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America's Superiority Complex and Their Role in Today's World

For most of its early history, the United States maintained a policy of strict isolationism, beginning with the position of neutrality in the French Revolution and the Monroe Doctrine. By the mid-nineteenth century, the US had abandoned its isolationist tendencies, trying to cement itself as a foreign power, evident in the Spanish-American War. The twentieth century began with strong interventionism, President Roosevelt giving his Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine as justification for the US' involvement in Latin America, and the colonization of the Philippines. The end of World War II launched the US into greater interventionism with the occupation of the Korean peninsula and West Berlin, as well as the CIA operations that occurred throughout the Cold War, and more recently, involvement in the Middle East. With the US government structured on the ideas of political philosophers such as Plato, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Immanuel Kant, the US' position on intervention has also been informed by these philosophers. Many of the philosophers focus on the idea that the spread of democratic government will lead to widespread peace and less war, in the long run, advocating for intervention by strong democratic powers. Historically, the US has held the belief of American exceptionalism, believing that the political system, values, and culture set the United States apart, giving it the right to have a distinct and powerful global role and that it should be modeled by other nations. In most cases of intervention, the US attempted to implement American style democracy, a move that has often failed because the interveners fail to think about how

American-style government will conflict with the existing culture, values, and traditions of the country they are trying to remodel, and as such, American methods of intervention should be altered to focus more on providing humanitarian support rather than state remodeling.

Although Plato was living and writing in Ancient Greece, a civilization made up of interdependent city-states, his ideas and theories can be applied to modern foreign relations. Throughout his writing in The Republic, Plato highlights the differences between Athens' relationships with other Greek city-states, and their relationships with other, non-Greek nations. Plato suggests rules for warfare between city-states to prevent damage to the Greeks but does not apply those same rules to war with other nations, because non-Greeks were "barbarians... [and] natural enemies," while inter-Greek-city-state wars were amongst "natural friends" when "Greece is sick and divided" (Plato, 470c). Many use this view to paint Plato as an isolationist on foreign relations, but it is important to consider the context of Plato's writing. Plato made his arguments in an ancient world, where a state's direct relations were shared with other city-states of the same civilization, while foreign nations were distant and less relevant. In the modern world, however, nations have taken the place of city-states, becoming interdependent on one another in the ways that the Greek city-states were upon each other. With the growth of a global interstate economy, ease of communication through social media and the internet, and the potential global effects of expanding programs for weapons of mass destruction, the world has evolved to a place where no one state is entirely isolated from others. With this shift to global interdependency, Plato's definition of factions and factional conflict has expanded to fit all modern nations and any conflict between those nations. As such, Plato's recommendation that city-states "discipline their foes in a friendly spirit...and not punish them with enslavement and

destruction" (Plato, 471a) can be applied to the debate on foreign intervention, highlighting the relationships and connections around the globe.

Almost two thousand years after Plato, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote The Prince as an instruction guide for new rulers. He provides recommendations for many different aspects of leadership and the management of a state, including foreign policy. With his goal of teaching leaders to expand their powers, Machiavelli is not concerned with intervention to aid other nations, but rather, conquest and domination. His methods for subjugation, however, can still be applied to topics of modern state intervention. Machiavelli warns rulers that when acquiring power over another state a ruler "cannot avoid offending those whose new ruler [they] are, both with [their] armed soldiers and with innumerable other provocations that come in the wake of a conquest. [They] end up making enemies of all those [they] have offended during [their] conquest of the principality," (Machiavelli, ch 3). Recognizing that intervening in another nation will cause harm to the people there is an important part of weighing the options of intervention and should be thoroughly considered. Machiavelli also gives rulers several options of how to prevent resistance when intervening, two of which are still used today: either destroy the state or "let it live with its own laws, exacting a tribute and creating within it a regime of a selected few who will keep it friendly toward you" (Machiavelli, ch 5). While destroying the state is still an option used today, although not as often by the United States, most cases of foreign intervention favor the second option of maintaining the current state while implementing an American style government with loyal officials installed. Although Machiavelli's guidebook was originally intended for a monarch, many of his teachings on foreign relations are used in plans for American involvement in other nations' internal affairs.

Unlike Machiavelli, Immanuel Kant was more focused on writing about obtaining and maintaining peace than gaining power. Kant believes that "the republican constitution also offers … perpetual peace" (Kant, 75), as citizens will be required to vote on going to war, a decision citizens will never want to make, meaning the republic will be involved in fewer wars. Following this idea, there is support from Kant for republics, such as the US, to spread their form of democracy as a way of decreasing war worldwide. While he does support the spread of republican government as a method to increase peace, he also stipulates that "no state shall forcibly interfere in the constitution and government of another state" (Kant, 70). Although in Kant's view international peace will only be fully achievable if all nations adopt a republican constitution and form of government, that fact does not give any nation the right to force another nation to change their government or constitution. This idea is important to keep in mind for America's modern global role, as it provides a reason to avoid intervening for purposes of changing state structures and governments, as not all states have a culture or beliefs that are well-suited for an American-style government.

From Plato, Machiavelli, and Kant's arguments, a common belief that expanding democracy leads to more widespread peace and less war can be found and seen throughout the US' history of foreign policy and interventionism. It is only since the fall of the Berlin Wall that the nature of the US' involvement in other states' affairs has become so controversial, but the US has been applying the philosophers' ideas on foreign relations since the mid-nineteenth century. Notable examples of early American interventionism are the Spanish-American war and colonies of the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico, and involvement in the Panama Canal. In 1898, when the US won the Spanish-American War, they secured themselves a position as an imperial power,

with the Spanish ceding sovereignty over Guam and the Philippines, as well as Puerto Rico (Library of Congress), expanding power following Machiavelli's instructions. For many Americans, this was a natural development of Manifest Destiny, the widespread belief that the US was destined to expand. While this was only the first step into international politics, this establishment as an imperial power opened the door to the possibilities of a future role in European affairs and more. Several years later, seeking to increase both their Pacific and global power, the US built the Panama Canal to connect the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. With the belief of American exceptionalism growing at the time, the US wanted to be separated from the traditional powers of Europe, trying to frame themselves as "more selfless, more [of] a help to the world, more advancing [of] civilization" (van Wagtendonk). While that was the goal, in Panama, for example, although the Canal was built with the idea of helping others, the US asserted its power over the country for a century. At the time, many Panamanians hoped that agreeing to the Canal would put an independent Panama at the center of the world trade system, but in the end, Panama only gained their independence by ceding the sovereignty over the Canal itself to the US (van Wagtendonk). With their stronger position as a global power, the US entered the twentieth century maintaining their impartiality to European affairs.

Their impartiality did not last long, however, as following World War I and II, US involvement in other nations increased significantly, beginning with the US' occupation of West Germany. Throughout the twentieth century, the US entered several wars and intervened in various states, trying to prevent the spread of communism and promote democracy as a more ideal form of government. During the Cold War, anti-communist sentiment was high in the US, and that fear fueled American support for intervention to prevent the spread of communism

around the world, seen in the American involvement during the Korean War and Vietnam War, both fought to prevent a domino effect of Pacific nations falling to communism, providing military support as Machiavelli recommended. For example, at the time of the Korean War, many Americans were in support, believing the Truman Doctrine had committed them to the war with the promise to help any country threatened by communism (BBC). At the time, anti-communist sentiment also fueled the CIA operations under President Kennedy that attempted to overthrow Fidel Castro's communist Cuban government and establish a non-communist, America-friendly government in its place (JFK). Eventually, the nationwide fear of communism subsided, but the belief that American democracy is superior remained.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the American goal of a "Europe whole, free, and at peace," (Goldgeier) grew closer to being achieved, but that did not put an end to American intervention. In Europe alone, the US was involved in the Bosnian War and the NATO bombing campaign in Serbia, in both cases working with NATO to help establish long-term peace (Goldgeier). Additionally, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, US intervention has become more focused on the Middle East, fighting the Gulf War, Iraq War, and the War in Afghanistan, imposing sanctions in Iran, and providing diplomacy and financial assistance to Egypt and Pakistan (Myre), showcasing the different options proposed by Machiavelli for intervening upon another state. Many Americans have criticized the US government for intervening in an area that cannot be helped until they "figure out who they are and what kind of countries they want to live in" (Myre), while others have praised the government for protecting the nation from further attacks like 9/11. With the increased debate on American involvement in other nations' affairs since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the increased focus on the Middle East since that time,

much of the debate has also focused specifically on the Middle East, however, it is a wider stretching issue that should apply to all parts of the world.

Although the regions, tactics, and reasoning of American involvement have changed over the 150 years or so that the US has favored interventionism, the basic motivation has not. Since the first few cases of US intervention, the idea of spreading American democracy and cultural structure has been the driving force. In the mid-nineteenth century, ideas of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny asserted major influence over American beliefs and politics, at first, as a reason to expand the borders of the nation westward, but later as justification to expand power globally. With Manifest Destiny portraying the bringer of light and civilization to places of darkness and ignorance, this idea was demonstrated by the US' implementation of democracy and American culture in other parts of the world, When Rudyard Kipling published his poem "White Man's Burden" in 1899 in support of the American colonization of the Philippines, he proposed that it was the moral burden of the white man to civilize the non-white, "new-caught, sullen..., half-devil and half-child" (Kipling) people living in the Philippines. While many at the time were aware of the racist tones of the poem, and it ruined Kipling's reputation in many places, those in favor of American expansion and intervention used this idea as justification. Today, this reasoning is not used as overtly, as most people are aware of the issues in Kipling's poem; however, the sentiment of American superiority is still there.

With the War in Afghanistan, for example, the US' involvement in nation-building showcases the belief that American democracy and society must be shared with all others. Like

the association of the "White Man's Burden" with American colonization of the Philippines, the US' intentions in Afghanistan continue to assert the belief that American society is superior and allows for the possibilities of exploitation and injustices that occurred in past interventions (Rothstein). Today, like many issues in American politics, there is a partisan ideological divide. In their party platform, the Republican Party explicitly states their belief "that American exceptionalism — the notion that [their] ideas and principles as a nation gives [them] a unique place of moral leadership in the world — requires the United States to retake its natural position as a leader of the free world" (GOP, 41). The Republican platform discusses the need for a stronger military to protect the nation and provide aid, following a more militaristic view of intervention, demanding war as support for others. The Democratic Party platform, however, focuses on the US' "urgent, moral obligation and strategic interest to help alleviate suffering around the globe" (Democrats). Vowing to contribute humanitarian aid, the Democratic platform prefers providing proactive and coordinated funding over military support. Within this split, Machiavelli's options of how to handle intervention can be seen, with the Republicans preferring the option of military force, and the Democrats preferring to provide support to preexisting structures. Additionally, Plato's rules for warfare are evident, with Republicans treating assigning all nations the role as Plato's foreign nations, while Democrats recognize the way that global interdependency has made all states' relationships similar to Plato's city-states. Following the Republican policy ignores the history of issues caused by doing just that. Throughout the history of American intervention, trying to force American-style government on another nation has rarely been successful, and directly contradicts Kant's rule of not forcing a change in government in another state. Forcing a complete change in government and society in any state will only lead

to resentment, rebellion, and the overthrow of that government, as seen in Afghanistan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The better alternative is, as the Democrats propose, providing the support a state needs through financial aid, humanitarian programs, and protection of displaced communities.

Although Plato, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Immanuel Kant all gave arguments that provide favorable support for intervention, the ways American intervention in the past has been executed have proven to be more detrimental than helpful. Plato's differentiation between the treatments of neighboring Greek city-states and foreign nations is no longer applicable in a modern world that has become interwoven and interdependent, and as such, America should follow his proposal of not treating the opposition with war and cruelty, something the Democratic Party platform agrees with. Machiavelli's options of war and destruction or supporting the existing structures is also an important factor that should be considered in all cases of intervention, as America, again following Plato's idea of generous treatment, should support the existing structures rather than entering complete war as has been done in the past. Finally, Kant's stipulation of not forcing a change in government gives further reason to avoid war, and rather provide support of change that will best fit a state.

While it is likely that the spread of democratic government would lead to widespread peace and less war overall, pushing American democracy on all states is not a realistic option. Every state has different cultures, beliefs, and values, and not all of those align with the values that are necessary for American democracy to work. It is true that as a strong nation, the US has a responsibility to aid those states that struggle with providing for their citizens or that are

committing atrocities against certain communities. However, that does not give the United States the right to believe they are unique and superior to all others and that that supposed superiority means all others should follow the American example. As the modern world continues to develop and internal issues arise over culture, religion, or race in other states, the United States should be prepared to provide support through financial aid or humanitarian programs but should stop jumping to solving all issues with military operations, as that gives off the impression that the United States is continuing the idea of American exceptionalism, trying to save all societies they deem inferior from themselves.

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