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The American Heritage of "Isolationism"

by Gregory Bresiger

You're against the war in Iraq. In fact, you're skeptical about the concept of nation-building and wonder about all of the U.S. interventions in history, from Haiti to the Philippines, the latter resulting in a bitter insurgency at the beginning of the 20th century in which U.S. troops resorted to torture. No, you're not a noninterventionist. You are told that you are an "isolationist."

You had your doubts about America's participation in NATO, especially today with Poland and the Baltic republics a part of this alliance that has members on Russia's doorstep. This is now an alliance that some Russian nationalists see as aimed at their country. It is an alliance, you fear, that could easily draw the United States into another cold war or maybe hot war. You're an isolationist.

You were a "dove" in the 1960s and 1970s. You were against America's war in Vietnam. That war still disturbs you to this day. You're upset when you see a movie such as *We Were Soldiers* or read books such as *The Best and the Brightest* or Bob Kerrey's horrific story of his time in the Special Forces (*When I Was a Young Man*). Yet, you are told — again and again — that your worldview is one of hopeless naiveté. You are an isolationist.

You opposed President Clinton's and President George H.W. Bush's failed attempts to bring democracy to Somalia. You question whether democracy can be installed and nurtured in Iraq within a few years, or many years, of American occupation.

You are not desensitized to the injuries and deaths you read about in the papers, as so many other video-game-loving Americans are. Instead, you are troubled by the deaths of both Americans and Iraqis. These disturbing feelings point to one thing: you're an isolationist.

You worry about the hundreds of military alliances that connect the United States to practically every dispute or potential disturbance in the world. To you, this is a recipe for a foreign policy of endlessly making enemies. Again, you're an isolationist. Accept this media term and, by implication, you're assumed to be a hopeless boob without culture or understanding of events overseas.

Or are you? Possibly you are holding to an American tradition almost as old as our nation.

Presidential deception on war

"Isolationism" is a term endlessly used whenever there is a foreign-policy debate and when someone dissents from the use of American force. "Isolationism" is a term recklessly employed by many in the major media who are often advocates of interventions supporting favored regimes of the Left or the Right. It is also a word of opprobrium. It is a word used by political leaders and media big shots who insist that America must accept its role as the world's policeman. Some even concede that we are now the scions of the British Empire.

Still, Americans have often voted like "isolationists." A foreign policy of endlessly making enemies, of perpetual war for peace is one Americans have frequently rejected at the ballot box. Indeed, they have often voted for presidential candidates they thought would keep the nation at peace but instead led the nation into wars and more wars.

For example, in the 1964 presidential election Americans overwhelmingly voted for Lyndon Baines Johnson. He campaigned as a moderate peace candidate and portrayed Goldwater as an extremist war candidate. Johnson ended up greatly expanding the American commitment to Vietnam, with some 500,000 troops sent to Southeast Asia. He left office in 1969 as one of the most hated men in America. He wouldn't even attempt to run for reelection.

Woodrow Wilson won reelection in 1916 on a platform that bragged that he had kept the United States out of war and kept the nation prosperous. Five months after the election, the nation was in World War I. By the end of Wilson's second term, the nation was in the midst of a depression.

Franklin Roosevelt, at the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, said the United States must be neutral. One year later, campaigning for a third term, he pledged that American boys wouldn't be sent to Europe to fight in World War II. This came while he was secretly scheming to help the British stay in the war.

Richard Nixon ran in 1968 with "a secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam. In the course of slowly pulling troops out of the war — and expanding the bombing — he spread the war to Cambodia.

The current president said little about foreign policy in the 2000 election except that he criticized the Clinton administration for allowing U.S. soldiers to become "rent-a-troops." He thought America's military commitment was becoming overextended.

A "great" nation

Yet, by reversing themselves and spurning any mention of the word "isolationist," most of these presidents became popular with mainstream historians. The historians, to this day, generally applaud these presidents' willingness to make America a "great" power in the world and continue that policy.

Reluctantly or not, those presidents greatly expanded the role of the world's policeman at the same time that they embraced the imperial presidency. They listened to the Thomas Friedmans of their day. Friedman has argued in the *New York Times* that the United States should throw its weight around, imposing an iron fist, all with the goal of ensuring a stable world.

The costs of those tragic policies include torture, constitutional violations, and the destruction of countless lives, a litany of complaints documented by American "isolationists." Yet those of us who didn't subscribe to this Bismarckian balance-of-power strategy are told that we don't matter or that our opinions are as relevant today as a horse-drawn carriage.

Isolationists, media elites suggest, are often economic nationalists who want to put up tariff walls and cordon the United States off from the rest of the world.

Possibly, isolationists are even xenophobes, media and political elites say. In the 1930s and 1940s many of those who wanted America to stay out of Europe's disputes were branded as isolationists. Sometimes they were even called "fascists" and "Hitler lovers." A few were. Most were not. They believed America's entrance into another world war would change the nation for the worse.

The triumph of internationalism

The 20th-century opponents of these "isolationists" were those who favored U.S. entry into World War II years before Pearl Harbor. This group later argued passionately in favor of American participation in NATO, SEATO, and countless other commitments. These interventionists were not depicted by the mainstream media in the 1950s as people who wanted to depart from America's traditional foreign policy. Instead they were called "internationalists" because they were ready to enter into myriad military pacts. When the "internationalists" pushed the United States to join NATO, they were bringing about the final break with the American tradition against military alliances in peacetime.

World War II, the Cold War, and the defeat of Sen. Robert Taft for the Republican presidential nomination in 1952 seemed to have ended the debate of the internationalists versus the so-called isolationists. (I prefer the term "noninterventionists" and will generally use that term in the rest of this essay.)

"America can't go back" was the refrain of those who dismissed the arguments of the noninterventionists. (This, by the way, is a similar argument of those who say a serious examination of the welfare state is out of bounds.)

But numerous controversial and often unpopular wars since the 1950s have now reopened the American foreign-policy debate. And, once again, it may be time to ask a question that hasn't been seriously discussed in America since the defeat of Robert Taft more than half a century ago. In this 54-year period, the United States accelerated its transformation from a government with at

least some of the remaining principles of limited government to one of openly embracing empire abroad and an unlimited welfare state at home.

Do Americans want to become the thing that their forefathers once condemned?

We now live in a country that has betrayed its own heritage of liberty and limited government. The loyal opposition, the Democrats, will say little critical about a war because it is impolitic and because they will be viewed as "unpatriotic." Indeed, Sen. Hillary Clinton, a prominent New York Democrat, today calls for more troops for Iraq. This is similar to the situation during the first years of the Vietnam war, when Congress generally let presidents send more and more troops without asking too many questions.

Meanwhile, neo-cons openly celebrate the ideas of historian Bernard Lewis. He is an Arab specialist who calls upon the United States to accept the responsibilities of the British Empire, an empire once reviled by Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries.

But an unanswered question is at the heart of any efforts to restore limited government in America. Just what is isolationism or noninterventionism? Is it an extreme un-American belief, at odds with limited government? Or is it at the heart of limited government, an inescapable component of any government under law or what liberal German philosophers once called the *Rechtsstaat*?

Our heritage of "isolationism"

If we go back to the beginnings of the republic, we see that isolationism — noninterventionism — became the standard for American foreign policy. And it was embraced by several major political and economic leaders for generations.

Its formal beginning came during the presidency of George Washington, with his Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793. As war was breaking out across Europe, he wrote that

> the duty and interest of the United States require, that they should with sincerity and good faith adopt and pursue a conduct friendly and impartial toward the belligerent Powers....

This idea was expanded three years later with Washington's Farewell Address. This came toward the end of his second term as president, a time of great trial for the United States.

The fragile young republic in the late 1790s faced many perils. A war between the French and British empires engulfed dozens of nations. It was to go on — with one three-year interruption — for some 23 years until Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo. American friends of both empires attempted to draw the republic into the war. But Washington warned that the young republic should stay out of foreign quarrels.

Washington's proclamation, which split his cabinet, was controversial because the United States still had an alliance with France that was entered into during the American Revolution.

The proclamation tended to favor the British because they had no special relationship with the United States. Nevertheless, Washington's goal was to put relations with both empires on an equal footing.

He saw war with either side as inherently dangerous. He feared that if the United States joined the war, the country would be divided between partisans of both sides. This was a critically important matter for the United States as a relatively weak, decentralized nation. The United States then had a relatively small armed force, which many Americans nonetheless viewed as expensive and dangerous in peacetime.

Americans had inherited a suspicion of militarism from their British friends who had supported them in the American Revolution. Those maverick Englishmen celebrated the Whig tradition, which had defeated the Stuart kings in two civil wars. The Stuarts lost, in part, because of their fondness for standing armies in peacetime.

So Washington's policy of keeping the nation out of foreign wars set a strong precedent. The policy was honored by some American leaders for the next century. Yet during the 20th century this historic noninterventionist tradition was discarded by another generation of Americans.

A foreign policy for the ages

Noninterventionism was meant not only as a policy of common sense for its time, but as a statement of principle that should bind all liberty-loving people through the centuries if America's republican ideas were to survive. Washington's Farewell Address is a counsel of idealism, justice, and liberty.

> Observe good faith and justice towards all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct, and can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it?

America, the first president argued, should set an example for the rest of the world by pursuing peace, commerce, paying its debts, and resisting the frequent pressures to go to war. He knew that this would be a difficult standard to abide by, but he urged his countrymen to try:

The experiment, at least, is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human nature. Alas! is it rendered impossible by its vices?

This fascinating address then came to a key point, a point that has divided Americans again, especially over the last century or so during America's persistent interventions around the globe. Who are America's permanent friends and enemies? Should America have permanent friends and enemies?

How one approaches this foreign-policy question is at the heart of any serious debate over what the United States should be: an empire with bases in dozens of nations around the world

and endless treaty obligations, or a decentralized republic that uses force only in limited circumstances in which its vital national security interests are at stake.

Washington counseled flexibility. He criticized “permanent, inveterate antipathies” as well as “passionate attachments” for other nations.

> The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness, is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.

Habitual hatred, he cautioned, would mean the United States would need little excuse for going to war.

> Antipathy in one nation against another, disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable, when accidental or trifling occasions of dispute occur.
>
> Hence frequent collisions, obstinate envenomed, and bloody contests....

Americans must turn away from those who would have their nation permanently allied to any other nation, said this president, who believed the French alliance of 1778 would lead to disaster. He probably would not have been surprised by warlike journalists such as the *Times’s* Friedman.

Washington would have probably understood the dynamics of the many lobbyist groups that, over the last generations, have successfully pushed for the United States to enter wars such as the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the two Gulf wars. He warned that Americans must be “constantly awake” to the pressures that could lead to war.

> As avenues to foreign influence in innumerable ways, such attachments are particularly alarming to the truly enlightened and independent patriot. How many opportunities do they afford to tamper with domestic factions, to practice the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public councils?

Pursuing trade and commerce

While Washington, as well as later generations of American noninterventionists, understood the danger that unnecessary wars and alliances would lead to more wars, what was his positive foreign-policy program?

It was person-to-person relations. It was also commerce. Trade was the positive force that Washington — and many of the great classical liberals from Cobden and Bright to the American anti-imperialist merchants who opposed the Spanish-American War and the feral follow-up war in the Philippines — believed would bring peoples together, in spite of the prejudices of their governments. The common economic goals of individuals might overcome the bloody histories of monarchies and aristocracies.

This idea became popular in the 19th century during the high point of classical liberalism. Men are hesitant to cut the throats of men who are putting food on their tables, said 19th-century economist David Ricardo.

"The great rule of conduct for us," Washington wrote, "in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled, with perfect good faith...."

Washington departed office in the midst of political controversy. The Democratic-Republican Party was becoming the official opposition party. Some believed that Washington had become pro-British because he approved the controversial Jay Treaty, which probably avoided another war with mighty Britain. He was also criticized for failing to show sufficient enthusiasm for the French Revolution.

Yet party politics, which by the 1796 and 1800 elections, were heating up, could not contravene Washington's noninterventionist, pacific counsels.

His successor, John Adams, despite many outrages committed by the French, would not be drawn into war. At the end of his presidency, he would say his greatest accomplishment in public service was his continuous pursuit of peace. That's even though a war declaration might have made him, for a time, a very popular leader who might not have lost the election of 1800. Adams hoped his epitaph would read, "Here lies John Adams, who took upon himself the responsibility of peace with France in the year 1800."

And when Adams's great political opponent, Thomas Jefferson, took office in 1801, he, too, paid homage to Washington's foreign-policy advice. Jefferson, despite his differences with the Federalists, promised no "entangling alliances." Isolationism, or non-interventionism, was, for a short time, the established policy of the United States.

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