



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on April 17, 2017

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American Principle

In these times of endless war, the military has become a central feature of American life. On television and the Internet, we are constantly reminded of the costs of war with heart-wrenching videos of long-absent fathers returning to their families after long deployments, wounded veterans struggling to cope with new physical handicaps, and commentators debating the merits of the War on Terror. From sea to shining sea, the U.S. military is a very visible component of American life, from bustling military bases to pageantry and parades to college ROTC programs on nearly every campus.



But it was not always so. For the first century and a half of American independence, the military was fairly inconspicuous, except during the four-year paroxysm of violence that constituted America's great Civil War. For significant stretches, America had virtually no permanent professional military at all, certainly nothing on the scale of the vast professional armies and navies fielded by great Old World imperial powers such as Great Britain, France, and Germany.

This was no accident. Most of America's Founders were — like the English patriots of the 17th century — deeply suspicious of standing armies. Such, they believed, were easily converted into instruments of tyranny, to oppress instead of liberate. Accordingly, the Founders made the army difficult to maintain by requiring in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution that all appropriations for the army be for a period of no longer than two years. In other words, every two years, at minimum, Congress would have to reauthorize spending on the military, to prevent a self-perpetuating, permanent military from coming into existence. In practice, of course, Congress makes sure that the money spigots for the U.S. military are kept wide open. But the constitutional authority to defund the military remains intact.

But the U.S. military has become by far the largest and most powerful the world has ever seen, spending on average more annually than the next 10 largest militaries (including Russia and China) combined. The United States has the world's largest navy by far, and one of the largest standing armies; though several other countries boast larger armies in terms of raw manpower, none of them can compete with the quality of weapons and technology enjoyed by the U.S. military.

The destructive power of the U.S. military has been on display in the many wars fought by American forces since the mid-20th century. Today the United States boasts a gigantic nuclear force. It also possesses a fearsome array of other weapons, including conventional bombs nearly as powerful as small nukes, space-based guidance systems for bombs and missiles, aircraft that can fly more than twice the speed of sound, submarine-launched cruise missiles for which no defense has been devised, and much more.

But with all this military power, what principles should govern its use? The primary use of any military should always be defensive. The American Founders opposed the notion of waging wars for the sake of



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conquest, or even in defense of distant allies. The Founders opposed immersing ourselves in the “broils” of Europe and elsewhere, since we had no moral standing to take sides in quarrels that were properly none of our business.

According to modern sensibilities, the Founders might seem callous, unwilling to go to the aid of nations in distress or to vindicate the principles of liberty abroad. But the Founders understood that the decision to go to war imposed commitments on the American people that were not justified by casual crusading on behalf of abstract ideals or even the defense of foreign nations. War meant the expenditure of treasure and the spilling of American blood, and was therefore not ordinarily justified except in defense of our own homeland.

Nowadays, of course, war is considered just as long as “vital U.S. interests” are at stake. But who defines those interests? In practice, “interests” has reference to vague economic and geostrategic interests, defined by elite Washington policymakers.

It was Woodrow Wilson who justified America’s plunge into World War I in the name of promoting “democracy” abroad. Such a statement betrayed Wilson’s ignorance of founding principles, since America was not created to be a democracy, but a republic. Nevertheless, advancing “democracy” — the goal of international socialism, not the American Founders — has been the handy rationale for invading the likes of Haiti, Panama, Iraq, Korea, Vietnam, and many other foreign countries over the last half-century or so.

So distorted have our military aims become that we patrol the Korean DMZ zealously, ever alert for North Korean incursions — but ignore the rush of illegal invaders bringing drugs and violent crime across our own southern border. We send our troops to distant lands to ferret out terrorists, yet invite large numbers of immigrants from those same countries into our homeland with little knowledge of whom we’re admitting and why.

Yet to advocate bringing our military home and restricting it to protecting American shores is to invite accusations of “isolationism.” What was once viewed as commonsense non-interventionism — or, in the vernacular, “minding our own business” — is now viewed with reproach.

John Quincy Adams once famously warned against going “abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” cautioning that, were America ever to adopt such a policy, she would lose control of her own destiny. How completely this has come to pass!

A proper and principled military policy would reserve the might of our armed forces for defense of our own territory, including embassies abroad — but not nebulously defined “American interests.” It would seek neither to police the world nor to impose our civic values by force. It would avoid entangling alliances such as NATO, which commit us to the defense of countries remote from our shores. Most especially, it would not be subordinate to foreign command, especially an agency such as the United Nations whose aim it is to usurp military authority from member countries. In short, a principled military doctrine would reaffirm self-defense as its top priority, extricate us from untoward alliances, and get our country out of the United Nations.



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