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**Forging a
New Conservative
Foreign Policy**

By Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D.



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Ladies and gentleman, I am not here today to talk about history. History tells us that it was a foreign policy which came to be called “conservative” by Americans that won the Cold War. A commitment in the 1980s to a strong national defense, the Reagan Doctrine, free markets, and free trade—all conservative ideas—helped speed the demise of the Soviet Union and the rise of free markets and democratic institutions around the globe. It is no accident that the Soviet Union collapsed only three years after Ronald Reagan left office, not only reducing the threat to America, but bringing freedom to Russians, Ukrainians, and others in the former Soviet Union.

No, I am here to talk about the future—about the type of foreign policy conservatives should embrace now that the Cold War is over. It stands to reason to assume that the very same principles that led conservatives to fight and win the Cold War can and will guide American foreign policy now that the Cold War is over. Conservatives were right before, so I assume that, if properly understood, their principles and advice can be right again.

But the trick is with this phrase “properly understood.” There are many conservative voices today saying many different things. Pat Buchanan wants to make “America First” by reviving isolationism and protectionism. Other conservatives call for a crusade for democracy around the globe. Still others remain more or less internationalist, willing for America to remain engaged in the world, but to a much lesser extent than before.

My task today is to lay down some guideposts for this confusing, ideological terrain. I want to discuss what conservative philosophical principles are and how they can guide foreign and defense policy now that the Cold War is over. Much, though not all, of what I will say today is derived from a review which The Heritage Foundation’s foreign policy and defense department has nearly completed. Our views are still preliminary and tentative, but they are worth sharing with you today.

PRINCIPLE AND POWER

There are two watchwords of a conservative foreign policy: principle and power. Let’s take the first one, principle. Summarizing the philosophy of conservative thinker Frank S. Meyer, Heritage Foundation President Ed Feulner says these conservative principles are: a “belief in an objective moral order; agreement that the human person is the proper focus of political social thought; the conviction that the power of the State should be limited; support of ‘the spirit of the U.S. Constitution as it was originally conceived’; and a shared devotion to Western civilization coupled with the will to defend it from inimical ideologies.”

To conservatives, human beings have certain inalienable rights—to life and liberty, for example—and it is the obligation of civil government is to preserve these rights. Civil government also is obligated to keep social order—or to create domestic tranquility—and to promote the material prosperity of its people.

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Concrete Principles. These principles may be true for all men and women, but to conservatives in America, they are embodied concretely in the American experience, its Constitution, and its political and economic institutions. As Edmund Burke once said, “Abstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found.” The principles of American liberty and rights must live and breathe in the laws and institutions of a real and existing government. All men and women, regardless of where they live, may have inalienable rights, as conceived by the Declaration of Independence, but it is the duty of the U.S. Constitution and government to protect those rights for Americans, and not for others who live outside of the United States.

In order to preserve American liberties and ensure that the obligations of civil government are met, American citizens agree to surrender some of their freedom to the state, giving it power over them and even others who live beyond its borders. Thus, the second watchword of a conservative foreign policy: power.

The U.S. government uses its power abroad, through diplomacy and the use of military force, to defend those very domestic institutions that embody and protect the inalienable rights and freedom of Americans. By preserving those institutions against threats from abroad and at home, by force if necessary, the government remains true to the principles upon which the country was founded. And it also remains true to the universal ideas upon which the principles themselves are founded. The principles may be true for all, but they are real only when protected by a duly constituted civil government in a real, existing place—in this case, the United States of America. People may come from other countries to enjoy these liberties, but the U.S. government is not obligated to go abroad to protect the liberties of those outside the covenant or social contract embodied in the U.S. Constitution.

Important Distinctions. If this is true, then I would claim that the exclusive aim of U.S. foreign policy is to ensure that Americans remain free and prosperous. Burt Pines, The Heritage Foundation’s Senior Vice President, characterizes this notion succinctly. He says that foreign policy should be the pursuit of domestic policy by other means. It is not the duty of American foreign policy to spread freedom and prosperity for others around the world. But for reasons of national interest, America may wish to encourage freedom and prosperity beyond its own borders, primarily because, as a practical matter, it may indeed be best for America that the world be prosperous and free. This is a fine distinction, but an important one: America has a duty only to itself, but within limits it may help itself by helping others.

Thus, a truly conservative foreign policy cannot be isolationist. To be so would disengage the United States from world affairs, leaving the protection of its vital overseas interests to others, and creating a danger for the very democratic and free market institutions which conservatives hold dear.

Nothing could be worse for the domestic institutions that protect American liberty and rights than a hostile outside world beyond the influence of American policy. America fought two world wars and the Cold War precisely because it seemed better to engage a hostile enemy in a foreign land rather than on its own doorstep. Liberty is a fragile thing, easily lost when a nation is threatened or impoverished. We Americans understood that the liberty and rights for all Americans could be suffocated by the national security imperatives of an isolated “Fortress America.” To be free at home, we must be safe abroad.

But to be safe abroad does not mean a holy crusade for democracy, as some neo-conservatives believe. It is beyond the capacity and will of the United States to make the spread of democracy its primary foreign policy goal. There are too many emerging democracies beyond our reach to

help. It can help in some instances, with political encouragement and economic assistance, but America should never fight for the survival of another democracy (or for any other reason) unless the protection of its strategic interests are at stake.

The U.S. government has no right to ask an American to die merely for the freedom of some other nation, or to spread democracy abroad. The covenant between the U.S. citizen and the Constitution requires only that an American be called upon to protect his own country. If American troops fight abroad to protect a democratic ally, the survival of that foreign country must in some way serve the freedom and prosperity of America. This is not some cynical example of *Realpolitik*, but a moral imperative. It is a principle of limited government that a citizen be asked to surrender his rights (in this case his life) only when the institutions that protect those rights (the civil government and its supreme interests) are endangered.

Thus, in my opinion, Pat Buchanan and the neo-conservatives both have it wrong. The one would leave us naked to events beyond our control, thus endangering our nation, while the other would smother us in exhausting overseas commitments and sacrifices which the government has no moral right to ask us to make.

PRINCIPLES OF A CONSERVATIVE FOREIGN POLICY

A foreign policy consistent with conservative principles must have a clear and simple goal: to preserve and protect American liberty and prosperity. To achieve this goal, we conservatives need to develop some practical principles or policy guidelines. I will list these principles now. Most were developed by the Heritage foreign policy review that I mentioned earlier. The review committee was co-chaired by Heritage Deputy Director for Defense Studies Jay Kosminsky, Deputy Director for Foreign Policy Studies Jim Phillips, and myself.

PRINCIPLE #1: Protect the physical security of America and its citizens.

This principle may seem obvious, but sometimes it gets lost in the discussion of foreign policy goals. The physical security of U.S. territory and American citizens should be the supreme goal of American foreign and defense policy. The U.S. government exists to secure the inalienable rights of its citizens, and without freedom from foreign domination or coercion, it cannot fulfill its duty to its citizens.

PRINCIPLE #2: Defend the strategic interests of the United States.

American security cannot be attained merely by defending U.S. borders. America has strategic interests worldwide which the U.S. government has an obligation to defend. I define strategic interests as those interests that are so critical as to require the use of military force to defend. These interests are: the protection of the American population and territory from weapons of mass destruction; freedom of the seas; access to vital resources such as oil; preventing the domination of Europe and Asia by a single hostile power or bloc of powers; and the protection of American citizens abroad.

All of these strategic interests are defensive in nature. So they should not be seen as aggressive or intending to deny the rights of other nations. On the contrary, I would argue that they promote international stability and freedom.

PRINCIPLE #3: Promote free trade.

U.S. living standards and economic security require unimpeded access to world goods and world markets. If we close our own markets, other countries will close theirs. The result would be spreading protectionism and the shrinking of international markets, upon which our exports depend. This will slow economic growth and cost Americans jobs.

Conservatives may support free trade as a matter of principle: after all, free trade is a natural extension of the conservative precept of maximizing economic liberty by curtailing the economic role of the state. Americans have a right to buy foreign products at the lowest possible price, without the artificial interference of the federal government.

But it is also a practical matter of what works best to promote the general prosperity of the country which, as I mentioned earlier, is a supreme obligation of the government. Economic nationalism or protectionism may sound patriotic, but it is self-defeating and leads to the impoverishment of the country. In addition to denying American exporters markets overseas, it saps the competitiveness of American industry. Wrapped in a cocoon of protectionist legislation, industry does not grow and adapt to changes in the world market, but rather slides into decline, which leads to bankruptcy and unemployment, or government bailouts of industry at the expense of the taxpayer.

PRINCIPLE #4: Encourage free markets and democracy abroad.

While the U.S. may have no moral obligation to spread free markets or democracy abroad, it may, depending on the cost and means employed, find it useful to do so. By and large it is true that Western-style democratic states, which have multiparty systems and limited governments, are friendly to America. Even when democracies are unfriendly, as India has been at times, they do not threaten us. By the same token, free markets spur economic growth throughout the world, creating new markets for U.S. goods and contributing to rising standards of living and economic freedom. Commercial-oriented, free market societies which strive to make life better for their citizens are not inclined to hate America or to attack its interests. On the contrary, they are inclined to be law-abiding nations which, stable at home, contribute to stability abroad.

The question for conservatives is not so much whether the existence of free markets and democracies abroad is good for America, but what means the U.S. government should employ to promote them, and why should it do it. The U.S. government should do it because in some cases it suits American interests to do so, and not because the U.S. owes the world free markets to promote world prosperity.

As for the means, they should be exclusively diplomatic and economic, as opposed to military, and they should not harm or conflict with other U.S. interests. The means at our disposal for spreading free markets and democracy abroad should be moral suasion, economic assistance, and political pressure. Thus, the U.S. should never fight to free another country from foreign aggression for purely moral reasons. It should do so only if its vital strategic interests are at stake. Nor should the U.S. impose economic sanctions on a foreign country exclusively for moral reasons if doing so harms U.S. trade or jeopardizes U.S. strategic or economic interests. Nor should it use taxpayers' money to promote foreign aid projects unless it can prove that those projects benefit U.S. strategic or economic interests.

PRINCIPLE #5: Acknowledge that government should be limited.

One of the great conservatives of the 19th Century, Lord Acton, said: "Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end." In the 20th Century the biggest threat to liberty has been big government. And there can be no doubt that an overly ambitious foreign policy, particularly when it leads to unnecessary military entanglements, poses domestic dangers because it fosters big government. While conservatives accepted the need for a huge Pentagon and a highly interventionist foreign policy during the Cold War, they should not, now that the Cold War is over, see a need for either.

The U.S. should do what is necessary to protect its interests, but it should not be the world's policeman. That would put too much power unnecessarily in the hands of the federal government and its vast bureaucracies. That power to police the world would inevitably come back to haunt us, by depriving us of our liberties and our money.

PRINCIPLE #6: Acknowledge that power matters.

We are not facing some New World Order where the utility of military power is disappearing. The ultimate arbiter of international disputes still remains military power. True, the Soviet threat is disappearing, but other threats to U.S. interests still exist and will continue to exist. Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait is only the most recent example of the continuing role of military force in settling disputes. Thus, America still will need military power and the will to use it if it is to defend its strategic interests.

PRINCIPLE #7: Learn from history.

Conservatives by nature appreciate the importance of history. America has learned two important foreign policy lessons in this century: 1) that isolationism not only failed to keep America out of foreign wars, but made things far worse once war became inevitable; and 2) that an overly ambitious foreign policy, unmindful of U.S. limits, such as in the Vietnam War and the involvement in Lebanon, can lead to national failure.

These two lessons point in opposite directions. The first toward more international involvement, and the second toward less. But reconciling these two lessons is not as difficult as it might seem. Clearly, the U.S. must remain engaged in the world if it is to protect its interests. But it must also appreciate that there are limits to what it can do. America must avoid the two extremes of Buchananite isolationism and neo-conservative crusaderism. Navigating between these two extremes should not be so difficult if the principles outlined here today are followed.

SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The term which best captures my concept of a conservative foreign policy is selective engagement. The U.S. should remain selectively engaged in regions and involved in international issues where it is clear that vital strategic, economic, and political interests are at stake. I have described these interests already and the principles listed here today are intended as guidelines for deciding when, where, how, and under what circumstances the U.S. should remain engaged in the world.

The specific policy implications of this concept will have to await another time. Once The Heritage Foundation's foreign policy review is complete and published, we will have more to say about this.

But for now I can say that many of our alliances with foreign powers will continue, but they will not be nearly as important as before. Some areas of the world, such as Russia and Mexico, will remain vitally important to the U.S., while others such as Africa will not. Some military services should be cut substantially, such as the standing army, while others such as the Marine Corps and Navy should not.

CONCLUSION

The goal of U.S. foreign policy should be to preserve and promote American liberty and prosperity—nothing more, nothing less. While this may seem obvious, it is forgotten by those who say that America owes the world its leadership, and is obligated to help the world's poor or spread democracy. It is also forgotten by those who ignore the lessons of history and believe that American liberty and prosperity can survive isolationism.

I have used the term selective engagement to describe my concept of a conservative foreign policy. To be selective is, by definition, to make choices. We must choose which regions of the world are most important to us. We must choose our fights carefully. And we must choose the best means to protect our interests, being mindful that we cannot do everything, but that we cannot afford to do nothing.

