

R.I.P Isolationism

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The foreign policy civil war inside the Republican Party is spilling onto the op-ed pages. The latest battle began Friday when Texas Gov. Rick Perry tried to brand Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul as an isolationist for Paul's stance on Iraq. The senator was quick to reject the label.

Why was the senator so eager to dodge the isolationist moniker? Because it's electoral kryptonite with the American public, whom, despite what you may have heard, do not support isolationism. Americans are not asking for a retreat from the world. They're a pragmatic public that's rejecting neo-conservative interventionism, but they're also opportunistic, engaging and diplomatic. And, they're looking to Washington for a foreign policy that matches those traits.

Perry's isolationist shaming isn't anything new. The rising tide of isolationism has actually been rising for decades, or so we're told. In 1950, as the Marshall Plan was in full force, Walter Lippman wrote, "There is indeed a rising tide of isolationist sentiment in this country." When the Cold War ended, President George H.W. Bush bemoaned the rising tide of isolationism, as did his son's administration more than a decade later. But, the rising tide truly reached its peak in December 2013 when a Pew poll found that 52 percent of Americans believe the U.S. "should mind its own business internationally," the most recorded in half a century of polling.

But, looking past this bare majority we quickly see a public that still strongly favors American leadership and engagement with the world. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) support a shared world leadership role — virtually unchanged for 20 years. More than half (55 percent) of elites desire a more assertive American leadership role, and 51 percent of the general public wants us to be about as active as other nations — once again, unchanged for 20 years.

What principles do Americans want to govern foreign affairs? Defense of the homeland, fighting terrorism, securing American jobs and pursuing energy independence all rise to the top in surveys. But more broadly, they support the administration's policy of cooperative engagement. Consider this:

- 83 percent say it's best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs;
- 77 percent say we should take major allies' views into account when deciding on foreign policy;
- 66 percent say greater involvement in the global economy is good for America; and,
- 56 percent want us to fully cooperate with the United Nations.

Scholars have noted the public isn't isolationist, it's prudent. The American people realize we cannot afford to solve all the world's problems, so they want America to cooperate with allies and get more involved with a growing global economy. Even the Pew poll that many cite as evidence of historically high levels of isolationism points out Americans "want the United States to play a leading role in world affairs, and they see the benefits of greater involvement in the global economy." This is precisely why Perry's critique may resonate with some, even conservatives, who have become disgruntled with Paul's less-engaging foreign policy, which calls for the U.S. withdrawing from international institutions like the U.N.

What the public does not want is American soldiers fighting on the ground, whether it be in Iraq (19 percent support ground troops), Ukraine (8 percent support military involvement), or Syria (29 percent supported air strikes last Fall). This is not isolationism; this is a rejection of the neoconservative interventionist approach. It is a pragmatic recognition that we cannot afford another prolonged ground conflict, and a keen awareness that we have much more cost effective

means to resolve foreign problems. Assuming such an isolationist public would mistakenly lead policymakers, like Paul, to shun extremely fruitful engagements that the public is strongly in favor of, like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The American public is pragmatic, prudent, war-weary, and looking to make the most out of an increasingly interconnected world. And, it's up to policymakers to steer America on this course of active engagement with the world, or risk isolating themselves from public office.

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TOPICS

PUBLIC OPINION 138

FOREIGN RELATIONS 115