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## Mitt Romney, Commander of the Fake Internationalists

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No surprise: Senator Mitt Romney does not like President Donald Trump, as he recently explained in *The Washington Post*. But what, one wonders, was the former GOP presidential candidate thinking two years ago when he supped with the man he now claims to deplore while seeking an appointment as secretary of state?

Much of Romney's complaint is over manners. Yes, the president is a boor. Most people, including many of Trump's supporters, recognize that. Trump won not because of his etiquette but because of what he stood for—and against.

Romney also defended The Blob, Washington's bipartisan foreign policy establishment. In his article attacking the president, he offered the usual vacuous bromides that characterize the interventionist consensus, which poses as internationalism but with plenty of bombing raids, illegal occupations, and nation-building. Most importantly, this perspective presumes permanent American domination, irrespective of cost.

Romney wrote: "America has long been looked to for leadership. Our economic and military strength was part of that, of course, but our enduring commitment to principled conduct in foreign relations, and to the rights of all people to freedom and equal justice, was even more esteemed." Indeed, "The world needs American leadership, and it is in America's interest to provide it. A world led by authoritarian regimes is a world—and an America—with less prosperity, less freedom, less peace."

In fact, Romney appears more committed to dependence on allies than American leadership. For him, these are two sides of the same coin. The only alternative he sees to Washington in control is the bad guys leading.

Related is Romney's apparent belief that foreign policy is fixed, irrespective of circumstance: the very same U.S.-dominated alliances created in 1950 are needed today. Although America's friends have raced ahead economically, politically, even militarily, Washington must forever treat them as helpless derelicts. For instance, Russia, a weakened declining power, faces the U.S. and Europe—which together have more than 20 times its GDP. Yet Romney sees Moscow as the greatest threat facing America. It is 1945 all over again.

Romney's most important omission is Iraq. After the war there turned bad, he remained silent about his support for it. The Iraq disaster is an important reason why Trump won and other Republicans, including Romney, lost. In 2008, Americans rejected John McCain, the very

symbol of promiscuous war-making. Four years later, Romney criticized President Barack Obama for leaving Iraq too soon, by which the Republican nominee probably meant leaving at any time. In saying he would keep more troops in Iraq, he ignored the fact that the Iraqis had refused to negotiate a status of forces agreement with the Bush administration.

Romney also failed to mention Afghanistan, both as a presidential candidate in 2012 and senator in 2019. After all, what good can be said for entering the 18th year of nation-building in a region of little strategic interest? As for Syria, last November, Romney predictably denounced as “recklessness in the extreme” exiting a multi-sided civil war in a country never important to America.

Now Romney is being touted as the new standard-bearer for the bipartisan War Party, filling in for John McCain. Bloomberg columnist Hal Brands theorized that Romney was attempting to “position himself as heir to John McCain as the congressional conscience of U.S. diplomacy” (defined as advocating policies designed to prolifically kill and destroy).

Towards this effort, Romney is articulating “a renewed Republican internationalism based on opposition to aggressive authoritarian regimes.” Brands celebrates Romney’s Russophobia, saying he “deserves credit for being anti-Russia before being anti-Russia was cool.” No hint that the U.S. might have contributed to Moscow’s hostility through the aggressive “internationalism” of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—violating commitments not to expand NATO, dismantling Moscow’s Slavic friend Serbia, and encouraging violent regime change against an elected government that neighbored Russia. After all, equivalent Russian intervention in Mexico would have triggered an extremely hostile reaction in Washington.

Neoconservative Max Boot lauded Romney for throwing “down the gauntlet to President Trump.” Indeed, argued Boot, “it now falls upon Romney to champion the cause of principled conservatism in Washington.” Boot hoped the freshman senator would lead a general opposition and seemed especially pleased at Romney’s support for the interventionist status quo.

Yet the passion-less Romney is a poor substitute for the perennially angry McCain. It is difficult to imagine Romney leading Lindsey Graham and Joseph Lieberman on another apocalyptic ride, demanding that death and destruction be visited upon an enemy du jour. Indeed, Romney admitted as much, complained *The New York Times*, which noted that he said he “would only speak out against Mr. Trump on issues of ‘great significance,’ which means not much.”

Worse, Romney is a typical denizen of Washington and lacks any connection to the disastrous consequences of his policies. Give McCain credit: he and his sons served in the military. Not Romney. He received four deferments during the Vietnam War, explaining that he “had other plans.” This sounds eerily like Dick Cheney, who said his five deferments reflected “other priorities.”

Moreover, none of Romney’s five sons served. That is, of course, their prerogative. But their decision further insulated Romney from any consequences of his policies. His response to questions about their lack of service: “One of the ways my sons are showing support for our nation is helping me get elected because they think I’d be a great president.” Did Romney believe working for him was as dangerous as fighting Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah? Or that his personal interest in winning the election was as important as the nation winning a war?

My friend William Smith at the Center for the Study of Statesmanship at Catholic University argued that Romney's article "is another clear sign that the bipartisan political establishment is largely oblivious to the terrible tragedy of wartime casualties disproportionately inflicted on certain communities." Candidate Trump did particularly well in states that so suffered. Complained Smith: "What is astonishing is that, after all this tragedy, Romney offers only cliched neoconservative bromides to the many heartbroken communities across the nation."

However, The Blob, which dominates foreign policy under both parties, poses an even larger problem. These policymakers consider permanent war to be America's natural condition. They seek to suppress dissident views to ensure united support for permanent war. Anyone who hesitates to back every proposed new intervention is demonized and marginalized.

The favorite technique, recently employed by Frederick Kagan in The Hill, is to call opponents, irrespective of their actual positions, "isolationists." Thus did Kagan urge left and right "internationalists"—meaning military interventionists—to work together to defend "the principle that the United States must remain actively engaged in the world," by which he meant warring without end on multiple countries.

Exclaimed Kagan: "The isolationists who have condemned the United States involvement in the Middle East and the rest of the world for decades are about to get their wish. We will witness what the world looks like when left to its own devices."

Egads. Imagine what might have happened had the U.S. not intervened in the Lebanese Civil War, armed Turkey to kill tens of thousands of Kurds and destroy thousands of Kurdish villages, invaded Iraq and triggered sectarian conflict, fostered civil war in Libya and the chaos that followed, supported decades of violent occupation over millions of Palestinians by Israel, backed murderous Saudi Arabia in Bahrain and Yemen, supported a coup against Iran's democratically elected government and a brutal invasion backed by chemical weapons against Iran's Islamist regime, actively underwritten tyranny across the Middle East, and tried to sort out the Syrian Civil War. Something bad might have happened.

Yeah.

In Syria, Kagan views as "isolationist" the withdrawal of an illegal military deployment that risks violent confrontation with Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Russia over minor stakes. In contrast, "internationalism" means war everywhere all the time, especially in a country like Syria.

Trump, complained Kagan, is leaving "Afghanistan for no clear reason whatsoever." No reason other than Washington long ago having achieved its objective of degrading and displacing al-Qaeda and punishing the Taliban for hosting al-Qaeda. And eventually having recognized, after more than 17 years passed, trillions of dollars were spent, and thousands of lives were lost, that using force to create a liberal democracy in Central Asia is a fool's errand. Why leave, indeed?

It has oft been recognized that Donald Trump is a flawed vehicle to achieve almost any foreign policy end. However, he still possesses far more common sense than Mitt Romney. It is time to rescue "internationalism" from those who love humanity so much that they would destroy the world in order to save it.

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