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Does the Tea Party Need a Foreign Policy?

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While many political observers agree that “the great mass of Tea Party America does not seem headed toward a new isolationism,”¹ its silence on foreign policy issues has allowed isolationist voices to speak up for the Tea Party as a whole and to discredit the movement’s relevance to American diplomacy. This isolationist voice could be detrimental to America’s security and is at odds with the principles of America’s founding, from which tea parties rightly gain much inspiration. Tea parties have the opportunity to reject isolationism and advocate the founding principles of America’s indispensable role in the world.

The Founders’ Foreign Policy. The ideal role for the United States as articulated by the Founders gives American diplomacy a perpetual purpose. American statecraft has been grounded, both morally and philosophically, in the principles of liberty and America’s sense of justice.² The true consistency of American foreign policy is to be found not in its policies, which can prudently change and adapt, but in its guiding principles, which are unchanging and permanent. America is a defender of liberty at home. Abroad, it maintains its independence and pursues its interests while standing for political freedom across the globe.

Because America stands for the principles of liberty, independence, and self-government, its interests are defined and shaped by those principles. The Founders did not believe that America had a duty to spread the ideas of liberty by waging wars that might be detrimental to America’s interests and

security, but they welcomed opportunities to prudently support the principles and practice of liberty around the world, even at times through military force. George Washington recommended choosing “peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.”³

Do Not Fall for Isolationism. Contrary to conventional wisdom, America’s early foreign policy was anything but isolationist.⁴ America’s energetic and astute early diplomacy was one of the keys to its diplomatic, trade, and military successes—despite its relative weakness compared to major European powers of the time. The one period in which the country mostly avoided engagement abroad was the interwar years of the 20th century, and its disastrous effects culminated in the uncontested rise of Hitler’s Germany and the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁵ It should have taught the U.S. an important lesson: Isolationism does not breed peace for America; rather, it makes us unprepared for war.

Because of the negative implications of the word “isolationism,” those who advocate this approach often prefer the term “non-interventionism,” which can be understood as a foreign policy of political or military non-involvement in foreign relations or in

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other countries' internal affairs. This commitment to remain disengaged necessarily diminishes the importance of a robust military prepared for potential threats. Several authors have advocated this non-interventionism doctrine,⁶ but the most well-known proponent is Ron Paul, who has described it as "the Founders' foreign policy." According to Paul, the Tea Party's foreign policy should advocate a "return to the traditional U.S. foreign policy of...non-interventionism."⁷ Paul misrepresents the Founders' foreign policy, however, because America's early foreign policy was neither isolationist nor principally non-interventionist.

In the years 1783–1860, the U.S. engaged in military action nearly 60 times at locations around the globe. These military actions in the service of America's interests and principles were defensive and, at times, interventionist.⁸ Occasionally, the U.S. military was also dispatched to "punish" violations of the Law of Nations, as interpreted by Congress—a power given by the Constitution.⁹

The tendency to oversimplify America's early foreign policy must be avoided. There is no hard-and-fast rule of non-interventionism that is compatible with America's foreign policy traditions. From the Founders' perspective, America's role in the world must be guided by perpetual prudence, which means never excluding the possibility of strong military action at a moment's notice and, therefore, maintaining a strong military. While a *policy* of non-

intervention is sometimes appropriate, the *doctrine* of non-interventionism leads to isolationist policies that limit the options available to America, weakening its ability to defend freedom. It is a limitation the Founders did not adopt, and neither should today's lawmakers.

Provide for the Common Defense. The United States' early foreign policy was fraught with constant danger and was guided by a desire to promote America's exceptional political principles. The necessary precondition for both goals was military preparedness, which would allow for a strong defense and an ability to act independently on the world stage.

In light of calls from both the left and right to significantly reduce America's defense spending and withdraw from engagement abroad, it is imperative to consider the Founding Fathers' understanding of the "common defense" and its significance for the proper constitutional governance of the United States.¹⁰

The early spending priorities of the United States were related to defense, which accounted for a significant majority of the national budget. This was because the Founding Fathers placed tremendous emphasis on a strong foreign policy backed up by military readiness. In George Washington's first annual address to Congress in 1790, he cautioned future Americans to safeguard defense:

Among the many interesting objects which will engage your attention, that of providing

1. Walter Russell Mead, "The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No 2 (2011); also see Colin Dueck, "Surging Tea Party Will not Lead to Isolationism," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 28, 2010.
2. See John Quincy Adams, speech to Congress, July 4, 1821.
3. George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796.
4. See Marion Smith, "The Myth of Isolationism, Part I: American Leadership and the Cause of Liberty," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Essay* No. 34, December 6, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/12/The-Myth-of-Isolationism-Part-1-American-Leadership-and-the-Cause-of-Liberty>.
5. Bruce Thornton, *The Wages of Appeasement* (Encounter Books, 2011), Chapter 5.
6. See Eric Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton University Press, 1995); Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Harvard University Press, 2004); and Patrick Buchanan, *A Republic, Not an Empire* (Regnery Publishing, 1999).
7. Ron Paul, "A Tea Party Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, August 27, 2010.
8. "The Myth of Isolationism, Part II" (Heritage Foundation *First Principles Essay*, forthcoming).
9. U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 8 gives Congress the power to "define and punish...Offenses against the Law of Nations."
10. Mackenzie Eaglen, "Why Provide for the Common Defense?" Heritage Foundation *Understanding America Report*, January 19, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/01/Why-Provide-for-the-Common-Defense>.

for the common defence will merit particular regard. To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace. A free people ought not only to be armed but disciplined; to which end a uniform and well digested plan is requisite: And their safety and interest require that they should promote such manufactories, as tend to render them independent on others, for essential, particularly for military supplies.¹¹

It is contrary to the above wisdom to argue that the United States should reduce its defense spending to levels similar to other nations and follow a strictly non-interventionist foreign policy in order to meet those cuts. Procurement policies and force projections should be adopted in order to protect America most effectively. But the U.S. cannot primarily rely on other nations or institutions to provide for its security. In part, this is because the U.S. defines its interests differently than other nations.

Stand for Liberty. Embracing the Founders' understanding of statecraft also means promoting America's political principles whenever possible through the conduct of foreign policy. The Founders believed that the idea of liberty and therefore the inherent right of self-government applied not only to Americans but to all people. This truth was a constant refrain voiced by America's early diplomats, who considered it fundamental to their task of representing the people of the United States abroad. At times, the American military was engaged to support those seeking liberty. It rescued refugees and leveraged American support to tip the balance

in favor of economic, civil, and religious freedom around the globe.

George Washington recognized that there are no easy answers to the hard questions of foreign policy. A policy based only on material interests would harm America's ideals, while a policy based only on ideals would ignore the realities of the world. Prudence allowed the Founders to navigate the complex circumstances of international affairs while protecting America's interests and promoting America's principles. This approach, balancing interests and justice, remains essential to securing the blessings of liberty for the American people and enabling America to stand resolutely for the cause of freedom around the world in the 21st century.

The Tea Party's emphasis on individual liberty and constitutional government has resulted in a significant paradigm shift in domestic politics. Such a shift is needed in foreign policy. In short, the Tea Party can and should help shape America's role in the world. However, it is only by adopting a correct understanding of the Founders' foreign policy that the Tea Party can successfully advocate an approach that is compatible with America's founding principles. This approach has broad but clear policy implications. First, America must be prepared militarily to meet any threat. Second, America's foreign policy tools must be used to protect America's interests and, when prudently able, to defend the cause of liberty abroad.

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11. George Washington, First Annual Address to Congress, January 8, 1790, at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washes01.asp (May 23, 2011).