

What Is in the National Interest?

David Center

The above question was recently put to me. At the time, I had no ready answer and some will probably conclude from this essay that I still don't have an answer. However, after thinking a bit about it, I have arrived at an answer of sorts, and it is likely the best I'll be able to do. It is not a delineation or a prescription but an attempt to suggest a way of thinking about the question.

I think the essential ingredient in an answer for what is in the national interest is to focus on the principles laid out at the nation's inception. In short, follow a path that best exemplifies our principles. To do this I think requires meeting two primary goals. The first goal is to preserve the nation in order that the second can be carried out. The second goal is to firmly root the nation in its core principles. The first in the absence of the second seems to me almost pointless.

Let's take a brief look at the first goal. Preservation implies two essential things to me. (a) A basic defense capability, which I think David Stockman* has aptly described, "*Indeed, in the post-cold war world the only thing the US needed was a modest conventional capacity to defend the shorelines and airspace against any possible rogue assault and a reliable nuclear deterrent against any state foolish enough to attempt nuclear blackmail.*" (b) To be a good shepherd for the resources inherent in the land mass that provides the stage for the political, economic and cultural activities we refer to as the nation.

Given that we already have more than sufficient capability for meeting part (a) of goal one for a basic defense capability, the primary activity related to defense should be the downsizing of our military forces until we have met the minimum requirement for a basic defense guided by the definition given above. One thing this should do is free up a lot of human and economic capital to be deployed otherwise.

To be a good shepherd, part (b) of goal one, first and foremost, requires that we preserve and conserve our resources. This entails having a rational plan for exploiting resources. Renewable resources, e.g., farm land and forest, should be used in a sustainable manner. Non-renewable resources, e.g., metals and minerals, should be used only for necessary activities and with the maximum efficiency possible with the intent of extending them as far into the future as reasonably possible. It goes almost without saying that inherent in being a good shepherd is minimizing pollution of the environment and making good faith attempts to clean up past pollution. It al-

so means that going forward we avoid new pollution to the extent possible and clean up any pollution that can't be entirely avoided. In short, be able to defend the nation, if necessary, use resources wisely and maintain a healthy environment. Much of the freed up capital referred to above should probably be dedicated to the preservation goal.

This brings us to the second goal. A nation rooted in its originating principles has three parts. (a) The first step in meeting this goal is to consider the originating principles. I will offer here a definition that some might disagree with but makes sense to me. I arrive at this definition by an extraction of general principles from the founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and, in particular, the initial amendments referred to as the Bill of Rights. In short, I offer my sense of what these documents imply.

To me it seems that the founding documents imply as paramount a citizenry of sovereign individuals. This is the core ingredient in the evolution and development of each person as a human being. A sovereign individual is one who is free to exercise control over his or her decisions about all manner of things, such as what he or she does or agrees to be done to their body, how they conduct themselves, how they support themselves, what they think, what they express and how they express themselves, among others. The obvious limitation upon this freedom is that it reaches a limit when it clearly impinges on someone else's rights to their personal sovereignty. The principle of personal sovereignty should not extend to organizational entities, for example, corporations.

Part (b) of the second goal recognizes that government has as its basic function responsibility for the preservation functions described above. One likely point of conflict between individuals and government in the question of defense is that of governmental violations of personal sovereignty in the name of defense. Personal sovereignty trumps government in such cases. Another likely point of conflict is intervention in foreign countries to protect personal or business interests. The principle of individual sovereignty requires that individuals assume responsibility for their actions. Thus, one should use discretion in making decisions to put personal or business interests at risk in foreign countries. Perhaps one can find an insurer that will assume the responsibility for a price. Otherwise, citizens should act prudently and not expect to be bailed out by the government or saved by the military. Another potential point of conflict is calls for intervention in countries experiencing internal strife. This should be considered only when the situation is dire enough to generate an international effort to bring it under control. This would be best handled through an organized international body that can make a relative objective

determination that the effort is necessary. We should, however, always be willing to offer temporary or permanent sanctuary, as required, to persons fleeing persecution, natural disasters, war and so forth. We should also be willing to offer a helping hand to those in need of material assistance, whenever possible. and hopefully as part of an international effort.

The second function, part (b) of goal two, of government should be to have an active role in regulating activity inconsistent with the principle of preservation, where that activity can be clearly demonstrated to be inconsistent with the principle. These conflicts are most likely to be related to property and its use and in how individuals conduct themselves. The burden of proof should be on the government, not on the individual, and when there is doubt the decision should go to the individual. In all matters in which government regulation is permitted, it should be constrained by maintaining, to as great an extent as possible, the personal sovereignty of its citizens, while still meeting the goal of preservation. Regulation should also ensure that citizens operate on a “level” playing field, where no individual or group is permitted an advantage not available to others due to government regulation or failure to regulate in favor of preservation.

The third function of government, part (c) of goal two, should be to conduct the nation’s relations with other nations. The original question about national interests had inherent within it a question about “foreign policy,” which is where we have finally arrived. The nation should conduct itself with other nations in a manner that is consistent with how it conducts itself with its citizens. It should recognize the sovereignty of other nations as being an important principle to be followed. When matters arise with other nations that would be regulated among our own citizens, the nation’s policy should be to lead by example and through persuasion. Under no circumstance should force, coercion, deception, or manipulation be employed, unless the activities of the errant nation clearly impose a direct threat to our preservation as a sovereign nation. In such cases, the nation will conduct itself with the restraint necessary to meet and neutralize the threat and no more. In short, the view taken here is that to affect others, the first step is to put one’s own house in order and then let your conduct serve as a model to others; i.e., be an exemplar of your own ideals.

One caveat is that there are serious hurdles to implementing such an approach to governance. The reason for this caveat is the influence of the “deep state**,” which has already spread throughout our society like a metastasizing cancer and has probably so corrupted the body politic that all of its vital systems have possibly been compromised beyond repair. In my view, there are already arising corporate struc-

tures that, in effect, subjugate traditional nation states to corporate interests. These structures are subverting the interests of our nation and its citizens as well as other nations and their citizens. An example is recent trade agreements that permit legal action by corporations against governments who are party to the agreement and pass laws that are viewed to be in conflict with the interests of the affected corporations.

I think we are already in a transition phase that is well on the way to the death of sovereign nations and their replacement by zombie states. The only hope for reversing this process, in my mind, is a widespread grass roots movement of citizens intent upon seizing back control of their lives and creating new structures through which to lead those lives. The last time such a movement occurred was the rise of the counterculture in the 60s and early 70s. In its failure should be found lessons to be learned.

* https://original.antiwar.com/David_Stockman/2018/04/17/america-first-r-i-p/

** <https://billmoyers.com/2014/02/21/anatomy-of-the-deep-state/>