

Posted by Joan Russow
Thursday, 24 October 2013 06:49 -

By [Andrew J. Bacevich](#)

<http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175764/>

The abiding defect of U.S. foreign policy? It’s isolationism, my friend. Purporting to steer clear of war, isolationism fosters it. Isolationism impedes the spread of democracy. It inhibits trade and therefore prosperity. It allows evildoers to get away with murder. Isolationists prevent the United States from accomplishing its providentially assigned global mission. Wean the American people from their persistent inclination to look inward and who knows what wonders our leaders will accomplish.

The United States has been at war for well over a decade now, with U.S. attacks and excursions in distant lands having become as commonplace as floods and forest fires. Yet during the recent debate over Syria, the absence of popular enthusiasm for opening up another active front evoked expressions of concern in Washington that Americans were once more turning their backs on the world.

As he was proclaiming the imperative of punishing the government of Bashar al-Assad, Secretary of State John Kerry also chided skeptical members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “this is not the time for armchair isolationism.” Commentators keen to have a go at the Syrian autocrat wasted little time in expanding on Kerry’s theme.

Reflecting on “[where isolationism leads](#),” Jennifer Rubin, the reliably bellicose *Washington Post* columnist, was quick to chime in, denouncing those hesitant to initiate another war as “infantile.” American isolationists, she insisted, were giving a green light to aggression. Any nation that counted on the United States for protection had now become a “sitting duck,” with “Eastern Europe [and] neighbors of Venezuela and Israel” among those left exposed and vulnerable. News reports of Venezuelan troop movements threatening Brazil, Colombia, or Guyana were notably absent from the *Post* or any other media outlet, but no matter -- you get the idea.

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Military analyst Frederick Kagan was equally troubled. Also writing in the *Post*, he [worried](#) that “the isolationist narrative is rapidly becoming dominant.” His preferred narrative emphasized the need for ever greater military exertions, with Syria just the place to launch a new campaign. For Bret Stephens, a columnist with the *Wall Street Journal*, the problem was the Republican Party. Where had the hawks gone? The Syria debate, he [lamented](#), was “exposing the isolationist worm eating its way through the GOP apple.”

The *Journal's* op-ed page also gave the redoubtable Norman Podhoretz, not only still alive but vigorously kicking, a chance to vent. Unmasking President Obama as “a left-wing radical” intent on “reduc[ing] the country’s power and influence,” the unrepentant neoconservative [accused the president](#) of exploiting the “war-weariness of the American people and the rise of isolationist sentiment... on the left and right” to bring about “a greater diminution of American power than he probably envisaged even in his wildest radical dreams.”

Obama escalated the war in Afghanistan, “got” Osama bin Laden, toppled one Arab dictator in Libya, and bashed and bombed targets in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Even so, it turns out he is actually *part of the isolationist conspiracy to destroy America!*

Over at the *New York Times*, similar concerns, even if less hysterically expressed, prevailed. [According to](#) *Times* columnist Roger Cohen, President Obama’s reluctance to pull the trigger showed that he had “deferred to a growing isolationism.” Bill Keller concurred. “America is again in a deep isolationist mood.” In a column entitled, “[Our New Isolationism](#),” he decried “the fears and defeatist slogans of knee-jerk isolationism” that were impeding military action. (For Keller, the proper antidote to isolationism is amnesia. As he put it, “Getting Syria right starts with getting over Iraq.”)

For his part, *Times* staff writer Sam Tanenhaus contributed a bizarre [two-minute exercise](#) in video agitprop -- complete with faked scenes of the Japanese attacking Pearl Harbor -- that slapped the isolationist label on anyone opposing entry into any war whatsoever, or tiring of a war gone awry, or proposing that America go it alone.

When the “New Isolationism” Was New

Most of this, of course, qualifies as overheated malarkey. As a characterization of U.S. policy at any time in memory, isolationism is a fiction. Never really a tendency, it qualifies at most as a moment, referring to that period in the 1930s when large numbers of Americans balked at the prospect of entering another European war, the previous one having fallen well short of its “War To End All Wars” advance billing.

In fact, from the day of its founding down to the present, the United States has never turned its back on the world. Isolationism owes its storied history to its value as a rhetorical device, deployed to discredit anyone opposing an action or commitment (usually involving military forces) that others happen to favor. If I, a grandson of Lithuanian immigrants, favor deploying U.S. forces to Lithuania to keep that NATO ally out of Vladimir Putin’s clutches and you oppose that proposition, then you, sir or madam, are an “isolationist.” Presumably, Jennifer Rubin will see things my way and lend her support to shoring up Lithuania’s vulnerable frontiers.

For this very reason, the term isolationism is not likely to disappear from American political discourse anytime soon. It’s too useful. Indeed, employ this verbal cudgel to castigate your opponents and your chances of gaining entrée to the nation’s most prestigious publications improve appreciably. Warn about the revival of isolationism and your prospects of making the grade as a pundit or candidate for high office suddenly brighten. This is the great thing about using isolationists as punching bags: it makes actual thought unnecessary. All that’s required to posture as a font of wisdom is the brainless recycling of clichés, half-truths, and bromides.

No publication is more likely to welcome those clichés, half-truths, and bromides than the *New York Times*

. There, isolationism always looms remarkably large and is just around the corner.

In July 1942, the *New York Times Magazine* opened its pages to Vice President Henry A. Wallace, who sounded the alarm about the looming threat of what he styled a “new isolationism.” This was in the midst of World War II, mind you.

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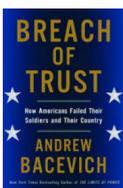
After the previous world war, the vice president wrote, the United States had turned inward. As summer follows spring, “the choice led up to this present war.” Repeat the error, Wallace warned, and “the price will be more terrible and will be paid much sooner.” The world was changing and it was long past time for Americans to get with the program. “The airplane, the radio, and modern technology have bound the planet so closely together that what happens anywhere on the planet has a direct effect everywhere else.” In a world that had “suddenly become so small,” he continued, “we cannot afford to resume the role of hermit.”

The implications for policy were self-evident:

“This time, then, we have only one real choice. We must play a responsible part in the world -- leading the way in world progress, fostering a healthy world trade, helping to protect the world’s peace.”

One month later, it was Archibald MacLeish’s turn. On August 16, 1942, the *Times* magazine published a long essay of his under the title of -- wouldn’t you know it -- “The New Isolationism.” For readers in need of coaching, *Times* editors inserted this seal of approval before the text: “There is great pertinence in the following article.”

A well-known poet, playwright, and literary gadfly, MacLeish was at the time serving as Librarian of Congress. From this bully pulpit, he offered the reassuring news that “isolationism in America is dead.” Unfortunately, like zombies, “old isolationists never really die: they merely dig in their toes in a new position. And the new position, whatever name is given it, is isolation still.”



[Buy the book](#)

Fortunately, the American people were having none of it. They had “recaptured the current of history and they propose to move with it; they don’t mean to be denied.” MacLeish’s fellow citizens knew what he knew: “that there is a stirring in our world..., a forward thrusting and

overflowing human hope of the human will which must be given a channel or it will dig a channel itself.” In effect, MacLeish was daring the isolationists, in whatever guise, to stand in the way of this forward thrusting and overflowing hopefulness. Presumably, they would either drown or be crushed.

The end of World War II found the United States donning the mantle of global leadership, much as Wallace, MacLeish, and the *Times* had counseled. World peace did not ensue. Instead, a host of problems continued to afflict the planet, with isolationists time and again fingered as the culprits impeding their solution.

The Gift That Never Stops Giving

In June 1948, with a notable absence of creativity in drafting headlines, the *Times* once again found evidence of “the new isolationism.” In an unsigned editorial, the paper charged that an American penchant for hermit-like behavior was “asserting itself again in a manner that is both distressing and baffling.” With the Cold War fully joined and U.S. forces occupying Germany, Japan, and other countries, the *Times* worried that some Republicans in Congress appeared reluctant to fund the Marshall Plan.

From their offices in Manhattan, members of the *Times* editorial board detected in some quarters “a homesickness for the old days.” It was incumbent upon Americans to understand that “the time is past when we could protect ourselves easily behind our barriers behind the seas.” History was summoning the United States to lead the world: “The very success of our democracy has now imposed duties upon us which we must fulfill if that democracy is to survive.” Those entertaining contrary views, the *Times* huffed, “do not speak for the American people.”

That very month, Josef Stalin announced that the Soviet Union was blockading Berlin. The U.S. responded not by heading for the exits but by initiating a dramatic airlift. Oh, and Congress fully funded the Marshall Plan.

Barely a year later, in August 1949, with Stalin having just lifted the Berlin Blockade, *Times* c

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columnist Arthur Krock discerned another urge to disengage. In a piece called “Chickens Usually Come Home,” he cited congressional reservations about the recently promulgated Truman Doctrine as evidence of, yes, a “new isolationism.” As it happened, Congress duly appropriated the money President Truman was requesting to support Greece and Turkey against the threat of communism -- as it would support similar requests to throw arms and money at other trouble spots like French Indochina.

Even so, in November of that year, the *Times* magazine published yet another warning about “the challenge of a new isolationism.” The author was Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, then positioning himself for a White House run. Like many another would-be candidate before and since, Stevenson took the preliminary step of signaling his opposition to the I-word.

World War II, he wrote, had “not only destroyed fascism abroad, but a lot of isolationist notions here at home.” War and technological advance had “buried the whole ostrich of isolation.” At least it should have. Unfortunately, some Republicans hadn’t gotten the word. They were “internationally minded in principle but not in practice.” Stevenson feared that when the chips were down such head-in-the-sand inclinations might come roaring back. This he was determined to resist. “The eagle, not the ostrich,” he proclaimed, “is our national emblem.”

In August 1957, the *Times* magazine was at it once again, opening its pages to another Illinois Democrat, Senator Paul Douglas, for an essay familiarly entitled “A New Isolationism -- Ripples or Tide?” Douglas claimed that “a new tide of isolationism is rising in the country.” U.S. forces remained in Germany and Japan, along with Korea, where they had recently fought a major war. Even so, the senator worried that “the internationalists are tiring rapidly now.”

Americans needed to fortify themselves by heeding the message of the Gospels: “Let the spirit of the Galilean enter our worldly and power-obsessed hearts.” In other words, the senator’s prescription for American statecraft was an early version of What Would Jesus Do? Was Jesus Christ an advocate of American global leadership? Senator Douglas apparently thought so.

Then came Vietnam. By May 1970, even *Times*-men were showing a little of that fatigue. That month, star columnist James Reston pointed (yet again) to the “new isolationism.” Yet in contrast to the paper’s scribblings on the subject over the previous three decades, Reston didn’t decry it as entirely irrational. The war had proven to be a bummer and “the longer it goes on,” he wrote, “the harder it will be to get public support for American intervention.” Washington, in

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other words, needed to end its misguided war if it had any hopes of repositioning itself to start the next one.

A Concept Growing Long in the Tooth

By 1980, the *Times* showed signs of recovering from its brief Vietnam funk. In a [review](#) of Norman Podhoretz’s *The Present Danger*, for example, the noted critic Anatole Broyard extolled the author’s argument as “dispassionate,” “temperate,” and “almost commonsensical.”

The actual text was none of those things. What the pugnacious Podhoretz called -- get ready for it -- “the new isolationism” was, in his words, “hard to distinguish from simple anti-Americanism.” Isolationists -- anyone who had opposed the Vietnam War on whatever grounds -- believed that the United States was “a force for evil, a menace, a terror.” Podhoretz detected a “psychological connection” between “anti-Americanism, isolationism, and the tendency to explain away or even apologize for anything the Soviet Union does, no matter how menacing.” It wasn’t bad enough that isolationists hated their country, they were, it seems, commie symps to boot.

Fast forward a decade, and -- less than three months after U.S. troops invaded Panama -- *Times* columnist Flora Lewis sensed a resurgence of you-know-what. In a February 1990 [column](#), she described “a convergence of right and left” with both sides “arguing with increasing intensity that it’s time for the U.S. to get off the world.” Right-wingers saw that world as too nasty to save; left-wingers, the United States as too nasty to save it. “Both,” she concluded (of course), were “moving toward a new isolationism.”

Five months later, Saddam Hussein sent his troops into Kuwait. Instead of getting off the world, President George H.W. Bush deployed U.S. combat forces to defend Saudi Arabia. For Joshua Muravchik, however, merely defending that oil-rich kingdom wasn’t nearly good enough. Indeed, here was a prime example of the “[New Isolationism, Same Old Mistake](#),” as his *Times* op-ed was entitled.

The mistake was to flinch from instantly ejecting Saddam’s forces. Although opponents of a war against Iraq did not “see themselves as isolationists, but as realists,” he considered this a distinction without a difference. Muravchik, who made his living churning out foreign policy analysis for various Washington think tanks, favored “the principle of investing America’s power in the effort to fashion an environment congenial to our long-term safety.” War, he firmly believed, offered the means to fashion that congenial environment. Should America fail to act, he warned, “our abdication will encourage such threats to grow.”

Of course, the United States did act and the threats grew anyway. In and around the Middle East, the environment continued to be thoroughly uncongenial. Still, in *Times*-world, the American penchant for doing too little rather than too much remained the eternal problem, eternally “new.” An

[op-ed](#)

by up-and-coming journalist James Traub appearing in the *Times*

in December 1991, just months after a half-million U.S. troops had liberated Kuwait, was typical. Assessing the contemporary political scene, Traub detected “a new wave of isolationism gathering force.” Traub was undoubtedly establishing his bona fides. (Soon after, he landed a job working for the paper.)

This time, according to Traub, the problem was the Democrats. No longer “the party of Wilson or of John F. Kennedy,” Democrats, he lamented, “aspire[d] to be the party of middle-class frustrations -- and if that entails turning your back on the world, so be it.” The following year Democrats nominated as their presidential candidate Bill Clinton, who insisted that he would never under any circumstances turn his back on the world. Even so, no sooner did Clinton win than *Times* columnist Leslie Gelb was predicting that the new president would “fall into the trap of isolationism and policy passivity.”

Get Me Rewrite!

Arthur Schlesinger defined the problem in broader terms. The famous historian and Democratic Party insider had weighed in early on the matter with a much-noted essay that appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* back in 1952. He called it – you guessed it -- “[The New Isolationism](#)”

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In June 1994, more than 40 years later, with the Cold War now finally won, Schlesinger was back for more with a *Times* op-ed that sounded the usual alarm. “The Cold War produced the illusion that traditional isolationism was dead and buried,” he wrote, but of course -- this is, after all, the *Times* -- it was actually alive and kicking. The passing of the Cold War had “weakened the incentives to internationalism” and was giving isolationists a new opening, even though in “a world of law requiring enforcement,” it was incumbent upon the United States to be the lead enforcer.

The warning resonated. Although the *Times* does not normally give commencement addresses much attention, it made an exception for Madeleine Albright’s remarks to graduating seniors at Barnard College in May 1995. The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations [had detected](#) what she called “a trend toward isolationism that is running stronger in America than at any time since the period between the two world wars,” and the American people were giving in to the temptation “to pull the covers up over our heads and pretend we do not notice, do not care, and are unaffected by events overseas.” In other circumstances in another place, it might have seemed an odd claim, given that the United States had just wrapped up armed interventions in Somalia and Haiti and was on the verge of initiating a bombing campaign in the Balkans.

Still, Schlesinger had Albright’s back. The July/August 1995 issue of *Foreign Affairs* [prominently featured](#) an article of his entitled “Back to the Womb? Isolationism’s Renewed Threat,” with *Times* editors [publishing](#) a CliffsNotes version on the op-ed page a month earlier. “The isolationist impulse has risen from the grave,” Schlesinger announced, “and it has taken the new form of unilateralism.”
□

His complaint was no longer that the United States hesitated to act, but that it did not act in concert with others. This “neo-isolationism,” he warned, introducing a new note into the tradition of isolationism-bashing for the first time in decades, “promises to prevent the most powerful nation on the planet from playing any role in enforcing the peace system.” The isolationists were winning -- this time through pure international belligerence. Yet “as we return to the womb,” Schlesinger warned his fellow citizens, “we are surrendering a magnificent dream.”

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Other *Times* contributors shared Schlesinger’s concern. On January 30, 1996, the columnist Russell Baker chipped in with a piece called “[The New Isolationism](#).” For those slow on the uptake, Jessica Mathews, then a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, affirmed Baker’s concerns by publishing an [identically titled column](#) in the *Washington Post* a mere six days later. Mathews reported “troubling signs that the turning inward that many feared would follow the Cold War’s end is indeed happening.” With both the *Times* and the *Post* concurring, “the new isolationism” had seemingly reached pandemic proportions (as a title, if nothing else).

Did the “new” isolationism then pave the way for 9/11? Was al-Qaeda inspired by an unwillingness on Washington’s part to insert itself into the Islamic world?

Unintended and unanticipated consequences stemming from prior U.S. interventions might have seemed to offer a better explanation. But this much is for sure: as far as the *Times* was concerned, even in the midst of George W. Bush’s Global War in Terror, the threat of isolationism persisted.

In January 2004, David M. Malone, president of the International Peace Academy, worried in a *Times* op-ed “that the United States is retracting into itself” -- this despite the fact that U.S. forces were engaged in simultaneous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among Americans, a concern about terrorism, he insisted, was breeding “a sense of self-obsession and indifference to the plight of others.” “When Terrorists Win: Beware America’s New Isolationism,” [blared](#) the headline of Malone’s not-so-new piece.

Actually, Americans should beware those who conjure up phony warnings of a “new isolationism” to advance a particular agenda. The essence of that agenda, whatever the particulars and however packaged, is this: If the United States just tries a little bit harder -- one more intervention, one more shipment of arms to a beleaguered “ally,” one more line drawn in the sand -- we will finally turn the corner and the bright uplands of peace and freedom will come into view.

This is a delusion, of course. But if you write a piece exposing that delusion, don’t bother

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submitting it to the *Times*.

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His new book is [Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country](#) .

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