



The Domestic Consequences of America's Many Wars in the Middle East
Remarks to a Salon of the Committee for the Republic

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In just four weeks, as the press never tires of pointing out, Americans will elect “a new commander-in-chief.” But no one claims that we will elect a *president* able to *govern*, even if she or he commands our uniquely powerful military establishment. There is almost no reason to believe that whoever is elected will be regarded as legitimate by other candidates or their followers. So unless you believe in magic or the triumph of the will, there's no basis for anticipating the end of dysfunctional government in the United States. Without radical reorganization of our politics, there won't be.

One major party candidate promises to “make America great again,” without providing any evidence that he knows what America's greatness has been or how to restore it. The other promises to double down on the very militarist and fiscally irresponsible policies that have brought America's greatness into question. The bipartisan political establishment does everything it can to prevent new or unconventional ideas from being heard. Most Americans – almost three-fourths of us by recent polls – think the country is on the wrong track, with no cure in sight.

This brings me to the subject of my latest book, *America's Continuing Misadventures in the Middle East*. I am not going to recapitulate the foreign policy blunders the book catalogs tonight. If you are interested in a list of the major ones, have a look at my remarks to the Association of Former Intelligence Officers. You can find it at **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** under “Speeches” or in the forthcoming Cairo Review. Or you can join me tomorrow afternoon when I speak on the topic at a Middle East Policy Council conference in the Russell Senate Office Building. Better yet, read both the new book and its predecessor, *America's Misadventures in the Middle East*. Both track our deteriorating position in the region over the past two decades. They do so in real time so you can see what other Americans and I got right and what we got wrong and draw your own conclusions.

This is the Committee for the Republic, which was formed out of concern that adventurist militarism would damage the traditions and civil liberties of our republic. And, sure enough, our interventions in the Middle East are the source of much of the corruption of constitutional order in our republic as well as our current economic malaise. These interventions have produced ruinous levels of debt, enriched a few but impoverished many of us, and made us ever less secure. They have pushed us toward the creation of a garrison state, militarized our foreign relations, consolidated an imperial presidency, and provided excuses for Congress self-indulgently to evade its constitutional and legislative responsibilities. In response to our perceptions of the Middle East and its challenges, we have done away with major aspects of the separation of powers and accepted the progressive impairment of our civil liberties. Debt, legislative default, and constitutionally illegitimate presidential efforts to work around these politico-economic impediments account for our chronic national indecision on priorities and means to deal with them. Who said foreign policy has little impact on the lives of ordinary citizens?

If the United States is today divided and lacking in agreed or feasible foreign policy goals, this too has a great deal to do with the cumulative burden of failed American policies in West Asia and North Africa. There is a long list of these, beginning with the total collapse of the five-decade-long American effort to broker security and acceptance for a Jewish settler state in Palestine. There is no longer a basis for such diplomacy, so there will be no resumption of an American-led “peace process.” The United States remains at odds with Iran. It is now estranged from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states as well as Israel, Egypt and Turkey, none of which remain willing to follow an American lead. Saudi Arabia, like Israel, has broken ranks with us and – for some of the same reasons – is doing its own thing.

Israel now shares few, if any interests with the United States, and is more often opposed to U.S. policies than supportive of them. Its values were once congruent with those of Americans, including the values of American Jews. They have now diverged to the point of incompatibility. The fact that the now wealthy, militarily powerful Jewish state remains on the U.S. dole is testimony not to shared interests or values but to the power of campaign contributions in an American political system that is openly venal.

The \$3.8 billion annual gift we have agreed to make to Israel for the next ten years will enable it to do all sorts of self-destructive things while buying Muslim hostility on the installment plan and guaranteeing continued terrorist blowback against us. The deteriorating prospects for the long-term survival of a Jewish state in the Middle East are the result of Israeli decisions and policies enabled by unconditional political, economic, and military support from the United States. It's no consolation that the United States will be there at Israel's side, still cutting checks to it, holding its hand, and doing nothing to stop it from destroying itself as it does itself in.

Once upon a time, anger at U.S. backing of Israeli injustices to Palestinians was the main driver of violent anti-Americanism in the Arab world. Region-wide enmity to Israel is still a factor in terrorist attacks on Americans, but now it's overshadowed by blowback from direct U.S. interventions in a widening swath of the Islamic world: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia, and Syria. These interventions have thrust much of the region into anarchy and directly or indirectly killed at least 1.3 million and perhaps as many as 2 million Muslims so far this century.^[1] U.S. support for Israel's wars in Lebanon and Gaza and Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen has indirectly enabled the death of many more. There is no plan to end to any of these wars. By contrast, there are lots of proposals for expanding them and for heating up America's thirty-five-year-old cold war with Iran.

The Constitution reserves the power to authorize wars to the Congress. But all of the wars in which we are currently engaged are presidentially ordained. As such, they are extra-constitutional – even the war to pacify Afghanistan, as opposed to the effort fifteen years ago to root out al-Qaeda in response to 9/11. And, with the exception of Afghanistan – where the government the United States installed wants Americans to do as much as possible of its fighting for it while we pay for its military – all are also illegal invasions of foreign sovereignty and breaches of the peace under the UN Charter and international law.

Invasions, drone warfare, assassinations, extraordinary rendition, torture and the arming of insurgents against established governments and populations are widely regarded abroad as constituting state terrorism. Up to now, this hasn't mattered much. But, if other countries react to the Saudi-targeted “Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act” (JASTA) as expected by enacting legislation that mirrors it, legions of aggrieved foreigners will eagerly sue the United States and its officials in their homelands' courts. There is already a bill before the Iraqi legislature that would direct the government to sue the United States for the terrible suffering and immense losses our invasion brought to the country.

JASTA privatizes U.S. foreign relations on the basis of unfounded conspiracy theories. Lawyers who bring or defend suits under JASTA or its foreign Doppelgängers will make out like bandits. But, in the end, their clients

will gain neither satisfaction nor financial compensation for their losses. Meanwhile, the United States, Israel, the UK, and other governments will spend a lot of time and money defending themselves and their military and civilian officers against lawsuits by foreign victims of their invasions, occupations, and drone strikes of other nations. And governments being sued by U.S. claimants are very likely to suspend important cooperation with the United States, including cooperation against terrorism. In terms of its probable impact on U.S. and allied interests as well as international law, JASTA is the mother of all “own goals.”

Meanwhile, as a society, we continue to misperceive the nature and sources of terrorism against Africans, Americans, Arabs, Chinese, Europeans, Israelis, and Russians. We analyze these as theological issues, rather than the politicized manifestations of social psychology that they are. Our counter-terrorist policies are misdirected. We are not being assaulted by religious fanatics so much as by young men (and the occasional woman) who fit the profile of American misfits like Dylann Roof, Timothy McVeigh, or Ted Kaczynski. Our attackers see themselves as humiliated, persecuted, bullied, or otherwise victimized. Like the perpetrators of gun massacres from non-Muslim backgrounds, they are boastful. They crave vindication, and they seek attention through spectacular violence.

Contemporary Islamism provides the powerless, disaffected youth of today with an opportunity very similar to the one young Europeans seized in joining the Crusades or young Iranians grasped in assaulting foreign embassies in Tehran during the Islamic revolution. Conversion to Salafi Jihadism magically transforms the sociopathic behavior of alienated youth into apparent support for a cause larger than themselves. Joining the Jihadi community enables the socially marginalized to redefine themselves as heroes in a cohesive subculture, cure their purposelessness and powerlessness, lord it over others, show off their machismo, and affirm a religious identity – all without having to endure the tedium of actually studying the theology they profess. “Islamist terrorists” are losers and gangbangers, not theologians. Like pirates, gun massacre perpetrators, and other criminals, they are primarily a law enforcement problem to be addressed in cooperation with other governments, not through unilateral military interventions..

Degrading the prestige of the so-called “Islamic State” by defeating it militarily on its own ground will help suppress recruitment to its cause. That’s worth doing. But bombing and strafing Iraq, Libya, and Syria will not cure the affronts to Muslim dignity in Israel, Europe, Russia, India, China, and the United States that generate Islamist terrorists. The more Islamophobia, the more Muslim alienation; the more alienation, the more attention-seeking acts of terrorism. The “Caliphate” will likely lose its territory in Iraq and Syria. But the dark forces it represents will continue to metastasize under the impetus of drone warfare and an ever-more credible narrative of a Christian crusade against Islam, now joined by Israel and the Jewish diaspora that Israel speciously claims to represent.

The “global war on terrorism” has ironically become the greatest stimulus to the spread and growth of anti-American terrorism. The U.S. Government needs to stop poking hornets’ nests abroad and spend more time and money at home, fixing all the things it has disinvested in to pay for its counterproductive wars. A more equal, tolerant, and healthier American society would enjoy greater prestige as well as enhanced domestic tranquility. It would produce fewer misfits and mass murderers. A country that went not abroad in search of monsters to destroy would attract fewer of them to its soil.

Where once our partners in the Middle East and elsewhere were poor and weak, they are almost all now rich and strong. We are not on the same wavelength anymore. Where once their problems fit into the framework of a coherent U.S. global strategy, this is no longer the case. Many of our foreign security partners’ problems are new, self-made, and peculiar to themselves. Confusion of foreign causes with our own in the post-Cold War period has led American commitments to exceed American capabilities by a growing margin. We gain nothing

and lose much by subsidizing and supporting interests we do not share and courses of action we consider counterproductive. Americans need to clarify our interests to ourselves, discuss them candidly with our partners overseas, work out new divisions of labor with them, and manage transitions to these refashioned and rebalanced arrangements.

Instead of acting in ways that multiply our enemies, we should be trying to manage down hostility to us abroad. Instead of picking fights with other great powers, we should be trying to solve the problems that are the sources of tension between us and bring our power to bear on issues of common concern. We may be strong enough to ignore the rules we helped establish in the U.N. Charter and through the 20th century evolution of international law. But by doing so, we encourage others who are growing in strength to do likewise. The law protects the weak against the strong. In the future, others may be stronger than we in some arenas. It is unwise to bet that we will always have the upper hand.

We should seek to preserve, not erode, the rule of law, which is the greatest legacy of Atlantic civilization. For this we need restored harmony with Europe. We need an agreed role for Russia in the councils and governance of Europe. We need an independent, prosperous, and nonaligned Ukraine. We need a mutually respectful and balanced relationship with China that recognizes the legitimacy of its interest in secure borders, including in the contested seas off its shores. To deal with shifting balances of power in Europe and Asia, we need greater contributions by allies to their own defense, not payments to us to provide continuing defense services for them. And we need to get out of the regime-change business. It produces anarchy and terrorist movements, not greater security or stability for us or anyone else.

These changes in our foreign policy make sense in their own terms. They are also prerequisites for winding down the predatory warfare state we have built over the course of the Cold War and the subsequent pursuit of American global military dominance. But the vested interests of our military-industrial complex keep us from extracting ourselves from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, or Yemen or seeking acceptable terms for ending the fighting in any of these places. We have no vision for a Russian role in stabilizing the European order or a Chinese role in doing the same in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, we try to bottle up both Russia and China and to convince ourselves, when they do not launch a war in response, that deterrence is working and everything is under control.

Maybe so. But without a peaceful international environment and harmonious relations with other countries and civilizations, we cannot hope for a rebirth of freedom, effective constitutional democracy, or the rule of law at home. These things are what America is all about. 229 years ago, these values found expression in the Constitution of 1787. The men who drew up that charter proved to be the greatest political engineers in human history. For more than two centuries, the system they designed and built promoted an ever-more perfect union, established justice, insured domestic tranquility, provided for the common defense, promoted the general welfare, and secured the blessings of liberty to Americans. If we cannot return to their design, we must update it in ways that remain true to their vision.

In my view, we should restore the legislative branch to the primacy and public accountability originally envisioned for it by Article I of the Constitution. This means accepting that the separation of powers has been fatally eroded. What is left produces political impasse and incurable governmental dysfunction. Congress enjoys the respect of around 10 percent of the American people. The military clock in at about 80 percent. What does that say about the state of our democracy?

With great reluctance, I have concluded that the time has come to adopt a parliamentary system. Candidates to lead the government should be members of our legislative branch, chosen by their peers – people who really

know them from having worked with them, not men or women of no experience chosen by people who know them only through spin-doctored appearances on television. A government that loses the confidence of the people's representatives deserves to be dissolved. It should be replaced through national elections that provide a mandate for a new government. In a world in which the United States has less margin for error, the qualifications of department heads need an upgrade. In a parliamentary democracy, the heads of government bureaucracies consist for the most part of people who have prepared themselves for the responsibilities of office by serving in shadow positions or previous governments. This is a model we should emulate.

The greatest blessings from embracing such change would be mercifully short political campaigns and the end of so-called debates convened by the media to entertain the public and generate advertizing revenue as the candidates pose before the cameras. Instead, the incumbent leader and his or her challenger would regularly debate the issues that divide them and their followers in question hour.

Think about it! Difficult as such constitutional reform would be, short of it will we be able to call off our endless wars, refocus the government on priorities other than those set by the military-industrial complex, retain our liberties, and remain a functioning democracy?