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What is The Establishment's Foreign Policy?

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The noted military historian Max Boot has written a long essay in *Commentary* magazine asking "Is a New Republican Foreign Policy Emerging?" His fear is that "isolationism" is raising its ugly head on the right as it has on the left since Vietnam. Unfortunately, he covers such a variety of topics that "isolationism" becomes a term of prejudice rather than analysis.

Having breathed a sigh of relief over the failures of Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) in 2012 and of his son Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) this year to wreck the party on the rocks of libertarian "non-interventionism," Boot concentrates on Donald Trump and Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX). These two "anti-establishment" candidates are presented as promoting fundamental changes in GOP policies. Since Boot is apparently happy with "establishment" policy, which he sees as going back to 1945, he regards any risk of change as being dangerous. Because Cruz has made more precise statements on defense and diplomacy than Trump, as well as having a dismal record in the Senate, he takes more of the brunt of Boot's criticism. And Boot makes some good points.

He notes, for example,

When he was running for a Senate seat in Texas, Cruz was already saying of Iraq and Afghanistan: "It made sense to go in, and we stayed there too long." In a June 2012 debate, Cruz voiced his opposition to "nation-building" and to America acting as the "world's policeman.... When we have succeeded in hunting and killing, "we should get the heck out."

This view would support President Barack Obama's pull out of all U.S. troops out from Iraq at the end of 2011; an act that opened the door to both Shia-Iranian aggression and the reaction by Islamic State. It is the absence of American power that creates instability and provides opportunities for adversaries to fill the vacuum. And the power that matters comes from boots on the ground, the only force that can control local political events, which is what conflict is all about.

Boot also reminds his readers that Cruz has opposed any involvement in the Syrian civil war, the Senator claiming "we have no dog in the fight." Yet, we do. The U.S. alliance system is based on the Sunni-ruled states that, along with Israel, see Iran as the main threat to the region. And the Assad regime in Syria is an Iranian satrap, supported in the field by Hezbollah fighters with Iranian advisors and special operators, and now by Russian airpower. Boot does not mention that in 2013 Cruz led the opposition (along with leftwing Democrats) to President Obama's plan to bomb Syria in retaliation for the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians. An attack then could have changed the balance of power in the civil war before the rise of ISIS, the

military intervention by Russia and the refugee flood that is now destabilizing the EU. But Cruz did not bother to look ahead, his instinct was to do nothing like a true libertarian in the mode of Ron Paul.

Cruz and Trump favor the use of airpower when necessary, but oppose the use of ground troops even to fight Islamic State. But this is hardly a unique failing, since it runs across the entire spectrum of Republican candidates. Only Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) advocated the return of U.S. ground troops to the Iraq/Syria theater, but his campaign never got off the ground. The sad truth is that there has been a long history in the GOP favoring "stand off" weapons over fighting on the ground to achieve political goals. This goes back to President Dwight Eisenhower who favored a strategy of "massive retaliation" via nuclear strikes rather than land campaigns like he had commanded in World War II (only one of several strategic blunders Ike made). Cruz's notion of "carpet bombing" and making the sand "glow" harkens back to this "establishment" tradition which Boot does not want to acknowledge. After Vietnam, the Nixon Doctrine rekindled the notion of the U.S. backing allies only with air and naval power, while letting others do the decisive fighting. How different is this from Obama's current policy in Syria?

It was President George W. Bush who was the radical. Frustrated by a Clinton administration that had only "pounded sand"; he sent ground troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq, going even further than his father had done by sending an army to liberate Kuwait in 1991. Yet even in 2003, establishment figures like Donald Rumsfeld wanted to minimize America's "foot print" and withdraw as soon as possible. America thus risked losing the war in 2006 and was only able to salvage the situation with "the surge." Sunni tribes were recruited into the coalition against al-Qaeda with the promise that Washington would protect them from Shiite domination----a promise that was broken with Obama's "cut and run" policy.

What has promoted "isolation" has been public disgust with leaders who have become entangled in "no win" wars; not because the enemy is ten feet tall but because they do not seem to know how to win. The two great examples are Vietnam and Iraq. In both cases, America held back its superior military power and lost both the wars and public support for an active foreign policy going into the future. Doing only part of what is necessary to be successful ends up being a waste of blood and treasure when you lose in the end. That is the record of the establishment since 1945, and, in this regard, there doesn't seem to be an "anti-establishment" candidate in the race.

When Boot gets away from his field of military affairs, he quickly gets lost. For some reason, he tries to defend "free trade" as a successful plank of establishment foreign policy. But the actual history of trade policy shows that when it has been used as a tool of foreign policy, it has not been "free." It has been directed to aid allies or restricted to cripple enemies (as it should). And when "free trade" is advocated on its own merits, it is by those in the transnational business community who want to "free" commerce from the parameters of international politics. Indeed, the very term "globalization" was adopted to replace "international" to escape the supposed limitations of policies which put the comparative strength of national economies at the top of the list of goals.

Boot's supposed bogey man of "protectionism" has nothing to do with isolationism in U.S. or world history. America became the largest industrial economy in the world on the eve of World War I behind protective tariffs. Germany, the second largest economy, had followed the same policies, surpassing "free trade" Great Britain with enormous strategic consequences for Europe.

But America used its strength to redress that balance in two world wars, giving the "arsenal of democracy" its superpower status after 1945. The abandonment of the principles which built its dominance has come in fits and starts, not because of a change in strategic thinking in government, but in the business community whose lobbyists shifted from supporting protection to campaigning for "open borders." It was only after the Cold War that it seemed safe enough to indulge the selfish interests of corporations; with the World Trade Organization created in 1995.

It should be remembered that the doctrine of "free trade" reached its maturity in the decades of relative peace that followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The French classical liberal economist Jean-Baptiste Say could then claim, "All nations are friends in the nature of things." But that time passed and protectionism returned as a vital part of nation building for the great powers. And the "free trade" moment has now passed once again (though the ideological link between political isolationism and free trade lives on at places like the libertarian Cato Institute).

Boot attacks Trump for wanting to close down trade with China. Yet, nearly two decades of open markets (in the U.S. not in China) has failed to generate the benefits promised. The Communist regime has not been tamed by trade; it has been empowered by it. Future historians will marvel at the unprecedented transfer of wealth, technology and production capacity from America to China, even as Beijing has openly used its new capabilities to menace the U.S. and its allies. Trump seems alone among GOP candidates in seeing this problem, but much of his support comes from Americans who have seen the results close up and personal; closed factories and lost jobs.

Boot tries to dispute Trump's claim that China will exploit the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement. While it is true that China is not a party to the pact, it has a record of using shipments sent through "free trade" areas to gain commercial advantages. Those who have followed the TPP talks know this has been a major concern. Beijing already does this on a large scale within both NAFTA and the AGOA agreements. This is ironic in the NAFTA case, which was not conceived as "free trade." Rather, it was a trade bloc, an attempt to find a pool of cheap Mexican labor that U.S. firms could use to compete with rivals who had access to cheap Asian labor. Unfortunately, NAFTA is now a conduit for Chinese goods shipped through Mexico rather than a base for American exports to Asia.

Because of the bad record of past trade agreements, TPP is being sold more as a statement of political cooperation by nations along the Pacific Rim who feel jointly menaced by China. This argument is not being persuasive, however, when even such an establishment figure as Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH), who served as Trade Representative in the George W. Bush administration, has come out against TPP.

Trump is hardly an extremist on trade since he holds basically the same views as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. As Alexander Hamilton stated, "There are some who maintain that trade will regulate itself [but] this is one of those speculative paradoxes...rejected by every man acquainted with commercial history." Billionaire Trump, who has world-wide enterprises, understands this statement better than any of his political rivals.

Though Max Boot is often insightful and always interesting, in this case he has tried to draw too neat a line between establishment and anti-establishment candidates. And worse, he has given

what he considers the establishment view far too much credit for a record of doubtful performance.