

Ethics and Foreign Policy: Module Guide

Introduction

How can the United States have a moral foreign policy? This module explores the tension between intentions and outcomes in international affairs. It highlights the wars in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011). In both cases, some support for the wars was driven by a desire to prevent human rights abuses by terrible dictators. In both cases, the wars ended up producing chaos and instability, including very negative human rights consequences. Good intentions were not enough.

Reading

A short excerpt from John Quincy Adams' [Independence Day Speech, July 4, 1821](#). Please share it with your chapter a few days before the meeting and encourage them all to read it.

And now, friends and countrymen, if the wise and learned philosophers of the elder world... should find their hearts disposed to enquire what has America done for the benefit of mankind? Let our answer be this: America, with the same voice which spoke herself into existence as a nation, proclaimed to mankind the inextinguishable rights of human nature, and the only lawful foundations of government. America, in the assembly of nations, since her admission among them, has invariably, though often fruitlessly, held forth to them the hand of honest friendship, of equal freedom, of generous reciprocity. She has uniformly spoken among them, though often to heedless and often to disdainful ears, the language of equal liberty, of equal justice, and of equal rights. She has, in the lapse of nearly half a century, without a single exception, respected the independence of other nations while asserting and maintaining her own.

She has abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings, as to the last vital drop that visits the heart. She has seen that probably for centuries to come, all the contests of that Aceldama the European world, will be contests of inveterate power, and emerging right.

Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.

She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from *liberty* to *force*.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit....

[America's] glory is not *dominion*, but *liberty*. Her march is the march of the mind. She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is, *Freedom, Independence, Peace*. This has been her Declaration: this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice.

Slide Background information

Opening – Show videos

The first video is George W. Bush's brief address to the American people on the beginning of the war in Iraq. The second video is from BBC's Channel 4 and illustrates the unintended consequences from Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The aim of this contrast is to demonstrate that good intentions do not guarantee good outcomes and that war is naturally a messy, inhumane affair. Important to know that some intentions in starting the war were grounded in a form of idealism and even good intentions, but the innate nastiness of war took over and turned the conflict ugly.

A key point missed in the video - In the case of the 6-year-old, it is highly unlikely that the soldiers fired with the intention of shooting her. They likely had orders about approaching vehicles, orders intended to keep them safe from attack by car bombs. Tragedies like this are common in war. They amplify the point that there should be a high moral bar to clear to start even well-intentioned wars.

Slide 3

People want their government to act ethically. They want to help other people around the world. However, similar ethics, care for human rights for example, are invoked on both sides of a debate about military force. How are we to sort it out? (Pictures are of protests for and against Western intervention in different conflicts.)

Slide 4

One question that must be addressed is whether we should judge the ethics of a military intervention by its intentions or by the results.

Slide 5

Two quotes from George W. Bush; the first from the days before the invasion of Iraq; the second from his "Mission Accomplished" speech. His Messianic call reflects an idealism about the American ability to transform Iraq and the Middle-east at large. (The language in the second quote is derived from Isaiah 49:9 – a verse typically interpreted as describing the actions of the Messiah, being applied here to America's actions.)

The Anne Marie Slaughter (a senior official in the State Department until a few months before the Libya war) quote reflects similar ambitions for the Libya conflict.

Slide 6

This photo shows the sectarian divide of Baghdad before and after the Iraqi Civil War in 2006. Despite US stability operations, Sunnis and Shia still waged a sectarian conflict that led to a sort of ethnic cleansing within Baghdad, during the American occupation. Mixed neighborhoods quickly sorted to become much less diverse as sectarian violence intensified. Red dots indicate major bombings. The chart in the bottom right shows casualties in Baghdad by month. Similar anarchic struggles go on today in Libya.

Slide 7

A video on the human costs of the Iraq War (and the War on Terror).

Slide 8

Two videos – the intentions and outcomes of the Libya War. Between the first and second videos, ongoing air support would enable the rebels to conquer Libya and overthrow Gaddafi.

Slide 9

JQA predicted how military interventions would go, even ones started with the best of intentions (“were they even the banners of foreign independence”). However, once military intervention is chosen, the US will become subject to the politics of the local country. Its most willing allies would seek to leverage US power for their own ends (“she would involve herself, beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom.”) This can frustrate the entire purpose of the intervention.

The video highlights one famous case of “usurping the standard of freedom”: Ahmed Chalabi, an influential Iraqi exile who had lobbied American leaders to invade and overthrow Saddam, often using false intelligence.

Slide 10

In Adams’ view, America should speak up on behalf of human rights, liberalization, and the pursuit of freedom. However, he saw dangers in directly involving America in conflicts not tied to immediate U.S. interests.

Slide 11

Some discussion questions. Feel free to add more.

Slide 12

Some suggested readings for those interested in these concepts.

[Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations](#)

Hans Morgenthau's classic text established realism as the fundamental way of thinking about international relations. Although it has had its critics, the fact that it continues to be the most long-lived text for courses in international relations attests to its enduring value. Someone has said the study of international relations has for half a century been nothing so much as a dialogue between Morgenthau, those who embrace his approach, and those who turn elsewhere for enlightenment. After 50 years, the dialogue between Morgenthau and scholars from around the world continues more or less as in the past something with more intensity even in an "age of terror."

[McDougall, Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy](#)

A fierce critique of civil religion as the taproot of America’s bid for global hegemony: Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Walter A. McDougall argues powerfully that a pervasive but radically changing faith that “God is on our side” has inspired U.S. foreign policy ever since 1776. The first comprehensive study of the role played by civil religion in U.S. foreign relations over the entire course of the country’s history, McDougall’s book explores the deeply infused religious rhetoric that has sustained and driven an

otherwise secular republic through peace, war, and global interventions for more than two hundred years. From the Founding Fathers and the crusade for independence to the Monroe Doctrine, through World Wars I and II and the decades-long Cold War campaign against “godless Communism,” this coruscating polemic reveals the unacknowledged but freely exercised dogmas of civil religion that bind together a “God blessed” America, sustaining the nation in its pursuit of an ever-elusive global destiny

[Bacevich, America's War for the Greater Middle East](#)

From the end of World War II until 1980, virtually no American soldiers were killed in action while serving in the Greater Middle East. Since 1990, virtually no American soldiers have been killed in action anywhere else. What caused this shift? Andrew J. Bacevich, one of the country's most respected voices on foreign affairs, offers an incisive critical history of this ongoing military enterprise—now more than thirty years old and with no end in sight.

During the 1980s, Bacevich argues, a great transition occurred. As the Cold War wound down, the United States initiated a new conflict—a War for the Greater Middle East—that continues to the present day. The long twilight struggle with the Soviet Union had involved only occasional and sporadic fighting. But as this new war unfolded, hostilities became persistent. From the Balkans and East Africa to the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, U.S. forces embarked upon a seemingly endless series of campaigns across the Islamic world. Few achieved anything remotely like conclusive success. Instead, actions undertaken with expectations of promoting peace and stability produced just the opposite. As a consequence, phrases like “permanent war” and “open-ended war” have become part of everyday discourse.

Connecting the dots in a way no other historian has done before, Bacevich weaves a compelling narrative out of episodes as varied as the Beirut bombing of 1983, the Mogadishu firefight of 1993, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the rise of ISIS in the present decade. Understanding what America's costly military exertions have wrought requires seeing these seemingly discrete events as parts of a single war. It also requires identifying the errors of judgment made by political leaders in both parties and by senior military officers who share responsibility for what has become a monumental march to folly. This Bacevich unflinchingly does.