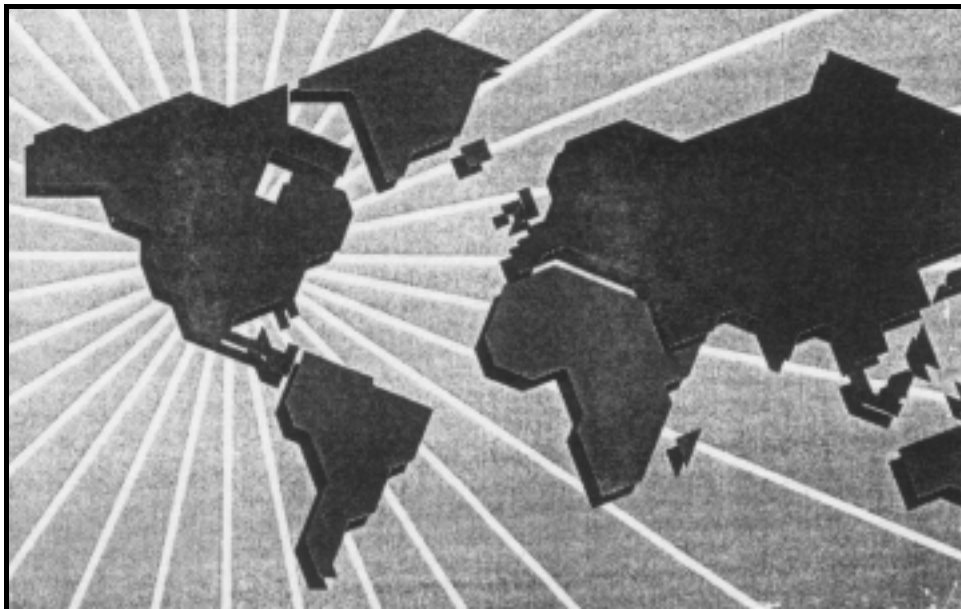


THE CASE AGAINST ISOLATIONISM

A REPLY TO DAVID BOTSFORD



TIM POWELL

It is an obvious point, but one always worth reemphasising to fellow libertarians, that we live in a world of States and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. So in addition to puzzling as to how precisely the libertarian societies of the future will operate and denouncing the iniquities of the State which stands in the way of the future, it would seem sensible for libertarians to give some thought as to the policies States should adopt in the meantime - whether 'positive' policies to hasten the dismantling of the State apparatus or 'negative' policies simply to preserve such liberties as already exist.

Most States, of course, assert that they love liberty and claim it as their own. In a few important cases one cannot dismiss such claims completely. While the State in general has proved to be the foremost enemy of liberty, it is indisputable that some States harbour considerably less enmity to it than others.

In deciding what attitude to adopt towards these liberal States libertarians face a real dilemma. It is uncontested that the State as it exists in, say, Belgium, is, as far as most libertarians are concerned, preferable to that in Bulgaria. Those living in these two countries would tend to agree. It is very easy to condemn all the works of a tyranny, but what about a State that is not? This question might be academic were it not for the fact that it is the military might of the liberal States of the West which has kept the more oppressive States of the Warsaw Pact at bay for forty years.¹

A very few foolish libertarians take the position that a State is a State is a State and that there is really nothing to choose between the USA and USSR, but this point of view is unacceptable to most libertarians, who understand that in preferring the United States they

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

are preferring a State which is not totally hostile to liberty to one which is.

So what sort of foreign policy should be advocated by realistic libertarians? The anarcho-capitalist libertarian would have the whole thing turned over to the free market as soon as possible. Others, however, believe that progress towards a libertarian society is best (and probably only) achieved via the limited State, and that therefore foreign policy should be one of the very last areas to be turned over to the market (and that only when it is clear that the consequences of free market failure will not prove fatal). If the latter, gradualist, option is chosen what sort of policy should be pursued in the meantime? Should it be isolationist or interventionist?

ALLEGED COSTS OF INTERVENTIONISM

The isolationist case, made by David Botsford in his *United States Foreign Policy: A Critique*,² is that the price of the interventionist foreign policy followed by the United States this century has been too high, in terms of freedom within the USA, and the benefits too few. Interventionism is said to have failed to achieve its objectives and therefore, it is argued, the United States should now “withdraw from military commitments abroad”.

The costs of interventionism are not, argues Botsford, purely financial. Although the US taxpayer has indeed had to bear a weighty burden to support his country’s overseas commitments Botsford claims there is another cost to be taken into account. The Government has used its foreign policy to increase the power of the State at home. Botsford suggests that these costs are inevitable, that a democracy simply cannot pursue an effective interventionist policy without restricting the freedom of its subjects.

He is right to point out the financial costs of an interventionist foreign policy; it is not a cheap option. Foreign bases cost money, fleets in the Indian Ocean and armoured divisions in Europe are expensive. Billions of dollars are being taken out of the economy and put to unproductive uses, all this is quite clear. It is less obvious what part US foreign policy has played in the rise of the power of the twentieth century State. Would the US State be any less powerful had it been isolationist? One can well envisage a scenario in which the USA, having isolated itself, becomes obsessed with the idea of National Security and, being unable to hold the line against Communism in the outside world, has to hold it within the United States itself. The prospects for liberty would not be good. So isolationism is not necessarily libertarian.

The costs of interventionism can only be properly assessed when measured against the benefits it has brought. Botsford delivers a damning judgement, that not only has interventionism this century not succeeded in achieving its objectives, but that it has in fact advanced the cause of Communism. In support

of this assessment he documents alleged US foreign policy failures.

FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

There are, however, some serious weaknesses in Botsford’s case. The first arises from Botsford’s definition of the proclaimed objective of US foreign policy, which he believes is “to spread democracy throughout the world”. Since the end of the Second World War it is actually more accurate to say that the United States has claimed to intervene on behalf of ‘freedom and democracy’. The 1947 Truman Doctrine, for example, declared that the USA would be prepared to “support the free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures”. The commitment to freedom is here made explicit and that to democracy implied. And when the ‘freedom’ is omitted in such statements it is because it is assumed to go hand-in-hand with the ‘democracy’.³ Botsford maintains that “democracy and freedom are mutually incompatible”, but are they? The dangers of dictatorship by the majority are well known, but it is no coincidence that the more democratic societies in the history of the world have also been the freest.⁴ Freedom is not an absolute of which one either has all or none; it comes in degrees and in the western democracies we enjoy a good deal. Thus in intervening for democracy the United States would claim to be intervening for freedom.⁵

EXAMINING THE HISTORICAL RECORD

A second weakness in Botsford’s argument stems from his isolationist interpretation of certain historical events. Take, for example, his assertion that US intervention into the First World War prolonged the conflict and so allowed the Bolsheviks to seize power in Russia. The United States declared war on 6 April 1917, only seven months before Lenin’s coup in November. For the argument to hold up it is necessary to believe that but for this intervention by the USA the Allies would have been forced to seek peace in the period before November. This is most improbable. And are we really to believe that General MacArthur was sacked by President Truman for advocating a quick victory in Korea when what MacArthur was actually advocating was an escalation of the war that verged on lunacy?

Nevertheless, David Botsford’s account of the (real) shortcomings of post-war US foreign policy does make grim reading. He does not exactly claim that these failures are the result of interventionism *per se*, but that they are the result of inconsistencies in the application of interventionism. For example, he argues that the US abandonment of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists in the late 1940s, through a wholly mistaken interpretation of the dangers posed by Chinese Communism, gave victory to Mao’s Red Army. He does not condemn the United States for starting to lend support to what was unarguably a corrupt and

brutal regime; he condemns the United States for stopping. Many interventionists would concur wholeheartedly. And Botsford voices similar sentiments in respect of Viet Nam. His criticisms of the US 'subsidising' of the USSR's military build-up are likewise echoed in much pro-interventionist literature.

DEMOCRACY AND THE FOREIGN POLICY PROCESS

An interventionist policy ineptly pursued, or one pursued off-and-on, is going to result in real foreign policy disasters as any interventionist would agree. According to Botsford, however, this is not merely undesirable, it is, in a democracy, inevitable. The democratic form of government, he suggests, automatically produces inconsistencies in the determination and the conduct of policies from which foreign policy is in no way immune. Rather than risk such disastrous inconsistency, which simply stirs up resentment for the Communists to use in advancing their own cause, the United States ought to decide against any involvement whatsoever.

Unfortunately Botsford's case here falls down on two more counts. Firstly, he does not acknowledge that there has been consistency in US foreign policy and, secondly, he does not show that consistent isolationism is preferable to inconsistent interventionism.

The first of these, his unwillingness to recognise any of the successes of consistency in US foreign policy, Western Europe being the best example, is the most damaging. It is just possible that without the US presence we would now see a strong and resolute Europe determined to resist Communist aggression. But is it not rather more likely that we would see instead a Europe in which Germany has been united under Herr Honecker and in which France's foreign policy bears an unhealthy resemblance to that of Finland (prior to its annexation as an SRS). This would most certainly be immensely damaging to the interests of the United States, not to mention the interests of West Europeans.

As Botsford himself realises, citing de Tocqueville, a democracy can learn through experience. Democracy may produce inconsistencies but experience has taught the United States the value of pursuing a broadly consistent foreign policy with regard to Western Europe, such inconsistencies as have occurred are not crucial to its broad thrust. And, if we return to the case of China here too it is obvious that the USA did learn from experience. In the 1950s and 1960s the United States proved itself willing to give substantial and steady support to unpleasant regimes - rather too willing at times⁶ - and Communism made no significant advances. Thus through the 1960s the US stood solidly by the South Viet Nameese, and only finally abandoned them in 1975.

Interventionism has succeeded when the Soviets have been aware that the USA might be willing and able to intervene against them (and thus the United States has

usually not needed to do so). But in the 1970s, culminating in the Presidency of Jimmy Carter, the United States was seemingly determined not to intervene, militarily, anywhere. The USSR understood this, exploited it through detente, and was able to extend its influence through the Third World as never before. If the USA had pursued such policies as the norm, the unhappy examples of Viet Nam and Angola would have had dozens of parallels, none of them in the interests of the USA. Botsford realises the sheer awfulness of US foreign policy in the Carter years, and condemns the cutting off of aid to the Shah of Iran and Somoza of Nicaragua. Yet a few paragraphs later, as a good isolationist, he advocates the abolition of such "government to government aid".

Botsford offers no convincing evidence that isolationism would have been anything other than a catastrophic failure from start to finish. It is fortunate that the US electorate has been consistent enough not to elect a truly isolationist administration this century. The extent of the advance of Soviet influence through the world shows what happens when interventionism fails (chiefly through inconsistency). That it has advanced no further than it has is due to the general success of interventionism. The failures are much more evident than the successes (which are generally marked by nothing happening!) but this does not mean that they are either more numerous or more significant.

One might make other criticisms of Botsford's analysis. Like all libertarian isolationists he is in favour of free-market intervention, but the inconsistency he condemns in present, Statist US foreign policies would surely pale into insignificance beside that resulting from the 'privatisation' of foreign policy. And Botsford's view of SDI as the universal panacea providing an "effective but non-aggressive defence for the US and other countries" is to make a claim for the 'Star Wars' programme which would astonish even its most fervent supporters. Even if the scheme/s can be made to work, the programme is designed to thwart attacks by ICBMs, not by armoured and infantry divisions. Most countries in the world have rather more need to stop tanks (for which purpose the best weapon is still another tank) than nuclear missiles.

GLOBAL INTERDEPENDENCE

Isolationism cannot be a realistic doctrine save in some libertarian future of voluntary States and anarchist communities. Meanwhile it is in the interests of the United States (that is, of its citizens as well as its government) that the USA be willing to intervene abroad. The idea that the United States is so powerful that it can afford to stand aloof from the rest of the world, that it does not need to defend its own interests beyond its borders, which must include protecting its friends, is misguided. The USA derives much of its prosperity from the fact that most of the world is not under Communist domination, that its citizens can trade relatively freely over most of the globe and can

live and own property in other countries. Botsford notes that Japan, which relies even more heavily on freedom in other countries for its prosperity, does not have overseas bases. This is, of course, because Japan was stripped of its overseas possessions after the end of the Second World War and has not been able or willing to acquire bases since. During this time the efforts of the West, principally the United States, have shielded both Japan and its markets. If Japan does not have bases it is because the USA has them instead.

The alliances entered into by the United States are usually condemned by isolationists, who argue that there can be no true mutuality in defence agreements between the United States and a smaller power. They argue that not only is this placing an unfair burden on US taxpayers, it encourages the smaller power to become militarily and psychologically debilitated. Certainly the defence agreements are expensive to the USA, potentially hugely so. Yet the fact that the United States is so very, very powerful will usually deter overt aggression against its ally. Whether or not this encourages dependency is a moot point. The unhappy example of Viet Nam might suggest the dangers of dependency but it is not so clear cut. The South Viet Nameese were, after 1965, increasingly willing to defend themselves for the very reason that the United States was their ally. Having such a 'big brother' encouraged resistance where otherwise it would have been judged expedient to capitulate. It is true that the South Viet Nameese relied on US assistance and were to collapse when the rug was pulled out from under them in 1975. At the same time South Viet Nam had been learning to stand on its own, culminating in the repulse of the 1972 offensive with very little US ground support. There is nothing to suggest that without the US military assistance which arrived in 1965 the South Viet Nameese would have been able to repel the Viet Cong. As in many other cases the choice is not always between dependence or self-reliance but between dependence or enslavement.

While the smaller power does what it can to preserve and extend its own freedoms, protects the lives and property of US citizens in its territory, allows relatively unrestricted trade and so on, it is serving the United States well as an ally. It is probably true to say that in the past the United States has been insufficiently demanding in these matters and allowed the military dimension of the fight against Communism to supersede all others.

SOME MERITS OF BOTSFORD'S ANALYSIS

Botsford's analysis is certainly not without merit. His attacks on the feebleness of much of Western foreign and defence policy, on mistakes made by various US administrations which served to advance the interests of the USSR, and the way the threat from the Soviet Union has been used to support Statism within the United States are all valid. He highlights a lack of consistency in the application of interventionism that

has been damaging and he also draws attention to some of the limits of interventionism - for there are many occasions when the United States should do nothing. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the USA should try to ensure that the principles by which it decides whether to intervene are properly considered and the interventions competently carried out.

Through its willingness to pursue an interventionist foreign policy the United States has been a net contributor to the cause of liberty. The sum total of freedom in the world is greater than it would have been had the USA been committed to isolationism. In a world where many forces are explicitly antagonistic to libertarian principles the United States is at least committed to a few of the things libertarians believe in and is not so very hostile to others. Botsford, in seeing the US interventions in terms of 'democracy', overlooks this.

Many libertarians object to State interventionism, even on behalf of liberty, on the entirely reasonable grounds that it is achieved through the violation of the liberty of US citizens. Taxation is certainly a violation of liberty but there are many worse violations. On the grounds of expediency, if not morality, the price of interventionism is worth paying if it helps keep more important freedoms alive elsewhere. Botsford says it does not. He is surely mistaken. Of course, there is nothing to guarantee that the United States will always intervene on behalf of liberty. That it has not always done so, and that when it has, has not always done so very well, demonstrates the work that has to be done by defenders of liberty, not that interventionism is never worthwhile.

NOTES

1. This question is not made easier to answer when the States of the Warsaw Pact are themselves beginning to liberalise.
2. Foreign Policy Perspectives No. 6, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1988.
3. It is argued by socialists that post-war US foreign policy has been too much geared towards, as they see it, spurious freedoms at the expense of real democracy.
4. Philip Vander Elst, in *Advancing Human Rights*, Foreign Policy Perspectives No. 10, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1988, is also rather hard on democracy. For information, Athens was by no means a representative democracy but its system of government did allow for a freer society than the despotisms elsewhere in the Greek world, let alone the totalitarian hell of Sparta. France in the Revolution was not a democracy; it was governed by what amounted to mob rule in Paris. And National Socialist Germany was, of course, not democratic. It ceased to be when it became National Socialist. The fact that Hitler was installed by democratic procedures is irrelevant.
5. Not that it always is.
6. One can, like Brian Micklethwait, rightly stress the enormity of the crimes of Communism to make the point that their opponents, whatever their vices, are worth supporting (*Why I Support The Contras*, Foreign Policy Perspectives No. 9, Libertarian Alliance, London 1988). But should we in the West really make do with second (or third) best? The USA has recently shown that it can help engineer events to get rid of the worst human rights abuses without conceding one inch to Communism. Authoritarian governments make excellent recruiting agents for Communist guerillas and distress Western public opinion, thus undermining US foreign policy efforts and contributing to inconsistency.