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America's
Vital Interests?

By Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D.



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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
U.S.A.
202/546-4400

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Tonight I would like to outline a conservative internationalist foreign policy anchored in the foundation of vital American interests.

I define those vital interests as developments that could concretely affect the security or economic future of America and our citizens. Before giving you my list of American vital interests, let me first touch upon the growing drift in U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. In other words, let's review current policy.

Clinton's foreign policy has been formulated by a group of retreats from the Carter Administration who were uncomfortable, unconvinced, and therefore unsuccessful in waging the Cold War against the Soviet Union. They returned to office with Clinton and believed that they could successfully reorient American foreign policy to harness the American military for what they deemed to be virtuous crusades in far-flung regions of the world. But they neglected the fact that the American people supported distant interventions during the Cold War only on behalf of important American national interests, and specifically to oppose the spread of an expansionist, ideological, totalitarian system that was publicly committed to burying us.

American foreign policy has drifted dangerously astray, especially since 1993. A large part of the problem is that the Clinton Administration appears to be incapable of distinguishing between America's vital interests and some liberal do-gooders' marginal interests. The Administration too often has resorted to questionable military interventions to promote its peculiar vision of American values in such countries as Bosnia, Haiti, and Somalia, where there were no vital American interests at stake.

The New World Order

Remember the New World Order that some American foreign policy gurus were hoping to achieve? The rest of us ordinary folks soon learned that it was long on new and short on order. Some of us have called this the age of chaos.

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. The tenor of the discussion in Russia went from "We will bury you" to "Do you want fries with that?" But with it, too, went America's organizing purpose abroad. Our prior purpose had been containment of the Soviet Union and eventually, for us conservatives, liberation of the captive nations.

Dr. Feulner is President of the Heritage Foundation.

He spoke at Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan, on February 6, 1996.

ISSN 0272-1155 © 1996 by The Heritage Foundation.

Isolationist Right and Interventionist Left

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States has been searching for an intellectual framework for its foreign policy.

A 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 the United Nations. Both approaches reflect a defeatist attitude of an 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 world economy. The interventionist left hides behind multilateralism, having no confidence that the U.S. can compete in values and in the integrity of its interests.

The real problem, it seems to me, is that neither group has any conception of America's true vital interests in the real world today.

Clinton's 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 unverifiable 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, under mandates from earlier liberal Congresses 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 accomplish or even define at home. Elsewhere in our foreign aid program, 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 discrimination by foreign governments against people with disabilities.

Currently, the ultimate foreign policy test is not the vital interests of the American people, but mushy compassion. I commend to you a scathing article in the current issue of the journal *Foreign Affairs* entitled "Foreign Policy as Social Work," which rakes the Clinton Administration over the coals for its feel-good foreign policy. Written by Michael Mandelbaum, a foreign policy scholar who is no conservative and initially supported the Clinton Administration, the article lambastes the Administration for a misconceived foreign policy that is aimed at relieving suffering in conflict-ridden regions of the world rather than promoting American national interests.

President Clinton presided over three failed military interventions in his first year in office which then set the tone and much of the agenda for this Administration's foreign policy. These were:

- ❶ The announced intention and subsequent failure to lift the arms embargo against Bosnia and bomb the Bosnian Serbs in May 1993;
- ❷ The deaths of 18 U.S. Army Rangers in a failed Special Forces operation in Somalia in early October 1993; and
- ❸ The dispatch of a U.S. Navy ship carrying military trainers and its subsequent recall due to anti-American demonstrations in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in mid-October 1993.

Under Clinton, American foreign policy has been transformed into an international social welfare program. Clinton has expended billions of dollars and scores of American lives in these naive military interventions in Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti—three countries where the U.S. has no vital interests at stake.

In Somalia, the Clinton Administration inherited a humanitarian intervention designed to feed starving Somalians. But while President Bush sent American troops to Somalia to feed people, President Clinton clumsily escalated the mission into a doomed scenario called “nation-building.”

In Bosnia, Clinton has zigged and zagged so many times, nobody is sure what U.S. policy actually is. But the same mission creep that led to disaster in Somalia is built into the ambiguous U.S. intervention in Bosnia.

In Haiti, Clinton has chosen to commit the U.S. to bring stability and democracy by working with an unstable leader, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in a country that has never had a stable democracy. Slowly, it is dawning even on the President that the only way to sustain Aristide in office is to extend the stay of U.S. troops in Haiti. Our troops have become Aristide’s palace guard. The intervention has already cost an estimated \$1.9 billion. This is the equivalent of almost \$300 for each of Haiti’s 6.5 million people.

The Administration is a hawk on Haiti, Somalia, and Bosnia—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.

That is not all.

The Clinton Administration’s feel-good foreign policy focuses on peripheral international issues, often to curry favor with special-interest domestic political constituencies. For example, the Administration actively has intervened in Haiti to court African-Americans.

These politically motivated actions are not only an unnecessary waste. They also come at the expense of important American foreign policy interests and defense needs. Humanitarian interventions and nation-building experiments have diverted attention from key items on the American foreign policy agenda.

These key items include:

- ◆ **Bilateral relations with Russia**, whose recent elections have underscored a growing anti-Western backlash;
- ◆ **China**, which is becoming increasingly aggressive and belligerent in East Asia;
- ◆ **Iran**, whose clandestine nuclear efforts and continued export of terrorism have led Congress to seize the initiative and force the Administration to impose trade sanctions;

- ◆ **NATO**, whose future now has become entangled with the future of Bosnia, a military quagmire of uncertain resolution;
- ◆ **Missile defense**, a critical element of national defense that the Administration has woefully neglected; and
- ◆ **The promotion of free trade**, which the Administration allowed to fall by the wayside when it failed to gain fast-track negotiating authority for expanding NAFTA to include Chile.

Moreover, the expanding commitment of U.S. military forces to far-flung humanitarian and peacekeeping operations has stretched thin our military forces around the globe. These commitments have also undermined our ability to respond to dangerous threats to our vital interests elsewhere. A recent article in the *Washington Times* reported that Pentagon officials are concerned that the commitment of 30,000 American troops to Bosnia and the surrounding region will seriously undermine our ability to repel aggression in the Persian Gulf or on the Korean peninsula—you see, in military and foreign policy, everything is connected to everything else. Thus, the diversion of U.S. combat troops to peacekeeping operations depletes our strategic reserves. It erodes military readiness by interfering with training to sharpen warfighting skills.

Despite the concerns of the Pentagon, the Administration is now considering an additional peacekeeping operation—the deployment of U.S. troops to the Golan Heights if a peace treaty is signed by Israel and Syria. Such a deployment is dangerous. It will be either too small to defend itself if another Middle East war erupts or too big, further straining our ability to meet other military contingencies around the world.

In addition, it will be an inviting target for a group of terrorists—or an official party to the treaty (I refer to Syria and not, of course, to Israel). I say inviting target because the U.S. troops would be an especially attractive “trip wire” to bring the U.S. into the conflict or to drive the U.S. home, out of our more appropriate role in the Middle East.

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 to protect American interests.

We have a policy of good intentions, as defined by a bunch of mushy-minded liberals. But in foreign policy, good intentions are not enough. We all know that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. As Mandelbaum noted in his article, “While Mother Teresa is an admirable person and social work a noble profession, conducting American foreign policy by her example is an expensive proposition.” And, I might add, an ineffective and inefficient one at that.

So what is to be done?

My friends, first of all, the left-liberals in America need to get over this notion that it’s somehow embarrassing or even immoral to have vital global interests. The isolationists need to get over the idea that, with Soviet communism gone, we no longer have global interests. The fact is, the United States is a global power. Responsibility as a global power requires us to behave like a global power.

We can protect neither our interests nor our values unless we remain a global power. As we approach the 21st century, we must apply the lessons we learned in the 20th century: It is too dangerous for us to hide and to put our heads in the sand.

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!" Each day we find out more and more from Soviet archives how it was U.S. strength that freed the people of the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe.

I believe the world is a freer, safer, more stable place when the U.S. is actively pursuing its own vital national interests.

Leadership that we have because we are the world's only remaining superpower—

- ✓ **Militarily:** America's blue water Navy helps safeguard access to free trade and natural resources not just for the U.S., but for all nations. The guarantee of U.S. military support for the NATO alliance is critical to Europe remaining a free and prosperous community of nations. But that does not mean the U.S. should get involved in a local conflicts like the one in Bosnia. Resolving that thorny crisis is a European interest, not an American interest
- ✓ **Economically:** Not only is the U.S. economy the world's largest, but Americans lead the world economy as both importers and exporters.
- ✓ **Educationally:** I don't need to tell you how many students from around the world come to America to study. When these students return home, they take with them experiences that bolster free ideas and free markets in their countries—and that benefits us all.
- ✓ **Technologically:** America leads the world in inventions and innovations of all kinds, and the whole world benefits. Look at the personal computer, soon to be as common and affordable as the television set. This tool empowers people everywhere to tap into the enormous wealth of information on the Internet and to share ideas unimpeded by national boundaries.
- ✓ **Entrepreneurially:** America's corporations know better than anyone how important it is to remain flexible in a global economy. Hence they are constantly innovating, finding ways to do more, to do it better, and to do it with fewer resources. When the world's largest economy does these things, it is felt around the world.
- ✓ **Culturally:** You can travel anywhere in the world and see vivid signs of American culture like popular music and movie stars. Less vivid but more enduring, however, are the ideas of democracy and free markets that the United States has been sharing with the other nations of the world for over two centuries, helping to make the world safer and more prosperous for everyone.

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 safer and more vital elsewhere in the world.

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

VITAL INTEREST #1: Safeguard U.S. national security.

This means, above all, 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.

The Clinton Administration vetoed Congress's defense bill recently, largely because it contained an aggressive program for building missile defenses for America by the year 2003. Yet Secretary of Defense William Perry just last month finalized plans for building a missile defense system for Israel in five years, using existing technology. To quote Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, "it will be a great contribution to the security" of the Middle East. But I believe it is inconsistent—no, it is mad for the United States to help allies to defend themselves against missile attacks while denying our own citizens that same capability.

A broad nonproliferation policy also should be a vital component of American foreign 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 if we decided to eliminate those facilities.

This also means maintenance of the necessary conventional forces to protect our homeland.

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

Here threats include expansionist activities by Russia against her neighbors, an expansionist Iraq or Iran, or 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.

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

Far better to keep 100,000 troops in Europe to maintain the peace than to send a million later to fight a war started in our absence. Far better to enter into strategic alliances—like NATO and our mutual defense treaties with Japan and South Korea—than to try to go it alone.

A word about China: The rulers in Beijing must learn that it is in the national interest of the U.S. to stay a permanent Pacific power. This means that we will not tolerate any forcible activity from mainland China against Taiwan. Taiwan is much more than our 7th-largest trading partner. She has also become the model for a vigorous, democratic, free-market society in Asia. We will not tolerate an invasion, blockade, or aggressive activity by mainland China against Taiwan.

VITAL INTEREST #3: Maintain access to foreign trade.

The greatest danger here comes not from outside U.S. borders but from inside, from those who fear America cannot compete. The protectionists who opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement and 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, not just the world's largest economy. Yet some Republicans seem to forget this, and some of them even have edged toward playing politics with free trade. I hope those Republicans return to the party's long tradition of seeking open markets for the benefit of both U.S. consumers and U.S. exporters.

The Heritage Foundation supported the Clinton Administration on the North American Free Trade Agreement, and we supported it on GATT. We will continue to support further efforts toward expanded free trade, such as expanding NAFTA to include Chile as the next step.

I have confidence that our great nation, with our great people, can compete economically with any country. I am distressed by those who don't have this confidence in America, that we can compete and win.

VITAL INTEREST #4: 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 Lebanese terrorists, wrote a book on his captivity entitled *Den of Lions*. While he was writing it, the U.S. State Department refused to turn over any documents it had on his captors for two years 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 chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jesse Helms of North Carolina, wrote to Secretary of State Christopher on the day after our seismic November 1994 elections, "It's about time there was an American Desk at the Department of State."

VITAL INTEREST #5: Maintain access to resources.

The American economy depends on foreign oil, which now accounts for more than 50 percent of America's oil consumption and is expected to provide an increasing share of future oil consumption. A threat to our oil supply is a threat to our national interest. Tour the oil fields of Kuwait, as I did three months ago, and you will see first-hand why we must maintain our access to vital natural resources.

Reduced to their basics, then these are America's five vital interests.

Assertive Multilateralism: A Liberal Oxymoron

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 is called "assertive multilateralism"—a contradiction in terms if I've ever heard 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 other important interests, as well as many marginal ones, constantly tugging at us. The U.S. has an important interest in promoting democracy and free markets abroad, especially in regions where old totalitarian or authoritarian empires have collapsed. The more democratic the world becomes, the more peaceful it becomes, and therefore the more congenial for U.S. values and interests. Public diplomacy—that is, reaching out above governments to tell America's story to the world—is an important tool for promoting American interests and values.

The problem, however, is that the marginal interests—not the vital ones—have been driving our foreign policy. This has undermined U.S. credibility abroad and casts doubt on the steadfastness of American foreign policy in many places. 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. That we believe in democracy, freedom, and the power of open markets is something of which we should be proud, not ashamed. We should reassert this in a positive and forthright way. Maintaining the strength and the coherent international principles to protect those values is not a luxury. Rather, it is an obligation of the federal government written into our Constitution. It is the most basic obligation of all: "to provide for the common defense... and secure the blessings of liberty."

The poet Carl Sandburg wrote of American destiny that "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, but I think it will take a change of administration to accomplish this. It is a challenge and an opportunity that we, as a great nation, cannot afford to let pass.

