As the ancients remind us, the statesman's primary concern must be the good of his own nation. In revolutionary times especially, thoughts, words, and deeds about international affairs must be subordinated to internal needs. That is the primary meaning of “America First.” But because “America First” has an equally compelling meaning internationally, it also implies taking seriously what the United States might do for itself vis-à-vis foreign nations—beyond simply using them as weapons in domestic battles, as so many politicians and commentators do today in what passes for discussion of Russia policy.

America is in the throes of revolution. The 2016 election and its aftermath reflect the distinction, difference, even enmity that has grown exponentially over the past quarter century between America’s ruling class and the rest of the country. During the Civil War, President Lincoln observed that all sides “pray[ed] to the same God.” They revered, though in clashing ways, the same founders and principles. None doubted that those on the other side were responsible human beings. Today, none of that holds. Our ruling class and their clients broadly view Biblical religion as the foundation of all that is wrong with the world. According to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, “The phrases ‘religious liberty’ and ‘religious freedom’ will stand for nothing except hypocrisy so long as they remain code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Christian supremacy, or any form of intolerance.”

The government apparatus identifies with the ruling class’s interests, proclivities, and tastes, and almost unanimously with the Democratic Party. As it uses government power to press those interests, proclivities, and tastes upon the ruled, it acts as a partisan state. This party state’s political objective is to delegitimize not so much the politicians who champion the ruled from time to time, but the ruled themselves. Ever since Woodrow Wilson nearly a century and a half ago at Princeton, colleges have taught that ordinary Americans are rightly ruled by experts because they are incapable of governing themselves. Millions of graduates have identified themselves as the personifiers of expertise and believe themselves entitled to rule. Their practical definition of discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, etc., is neither more nor less than anyone’s reluctance to bow to them. It’s personal.

On the other side, some two thirds of regular Americans chafe at insults from on high and believe that “the system” is rigged against them and, hence, illegitimate—that elected and appointed officials, plus the courts, business leaders, and educators are leading the country in the wrong direction. The non-elites blame the elites for corruptly ruling us against our will, for impoverishing us, for getting us into wars and losing them. Many demand payback—with interest.

So many on all sides have withdrawn consent from one another, as well as from republicanism as defined by the Constitution and as it was practiced until the mid-20th century, that it is difficult to imagine how the trust and sympathy necessary for good government might ever return. Instead, we have a cold civil war. Statesmanship’s first task is to prevent it from turning hot. In today’s
circumstances, fostering mutual forbearance may require loosening the Union in unfamiliar and unwelcome ways to accommodate differences that may otherwise become far worse.

**Taking Sides**

Well-nigh the entire ruling class—government bureaucracies, the judiciary, academia, media, associated client groups, Democratic officials, and Democrat-controlled jurisdictions—have joined in “Resistance” to the 2016 elections: “You did not win this election,” declared Tom Perez recently, the Democratic National Committee’s chairman. This is not about Donald Trump’s alleged character defects. The Resistance would have arisen against whoever represented Americans who had voted not to be governed as they have been for the past quarter-century. It is a cold civil war against a majority of the American people and their way of life. The members of the Resistance mean to defend their power. Their practical objective is to hamper and otherwise delegitimize 2016’s winners. Their political objective is to browbeat Trump voters into believing they should repent and yield to their betters. This campaign might break the Trump presidency.

In the meantime, however, it exacerbates the spirit of discontent in the land. In 2016 the electorate, following the pattern it had set in 2010 and 2014 (and even in 2012, except for the presidential election), voted Republican to show its desire to reduce government’s intrusion in American life, to get out from under the ruling class’s socio-economic agenda and political correctness. But the Republican leadership did not and does not share the electorate’s concerns. Cycle after cycle, Americans who vote to “throw the rascals out” get ever more unaccountable rules piled on by the same unelected bureaucrats; and even modest attempts to hold back capillary intrusion into their lives get invalidated by the same judges. They come to believe that the system is rigged. In short, they want to drain the swamp.

Yet such revolutionary sentiments do not amount to a coherent program to reverse the past century’s course. Donald Trump’s promises with regard to the swamp and to restoring America’s greatness would be extraordinarily difficult to keep even were they matched with due understanding and forceful execution. But the ruling class is so big, so pervasive and so committed to its ideas, that sideling it, and even more so, undoing its work, would require at least matching its power, pretensions, and vehemence. In other words, it would take raising the temperature of our cold civil war’s right side to match or overmatch the temperature of its left side. Statesmanship’s task, however, is to maximize peace, not strife.

American society has divided along unrecognizable visions of the good, held by countrymen who increasingly regard each other as enemies. Any attempt by either side to coerce the other into submission augurs only the fate that has befallen other peoples who let themselves slide into revolution. It follows that the path to peace must lie in each side’s contentment to have its own way—but only among those who consent to it. This implies limiting the U.S. government’s reach to what it can grasp without wrecking what remains of our national cohesion.

**Lincoln's Example**

The events preceding the Civil War, which killed some 10% of military-age American men, may offer some guidance. The conflict loomed for 30 years because Northerners and Southerners wanted to impose their views about slavery, the tariff, and much else on the other. South Carolina had nullified the Tariffs of 1828 and 1832. Because war was the only way by which it could have been forced to accept the tariffs, President Andrew Jackson and Congress, while threatening the use of force, offered a compromise that effectively let South Carolina get what it wanted out of nullification.

By 1858, America had become a “house divided” by a cold civil war that, Lincoln warned, would lead eventually to total victory for one side or the other. Lincoln left no doubt which side he wanted to prevail. But, until the firing on Fort Sumter left him no other option, he focused on cooling the conflict. He would send no obnoxious officials to the South—effectively agreeing to at least temporary nullification of federal law—though he made clear he would defend federal forts and arsenals in the South. He would faithfully enforce the fugitive slave law in the North, and even consider a constitutional amendment specifically protecting slavery where it existed. He believed that, so long as slavery was not allowed to expand into the territories, regardless of what the Southern states did within their boundaries, the best features of diverse America would triumph in the end.

To this extent, Lincoln was following the standard American way of getting along with...
people with whom one disagrees. Ever since Roger Williams led his band out of Massachusetts to found Rhode Island, Americans have avoided contention by sorting out into more congenial groups. The Constitution was written to reflect the reality of very different ways of life, united by a common commitment to “the laws of nature and of nature’s God” and to the supreme law of the land. The wanting of agreement among ourselves regarding first principles has increased the need for—and the difficulty of—tolerating differences among ourselves.

As with Lincoln, the practical limits of the U.S. government’s reach should guide its grasp. Of what would similar statesmanship today consist? Much of the heat in contemporary American politics comes from the attempt, principally from the Left but increasingly from the Right as well, to force the entire nation to live in precisely the same way with precisely the same values. Statesmanship should begin by questioning and moderating that tendency.

**Accepting Reality**

Consider sanctuary cities (and states). Some hundreds of cities in America have declared that they are taking no part in enforcing national immigration laws. The government of great big California has set up an executive office to figure out all the ways in which to evade or just to stiff anything it does not like coming from the Trump Administration. And why not? Practically speaking, the federal government doesn’t have the power to make local officials enforce its rules, or even court judgments, against significant popular opposition. Yes, nowadays every federal agency has its SWAT team. But state or city officials, backed by the voters, can nullify or simply ignore a federal law, regulation, or court order, because countering peaceful nullification is hard—and usually unwise, too. Sending paramilitaries to arrest elected officials or citizens who comply with local law or policy is a blind alley. Yes, President Eisenhower sent the 101st airborne to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to enforce school desegregation after *Brown v. Board of Education*. But that symbolic act (no resistance, no force, no arrests) succeeded because the government then enjoyed a moral authority that it has since squandered. Nothing like that will ever happen again.

The reality is that, today, the people of California and Massachusetts continue to diverge from those of Texas and the Dakotas in so many ways that applying the administrative state’s formulae to them requires ever more force. Substituting administrative force for waning consensus makes for less national unity, not more. Why not, then, deal with the problem by accepting reality?

Texas passed a law that, in effect, closes down most of its abortion clinics. The U.S. Supreme Court struck it down. What if Texas closed them nonetheless? Send the Army to point guns at Texas rangers to open them? What would the federal government do if North Dakota declared itself a “Sanctuary for the Unborn” and simply banned abortion? For that matter, what is the federal government doing about the fact that, for practical purposes, its laws concerning marijuana are being ignored in Colorado and California? Utah objects to the boundaries of national monu-
ments created by decree within its borders. What if the state ignored those boundaries? Prayer in schools? What could bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., do if any number of states decided that what the federal courts have to say about such things are bad?

Now that identity politics have replaced the politics of persuasion and blended into the art of war, statesmen should try to preserve what peace remains through mutual forbearance toward jurisdictions that ignore or act contrary to federal laws, regulations, or court orders. Blue states and red states deal differently with some matters of health, education, welfare, and police. It does no good to insist that all do all things uniformly. Why shouldn’t each spend its money and legislate as it wishes? Regarding sanctuary cities, the federal government can, and should, withdraw whatever money such jurisdictions receive from the federal government for the functions in question. Indeed, as jurisdictions on the Left and Right effectively nullify some of the administrative state’s functions, fewer and fewer congressmen and senators will be inclined to maintain those functions. America’s founders had learned from the empires that keeping diverse peoples under the same roof requires interfering as little as possible with their views of themselves and of the good. Time to relearn federalism.

The limits to such forbearance are set by the Declaration of Independence’s requirement that no one may rule another without his consent; such unity as may be possible, therefore, has to result from the politics of persuasion. Today, states and cities ruled by the Left are seizing disproportionate influence in national politics by counting the votes of non-citizens. California issued drivers’ licenses—de facto voter registration—to a million illegals. Countless localities, such as New York City, Detroit, and Florida’s Broward County, do similar things. A few million votes here and there add up to a wall protecting today’s ruling class as it imposes itself on the rest of the country. Because this fraud so threatens the body politic’s integrity, a federal law requiring positive proof of citizenship for voting in federal elections is a *sine qua non* of continued national cohesion.

### The Common Defense

**R**evolution narrows statesmanship’s focus to first principles regarding foreign affairs, too. The fundamentals never change: foreign policy must serve internal needs first. It must speak softly and carry a big stick. In revolutionary times or times of profound discord, this approach is especially important: minimize interference in others’ affairs so as to minimize occasions for others’ interference in ours, and maintain such military capacity as would discourage anyone from taking advantage of our temporary distraction. The overarching challenge is to secure such respect from other peoples as may be needed to live safely and without interference as our body politic secures internal peace.

George Washington’s Farewell Address stressed the priority of avoiding foreign commitments that set Americans against one another, encouraging them to be partisans of contending foreign causes. Contrary to Washington’s warnings, U.S. foreign policy has oscillated between support for, and opposition to, governments and factions entangled in the Middle East’s perennial struggle between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Like its predecessors, the Trump Administration seems preoccupied, for example, with the question of which sect will hold the mayoralty of Mosul. But attention to such questions exacerbates divisions that already exist among Americans. Our incapacity to make lasting changes in other peoples’ arrangements with one another continues to subtract from the respect that we Americans need in order to secure ourselves from foreign interference at a time when this is crucial. The same is true of official U.S. pronouncements on world events that are not of our making and are beyond our control. They bark without biting, furthering contrasting reactions among Americans and increasing foreigners’ contempt for us all.

We should take to heart Washington’s injunction to treasure and defend America’s peculiar—yes, exceptional—nature and circumstances. Military preparedness naturally unifies Americans of disparate views insofar as it is directed to “the common defense.” Since political divisiveness results from suspicions that our military power is directed to partisan ends, military power can contribute mightily to national unity by focusing unambiguously on protecting Americans and killing those who harm us. In this regard, nothing has ever enjoyed so near-unanimous support as defense against ballistic missile attack. Most Americans mistakenly believe it already exists, and strain to comprehend why U.S. policy remains not to raise any obstacles whatever to Russian and Chinese missiles hitting our country. Americans of all sorts (elites of a certain age excluded) could unite around missile defense as essential to themselves and to their neighbors.

Revolutions end when a coherent, persuasive idea of the common good returns to the public mind. Only then can statecraft be practiced rationally, as more than a minimalist calling designed to prevent the worst from happening.

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