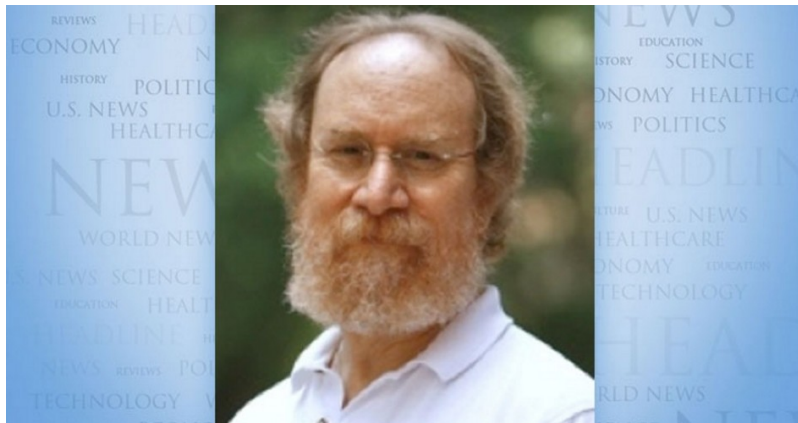




Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on August 4, 2014

In Foreign Affairs, Not Doing Anything Is the Thing to Do

The heartbreaking violence in the Middle East, Ukraine, and elsewhere carries many messages, but here's one Americans shouldn't miss: The United States — no matter who the president is — cannot manage world conflict. The corollary is that when a president tries to manage it, things will usually get worse. Foresight is always defective, and tragic unintended consequences will prevail.



The foreign-policy “experts” in both major political parties, and the intelligentsia generally, think otherwise. No matter who holds power, we can expect the opposition to complain that the chief executive poorly anticipated and thus improperly responded to world events.

If this charge weren't so ominous, it would be comical to hear Republicans berating Barack Obama for failing to be “proactive,” for repeatedly being caught by surprise, and for not exerting “American leadership” to keep the world's hot spots under control and, most important, in harmony with “American interests.”

But contrary to what Republicans say (or what Democrats would say if a Republican were in power), the fault lies not in the president — at least not *this* fault — but in the mission itself: anticipating change and managing world conflict. No president can do that competently. Why not? Because the task is not doable, and danger lies in thinking it is. Moreover, the delusion that it is doable almost always makes situations worse than they otherwise would be — weapons proliferate, violence spreads, noncombatant casualties multiply — and all this creates enemies for the American people.

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Who thinks that's a good thing? I doubt the American people would if they understood what their so-called leaders — *misleaders* and *misrepresentatives* are better terms — are doing to them, not to mention what the “leaders” are doing to the hapless subject populations abroad that suffer because of U.S.-supported machinations.

The world is complex. Specifically, individual societies are infinitely complex, historically, politically, and culturally, and thus beyond the full comprehension of any person or group. Even societies ruled and ostensibly planned by dictators have informal, hidden, and spontaneous aspects that no one can fully grasp, especially outsiders. Written laws are often irrelevant to the unwritten rules and customs actually governing a society. And each society consists of many moving parts (religious, ethnic, etc.).

Anyone who still thinks a U.S. president with expert advisers can determine the opportune moment to send armed forces into a country to effect regime change — or to arm a presumed moderate opposition — and have everything come out as planned fails to grasp this and hasn't been paying attention for the last dozen years. The same goes for anyone who still believes America's latest brain trust can smoothly dictate political events in another country, say Ukraine, from behind the scenes with money funneled through innocent-sounding organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy.

The problem with these grand plans is that there are human beings on the other end — people who



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have their own preferences about what should take place and who are likely to resent foreign or foreign-backed interference. Another stumbling block to presidential world-building is that historical regional powers — say, Russia or Iran — don't look kindly on the United States asserting its will in their neighborhoods, just as American presidents have not welcomed foreign influence in Latin America. To many people in the world, American exceptionalism means that the United States alone gets to regard every region as within its sphere of influence. Responses to American arrogance produce many of the "crises" that the chief executive will be accused of having failed to anticipate and preempt. But no one can hope to manage the world.

The basic failure is the intervention itself. There will be crises enough without a U.S. president helping to create them.

Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Palestine/Israel, Ukraine and so many more in the past are all variations on a theme. Ignorant intervention begets bad consequences — unintended or not — perhaps not for American politicians or those who peddle war materiel, but certainly for those who bear the brunt in the target countries and the Americans who kill, die, and pay the economic cost.

Managing world conflict is beyond the power of any mortal. Don't demand that a president do it.

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