

The World's Most Warring Nation

Written by Richard Jackson

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RICHARD JACKSON, JUL 2 2011

The history of US foreign policy is a violent and bloody one, although this is not necessarily the dominant perception of most Americans. From the frontier wars of subjugation against Native Peoples to colonial wars against Mexico, Spain and the Philippines, the Cold War interventions in Korea, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Grenada, Lebanon, Panama, Libya and elsewhere, the post-Cold War interventions in Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Kosovo, and the post-9/11 interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen and Libya today, the US has an unrivaled record of war and foreign military intervention. There are in fact, few periods in its history when the US has not been engaged in war or military attacks on other countries. In addition, the US is the world's largest manufacturer and exporter of military weapons, and has a military budget several times greater than all its nearest rivals combined. It is in fact, the most warring nation in modern history. It is in this historical context that we have to try and understand its current military involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, the Horn of Africa and Libya.

Although it is sometimes argued by apologists that these military actions are always defensive in nature rather than proactive and expansionist, and are the result of real and serious threats to US security or the wider international system, the virtually impregnable security position of the US, notwithstanding the 9/11 attacks a decade ago, makes this argument unconvincing. The reality is that the size of the US landmass and population, the vast oceans to its eastern and western borders and the friendly countries to its north and south, and the extent of its economic and military power, means that there are no serious obstacles to the adoption of an isolationist foreign policy or even the adoption of a pacifist role in international affairs. In other words, there is nothing inevitable or predetermined about its long record of war and intervention. Explaining the historical record of US foreign intervention requires a careful evaluation of both its strategic interests and its ideological system, as it is the almost unique combination of these factors and the way in which they underpin and interact with each other which helps to explain why the US continues to be the most violent state in the international system today.

Strategically, the US is today the world's dominant power. In order to maintain this hegemonic position in the international system, which is the primary and preeminent goal of all US foreign policy (or at least, no major foreign policy initiative can seriously contradict this first principle goal), necessitates a number of key measures, such as: maintaining military advantage over rivals, which in turn requires a permanent internal military-industrial complex; a system of allies and a military presence in bases stretched around the globe, especially in strategic regions like the Middle East and the Horn of Africa; influence over or control of strategic resources such as oil; domination or at least influence over the global economic and trading system; significant influence in international institutions; and preventing the rise of serious challengers to its overall hegemony.

At the same time, the US has evolved since the founding of the republic a core set of ideological beliefs which are now deeply embedded culturally and accepted by both the political elite and the wider society. Some of these beliefs are necessitated by, and functional to, the military power of the US: maintaining a costly and permanent military-industrial complex capable of staying ahead of its rivals, for example, requires a supporting set of cultural values which valorize military prowess, patriotism and sacrifice in war. These values are now part of the military-industrial-media complex in which video games and movies, among others, serve as recruitment tools for the military, narrative frames for interpreting foreign threats and as propaganda for generating support for foreign military intervention. Importantly, this military-industrial-media complex has come to generate its own material and political interests, in

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part because it requires actual wars to reproduce and sustain itself.

Other important ideological values include the strongly-held belief that the US has been called by history (or God) to protect the so-called free world from major threats. Thus, it is believed that the US was first called to defeat the threat posed by the Axis powers, then the communist threat, and today, the global threat of terrorism. This ideological belief rests on the notion that the US is uniquely placed – by virtue of its military and economic power, and its moral values – to ensure the safety of the civilized world; it is the 'exceptional nation' which must lead the world. Related to this, the US has come to believe that its core values of liberty and democracy are actually universal values which it is bound to protect at home and spread abroad. As with its military values, these ideological beliefs are ubiquitous in popular and political culture.

It is the combination of the US's strategic interests and its ideological dispositions in the past two hundred years or more which explains the frequency and geographical distribution of its military interventions. In some cases, interventions have been launched primarily to protect perceived strategic interests, such as the case of the first Gulf War in which Iraq took control of Kuwait oil reserves and appeared to seriously threaten Saudi oil reserves. In other cases, the US's strategic interests coincided with strong ideological imperatives, such as the Libyan intervention today where the presence of significant oil reserves and the desire to create a pro-US regime in a strategic region has combined with the US ideological value of spreading democracy and overthrowing a long-term dictator and US opponent. The key point however, is that ideological values such as democracy promotion only rarely generate sufficient will by themselves for military intervention, although Somalia and Kosovo may be considered exceptions (although there were strategic interests involved in both cases). In many other cases, such as Rwanda in the 1990s and Syria today, such ideological imperatives are insufficient on their own to generate US-led military intervention. At the same time, no wars can be justified or defended to the American public, except by claiming that they fit US ideological values; US politicians cannot admit that they are ever at war solely to secure strategic advantage.

Of course, during some periods such as the cold war and to a lesser degree the war on terror, US strategic interests simply overrode ideological commitments to human rights or democracy promotion, as it supported a series of brutal dictatorships in places like Latin America, Asia and Africa. In some cases, the US even approved of mass murder, such as the Indonesian government's suppression of Communists in 1965 which killed 500,000 people, its support for the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, and its support for Latin American death squad activities in places like Chile and El Salvador. In other special cases, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, US strategic interests override ideological commitment entirely and little real effort is made to promote values-based policies.

The war on terror, particularly the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions, demonstrates the interplay of these two factors, with both strategic interests – dealing with the threat of terrorism, the securing of Iraq's oil and Afghanistan's potential role as an access-point to Central Asian oil reserves, fashioning pro-US regimes, and the construction of military bases in strategic regions to put pressure on countries like Iran – and ideological imperatives – bringing liberty and democracy to countries wracked by human rights abuses – driving the interventions. Paradoxically, of course, the war on terror, like many previous US interventions, has resulted in massive human rights abuses around the world and the denial of liberty to millions, with torture, rendition, and the denial of civil rights commonplace, among others. At the same time, it has also endangered US strategic interests: the attack on Iraq strengthened and emboldened Iran, destabilized Pakistan, and greatly damaged the reputation and standing of the US in the Middle East and large parts of the Muslim world.

In the end, the culturally and politically embedded ideology of the US – its militarized patriotism – blinds its leaders and public to the interests and consequences of its military interventions, and sustains the likelihood of future interventions. Few Americans accept that its country's wars have killed, injured and displaced literally millions of people in the last few decades, most often for little or no positive result in either strategic or ideological terms – that in fact the real-world consequences of its interventions are virtually always the denial of its own stated values of liberty and democracy. Fewer still question why the US is willing to sacrifice thousands or even millions of lives to secure its strategic interests, or why the US population is so perennially vulnerable to ideological appeals by leaders which mask the deeper strategic reasons for violent intervention. While it is unlikely that its strategic interests will change any time soon or that the military-industrial complex can be significantly reduced in size, there is always the hope that

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new leaders might arise and peace movements might emerge which are able to challenge, and perhaps even change, the militarized patriotism and deeply-embedded culture of violence which makes the US the most violent state in the world.

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