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## [The Isolationists Are Coming! The Isolationists Are Coming!](#)

David Boaz - June 20, 2011



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As America's Muslim Wars drag on into the tenth year, the American people are getting war-weary, even the [Republicans](#) are starting to ask the occasional question, and the neocons are riding and spreading alarm. Through every Middlesex village and farm, For the country folk to be up and to arm. On ABC's "This Week," [John McCain warns](#), "I was more concerned about what the candidates in New Hampshire the other night said. This is isolationism." Sen. Lindsey Graham — serving, as George Will [wrote](#) a few weeks ago, "as [Sancho Panza](#) to Sen. John McCain's [Don Quixote](#)" — [said](#) on "Meet the Press" that Republican presidential candidates were trying to "get to [Barack Obama](#)'s left on Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq." And Alex Della Rocchetta of the American Enterprise Institute [calls for](#) vigorous presidential leadership:

In order to combat the trend of American isolationism and salvage public support for the mission in Libya, President Obama must stage an immediate reversal from his approach implemented at the outset, one characterized by ambiguity and inconsistency. Indeed, the president must now present clear and consistent objectives on the direction that the war is heading.

Her colleague Danielle Pletka [chimes in](#), "it's hard not to hear an isolationist duck quacking." Even Jackson Diehl of the Washington Post fretted that the GOP might be "[turning isolationist](#)."

Now there are two basic problems with all this hand-wringing. First, there aren't isolationists in the contemporary American debate. The Britannica defines [isolationism](#) as "National policy of avoiding political or economic entanglements with other countries." Who's calling for isolationism, with its historical connotation of protectionism and cultural isolation? Surely not businessman [Mitt Romney](#), who ran the Olympics, and whom [McCain singled out](#). Surely not former deputy trade representative and ambassador to Singapore and China [Jon Huntsman](#), whom Pletka [indicts](#). And certainly not the free-trading, immigration-friendly Cato Institute, a center of [noninterventionist](#) thinking. Now McCain did [say](#), "There's an always been an isolationist strain in the Republican Party, the Pat Buchanan wing of the party," and Buchanan might be more plausibly tarred with the label, as he has indeed since the end of the [Cold War](#) joined noninterventionism with [protectionism](#). But nobody in last week's GOP debate flirted with such ideas.

Second, this new "isolationism" in Republican circles is pretty weak tea. Jonathan Weisman [wrote](#) in the Wall Street Journal,

Republican White House hopefuls are showing clear signs of impatience with military conflict, a contrast with past years that saw GOP candidates take tough stances on national-security issues.

One after another, they expressed qualms about the fighting in Afghanistan and Libya at the presidential debate in New Hampshire on Monday night.

But what did they say? Well, Romney said, "It's time for us to bring our troops home as soon as we possibly can, consistent with the word that comes from our generals that we can hand the country over to the...Afghan military...I also think we've learned that our troops shouldn't go off and try to fight a war of independence for another nation. Only the Afghans can win Afghanistan's independence from the Taliban." And [Newt Gingrich said](#), "I think that we should say to the generals we would like to figure out to get out as rapid as possible with the safety of the troops involved." And Weisman noted that potential candidate Huntsman said the next day:

"There is the desire on the part of most Americans to begin phasing out [of Afghanistan] as quickly as possible." He suggested the U.S. could leave behind 10,000 or 15,000 troops "to collect intelligence and fight an asymmetric war against terror." But, he added, "the very expensive boots on the ground may be something that is not critical for our national-security needs, nor is it something we can afford this point in our economic history."

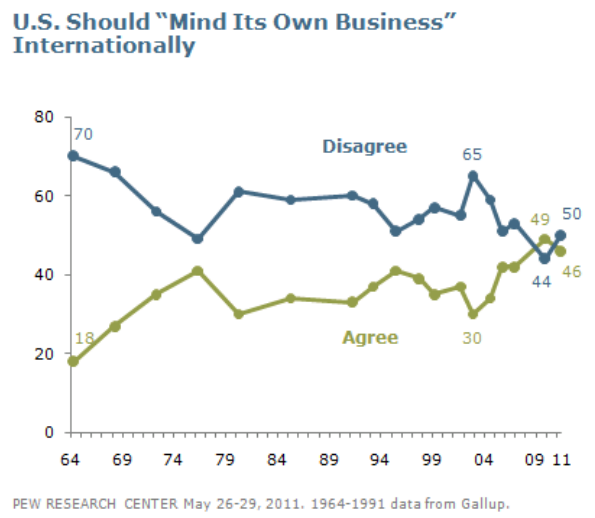
Those are hardly ringing calls for a new and different foreign policy. Romney's comments [didn't faze](#) neocon columnist Jennifer Rubin of the Washington Post. But maybe the hawks and the neoconservatives are right to see them as straws in the wind. What they're really worried about is not so much the Republican leaders as the people. The country folk just don't see the British coming any more. Rubin noted "a distinct isolationist streak that was very much in evidence in the questions from the audience last night." Della Rocchetta's main concern was "a growing isolationist sentiment espoused by the U.S. public":

According to a new [Rasmussen Reports survey](#), just 26 percent of likely United States voters feel that the U.S. should continue to engage in military action in Libya. Meanwhile, 42 percent are opposed and 32 percent remain undecided on the issue. As Congress ponders the merits of executive unilateralism in Libya, the survey found that 59 percent of voters believe that President Obama should seek the approval of

Congress if he plans to continue U.S. military action in the country. The number marks a jump in support for congressional authorization from when President Obama initially committed U.S. military resources to the Libyan mission in mid-March. The increase is not just reflective of public opinion on the powers of the executive, but is evidence of a growing sentiment of isolationism in the U.S.

The June 10 [Pew Research Center poll](#) provides evidence that Americans are becoming more isolationist. Indeed, the center reports that the present assessment of isolationist sentiment is the highest recorded in over four decades.

“Isolationist,” of course, is her word, not a word used in the polls. But here’s the specter that is haunting the neocons, [a graph from the Pew center](#) (using Gallup data) showing a striking rise in “mind our own business” sentiment:



John McCain says, “We cannot repeat the lesson of the 1930s.” Seriously, that’s what he’s got? Qaddafi is Hitler? The interventionists may really have overplayed their hand with the Libya adventure — it’s causing conservatives to discover the [War Powers Resolution](#), and it’s obviously not a vital interest of the United States. Meanwhile, few supporters of the [Afghan invasion](#) anticipated having 100,000 troops there a decade later, and even supporters of the always ill-fated [Iraq War](#) are beginning to have doubts.

“Isolationism” has always been a charge used by [warmaking presidents](#) and their supporters whenever anybody raises questions about the wisdom or prudence of any particular exercise of military power. Maybe if it’s overused, it will lose its sting, and we’ll be able to have a serious debate about how many years we intend to entangle our troops and our countries in faraway quarrels.

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