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Pathetic Arguments for Foreign Intervention **by Sheldon Richman**

Republican presidential contender Ron Paul certainly deserves credit for putting the foreign policy of noninterventionism into the public debate. It's about time. For decades U.S. presidents have sought to manage the world in behalf of what they call "American interests," and all it has brought is death, mayhem, anti-Americanism, and a price tag that would blow the average citizen's mind if he fully grasped it.

Yes, the time for this debate is long overdue. Unfortunately, the quality of the debate on the other side is pathetic. Proponents of America-as-world-policeman think they can get away with sneers and slogans — and they may be right. The media stars who seem so incredulous and amused when interviewing a noninterventionist such as Representative Paul are like putty in the hands of American imperialists such as John McCain, Rudy Giuliani, Mitt Romney, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards.

To say the imperialists miss the point would be a gross understatement. McCain, for example, says he would have no problem keeping troops in Iraq for a hundred years or more. What matters to Americans, he says, is not how long the troops are away, but whether they are taking casualties.

How about what matters to the Iraqis or other people forced to host a foreign army? And perhaps Americans too will mind if "blowback" occurs and resentful Iraqis engage in terrorism in the United States.

Bret Stephens of the *Wall Street Journal*, in criticizing Representative Paul's call for a full U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East, writes, "Liberal societies are built on the belief in (and defense of) individual rights, but also on the overawing power of government to transform natural rights into civil ones. In the same way, trade between nations is only possible in the absence of robbers, pirates and other rogues. Whose job is it to get rid of them?"

It is the mark of a devout statist to attribute all good things to the state. In fact, civil societies, as Thomas Paine pointed out long ago, evolve on their own. Occasionally government

has protected rights, but far more often it has usurped them. As for protecting international trade, why assume only a government can do that? Stephens makes a peculiar argument:

“A strict libertarian might offer that mercenaries could be authorized to build aircraft carriers, Aegis cruisers and nuclear submarines to keep the freedom of the seas in the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca. But what happens when the pecuniary interests of mercenaries collide with the political interests of the U.S. or some other government?”

That argument cuts both ways. What happens when the interests of a government that has assumed the role as protector of world trade collide with the interests of the people in whose name it acts or some other people? That is not a hypothetical question. It happens every day. Governments seize their revenue by force and are essentially unaccountable. Any resemblance between their interests and the interests of ordinary people is largely coincidental.

The trade issue is a distraction, actually. George Bush did not go to war against Iraq and hasn't thought about going to war against Iran to protect world commerce.

Stephens writes, “Mankind is not comprised solely of profit- and pleasure-seekers; the quest for prestige and dominance and an instinct for nihilism are also inscribed in human nature, nowhere more so than in the Middle East. Libertarianism makes no accounting for this. It assumes the relatively tame aspirations of modern American life are a baseline for human nature, not an achievement of civilization.”

Is he serious? Libertarians make no accounting for people motivated by the desire to dominate? If that were true we wouldn't work so hard to minimize government power. When will interventionists realize that their plans for protecting us from bad guys abroad require the placement of awesome corrupting power in the hands of politicians here?

“There is a not-incidental connection here between libertarianism and pacifism,” he writes.

Leave it to an interventionist to think that the opposite of imperialism is pacifism.

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