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OPINION

Is the United States Done Being the World's Cop?

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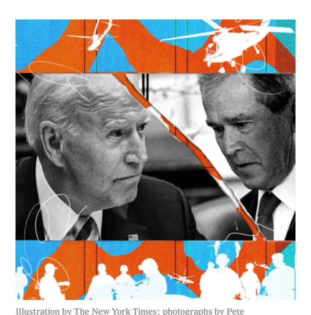

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This article is part of the Debatable newsletter. You can sign up here to receive it on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

When the United States announced its military withdrawal from Afghanistan in May, the Taliban wasted no time in launching an offensive to reclaim the country, fueling warnings of mass displacement and government breakdown. But President Biden hasn't budged from his plan to complete the withdrawal by Sept. 11, 20 years after the attacks on the World Trade Center.

"We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build," he said this month. "And it's the right and the responsibility of Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country."

It's a very different message from the one that prevailed in the early 2000s, when George W. Bush declared that "ending tyranny in our world" had become "the calling of our time." How has U.S. interest in humanitarian military intervention waxed and waned over the years, and what should Biden's approach to it look like? Here's what people are saying.

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The rise of 'the American Century'

The United States did not always conceive of itself as "the world's policeman." While the United States expanded its dominance in the Western Hemisphere in the 19th century, it didn't emerge as a global military superpower until World War II.

"The fall of France, in 1940, convinced U.S. leaders of the need to enter the fray," Daniel Immerwahr explained in The New Yorker last year. "In 1941, the publisher Henry Luce went further and proposed an 'American Century,' a postwar global order led by the values, institutions, and ultimately the military force of the United States. Luce's idea was controversial at first, yet by the end of the war it seemed inevitable."

Part of the justification for U.S. military supremacy was tactical. After World War II, U.S. leaders came to see the Soviet Union and the spread of Communism as a national security threat. "In a shrinking world, which now faces the threat of atomic warfare, it is not an adequate objective merely to seek to check the Kremlin design, for the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable," read a formative document to the National Security Council. "This fact imposes on us, in our own interests, the responsibility of world leadership."

Yet U.S. military supremacy also took on a moral dimension. "If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation," Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton's secretary of state, said in 1998. "We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future."

The logic of humanitarian military intervention gained force in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, "the unipolar moment" of American dominance, and after the Sept. 11 attacks, when it became increasingly common among conservatives to tie national security to democracy promotion abroad. "The failure of Iraqi democracy would embolden terrorists around the world, increase dangers to the American people, and extinguish the hopes of millions in the region," George W. Bush proclaimed in 2003, after the United States had invaded Iraq. "Iraqi democracy will succeed — and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Tehran — that freedom can be the future of every nation."

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There were liberal defenders of intervention too. One of its foremost champions emerged in Samantha Power, an ambassador to the United Nations under President Barack Obama and the current administrator of the United States Agency for International Development. If the United States rightfully prided itself on helping to end the Holocaust, she wondered in her 2002 book, "A Problem From Hell," why had it done nothing to stop the Rwandan genocide that left some 800,000 dead in 1994? The promise of "never again," she argued, obligated the United States to prevent atrocities around the world — by unilateral force, if necessary.

To the Times columnist David Brooks, both the national-security and humanitarian justifications for U.S. military hegemony still hold sway. "Every day I see progressives defending women's rights, L.G.B.T.Q. rights and racial justice at home and yet championing a foreign policy that cedes power to the Taliban, Hamas and other reactionary forces abroad," he writes. "If we're going to fight Trumpian authoritarianism at home, we have to fight the more venomous brands of authoritarianism that thrive around the world. That means staying on the field."

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How the postwar consensus cracked

For better or for worse, military engagement abroad and U.S. dominance more generally have become unpopular with the American public.

One reason is that national-security justifications for U.S. supremacy no longer pack the same punch they did after Sept. 11. "Americans live in a world that is safer and freer than ever before in human history — and it is not even close," Micah Zenko and Michael A. Cohen wrote in their 2019 book, "Clear and Present Safety." Decades of fear-mongering about foreign threats by Washington insiders, they argued, have obscured what truly harms Americans: substandard education and health care systems, dilapidated infrastructure, gun violence, inequality, congressional gridlock and climate change.

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The global war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq also did severe damage to the humanitarian justification for military intervention. In a 2010 article in The Journal of Genocide Research, the historian Stephen Wertheim argued that after the Rwandan genocide, neoconservatives and liberal interventionists like Power fatally underestimated the difficulties of stopping ethnic conflict and ignored the challenges of postwar nation-building. In casting military intervention as a categorical imperative — regardless of the consequences, and regardless of public opinion — interventionists laid the path for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Nearly two decades later, Peter Beinart argues in The Times, it is difficult for the United States to maintain its preferred image as a uniquely beneficent global actor. According to Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, post-Sept. 11 wars in which "U.S. forces have been most significantly involved" have killed over 800,000 people, displaced 37 million and cost the United States some $6.4 trillion. (For reference, that is about $1.9 trillion more than the estimated cost of completely transitioning the U.S. power grid off fossil fuels.) The United States also continues to export more weapons than any other country, including to five of the six most interventionist states in the Middle East.

How, then, should the United States change its approach to the world? Beinart turns to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who, in a 1967 speech opposing the Vietnam War, called the United States government "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." Rather than seeking to dominate the world, King argued, the United States should show "solidarity" with it: First, by curbing its militarism and second, by joining a global effort to battle "poverty, insecurity and injustice." In embracing King's notion of solidarity, Beinart writes, Biden "would acknowledge that while the United States can do much to help other nations, its first obligation — especially after the horrors of the Trump era — is to stop doing harm."

Many foreign policy thinkers believe that in the absence of U.S. primacy, the world "descends into a dog-eat-dog, might-makes-right environment," as the former defense secretary Robert Gates has written. But Wertheim disagrees. "The world conjured by the Washington establishment is an empty space, a 'power vacuum,' waiting passively to be led," he wrote in The Times in 2019. "The real world is full of people ready to safeguard their freedom. Today a world with less American militarism is likely to have less militarism in general."

How different is Biden, really?

Last week, Biden declined a request from Haiti's acting prime minister for military support following the assassination of that country's president, Jovenel Moïse. It was a decision that some commentators took as yet another sign of America's shrinking hegemony.

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"The world's policeman is officially off duty," Max Boot wrote in The Washington Post. "After the fiascos of Iraq and Afghanistan, we have lost our appetite for democracy-building abroad. Biden doesn't use the slogan 'America First,' but he shares former President Donald Trump's aversion to nation-building and desire to end 'forever wars.'"

Yet others, like Noam Chomsky, don't see much of a rupture. "The short answer is that on international issues, Biden so far has scarcely shifted from traditional policies," he told me in an email. Neoconservatives would have had no interest in sending troops into Haiti under current circumstances, he maintained, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, whatever one thinks of it, still leaves open the option of U.S. airstrikes there.

Chomsky added that Biden has not lifted the embargo on Cuba or sanctions on Iran, and has departed from Trump's "total sellout of Palestinians only by withdrawing acts of gratuitous savagery" like the elimination of humanitarian aid. And "in other areas, like China, he's adopted a more confrontational (and quite dangerous) stance than predecessors."

In May, Biden requested his first military budget: $753 billion, a 1.7 percent increase over the 2021 budget, which already exceeded the defense spending of the next 13 countries combined. According to Reuters, Biden's plan also "shifts billions in spending from old systems to help pay to modernize the nuclear arsenal to deter China."

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WHAT YOU'RE SAYING

Here's what a reader had to say about the last debate: How worried should you be about inflation?

Gary, 75, from Georgia: "In my humble opinion, your debate sees the trees but is missing the forest. For two decades the U.S. has exported wage inflation to China and imported inexpensive Chinese products. That era is over as the wages have risen in China.

"Second, we baby boomers have, or will soon, retire and there are fewer workers in the following generations. Fewer workers in an economy fueled by trillions of 'rescue' dollars inevitably means wages will go up. Unlike lumber prices, wage increases are 'sticky'; they may slow their rate of increase but they don't retreat. Higher wages can be compensated for by productivity increases, and some of that might happen in the long term, but we all know what Keynes said about the long term."

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