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Rand Paul is no isolationist

By: Justin Logan, Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.

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Remember when your older brothers and sisters used to prank you by warning about the monster under your bed? In a similar way, Washington's war hawks are gearing up to scare you with another phantom devil: isolationism.

If you feel like you've already been hearing increasing warnings about isolationism, you're right. Pundits, journalists, and now a whole new think-tank initiative are warning about this dangerous ideology.

Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer asserts that the "natural tension" within the GOP is between "isolationist and internationalist tendencies." His colleague Dana Milbank, in a fawning profile of Sen. John McCain, alleges inexplicably that there are "roughly 15 isolationists in the Senate GOP caucus." (McCain represents the internationalists.) Rounding out the *Washington Post's* fear-mongers, Jennifer Rubin regularly inveighs against isolationists — lately, she's been targeting Sen. Rand Paul.

And now there is a whole department at the American Enterprise Institute, the "American Internationalism Project," dedicated to warning about the evils of isolationism. Its co-chairs, hawkish former senators John Kyl and Joseph Lieberman, worry that the country will repeat "the cycle of American isolationism." According to Kyl and Lieberman, the last treacherous iteration of this cycle was when Dick Cheney cut defense spending after the United States won the Cold War, which they loosely insinuate had something to do with the 9/11 attacks.

You should know three things about these claims. The first is that they are nonsense. Rand Paul, Rep. Justin Amash, and other skeptics of reckless foreign wars and secret government spying on Americans aren't isolationists. They're prudent conservatives who take the Constitution seriously and rose to power amid the wreckage of the George W. Bush administration, which destroyed the GOP advantage on national security and provided a good example of how not to conduct foreign policy.

The second thing you should know is that "isolationist" was designed as a slur and remains one. No one calls himself an isolationist. It's always intended to link the target with the ignominious record of Americans in the 1930s who were slow to recognize the threat from Nazi Germany. But the term itself was coined around the turn of the 20th century by the imperialist A. T. Mahan to disparage opponents of American overseas expansion. As the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Walter McDougall showed, America's "vaunted tradition of 'isolationism' is no tradition at all,

but a dirty word that interventionists, especially since Pearl Harbor, hurl at anyone who questions their policies.”

Coincidentally, perhaps, the third thing you should know is that the people trying to create anxiety about isolationism favor an interventionist military policy that has fallen out of favor with the public. After the twin disasters of Iraq and now Afghanistan, they are pawing the ground for more wars in Syria and Iran. Accordingly, they are trying to claim “internationalism” for themselves, so that they can look prudent and modest — in comparison with the ideology that failed to recognize the threat from Adolf Hitler.

And that’s what’s really going on here — using rhetoric to remove any sensible alternative to America’s expansive grand strategy. But in fact Paul & Co. do represent a moderate third way that breaks with the failed bipartisan policies of the recent past. Paul’s views are also better in line with public opinion and America’s thinning pocketbook. Cutting military spending and aid to the Egyptian junta isn’t isolationism —it’s common sense.

Unfortunately, journalists and pollsters have helped the interventionists with their messaging. For example, as the Center for American Progress’s Matt Duss pointed out, an April *New York Times* article reported on America’s growing “isolationist streak,” defining as isolationists those Americans who wanted to bomb neither North Korea nor Syria. And in characterizing the public response to a poll question that has been asked for decades—whether America should “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own”—pollsters at the Pew Research Center described those answering in the affirmative as isolationists.

Isolationists? Who would describe a neighbor or family member who minds his own business as a recluse or a loner? When did minding our own business become a dangerous idea?

So when you start hearing about the scary isolationists who might cause a replay of World War II, remember three things: Isolationists don’t exist in modern America; the term is a slur, not a descriptor; and the people using the term are usually trying to hide their own ideology and delegitimize their opponents. Oh, and while we’re here — there’s no monster under your bed, either.

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