

Realism, Ethics and US Foreign Policy

Opening remarks by **Andrew Bacevich**

Author of *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (Macmillan, 2008),
and
Professor of International Relations and History
Boston University

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When President Obama took office he swore to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” The oath taken by other federal officials and by US military officers is quite similar. The administering of this oath is not simply the occasion for a photo op and expressions of lofty rhetoric. It signifies a solemn commitment and contract.

Here I would argue lies the distilled essence of any official’s moral obligation. The oath of office explicitly defines that obligation not in relation to the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount much less the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but in relation to the Constitution.

As an individual who professes a Christian identity, Barak Obama may well have a personal obligation to respond to the needs of his fellow humans on the other side of the world. After all the Lord has commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves. To the extent that Obama wishes to devote himself in a private capacity to such efforts and to the extent that he wishes to spend his own money for such purposes, he will deserve our admiration. But that’s not what he was elected president to do.

Note that the oath of office does not summon the president to eliminate tyranny, make the world safe for democracy, or eradicate the evils that have afflicted humankind since God banished Adam and his partner from the Garden of Eden.

When they drafted their compact in 1787, the Framers had more modest, if by no means trivial, purposes in mind. They enunciated those purposes in yet another text that typically receives too little attention, namely the Preamble.

Here we find a definitive expression of the Constitution's enduring purpose: "to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

In their wisdom, the Framers did not define union, justice, tranquility, welfare, and liberty. Arguments over the meaning of these values have constituted the lifeblood of American politics. These arguments continue today.

Yet I would assert the following: as long as the aspirations stated in the Preamble remain unfulfilled, then the central moral imperative of US policy is to make good on that deficiency. If our own people do not enjoy justice or the blessings of liberty, then the oath of office imposes on officials a moral obligation to focus their attention on these shortcomings – that is what they are elected to do. Their obligation is to us.

At the present moment two particular parts of the Preamble merit particular attention. The first has to do with the Preamble's reference to posterity. The second has to do with its reference to the common defense.

No definition of moral obligation can qualify as worthy of the name unless it takes into account our collective obligation to future generations. Yet the actual practice of American politics in our day has ignored or slighted the interests of posterity. On everything from fiscal policy to entitlements to the environment to energy policy, we have privileged the present at the expense of the future. By refusing to live within our means, we are saddling generations to come with intolerable burdens. This practice is not only wrong, but also fundamentally at odds with the oath that the president and other federal officials take.

Securing the blessings of liberty to posterity – making it possible for future generations to enjoy what we have today – necessarily requires:

- A balanced budget;
- A cap on federal entitlements;

- Alleviation of the current account deficit;
- An end to our dependence on foreign oil; and
- The restoration of the environment and its protection from further harm.

I do not mean to imply that such matters are to be dispatched with a wave of the hand. Although President Obama may well be “the most powerful man in the world,” none of these problems will be fully resolved on his watch. Yet we owe it to posterity to begin the effort now. To postpone action further is intolerable. Indeed, should we persist in refusing to act, future generations will condemn our selfishness and profligacy. We will roundly deserve that condemnation.

Then there is the matter of what the Constitution refers to as the “common defense.” In an era when U. S. military spending outstrips the rest of the world combined and U. S. forces specialize in global power projection, when the Pentagon maintains a network of bases around the world and our soldiers fight perpetual wars in distant and obscure places – and when few Americans even bat an eyelash when contemplating these facts -- the very phrase “common defense” has something of an antique ring about it.

In present-day Washington the preferred term is “national security,” a concept imbued with enormous and deeply problematic elasticity. Bluntly, as that concept has evolved over the past sixty years or so, it has become a rationale for global hegemony and a recipe for immensely costly and debilitating military interventionism. Rather than being fixed, the imperatives of national security turn out to be infinitely expandable. Therefore, the exertions required to satisfy those imperatives are endless.

In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan President Obama has inherited some of the consequences. He has promised to extricate the country from Iraq. For reasons that remain obscure, he seems intent on plunging more deeply into the other two active fronts of the so-called war on terror.

I urge him to look before making that leap into the unknown. He should consider this possibility: that the concept of national security – and all the assumptions, routines, institutions, and policies implied by that phrase – has become incompatible with his moral obligations to the American people.

To put it another way, the pursuit of truly moral policies here at home – those consistent with the oath he took on January 20 -- may well require that he jettison the concept of national security abroad. My basic proposition is this one: the common good requires the common defense – the revival of military practices more akin to what the authors of the Constitution intended.

The Founding Fathers were by no means pacifists. After all, to win their independence, Americans relied on the sustained use of violence. The Founders did not doubt the utility of armed force. They simply viewed that utility as limited. Even as they set out to make the United States a great nation they remained wary of relying excessively on military power, a concern expressed in their aversion to a “standing army.”

In our own time, we’ve abandoned such thinking as retrograde or obsolete and have come to see force as our strong suit. We’ve committed ourselves to a policy that aims at maintaining a position of permanent military supremacy. We’ve embraced practices and policies that in others we would be quick to denounce as evidence of militarism. The Bush Doctrine of preventive war offers one, especially egregious example of this tendency.

What would it mean in practical terms to abandon the ideology of national security and content ourselves with providing for the common defense?

For starters, it would mean abrogating the Bush Doctrine and reviving the tradition that sees force as a last resort to be employed for defensive purposes only. It would mean giving up on the notion that “hard power” provides an effective and affordable instrument for transforming or pacifying the Islamic world. It would mean devising a completely different scale for answering the classic question “how much is enough?” It would mean restoring the connection between citizenship and military service. It would mean shifting resources away from the Pentagon and toward those agencies that specialize in what Secretary of State Clinton refers to as “smart power.” It would mean taming the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned about.

I don’t honestly expect the Obama administration to do any of these things – the forces of inertia are great indeed. I do suggest that as long as we continue to subscribe to the perverse doctrines of national security that in Washington pass for the received wisdom

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any serious pursuit of a morally coherent policy will remain an illusion – not only because our policies are so frequently at odds with the actual well-being of others but because they are at odds with the well-being of the people Obama was elected to serve.