

Principles of Foreign Policy

apostolic excerpts from “United States Foreign Policy”
as spoken by Elder Ezra Taft Benson on 1968 Jun 21
to a Farm Bureau banquet held in Preston, Idaho, USA

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There is one and only one legitimate goal of United States foreign policy. It is a narrow goal, a nationalistic goal: the preservation of our national independence. Nothing in the Constitution grants that the President shall have the privilege of offering himself as a world leader. He’s our executive; he’s on our payroll, if necessary; he’s supposed to put our best interests in front of those of other nations. Nothing in the Constitution nor in logic grants to the President of the United States or to Congress the power to influence the political life of other countries, to “uplift” their cultures, to bolster their economies, to feed their peoples or even to defend them against their enemies. This point was made clear by the wise father of our country, George Washington: “I have always given it as my decided opinion that no nation has a right to intermeddle in the internal concerns of another; that every one had a right to form and adopt whatever government they liked best to live under themselves; and that, if this country could, consistently with its engagements, maintain a strict neutrality and thereby preserve peace, it was bound to do so by motives of policy, interest, and every other consideration” (*Writings* 13:263, 1796 Aug 25).

The preservation of America’s political, economic and military independence—the three cornerstones of sovereignty—is the sum and total prerogative of our government in dealing with the affairs of the world. Beyond that point, any humanitarian or charitable activities are the responsibility of individual citizens voluntarily without coercion of others to participate.

The proper function of government must be limited to a defensive role—the defense of individual citizens against bodily harm, theft and involuntary servitude at the hands of either domestic or foreign criminals. But to protect our people from bodily harm at the hands of foreign aggressors, we must maintain a military force which is not only capable of crushing an invasion, but of striking a sufficiently powerful counterblow as to make it unattractive for would-be conquerors to try their luck with us.

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Applying this philosophy to the sphere of foreign policy, one is able almost instantly to determine the correct answer to so many international questions that, otherwise, seem hopelessly complex. If the preservation and strengthening of our military, economic and political independence is the only legitimate objective of foreign policy decisions, then, at last, those decisions can be directed by a brilliant beacon of light that unerringly guides our ship of state past the treacherous reefs of international intrigue and into a calm open sea.

Should we disarm? And does it really make any difference whether we disarm unilaterally or collaterally? Either course of action would surrender our military independence. Should we pool our economic resources or our monetary system with those of other nations to create some kind of regional common market? It would constitute the surrender of our economic independence. Should we enter into treaties such as the U.N. Covenants which would obligate our citizens to conform their social behavior, their educational systems, their treatment of the news, and even their religious practices to rules and regulations set down by international agencies? Such treaty obligations amount to the voluntary and piece-meal surrender of our political independence. The answer to all such questions is a resounding “no,” for the simple reason that the only way America can survive in this basically hostile and topsy-turvy world is to remain militarily, economically and politically strong and independent.

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Many well-intentioned people are now convinced that we are living in a period of history which makes it both possible and necessary to abandon our national sovereignty, to merge our nation militarily, economically, and politically with other nations, and to form, at last, a world government which, supposedly, would put an end to war. We are told that this is merely doing between nations what we did so successfully with our thirteen colonies. This plea for world federalism is based on the idea that the mere act of joining separate political units together into a larger federal entity will somehow prevent those units from waging war with each other. The success of our own federal system is most often cited as proof that this theory is valid. But such an evaluation is a shallow one.

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A consideration of these facts means that we have to redefine our terms when we talk about “peace.” There are two kinds of peace. If we define peace as merely the absence of war, then we could be talking about the peace that reigns in a communist slave labor camp. The wretched souls in prison there are not at war, but do you think they would call it peace?

The only real peace—the one most of us think about when we use the term—is a peace with freedom. A nation that is not willing, if necessary, to face the rigors of war to defend its real peace-in-freedom is doomed to lose both its freedom and its peace! These are the hard facts of life. We may not like them, but until we live in a far better world than exists today, we must face up to them squarely and courageously.

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Until all nations follow the concept of limited government, it is unlikely that universal peace will ever be realized on this planet. Unlimited, power-grasping governments will always resort to force if they think they can get away with it. But there can be peace for America. As long as our leaders faithfully discharge their duty to preserve and strengthen the military, economic and political independence of our Republic, the world’s petty despots will leave us alone. What more could we ask of U.S. foreign policy?

From these primary policy pronouncements some general principles emerge. They can be reduced to a few heads and stated as imperatives in the following manner: The United States should: (1) establish and maintain a position of independence with regard to other countries; (2) avoid political connection, involvement or intervention in the affairs of other countries; (3) make no permanent or entangling alliances; (4) treat all nations impartially, neither granting nor accepting special privileges from any; (5) promote commerce with all free peoples and countries; (6) cooperate with other countries to develop civilized rules of intercourse; (7) act always in accordance with the “laws of nations;” (8) remedy all just claims of injury to other nations, and require just treatment from other nations, standing ready, if necessary, to punish offenders; (9) maintain a defensive force of sufficient magnitude to deter aggressors.

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It seems fitting in conclusion to refer you again to the inspired words of the wise father of our country. He said: “My ardent desire is, and my aim has been . . . to keep the United States free from political connections with every other country, to see them independent of all and under the influence of none. In a word, I want an American character, that the powers of Europe may be convinced we act for ourselves, and not for others. This, in my judgment, is the only way to be respected abroad and happy at home” (*Writings* 13:119, 1795 Oct 09).

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