



BY PETER GOETTLER

“Contemplate today’s world had America’s foreign policy followed the path illuminated by Cato’s experts.”

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

The Compelling Case for Restraint

We sometimes hear from allies and supporters of liberty, “I agree with Cato on most everything, except foreign policy.”

One wonders why this should be. Those skeptical of government—and wary of its incompetence—should be even more skeptical of its ability to police the world and wield awesome military power without lots of collateral damage. Cato’s criticism of our government’s foreign policy, advocacy of greater military restraint, and encouragement of more careful threat assessment stand in stark contrast to the feckless and costly—in both lives and money—foreign policy the U.S. government has been running for so long.

Last month passed the twentieth anniversary of the start of the war in Iraq. Cato’s lonely opposition to the war was perhaps the Institute’s finest hour. At the time, its position was unpopular in the nation’s capital and even with many of our supporters.

But that stand was ultimately vindicated by the disastrous consequences of the war, which most proponents now concede it was a big mistake. (Including, I’m sorry to admit, me.) Those at Cato today take inspiration from this principled stand, its attendant challenges, and its vindication. This is the legacy we’re to uphold. So that the Institute’s reputation for principle, independence, and integrity is protected and, hopefully, grows.

It’s heartening that many more people across the political spectrum are questioning the conventional wisdom in American foreign policy and the frequency with which military intervention is deployed. Not so long ago, Stephen Wertheim, a prominent scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, captured this in a tweet: “A decade ago, I could not have imagined such a prominent debate between primacy and restraint would take place...@CatoFP is the think-tank pioneer of restraint. Scholars there said it all when it was all unpopular.”

Much of the opposition to Cato’s foreign policy point of view in Washington relies on caricature. We are sometimes pilloried as isolationists. But this is unfair rhetorical sleight of hand. Because if critics want to debate whether it’s a legitimate, constitutional role of the state to protect our country and defend our freedom—and possibly use the military to do so—I don’t think there’s anything to debate. But if those same critics want to debate the sub-

stance of what Cato’s experts have been recommending for more than three decades compared to America’s actual foreign policy, bring it on.

For it’s fascinating to contemplate today’s world had America’s foreign policy followed the path illuminated by Cato’s experts, rather than that led by politicians, bureaucrats, and vested interests. A world in which the Iraq War hadn’t happened and Afghanistan didn’t turn into a 20-year fiasco. A world in which America’s foreign policy received a full reassessment following communism’s collapse, rather than leaving tens of thousands of troops in Europe and Korea while expanding NATO and American security guarantees to Russia’s borders. A world in which ghastly regimes in Iran and North Korea are not so strongly incentivized to pursue nuclear weapons, by seeing odious regimes without them toppled by American military power.

The unintended consequences of military engagement can be catastrophic in blood, treasure, and the growth of the state at home, so the bar for war must be very high. It’s not enough for intervention to serve an American interest or a noble humanitarian cause; it must be reserved for only the most vital U.S. interests, truly grave threats, and in a manner that aligns with the Constitution.

Ukraine is a case in point. The barbarism brought down on the Ukrainian people by the ruthless Russian invasion is heart wrenching. But Russian aggression in Ukraine does not threaten U.S. security in any meaningful way. And, save for its nuclear weapons, Russia is a weak foe—both economically and, has now been revealed, militarily. It’s ironic that nuclear weapons are the only way Russia can truly threaten the U.S., while our deepening engagement heightens precisely this risk. A risk that simply isn’t justified by threats to the U.S. or our interests.

If we truly aspire to a free society, the bar for extracting trillions from taxpayers and future generations, much less sending young Americans to die for their country, must be very, very high, and its justification unimpeachable. As John Quincy Adams reminded us 200 years ago, Americans are friends of freedom everywhere but custodians only of our own.