



How Many Different Countries Should the US Interfering In?

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): How many foreign countries should the United States government be attempting simultaneously to fix, change or otherwise improve? How many different foreign governments should our government be arming, funding and propping up? And in how many different countries should we be funding and sending aid to opponents of their governments or otherwise interfering in their internal politics? Is it wise or even possible for the U.S. government to simultaneously affect positive change inside the borders of Iran, Syria, Russia, China, Venezuela, Cuba, Afghanistan and any other number of countries which emerge with great regularity as the new objects of U.S. political and media interest? The U.S. government quite clearly cannot manage to materially improve the lives of its own citizens, nor safeguard their liberty - our liberty - from inexorable erosion. Why does anyone think that this same government that fails so miserably and reliably in effectuating even the most basic improvements at home is competent to go around the world picking and choosing which countries need better governments? And then going about improving those other countries, making their citizens freer and more prosperous. And why does anyone rational believe that going around the world, changing the politics and culture of foreign countries is the proper role of the U.S. government? A valid way to use the money that you pay to it in taxes, presumably with the expectation that it will be used to improve your lives and your society and not those of other people all over the world. Most Americans simply do not believe that this is the proper role of the U.S. government. And these anti interference sentiments have remained more or less stable for decades as this 2013 poll demonstrates. Quote: "Very few voters think the United States should take on the responsibility of ensuring peace and democracy in the world, a view that has changed little over the years." A new Rasmussen Reports national telephone survey finds that just 11% of voters, 11%, think the United States to be the world's policeman. Virtually unchanged from findings in 2011 and 2009. 72%. 72% disagree that that's the role of the US, while 17% are not sure.

Now, the U.S. government should not act as the world's policeman and that it should instead prioritise fixing the ample problems of its own citizens before it spends time and resources trying to fix other countries has been a consensus view, at least in principle, for years. We seem to be inexplicably trapped in this repetitive and apparently inescapable carousel, where

large majorities of Americans agree in principle that the US should not be the world's policeman and that we should therefore significantly rein in our attempts to fix and change governments around the world. All while the US government somehow constantly finds ways to induce the same population to support every one of its newest proposals to interfere in other countries. And yet at any point during the day right now, one can find politicians in both parties and their supporters urging that the U.S. government involve itself in the internal affairs of multiple other countries in order to improve or fix or transform or destabilise how that country, and often ones on the other side of the world, is being governed.

Somehow, political discourse and propaganda combined to convince Americans in each specific case to support exactly that, which in principle they continuously insist that they oppose. The D.C. media and political class seemed to be in consensus right now that the U.S. should, in one form or another, be attempting to interfere in and improve a broad range of countries, either by empowering government opponents of those governments or by forcing them to change their own policies. From Iran and Russia to Cuba and China to Venezuela and Qatar. And that's all independent of the huge amount of military aid and weaponry and surveillance technologies and clandestine pro-democracy operations the U.S. is sending to and deploying in all sorts of countries all over the world. For instance, sending tens of billions of dollars, seeming to be hundreds of billions to Ukraine. Transferring large amounts of U.S. taxpayer dollars by the billions to Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Colombia, Nigeria and many others. Maintaining sprawling, permanent military bases in Germany and South Korea and Qatar and many other countries on every continent on Earth. And just by the way, the U.S. government is still arbitrarily bombing all kinds of countries at will with whom the U.S. is not officially at war. Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, etc. There is no other country on earth that comes even close to this level of multipronged interference in other countries. That is just a statement of fact, and that has been true for decades now, since at least the fall of the Soviet Union. The only country in history that competed with the U.S. when it came to having tentacles in multiple other countries.

Now, it is vital to note that the questions raised by this multi-pronged and seemingly endless interference in other countries has absolutely nothing to do with the question of whether the governments the U.S. seeks to overthrow, replace, destabilise or reform are good or bad. Virtually every government on earth has repressive and despotic components to it. Including most certainly the United States itself. And as has been true since at least the end of World War Two, some of the U.S. government's closest allies and partners are some of the most brutal tyrannies on the planet, such as the current regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Indonesia and the Philippines. The 2003 invasion of Iraq illustrates this point most vividly. During 2002 and early 2003, the debate over whether to go to war with Iraq virtually nobody doubted that Saddam Hussein and his government were savagely despotic. That was true when the U.S. government was a close ally of Saddam's, and it was true once the U.S. decided Saddam should be regarded as an enemy. And to this day, virtually nobody doubts

that Saddam was a hideous despot. That's not in question. Nonetheless, millions of Americans, as you can see in this polling data, who supported the war back in 2003 now regard it as a mistake. Despite the fact that it toppled Saddam and did change the regime in Iraq. As you can see from these two Gallup polls, the number of Americans who regard the war in Iraq as a mistake has more than doubled a decade after the invasion. That is not because these Americans changed their mind and no longer think that Saddam was a repressive pirate. Instead, it's because they now realise that despite Saddam's indisputable brutality, spending hundreds of billions of dollars, losing thousands of American lives, causing the deaths of many hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis, at least, was not the role, not the proper place of the United States to do. These Americans who changed their mind realised that the US does not have the capacity to manipulate and improve complex countries on the other side of the world whose culture and history and religion and factional conflicts are far too complicated for State Department functionaries to understand, let alone to govern. Even if improving these foreign countries is the actual motive for why we are going to war or otherwise interfering with their internal affairs. A highly dubious proposition. None of these debates are remotely new. In 1917, more than 100 years ago, substantial opposition in the U.S. to Woodrow Wilson's desire to involve the U.S. in World War One, which came primarily but not exclusively from the left, resulted in the enactment of repressive laws such as the Espionage Act of 1917, still used today as the law of choice to prosecute whistleblowers such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. And also resulted in the mass prosecution of war opponents such as the anti-war socialist Eugene Debs. That's because Woodrow Wilson regarded antiwar opposition and dissent as a serious threat. Similar opposition coalesced in response to Franklin Roosevelt's obvious desire to involve the U.S. in World War Two. Opposition, which that time came mostly, though not exclusively from the American right. In both cases, the sentiment driving war opposition was the argument that the U.S. has no valid business risking the lives of its citizens and its treasure for wars on the other side of the world that did not directly involve threats to the borders of the United States. That's why Pearl Harbour was necessary to convince so many Americans to support World War Two. Because at least there was now a plausible case that that war could find its way to U.S. shores. But even with Pearl Harbour, the reasons for the U.S. entering either of those world wars was far from obvious for many millions of Americans who, quite reasonably, even if you don't agree with them, believed in the principle that the U.S. should not interfere in other countries wars, much less their internal affairs, unless doing so is directly necessary to preserve the security of American citizens. But with the U.S. riding high on the intoxicating scent of victory in those two world wars, it adopted a posture of endless war almost immediately following the end of World War Two. That's when the US security state and then the CIA and the NSA was created. The National Security Act of 1947, implemented just two years after the end of World War two, radically transformed the nature of the US government. It created a permanent war, an intelligence and security bureaucracy that, by design, operated entirely in the dark outside of the structures of democratic accountability and transparency. And as many predicted at the time of its enactment, it eventually indeed quite quickly ended up being used not only to interfere in the internal affairs of dozens of other

countries simultaneously, but was also turned inward on the American people where it remains today.

The president, who oversaw the massive growth of the secret security state, was the hero of World War Two, the five star general, Dwight Eisenhower, elected in 1952. Eisenhower was certainly no pacifist. He believed in the need for the U.S. to maintain the most powerful and expensive military in the world. Yet he frequently attempted, often without success, to at least try to slow down the uncontrolled explosion of military spending and to impose some safeguards and oversight on the explosion in secret clandestine covert intelligence operations. Much of which was often kept from him, he angrily learned afterward. So after spending two terms as president, eight full years, Eisenhower delivered his primetime farewell address to the nation in 1961. He was not a man of many words, and he did not have much time. His speech was less than 10 minutes in length. But he decided to use that small amount of time to warn Americans of the grave threats to their democracy, to Americans national identity as a republic, and to the prospect of enduring peace posed by what he now famously called, quote: "the unwarranted influence of the military industrial complex". Many people are aware of this term and its origins, but it also is nonetheless really worthwhile to listen again to the crux of Eisenhower's warnings. And when doing so, think about how it applies to contemporary debates over what role the US should have, if any, in the domestic political conflicts of foreign governments on the other side of the world.

Dwight Eisenhower (DE): We have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. And to do this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defence establishment. We annually spend on military security alone more than the net income of all United States Corporations. Now this conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence, economic, political, even spiritual, is felt in every city, every state house, every office of the federal government. We recognise the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved. So is the very structure of our societies. In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defence with our peaceful methods and goals so that security and liberty may prosper together.

GG: Now, note that clip, while emphasising the likelihood that this military industrial complex may lead to war, also emphasises the harms posed to American citizens domestically. And while that clip is reasonably well known, indeed, when I posted that speech excerpt on Twitter in 2020, it was notably retweeted by then President Trump for

reasons I'll discuss in a minute. There's a second less known excerpt from Eisenhower's speech about the urgent need to prioritise respectful dialogue over power driven conflict and interference in US foreign policy.

DE: Together, we must learn how to compose differences not with arms, but with intellect and decent purpose. Because this need is so sharp and apparent, I confess that I laid down my official responsibilities in this field with a definite sense of disappointment. As one who has witnessed the horror and the lingering sadness of war. As one who knows that another war could utterly destroy this civilisation which has been so slowly and painfully built over thousands of years. I wish I could say tonight that a lasting peace is in sight. Happily, I can say that war has been avoided. Steady progress toward our ultimate goal has been made, but so much remains to be done. As a private citizen, I shall never cease to do what little I can to help the world advance along that road.

GG: Now, just one note about that clip. As you listen to that just imagine how Eisenhower would have reacted to the reality over the last nine months that anyone who proposed diplomacy as a way to try to end the extraordinarily dangerous war between Russia and Ukraine, with the U.S. acting as a proxy partner, would be castigated as some sort of traitor. Diplomacy in order to avoid war was what Eisenhower wanted most. Now, the fact that war-happy neocons ended up as the dominant strain in the Bush-Cheney administration has made many forget their opposition to U.S. interference and other countries has long been a growing sentiment on the American right. Indeed, many have forgotten that George W. Bush's primary foreign policy critique against Bill Clinton and Bush's opponent in the 2000 election, Clinton's vice president, Al Gore, was that Clinton's foreign policy, with the notoriously war hungry Madeleine Albright at his side, as they attempted to transform Yugoslavia, was insufficiently, quote, "humble". That was Bush's argument. And that Gore's vice presidential running mate, the democratic Senator Joe Lieberman, was a neocon in the classic sense of that term only underscored this contrast. George Bush ran not on a vow to interfere more in other countries, but as this amazing clip from his foreign policy debate with Al Gore from 2000 shows unable to do so less.

George W. Bush: Yeah, I'm not so sure the role the United States has is to go around the world saying this is the way it's got to be. We can work with them on security matters, for example, but it's their call to make. So I'm not exactly sure where the vice president's coming from, but I think one way for us to end up being viewed as the ugly American is for us to go around the world saying, we do it this way. So should you. I think the United States must be humble and must be proud and confident of our values, but humble in how we treat nations that are figuring out how to chart their own course.

GG: Now, needless to say, the attacks on September 11th altered the prevailing framework. And one could most definitely make the case that Bush's defence of a more humble foreign policy, one that entailed far less attempts by the U.S. Government to dictate values to and

interfere in other countries was insincere, just an election ploy. But sincere or not, that Bush made such sentiments a centerpiece of his winning presidential campaign was proof that a large sector of the American voting population already back in 2000 shared those views. Growing right-wing anger over the U.S. Securities estate's attempt to dominate multiple countries around the world, which, of course, also entails the expenditure of huge sums of your money to weapons manufacturers - the industrial part of Eisenhower's warning - is what also drove the unexpected success of Ron Paul's presidential run in 2008 and 2012. Just five years after the invasion of Iraq, Congressman Paul, as part of the GOP primaries, went deep into communities, highly conservative communities in Iowa and South Carolina with a message that had been unthinkable in GOP politics after 9/11. Congressman Paul vehemently denounced neocons for sacrificing the interests of American citizens at the altar of other countries. He harshly condemned Bush-Cheney's wars and in general previewed what would become Trump's winning America first 2016 foreign policy by insisting that the priority of the U.S. government should be the welfare of American citizens, not those of other countries. With the responsibility to change the politics resided with the citizens of those countries and not with the United States government. This extraordinary clip of Congressman Paul debating foreign policy while standing next to the traditional GOP war hawk Mitt Romney, who would go on to be the party's presidential nominee that year and then lose to Barack Obama, is really striking. Back then, in 2012, this sensible message was derided, mocked by the establishment wings of both parties as dangerous isolationism, even though Congressman Paul's view clearly represented how most Americans had thought for years and ultimately became the winning message of Trump's 2016 campaign.

Ron Paul: I served five years in the military. I've had a little experience. I've spent a little bit of time over in the Pakistan, Afghanistan area as well as in Iran. But I wouldn't wait for my generals. I'm the commander in chief. I make the decisions. I tell the generals what to do, and I bring them home as quickly as possible and I get them out of Iraq as well. And I wouldn't start a war in Libya. I'd quit bombing Yemen and I'd quit bombing Pakistan. I'd start taking care of people here at home because we could save hundreds of billions of dollars. Our national security is not enhanced by our presence over there. We have no purpose there. We should learn the lessons of history. And the longer we're there, the worse things are and the more danger we're in as well. Because our presence there is not making friends. Let me tell you.

GG: That the U.S. should stop interfering in other countries, absent a direct national security threat to the U.S. homeland, indeed, that it's actually dangerous for the U.S. to go around interfering in other countries because it provokes huge amounts of anti-Americanism was the crux of Trump's winning 2016 foreign policy. It was a message that defined Ron Paul's politics for decades, was then refined by Steve Bannon who rebranded America First, recalling the right-wing opposition to U.S. involvement in World War Two and then became Trump's reflexive perspective on the U.S. role in the world. Leading to Trump becoming the first American president in decades not to involve the U.S. in a new war. The first specific

expression of this was found when Trump repeatedly questioned why the U.S. would want to overthrow the regime of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, who Trump argued might be very repressive and indeed he was, but could be of help to the U.S. in vanquishing al Qaeda and ISIS. Actual priorities of U.S. foreign policy. That Trump invoked American first principles to directly attack a key CIA programme overthrowing Assad was definitely one of the prime impulses for the CIA and then the neocons to become extremely hostile toward Donald Trump. Indeed, Trump had already earned their distrust, especially of neocons, by briefly musing in 2015 that the U.S. should be more, quote, neutral when it comes to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Until he was quickly persuaded by his son in law, Jared Kushner and other traditional Republicans to abandon that line for a much more traditional pro-Israel tilt. But that early heresy on foreign policy by Trump was reflective of his clear impulses to avoid any unnecessary attempts to interfere in other countries, including regime change operations against repressive leaders, but also any instances of using U.S. resources for any reason other than the direct benefit of American citizens. Countless examples illustrate Trump's anti interference sentiments. This is just one example, a 2015 interview with The Guardian, where he expresses it clearly.

Ben Jacobs: And you've talked a lot about Syria and you talked a lot about your opposition to the war in Iraq in the beginning and your concerns about the United States jumping in. A lot of these interventions have been motivated by the desire to spread democracy, to promote human rights. Is that an appropriate objective of foreign policy?

Donald Trump: We're nation building. We can't do that, we have to build our own nation. We're nation building. We're trying to tell people that have had dictators and worse for centuries how to run their countries. We have to build our own country. We have to rebuild the United States. And look, look what's happened in Iraq. We got rid of Saddam Hussein. I don't think that was a very helpful thing. Iraq is a disaster right now and it's going to be taken over by Iran and ISIS.

GG: Now, in some cases, applying that anti-interventionist sentiment was easy for Republican politicians. The GOP, after all, had voted overwhelmingly in 2011 against Obama's request for authorization to go to war in Libya in order to overthrow Gadhafi. Obama ended up ignoring that vote and went to war anyway, despite the House rejecting its authorisation and the GOP did nothing to stop him, such as defunding the war effort. But that Libya vote and its opposition showed that the GOP was perfectly comfortable in some instances with taking this anti interference position. Much more difficult are the governments of the Republican Party and many Democrats have traditionally wanted to destabilise or overthrow such as in Cuba. That's why it was so striking to me when I went on to the nation's most watched cable programme in 2021, and it was during the week when anti-Castro protests had erupted in Havana and both parties, Republicans and Democrats in Washington, united to demand U.S. support for these protesters. Now, I went on that show, Tucker Carlson's show, to talk about a different topic that night, namely how the Biden

administration was imposing its own form of tyranny here at home through the use of big tech censorship. But the Fox host angrily referred in his question to me to what he called, quote, "the idiot Republicans who had spent the day urging that the U.S. assist the Cuban protests in their attempts to change their government". Now for me, this clip really illustrates the radical changes in conservative discourse on the question of foreign policy due precisely to the emergence of American first foreign policy, and MAGA principles in general.

Tucker Carlson: I'm glad you mentioned Cuba, because even today, idiot Republicans on the hill spent their whole day talking about the lack of freedom in Cuba. And it's not a free country. That's true. But increasingly, neither are we. And they don't seem to notice what's going on in the country they're supposed to be running and they're spending all their time focussed on this Caribbean nation, which is not central to our interest. I mean, doesn't the First Amendment say pretty clearly the government is not allowed to control the press? I thought that was the point of it. Here, the government seems to be controlling the press.

GG: Yeah. I mean, I thought the whole point of the Make America Great Again, America First Foreign Policy, as articulated by Donald Trump and his allies in Congress, was that we shouldn't be fixing other countries. We should be focusing on our own country and making lives better for Americans.

Now, if I had to choose the most organic and genuine MAGA member of Congress, it would almost certainly be Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia. And it's quite notable that she reflexively opposes U.S. attempts to interfere in other countries. Indeed, she has been one of the most vocal members of Congress from the start opposing the U.S. role in Ukraine on the ground that the U.S. has no vital interest in that country, something Barack Obama often said, and they should not be interfering there.

Marjorie Taylor Greene: Thank you. I rise in opposition to the Ukrainian supplemental bill. 40 billion dollars. But there's no baby formula for American mothers and babies. An unknown amount of money to the CIA in the Ukraine supplemental bill. But there's no formula for American babies and mothers. 54 million dollars in COVID spending in Ukraine, but there's no formula for American babies and mothers. 900 million dollars for non-profit organisations in Ukraine. But there's no formula for American babies and mothers. 8.7 billion dollars for economic support and funding in Ukraine. But there's no formula for American mothers and babies.

GG: Now, whatever else you want to say about those principles, there is a consistent strain for over a century in American political life. Americans questioning and objecting to attempts by the U.S. Government to interfere in other countries when there's no direct benefit to American citizens. The question, therefore for me, is how do these principles apply to China, to Iran, to Russia, as well as weaker traditional U.S. Enemies such as in Cuba or Venezuela? Obviously those governments are all repressive in various ways, though no more so than key

U.S. allies, such as in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. But I certainly would not want to live under those governments. And watching protesters in those countries demand change will most definitely stimulate the emotions of any decent person. And that's perhaps why, that's perhaps why it's so easy for the U.S. government to induce popular support for interference in specific cases where it wants to interfere, even when Americans continue in large numbers to oppose such interference in principle. That propaganda that appeals to emotions is the strongest. But if one accepts the premise around with both the populist left and the populist right have coalesced; what the left calls antiwar principles and the right calls America first principles, namely that the duty of the U.S. government is to care for its own citizens, not go around the world interfering in the affairs of other countries, which usually ends very poorly for everyone except arms dealers and the U.S. security state. And even when they are successful, it comes at the expense of American citizens. I think it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to justify why the U.S. government should be devoting itself to attempting to undermine various governments all over the world, including those where it may be easy to do so, such as Cuba and Venezuela, and ones where it is clearly far more difficult. Iran, Russia and especially China. At the very least, to justify such interference, some argument should be mounted that a failure to interfere in those countries will result in tangible harm to the lives of American citizens. Or, conversely, that success in interfering there will benefit Americans in some clear and tangible way. It is very difficult to find an example in post-World War Two history where U.S. intervention and interference in foreign countries did anything but harm both the citizens of those countries, and, most importantly, harmed most Americans, except for those who work for Boeing, Raytheon and the US security state.

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