

The Tragic U.S. Choice to Prioritize War Over Peacemaking

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Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. – [Matthew 5:9](#)

In a brilliant [Op-Ed](#) published in the New York Times, the Quincy Institute's Trita Parsi explained how China, with help from Iraq, was able to mediate and resolve the deeply-rooted conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whereas the United States was in no position to do so after siding with the Saudi kingdom against Iran for decades.

The title of Parsi's article, "The U.S. Is Not an Indispensable Peacemaker," [refers](#) to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's use of the term "indispensable nation" to describe the U.S. role in the post-Cold War world. The irony in Parsi's use of Albright's term is that she generally used it to refer to U.S. war-making, not peacemaking.

In 1998, Albright toured the Middle East and then the United States to rally support for President Clinton's threat to bomb Iraq. After failing to win support in the Middle East, she was [confronted](#) by heckling and critical questions during a televised event at Ohio State University, and she appeared on the Today Show the next morning to respond to public opposition in a more controlled setting.

Albright [claimed](#),

"..if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see here the danger to all of us. I know that the American men and women in uniform are always prepared to sacrifice for freedom, democracy and the American way of life."

Albright's readiness to take the sacrifices of American troops for [granted](#) had already got her into trouble when she famously asked General Colin Powell, "What's the use of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" Powell wrote in his memoirs, "I thought I would have an aneurysm."

But Powell himself later caved to the neocons, or the “[fucking crazies](#)” as he called them in private, and dutifully read the lies they made up to try to justify the illegal invasion of Iraq to the UN Security Council in February 2003.

For the past 25 years, administrations of both parties have caved to the “crazies” at every turn. Albright and the neocons’ exceptionalist rhetoric, now standard fare across the U.S. political spectrum, leads the United States into conflicts all over the world, in an unequivocal, Manichean way that defines the side it supports as the side of good and the other side as evil, foreclosing any chance that the United States can later play the role of an impartial or credible mediator.

Today, this is true in the war in Yemen, where the U.S. chose to join a Saudi-led alliance that committed systematic war crimes, instead of remaining neutral and preserving its credibility as a potential mediator. It also applies, most notoriously, to the U.S. blank check for endless Israeli aggression against the Palestinians, which doom its mediation efforts to failure.

For China, however, it is precisely its policy of neutrality that has enabled it to mediate a peace agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the same applies to the African Union’s successful peace [negotiations](#) in Ethiopia, and to Turkey’s promising [mediation](#) between Russia and Ukraine, which might have ended the slaughter in Ukraine in its first two months but for American and British determination to keep trying to pressure and weaken Russia.

But neutrality has become anathema to U.S. policymakers. George W. Bush’s threat, “You are either with us or against us,” has become an established, if unspoken, core assumption of 21st century U.S. foreign policy.

The response of the American public to the cognitive dissonance between our wrong assumptions about the world and the real world they keep colliding with has been to turn inward and embrace an ethos of individualism. This can range from New Age spiritual disengagement to a chauvinistic America First attitude. Whatever form it takes for each of us, it allows us to persuade ourselves that the distant rumble of bombs, albeit mostly [American](#) ones, is not our problem.

The U.S. corporate media has validated and increased our ignorance by drastically [reducing](#) foreign news coverage and turning TV news into a profit-driven echo chamber peopled by pundits in studios who seem to know even less about the world than the rest of us.

Most U.S. politicians now rise through the [legal bribery](#) system from local to state to national politics, and arrive in Washington knowing next to nothing about foreign policy. This leaves them as vulnerable as the public to neocon cliches like the ten or twelve packed into Albright’s vague justification for bombing Iraq: freedom, democracy, the American way of life, stand tall, the danger to all of us, we are America, indispensable nation, sacrifice, American men and women in uniform, and “we have to use force.”

Faced with such a solid wall of nationalistic drivel, Republicans and Democrats alike have left foreign policy firmly in the experienced but deadly hands of the neocons, who have brought the world only chaos and violence for 25 years.

All but the most principled progressive or libertarian members of Congress go along to get along with policies so at odds with the real world that they risk destroying it, whether by

ever-escalating warfare or by suicidal inaction on the climate crisis and other real-world problems that we must cooperate with other countries to solve if we are to survive.

It is no wonder that Americans think the world's problems are insoluble and that peace is unattainable, because our country has so totally abused its unipolar moment of global dominance to persuade us that that is the case. But these policies are choices, and there are alternatives, as China and other countries are dramatically demonstrating. President Lula da Silva of Brazil is proposing to form a "[peace club](#)" of peacemaking nations to mediate an end to the war in Ukraine, and this offers new hope for peace.

During his election campaign and his first year in office, President Biden repeatedly [promised](#) to usher in a new era of American diplomacy, after decades of war and record military spending. Zach Vertin, now a senior adviser to UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, [wrote](#) in 2020 that Biden's effort to "rebuild a decimated State Department" should include setting up a "mediation support unit... staffed by experts whose sole mandate is to ensure our diplomats have the tools they need to succeed in waging peace."

Biden's meager response to this call from Vertin and others was finally [unveiled](#) in March 2022, after he dismissed Russia's diplomatic initiatives and Russia invaded Ukraine. The State Department's new Negotiations Support Unit consists of three junior staffers quartered within the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. This is the extent of Biden's token commitment to peacemaking, as the barn door swings in the wind and the four [horsemen](#) of the apocalypse – War, Famine, Conquest and Death – run wild across the Earth.

As Zach Vertin wrote, "It is often assumed that mediation and negotiation are skills readily available to anyone engaged in politics or diplomacy, especially veteran diplomats and senior government appointees. But that is not the case: Professional mediation is a specialized, often highly technical, tradecraft in its own right."

The mass destruction of war is also specialized and technical, and the United States now invests close to a [trillion dollars](#) per year in it. The appointment of three junior State Department staffers to try to make peace in a world threatened and intimidated by their own country's trillion dollar war machine only reaffirms that peace is not a priority for the U.S. government.

By [contrast](#), the European Union created its Mediation Support Team in 2009 and now has 20 team members working with other teams from individual EU countries. The UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs has a staff of [4,500](#), spread all across the world.

The tragedy of American diplomacy today is that it is diplomacy for war, not for peace. The State Department's top priorities are not to make peace, nor even to actually win wars, which the United States has failed to do since 1945, apart from the reconquest of small neocolonial outposts in Grenada, Panama and Kuwait. Its actual priorities are to bully other countries to join U.S.-led war coalitions and buy U.S. weapons, to mute [calls for peace](#) in international fora, to enforce illegal and deadly [coercive sanctions](#), and to manipulate other countries into [sacrificing](#) their people in U.S. proxy wars.

The result is to keep spreading violence and chaos across the world. If we want to stop our rulers from marching us toward nuclear war, climate catastrophe and mass extinction, we had better take off our blinders and start insisting on policies that reflect our best instincts

and our common interests, instead of the interests of the warmongers and merchants of death who profit from war.

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Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies are the authors of [War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict](#), published by OR Books in November 2022.

Featured image: President Xi of China at the head of the table in a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Photo credit: DNA India

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