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The Folly of Interventionism

by George C. Leef

[Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire](#) by Doug Bandow (Xulon Press, 2006); 383 pages, \$19.99.

George Washington unfortunately sided with the big-government federalists when it came to domestic policy, but his famous Farewell Address contained some sage advice for America when it came to foreign policy — not to get entangled in the affairs of other nations. Sad to say, most of his successors have ignored that advice. You have to go back to Herbert Hoover for a president who didn't get U.S. troops involved in foreign conflicts. The administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have been dominated by military adventurism. While there has been plenty of partisan sniping over it — Republicans criticizing Clinton's escapades in Somalia and the Balkans and Democrats criticizing Bush's attack on Iraq — there aren't many commentators who take a consistently noninterventionist line.

Doug Bandow is one of the few who do. His book *Foreign Follies* is a compilation of his essays going back to 1993 and running through 2005. Reading them and thinking about the great loss of life among American military personnel as well as among foreigners, the prodigious expenditure of taxpayer money, and the shrinkage of freedom we have had to endure, you can't help but wish that Bandow could have influenced both administrations to get them to see the folly of their policies. We would be far better off today if that had been the case.

Bandow and the few like him who in principle oppose American intervention in foreign conflicts — let alone initiating them, as in Iraq — are often dismissed as “isolationists” who want to “ignore America's role as a world leader.” To that, the author replies,

Opposition to attacking Yugoslavia, occupying Bosnia, invading Haiti, expanding NATO, increasing foreign aid, opposing the Test Ban and Law of the Sea treaties, paying more dues for the United Nations, continuing draft registration, and any number of other initiatives have been met with the

epithet “isolationist.” Rather than debate the issues, global interventionists prefer to smear their opponents.

The “isolationist” label is just a red herring. No one proposes that the United States should wall itself off from contact with the rest of the world (although some protectionists come close to that). The real question is whether it will continue with, as Bandow puts it, “promiscuous intervention” that makes us less secure, less free, and less prosperous.

The book is organized into chapters covering the *foreign follies* of the Clinton and Bush administrations, including the Balkans, Iraq, the “war on terrorism,” humanitarian interventions, the Middle East, and Asia. Additional chapters give us the author’s views on the impact of those foreign follies on our liberty, the prospects for a revival of the draft, and the role of that forgotten document known as the Constitution in determining when American troops may be sent into combat. Since the book is a collection of essays, the same point is often made several times over, but given the importance of the issues and the obtuseness of most people about them, that’s actually a virtue.

The overarching theme of the book is that foreign meddling is counterproductive. That is most clearly true when it comes to America’s big military involvements, but is also true when U.S. meddling doesn’t involve any troops. Let’s start with one such instance — Burma (or “Myanmar,” as the rulers now insist their nation be called). For decades, that country has suffered under the iron-fisted rule of a military junta. Opponents of the junta have been waging a guerrilla war for years. The United States hasn’t gotten involved militarily, but it has imposed trade sanctions. That bit of political grandstanding hasn’t weakened the Burmese government one bit. All it has done is driven the rulers in Rangoon closer to their main arms suppliers (the Chinese) and kept the people subject to this thuggish regime in poverty.

Bandow has actually journeyed to Burma (and to most of the other places he writes about) and, on the basis of his interviews with opposition leaders, concludes that official U.S. policy is accomplishing nothing good. The only bright spot he sees is that a voluntary group, Christian Freedom International, has been able to build several hospitals in areas under the control of rebel groups and helps to “clean up the carnage” from the fighting. Message: Private efforts can accomplish something whereas government efforts are futile.

American troops are often stationed abroad at great cost to taxpayers, but in places where there is no fighting. Japan is a good example. Owing to the presence of U.S. forces there, the Japanese can spend just a minute fraction of their GDP on defense. Sometimes the U.S. military bases lead to unnecessary trouble with the local population. On the island of Okinawa (where American soldiers are still stationed, a mere 63 years after the end of World War II) there was an ugly rape incident several years ago. Why run the risks of such behavior by keeping troops

stationed there? Or, for that matter, elsewhere in Japan, Korea, or other parts of Asia? Just bring them home, Bandow says.

Militarism and meddling

Oh, of course the military doesn't want to see its role (and its budget) shrink. It's no different from other bureaucracies in that respect. The military brass set forth scenarios of "regional instability" and "loss of American influence" should troops ever be withdrawn, but those scenarios are no more convincing than are those advanced by other government agencies whenever anyone suggests downsizing them. Bandow wants to see American forces withdrawn from their numerous outposts and if, perchance, the result is "instability" — so what? The United States doesn't have the responsibility to act as a referee for every conflict around the world.

Bandow's chapter on the Balkans, the site of the Clinton administration's most egregious meddling, revisits a sorry part of America's recent history that has largely been forgotten. Although Clinton and his spokesmen said over and over that the United States was getting involved for humanitarian reasons, the fact is that, as with virtually all government meddling, the results were counterproductive. Bandow writes,

Rather than promote a peaceful resolution ... Washington fomented war. It encouraged Croatia to conduct the region's largest campaign of ethnic cleansing — kicking hundreds of thousands of Serbs out of ancestral lands in the Krajina region. Then the U.S. began bombing Serbian insurgents in Bosnia to compel them to accept the bizarre Dayton Agreement, which purports to preserve a multi-ethnic Bosnia. This artificial state survives only through Western military occupation and has achieved little other than record corruption.

Furthermore, the efforts to pressure the Serbians succeeded only in strengthening the position of the tyrant Slobodan Milosevic. Economic sanctions against his government merely caused the people to rally around their vicious government, giving the rulers a convenient scapegoat for their own failings.

If American meddling in the Balkans was futile, U.S. meddling in the Middle East has been tragic. The wisdom of George Washington's advice and the bad consequences of disregarding it couldn't possibly be plainer. Going back to the years right after World War II, the United States has tried to juggle military and financial support for Israel with backing in various forms for most of the region's Islamic nations — nations that have for the most part wanted to see Israel obliterated. Trying to settle the volatile situation in the Middle East hasn't come close to succeeding, but it has created implacable enemies for the United States, cost the lives of many American soldiers, and cost Americans billions of dollars.

The war in Iraq is, of course, the latest episode in the United States's continuing intervention in that region. Bandow surveys the information that has come to light regarding the official justification for the Bush administration's decision to eliminate Saddam Hussein and comes away convinced that the war was a "grudge match" all along. The president and most of his top advisors were looking for a pretext to attack the Iraqi regime. The arguments used to "sell" the war to the world — Saddam Hussein's supposed complicity in terrorism against the United States and his government's supposed stockpile of weapons of mass destruction that might be used against Americans — have turned out to be as genuine as a three-dollar bill. Moreover, the whole regime-change enterprise has turned out to be far more difficult and costly than government officials imagined. Back in August 2002, Bandow presciently wrote, "Unfortunately, war is not likely to be the simple and certain procedure that [President Bush] and many others seem to think." Painfully correct. Like everything dreamed up by government planners for "the good of the people," the war in Iraq has proven to be a calamity.

Bandow also foresaw that an attack on Iraq would be apt to heighten anti-American hatred in the Islamic world. "Attacking Iraq," he wrote in February 2003, "is sure to inflame fundamentalist sentiments, offering yet another grievance for recruiting terrorists." Again, painfully true.

The book concludes with two important topics — the draft and the power to send American forces to war. As to the first, Bandow is adamantly opposed to the resumption of military conscription, writing, "Unnecessarily subsidizing wealthy client states is ridiculous enough; drafting young Americans so allies don't have to burden their own citizens is senseless."

As to the second, he wants a return to the Constitution's procedure of having the Congress declare war before American forces are sent into combat. It's too bad that the constitutional plan for dividing authority and limiting governmental power has mostly been abandoned over the last century. Both the welfare state and the warfare state have grown to enormous proportions because of that.

When it comes to governmental actions, people tend to lose sight of the forest for all the trees. They get immersed in the details of individual instances and never step back to take in the big picture. With *Foreign Follies*, Doug Bandow helps us to do that. The clear conclusion from his overview is that we ought to heed George Washington's advice and keep our nose out of the affairs of other nations.

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