

“America First or America Only?”

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By Dennis Prager

LOS ANGELES, Calif.—I am a strong advocate of America First. Indeed, I believe the citizens of every country should put their country first.

The case for doing so is not difficult to make. Just as people should put their family’s well-being first, they should put their country’s well-being first. Just as we would regard parents who put the well-being of others’ families before—or even on par with—the well-being of their own family as defective parents, we should regard people who place other countries’ well-being before that of their own country as defective citizens.

Similarly, with rare exceptions (such as in a time of war or when saving another person’s life in an extreme situation), people should first take care of themselves.

In this regard, I am guided by two Jewish teachings.

- One is the basic and well-known principle, stated 2,000 years ago by Hillel, one of the most important thinkers in Jewish history: “If I am not for me, who will be for me?” To paraphrase Hillel: “If Americans are not for America, who will be?”

- The other Jewish teaching is the Talmudic principle that, when deciding to which poor people one should first give charity, “the poor of your own city come first.”

The idea of America First accords with both reason and religious morality.

However, some prominent conservatives, whom I know and respect, seem to equate “America First” with “America Only.”

And that is neither logical, nor moral, nor American.

It is illogical

It is not logical because the word *first* implies a “second” and more.

In baseball, “first base” implies a “second base,” etc. If first base were the only base, it would not be known as “first base.”

If you said that your first choice among airlines was, let us say, Delta Air Lines, no one would assume that Delta was your only choice. By definition, therefore, "America First" does not mean "America Only."

So, those who believe that Americans should be concerned only with America are being disingenuous when they say, "America First." They should say what they mean: "America Only."

But "America Only" violates one of the most basic principles of morality—that we should not only take care of ourselves, our family and our country.

Indeed, the second part of Hillel's famous aphorism makes this clear. His rule begins, "If I am not for myself, who will be?" But that is not his entire rule. His first question is immediately followed by this one: "But if I am only for myself, what am I?"

On the important conservative website American Greatness (my own column appears there), an America First advocate wrote a column last week titled, "The America First Response to the Israel-Hamas War."

He opens his column with these words: "Not my circus, not my monkeys. The America First position on the Israel-Hamas mess is clear: Stay far, far away."

He then writes: "Before anyone in any position of power begins to think about even commenting on foreign conflicts, they should solve the crises roiling our civic life at home."

It is amoral

This is another example of the amorality inherent to "America Only."

To take the subject of his article, the current Hamas-Israel war, if the writer really means what he says—that no American in a position of power should "even comment" on that war, that is as pure an example of an amoral position as one can imagine.

Israel was attacked by a terrorist movement that has announced for years that it seeks not to merely defeat Israel but to annihilate the country. Its members tortured, burned and otherwise murdered entire families, raped women, kidnapped grandmothers and babies to hold them hostage, and murdered more Jews than on any one day since the Holocaust—yet no American official should "even comment" on this?

He then writes: "The answer to who Americans should support in the war between Hamas and the Israelis is simple: America."

Presumably this author would have written in 1940-41: "The answer to who Americans should support in the war between Nazi Germany and Great Britain is simple: America."

If this is what he and other spokesmen for America First believe, these people should tell the truth and rename their movement "America Only."

It is un-American

Which brings me to the third problem with this version of America First. It is not only illogical and amoral; it is un-American.

America has never been just a country. Nor is America an ethnic group or race. America is an idea: the greatest nation-making idea in world history. America was set up to be a “bright shining light,” and has always seen itself—correctly, I believe—as exceptional. The America Firsters who believe in America Only do not see America as a moral force for good in the world. It should not “even comment” on good and evil outside of its borders.

As for the argument—offered by every America Only advocate—that America must first deal with its own problems before helping any other people on earth, this simply means that America will never help any other people on earth. There never was and never will be a time when America is free of domestic problems.

The argument that we should concern ourselves with our borders, not those of Israel (or, presumably, Taiwan) is a non sequitur. That we have made America into a country with open borders has nothing to do with Israel or any other country. It has to do with the left’s desire to undo America (and Western civilization in general). And it is not an America First argument; it is an America Only argument.

If conservatism succeeds in changing “America First” into “America Only,” you can say good-bye to American exceptionalism, and to freedom on this planet.