Retreating From Violence in 2013

I propose a New Years Resolution for America: the retreat from violence in 2013. We ended 2012 witnessing a mentally unstable, 20-year-old slaughter school children using assault weapons owned by his gun-enthusiast mother, who also became his first victim. We watched in shock as an apologetic NRA urged more guns, not less, on our wounded society.

Yet even the deranged NRA performance had one thing right: Our problems are not just guns, but a society drenched in violence. I'm not speaking about Hollywood and video games. I'm speaking about our nation's approach to the world.

Our foreign policy is the NRA's strategy applied globally: shoot first and aim later, believe that the only instruments in our foreign policy toolkit are threats and drone missiles, and sell advanced weaponry far and wide.

Americans were all too easily whipped into a war fury to topple Saddam Hussein on phony pretenses and lies. Perhaps 100,000 Iraqi civilians died, if not many more. Thousands of young American men and women died and tens of thousands are maimed for life.

We continue fighting a war in Afghanistan on a cynical political cycle. If the U.S. had real war aims in Afghanistan, the Obama Administration would not have announced years ago that the war would end in 2014. The date was set for Obama's reelection campaign, to avoid an appearance of weakness in the run-up to reelection. We will leave Afghanistan accomplishing nothing that we couldn't have accomplished at a tenth the cost and without a war.

We continue the U.S. foreign policy of regime change, despite its absurd failures and blowbacks time and again. It's a hallowed tradition, stretching back to Mossadegh, Arbenz, Diem, Allende, and others.

In 2011 we decided that Libya's Muammar Gaddafi had to go, so NATO provided the air cover and the heavy arms to topple him. Yes, Gaddafi was crazed, but no, NATO cannot now run Libya nor even handle the blowback as armed troops once in Libya now overrun Mali. Be sure that more violence will follow in Mali and other parts of West Africa.

Now we are told that Syria's Bashar al-Assad has to go. We will arm and try to manipulate the rebels. Syria's ancient cities will be turned to rubble and thousands more civilians will die in the name of saving them. And then Syria will be ungovernable, but now on our watch. The rebels we armed will soon be our enemies. As in Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Syria -- the list goes on. This we call a foreign policy.

Of course the numbers of dead in these recent wars pale in comparison with the deaths in another unnecessary American war, the Vietnam War, which took the lives of more than one million Vietnamese civilians and more than 50,000 Americans. And what was the point of that war? It resulted from a grotesquely exaggerated U.S. fear of Vietnam being reunited under nationalist-communist leaders, the ones we signed a trade pact a few years after the war ended.

We do engage in so many useless wars? Almost for the same reason that we have no gun control. A significant number of Americans, perhaps a quarter or a third, harbor the belief that force is the only answer to disagreements. Yet more consequentially, the larger part of America, and the political class in general, is afraid of this group.

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Consider why we were in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson knew the war was both pointless and hopeless, but he sent more than 500,000 troops because he was afraid that the U.S. right wing would attack him for being soft on communism if South Vietnam were to fall on his watch. This is the same reason why we will leave Afghanistan in 2014 rather than 2012 or earlier.

It's a deeper question why a minority preaching violence so often gets its way. Why are the politicians so paralyzed by the fear of being called weak? Why are peaceful approaches to solving problems at home and abroad not even pursued? My guess is that the powerful emotion of fear dominates reason. Extremists can whip up pervasive and infectious fear that turns peaceable people into proponents of violence.

The constant resort to violence is draining America's spirit and finances. The $700 billion spent on the Pentagon this past year is not only more than the combined spending of the next 15 countries, and more than five times China's military spending, but also overshadows by far our other approaches to solving world problems and building national security.

The Republicans rail against foreign aid, but all foreign aid combined, around $30 billion a year, is not even a one-twentieth of what
we spend annually on the Pentagon.

There is a much smarter way. The NRA wants us to have a gun in every classroom. How about realizing that free trade in assault weapons in a violence-prone society is a bad idea, and one incidentally that doesn't have a scintilla of constitutional protection (even Scalia believes that the Second Amendment does not protect assault weapons). It's time to remove assault weapons from the marketplace, not with fig-leaf legislation that is easily ignored, but through real and consequential measures as they have in Australia, the UK, and many other countries.

Similarly, a world awash in weapons and wars can never be a safe world. We need to find other inducements to peace. The key step would be to take a moment to understand the places we are bombing -- in doing so, we'd actually discover a better way to national security.

These violent places, from Mali to Afghanistan, are poor, famine-prone, water scarce, and reeling under climate change (which is causing longer and more intense droughts). Their extreme poverty and vulnerability to famine leads to the violence of desperate and frustrated people. These societies need help to grow food, improve livestock, harness solar power, mobilize information technology, and thereby address the problems that are crippling their societies and turning hope to despair and to arms. In 2009, Obama gave a speech in Cairo calling for the mobilization of science for development in Africa and the Middle East. Good idea, but barely implemented. It's high time to turn that speech into action.

In 2013 let's take just one-seventh of the Pentagon budget, $100 billion, and devote it to solving global problems like food, water, energy, and education. We will see a renaissance of peace that would change minds as well as hearts, in the U.S. and around the world.

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