

OPENING INTERNATIONALISTS UP: A DEFENSE OF ISOLATIONISM

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In today's globalized world, strict isolationism is neither feasible nor advised. When ideas, capital, and populations move freely and quickly across borders, a more cosmopolitan view on foreign policy is necessary. A growingly complex, interconnected world deserves decisions that take into account all of the world's actors. To be isolationist is to be inherently selfish and short-sighted. At the same time, it is even more selfish and short-sighted for someone to ignore a viewpoint just because he or she disagrees with it. As isolationism has persisted for decades in the minds and hearts of American citizens and policymakers alike, it must be given its due and investigated in a way that gives it every affordance possible. To the internationalist: you can only convince your isolationist counterparts if you understand their position and justifications. Isolationists: consider this a reprieve from ridicule. This paper will contextualize modern isolationism and then proceed to justify this contextualization theoretically, philosophically, and by evaluating the modern state of American politics.

There is a great deal of debate regarding the roots of American isolationism and the historical shift that occurred around World War II that potentially shifted American foreign policy decisions into the sphere of internationalism. Academics continue to argue about the extent to which the United States was motivated to act as an isolationist world actor. Some are of the view that the United States was never isolationist and that instead it utilized subtle diplomatic tactics to influence the world arena.¹ Others are of the opinion that isolationism dominated the United States' foreign policy decisions for the entire first half of the twentieth century.² Although this field of research is fascinating to delve into—although it is of the utmost importance to understand the context behind political ideologies in order to apply them—a discussion of this historical context unfortunately is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, to avoid this debate and instead focus only the current iteration of American isolationism, a set of formalized parameters will be set forth.

Ideologies are notoriously difficult to define; as the world continues to adapt and change as a result of applied systems of knowledge, these very systems adapt to the world. As the globe has become so interconnected through a process of radical globalization, isolationism has a different character than it had prior to this modern technological era. Modern isolationism is best defined by a “voluntary abstention by a state from taking part in security-related politics in an area of the international system over which it is capable of exerting control.”³ Like any ideology, isolationism guides its

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proponents to advocate for foreign policy decisions that have a fundamentally different character than they would otherwise. For example, while an internationalist would have argued that the United States ought to have directly intervened in Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by sending military troops to the Ukrainian border, the strict isolationist would have ignored the situation in its entirety. It should be noted that these two responses are the extremes of the internationalist–isolationist spectrum. The middle ground of this spectrum may have very well have been sanctions, which recognizes some internationalist obligation while simultaneously respecting the limits of the isolationist. It should also be noted that isolationism does not imply that its champions will never intervene in the affairs of other nations. Even the strict isolationist is capable of making rational decisions about which policies will end up being the most effective in securing their home state. A single case where an isolationist agrees to interfere in the affairs of another state does not deny his or her isolationist character if the justification for the action is that it is the last possible action that has the greatest probability of ensuring security for the isolationist's home state.

With this set of parameters for contextualizing isolationism, it becomes evident that there are legitimate reasons why the isolationist ideology is attractive to individuals in the United States. Every state in the international arena has its own unique aspects of their respective political cultures. In the United States, political culture is often underscored with a balance between “Lockean Liberalism and American Exceptionalism” that simultaneously highly regards some sort of loose conception of democratic ideals.⁴ A notion of American exceptionalism, the idea that somehow the United States is “a unique place free from the stains and evils of the Old World, and thus blessed with the opportunity to create a world of freedom, liberty and justice without its motives, and goals being damaged by the corruption of...European colonial powers” acts as an undercurrent within these scripts that motivates the way that American citizens view their political identity.⁵ One of the methods by which this exceptionalism can be defined is by turning to an idealized notion of liberalism wherein American citizens spout a desire for individualism, personal freedom, and—most relevant to a discussion of the isolationist ideology—a freedom from undue government authority.⁶ While an isolationist policy maker can recognize human rights abuses and deem the actions of a fellow state unjust, he or she must simultaneously acknowledge the sovereignty of this state.

While it may seem heartless for the isolationist to not act to condemn the actions of an unjust, undemocratic state in the international arena, in this case, it is simply a rare example of internal consistency in terms of extreme notions of liberalism. Furthermore, policymakers as agents of the state have obligations that are different from the obligations of individuals. If a member of the state, acting as a proxy for the state, must make a judgment, he or she must do so as the state would. The relationship between states and individuals is messy at times; in many cases, states are only capable of interacting as unified bodies that care only about being large, overarching

decision-making calculators. If individuals within a democratic society must respect the autonomous value of other citizens, then states in the international arena must respect their fellow states.

The isolationist mindset—the perspective that denies an obligation to interfere in the decisions of members of the international arena—respects the notion of state sovereignty in a way very much consistent with the democratic ideals that the United States values in a few odd but important ways. First, democratic ideals imply a value on equality of opportunity that contrasts with an equality of ends. Equality of opportunity allows for there to be “losers” at the end of a process as long as the beginning of the process allowed every participant to start out on equal footing. Equality of ends would condemn a process that had any conception of “losers” at the end of the process. Although there are blatant historical inequalities between states as a result of historical trends like European colonization, equality of opportunity in the international arena correlates most strongly with a strong respect of sovereignty as the “opportunity” for states would be to legislate within their own borders. Interfering in the affairs of other states to assist in some sort of equality of ends would contradict with this precept. Second, a prioritization of personal freedom and individual determinism would incentivize those who adhere to a democratic ideology to attempt to focus efforts inward in order to assist in the actualization of their home state. Inherent in the notion of democratic liberalism is the idea that individuals ought to be given the freedom to pursue and achieve their own ends without interference. This implies a reciprocity clause wherein every member of this free society should adhere to principles that will allow for negative liberty.⁷ Inevitably, in its idealized ideological form, this mindset most closely aligns with a radical sort of libertarianism that places a high value on personal culpability and potential. For isolationist policymakers within the United States, this mindset would justify policies that focus efforts inward at bettering the United States rather than looking to improve the welfare of other states.

To make this argument less abstract and theoretical, one can turn to the United States Constitution, the ideological backbone and codification of American ideals. The Preamble states that the purpose of the United States was to “form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”⁸ It clearly prioritizes the wellbeing of the United States and its constituency over that of other nations. While there are many arguments about whether the Constitution has—or ought to have—any normative force, the most common argument that it does is a general, codified social contract theory. As the state was established under the guise of agreeing and consenting to the Constitution, the Constitution is the best, most objective way of evaluating the appropriateness of policymaker’s action. In a more direct sense, abstracting normative context from the argument, the Constitution is legally binding and therefore must be adhered to. The isolationist policymaker can use a pragmatic resource-allocation argument to justify their ideology. As the state has a limited amount of resources, those resources ought to

go to directly benefit the constituency. This holds some special significance in the case of the United States as a significant portion of the government's budget comes from taxing its constituency.⁹ In terms of justifying foreign action to their constituency, there are a few problems. Primarily, the argument would be that because these foreign benefactors had not paid taxes, they have no right to reap the benefits of the resource expenditure. A stronger claim that could also be made is that by spending tax dollars on actions that do not benefit its constituency, the United States has no contractual or constitutional grounding for foreign interference, invalidates its established contract with its citizens, and inherently undermines its relationship to its constituency.¹⁰ The only legitimate contractual or Constitutional justification for interfering in the affairs of other nations would be to ensure security or procure some benefit for the United States. However, as established in the contextualization of the modern isolationist ideology, this justification falls under the purview of isolationism.

If one accepts that policymakers in the United States must—to a certain reasonable sense—be able to justify their decisions to their constituency, then it would be logical to look at what the population of the United States believes. Even if one does not believe that policymakers must justify their decisions to the common folk, there is a strong claim to be made that, in a state that has elections and cares about democratic ideals, policymakers have a vested interest in appealing to the interests of their constituents to prevent a disenfranchised, alienated population that would negatively affect social welfare and to gain some sort of approval as to ensure reelection. In 2013, views of U.S. hegemonic dominance fell to a 40-year low with 53% of Americans agreeing that the United States had a “less important and powerful role [in the world arena] than 10 years ago.”¹¹ Furthermore, for the first time since 1964, the poll found that a majority—52% of citizens polled—agreed that the United States should “mind its own business internationally.”¹² Additionally, 70% of Americans found that the United States was “losing respect internationally” as a result of its failed interventionist foreign policy endeavors.¹³ Since 2013, this trend has only worsened. In 2016, polling data found that 57% of Americans believed that the United States should “deal with [its] own problems [and] let others deal with theirs as best they can,” 41% of those polled found that the United States did “too much” to solve the world's problems, and 49% had a negative perception of United States' involvement in the global economy.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, this 49% is an averaged account of responses from all points on the political spectrum. Most apropos to America's current political dynamic, 65% of individuals—the most out of all the cohorts polled—who had a positive opinion of current President Donald Trump during the Republican primaries agreed with the statement that “United States involvement in the global economy is a bad thing, lowers wages, [and] costs jobs.”¹⁵

This polling data underscores a few important features of the attractiveness of the isolationist ideology. First, regardless of a policymaker's personal views on the United States' effectiveness in the international arena, when a substantial, bipartisan portion of their constituency maintains isolationist views, this policymaker has

reason to favor isolationist policies. Second, there must be some reason why a large proportion of Americans favor isolationism. Not only is it unacceptably dismissive to ignore a popular opinion because of preconceived notions of the opinion's misdeeds, it also will contribute to the same disenfranchisement that most likely contributes to Americans favoring isolationism as a means to focus the government's efforts inward. Perhaps most importantly, this polling data represents the dialectical nature of ideological shifts. If Americans influence policymakers, and policymakers shift their policies to somewhat reflect the desires of their constituents, then Americans will see these policies in action, it will affect their original beliefs, and then policymakers will be forced to adapt to these beliefs for a second time. In the modern era, news outlets and the media act as the primary sources of information regarding foreign policy decisions for the majority of Americans. However, news stories become sensationalized as the media "place[s] greater emphasis on dramatic, human-interest themes and episodic frames and less emphasis on knowledgeable information sources...while also having a greater propensity to emphasize the potential for bad outcomes."¹⁶ As average Americans receive their news from these softer news sources, most will have an extraordinarily myopic, negative view of the United States' foreign interventions and thus favor isolationism as a default response. After all, if all of the information that a person consumes on a subject comes to the same conclusion, it is almost impossible to refute that conclusion. Although "highly politically aware individuals" tend to be by the large majority internationalists, that does not deny the opinion of the majority. Because the misinformed—and even the uninformed vote—politicians and lawmakers must give credence to isolationism.

The 2016 presidential election underscores this political reality. Although President Trump has taken action to intervene in Syria since entering office, it benefited his campaign to have an isolationist platform. Because the executive branch has few constraints on international action, when a political party has control of the executive branch, the party has a vested interest in expanding their ideology to support further international action in order to gain clout and develop an agenda. Accordingly, the opposing party has an equally strong reason to oppose intervention in order to capitalize on the inevitable failures of intervention, exploit the effect that the 24-hour news cycle's emphasis on those failures will have on the voting population,¹⁷ and further distance themselves from the other party.¹⁸ As the Democratic Party had control of the executive branch for eight years, every Republican has a strong reason to engage in advocating for isolationism. Because the Republican party tends to have more libertarian leaning—and, as discussed previously these libertarian ideals already correlate with isolationism—Republican policymakers and citizens alike have a secondary reason of maintaining platform consistency to favor isolationism. It may seem absurd, but the state of American politics does create a coherent, robust reason why certain individuals would be attracted to isolationism. To deny this conclusion is to deny the power that political parties have in the United States. Obviously, in today's polarized political society, it would be ludicrous to deny that partisanship motivates political choices.

However, to dismiss isolationist policymakers as only maintaining this ideology to appease their constituency or support their party would be to do a disrespectful disservice. There are valid economic reasons to favor isolationism for a simple reason—foreign intervention costs money. Not only can the original costs of intervention be exorbitant, the upkeep cost in the region in a situation that calls for a proposal like democracy promotion can accumulate over time. This accumulation often ties the United States to the region for many financial years and acts as a drain on economic resources. This money comes from taxpayers and one could make the argument that it could be spent in ways that better the lives of United States citizens. Regardless of the amount of money that the intervention and its upkeep costs, it is still money that could go to welfare programs that, although they are not large portions of the budget, still end up being cut in favor of defense spending. To use a single example, although the estimated costs to go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan at the start of the intervention were between \$50 billion and \$200 billion.¹⁹ In 2007, the Congressional Budget Office reevaluated their prior estimate and projected that over the next decade, the total cost of intervention would reach upwards of \$2.4 trillion.²⁰ Furthermore, intervention is costly in other ways—as the United States has seen in the Middle East, interfering with the affairs of other states often carries with it the baggage of casualties. Once again, as discussed above, this negative humanitarian reality of the direct results of intervention often strengthen the pull that citizens and policymakers alike have to isolationism as an ideology.

For the internationalist, it might often be preferable to minimize foreign action for two reasons that each correlate with the above costs. First, in modern times, as indicated by polling data²¹ and political shifts related to the Obama Doctrine of foreign policy, Democrats are more inclined to be internationalists. However, Democrats also are in favor of increased spending and increased efforts within the domestic sphere to care for the wellbeing of their own citizens. With less money spent on defense, the budget could perhaps be balanced more in favor of domestic social programs. For internationalist Republicans, the argument could be made that without so many interventional drains on resources, if you keep defense spending constant, there would still be more financial resources for the military to more effectively provide for a common defense. If that argument were to be unpersuasive, then the claim could also be made that the extra money in the budget could go towards helping the deficit. Second, for any political actor—regardless of party affiliation or any extraneous political beliefs not encompassed by party lines—who believes in the validity of internationalism, it would be important for them to gain more support for their internationalist endeavors. If there are fewer negative reactions to internationalist policies, then the internationalist ideology has a better chance at gaining support in the general public.

At the end of the day, isolationists and internationalists, Republicans and Democrats, politicians and citizens all want mostly the same end result for the United States. A comparison of methodologies is of the utmost importance for accomplishing this task. However, for this to occur, every party must be willing to understand one

another and shirk polemics. No one has ever lost by educating themselves. Ignorance and dismissiveness, in contrast, certainly contribute to decreases in effectiveness and undesirable end results. When one considers isolationists as patriots attempting to minimize risk and benefit their direct constituency, their advocacy does not seem all that preposterous. It would do internationalists well to remember and learn from that.

NOTES

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