

The new president will face a crescendo of voices in Washington DC urging a restart to American interventions abroad.

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The decade after 2001 saw US military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, with the relative failure of the aftermath of the Libyan intervention leading President Obama to adopt a more soft-power approach. Adam Weinstein writes that despite previous disastrous interventions, whoever enters the White House next January will face a chorus of calls from DC-based think-tanks for the US to become involved in the Syrian civil war, demands that the new Commander in Chief may find difficult to ignore.




The events of 9/11 triggered a manic phase for US interventionism. Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, and later Muammar Qaddafi all fell from power with American military might as the catalyst of their demise. This era of intervention ended with a bang as post-Qaddafi Libya descended into chaos in 2011. Obama's second term responded to this emerging reality by shifting to a projection of soft American power. The most criticized manifestation of this approach has been the administration's restraint in intervening in Syria. In response to this perceived failure proponents of American military intervention abroad are clamoring for its revival—not in the name of security—but morality.

Proponents of American intervention as a moral duty include Shadi Hamid of Brookings, Michael Doran of the Hudson Institute, and Charles Lister at the Middle East Institute. Hamid recently wrote in the [Atlantic](#) that the “more just world that so many hope for is simply impossible without the use of American military force.” He goes on to assert that despite the mishandling of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, American intervention abroad is in fact necessary. Meanwhile General John Allen and Charles Lister recently coauthored a piece in the [Washington Post](#) advocating US military intervention in Syria. They note that the “United States should not be in the business of regime change” and then refers to Assad's departure as the stated policy objective of the US in the very next paragraph. Ultimately Allen and Lister advocate an aggressive military campaign targeting Assad that is justified primarily in moral terms.

But it is not simply the disaster of the 2003 invasion of Iraq that has proved the ill-effects of US force abroad. Rather a parade of blunders including the Vietnam War, support of the contras in Nicaragua, the Somalia fiasco, and the unintended creation of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan warn us of its risks. There is a disconnect between D.C. think tanks and the fighting men and women of the military as revealed by the lack of veterans—save the occasional retired general—present in their ranks. Perhaps if more D.C. policymakers experienced war as participants they would not so blatantly omit US casualties as a consideration of intervention. More importantly they would understand the dangers of injecting a savior complex into the military.

In war for every action there is an equal reaction. Yes, the US effectively prevented Saddam Hussein from annexing Kuwait in the first Gulf War. But had the US not emboldened Hussein through its material assistance of his brutal war to annex parts of Iran perhaps he would never have set his eyes southward. It is true that NATO slowed the genocide in the former Yugoslavia but Putin later used this as a precedent for his war in Ukraine. To use Putin's [own words](#), “the Crimean authorities referred to the well-known Kosovo precedent – a precedent our Western colleagues created with their own hands in a very similar situation.” Thus, interventions often produce long-lasting and unintended consequences.



The crescendo of support for US intervention in Syria coming from D.C. think tank fellows suggests that the next US president may well pivot towards increased intervention abroad.

- Adam Weinstein, Temple Beasley School of Law

The US simply cannot afford to intervene in every grave conflict. Therefore, the US must choose conflicts in which to intervene based on self-interest and this becomes morally hypocritical. [Writing](#) in the New York Times, Amanda Taub points out that it is not just about the number of casualties of the conflict. After all, millions died in Congo's conflict and the West barely batted an eyelash. According to Taub, a war often only gains the attention of the American public if there is "an emotionally engaging frame of clearly identifiable good guys and bad guys." Thus the Syrian civil war presents a perfect storm for US media and policymakers with Assad, Russia, and Iran as the antagonists.

What is the legacy of President Obama's sometimes bizarre mix of isolationism, aggressive diplomacy, and liberal use of drone warfare? Some critics believe these policies caused the US to lose Iraq and Afghanistan. These criticisms ignore the reality that Obama inherited two broken wars and a shattered American image from the Bush administration that was largely due to the follies of US interventionism. Others [criticize](#) Obama's achievement of the Iran Deal as holding the US hostage to both Iranian and Saudi interests in the region rather than recognizing the limited goal of the deal and its potential as a catalyst for greater engagement with Iran.

Meanwhile President Obama's preference for diplomacy has produced an interesting effect on America's number one ally in the Middle East—Israel. Netanyahu's hawkish rhetoric is enabled by a moderate White House that won't hold him accountable to actually carry out his more aggressive plans. Therefore, Netanyahu can capitalize on this US-imposed restraint to make outlandish statements that appeal to his base. In fact, the US did prevent some of Israel's more aggressive tactics from being used against Iran. According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), the late Shimon Peres said that Netanyahu wanted to conduct military strikes against Iran.

At home President Obama cannot win. He is criticized by neoconservatives for his reluctance to place significant troops on the ground and at the same time by the Left for his use of drone strikes. There is something about placing the lives and reputation of American troops in harm's way that forces commanders to consider decisions more closely. But drone technology combined with deep air support have enabled the US to vigilantly pursue terrorists without full scale invasions.

The crescendo of support for US intervention in Syria coming from D.C. think tank fellows suggests that the next US president may well pivot towards increased intervention abroad. The lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan will be downplayed as new "unprecedented" circumstances arise. After 9/11, President Bush famously said "you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Now it is assumed one must support interventionism or else risk supporting

Assad's war crimes. With this false dichotomy comes great risks for deeply flawed policy. Ultimately both civilians and US troops will pay the ultimate price for Washington's self-righteousness.

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