

WESTERN FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE COLD WAR



I see very little in David Botsford's reply to my critique of his article on United States foreign policy¹ to which I really need to respond, partly because I would agree wholeheartedly with some of his points (e.g. the damaging effects of 'the war against drugs'), partly because most of his point with which I disagree would just require a "yes, but ..." answer (for discussing what foreign policy should be like in a libertarian world and discussing as a libertarian what foreign policy should be like in the present world are two very different things), and partly because my piece was written when there was a cold war on. There isn't now and the world is an utterly different place for that reason. So I think the most significant paragraph in Botsford's piece is the final one and it advances a line of thought with which I would not much disagree. The fact that the cold war is over has brought more freedom to the world and makes possible a much freer world in the future. It must therefore be a great encouragement to libertarians. It also means foreign policy can be reconsidered.

However, Botsford does make a couple of specific points requiring rejoinders.

ANSWERS TO BOTSFORD

My first point is simply to set the record straight about US foreign policy in the 1920s, about which I am accused of being ill informed insofar as I claimed the people of the United States were fortunate not to have experienced a "truly isolationist" government this century. I think Botsford misunderstood me. US foreign policy in this period can be characterised as isolationist only in the (narrow) sense that it tried to avoid entangling treaty obligations. The libertarian usage of the word, and the sense in which Botsford generally uses it, refers to States not having any foreign policy at all. This is clearly not the case for any US government this century.

If one examines the administration of President Harding, the quintessential isolationist, one finds that one of his first major acts was to call an international conference in November 1921. According to O-level history the conference was called to reduce warship numbers in the Pacific but this is not the whole story. The background to the conference was US concern about Japanese expansionism in the Pacific and Far East. The United States wanted to secure Japanese withdrawal from Shantung Province in China and from

Siberia and to limit the number of capital warships the Japanese could maintain in the Pacific. This it achieved through the conference, partly by offering to limit the number of capital warships that the Western imperial powers (the USA, Great Britain and France) could deploy in the Pacific, and partly through the unspoken but clearly understood threat to fill the Pacific Ocean with US warships (many of which were actually being built as the conference was going on).

The conference also agreed that the four powers would guarantee the territorial integrity of existing colonial possessions in the area. One can see why many in the United States believed that these terms amount to the very sort of entanglement the US government should be trying to avoid.

What of the other US Presidents of the 1920s? The United States line was admirably summarised in May 1925 by Coolidge's Secretary of the Navy who proclaimed that far from the USA having no interest in the outside world "To defend America we must be prepared to defend its interests and our flag in every corner of the globe."

The US was not unwilling to intervene abroad, it was unwilling to be obliged to do so. Thus in 1927 the US invaded Nicaragua. It also came very close to sending troops into Mexico and actually sent gun-boats to protect its interests in China (when it was said that the US Navy would sail a thousand miles up the Yangtze if an American child in China so much as shed a tear). All this is hardly isolationism in the libertarian sense.

My second point has a direct implication for a post-cold war foreign policy. I am invited to compare the "progress" of the world in the period 1776-1898 (the character of which was supposedly shaped by US isolationism) with that from 1898. This is an absurd contrast and it shows Botsford has missed my point. In the years 1776-1898 the world was not threatened by expansionist, totalitarian ideologies. Napoleon was not Lenin, Bismarck was not Hitler. The only power able to do real harm on a global scale was Great Britain, a liberal country. One might also note that this period was actually marked by non-totalitarian interventionism on a vast scale. I wouldn't actually idolise this period, but those who do should perhaps consider whether European colonialism led to the progress they see.

The period from 1898, by contrast, has been marked by the rise and, for which US governments deserve some thanks, the fall of two evil ideologies bent on totalitarian domination of large chunks, if not the whole, of the world. Now some libertarians write as if there is no real difference between Palmerston and Stalin. This is nonsense and does them no credit.

The world has changed. We no longer have powerful neighbours with a self-proclaimed mission to shape the world according to their ideology and willing to use force to do so. Therefore, it follows, there is no need to behave as if we had. This is good for libertarians. The West, which proclaimed itself to be fighting for freedom, won the ideological battle against the USSR and socialism. The Left has been dealt a hammer blow by this, for while they claim the USSR was no more socialist than libertarians would claim the West is free, in the battle of ideas they lost.

At the present moment the only Statist ideology with real power to motivate people is fundamentalist Islam and this, I would argue, is firstly not a force for evil like National Socialism or Communism and secondly does not and will not pose such a military threat to western civilisation. It is a mistake to assume, on the example of the Ayatollah Khomeini and Lebanese Shi'ites, that fundamentalist Islam is invariably militant. It need not be. In these two cases fundamentalism is combined with a hatred of any opposition (manifested in their detestation of the West) and a revolutionary fervour. By no means all Moslems of a fundamentalist disposition agree with them. To assume they do is to repeat the old error of lumping anything and everything that is alien into one basket.

'NEW WORLD ORDER'

So what sort of foreign policy is now appropriate for the West? One could take the line argued by P. J. O'Rourke. "To extend civilization, even with guns, isn't the worst thing in the world ... Better that we study to conduct war as decently as possible and as little as necessary. The trouble in Lebanon, South Africa and the occupied territories of Palestine should, simply, be stopped by the military



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

intervention of the civilized nations.”² There is a great temptation to try to create a ‘new world order’ in which the might of the West is deployed to stop the squabbling States and statelets of the world killing people in the name of their pathetic little nationalisms. Such an argument was recently advanced in the *New Statesman and Society* by David Marsland who argued for intervention in Yugoslavia. He called for a British declaration of war against Serbia to stop the Serbian advance into Croatia, claiming that “within a week Croatia and freedom could be saved”.³ Many find this sort of thing attractive, even those who will realise that things aren’t that easily resolved.

The Gulf War certainly did demonstrate how easily the West could demolish the fighting of even a quite powerful less-developed country. But it also gave the West a glimpse of the danger of trying to create a ‘new world order’, namely the fact that the world’s policeman cannot, if he is to enjoy moral authority at home and abroad, pick and choose to which emergencies he will be called. Our political leaders showed wisdom, if not moral courage, in having limited and clearly defined war aims.

The conflict in Yugoslavia brought the world back to the nineteenth century and it is reasonable to assume that the war in Yugoslavia is just a foretaste of what is to come. When the various nationalities, quasi-nationalities and pseudo-nationalities of Eastern Europe have become accustomed to there being no Soviet army to terrorise them it is a fair bet they will revert to terrorising each other. The European Community made gestures which, to be fair, would prove helpful if the parties actually wanted to reach an accord but had failed themselves to reach one. At least the Europeans have not, so far, tried military intervention to stop the war (despite David Marsland’s pleading above). They have had the sense to realize that plunging straight into the Yugoslav conflict would be foolish (but cannot help dabbling their toes just to show they are not afraid and that they are a big, grown-up power).⁴ Enoch Powell may well be right in saying that history clearly shows time and time again that warfare is the only way of establishing States and, in the longer term, nationalities. And since everyone seems to want to be a member of a nationality and have a State to which to belong, warfare is inevitable. To interfere in this process, he has argued, out of a sense of moral indignation, to cast one side in the role of vicious bully and the other as innocent victim, is to invite further catastrophe and prolong misery.

Now that the West is as secure as it has even been - no longer needing to fear aggressively ideological or shamelessly imperialistic States - there is no need to press for a foreign policy designed to combat the threats posed by such aggressors. In this new situation the need for intervention is diminished and is prompted by different and lesser threats.

SOME INTERVENTION, BUT LESS

The rules of intervention by the West should be kept simple. It should be discouraged as much as possible not least because, as David Botsford pointed out, it has enabled the State to grow more repressive at home. Intervention certainly has its place but to avoid open-ended commitments and hugely expensive military entanglements it must be used sparingly and for negative ends - that is, to prevent the undesirable, not to enforce the desirable. Furthermore, such intervention must cease when the ends of intervention, clearly defined and limited in advance, have been achieved.

The sort of threat which might call for an interventionist response, apart from a direct threat of invasion, would for example be that posed by a terrorist State acquiring or trying to acquire atomic weapons. This, I believe, would have been a stronger argument for international action against Iraq.

At the same time as libertarians urge a reduction (or in some cases a cessation) of interventionism they also call for an end to the notion of ‘non-interference in other countries’ affairs’. This foul doctrine, enshrined in international law, is simply armour for despots and should be denounced as such. Mass-murderers cannot be looked upon as legitimate rulers, national sovereignty cannot be allowed to protect vicious dictators. It is reprehensible that thugs and criminals have been considered by law to be above common justice. Libertarians must deplore such statist immorality and work towards the erosion of national sovereignty as a cloak for wickedness. However some libertarians, with gung ho enthusiasm for ‘free market’ foreign policy, give the distasteful impression that they don’t mind brutality

as such but just don’t want it administered or supported at taxpayers’ expense.

In the new post cold war world most of the conflicts overseas should not warrant any military action or threat thereof. Many ought to be of no concern whatsoever, save to individuals and groups who choose to involve themselves. If a country’s citizens choose to live in or go to visit a dangerous part of the world, then they should accept the consequences if things go wrong. It is really not fair that they or their friends and relatives should go complaining to all and sundry (generally via television) that “the government should do something”. Nor is it sufficient cause for intervention that, for example, a foreign government nationalises a British-owned company operating abroad. The remaining obligations of Empire (in Britain’s case the Falklands, Belize, Gibraltar) cannot be renounced while the population wish to ‘be British’ but no further long-term commitments should be given. Ideally NATO should be disbanded but there are pragmatic reasons for not doing so, one of which being that this would encourage the European Community to form an even more binding alliance.

FREE TRADE AND DEBT REPAYMENT

The motto of the Cobden Club was “Peace, Free Trade and Goodwill among Nations”. This is not an unworthy goal at which to aim, at least insofar as it is within our power to accomplish. If there is one achievement for which we should recognise Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher it is their belief in and struggle for Free Trade. Largely as a result of their efforts the prospects for Free Trade are bright. The principled case for Free Trade has triumphed completely; the only arguments advanced against freeing trade are based on ‘reciprocity’. No one of any consequence doubts that universal Free Trade would be a wonderful achievement for the betterment of mankind. And the need for it has never been greater. I sometimes have the impression that some libertarians regard the idea of discussing problems of the less developed world as tantamount to accepting a socialist agenda. Unlike them, I do, for example, regard ‘Third World’ debts as a real issue, not just another cause of the Left. The burden of repaying these often quite staggering debts falls not on those who ran them up (for the most part dictators and their cronies, henchmen and lackeys) but on poor people who saw little or nothing of the money loaned. They may well ask why they should be expected to worsen their already miserable conditions to pay off a debt they didn’t incur and from which they did not benefit. Many of the countries most heavily in debt are emerging into relative freedom which their people are coming to associating with worsening poverty and falling life chances. We are fortunate the cold war ended when it did.

I am not in favour of the debts being renounced by less developed countries, as I suspect defaulting would damage their economies more than those of the West, but I do believe there is an obligation on the West to open its markets to their goods. Not only should this stave off the risk of a world banking collapse and raise living standards in the less developed world, it will help erode nationalism and speed the progress towards a more libertarian world by spreading the ideal of Liberty.⁵ This, I believe, cannot be achieved by political and military intervention in the name of a ‘new world order’; the only sure way to achieve ‘Peace’ and ‘Goodwill among Nations’ is through Free Trade. Now the great foe of the West has been vanquished the example and the practice of freedom, both at home and abroad, can achieve more long-term good than any amount of interference and coercion. The only reason for intervention abroad is to deal with immediate and intense short-term dangers.

NOTES

1. *The Case For Isolationism: A Reply to Tim Powell*, Foreign Policy Perspectives No. 20, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1990.
2. *Holidays in Hell*, Picador, London, 1989, p. 13.
3. *New Statesman and Society*, 1 November 1991.
4. At the time of writing it looks as if a UN force will be sent into Yugoslavia in a peace-keeping role. There isn’t any peace to keep of course, merely another ‘cease-fire’ (which is not marked by a cessation of firing). This UN force will not resolve the conflict; at best it merely puts it on hold.
5. One of the most fascinating aspects of the English Revolution (or Civil War) is the emergence of a genuinely freedom-oriented political group, the Levellers. Some of their writing makes it quite clear that they derived their notion of liberty of conscience from the idea of commercial liberty - just as merchants competed to sell their goods so religious groups should compete for people’s minds.