

The Unfortunate Rise of Retrenchment Chic

by [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey)

Dec 3, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey)

Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



Articles & Testimony

Why President Obama's second-term national security team can't shy away from getting involved in the world's difficult conflicts.

In his second term, President Barack Obama will be assembling a new national security team. As the president goes to his bench for fresh players to replace Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and CIA Director David Petraeus, what sort of leaders will he be looking for to implement his foreign-policy agenda?

Having shunned foreign intervention in the run-up to the election -- even to tip the scales in Syria -- the president may believe he was elected to pursue a policy of "disengagement." Certainly he has shown a visceral dislike for open-ended, long-term commitments of U.S. boots on the ground in the Middle East, as has been seen in Iraq and probably Afghanistan. But the reluctance to engage more directly in Libya or at all in Syria, where ground troops were never the issue, could point to a larger concern about any military engagement beyond drones and special forces -- anywhere, for any reason, in the broader Middle East.

As someone who has spent decades involved in less-than-happy foreign adventures -- from Vietnam to the Middle East -- I am inclined to sympathize with critics who argue that ensuring our status as the global "indispensable power" is too militaristic, economically unsustainable, and ignorant of real problems, such as the ascension of China and other rivals.

But I'm not quite ready to join the retro-1960s march to peace, love, and isolationism.

History and my own personal experience have imbued me with a healthy skepticism about America's ability to impose peace and spread our values abroad. But this same hard-won realism makes me wary of leaving the world to its own devices.

Like it or not, the world is an interconnected place. Even an energy-independent America must rely on trade, intellectual exchange, immigration, and creativity from around the world, and also depend on its international

network of allies. As we feared in 1917, saw in 1941, and learned again in 2001, war -- if not fended off over there -- will come after us here. No one else can really contain it -- not the United Nations, not international human rights law, not (absent our leadership and munitions) NATO. Only us.

The debate over U.S. foreign engagement must weigh the cost of involvement against the high price of withdrawal. Much of "retrenchment chic" is tied to perceived failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, rather than to military action in general, which was repeatedly successful -- with limited cost -- between 1991 and 1999. To be sure, America's recent military deployments have cost us dearly in lives impaired and taken. However the argument that these wars have plunged us into red ink is not true: Even the \$2 trillion spent in Iraq and Afghanistan is only a small part of the \$16 trillion deficit we've racked up since 2000, and our approximate 4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) for defense is still historically low and a minuscule proportion of our national accounts.

I believe that the United States can and should play a peacemaking role across the globe. Our most powerful tools include diplomacy, economic aid, humanitarian assistance, and simply striving to understand other cultures. We must resist the impulse to demonize and refuse to talk with those who see us in unflattering ways. When push comes to shove, we should not refrain from taking military action -- be it special operations missions, counter-terrorism, training and equipping allies, or even full-scale war. But as Colin Powell famously advised, our military interventions must have clear and realistically attainable goals. As I've learned in several deployments, we should not engage in wars of choice when we, not the locals, provide most of the ground troops -- and when creating a functioning state from chaos is the only exit strategy for bringing those troops home.

The American people seem to understand the subtlety: According to a new Pew Survey, more than 60 percent want us out of Afghanistan and even less involved in determining the makeup of Middle Eastern governments, while almost as large a percentage (56 percent) urge a firm stand against Iran (up 6 percent since January).

This points to a possible way forward for any new foreign policy team. The new custodians of our national security should be willing to use all elements of American power to defend and advance our core interests -- but must be careful not to launch massive new adventures for questionable strategic goals. They must understand that preserving our economic strength, reputation for military competence, and support among the American people are also core national interests as much as any specific on-the-ground success.

America's strengths are manifest. We will not soon relinquish our global leadership in scientific research, capital markets, higher education, manufacturing, and the military. We will inevitably surmount our economic troubles. And we can continue to play a smart role as the world's cop on the beat. Let's focus on how to do it, not pull back. Because there is no international security without us, and there can be no prosperous, safe America without that security. Staying engaged, including through the use of force, if done right, will cost us less -- in both treasure and American lives.

Ambassador James F. Jeffrey is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Foreign Policy

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)