

# *Is America in Retreat?*

## Discussion Questions

1. "American Exceptionalism" is the idea that America is inherently different and even better than other nations, based on the revolutionary founding ideas that formed the country, such as limited government, individual rights, private property, free enterprise, and a republican form of government. French writer Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), described this in his *Democracy in America*:
  - a. "The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, the proximity of Europe, which allows them to neglect these pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand special causes, of which I have only been able to point out the most important, have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical objects. His passions, his wants, his education, and everything about him seem to unite in drawing the native of the United States earthward; his religion alone bids him turn, from time to time, a transient and distracted glance to heaven. Let us cease, then, to view all democratic nations under the example of the American people."
    - i. Is America still unique compared to other democratic nations?
2. Thomas Jefferson argued America was becoming a model for the world. In 1809, he said America was:
  - a. "Trusted with the destinies of this solitary republic of the world, the only monument of human rights, and the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self-government, from hence it is to be lighted up in other regions of the earth, if other areas of the earth shall ever become susceptible of its benign influence."
    - i. Should America be a beacon for others to emulate, or should we take a more active role, "spreading light" to the other parts of the world?
3. Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg address (1863), argued that Americans have a duty to ensure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."
  - a. How far should this be taken with foreign policy, i.e. are we obligated to:

- i. Support democracies around the world?
    - ii. Create democracies around the world?
  - b. When should the U.S. Government intervene militarily?
    - i. Humanitarian reasons?
    - ii. National self-interest?
    - iii. Protecting shipping routes?
4. Walter Russell Mead argues "American foreign policy is at its best when we really face a crisis." Is this true for all nations, or is something unique about America?
- a. Answers will vary; possible answer:
    - i. U.S. legal-institutional arrangements, specifically how power is enabled and constrained, determine to a large extent the response the U.S. chooses.
    - ii. The acceptance by other countries of the U.S. as a leader.
    - iii. That the United Nations relies on the U.S. to lead military actions.
5. Bret Stephens argues that America has scaled-back its involvement in the world, which may spark instability. Does the world need a hegemonic power to keep stability and avoid a Hobbesian war of "all against all"?
6. If the U.S. does not lead militarily, who will stop, for instance, Russia expanding into other sovereign countries such as Crimea, Ukraine and Estonia?
7. What will happen to the legitimacy of the US as a military force if threats are not followed with action? Does this create a permissive environment for expansionist regimes? As Brett Stephens argues:
- a. "President Obama set a red line, no use of chemical weapons. Bashar Assad crossed that red line by killing a thousand people with sarin gas in Damascus. There were no consequences. Six months later, Vladimir Putin, observing what happened in Syria, took Crimea in the space of a couple of days. Even then there were almost no consequences... he understood that he could also flagrantly violate international law, and not suffer serious consequences..."
  - b. How should we respond to such aggression?
    - i. By providing training to resistance fighters?

- ii. By arming the resistance fighters?
  - iii. With direct military intervention?
8. John Herbst points out that Vladimir Putin has argued that Russia has “the right, in fact, the duty – to protect not just ethnic Russians, but Russian speakers...wherever they live.” This argument was used to justify the Kremlin’s aggression in Georgia and Crimea.
- a. Is this a valid argument? Is this not what Hitler did in the Sudetenland (bordering areas of Czechoslovakia)?
  - b. What about the Russian speakers of Latvia (25%) or Estonia (25%)?
  - c. Is this redefining what a nation is back on the old idea of bloodlines?
  - d. Could America or any other English-dominant country use the same justification to defend English speakers worldwide?
9. Annexing Crimea and attacking Ukraine was a violation of international law.
- a. Was Operation Saber Strike, an annual military exercise in the Baltic States led by the U.S. Army, enough of a signal to ward off such aggression?
  - b. If not, what is the appropriate amount of force to show/use?
10. Estonia is a NATO member (and one of the freest economies in Europe). If they were invaded, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty guarantees a defensive response.
- a. Is that too much force, risking a greater war?
  - b. Is not showing that force tantamount to appeasement, as with Hitler’s expansion of territories into Austria, the Sudetenland, etc.?
11. What should America’s role be in the Middle East?
- a. Is it the “graveyard of Empires” that will only drain our resources compared to the political gains?
  - b. Is it a valuable ally, since oil is a precious resource?
  - c. Is it worth defending Israel, the lone democracy surrounded by mostly hostile nations?
12. What role should the United Nations play?
- a. Does the U.N. lead the way or rely on the U.S. to do the military work?
  - b. Should the U.N., as the soldier said in the video, remain “impartial. We’re not taking part

in any of the conflict. So, I think that's why the U.N. is so unique." Is this effective or is it moral equivocation when a stronger stand is needed?

13. Is the \$4 billion given in military aid each year to Israel a worthy investment in an ally, or something they should be providing themselves?
14. Should America protect shipping trade lanes, where \$5.3 trillion passes, or leave this to countries near those shipping lanes to protect?
15. How should the U.S. respond to China for unilaterally redrawing the boundaries of their fishing rights and territories?
  - a. For using their fishing boats as a de facto militia?
  - b. For intruding on the Philippines and other countries Exclusive Economic Zones?
16. Should the U.S. continue the tradition of being the world's policeman, or give way to another country? An international body?