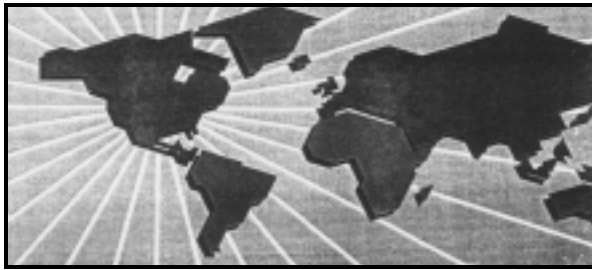




THE CASE FOR ISOLATIONISM:

A REPLY TO TIM POWELL



DAVID BOTSFORD

In his article *The Case Against Isolationism* (Foreign Policy Perspectives No. 14), Dr Tim Powell argues against the critical view I took of the interventionist foreign policy of the United States government in my earlier piece on the subject. Without seeking to repeat the arguments I made in *United States Foreign Policy: A Critique* (Foreign Policy Perspectives No. 6), I think it is important to reply to Powell's criticisms, and perhaps bring out more clearly my libertarian case for an isolationist American foreign policy.

As Powell tells us, citizens of the United States enjoy far more freedom than those of the Soviet Union. It does not follow, however, that libertarians should therefore give unquestioning support to the foreign policy of the US government. The point is that the US government has been steadily increasing its powers at home - at the expense of individual freedom - in exactly the historical period in which it has developed a foreign policy based on interventionism, and the two cannot be separated from one another.

THE "WAR ON DRUGS"

Just as the League of Nations carried out an international (and unsuccessful) "war on drugs" in the 1920s in order to extend its powers, so today Mr William Bennett, Washington's "drug tsar", and other bureaucrats, are using the current "war on drugs" to generate an increasingly hysterical atmosphere within the United States in which individual freedoms can be abolished or curtailed, and the government take on vast new powers. A Detroit shopkeeper had \$4,381 confiscated from his safe under the forfeiture laws after police dogs sniffed cocaine residue on three \$1 bills in his cash register: the authorities considered this alone "probable cause" to connect him to drugs. In October 1989, 65 gardening stores in 22 states, each of which had advertised gardening equipment in the magazine *High Times*, were raided, and their customer lists seized, in an effort to close down *High Times* by frightening off its advertisers - a violation of the First Amendment to the US Constitution - and also to harrass customers who appeared on the seized lists. US banks are now required to inform the Treasury of all money transfers from the US to other countries, all cash transactions of \$10,000 or more, and all purchases of money orders or traveller's cheques of \$3,000 or more; foreign banks dealing in dollars have to report cash transactions of \$10,000 or more. This data will be processed at a

new Financial Crimes Enforcement Center, which will also have access to all the data of the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Reserve, the Customs Services, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the State Department, and the financial agencies of most states.¹ The potential for tyranny need not, I hope, be pointed out to libertarians.

And the use of the "war on drugs" as the main rationalisation for US military and political intervention abroad has exactly coincided with the collapse of the Soviet empire, the activities of which were previously the main justification for that policy. The Bush administration sought to justify its invasion of Panama in December 1989 on the grounds that General Noriega, who had been installed and maintained in power over many years by the US government, had become a drug dealer - and is even organising what can only be described as a political show trial to support this view. Washington is tailoring its military and economic aid programmes to foreign governments to ensure that the latter carry out virtual civil wars against local drug dealers and producers (many of whom are simply peasants trying to make a living) under American direction and with the use of US military equipment and personnel. The US Office of National Drug Control Policy is, for instance, breeding special coca-leaf eating caterpillars which are to be air-dropped into supposedly drug producing areas of Peru.² In one case earlier this year, US aircraft, attempting to destroy poppy fields in Pakistan, devastated a large area of food producing farmland with crop destroying chemicals as a result of a navigational error. Under the banner of the "war on drugs", the scope for increased US state intervention both at home and abroad is virtually limitless.

WORLDWIDE INTERVENTION IS NECESSARILY UNLIBERTARIAN

Powell is correct in saying that "isolationism is not necessarily libertarian".³ Isolationism can be practised by both tyrannies and the governments of relatively free societies, as the examples of Albania and Switzerland demonstrate. But a policy of world wide interventionism, as carried out by the United States government, is necessarily unlibertarian, given the nature of international politics as they are in the real world. Throughout history, the governments of powerful nations have sought to expand by seizing the land and resources of other countries and peoples, either by force or under the threat of force. Such expansion may be carried out as straightforward robbery with no attempt at justification, or in the name of some political or religious idea, or by reference to legal claims of varying degrees of validity. The conquest may be barbaric, involving the slaughter or enslavement of the conquered, or it may impose on them a more civilised regime than the one they lived under previously. Whatever the case this is the overwhelming reason why borders and relations between states have changed over the millennia, and is as true today as it was in prehistoric times. Now I, for one, would like to see this tendency replaced with market and other voluntary methods for the resolution of disputes, but for the time being we have to face the world as it is.

The interventionist foreign policy of the United States regards any change in borders which occurs along these lines as an act of aggression, in which, in certain circumstances, the US has a duty to intervene militarily against the aggressor. To take the most obvious contemporary example, the US has responded to the Iraqi government's annexation of Kuwait by persuading Saudi Arabia to accept large American military forces to defend it (along with British and other Western forces), and is attempting to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime by the institution of an armed blockade around Iraq and Kuwait. Besides making the observation that in 1980 Washington supported Saddam's invasion of Iran (which was carried out in a similar manner to his present Kuwaiti adventure), and in 1987-88 sent warships to the Gulf to rescue Saddam from the Iranian advance across Iraqi territory, it is clear that the interventionist policy of the US government effectively writes a blank cheque on the resources of the American taxpayer and, potentially, on the lives of US and allied servicemen, whenever and wherever a crisis should arise such as that now transpiring in the Gulf. In effect, US citizens are made prisoners of the likes of Saddam, as Washington has to have at its disposal, at the absolute minimum, the private property to be seized by taxation) and lives (to be seized by conscription) of American citizens in order to prosecute its interventions, quite apart

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



THE WISHES OF US VOTERS OVERRULED

I have rarely read any statement by a libertarian so ill-informed as Powell's claim that "It is fortunate that the US electorate has been consistent enough not to elect a truly isolationist administration this century."⁵ It is all the more remarkable that such an assertion should come from a PhD in history. Surely the comrade is in dire need of some political re-education! I would urge Brother Powell to examine not only the historical record, but also to apply elementary libertarian analysis to the making of US foreign policy in our time.

Leaving aside the question of whether interventionism would be justified even if the electorate had voted for it in advance, the fact is that the wishes of American voters have been repeatedly overruled by political leaders who have developed interventionist foreign policies which directly contradict those on which they were elected. From 1914 to 1917, American public opinion overwhelmingly opposed intervention in the First World War. In November 1916, Woodrow Wilson was re-elected President on the slogan "He kept us out of war", and a firm pledge to remain neutral. In April 1917, however, a month after his inauguration, amid a campaign of war hysteria whipped up by the government, Wilson asked Congress for, and received, a declaration of war against Germany. None of the Wilsonian schemes which US intervention attempted with such disastrous results to impose by force from 1917 to 1919 - "making the world safe for democracy", the Fourteen Points, the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations, and so on - and for which so many were ever subjected to electoral scrutiny before being carried out. Indeed, in 1919, in a reflection of public opinion, Congress refused to ratify Versailles or bring the United States into the League, and in the presidential election of 1920 such was the rejection of interventionism that Warren G. Harding, the Republican candidate, a little known Ohio Senator who stood on an isolationist platform, won more than 60% of the vote, the largest landslide in US electoral history to that time.

US public opinion remained firmly and overwhelmingly isolationist throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and remained so after the outbreak of war in September 1939. Franklin D. Roosevelt, however, covertly made every possible attempt to bring the United States into the Second World War, and repeatedly lied to the voters about his intentions. On November 3rd, 1940, to take a single example, during the presidential election campaign, he declared: "The first purpose of our foreign policy is to keep our country out of war." After he was re-elected, his administration intensified its war drive against both Japan and Germany, with the result that the US was brought into the war, even though opinion polls showed that 80% of Americans still opposed intervention at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

From 1947 the Truman administration had to try and justify its new and unlimited Cold War interventionism, involving commitments on all continents, to a reluctant Congress and public, who had been led to believe that the United States would finally be permitted to return to non-intervention. Since that time, the Republicans and Democrats have adopted a "bipartisan" interventionist foreign policy, which has meant that the electorate has had no opportunity to vote for an isolationist strategy from the only two parties which have any serious chance of being elected. Indeed, foreign affairs has been the area of American policy above all others which has been most monopolised by professionals and most immune to any form of popular or electoral influence. In 1950 Truman sent US forces into Korea without the prior approval of Congress, as did Lyndon Johnson into Vietnam in 1965. Needless to say, the voters were never consulted beforehand about whether they wished to be involved in these conflicts. To take another example, those who re-elected Richard Nixon as President in 1972 could have had no idea that his Presidency would see a rapprochement between the US and communist China, nor the policies of "detente" with the Soviet Union, both of which were developed by career bureaucrats who would doubtless have been profoundly shocked at the idea that their policies should be subjected to any form of public interference or electoral veto.

Indeed, it has often been through the deliberately misleading exploitation of "outrages" that American public opinion has been conditioned to accept intervention in foreign wars.

Nobody knows for certain whether the explosion on board the US warship the *Maine* in Havana harbour on February 15th 1898, in which 266 sailors were killed, was accidental or deliberate (or in the latter case, by whom it was caused), but the incident was used by the US government and its supporters - for whom it came at a very convenient moment - to create an hysterical atmosphere in which the US initiated a war against Spain and its colonies, and thus broke with the tradition of non-intervention.⁶

The sinking of the British ship the *Lusitania* by a German U-boat on May 7th 1915, with the loss of 1,198 lives, including many Americans, was presented as a barbaric atrocity against unarmed civilians, and helped pave the way for US intervention in the First World War. In fact the *Lusitania* was an armed vessel (listed as such in British naval publications), was transporting weapons for the use of the British armed forces, and was sunk in a war zone clearly delineated by the German government, which had moreover placed prominent advertisements in US newspapers warning Americans not to travel on British or other Allied ships.⁷

The evidence is convincing that on December 7th 1941 the Roosevelt administration deliberately withheld from the commanders of the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor information about the impending Japanese attack, which killed 2,403 American servicemen, in order that America should be brought into the Second World War by a sense of outrage at the attack. Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, admitted in his diary entry for November 25th 1941, discussing a meeting with Roosevelt and other cabinet members at the White House on that day, that "The question was how we should maneuver them" [the Japanese] "into firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves."⁸

On August 2nd 1964 the Johnson administration announced that two North Vietnamese gunboats had launched an unprovoked attack on the US destroyer the *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin, 30 miles from North Vietnam. In response, the US launched 64 bombers against North Vietnam in reprisal raids, and Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which Johnson later interpreted as empowering him to bring US forces (mainly conscripts) directly into the Vietnam war on a massive scale. It was later disclosed that the *Maddox* had been accompanying South Vietnamese boats which were shelling the North Vietnamese coast from within ten miles offshore, and that the North Vietnamese gunboats may not have fired a single shot while chasing the destroyer out to sea.⁹

I would also invite Powell to use the insights of the school of public choice, which examines the phenomenon of government bureaucracy acting as an interest group in its own right, often in contradiction or distortion of the policies for which the electorate has voted, in examining the making of American foreign policy. In the United States, the State Department is the official body responsible for developing and carrying out foreign policy, and its career bureaucrats and diplomats, who remain in positions of authority for decades, exercise far more power over the actual workings of foreign policy than presidential administrations and congresses which are voted out every four or eight years. The *esprit de corps* of the State Department is that of a haughty elite which zealously guards its privileged position from any and all outside influences, and particularly from the taxpayers who finance it.

STATE DEPARTMENT COLLECTIVISM

Such is its power and autonomy - exceeding that of any other department of the US government - that it has been described with considerable accuracy as a "state within a state". The economic and political outlook the State Department is rigidly statist and collectivist, an unreformed socialism that goes beyond "liberalism", in the current American misuse of the term. Its employees transfer the socialist economic teaching they receive at Ivy League universities (in which their exposure to free market and individualist scholarship is negligible) into their work in the construction of foreign policy, and this is true whatever the outlook of the elected government.

In 1981 the United States' programme of assistance for El Salvador, which was facing a Marxist guerilla war, included an obligation on the part of the El Salvadorean government to accept an economic strategy which included the nationalisation of all banks, the imposi-

tion of a state monopoly in foreign trade and a “land reform” programme which meant the massive confiscation of private property. The other Central American governments which were facing similar uprisings rejected such schemes of US “assistance”, and were each more successful than El Salvador in defeating the communist challenge. While the Reagan administration, which had been elected on a platform of carrying out radical free market policies, had initiated the programme of assistance to El Salvador, the details of that programme were worked out by State Department officials who held economic views of the sort which were already being discarded wholesale by socialist governments and parties in western Europe.

US FOREIGN POLICY SHOULD BE PRIVATISED

It is remarkable that so many libertarians, including Powell, oppose the privatisation of American foreign policy. The US government maintains a state monopoly on foreign policy which is far more rigid than that of Britain or France. Any American who serves as a mercenary with any foreign armed force (whether governmental or private) stands to lose his citizenship, and the planning of private military involvement abroad is a serious criminal offence resulting in long prison sentences. By contrast, British and French citizens who fight as mercenaries abroad are breaking no law of their own countries, and mercenary recruiting and the planning of campaigns are carried out from Britain and France without legal restriction. The activities of such entrepreneurs of foreign policy as Colonel “Mad Mike” Hoare and Colonel Bob Denard are far more in accordance with libertarian principles than those of any interventionist government: they fight for money for paying customers, ask for no subsidy or forced military service from the taxpayer, and bring no adverse repercussions on their compatriots, whom they do not in any way claim to represent. It is hardly surprising that the US government has outlawed such activities in the same way as, for example, in 1845 it closed down private enterprise postal services when the latter attracted customers by providing a cheaper, faster and more efficient service than that of the US Post Office. Why is a state monopoly in foreign policy any more acceptable than one in postal deliveries?

Privatisation is, of course, the way forward in American foreign policy. In the first instance, this could be manifested by contracting out America’s existing foreign and, indeed, domestic defence commitments to private armed forces, for which the countries concerned - particularly in the case of wealthy ones - should be required to contribute a share. Writing from Saudi Arabia about the present Gulf crisis, the American journalist Charles Glass mentions Sheikh Bynani, an adviser to Prince Faisal, who recently lost 114 million francs (the equivalent of £11.4 million) on a trip to the casinos of Monte Carlo and Cannes. “Are the American boys and girls I see here, as well as boys from Britain and Egypt, going to fight, kill and die so the sheikh can try his luck again with the casinos of the Cote d’Azur?” he asks.¹⁰

The question is, I think, a reasonable one on libertarian grounds. While no libertarian would, of course, dispute the sheikh’s right to dispose of his own money as he chooses (at least insofar as it has not been gained by force or fraud), it is worth pointing out the remarkable discrepancy in the thinking of those conservative “free marketeers” in Britain and the US who on the one hand deplore the granting of handouts and services at the taxpayers’ expense to wealthy individuals at home (for example, through loopholes in the welfare laws), while being more than eager for British or American taxpayers to take the full burden of the cost of defending countries as rich as Saudi Arabia.

In addition, citizens of the United States, and all other western countries, should be free to engage in “foreign policies” of their own, including organising or participating in military campaigning abroad, insofar as they are understood to be acting strictly in their own right. Powell argues that this would create greater “inconsistencies” than the present statist system. Indeed it would, in the same way as consumers and providers of goods or services within any market are “inconsistent” with one another; this is, after all, what makes a market economy possible. The difference would be that nobody would be forced to pay for or die for anybody else’s opinions on foreign policy, and nor would they have to take adverse

consequences as the result of somebody else’s “foreign policy” ending badly if they had not voluntarily involved themselves with that policy. The State Department could be abolished with great benefit to liberty world wide, as could, of course, the British Foreign Office.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR SHOULD MEAN THE END OF INTERVENTIONISM

The realisation of such ideas is, I accept, still some way off. But surely the recent remarkable and most welcome events in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and particularly the retreat of the latter as a world power and the much trumpeted “end of the cold war” should provide the occasion for a major reassessment of American foreign policy. For while many supporters of liberty may have been convinced by the US government’s claims to be “defending freedom” in its rivalry with the Soviet Union, as the “cold war” developed, the reality was that the conflict between the USA and the USSR soon developed into a situation in which, whatever heated rhetoric might be exchanged between the two states, the existence of the other became rather useful in terms of domestic political control, and their “power struggle” became, so to speak, the only game in town. Each in practice began to recognise and keep aloof from the other’s “turf”, while vigorously seeking to kick minor players out of the game entirely.

This tendency was shown in dramatic form in the autumn of 1956, which saw the simultaneous international crises over Hungary and Suez. Before the Soviet invasion of Hungary, John F. Dulles, US Secretary of State, had given the Hungarian rebels every possible verbal encouragement to take up arms to overthrow the communist regime, and every prospect of massive US assistance if they did so. In practice the US government gave the Hungarian uprising no practical support whatsoever, despite repeated pleas on the part of the Hungarians that it should fulfill its promises, and Soviet domination over the country was reimposed with appalling savagery. When, at the same time, Britain and France invaded Egypt to recover the Suez Canal after Nasser’s government nationalised it, the most intense US diplomatic, economic and political pressure and threats succeeded in forcing them to withdraw, and neither power has ever again undertaken a foreign intervention which did not meet with the approval of the US government. It is doubtless for this reason that the foreign policy debate between libertarians focuses so much on that of the USA: no other western country really has a genuinely world wide foreign policy independent of the US these days.

But to mention these things is to describe a state of affairs that should now be largely for the historians to analyse. Many libertarians, including Powell, may in the past have taken the view that, whatever the faults of US interventionism, it at least played a positive role in counteracting Soviet expansionism. Surely, however, now is the time for the US to begin to develop a reasoned and principled policy of non-intervention in foreign affairs, just as it did in the late 18th century, and I for one hope that such a process goes hand-in-hand with a corresponding development towards a libertarian American and a libertarian world.

NOTES

1. D. Frum, “Statutes Against Liberty”, *Spectator*, May 26th 1990, pp. 16-17.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
3. T. Powell, *The Case Against Isolationism*, Libertarian Alliance Foreign Policy Perspectives No 14, 1989, p. 2.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. W. A. Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire*, Anthony Blond, London, 1970, p. 424.
7. C. Simpson, *Lusitania*, Longman, London, 1972, *passim*.
8. W. H. Chamberlain, *America’s Second Crusade*, Henry Regnery, Chicago, 1950, p. 167.
9. D. Wallechinsky and I. Wallace, *The People’s Almanac*, Doubleday, New York, 1975, p. 249.
10. C. Glass, “Gambling on the Gulf”, *Spectator*, August 25th 1990, pp. 6-7.