

---

George Washington, Isolationist?

Author(s): Caspar W. Weinberger and Gordon Tullock

Source: *The National Interest*, SPRING 1986, No. 3 (SPRING 1986), pp. 88-91

Published by: Center for the National Interest

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42894419>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The National Interest*

# George Washington, Isolationist?

—Caspar W. Weinberger—

---

**W**E CAN better understand the current pressures against the defense budget, and what I see as a possible retrenchment from our worldwide commitments, if we reflect for a moment on the political traditions and principles that shape our great republic.

After nearly 40 years of service to his country, George Washington offered his fellow citizens what he called the “counsels of an old and affectionate friend.” Few, we must admit, could better lay claim to the title of “affectionate friend” than this giant of a man. And yet he feared that the words of his Farewell Address, which counselled unity to a nation he believed torn by faction, would be largely ignored. How wrong he was. Ironically, however, we hardly remember that address for its call for unity, its attack on party factions, or its caution against our striking out on ideological campaigns. Rather, we have taken out of context Washington’s valedictory, and interpreted in crude fashion his warning to avoid entangling alliances. (I cannot help but be comforted by the fact that Washington also wrote speeches he thought would be disregarded, but instead were simply widely misinterpreted.)

---

Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, delivered this speech to the Hoover Institution Board of Overseers in Washington, D.C. on January 21, 1986.

Washington’s Farewell Address has become a true political testament in America, for it so gracefully set forth the ideas and principles that our first president believed should guide the young republic. Unfortunately, that testament is generally regarded as urging an American isolationism, as advising the United States to remain forever politically separated from the “evils of foreign intrigues” that had cast so many nations into fruitless war. What has issued from this interpretation of that testament is the idea—sometimes it is only a feeling—that our worldwide commitments and alliances are somehow un-American, and that it would be far better if we could simply close ourselves off from that corrupt world beyond our shores.

Two important corrections need to be set against this popular interpretation of Washington’s address. First, Washington did not believe that the republic should cut itself off from external commercial relations; he only advised that those relations remain impartial. Second, it seems clear that Washington’s testament was prudent instruction to a very weak and fragile nation, blessed by geography to be physically distant from European conflicts. “Why,” Washington asked, “forgo the advantages of so peculiar a situation?”

Washington had been struggling, in his last years as president, to keep the United States out of a particular alliance, one with revolutionary

France—an association that could not have served American interests and might well have drawn us into war. Only the blind fury of ideology could have defeated his sound dictates and thrust our new nation into foolish conflict. Also do not forget that it was the evils of “foreign intrigues” that Washington was worried about. Washington’s was the counsel of prudence, pure and simple.

It seems to me that it is the prudential character of Washington’s testament that we tend to forget. Circumstances do not remain the same, alliances are sometimes required, and great exertions often demanded. Our founders would not be surprised to learn that their creation had become a great and influential world power. What would surprise them is our unwillingness, from time to time, to maintain our own strength and influence. It is commonplace to note that American foreign policy has tended to swing—pendulum-like—from involvement in the world to what appears to be a comfortable isolation. During those periods of withdrawal, we often hear a call to return to the teachings of Washington, to abandon our foolish attempt to influence world politics, and to “get our own house in order.”

Immediately after World War II, we seemed to think that our own demobilization, combined with our homage to world law embodied in the United Nations, would forever prevent the re-emergence of fascism and totalitarianism. We simply did not understand that the slogan “bring the boys home” might not serve the interests of world peace or justice.

I suggest that excessive misgivings about foreign entanglements—this desire to withdraw militarily and politically—misses the central point Washington was trying to make. For Washington, neutrality was a policy that national unity and strength would give us the option of choosing, should we so desire. It was neither an unvarying policy, nor always the best choice—but clearly, neutrality would be more difficult if America were weak. We seem to forget that a desirable political goal often depends upon our willingness to create the military power to back it up.

If we remain united, Washington argued,

“the period is not far off, when we may defy material injury from external annoyance...when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected.” In the latter part of the 18th century, neutrality and political distance from the world’s troubles were the only *prudent* courses for America to follow. And certainly neutrality is not inconsistent with our political principles. But, as the 20th century draws to a close, prudence clearly dictates another course. That it does, neither violates, nor puts us in opposition to, the framers’ intentions. How could we act otherwise and remain true to ourselves, and remain true to the idea, which was fundamental to the founders’ thought, that America is the strongest home of liberty.

**T**HERE IS NO unvarying principle that requires we be either assertive or isolationist. To believe that there is ignores the most basic fact about politics—that politics is the realm of action; and action must be molded by circumstances. Since the birth in America of enlightened internationalism, we have understood that circumstances demanded an American presence worldwide. What other nation had the economic and political power to contain Soviet expansionism; to bring the world at least a modest amount of stability; and to guarantee freedom to those fortunate enough to have achieved it.

We were not prepared for such leadership, nor were we anxious for it—but that generation, the post-World War II generation, was prepared for one thing: it was prepared to explain to the people why we had to abandon, perhaps forever, the dream of an isolated America, sustaining itself on the basis of geographic separation and political unity.

Our dedication to this enlightened internationalism has undergone its own pendulum-like swings since the late 1940s—with a most dramatic shift away from world involvement occurring after the war in Vietnam. Clearly, we did not simply fold up our tents and retreat behind our nuclear deterrence—our withdrawal was more subtle than that. It is true that our defense budgets were cut dramatically, and the Soviets

took advantage of our post-Vietnam syndrome by extending their influence through proxies—and in Afghanistan through the Red Army. But perhaps the worst damage was done here at home, where we sank into a paralyzing self-doubt and a repugnant moral relativism.

We heard about the end of the cold war, about how we could not be the “world’s policeman”—not that this was ever intended in the first place. We heard that America’s fear of communism was inordinate, and we even heard that our president and the Soviet general secretary “shared the same dreams and aspirations.” More often than not *we* were portrayed frequently by some of our leaders and people as the greatest threat to peace; we were the ones threatening war with nuclear weapons; we were the neo-colonialists; we were the imperialists—America could always be hated, and in any event (those Americans and others felt) America of course should always be blamed first.

What is remarkable about this attitude is how it differs from our traditional desire to separate ourselves from the world when prudence so dictated. When Washington or Adams or Woodrow Wilson argued for isolationism, they did so on the basis of our national interest as they saw it. But the neo-isolationists hardly regard American national interests as primary. Rather they look to some unspecified “global interest,” and claim that it is greatly threatened by American power. For this group, the United States should avoid “entangling alliances” because they think we are a corrosive force in the world. Also there is always the chance, they think, that we might strengthen such an alliance.

The most distressing aspect of this position is not its desire for *political* neutrality. Neutrality may or may not be a wise policy. Rather, it is its *moral* neutrality that condemns this argument and sets it radically against the traditions of American foreign policy. The United States and the Soviet Union are not equivalent morally. We should start and finish with that proposition.

The attitude of moral relativism, as revealed in the argument advanced by some that American power is at least as destructive as Soviet power, feeds the inclination for isolationism, as it saps our will to resist the obvious

encroachments of tyranny—be they in the form of Soviet power, or terrorist nihilism. In the name of peace, we are lectured by these relativists on the immorality of American power, when it is often the mere existence of American power that keeps the peace. Because moral relativism offers no real reason to prefer American freedom to Soviet communism, it cannot distinguish, for instance, between the invasion of France in 1940, and the liberation of Europe in 1945. This is indeed the kind of absurdity one is led to if one embraces the popular notion that Soviet and American uses of power are essentially the same. And the ultimate obscenity in this dubious exercise is that the Red Army’s invasion of Afghanistan and our action in Grenada are equivalent exercises in power politics.

**I**T WAS POLITICAL and not moral neutrality that George Washington recommended to his youthful nation. When we become a powerful republic, never doubting for a moment that we would, Washington said, “belligerent nations” will not lightly “hazard giving us provocation” and “we may choose peace or war, as our interests guided by justice shall counsel.”

What distinguishes us from much of the world, and provides the final refutation to the neo-isolationists, are those three simple words Washington uses to outline the proper course for American foreign policy—“guided by justice.” What other nation goes to such lengths—including an extraordinary degree of self-examination and self-criticism—to ensure its actions are just? That we are human—complete with imperfections—is no argument for isolationism, or inaction, or even self-doubt. What should be asked is not whether we are perfect, but whether we understand our principles of action, whether we still respect the ideas of our founding, and whether we are constantly measuring our actions against Washington’s standards of prudence and justice. Indeed what should be asked is whether any other nation in mankind’s long history has done more good for more people, whether inside or outside our boundaries.

At the end of his Farewell Address, Washington expressed the wish that his “counsels”

would “prevent our nation from running the course which has hitherto marked the destiny of nations.” One supposes that if he were to return and pass judgment on our last 200 years, he might well regret that we had had thrust upon us the role of world power. But he would surely

understand and support our need to “entangle” ourselves in the politics of the world—for what he would most regret is the influence of those still blind to the threat of a powerful, totalitarian ideology that seeks to extinguish liberty, equality, and the nation he helped set free.

### Tullock on Moynihan on Acheson

In January 1950, I was in Tientsin China as a Vice Consul in the unrecognized American Consulate General there. The reason that I was there was that the Department of State had been planning on recognizing Communist China and hence had left the diplomatic establishment in place. Eventually it changed its mind and we were withdrawn about four months later. Although we were not locked up like the Consulate General in Mukden, nevertheless, our communications with the rest of the world were rather poor. I give this bit of personal biography to explain why I had not previously heard of the speech by Secretary Acheson quoted by Senator Moynihan [“The Potemkin Palace,” Winter 1985/6]. The Senator refers to Dean Acheson’s ability to ‘make the obvious obvious.’ What Acheson said was,

“. . .the Soviet Union’s taking the four northern provinces of China is the single most significant, most important fact, in the relation of any foreign power in Asia.” What four provinces? What is Acheson talking about? I would say that at best, he is making the obviously wrong obvious.

I am not particularly surprised at Acheson making this schoolboy mistake, he always had the most bizarre ideas about the far east. But I am deeply surprised at Senator Moynihan endorsing it. I am particularly surprised that he does so in an article which otherwise is very very sensible.

*Gordon Tullock is  
Holbert R. Harris Uni-  
versity Professor at  
George Mason University*