America Needs a Stable Bipartisan Consensus on National Security

All thoughtful Americans wish to resume a bipartisan consensus on principal foreign policy issues.

by Conrad Black

Those of us who remember the years before Vietnam remember when, in foreign policy matters, “partisanship ended at the water’s edge.” There wasn’t much foreign policy in the United States until a rending national debate over participating in the League of Nations in 1919 and 1920. President Woodrow Wilson invented the League and asserted that, in entering

World War I, the United States was waging “a war to end war and to make the world safe for democracy.”

This was effectively repudiated by the voters in 1920 (when Franklin D. Roosevelt was defeated as vice president). As the war clouds gathered over Europe and the Far East in the late 1930s then-President Roosevelt, who spoke French and German fluently and was extremely well-informed about the principal Western European countries, saw that coexistence with Hitler was going to be impossible.

As Roosevelt gradually refocused his workfare programs to complete the restoration of American employment from what would today be called infrastructure to national defense including the construction of the soon-to-be world-famous aircraft carriers Enterprise and Yorktown, he defined his policy as peace through strength and arming America to deter aggression against it.

He broke a tradition as old as the Republic in seeking a third term in 1940 and said he was only doing so to keep America out of war. He aimed to do so by building our deterrent strength and by assisting the democracies in defending themselves and preventing the war from spreading across the oceans to the Americas. Although the Republican presidential candidate that year, Wendell L. Willkie, supported aid to the democracies, he accused Roosevelt of leading the nation into war, and said of America’s young men: “They are already almost at the boats.”

Roosevelt concluded one of his last speeches of that memorable campaign: “Your president says this nation is not going to war.” The opposition to Roosevelt’s policy was led by the isolationist organization America First (which has given President Trump’s slogan a bad precedent), led by aviation hero Colonel Charles Lindbergh, who was over-impressed by the German Air Force and was a militant isolationist.

Roosevelt feared that the democracies in Western Europe were

not strong enough on their own to defeat an aggressive Germany; that there was no local power in the Far East to counterbalance Japan, and that if the United States were not to some extent active in both Western Europe and the Far East there would be the risk every generation of the entire Eurasian landmass and its adjuncts being in the hands of anti-democratic powers.

“We in the Americas would be living at the point of a gun,” Roosevelt said in a famous address to the nation on December 29, 1940, as he rebutted what he called “the pious frauds” of those who served the dictators in the American political debate.

He urged that the United States become “the great arsenal of democracy.” From these convictions, almost all subsequent American foreign policy was born and was elaborated by his entourage to deal with the Cold War.

FDR’s definition of neutrality was idiosyncratic: he loaned the British 50 anti-submarine destroyers in the middle of the election campaign, instituted the first peacetime conscription in the country’s history, extended U.S. territorial waters from three miles to 1,800 miles out into the Atlantic, ordered the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard to attack any German ship on detection, and passed the Lend Lease Act offering Britain and Canada anything they asked with payment to be made when possible, and ostensibly in exchange for granting the United States bases in a number of British Empire locations. Winston Churchill called this “the most unsordid act in the history of any nation” and Roosevelt told him when they met for the first time in over 20 years at Newfoundland in August 1941, “We will make war without declaring it.”

As all the world knows, Roosevelt’s decision to embargo the sale of oil to Japan which relied on the United States for 85 percent of its oil and aviation fuel, forced Japan to choose between ending its invasion of China and Indochina or seizing

the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), and going to war with the United States. In choosing the second option, Japan committed the most disastrous strategic error of the last century, and it was compounded by Germany then declaring war on the United States also, though it had no obligation to do so under its treaty with Japan.

The combined power of the United States, the British Commonwealth, and the USSR (which Hitler had attacked in June 1941 to try to get rid of it before the United States entered the war against him) was far too great for Germany and Japan and both countries surrendered unconditionally to the Allies in 1945.

At this point, the United States had hoped to bring all its forces home, and had set up the United Nations Organization, which Roosevelt intended as a method of collegializing the immense influence of his country in the world and also as a way to demonstrate to his isolationist countrymen that the world was a less dangerous place than it had been. Roosevelt retained his conviction that American presence in the world was necessary to preserve peace.

Roosevelt's intention had been to wait until he was certain that the atomic bomb worked and then to entice Russia to fulfill its Tehran and Yalta conference commitments to vacate Eastern Europe and allow those countries to choose their governments in free elections as the Western powers had done in Western Europe, and to dangle an immense economic aid package as a carrot in front of Stalin to fortify the nuclear stick. But Roosevelt died in April 1945, Stalin chose to ignore his commitments to withdraw from Eastern Europe (the second greatest strategic blunder of the last 100 years), and Roosevelt's team—Harry S. Truman, George Marshall, Dean Acheson, Dwight D. Eisenhower, George Kennan, Charles Bohlen, and others—fashioned the containment policy of resistance to Soviet aggression and retention of deterrent force while gradually making Soviet competition with the West unaffordable

to a Communist system. This policy was a gradual but complete success. The Soviet Union peacefully disintegrated in 1991.

With no enemy posing a mortal threat to the United States, the former times of bipartisan foreign policy consensus have been lost, and the Roosevelt-Truman policy of the preceding 50 years has drifted. It started to crumble with disagreements over Vietnam in the 1960s, but was tightened again by President Nixon's artful triangulation of Great Power relations with China. We now have the spectacle of American policy towards Iran, Israel, China, Russia, and to some extent its traditional allies, all fluctuating unpredictably every four to eight years, though aspects of the Roosevelt-Truman policy remain. This is disconcerting to the world, and gives the United States the appearance of unreliability.

Whenever the extreme level of antagonism that is now dividing the main political parties in the United States subsides, all thoughtful Americans will wish to resume a bipartisan consensus on principal foreign policy issues. Abraham Lincoln famously said when he was a young man that no foreign invader "will drink from the Ohio or make a track in the Blue Ridge; America will flourish as a democracy or perish by suicide."

Despite these fraught times of societal atomization and widespread collective self-hate, the suicide of America still seems remote. But it is never too soon to try to reduce the potential now available to unfriendly countries to exploit internecine American strategic differences. The American national strategic interest evolves slowly and these oscillations in American policy are excessive, and are destabilizing to the world.

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