic circles that an idea of national character should be considered in theories of international behavior. Whether due to conceptual confusions, cultural diversity trends, questions about relevancy or the realities of geo-politics, social and political scientists are hard pressed to develop a theory of behavior prediction based on the “character” of a nation.⁸

However, as Robert Luginbill points out in *Thucydides on War and National Character*, the idea of a state or nation acting out of honor or in response to its fears is an ancient concept. He concludes that “the pervasiveness, significance, and essence of national character have been overlooked by many past studies” of Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian Wars, but, in his opinion, “the significance of the theme would be difficult to overstate.”⁹ Even more,

the essence of national character cannot be understood apart from the principles of individual psychology that give rise to it, for, in Thucydides, the human psyche is the wellspring of national character, and the stream which bears all national behavior along in its powerful current.¹⁰

In addition to this construct of national character driving national behavior, one can also see Thucydides establishing the linkage between character and notions of national security. Indeed, it can be viewed plainly in many of the speeches recounted in *The Peloponnesian War*, but is framed most succinctly by Alcibiades as he addressed the Athenians in the seventeenth year of the war:

I have no doubt that a state of the active type would be destroyed very quickly by shifting to inactivity, and that it is the people who conducts its foreign policy with the least divergence from its present character and customs (even if these be deficient) that possess the greatest security. (6.18.7)¹¹

So, if the lessons of antiquity are to be learned and not forgotten, how would the United States begin to identify its character?

The first step is to formally define the term, “national character.” Borrowing from Kenneth Terhune and his monograph in *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, this paper shall use the term to refer to those enduring, distinguishable attitudes, beliefs, values, and value orientations that motivate a nation.¹² With a definition in place, however, the problem is only partly solved. What enduring beliefs and values can be attributed to the United States, and who validates such a list? As has been previously noted, many have tried anthropological studies and cross-cultural analysis to capture the essence of the “American spirit.” However, the truest answer may have been hiding in plain sight.

Indeed, from the National Archives to the National Security Strategy, the United States plainly advertises the ideals it would like to uphold. Since the Nation’s birth, the Declaration has identified equality, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as “unalienable Rights.” These codified values arguably changed the direction of, at least, the Western world and sparked revolutions and democratic reforms among many people groups. Of the four concepts, “pursuit of happiness” might be the hardest to

explain and the easiest to manipulate for personal interpretation. However, as Dr. Carol Hamilton explains, “properly understood...when John Locke, Samuel Johnson, and Thomas Jefferson wrote of ‘the pursuit of happiness,’ they were invoking the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition in which happiness is bound up with the civic virtues of courage, moderation, and justice.”¹³ The Constitution later repeated liberty and justice as values in its preamble, which could be understood as the prerequisites to securing domestic welfare, tranquility and the common defense.

Are these romanticized, out-dated ideals? Have the harsh realities of political posturing and economic hegemony brushed aside notions of virtuous character? The consistent answer from the current Obama Administration is a resounding “no,” according to numerous spoken and written declarations.

- From 2009 Inaugural Address: “Earlier Generations...understood that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please. Instead, they know that our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.”¹⁴
- From 2009 National Archives Speech: “But I believe with every fiber of my being that in the long run, we cannot keep this country safe unless we enlist the power of our most fundamental values. The documents that we hold in this very hall...are not simply words written into aging parchment. They are the foundations of liberty and justice in this country, and a light that shines for all who seek freedom, fairness, equality and dignity in the world.”¹⁵

- From 2010 National Security Strategy: “The United States believes certain values are universal and will work to promote them worldwide. These include...dignity, tolerance, and equality among all people, and the fair and equitable administration of justice. The United States was founded upon a belief in these values.”¹⁶
- From 2010 “National Character Counts” presidential proclamation: “America’s strength, even in the most challenging times, is found in the spirit and character of our people...[and] we reflect upon the values of equality, fairness, and compassion that lie at the heart of our country.”¹⁷

The body of evidence makes it clear that it is still in the highest interest of the current Administration to remember America’s founding values as it conducts both domestic and foreign policy. The practical questions that arise, though, are, “Why should character matter?” and “How should it influence the national security interests of the United States?”

Importance of National Character

The issue of whether a national character matters to any facet of national policymaking is not an easily agreed upon supposition. Even if one could convince the academic community that an American ethos is in play, it is much harder to show that character actually surfaces in the policy decision-making process. Bernard Hennessey, of the National Center for Education in Politics, argued in his 1962 psycho-cultural study that “there is no particular reason, at this point, to believe that national character shapes policy any more than...policy shapes national character.”¹⁸ Additionally, Terhune pointed out in his 1970 study that “research relating national character to national

behavior is scant” and recommended further research.¹⁹ Further, a National Institute of Health study conducted in 2007 concluded that “national character stereotypes are a poor guide to understanding the people in any country or culture.”²⁰ However, these studies, though impressive in their scientific rigor, may fail to account for the simple presence of the human psyche, addressed by Thucydides, in the policy decision process.

In this sense, it may be best to heed the advice of those who have been in a position to make national security decisions. General MacArthur once remarked that, “History fails to record a single precedent in which nations subject to moral decay have not passed into political and economic decline. There has been either a spiritual awakening...or a progressive deterioration leading to ultimate national disaster.”²¹ As National Security Advisor, Condeleeza Rice emphasized that “this question of how values play in American foreign policy is extremely important.”²² Congressman Brian Baird, in a 2007 article, concluded, “The way we conduct our politics shapes the national character and in turn our perceptions of the national character shape the way we conduct politics.”²³ President Obama, from his 2009 National Archives speech, announced that, “The American people...know that we need not sacrifice our security for our values, nor sacrifice our values for our security, so long as we approach difficult decisions with honesty, and care, and a dose of common sense.”²⁴ From these combined perspectives, there is a definite sense that character and values need to be intertwined with our politics as a way to secure not only the security and the international standing of the United States but maybe its very existence.

In a closer analysis, there are several points of view that support such an understanding. From a Thucydidean point of view, individual character is an inextricable generator of national character. If Americans truly demand character and accountability from their local and national leaders, then national behavior must derive its character from that source. If not, the resulting cultural dissonance would be nationally destabilizing. As Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky explain in *Cultural Theory*, “When cultures cease to provide solutions, when they cease to make sense, their members begin to doubt them, and if plausible alternatives are available, members ultimately defect.”²⁵ In other words, as long as documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution remain the bedrock for American society and are the basis for oaths of office, there will always be expectations of freedom, liberty, equality and dignity in the American political process.

From a purely qualitative point of view, character has been shown to be an irrefutable trait of effective leadership. Kim Holmes of The Heritage Foundation argues that character controls the destiny of a nation just as it determines the fate of an individual leader.²⁶ It is the classic expectation of knowing the right thing to do and doing the right thing, even when no one else is looking. Even more, it is the self-proclaimed baseline of the 2010 National Security Strategy to establish America’s leadership in the world as the best way to advance the national security interests.²⁷ However, the U.S. cannot expect other nations to follow it if its principles and actions are not congruent and trustworthy. Not surprisingly, George Washington recognized this in the earliest days of the Nation’s existence when he spoke, “I want an American character that the

powers of Europe may be convinced we act for ourselves and not for others; this in my judgment, is the only way to be respected abroad and at home.”²⁸

Finally, from a descriptive point of view and as alluded to in this paper’s introduction, a nation’s character will define a nation’s definition of “security” and thus its strategies for securing it. Simply put, a nation will pursue what it ultimately values. To some in the United States, security means strong borders and a valued currency. To others, security means a strong military establishment that is capable of deterring, dominating and dismantling enemies around the globe. These definitions can and do set nations on very particular courses of action. However, if national character, as defined in this paper, matters, a third definition of security then becomes viable—the uncompromising pursuit of stated national values. Maybe the ultimate national security can be found in simply orchestrating acts from a firm philosophical, moral foundation, one which no enemy can take away. The same cannot be said of territory or money or physical welfare. If this third definition of national security is pursued, some of the resulting U.S. strategies would appear similar to current ones, but many would look completely different.

Since character determines the viability of a nation, its role as a leader and its national interests and security strategies, there is a lot at stake in this issue. What then would be the results of straying, of not aligning actions with principles? Author Henry Brinton warns, “We will never eliminate every threat to our personal and national well-being, and our efforts may strain our relations with neighbors as we make our barriers ever more impenetrable.”²⁹ If true, then the United States could find itself in more battles, internally and externally, than it ever counted on. Or does it already?

Losing the Compass of National Character

Thomas Paine once remarked that “character is much easier kept than recovered.”³⁰ It is a warning to be well heeded by those who have much to lose in this increasingly complex, volatile, uncertain world. Is it too late for the United States? Are we already in recovery mode? Has the United States let bad means deform the noble ends the Founding Fathers envisioned?³¹ Are liberty, freedom, equality, moderation and fairness words that even describe the “ends” of its national security policy?

There are passionate advocates on both sides of the argument, and truly it would be impossible to categorize all of the United States’ security strategies of the past 65 years as simply all good or all bad.³² The success stories of liberation, democracy and free markets are plainly seen in the nations of Great Britain, France, Germany and Japan, for example. Furthermore, in the past twenty years, the United States has taken upon itself to protect the global commons, to respond to international humanitarian crises with unprecedented scale and to lead the opening of world economic markets. These stories are all easy to identify and are worthy of praise.

That being said, the U.S. must take the next, although uncomfortable, step of identifying the dark cloud inside the silver lining. The important part of character is its self-reflection, its ability to self-correct. More so, knowing the proverbial truth that power corrupts, the U.S. needs to be even more vigilant in its role as the most powerful nation in the world. This should not be just an academic exercise—the American public is starting to demand this analysis from their elected officials. According to recent *USA Today*/Gallup polling, 80 percent of Americans feel that because of its history and Constitution, the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world.³³ Alarming, though, 77 percent felt that the United States was at

risk of losing its unique character.³⁴ What warning signs are there to look for then? The answer to that demands both an inward and an outward view.

First, internally, the U.S. needs to balance physical security and personal liberties. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. public has watched the Patriot Act, full-body scanners and restricted access to public buildings become part of everyday life. It is probably safe to say much of the public life is captured on a surveillance video camera somewhere on a street corner or behind the mirrored glass of a store security system. Ultimately, private citizens, public commentators and civil liberty groups must decide how much security is enough and if the benefits outweigh the costs. Having an open society is the grand design of the American fabric, but this openness is also a great weakness in the fight against terrorism. Unfortunately, an increase in one (security) necessarily demands a reduction in the other (liberty). As Brinton remarks, “National security is an expensive religion to practice, and it tends to increase our insecurity as we become more zealous about it...”³⁵

In addition, the American public has to remain cognizant of the financial burden that physical security demands. The U.S. government, in trying to support social programs along with a robust homeland defense/security budget, currently funds most of its debt by international borrowing. In doing so, the 2010 *Joint Operating Environment* estimates “that the amount of U.S. government debt held by foreigners has grown from 1.3 trillion to 3.5 trillion dollars, representing some 40% of total U.S. debt.”³⁶ However, that debt restricts fiscal freedom of action for the United States and forces the government to rely upon non-sovereign sources of income to fund its budget. That is not

exactly what George Washington had in mind when he envisioned acting “for ourselves and not for others.”

Washington’s thought is especially poignant when one considers the effect that debt has on the dignity and compassion promoted by National Character Counts Week. What is the message sent when, in 2008, Americans put more money into the Department of Defense (\$628 billion) than all of the churches and charities across the U.S. (\$308 billion)?³⁷ The answer might seem to some that such a vigilant outward focus is causing an internal decay. Indeed, the Gilmore Commission concluded similarly in its 2003 report, *Forging America’s New Normalcy*: “There will never be a 100% guarantee of security for our people, the economy, and our society. We must resist the urge to seek total security—it is not achievable and drains our attention from those things that can be accomplished.”³⁸

As a final internal danger, the American public has to keep in check its tendency toward national egoism.³⁹ It would be the natural inclination of any leader of a uni-polar world to feel it had the freedom to act however and whenever it needed to protect itself, especially when its way of life is under attack. However, Reinhold Niebuhr warns that “power without moral constraint” is a dangerous weapon for a nation to yield.⁴⁰ Professor Miroslav Volf echoed that same sentiment in his thoughts about pursuing national invulnerability: “We would likely walk through the world with a John Wayne swagger...living in a secure but unreal world, we would be a danger to others.”⁴¹ In this sense, it would be wise to heed the words of Thomas Jefferson: “While we are securing the rights of ourselves and our posterity, we point out the way to struggling nations who wish, like us, to emerge from tyrannies also.”⁴² In other words, humility and moderation

are the best examples a nation can exhibit to show that it is a wise and capable leader on the global stage.

In this vein, as the United States seeks to assert itself with a “strategy of national renewal and global leadership,” what are some recognizable external effects of national character gone wrong?⁴³ First, the United States must be wary of the militarization of its foreign policy. As the leading military power of the world, Professor Richard Betts points out that the U.S. has to wean itself from an over-reliance on the use of force, especially if it finds itself fighting over subjective values, like “credibility.”⁴⁴ If not, “there are few standards to prevent credibility from becoming an excuse for showing who’s boss in any and every conflict, and this makes the defense of credibility a recipe for overextension.”⁴⁵ In addition, the U.S. must be careful of the message it is sending to the rest of the world with its establishment and reliance on Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs). As discussed in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, “pundits note that American combatant commanders have ‘evolved into the modern-day equivalent of the Roman Empire’s proconsuls—well-funded, semi-autonomous, unconventional centers of U.S. foreign policy.’”⁴⁶ Again, the U.S. does not want to give the impression of empire-building or the establishment of tyrannies that the Founding Fathers fought so hard to throw off themselves.

Second, the U.S. must remain vigilant of foreign perception of its actions, especially as it works toward building partnerships and international coalitions. Listed as a key component of the 2010 National Security Strategy, building “international order advanced by U.S. leadership” will not be possible unless they see America’s values aligned with its actions.⁴⁷ The House Committee on Foreign Affairs authored a study in

2008 that seemed to indicate that was not happening. In response to the finding that U.S. approval ratings were at record lows in nearly every region of the world, Representative Bill Delahunt announced: “The data presented at these hearings make it clear that people in other nations don’t ‘hate us because of our values’—but rather that they are disappointed with us because we aren’t always true to those values.”⁴⁸ Simply stated, integrity matters no matter where you live. As a consequence, future Administrations will have to decide the merits of certain policies, like unilateralism, and decide if the risk is worth the cost.

Last, the United States has to keep the strategist B.H. Liddell Hart in mind when he taught that grand strategy should look “beyond the war to the subsequent peace.”⁴⁹ Specifically, when developing and utilizing its military arsenal, the U.S. needs a clear vision of that “better peace” which focuses beyond just a military victory, and it has to be careful not to let “bad means deform the end” in its pursuit of security.⁵⁰ Issues like insurgency operations, detainee torture and the use of nuclear weapons are not to be considered lightly. As Senior Research Fellow Elaine Bunn, of the Institute for National Strategic Studies, declared, the U.S. has “to calibrate what it says and does, or threatens to do in two dimensions: it must deter an opponent, and it must be morally acceptable to its own society.”⁵¹ If that is lacking, Hart warns that “the experience of history brings ample evidence that the downfall of civilized States tends to come not from the direct assault of foes but from internal decay, combined with the consequences of exhaustion in war.”⁵²

This warning rings true because character is the hardest to hold onto in times of military action. Many times, military necessity and expediency will try to trump national

values, especially if national survival is deemed at risk. Maybe this is why John Keegan eerily surmised that,

The purpose of war, Clausewitz said, was to serve a political end; the nature of war, he succeeded in arguing, was to serve only itself. By conclusion, his logic therefore ran, those who make war an end in itself are likely to be more successful than those who seek to moderate its character for political purposes.⁵³

This is a debatable statement, but one simply has to recount the fire-bombings and nuclear detonations of World War II to see this kind of tension played out. The question now is, what does the United States want to stand for as it offers its leadership to the rest of the world heading into the 21st century? The world is watching and waiting for the answer.

Analysis and Recommendations

The United States has steadily lost focus on its national character over the past 60 years in the pursuit of physical and economic security. Indeed, as author Michael Mann concludes, the United States is a jumble of metaphors—“a military giant, a back-seat economic driver, a political schizophrenic, and an ideological phantom.”⁵⁴ The very written structure of the current NSS drives this point home. Concerning the four enduring national security interests, the NSS devotes nearly 11 pages to physical security measures and the use of force, 7 pages to economic prosperity, 10 pages to advancing international order, but barely 5 pages to promoting values.⁵⁵ Is that the balance the United States needs, or does this further portend the diminishment of the United States as the light of liberty for the rest of the world? The United States could embark on four important, but contentious, paths to re-balance its national security portfolio.

First, the United States should immediately begin to address the discontinuities in its Nuclear Posture Review. Claiming to pursue “a world without nuclear weapons” while simultaneously sustaining “a safe, secure and effective nuclear arsenal” is hypocritical and assuredly confusing to the international community.⁵⁶ Noted nuclear theorist Jonathan Schell captured the tension best when he asked, “If nuclear weapons are needed not only to counter other nuclear weapons but to repel conventional, chemical and biological attacks as well, then what responsible national leader can afford to do without them?”⁵⁷ Admittedly, the answers are not easy or risk-free, but true leadership does not shy away from taking risks when opportunities present themselves.

Unfortunately, many theorists see deterrence as the inescapable evil of nuclear weapons.⁵⁸ Professor Michael Walzer further points out that deterrence seemingly works because it is so easy to hold people hostage who don’t realize they are being held hostage.⁵⁹ It does not relieve any nation, though, of the moral burden it must face by threatening the destruction of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of noncombatants by the use of nuclear weapons. Yet, a staple of United States foreign policy is that exact threat. In addressing this tenuous balance of terror, diplomat George Keenan once remarked, “I have no sympathy with the man who demands an eye for an eye in a nuclear attack.”⁶⁰ What to do then? Walzer captured it best when he said,

We are under an obligation to seize upon opportunities of escape, even to take risks for the sake of such opportunities. So the readiness to murder is balanced, or should be, by the readiness not to murder, not to threaten murder, as soon as alternative ways to peace can be found.⁶¹

In other words, someone must take the initiative.

There are several bold moves that the U.S. should take. First, the United States should set an example for the rest of the world and announce a 5-year nuclear

disarmament plan of its own forces. This should be accompanied by a new push for non-proliferation, the establishment of Nuclear Weapon-Free Zones and a United Nations resolution stating “that possession of nuclear weapons is a crime against humanity that violates the norm of international relations.”⁶² Finally, the U.S. should strengthen its missile defense shield as a defense against rogue nations and work more aggressively on conventional Prompt Global Strike options.⁶³ The detail work behind these initiatives would take moral courage and wisdom as the U.S. dismantled a major cornerstone of its defense policy. However, the world needs a major player like the U.S. to make nuclear weapons a moral issue, as chemical and biological weapons have become, instead of a bargaining chip for international relations.

The second issue to address in this recapturing of the national character is the recent historical trend in supporting the “export of democracy” through military endeavor. Although a noble cause in theory, the U.S. has found itself supporting nations and movements in the name of “democracy” while opening itself to charges of hypocrisy, financial over-commitments and foreign opinion backlash. As former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft lamented,

We advocate the export of democracy, and yet we find ourselves embracing a number of leaders who are anything but democratic in order to advance other policies or even the spread of democracy elsewhere. You cannot argue for absolutes and then practice pragmatism without opening yourself up to criticism.⁶⁴

This sentiment is exactly what was captured in the aforementioned 2008 Congressional report when it concluded that “the phrase ‘democracy promotion,’ when associated with the United States, has for many foreign audiences come to mean a muscular, military-oriented approach that includes invasion and ‘regime change.’”⁶⁵

Unfortunately, the United States failed to learn this lesson after its struggle in Vietnam or its difficulties in pursuing the Reagan doctrine in the 1980's. As foreign policy analyst Ted Carpenter studied, aiding "freedom fighters" in Angola, Nicaragua, Cambodia, Mozambique and Afghanistan in this time frame produced few tangible results but drained resources and fostered "dependency on the part of recipients."⁶⁶ Additionally, in his analysis on supporting insurgencies, B.H. Liddell Hart noted that "violence takes a much deeper root in irregular warfare...and makes a virtue of defying authority and violating rules. It becomes very difficult to rebuild a country...on a foundation undermined by such experience."⁶⁷

Indeed, looking back at its own historical roots, the United States should realize the value of a nation determining its own character and government. As Walzer exhorts, "self-determination is the school in which virtue is learned (or not) and liberty is won (or not)," and non-intervention should be the general rule unless very special circumstances are in motion.⁶⁸ Seen in this light, the United States, as a great power, should provide a struggling nation the independence to determine its own course. Offering moral support and incentives to join the democratic community should be the only course of action, unless pressing humanitarian needs arise.⁶⁹

The third proposal in this national security re-balancing act, minimizing the basing of U.S. troops overseas, is not an obvious choice for a nation to make if it values physical security above all. However, reducing the American military footprint abroad would yield immediate budget savings of potentially \$250 billion a year and force other nations to step up their contributions to regional security.⁷⁰ Additionally, as Professor David Vine researched, it would relieve much of the strain on local overseas

communities who “suffer environmental and health damage from military toxins and pollution, disrupted economic, social, and cultural systems, military accidents, and increased prostitution and crime.”⁷¹

Policy makers will not find this an easy decision. As Lieutenant Colonel Steve Basham wrote in his paper, *Forward Military Presence: A Matter of Strategic Culture*,

Any attempt to decrease forward presence will cause conflict and anxiety because it questions the basic underlying assumption that forward presence is required to ensure influence and leverage in international affairs for the pursuit of security in the United States.⁷²

However, leadership and initiative must challenge the status quo in this area. The United States may fear a withdrawal of its forces from critical areas in the Middle East, for example, but has our presence actually stemmed any conflict or simply added to it? Perhaps a greater emphasis on the diplomatic and informational abilities of national power is what is needed instead. The United States is not (ideologically or financially) the only nation interested in the free flow of goods and commerce through the global commons. Therefore, the best way to advance “a just and sustainable international order that can foster collective action to confront common challenges” is to reduce dependency on U.S. capabilities and seek greater international participation.⁷³

Finally, the last recommendation of this paper is to radically reduce the dominance of the GCCs in international relations. This step would be instrumental in reducing both foreign perception of American “imperialism” as well as its dependence on military solutions towards non-vital issues. It is telling when even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff makes the same argument:

U.S. foreign policy is still too dominated by the military, too dependent on the generals and admirals who lead our major overseas commands. It’s one thing to be able and willing to serve as emergency responders; quite another to always have to be the fire chief.⁷⁴

If even senior military leaders feel this way, then substantial issues need to be addressed by policymakers to rebalance the American face in foreign affairs and keep the Department of Defense from “drowning the foreign policy voice” of the State Department.⁷⁵

One solution is to re-address the Goldwater-Nichols Reorganization Act of 1986, so as to limit the scope and responsibilities of GCCs and allow the pursuit of a broader 3D (diplomacy, development, defense) security engagement policy.⁷⁶ In effect, by reducing funding for the Department of Defense while increasing that of the Department of State and USAID, the United States can better balance its uses of power and engage in more cooperative, civilian-friendly solutions. As National Security Agency analyst Dennis Penn argues, “not only would an enhanced civilian capability reduce the temptation to use the military as a first choice, but it also would have a positive impact on perceptions abroad.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

Starting in the closing months of World War II, with its post-war economic and military superiority and faced with a daunting ideological foe in the Soviet Union, the United States has slowly allowed its integrity and national values to be eroded away in its overemphasis of externally “providing for the common defense.”⁷⁸ The evidence is more than anecdotal, but only if one allows for a serious discussion on the definition or the value of “security.” This is not news to the U.S. government. In the pages of the 2008 National Defense Strategy, the Defense Department admits that “although the United States invented modern public relations, we are unable to communicate to the world effectively who we are and what we stand for as a society and culture, about freedom and democracy, and about our goals and aspirations.”⁷⁹ Maybe it is because

the actions of the nation do not match the proclaimed national values. The Obama Administration is making strides to reassert the prominence of national values into the national security discussion, but the attempts lack the forcefulness to truly change American or international politics.

There is never a convenient time, as an individual or a nation, to make hard choices and to exhibit true leadership. Reflecting on this whole issue, Liddell Hart, looking back at his life's work on war and strategy, once poignantly remarked:

What is the use of anyone sacrificing himself to preserve the country unless in the hope, and with the idea, of providing a chance to continue its spiritual progress—toward becoming a better country? Otherwise he is merely helping to preserve the husk—saving the form but not the soul. Only a *perverse* patriotism is capable of such hopeless folly.⁸⁰

What kind of nation is the U.S. asking its sons and daughters to sacrifice for? As George Washington stated nearly 230 years ago, we have a “character to establish,” and that quest is not yet complete. It is my hope that real change will ensue in the coming years as the American populace seeks to become “a better country” through values-based, actionable deeds, at home and abroad.

Endnotes

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