



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on September 3, 2021

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The Perils of Interventionism and Nation Building

“Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” Thus said the early 20th-century Harvard philosophy professor George Santayana, a quotation well known by every serious historian.

As Americans watched in horror as a man held onto an airplane leaving the Kabul airport in Afghanistan, many no doubt had the feeling I had: I’ve seen this movie before. It was reminiscent of the humiliating end to America’s experience in Vietnam in 1975, when those Vietnamese who had put their trust in the United States clung to helicopters lifting off from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

Despite all of the history he could have drawn upon, President George W. Bush chose to ignore all of it and attempt nation building in Afghanistan. At first, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was purportedly to capture the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attacks upon America — Osama bin Laden. But even after bin Laden had fled the country, and even after American forces found him and killed him in Pakistan, American forces remained in Afghanistan in an attempt to create a “nation” out of one of the most backward places on earth.

The withdrawal of U.S. forces has understandably evoked great criticism of the presidential administration of Joe Biden, but as former Congressman Ron Paul wrote recently, “So, who is to blame for the scenes from Afghanistan? There is plenty to go around.”

Certainly, some of that blame falls upon the shoulders of President George W. Bush. When he ran for president in 2000, Bush said that he believed the United States needed a “more humble foreign policy,” and that America did not need to be the world’s policeman. But, following the attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Congress joined in authorizing Bush to use force to retaliate against those responsible for the attacks. Even noninterventionist Paul voted for the resolution, and the country was overwhelmingly in favor of taking action.

But Paul wanted the mission limited to bringing bin Laden and his associates to justice. What he was not for was when the mission morphed into “regime change and nation-building.”



AP Images

“Gaijin Shogun”: At the conclusion of World War II, General Douglas MacArthur was the de facto dictator of Japan. His wise handling of postwar Japan led to a stable nation built on the rubble of the war. Many have incorrectly held that this successful effort at “nation building” is something that can be repeated all over the world in other nations and with other cultures.



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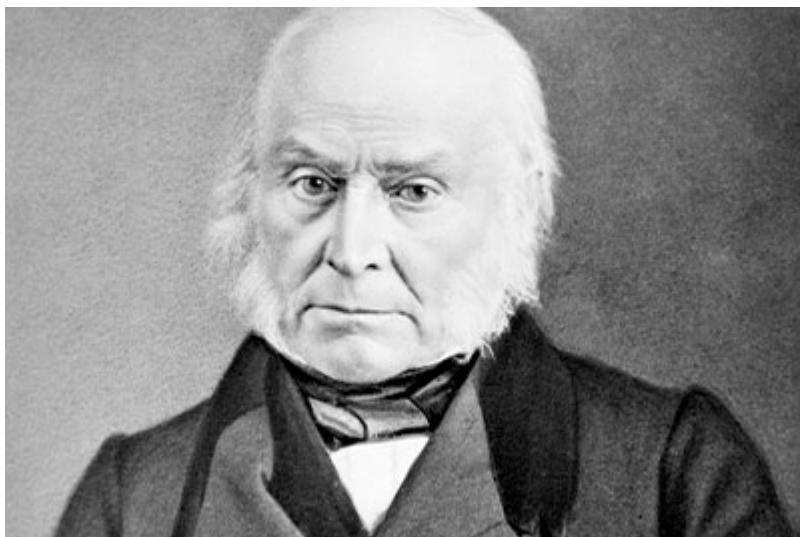
By the time of his second inaugural address, Bush had abandoned any pretense of having a “more humble” foreign policy, announcing his “ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” He vowed to change from just defending our own country to treating other nations based on how they treated their own citizens.

The Foreign Policy of the Founders

This, of course, is in stark contrast not only to Bush’s campaign statements five years earlier, but to the foreign policy of the Founding Fathers. While they disagreed on some things, our first three presidents — George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson — all rejected the concept that it is the responsibility of the United States to end tyranny in the world, and to dictate to other nations their domestic policies. Adams’ son, John Quincy Adams, while secretary of state for President James Monroe, said, “But she [America] does not go abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars and interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from *liberty to force.*”

Put simply, Adams argued that we Americans should promote liberty by example, not take it upon ourselves to force other peoples of the world to be like us.

It is understandable that Americans are disgusted by the brutal treatment of Afghans — especially women — at the hands of the Taliban. But, if we are going to end tyranny in the world, we should start with the bullies in our own government and the progressives who want to force us to all think alike. What’s more, we seem rather selective in our outrages over mistreatment of foreign people. After all, in Communist China, millions of Chinese languish in prison, their only crimes being that they practice a religion the totalitarian regime does not like, or perhaps they have expressed a contrary political opinion. Where are the calls to end this oppression of Chinese people by overthrowing the Chinese government and installing a “democracy” in China?





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Setting an example: While serving as secretary of state, John Quincy Adams explained to Congress why it would be unwise for the United States to use military force to get other nations to follow our example.

The rejection of the foreign policy of the founding generation is not a recent innovation, although trying to make a nation out of a place such as Afghanistan certainly takes it to a new level. The first indication that the United States was abandoning the noninterventionist policy of the Founders was when she became embroiled in a war with Spain, largely over the mistreatment of the Spanish colony in Cuba. After taking away some colonial possessions from Spain, the United States tried nation building in the Philippines. James Patterson, writing in his biography of Senator Robert A. Taft, *Mr. Republican*, remarked on the opposition of Taft's father, William Howard Taft, to the nation-building efforts in the Philippines. William Howard Taft said America should not be a "knight-errant country going about to independent people and saying, 'we do not like your form of government, we have tried our form of government ... and you have got to take it.'"

Senator Robert Taft was famous for his noninterventionist philosophy. "The basic foreign policy of the United States should be to preserve peace with other nations," the younger Taft wrote not long before the United States got involved in the Second World War, "and enter into no treaties which may obligate us to go to war." He later said, "We should be prepared to defend our own shores, but we should not undertake to defend the ideals of democracy in foreign countries." He added that no single nation, including the United States, "should range over the world, like a knight-errant, protect democracy and ideals of good faith, and tilt, like Don Quixote, against the windmills of fascism.... Such a policy is not only vain, but bound to lead to war."

Some argued then, and some argue today, against Taft's reluctance to go abroad and slay monsters to promote our form of government. These champions of interventionism note that without the help of France, we might not have won our independence from the British Empire. But what these advocates of intervention do not say, either from ignorance or dishonesty, is that France was acting in its own self-interest, not ours — they wanted revenge upon the British for having lost the French and Indian War. Even more relevant to our situation is that France's intervention wreaked great havoc upon that nation's finances, and was one of the principal reasons that the country succumbed to the madness known as the French Revolution a few years later.

The Perils of Nation Building

To many, our War of Independence and the French Revolution are ancient history, but our recent involvement in Vietnam ended less than 50 years ago. The Kennedy administration was determined to make South Vietnam "a showcase for democracy" in Asia. By pouring large amounts of American tax dollars into that country, the reasoning went, other nations in that part of the world would be so impressed that they would adopt our system of government. After the debacle of 1975, it was fashionable to ridicule the naiveté of the policy, but the Bush administration made much the same argument in Iraq less than 30 years later. By replacing Saddam Hussein with a "democratic" government, the argument went, other nations in the Middle East would suddenly adopt a similar government.

While Hussein was certainly a brutal dictator, it is difficult to argue that the people of Iraq are better off under their present "democratic" regime. After all, the United States was not founded upon the



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supposed blessings of majority rule, but rather on the blessings of liberty. In the Middle East, majority rule means the suppression of minority religious views. When Saddam Hussein was in power, Christians and other religious minorities were mostly protected from Islamist violence. Christians were not afraid to display Christmas and Easter decorations outside their homes. Saddam even had a Christian — General Georges Sada — as one of his principal advisors.



Minding our own business: Students of U.S. history know that our first three presidents — George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson — had differences of opinion on some things, but all three agreed that the United States should adopt a policy of nonintervention in the internal affairs of other nations.

But after the nation-building efforts of America, the new regime proved unable or unwilling to protect religious minorities. Christian businesses were shut down, churches were bombed, and Christian women were raped.

As Archbishop Athanasios Dawood of the Syrian Orthodox Church explained regarding the fate of Christians in Iraq, “Since 2003, there has been no protection for Christians. We’ve lost many people and they’ve bombed our homes, our churches, monasteries.”

While religious liberty and no government establishment of religion is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, the Iraqi constitution dictates that Islam is the official religion of the state. Rather than imposing any form of limited government and respect for minority rights, the constitution of Iraq gives government control over healthcare, education, housing, and the economy.

The Perils of Interventionism

The United States did not send in troops to oust Moammar Gadhafi in Libya, but the Obama administration backed those seeking his removal. Were they Jeffersonian Democrats? Hardly. Gadhafi’s opponents included al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other radicals, some of whom actually fought against American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan! After they won, the al-Qaeda flag even flew over the rebel headquarters in Benghazi.

When rebels marched into Tripoli, Saint George’s Church — the oldest Orthodox church in northern Africa — was ransacked and desecrated. As *The New American* noted in 2012, Christians were even jailed just for importing Christian literature.



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Again, Gadhafi was a brutal tyrant. But his regime was mostly secular. He was even friendly with the leaders of the Coptic Christian Church.

Similar stories can be told of the consequences of American interventionism in Egypt and Tunisia. President Obama even publicly called for the ouster of longtime American ally Hosni Mubarak, who was president of Egypt. “Change must take place,” Obama demanded. “My belief is that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now.”

Enter the so-called Arab Spring, in which extremist Muslims ousted, or attempted to oust, moderate dictators, replacing them with their own tyrannical regimes and with their own theocratic rule.

It was not only in the Middle East and Vietnam that American interventionism either failed to produce a freer country or made things worse. In the Ivory Coast in 2011, for example, President Laurent Gbagbo was overthrown with the endorsement of the U.S. government. Obama boasted that America had joined with the United Nations, Nigeria, and France to “support the will of the people.” Supposedly Gbagbo had lost an election, but the election was marred by massive voter fraud and ballot-box stuffing. The New American noted at the time, “Obama, France, and the UN decided to invade. Partnering with local Muslim militias, international forces dropped bombs and marched to the capital to arrest President Gbagbo, a Christian — slaughtering and raping tens of thousands of Christians along the way. Many fleeing Christians were hacked to death with machetes.” Senator Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma said the UN-Obama campaign was “a reign of terror.”

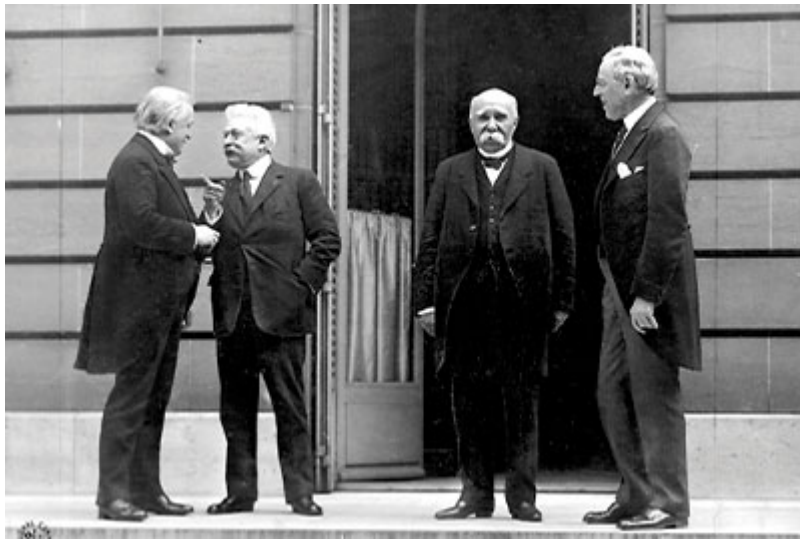
It seems to be a pattern for the U.S. government to oppose governments that are led by Christians. During the administration of President Bill Clinton, the United States bombed Christian forces in the former Yugoslavia, in favor of the Muslim forces. His predecessor, George H.W. Bush, had initiated the U.S. intervention, even seeking to jail former world chess champion Bobby Fischer for daring to play a chess match in Belgrade with another former world chess champion, Boris Spassky. (Bush’s justification was that the United Nations had placed economic sanctions upon the country. One can search in vain in the U.S. Constitution for presidential authority to enforce foreign laws.)

Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has long been in the cross hairs of the interventionists, which fits the pattern of targeting secular dictators who protect Christians in the Middle East. President Obama called for Assad’s ouster, arguing that Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people in that country’s civil war. There is considerable doubt as to whether this is even true, but what business is it of the United States which thug rules Syria? How would Americans have liked it if other countries had called for the ouster of President Abraham Lincoln because his general, William Sherman, had attacked civilians in Georgia during our own Civil War?



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Do it for “democracy”: President Woodrow Wilson was able to persuade the other three allied leaders (from left to right: David Lloyd George of Great Britain, Vittorio Orlando of Italy, Georges Clemenceau of France, and Woodrow Wilson) at the post-WWI Versailles conference to create a League of Nations — a form of world government reliant on interventionism and nation building.

Again, in Syria, not only are Christians afforded considerable rights, they even serve in the Assad government. In fact, Syria has often been a place of refuge for Christians fleeing other Middle Eastern nations. Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo, international director of the Barnabas Front (a nonprofit organization that supports persecuted Christians), has said, “Syria has been very much a safe haven for Christians in the Middle East, one of the few Arab countries where they were treated with respect and had equality with the Muslim majority. Syria also has a history of welcoming in persecuted Christians from other countries.”

Despite this (or because of this?), the Assad regime is regularly condemned in the United States by leaders of both political parties. Even President Donald Trump decided to bomb Syria after Assad allegedly used chemical weapons in fighting his civil war. One CNN host, Fareed Zakaria, said that Trump’s missile strike in Syria showed him displaying the same qualities as America’s past leaders.

“I think Donald Trump became president of the United States last night,” Zakaria said on CNN’s *New Day* program the morning after the bombing. “For the first time really as president, he talked about international norms, international rules, about America’s role in enforcing justice in the world.”

To interventionists, bombing countries that are too weak to retaliate is apparently a baseline requirement to serving as president, right up there with being at least 35 years of age.

Assad is certainly a dictator, but his replacement would not be George Washington or Thomas Jefferson. His replacement would be a hardline, Islamist theocratic government.

To be blunt, it would be difficult to argue that the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan was as respectful of religious minorities as the governments of Assad, Ghadafi, Hussein, and Mubarak. While the Taliban is certainly worse, the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan was notorious as well.

The Christian faith was brought to Afghanistan by Thomas, one of Christ’s apostles, and the church thrived for a thousand years until the arrival of strict Islamists in the 13th century, which resulted in the destruction of churches and the attempted extermination of the Christian religion.



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Still, Christianity survived into the late 20th century. After the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1979, Afghans resisted the attempt to impose communism upon their country. President Ronald Reagan supported the Afghan rebels as part of his effort to bring down the Soviet empire. Unfortunately, many in the American-supported Afghan resistance fighters evolved into the Taliban, which quickly began persecuting the Christian minority.

After the U.S. invasion in 2001, the status of Christians only got worse, as Christians were now associated with the American invaders. In 2010, the last remaining Christian church building was demolished — under the government put in power by the United States. By 2012, World Watch List, which ranks nations by their persecution of Christians, ranked Afghanistan second in the world, behind only North Korea.

These are the fruits of interventionism and nation building.

Who Is to Blame?

After Senator Robert Taft's death from cancer in 1953, a notepad with a speech he was working on was found on his desk in his Capitol office. It was the beginning of a speech arguing against intervention in Indochina.

A few short months before, Taft had warned that continued interventionist policies were changing the country. "We simply cannot keep the country in readiness to fight an all-out war unless we are willing to turn our country into a garrison state and abandon all the ideals of freedom upon which this nation has been erected. It is impossible to have such a thing in this world as absolute security."

America is a different country today than it was before 9/11. Some of the provisions of the so-called Patriot Act have increased the power of the federal government beyond what is enumerated in the Constitution, and reduced our civil liberties, without making us any safer from terrorism. As with France's intervention in our war for independence, interventionism has damaged our country in many ways, as well as damaging the places where we have intervened.

Who is to blame for all of this? Ron Paul addressed this question in a recent column. "Congress had kicked the can down the road for 20 years.... The generals and other high-ranking military officers lied to their commander-in-chief and to the American people for years about progress in Afghanistan. The same is true for the U.S. intelligence agencies.... The military industrial complex spent 20 years on the gravy train with the Afghanistan war.... The mainstream media has uncritically repeated the propaganda of the military and political leaders about Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and all the other pointless U.S. interventions.... The corruption is deep."

But in the end, Paul noted, "American citizens must also share some blame. Until more Americans rise up and demand a pro-America, noninterventionist foreign policy they will continue to get fleeced by war profiteers."

If one reads the history of America's intervention — and attempt at nation building — in Vietnam and compares it to our experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is eerily similar. During the Vietnam War, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara boasted about how "Operation Rolling Thunder," the carpet-bombing of North Vietnam, would end the war. In Iraq, it was "Shock and Awe," and Bush's secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, ran that operation. Despite all the boasting and bluffing, we ultimately failed in both places.



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It is no accident that the U.S. interventions in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were all run by members of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), an organization that has supported the creation of a world government since its inception after the First World War. All of these interventions and attempts to “nation build” are an important part of that traitorous agenda.

It is time for Americans to say, enough is enough. It is time to reject what John Quincy Adams aptly called going abroad “in search of monsters to destroy” in favor of a noninterventionist foreign policy where America is once again “the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all,” but “the champion and vindicator only of her own.”

Steve Byas is a university professor of history and government, and the author of History's Greatest Libels.



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