

# The Debate Over America First

by George Friedman - November 29, 2021

Since the 1930s, there has been a debate in the United States over a foreign policy based on “America First,” a nationalistic policy that prioritizes U.S. objectives over others’. It’s an idea that has at different times been central to Democrats and Republicans alike. The positions have ranged from the right urging that the U.S. not take responsibility for the fate of other nations, and the left condemning the United States for acting as the world police. The left has supported a strategy that the United States must remain enmeshed in the world through alliances. On the right, there has been the belief that the U.S. must remain enmeshed in the world in order, for example, to defeat communism. It has taken on the character of a moral principle and prudent action in both ideological tendencies, and as a moral obligation in both as well.

The question of the proper relationship of the United States to the rest of the world has been a central issue since America was founded. Thomas Jefferson warned against entangling alliances, while George Washington and Benjamin Franklin were maneuvering to try to get France engaged in the American Revolution. America was founded as an alternative to Europe and a new order of the ages. It was also one nation among many, and for a while a very weak one. The American relationship to the world has always been ambiguous as a practical and a moral matter and at different times for both sides.

The modern notion of America First emerged in the years before World War II. The United States had been drawn into World War I, in many ways against its will, and the general and reasonable view was that little was gained by the war, which was about to reignite. The left saw intervention against Hitler as a moral obligation. The right argued that the primary moral obligation of the United States was to the well-being of Americans, and that if intervention was a moral necessity, Stalin would be a more appropriate target.

The United States assumed that the oceans separating the U.S. from Europe would protect America from Europe’s follies. The problem with this reasoning was that it wouldn’t. As Hitler conquered France and launched a war against Europe, a vast danger appeared. Britain had the world’s most powerful navy. If Germany defeated Britain, it might take control of its vessels, and it followed that it would take control of the North Atlantic and pose an existential threat to the United States. The America First movement saw intervention as a charitable act, not as a strategic imperative. America

First overestimated the security of the United States in a dangerous world. Isolationism was dangerous.

After World War II, the American view was that the cost in American lives was the result of a failure to act sooner against Germany and Japan. As a result, it reacted to Soviet power by reducing its wartime force but never actually demobilizing. The United States created the most entangling alliance possible, NATO, and undertook a policy whereby, as President John Kennedy, put it, “we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.” This was, of course, the most extreme commitment any nation could make. It was the logical continuation of liberal interventionism, and it opened the door to a series of wars, beginning with Vietnam, that continue to this day. And he was supported on the whole by the right wing. Isolationism and America First had become discredited, seen as they had been as immoral principles, and Kennedy’s vast commitment was simply the summary of the American interest.

In Vietnam, the war went neither badly nor well. It simply went. And as it went, the mood contained in Kennedy’s statement withered. The Kennedy Doctrine was attacked by the left, which argued that the U.S., in assuming responsibility for the world, had become an imperialist monster, waging a ruthless war that was none of its business. The view went beyond Vietnam to the notion that American influence and power throughout the world was exploiting and crushing the rights of other nations. The left made the case for American withdrawal from the world, not as an America First doctrine but as a doctrine by which it was immoral for the United States to be the world police. Nuances aside, the practical application was America First without the celebration of America.

The interventionism in Kennedy’s speech was a reaction against pre-World War II America First. Under attack from the left, the principle survived. The United States has spent more time at war since 2000 than in any prior century in total. (And since 9/11, it has waged war largely unsuccessfully.) Time is not intensity, but it still reshapes the nation’s understanding of itself.

America First is a self-evidently reasonable doctrine if it means placing American interests at the center of consideration. Every nation in the world places its own interests first. Alliances must serve the national interest, as must isolation. None are strategic doctrines themselves. They are means to an end. The government has a moral obligation to protect the nation. Sometimes that requires allies and sometimes war, but to undertake Kennedy’s vision would be to create a set of obligations that can break a nation and has in fact cost the United States a great deal.

And if the idea of Americans putting America first is self-evident, then what that means in practice is

subtle and complex. The isolationists on the right thought the United States invincible as it stood. Isolationists of the left thought the United States a brutal oppressor. Both analyses were simplistic, harmful and untrue. But at the core of any national strategy must be an understanding of the national interest, which is never simple, nor self-evident. And it defies simplistic ideologies. The world is a dangerous place, and even if we don't want war, war may want us. And a moral principle that demands constant war is unbearable.

The issue is always what we shall do now. Not what we did before, nor even what we will do later. The future always surprises us. The issue is to be thoughtful and subtle and to always put America first, which may take us to many parts of the world. America First is not isolationism, it is our moral commitment to the nation.

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