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The Threat Inflators and “Isolationism”

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| June 28, 2011

| [Justin Logan](#) ^[2]



There is something ironic about the fact that the American foreign-policy establishment, which is afflicted terribly by the illness of threat inflation ^[3], is now inflating the threat of competing ideas.

As my colleague Gene Healy has pointed out on the Cato blog ^[4], the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute has been fanning the flames of fear not just of Iran, China, Hamas, Hezbollah, and a host of other nefarious international actors, but of the growing threat to the nation posed by isolationism, which, like the forces mentioned above, is ascendant.

Earlier today, Republican presidential hopeful Tim Pawlenty painted a dire picture of the threat environment facing the country, including, alongside the myriad dangers outside our borders, the declaration that “parts of the Republican Party now seem to be trying to out-bid the Democrats in appealing to isolationist sentiments ^[5].”

And in the pages of *USA Today*, Rutgers political scientist Ross K. Baker, author of such works as *The Afro-American* and *The New Fat Cats*, asserts [6] that isolationism is taking over, but that it represents the sort of bipartisanship that “we”—who is we?—don’t want.

I’ve written about isolationism for years now [7], and Chris Preble and I recently tried to push back [8] on the idea that the isolationists have taken the reins of American foreign policy.

What’s very frustrating is the baseline by which people seem to judge what constitutes isolationism. John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and T-Paw [9] think it’s people who want fewer wars than they do, which is almost everybody who doesn’t work on foreign policy in Washington.

I’d be pleased if what the interventionist establishment calls isolationism were coming into vogue. Except that among the people who make foreign policy in Washington, nothing like that is happening. There may come a time where the public is so frustrated with the hash that the establishment has made of our foreign-policy portfolio that it forces them to change their ways, but there’s little evidence that that is happening now.

Saying that we don’t support Israeli settlements, that the Pentagon’s budget may have to grow, in real terms, more slowly than it has for the past decade, and suggesting that keeping 100,000 American service members in Afghanistan forever might not be desirable just isn’t that. So, as with foreign threats, our foreign-policy establishment is inflating the threat of isolationism as well.

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[3] http://books.google.com/books?id=-zUUnoQcx0AC&pg=PA174&ots=lElm_ZWfP9&dq=thrall%20cramer%20threat%20inflation&pg=PA97

[4] <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/aei-on-the-spectre-of-isolationism>

[5] <http://www.timpawlenty.com/articles/no-retreat-from-freedoms-rise-gov-tim-pawlentys-remarks-at-council-on-foreign-relations>

[6] http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2011-06-27-bipartisanship-of-isolationism_n.htm

[7] http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=5547

[8] http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=13230

[9] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-06-27/tim-pawlenty-girds-for-romney-embraces-reagan-jeffrey-goldberg.html>