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Conservative
Internationalist
Foreign Policy

By Edwin J. Feulner, Jr.



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A New Conservative Internationalist Foreign Policy

By Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., Ph.D.

Whenever I give a speech somewhere, I always say I'm delighted to be there—and I usually am delighted. Tonight, I feel something more, however. I am honored to be here. I'm genuinely honored to be among you who are carrying on the glorious, disheartening, frustrating, God-inspired battle for human freedom.

Five years ago, who can forget how high your hopes—our hopes—were running? We all felt your joy. The world was absolutely giddy with the prospects for political and economic reform. And rightly so. Some of those hopes have been fulfilled; some have caused heartache. So I am well aware that tonight has a bittersweet taste for some. In the words of the American humorist Will Rogers, "Liberty don't work as good in practice as it does in speeches."

Even a great optimist like myself must tell you that democracy always has a certain wistfulness—perhaps even a trace of melancholy—in its character. Why? Because as conservatives, we know that the human condition is such that Man can never reach his perfection. The practice of democracy is an imperfect art. I once heard someone say that democracy is like a raft—it doesn't sink, but your feet are always in the water.

Some of the countries who are gaining democracy have water up to their knees, their waists. But, oh, my friends, the sustaining, uplifting purpose of what you have undertaken to accomplish! And I remain decidedly optimistic about your eventual success. I look forward to the U.S. and Central Europe enjoying a free trade relationship. I look forward to Poland and all your countries being part of NATO. I look forward to the countries represented here this evening making real economic progress towards free markets for free men.

THEME: AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

In those places here in Central and Eastern Europe where reform has stalled, I believe one reason is because American leadership has stalled. America's purpose has drifted since the Cold War ended. I don't believe the United States can truly advance political and economic freedom around the world until it regains a sense of its own vital interests. And this is what I would like to discuss with you tonight. (Incidentally, I use the words "liberal" and "conservative" in the common, contemporary American usage: liberal is left and statist; conservative is right, advocating free markets and robust defenses.)

Remember the New World Order that America was hoping to achieve? We rapidly learned that it was long on new and short on order. I can almost point to the very moment when American foreign policy began losing its purpose. It was that defining day in Moscow—the day when the line at McDonald's became longer than the line at Lenin's tomb. That really happened, and when it did the communism versus capitalism argument was over.

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The tenor of the Soviet Union went from “We will bury you” to “Do you want fries with that?” But with it, too, went America’s organizing purpose abroad.

ISOLATIONIST RIGHT AND INTERVENTIONIST LEFT

The United States ever since has been searching for an intellectual base for its foreign policy.

A scraggly band of conservative isolationists on the fringe wants America to withdraw from the world altogether, while a suddenly macho band of liberal interventionists seeks to remake Haiti, Rwanda, Somalia, and the rest of the world in its own preening self-image.

The isolationist right thinks that we have few vital interests and so we shouldn’t join alliances, which only entangle us. The interventionist left distrusts America’s power and our vital interests and seeks to deny them by putting our troops and interests under the authority of multinational coalitions. Both approaches reflect a defeatist attitude of America in decline—a pessimistic attitude that America cannot hold its own in the world.

The fringe isolationist right hides behind protectionism, having no confidence that the U.S. can compete in the international trade arena. The interventionist left hides behind multilateralism, having no confidence that the U.S. can compete in values and in the integrity of its interests. Neither group has any conception of America’s true vital interests.

Before I outline for you what a conservative internationalist foreign policy looks like, let me review current policy.

PRESENT FOREIGN POLICY

The Clinton Administration’s foreign policy reminds me of the man who said he wanted to take assertiveness training but that his wife wouldn’t let him. It variously and alternately seeks to promote human rights, alleviate human suffering, recreate history by undoing coups, build Western-style nations in places that have no Western values, stop nuclear proliferation with vague agreements, and advance democracy and international law while raising the planet’s environmental conscience.

When not engaged in these activities, the U.S. State Department issues reports on America’s own human rights abuses and bemoans what it calls the historical and continuing oppression of African Americans, Native Americans, and Women Americans. Meanwhile, the U.S. foreign aid bill mandates that U.S. government agencies promote “harmony among diverse racial, religious, and ethnic groups” in foreign countries—something we can’t even accomplish at home. Elsewhere in our foreign relations, it’s mandated that we must “include the economic empowerment of women as a factor in the evaluation of projects and programs.” We’re even supposed to stop the discrimination of foreign governments against people with disabilities.

Currently, the ultimate foreign policy test is measured not by vital interest but by mushy compassion. In a September 8, 1994, editorial in *The Wall Street Journal*, Karen Elliott House asks the question: “The U.S. Military: Are its troops warriors or welfare workers?”

And listen to the words of one Congressman who supported the Administration’s take-over of Haiti: “I commit myself once again to do all I can to bring human and civil rights to Haiti, a land that has suffered so long and so much.” In other words, for this Congressman, his support for invading Haiti was the moral equivalent of a civil rights march. However admirable, this is no basis for a foreign policy.

The Administration is a hawk on Haiti, Somalia, and Rwanda—in other words, causes that require only small-scale military actions, enjoy the cover of U.N. approval, and serve no clear-cut strategic interest of the United States. And yet it is a dove when it comes to standing up to North Korea, Iran, or some other hostile power that genuinely does threaten U.S. vital interests.

I'm pleased, of course, that the President did what was necessary in Iraq, although he has yet to say that Kuwait is in our vital interest because of its oil. The vital interest is not Saddam Hussein; the vital interest is oil.

In summary, ladies and gentlemen, America now has a foreign policy as chaotic as the world itself. I do not believe such a policy can possibly offer the leadership that is needed here in Central and Eastern Europe.

So what's to be done?

My friends, first of all, the left-liberals in America need to get over this notion that it's somehow embarrassing to have vital global interests. The isolationists need to get over the idea that we don't have such interests with Soviet communism gone. The fact is, the United States is a global power, and that responsibility as a global power requires us to behave as such.

I believe the world longs for America's leadership, the kind of leadership that led Ronald Reagan to stand there in Berlin in 1987 and demand, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" I believe the world is a safer, more stable place when the U.S. is actively pursuing its own vital national interests. I believe that when America's vital interests are served, so are the values of political and economic freedom worldwide. Because to the extent that America is a strong leader protecting its values, those same democratic values are safe and more vital elsewhere in the world.

Here, briefly, are what I believe America's interests to be.

VITAL INTEREST #1: To protect America's territory, borders, and airspace.

Our borders are not threatened by the likes of Haitian boat people—a situation created by our own economic embargo of that poor, desperate country. No, the biggest threat to the United States remains long-range missiles armed with nuclear weapons. Our response to this threat should include an anti-missile defense and a broad nonproliferation policy.

If diplomacy fails to discourage hostile powers from acquiring nuclear weapons, our vital interest could warrant the use of force—unilaterally if necessary—to stop renegade nations from becoming nuclear powers. I believe the civilized world would sigh with relief.

VITAL INTEREST #2: To prevent a major power threat to Europe, East Asia, or the Persian Gulf.

Here threats include the breakdown of Russian democracy, an expansionist Iraq or Iran, a nuclear-armed North Korea. And we should not focus simply on immediate threats. Today radical nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, and—although not as threatening as its original version—neocommunism exist in places where the U.S. has vital interests.

It is a false economy to withdraw any more of our 100,000 troops from Europe because Russia is not an immediate danger. To those who say, "Well, we'll just come

back when Russia is a threat again,” I say, “You mean like we did in 1944 on the beaches of Normandy?” And to those who ask “Why should America pay anything to defend Europe or East Asia?” I say, “We’re not paying for Europe’s defense or Japan’s defense. We’re paying for our defense.”

VITAL INTEREST #3: Access to foreign trade.

The greatest danger here comes not from outside U.S. borders but from inside from those who fear America can’t compete. The protectionists who oppose GATT are pessimists about America’s future. They favor the low-paying textile jobs of the past over the higher paying technology jobs of tomorrow. They are blind to the regenerative power of the free market, which they believe in devoutly for the domestic economy but not for the world economy.

GATT was central to the Reagan and Bush agendas because those administrations recognized that the U.S. is the world’s largest exporter. Yet prior to the recent congressional elections, the Republicans seemed to forget this and some edged toward playing politics with free trade. I hope those Republicans return to the party’s long tradition of seeking open markets.

The Heritage Foundation supported the Administration on the North American Free Trade Agreement, and we support it on GATT. We will continue to support further efforts towards expanded free trade after GATT is approved.

VITAL INTEREST #4: To protect Americans against threats to their lives and well-being.

The U.S. has an obligation whenever possible to protect American citizens from terrorist activity and other international criminal activity. Yet if a recent incident is any indication, I don’t think the U.S. State Department quite understands this elementary concept.

Terry Anderson, who was held hostage for seven years by Mideast terrorists, is writing a book on his captivity. For two years, the U.S. State Department refused to turn over any documents it had on his captors, because—get this—it felt compelled to protect their privacy. The State Department said it could not give Anderson the documents unless he received written permission from the terrorists for the information’s release.

Is it any wonder the State Department seems to have a problem sorting out America’s vital interests?

As the incoming chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jesse Helms of North Carolina, wrote to Secretary of State Christopher on Wednesday—the day after our seismic elections—“It’s about time there was an American Desk at the Department of State!”

VITAL INTEREST #5: Access to resources.

The American economy depends on foreign oil, which accounts for over 50 percent of America’s oil consumption. A threat to our oil supply is a threat to our national interest. I think it was a mistake for George Bush to base the Gulf War on anything other than oil.

Liberals, of course, often believe that where the U.S. has real interests is exactly where we should tread the lightest because these interests are somehow unseemly. As

a result, America's foreign policy recently has pursued what's called "assertive multilateralism," a contradiction of terms if I've ever heard of one.

Let me add that using force multinationally is no more moral than wielding it unilaterally. The U.N. is filled with governments and dictatorships that do not represent the wills of their people. Why is the U.N. more "moral" than the U.S. Congress? Yet President Clinton sought and received U.N. approval for invading Haiti but skipped the U.S. Congress. I believe multilateralism is the abandonment of America's leadership role in the world.

Now, beyond these vital interests I've just mentioned, America has a number of important interests as well as marginal ones. The problem is that the marginal interests have been driving our foreign policy.

I've read the world press. I know what is being said about my country's foreign policy. I cannot say I disagree, but I can assure you this situation will not endure. I'm reminded of what Winston Churchill said during World War II: "You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing, but only after they exhaust all other opportunities."

So, in closing, I believe the United States eventually will do the right thing and recognize our own vital interests. We need not deny these interests. The world need not fear them. They are a stabilizing force for peace and prosperity.

The American poet Carl Sandburg wrote of American destiny—which admittedly is an odd thing for me to be discussing with a non-American audience—but Sandburg said: "Always there arose enough reserves of strength, balances of sanity, portions of wisdom to carry the nation through to a fresh start with ever renewing vitality."

I believe America's vitality and leadership abroad will return, and I hope with it will return the momentum for reform here in Europe.

