

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

The Isolationists Are Coming!

By: Matthew Duss – May 2, 2013

Ask yourself: Do you oppose putting U.S. troops everywhere, all the time? If you answered yes, you might be an isolationist, according to the word's new definition. A piece in Tuesday's *New York Times*, based on a new NYT/CBS poll, warned that "Americans are exhibiting an isolationist streak, with majorities across party lines decidedly opposed to American intervention in North Korea or Syria right now."

In the very next paragraph, however, we are told that, "While the public does not support direct military action in those two countries right now, a broad 70 percent majority favor the use of remotely piloted aircraft, or drones, to carry out bombing attacks against suspected terrorists in foreign countries."

In other words, if you only support bombing unspecified foreign countries with flying robots, you're exhibiting an isolationist streak.

Further illustrating the crazy isolationist fever infecting the American people, the article quoted poll respondent Pat Bates of Missouri, who said she would "Hate to see us trot into yet another country and try to fix things when we're not quite sure what we're doing."

Who will save us from this madness?

John Kyl and Joe Lieberman will! Last week, the two former senators, now co-chairs of the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute's American Internationalism Project, published a *Washington Post* op-ed cautioning against "neo-isolationist policies—demands for retreat from the world clothed in the language of fiscal prudence and disinterested realism."

Presenting the post-Cold War 1990s—falsely—as an era of American withdrawal from global affairs, the former senators warned, "Today, we are in danger of again repeating this cycle" of isolationism. "Progress in the fight against al-Qaeda and the perceived costs of global leadership have led some to question whether the United States should retain—or is even capable of retaining—a robust international economic and political presence."

In case you were wondering just who "some" are, the link takes you to Senator Rand Paul's February foreign-policy speech at the Heritage Foundation, in which he argued that "a more restrained foreign policy is the true conservative foreign policy, as it includes two basic tenets of true conservatism: respect for the constitution, and fiscal discipline." Yes, Senator Paul proposes a more restrained foreign policy than that

favored by the American Enterprise Institute. But that's like saying I favor a more restrained approach to music than Slayer.

The problem is the default assumption for many in our political elite—reflected in both the *Times* write-up of the poll and Kyl and Lieberman's op-ed—seems to be that the United States has the right—nay, *the duty*—to get into everyone's business, everywhere, all the time. Anything less represents an abdication. They've gotten so into Slayer that anything less seems like smooth jazz.

Tracing the provenance of the “isolationism canard” back in 2006 when it was being deployed by President Bush against opponents of his Iraq policy, the Cato Institute's Justin Logan quoted historian Walter McDougal, who called isolationism “a dirty word that interventionists ... hurl at anyone who questions their policies.”

“In the real world, the choice is much more complex than simply between the reckless and militant interventionism of Bush's forced democracy policy and the head-in-the-sand posture of isolationism,” wrote Logan. “Setting up the isolationist straw man was a cynical tactic used to frame the debate over Iraq, not a serious characterization of a real position on foreign policy.”

Yes, Americans support downsizing our country's role abroad from radical post-9/11 levels. But it's dishonest to pretend there is no middle ground between “Let's invade more countries” and “Let's pull up the drawbridge.” Despite the warnings of hardline interventionists, the U.S. remains deeply engaged with the international community across a range of issues, and through a range of organizations – economic, humanitarian, cultural, and military.

The fact is that both the NYT/CBS poll (whose findings are consistent with those of other recent polls), and Rand Paul's call for “moderation” and “restraint” in foreign policy, especially in an era of fiscal constraints, are reflective of a new American consensus—or perhaps, the reassertion of the older one, in which diplomatic and economic engagement, not military intervention, is the primary mode through which the U.S. relates to the world.

This obviously doesn't mean that U.S. military intervention is a thing of the past. We are, after all, still engaged in drone wars in multiple countries—engagements supported, as noted, by more than two-thirds of Americans. We still have more military assets deployed abroad than the rest of the world combined. Mounting evidence of chemical weapons use by the Assad government may yet lead to some sort of U.S. military action in Syria. But, while popular opinion doesn't by itself demonstrate the wisdom or folly of any particular policy, I'd argue that greater skepticism toward costly, open-ended and strategically questionable military adventures is the appropriate default position of a responsible citizenry. To the extent that the American public's so-called “isolationist streak” is a reaction to the Bush administration's aggressive and expensive interventionism, it deserves to be listed among his presidency's few positive foreign-policy achievements.