

Why It Makes Sense That Soros and Koch Are Uniting to Fund a New Anti-War Think Tank

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The group wants to challenge the bipartisan reliance on military force.



George Soros at the Schumpeter Award ceremony in Vienna on June 21, and Charles Koch at the Stand Together summit on June 29 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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Any initiative that boasts funding from both George Soros and Charles Koch—boogymen of the right and left, respectively—is going to garner some attention. But the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a newly planned anti-war foreign policy think tank, aims to get noticed for more than just the money behind it. Its founders hope that, as operations ramp up in the coming months, the institute will provide a critique not only of the Trump administration’s foreign policy, but of the hawkish bipartisan consensus in Washington.

The group’s inception is driven by a shared concern over the United States’ long-standing reliance on military force over diplomacy, as well as the belief that “the foreign policy establishment is ill-equipped to interpret what was happening, particularly the foreign policy of Donald Trump, let alone to combat it and steer it in

a better direction,” says co-founder Stephen Wertheim, a historian at Columbia University and writer on U.S. foreign policy.

According to a [column in the Boston Globe](#) earlier this week, the group is likely to advocate the withdrawal of U.S. troops from combat missions in Syria and Afghanistan as well as a reduction in defense budgets, and a less confrontational foreign policy overall.

While much of the foreign policy establishment supports diplomatic initiatives like the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, Wertheim believes that there’s not enough of an apparatus to support them. “Worthy initiatives like the Iran nuclear deal—it was way too hard to fight for them, and then it proved too difficult to maintain them,” he says.

The Quincy Institute is named for President John Quincy Adams, who famously warned Americans against going abroad “in search of monsters to destroy.” They plan to set up offices in D.C. and begin hiring fellows in the coming months as well as release several reports before the end of this year. In addition to Wertheim, the group’s founders include Trita Parsi, the former president of the National Iranian American Council and a leading proponent of the Iran nuclear deal; Suzanne DiMaggio, an expert on negotiations with Iran and North Korea currently with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; journalist Eli Clifton of the Nation; and the historian and retired Army Col. Andrew Bacevich.

“We are all for democracy and human rights. But what is the best way to promote those things?” — Stephen Wertheim, co-founder of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

Liberals might be surprised to see Koch involved in a venture like this; he and his brother are better known for funding initiatives that promote deregulation and oppose universal health care and action against climate change. But the older of the two famous brothers has held iconoclastic views on foreign policy [since the Vietnam War](#) and has made previous donations in support of a less [interventionist foreign policy](#).

The bigger surprise of the two may actually be Soros. The billionaire philanthropist is a personification of the “liberal international order,” best known internationally for his support for pro-democracy and civil society movements around the world, movements that foreign governments—particularly Russia’s Vladimir Putin—often [paint as tools](#) of U.S. power and influence.

“We are all for democracy and human rights,” Wertheim says. “But what is the best way to promote those things? If we rhetorically promote human rights and democracy in ways that lead to war or the kind of starvation sanctions we currently see with Iran, that does not advance human rights.”

The time does seem ripe for an initiative that challenges the interventionist conventional wisdom. Polls show that 18 years after the 9/11 attacks, Americans are weary of [long-term military commitments](#) and deeply skeptical of regime change and interventionism. An increasing number of Democrats are taking on foreign policy sacred cows including [support for Saudi Arabia](#) and the [relationship with Israel](#). Several of the candidates running for president appear to be [working to craft a message](#) that emphasizes support for democracy and human rights abroad but eschews military interventionism.

There's even some anti-militarist bipartisanship on display at the margins. Left-wing California Rep. Ro Khanna recently teamed up with Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz, a Trump acolyte, on [legislation](#) to prevent funding for a war with Iran. Libertarian-leaning senators like Mike Lee and Rand Paul have worked with liberals on [efforts](#) to end the U.S. role in the Saudi-led war in Yemen.

The Quincy Institute's message will likely be welcomed by anti-war leftists, libertarians, and even some paleoconservatives. But they may expect to face some hostility from what Obama adviser Ben Rhodes once termed "the blob"—members of the influential bipartisan Washington foreign policy consensus that prizes American leadership and the use of military power to maintain the liberal international order. They've already taken some [incoming fire from never-Trumper neocons](#) like Bill Kristol.

"Something that I have been very concerned about is that a lot of opponents of Trump have consistently complained that he's not aggressive enough," says Wertheim. Case in point: the outcry over Trump's recent overtures to North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. Wertheim sees Trump's North Korean diplomacy as disastrously mismanaged but adds, "A lot of establishment types and some Democrats criticize Trump's diplomacy so much that it sounds like they almost don't want diplomacy to take place."

The Quincy Institute's message, somewhat ironically, sounds a little like what Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy was supposed to be in theory. The president ran as a critic of regime change who wanted to reduce America's military footprint. In practice it's been quite different. Trump has stocked the White House with the likes of John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, expanded counterterrorism missions in Africa and the Middle East, launched airstrikes on Syria, and allowed himself to be talked out of troop withdrawals by "great looking central casting" generals, while issuing vague threats of military force in Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela.

Wertheim describes Trump as "more of a militarist than an isolationist," adding, "Whatever you make of what Trump is or what he wants, I think it's very important to push him in the right direction, not the wrong direction, and also to start rethinking what American foreign policy should be after Trump."

Give Trump credit for something: He's built a foreign policy approach so idiosyncratic that everyone—neoconservatives, liberal internationalists, anti-war leftists,

libertarians, and conservative realists—objects to it for different reasons, with completely coherent arguments. Someday soon, they may not have Trump to agree on any more.
