

Promoting democracy: foreign policy imperative?

by Larry Diamond



March 1965: U.S. Marines wade ashore at Da Nang, Vietnam, to defend the coastal airbase against Communist attack. (AP)

SINCE THE FOUNDING of the American Republic, the U.S. has been torn between two quite different visions of how it should relate to other countries. One approach sees the world as it is, not as the U.S. would like it to be—an intrinsically anarchic and amoral collection of states seeking to expand their power and influence in the world. In this unsentimental conception of a dangerous, conflictual world—where (to paraphrase the 19th century English statesman Lord Palmerston) nations have no permanent friends or allies, only permanent interests—the guiding foreign policy priorities for the U.S. are the safety of its citizens, the security of its borders, the extension of its power and the advancement of its economic interests in trade, investment and natural resources. Not surprisingly, this approach to foreign policy has come broadly to be known as the “realist” school, though realism has contained within it sharply different tendencies, from isolationism to a strong propensity for interest-driven intervention. In the early decades of American independence, when the U.S. was still a relatively new and fragile nation, its basic tenet was caution about alliances and “foreign entanglements.” Thus, in 1821, President John Quincy Adams proclaimed that America’s

principal “gift to mankind” was its repeated affirmation of democratic principles. The U.S., he said, had been wise to abstain from “interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings.” He added, in terms that would have a deep impact on 20th-century advocates of realist restraint in global affairs, like Hans P. Morgenthau and George F. Kennan:

Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America’s] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.

An alternative strain of thinking in American foreign policy

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