



Isolationism — so old it's new again

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May 27, 2022

Montana's hard rightwing Republican congressman, Matt Rosendale, has likely never been compared to a historic progressive politician who figures prominently in his state's history. At first blush, there is precious little about Rosendale, a disciple of Donald Trump and opponent of almost everything, that is remotely like New Deal-era Montana Sen. Burton K. Wheeler.

Wheeler was a pro-union, anti-big business Western progressive. He was a driving force behind big Montana public works projects such as Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River. He fought corruption in the Justice Department during the 1920s and battled Franklin Roosevelt, a president of his own party, over an ill-advised scheme to "pack" the Supreme Court.

Rosendale is known, to the extent he is known, for often being in a tiny minority of House members who vote no on many things, including infrastructure spending. Rosendale is an outspoken member of the hard right "Freedom Caucus," traffics in conspiracy theories and recently observed that he found it ironic that Congress passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973, the same year the Supreme Court issued its decision legalizing abortion.

But in one important respect Rosendale and Wheeler, who left the Senate in 1947 and died in 1975, are similar. They are unapologetic isolationists. Wheeler was the acknowledged leader of isolationist or non-interventionist forces prior to World War II. Wheeler, along with Charles Lindbergh, the famous aviator, became the chief spokesmen for the America First movement, an umbrella group that attracted both passionate pacifists and disgusting anti-Semites.

Idaho's Mike Crapo, a very conservative Republican senator not known for his foreign policy expertise or even interest, is also displaying isolationist instincts. So, too, Utah Republican Sen. Mike Lee and Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul and a handful of other conservatives. All three senators joined with eight others recently to vote no in the Senate on a \$40 billion aid package to Ukraine. That aid was nevertheless approved and will, like previous assistance, continue to allow Ukraine to hold off, and indeed turn back, a brutal, unnecessary war started by Vladimir Putin.

Trump, with his threats to pull the United States out of the NATO alliance and his actual withdrawal from trade and other agreements, popularized — again — the notion of America First, perhaps knowing the slogan would become a rallying cry for the far right, as well as serving as a dog whistle for anti-Semitism and pro-authoritarianism.

This neo-isolationism from the far right is not exactly new in American politics. Figures such as Ohio Sen. Robert Taft in the 1950s and more recently conservative gadfly Patrick Buchanan embraced the notion that the United States should essentially retreat from world leadership and focus more completely on domestic concerns. Buchanan wrote a book claiming it was Winston Churchill's blunders rather than Adolf Hitler's megalomania and desire to dominate Europe that sparked World War II.

This is the kind of revisionist, pro-Putin, anti-democratic, white supremacy nonsense that is being widely embraced in the dark corners of internet and the increasingly dark corners of American conservatism.

Republican J.D. Vance, the opportunist Ohio Senate candidate who rejected Trump before embracing him, has become a key figure among the neo-isolationists. In one of the greatest political non-sequiturs ever, Vance recently said, “I will be damned if I am going to prioritize Ukraine’s eastern border right now when our own southern border is engulfed by a human tsunami of illegal migrants.”

If Vance wins in November he will, fittingly, occupy Bob Taft’s old Senate seat.

Another would-be leader of the neo-isolationists is Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley, who clearly hopes to be president one day and knows just how to push the most powerful alt right buttons.

“We don’t need any more globalism, left or right. We need realistic, robust nationalism,” Hawley said recently. Whatever that means, it apparently appeals to Trumpers everywhere. Hawley also voted no on the Ukrainian aid package.

As the online news site Axios reported recently: “Republican lawmakers — following former President Trump’s lead — are working with a wide range of conservative groups to pull back American support for Ukraine, the Middle East and Europe.”

The money and influence behind this neo-isolationist surge is powered by a permanent alt right infrastructure that includes the Koch Brothers, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and others. (This same network funds state-level anti-public school and tax cut advocacy from groups such as the Idaho Freedom Foundation.) Fox News personality Tucker Carlson champions neo-isolationism, while playing to the white nationalist sympathies of his audience.

After acknowledging that Putin’s war against Ukraine is illegal and has been clouded by vast lying from the Kremlin, the Cato Institute dismisses the war for the future of Europe with this: “It is a tragedy that neither the United States, nor NATO, nor Ukraine itself made a serious effort to discover whether there was a diplomatic way to prevent this invasion.”

That single sentence neatly sums why the neo-isolationists are as wrong today as they were in 1941.

Sen. Wheeler, in many ways a heroic character, misread completely the state of the world as Hitler sought to dominate Europe. And like the neo-isolationists in the modern Republican Party, Crapo, Lee and the loathsome Paul, he opposed the American aid to England that became known as Lend-Lease.

“We sympathize with the oppressed and persecuted everywhere,” Wheeler said, channeling Montana’s current congressman, “We also realize that we have great problems at home, that one-third of our population is ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clad, and we have been told repeatedly, upon the highest authority, that unless and until this situation is corrected our democracy is in danger. I fully subscribe to this view.”

Wheeler’s views about Nazi aggression, had they prevailed rather than FDR’s, might well have allowed Hitler to control Europe for a generation or more. Imagine our world today had that happened. Crapo worries, apparently, about the country spending too much to defend democracy

in a place far away. But he's never met a tax cut he didn't love. So, the fiscal responsibility argument is about as specious as justifications coming from the Kremlin for this unjustifiable war. Crapo's stand, oddly, also puts him at cross purposes with Idaho's other senator, James Risch who has steadfastly supported Ukrainian aid.

Crapo and the rest should know that Ukraine's fight is our fight, too. The history of appeasement of dictators with territorial ambitions is not at all promising. We should have learned this in high school.

A great benefit of studying history is the insight past experiences provide for the present. This is surely such a moment. Why would a Crapo or Rosendale take such a blinkered view of history? Why, indeed, would these folks turn their backs on 80 years of history?