

Who's an Isolationist?

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Conservatism once was cautious, urged prudence, and emphasized fidelity to the Constitution. Conservatives saw responsibility as the flip-side of liberty, opposed the transfer society, and detested welfare dependence. On international affairs conservatives believed in defending America, not promoting social engineering overseas.

Liberals responded by tarring traditional conservatives as “isolationists.” Skeptical of joining imperial wars in the name of democracy, unwilling to risk American lives in dubious foreign crusades, and unenthused about transferring U.S. wealth abroad, traditionalists were treated as somehow disreputable. After all, progressive thought required turning Americans into warriors on behalf of a new global ethic.

Now neoconservatives toss the same epithet at conservatives who oppose promiscuous war-making and endless foreign aid. Never mind that many opponents of today’s hyperinterventionist foreign policy favor free trade, cultural exchange, liberal immigration, and political cooperation. If you do not believe in bombing, invading, and occupying adversaries and subsidizing allies, then you must be an isolationist.

Consider the hysterical response to Sen. Rand Paul’s proposal to eliminate foreign aid, including to Israel. The new Senator has drafted \$500 billion worth of budget cuts, but less than one percent of the total has received much attention: the \$3 billion in annual aid to Israel.

The U.S. is running a \$1.5 trillion deficit this year. The national debt is \$14 trillion. Without a major change in course, Uncle Sam will run up in excess of \$10 trillion in red ink over the coming decade. So an obvious question to ask would seem to be: why are Americans being forced to fund *any* foreign government?

Washington’s transfers to Israel are among the most problematic. The country is a prosperous regional superpower, possessing upwards of 200 nuclear weapons. It can defeat any of its neighbors, so why does it continue to be an American welfare dependent?

There are threats to Israel’s existence, but they are internal—how can Israel remain Jewish and democratic while maintaining military rule over a fast-growing Palestinian population? The best evidence that Israel doesn’t need American subsidies is the fact that its government spends lavishly to subsidize ever-expanding settlements on the West Bank, a policy of de facto colonization which breeds Palestinian hatred and diminishes any

chance of peace. If Israel is determined to follow such a policy, so be it, but why should American taxpayers indirectly pay the bill?

No surprise, Israel's lobbyists and legislative guardians reacted with shock and horror at Rand Paul's proposal. Expect a friendly country to take care of itself? Whatever could he be thinking! They saw no need to debate the issue. They just denounced Sen. Paul for his "shocking," "short-sighted," and "misguided" proposal.

Even less serious was the response by Jennifer Rubin, the *Washington Post's* official "conservative" blogger. Rubin rolled out the standard epithet used against anyone who doesn't believe Washington should rule the world: [Sen. Paul is "a proponent of a neo-isolationist foreign policy."](#)

Yet Rubin made no effort to defend aid to Israel. She simply treated as self-evident the American people's obligation to fund an international dole, and the right of prosperous allies to collect U.S. alms—apparently forever.

Of course, she's not alone on the right. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor recently seemed to suggest that aid to Israel should be treated differently than other foreign assistance, essentially becoming an untouchable entitlement rather like Social Security and Medicare. It is a curious conservatism which makes international welfare one of its fundamental tenets.

Even more bizarre, Rubin's ad hominem attack took a page from the liberal playbook. When the new Republican Congress merely sought to reduce, not end, foreign aid after the 1994 election, the Clinton administration denounced the GOP members as, yes, "isolationists." Today, it seems, both neoconservatives and liberals support forcing taxpayers to fund an international soup line for other countries.

It's bad enough to equate opposition to foreign aid with isolationism. It is far worse to equate nonintervention with isolationism. But this also has become a standard tactic of the imperial right.

I recently wrote an article ([for Forbes online](#)) arguing that a country on what the Congressional Budget Office calls an "unsustainable" fiscal path no longer can afford to subsidize rich allies and remake failed states. Republican activist [William Hawkins said these views made me an "isolationist."](#) Not "neo-isolationist," like Rubin terms Sen. Paul. But a full-bore, complete, absolute, unhyphenated "isolationist."

That's an interesting idea, since I am writing this article while attending an international economics conference in Delhi, India. It seems that believing in peacefully engaging the world while exercising cautious discretion before starting wars is "isolationist." To paraphrase Bill Clinton, it all depends on how you define internationalism. To Hawkins, internationalism apparently means wandering the globe imposing one's will—bombing some countries, defending other ones, occupying some nations, subsidizing other ones.

The costs of such promiscuous intervention are obvious: endless wars, risk of additional conflicts, tens of thousands of dead and injured U.S. military personnel, hundreds of thousands of dead foreign civilians, more enemies determined to do America ill, increased military spending, limits on domestic liberties. Obviously, one can still conjure up arguments for America to subsidize and defend its rich allies, and to remake unstable poor states. But it should be obvious that virtually none of Washington's current aid and military policies have much to do with "defense," at least of America.

And there is nothing "isolationist" in opposing such policies. Hawkins complains that supporting a smaller U.S. international role reflects "the notion that the U.S. has no interests, or faces no threats, outside its borders." That's a silly claim, as he surely recognizes. America has lots of interests, but most do not warrant war. Unlike God, who worries about the smallest sparrow falling to earth, a superpower doesn't have to try to fix every failed state and defend every rich friend. A serious power sets priorities and measures costs and benefits. America will be stronger and more secure if it does *not* indiscriminately create a debilitating welfare program for foreign governments, relieve prosperous and populous states of responsibility for their own defense, and administer poor and fractured societies.

Rather than avoiding substantive issues and tossing liberal epithets, conservative advocates of an expansive and expensive foreign and military policy should make the case of encumbering the bankrupt American republic with a quasi-imperial foreign policy. They should explain how the U.S. would be endangered if it was merely the world's strongest country, instead of being the globe's wannabe dictatress.

Real isolationists are few. But the strongest encouragement for true isolationists is the interventionist philosophy which believes in sacrificing American wealth and lives around the world for unimportant, even frivolous reasons. For years conservatives have opposed social engineering in America. Conservatives should similarly oppose social engineering abroad.

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