



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on July 26, 2011

Foreign Intervention: “Moral” Attacks?

Most reasonably informed Americans know our country has long had a large number of overseas bases, but we seldom think about how extensive that network is or what it costs — in lives, in dollars, and in the simmering resentment of people living in the shadow of a foreign military power. It might seem bitterly ironic to some that a people who gained independence by driving British redcoats off their land now maintains more than 700 military bases in some 130 nations around the world. In the decades following World War II, Americans accepted our role as defenders of “the free world” against Soviet communism, though it often involved propping up and defending corrupt tyrants over people who were anything but free. Yet since the end of the Cold War, America has expanded its role as the world’s police force. In the decade preceding our post-9/11 “War on Terror,” the United States intervened militarily in Panama, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Colombia, and Serbia. Some of these “humanitarian interventions” have been fraught with unintended consequences. In their 2001 book, *Fool’s Errands: America’s Recent Encounters With Nation Building*, Gary T. Dempsey and Roger W. Fontaine wrote: “Washington said it would bring order to Somalia and left chaos.... It intervened in Bosnia to reverse the effects of civil war, but now oversees a province that is not self-sustaining; and it occupied Kosovo to build a multi-ethnic democracy, but instead has observed widespread ethnic cleansing.”



Since 9/11, the cost of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is running into the trillions, with the loss of lives on all sides numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Millions have been displaced and made refugees by the chaos of war. The principal selling point for the Iraq War was to remove those “weapons of mass destruction” that never were found. But the policy of pursuing “regime change” in Iraq, formally adopted by Congress under the Clinton administration, and the creation of a democracy in the Arab world were among the goals of “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” as expressed by the Bush



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administration and its supporters in Congress. In the same month that President Bush launched the invasion of Iraq, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) offered the following rationale in the *Washington Post*: “The true test of our power, and much of the moral basis of its use, lies not simply in ending dictatorship but in helping the Iraqi people construct a democratic future. This is what sets us aside from empire builders; the use of power for moral purposes.” Our nation’s armed forces have the constitutional role of providing the “common defense” of the United States. It is quite a stretch of even a liberal interpretation of “collective security” or “mutual defense” to proclaim a right and duty to topple governments in other lands for the sake of creating democracies in their place. Republicans once scorned Woodrow Wilson’s war to make the world “safe for democracy.” In the last decade, they embraced the Bush crusade to make the world democratic. “But where in law or morality,” asked columnist and author Pat Buchanan, “does the United States get the right to invade a country that has not attacked us and kill thousands of its people for the ‘moral purpose’ of guaranteeing them a democratic future?”

Recently, McCain has voiced his concern over an “isolationist strain” he fears is now taking “center stage” in the Republican Party. As Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute recently reminded readers, McCain during his presidential campaign of 2008 was urging confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia over its conflict with the nation of Georgia. “We’re all Georgians now,” McCain said at the time, though it is not clear how he divined his authority to confer a mythical Georgian citizenship on an American populace that had shown no desire for it. President Obama is now waging military campaigns in at least five countries — Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Libya. “Had McCain won the election, no one knows how many additional wars Washington now would be fighting,” Bandow wrote.

But McCain is far from alone in employing the red herring of “isolationism.” In a recent address to the Council on Foreign Relations, Tim Pawlenty, former Minnesota Governor and current candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, warned that “parts of the Republican Party now seem to be trying to out-bid the Democrats in appealing to isolationist sentiments.” Surely some Republicans take a less expansive view than Pawlenty does of the role of the United States in policing the planet and steering the nations to a brighter future. In Libya, said Pawlenty, we must “commit America’s strength to removing Qaddafi.” We must tell the Saudis “they need to reform and open their own societies.” Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad must go, and he should know by now that Pawlenty has said so: “I called for Assad’s departure on March 29,” Pawlenty said. “I call for it again.” And, of course, the military option against Iran must be kept on the table.

A Pew Research Center survey released in June showed 55 percent of respondents who consider themselves “conservative Republicans” endorsed the proposition that our nation should “pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate more on problems here at home.” That, said the Pew press release, contrasts with the result of a similar survey in 2004 that showed 58 percent of the conservative Republicans endorsing the opinion that “it is best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs.” The release was entitled, “In Shift from Bush Era, More Conservatives Say, ‘Come Home, America.’” The headline over the graph read: “Conservative Republicans No Longer Bulwark Against Isolationism.”

But paying “less attention” to affairs overseas does not mean a withdrawal from the world, as the term “isolationism” suggests. In the context of today’s vast array of U.S. military operations, it might simply mean no longer attempting to either support or subdue uprisings all over the world, whether or not they have any bearing on our own national security.



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Perhaps, rather than isolation from the rest of the world, what Americans — yea, even “conservative Republicans” — want today is what Thomas Jefferson proposed: “peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.” Or, at the least, what George W. Bush, the President who would “rid the world of evil-doers,” offered as a candidate: a “more humble” role for America in the world.

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