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Neither Isolationist nor Noninterventionist: The Right Way to Think About Foreign Policy

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There is a lot of confusion about America's proper role in the world at the moment. The terms "isolationism" and "noninterventionism" are often used without clear meaning. These two concepts do have specific definitions that should be properly understood, but we must also be aware of how these terms are being used. The stakes are high, and America cannot afford another deadly encounter with isolationism.

A debate is needed. How else can America's principles be prudently applied to foreign policy? Disagreement over the merits of a particular war is not, in itself, indicative of rising isolationism in Republican ranks. Indeed, most people shun isolationism. But for the war-weary, it may sound tempting to embrace strict noninterventionism, even if they don't wish for America to isolate itself from the world. The problem is that many arguments now masquerading as "noninterventionist" are actually isolationist and, as such, at odds with America's principles and foreign policy traditions.

Isolationism Defined. Isolationism—as a complete and coherent grand strategy—is composed of economic protectionism, military noninvolvement, and cultural seclusion. By this definition, the best examples of isolationist foreign policies are offered by 17th century China, 18th century Japan, 19th century Korea, or 20th century North Korea.

Considering America's historically vibrant commercial engagement and interconnectedness to economic markets abroad, America's diplomatic interaction with foreign powers, and America's cul-

tural affinity with Europe, it is clear that U.S. foreign policy cannot accurately be called "isolationist" if the word is to have any meaning at all. This is not to say that isolationist ideas have not influenced American foreign policy in the past, but isolationism is a modern idea in America and is not rooted in early U.S. history.

According to historian George C. Herring, the term "isolationism" did "not become fixed in the American political lexicon until the twentieth century."¹ The term itself soon came to be understood as the antithesis of the increasingly trendy concept of internationalism. By the end of the 20th century, few objected when historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., described America's reaction against Woodrow Wilson's internationalism as a return to the "womb" of "familiar and soothing isolationism," which, according to Schlesinger's Progressive narrative, had been articulated by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.² This use of "isolationism" has shifted Americans' popular understanding of this term.

Noninterventionism Defined. A noninterventionist policy is a particular policy of political or military noninvolvement in foreign relations or in

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other countries' internal affairs. The United States has sometimes followed a short-term policy of non-intervention, more accurately termed "neutrality." This began with George Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793, which remained in force until naval hostilities broke out between the United States and Revolutionary France a few years later.

Modern advocates of so-called noninterventionism, however, often go far beyond a specific *policy* of nonintervention or neutrality and instead advocate an isolationist *doctrine* of strict noninterventionism, which prescribes that America should remain militarily uninvolved abroad except when there is a clear and imminent threat to U.S. territory. This understanding of noninterventionism is a key element of an isolationist grand strategy and stands at odds with the guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy going back to the early years of the Republic.

Despite its traditional use as a particular policy to be employed on a case-by-case basis as prudence guides, the term "noninterventionism" has taken on a very different meaning in popular discourse today. Whereas past disputes over war-making had involved individual situations, opponents of wars in the 20th century have increasingly begun to invoke a sweeping doctrine of noninterventionism. Several authors today advocate this truly isolationist doctrine,³ and many of these "noninterventionists" claim to represent the Founders' foreign policy. According to Congressman Ron Paul (R-TX), for example, the United States should "return to the traditional U.S. foreign policy of...non-interventionism."⁴

Many Americans have fallen for this isolationist doctrine before. We must not do it again, even though the waters have been thoroughly muddied

by partisan politics and frequent misuse of the terms "isolationism" and "noninterventionism."

Calvin Coolidge's Warning. At another time of great uncertainty about America's proper role in the world, President Calvin Coolidge warned the nation to follow neither the Progressive internationalism of Woodrow Wilson nor the counterpoised isolationism.⁵ In his 1925 Inaugural Address, he said, "It will be well not to be too much disturbed by the thought of either isolation or entanglement of pacifists and militarists." Instead, Coolidge advised, America should maintain "such a military force as comports with the dignity and security of a great people."

Faced with mounting pressure to withdraw America from its traditional role of leading in the cause of liberty, Coolidge recognized and celebrated the beneficial role America had played abroad: "We have made great contributions to the settlement of contentious differences in both Europe and Asia. But there is a very definite point beyond which we cannot go. We can only help those who help themselves." With the full array of foreign policy tools, Coolidge noted, "Our program is never to oppress, but always to assist."⁶

This tradition of an independent and strong American foreign policy committed to standing for freedom and peace abroad is in keeping with early U.S. foreign policy. America was the leading country in the world supporting the cause for republican self-government for the Latin American republics in 1821, Greece in 1823, and Hungary in 1848. Thomas Jefferson, who coined the phrase "entangling alliances with none," committed American troops in a military coalition with England, Swe-

1. George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 83.
2. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Back to the Womb," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 74 (July/August 1995), p. 3.
3. See Eric Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Patrick Buchanan, *A Republic, Not an Empire: Reclaiming America's Destiny* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 1999); and Ron Paul, *The Revolution: A Manifesto* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2008).
4. Ron Paul, "A Tea Party Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, August 27, 2010.
5. Represented in Warren Harding's Inaugural Address of March 4, 1921.
6. Calvin Coolidge, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925.

den, and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in order to fight the Barbary Pirates and protect American commerce. Jefferson and the rest understood these actions to be consistent with America's interpretation of the "Law of Nations," which the Constitution grants the U.S. government the power to define and enforce. America's character—its interests and principles—invigorated America's prudent engagement abroad, which has proven to be an indispensable good throughout most of our history.

For Coolidge, it was clear that both strict non-interventionism and militarism fell outside the traditional current of American foreign policy going back to the Founding Fathers, not least because both exclude the central role of prudence in applying America's principles to the circumstances at hand. Soon after Coolidge's warnings, however, and in reaction to Woodrow Wilson's equally dangerous internationalism, Americans did fall for an isolationist doctrine under the mantle of noninterventionism in the late 1930s and early 1940s; its disastrous effects culminated in the uncontested rise of Hitler's Germany and the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁷

Truly Traditional Foreign Policy. Americans today must not embrace the doctrine of noninterventionism. This imprudent commitment to remain disengaged diminishes the importance of military preparedness and weakens America's ability to leverage its power in support of freedom. It is solidly outside the American foreign policy tradition. Unambiguously, the Founders made clear to the world that America mattered abroad. When attacked, America has vigorously defended itself. Other times, the United States has had the opportunity to prudently advance the cause of liberty abroad and has done so—at times by leveraging its military power.

Those who want to advance a traditional American foreign policy should call the isolationist doctrine of "noninterventionism" what it is: a return to the naïve and dangerous isolation warned against by President Coolidge.

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7. Bruce Thornton, *The Wages of Appeasement: Ancient Athens, Munich, and Obama's America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2011), Chapter 5.