It's not isolationist for America to mind its own business

By [GENE HEALY](#)

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A new [poll](#) from the Pew Research Center, "America's Place in the World 2013," brings some sobering news to advocates of armed international meddling. Among a survey of some 2,000 Americans, 51 percent believe that the U.S. does too much in helping solve world problems, and 52 percent say that the U.S. "should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own."

That's the highest margin since pollsters began asking the question nearly five decades ago. [Indeed, Pew reports](#), "a decade ago only about one-in-three Americans said the United States should mind its own business abroad."

Minding one's own business is a virtue, you'd think; and restraint and circumspection make one a good neighbor, not a hermit. Alas, some of the headlines reporting Pew's results were all too predictable: the Associated Press: "Americans' isolationism on the rise"; the Washington Post: "American isolationism just hit a 50-year high."

But Pew's poll results hardly suggest a public bent on pulling up the drawbridge and retreating to Fortress America. The overwhelming majority of respondents welcome increased commercial engagement abroad. Even in a weak economy, over three quarters say that growing trade and business ties are "good for the U.S."; Two-thirds say "greater U.S. involvement in the global economy is a good thing because it exposes the U.S. to new markets and opportunities for growth."

Does that sound like "isolationism"? Hardly: if ever there was a term that deserved "scare quotes," this is the one. As my [Cato Institute](#) colleague Justin Logan [has pointed out](#), "isolationism" has always been a smear word designed to shut off debate. It was [coined in the late 19th century](#) by Alfred Thayer Mahan, "an ardent militarist, who used the term to slur opponents of American imperialism."

Back then, you were an "isolationist" if you opposed "civilizing" the Philippines at the point of a bayonet. Today, you just might be an "isolationist" if you oppose lobbing Tomahawks at Syria to show you care.

The dangers of isolationism are everywhere: the Post warns that "a wholesale withdrawal [from Afghanistan] would also shut down the foreign-aid pipeline that keeps the Afghan state afloat."

We've been in Afghanistan since before the iPod was introduced, when "YouTube" was a nonsense word. Sept. 11 babies are now hitting puberty. Meanwhile, according to Pew's numbers, 64 percent of the American public thinks the 12-year war in Afghanistan has either made the U.S. less safe (21 percent) or "has not made a difference in U.S. security" (43 percent).

Meanwhile, President Obama is busily expanding the war on terrorism to other theaters: planning the training of Libyan forces, gearing up for training missions in Africa. As a candidate Obama once made much of his opposition to "dumb wars" like Iraq. As president, he thinks dumb proxy wars are another thing entirely, it seems.

The Pew study authors see a "mixed message" from the public to policymakers in the poll results. "Americans are conflicted about the U.S. role in the world," they insist: On the one hand, record numbers "think the United States should mind its own business internationally"; on the other, "they see the benefits of greater involvement in the global economy."

Pardon me, but where's the conflict? What's "mixed" about that message? Far from reflecting a confused outlook, Americans' renewed appreciation for restraint looks like a return to what Thomas Jefferson, in his first inaugural address, called "the essential principles of our Government": in foreign affairs, "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none." Isolationism it isn't.