



For U.S. Interventionists, 'Isolationism' Is Just a Dirty Word

By Justin Logan, Christopher Preble | 22 Jun 2011

Sen. John McCain is worried about the direction of U.S. foreign policy, especially within his own party. Some Republican presidential contenders have questioned the nation-building mission in Afghanistan. Others point out that the undeclared war in Libya is neither necessary nor constitutional. "This is isolationism," an aghast McCain declared on the ABC News program "This Week."

Isolationism?

The term "isolationist" is little more than a slur. It essentially means someone who thinks the U.S. should engage in fewer foreign wars than the speaker does. The term emerged in the late-19th century, when it was made popular by the ardent militarist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who used it to attack opponents of American imperialism. As historian Walter McDougall has pointed out, 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."

It is a familiar trope for McCain. Late last year, he warned that the newly elected batch of tea party legislators harbored isolationist tendencies. And anti-isolationism was a frequent refrain in his failed presidential bid in 2008. But this is a schoolyard taunt, not a sound basis for policymaking.

To move from rhetoric to reality, the McCain school of foreign policy analysis would not only have pushed the U.S. deeper into Afghanistan and Iraq -- McCain memorably remarked that staying in that country for 100 years would be "fine with me" -- but McCain would also have taken us [to the brink of war with Russia](#) over its Georgian intervention. He [has joked about bombing Iran](#) and spoken glibly about [doing the same to North Korea](#).

This laundry list of McCain-approved wars helps explain why it is so easy for the Arizona senator to label others as isolationists: His foreign policy prescriptions push the outer bounds of interventionism. Fortunately, the American people have better instincts than McCain on foreign policy. Maybe McCain is simply concerned that the neoconservative moment has run its course. Consider:

[A 2009 poll](#) (.pdf) asking Americans whether the United States should "mind its own business" internationally produced a 40-year high "yes" response of 49 percent. (That figure [dropped slightly this year to 46 percent](#) (.pdf).

A recent [poll of young leaders](#) (.pdf) conducted by the Brookings Institution found that nearly 58 percent of respondents agreed that "The U.S. is too involved in global affairs and should focus on more issues at home," while only 10 percent thought that the United States should be more involved globally.

In [a recent poll](#) of Americans' views on how to deal with the long-term national debt, 65 percent of respondents, including 56 percent of Republicans, favored "reducing overseas military commitments" to help close the fiscal gap. In the same poll, 58 percent said the United States needs to "concentrate on problems at

home" as opposed to those abroad.

In short, the public is significantly less interventionist than the bipartisan foreign-policy elite in Washington. We should observe, too, that there are other possible meanings of "isolationist." There is the xenophobia, nativism and outright bigotry that pervade the national debate over immigration. It might bear mentioning in this context that McCain, whether [due to political pressure or shifting principles](#), endorsed the recent Arizona law allowing police to question people who look or sound foreign about their immigration status. While this may be more coherent than McCain's previous "invade the world, invite the world" position, the senator's support for this law positions him poorly to level charges of isolationism.

Foreign policy should not be conducted by polls and focus groups, but in this case the public is right, and the interventionist consensus in Washington is wrong. The threats facing us are not so urgent that we must maintain a vast military presence scattered across the globe and consistently make war in multiple theaters at once. The United States is the most secure great power in history, and if policymakers would act like it, the evidence suggests the public would support them.

In particular, given that our recent overseas military interventions have carried significant costs and delivered very few measurable benefits, it is hardly surprising that Americans are pushing back against the sorts of foreign adventures McCain favors. We don't know whether the faint rumblings of common sense in the GOP presidential primaries indicate that Beltway elites are finally coming around to our view, but we hope they do. Should that happen, it would be prudence prevailing, not isolationism.

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Photo: John McCain (U.S. Senate photo).