The Logic of Isolationism

On July 17, 1998, an international conference approved a treaty to establish an International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC would try persons accused of crimes against humanity, such as genocide and violations of the laws of war. The United States was one of seven nations that voted against. Gary T. Dempsey, a foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote an essay supporting the administration’s controversial position. The ICC, he wrote, would eventually supercede the U.S. court system and thus “threatens to diminish America’s sovereignty.” As a consequence, “… many of the legal safeguards American citizens enjoy under the U.S. Constitution would be suspended if they were brought before the court.” In opposing international commitments because they endanger the domestic systems of the United States, Mr. Dempsey was making an argument inspired by the logic of isolationism.

INTRODUCTION

Overview

In presenting the logic of isolationism, this chapter makes the following main points:

• isolationism argues that interdependence does not create vital interests requiring political and military involvement;
• it holds that foreign commitments inflict serious domestic costs;
• it contends that the United States has sufficient power to protect its vital interests but not enough to undertake other objectives abroad;
• it insists that the United States has no binding moral obligations abroad; instead, its duties at home are put at risk by international commitments.

Isolationism was the most important foreign policy logic until midtwentieth century. According to conventional wisdom, it was destroyed with the fleet at Pearl
Harbor. Indeed, since 1941 there have been few self-identified isolationists. The conventional wisdom, however, overstates the case. Granted, few elites claim to be isolationist and public opinion generally rejects “isolationism” as a foreign policy option. Nevertheless, arguments reflecting isolationist logic continue to be raised in American foreign policy debates, especially by libertarians, some conservatives, populists such as Patrick Buchanan, many progressive Democrats, and political radicals. Because “isolationism” carries negative connotations, advocates of policies reflecting isolationist perspectives give their proposals different names, such as a republican foreign policy, offshore balancing, strategic independence, the strategy of restraint, and enlightened nationalism.2

Isolationist logic offers a doubly distinctive interpretation of U.S. interests. It fundamentally challenges the notion that its interests compel the United States to undertake extensive foreign policy commitments. It also condemns international activism for harming the U.S. society and constitutional order. By showing that foreign policy commitments are unnecessary and carry high costs and risks, the logic of isolationism makes a case for a substantial but selective retrenchment from international affairs.

Isolationism Defined

The nearly universal rejection of isolationism flows partly from its nearly universal misinterpretation. Usually it is misunderstood to mean cutting all contact with the outside world. Isolationism does not require such a stance. A complete withdrawal from the world, even if it were possible, would not be necessary to achieve the benefits it seeks.

Surveying the history of the idea of isolationism, one scholar found its essential meaning to be “diplomatic and military nonentanglement, as illustrated by President Jefferson’s admonition in 1801 against ‘entangling alliances.’”3 Diplomatic and political nonentanglement aims, first and foremost, to secure the autonomy of the United States. Isolationism understood as nonentanglement for the sake of autonomy spawns seven corollary ideas. First, it seeks autonomy partly because it safeguards against being drawn, against U.S. interests, into other nations’ wars. Neutrality, then, is a corollary of isolationism. Second, the United States must maximize self-sufficiency in order to be strong enough to protect its freedom. Third, to ensure safety, foreign powers must be kept from gaining a territorial foothold close to the United States. Isolationism, then, exalts continentalism, a focus on North America and the Caribbean and a correlative distancing from Europe and Asia. Fourth, in conducting foreign policy, isolationist diplomacy basically is unilateralist. Other things being equal, isolationists choose to go it alone, in order to preserve autonomy. Fifth, isolationists recognize, however, that sometimes the United States must collaborate with other countries. In those circumstances, isolationist logic dictates that coalitions be ad hoc, limited to the particular problem at hand, and temporary.

Nonentanglement and its corollary ideas are not ends in themselves, though. Rather, they are means to a specific end. Isolationism seeks to create a protective shell around American society so that the country can fulfill its most important mission,
namely, achieving the purposes stated in the Preamble to the Constitution: “establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, . . . promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty. . . .” That implies the sixth facet of isolationism: The scale of foreign policy commitments must be compatible with what the Founders called “ordered liberty.” Because excessive foreign policy commitments endanger the constitutional order, isolationism is a doctrine of minimal commitment.

Seventh, because wars and standing militaries endanger the Constitution’s purposes, isolationism has a negative view of war. While not pacifist—it requires fighting wars that are necessary to protect vital interests—it seeks to minimize war, preparation for war, and commitments that might require war or preparation for war.

Within those constraints, isolationism is compatible with and even encourages foreign relations, through governmental channels and through the private activities of Americans. Among other things, an isolationist United States would still conduct normal diplomatic, cultural, and commercial relations, provide humanitarian assistance to the victims of disasters, and share tourism and cultural exchanges with the world.

Preserving autonomy has uncertain implications for international economic relationships. International economics divides isolationism into two distinct strains. One, which will be called political isolationism, views free economic exchanges as independent of politics; economic ties, because they do not entail political entanglements and do not erode American autonomy, are permissible. Indeed, one group of political isolationists, the libertarians, aggressively advocates free trade. The second strain, however, criticizes foreign economic ties, especially as they reflect the process and policy of globalization, which they see as eroding autonomy. This strain will be called protectionist isolationism.

Isolationism’s rejection of foreign commitments, even entangling alliances, is more prudential than principled. It represents a judgment that, given the way the world works and how world power is distributed, the United States best promotes its core values and interests by minimizing its international commitments. Isolationism would endorse an expansive foreign policy if it were necessary and sufficient for removing a threat to vital interests and core values. Once the threat had disappeared, however, foreign policy would revert to one of minimal commitment.

U.S. NATIONAL INTERESTS

The sole purpose of foreign policy must be to protect vital national interests, those important enough to defend by war if necessary. Primary vital interests are those conditions necessary for independence as a political community: territorial integrity (freedom from military attack), sovereignty (freedom from political domination), maintenance of constitutional order, and preservation of economic and social stability. Secondary vital interests are those that have “a direct, immediate and substantial” connection to the primary ones.

The United States can protect its vital interests without extensive foreign policy commitments. In both national security and economics, the United States is less interdependent internationally than is generally recognized. Furthermore, inter-
dependence does not create vulnerabilities that require foreign commitments. Indeed, when all national interests are considered, weighing the costs of foreign policy commitments against the costs of isolationism, foreign disengagement best serves the national interests. This is so in both the security and economic realms.

Limited Interdependence in National Security

Protection of the United States does not require managing the international system, participating in alliances, or using force outside a narrowly drawn zone of national security that includes its territory, the oceans around it, and its neighbors Canada and Mexico. This security zone is limited because the United States uniquely is an inherently secure country. For well over 150 years, it has not faced a serious military threat, nor is there a plausible scenario by which one could emerge.

American security rests on six pillars. First, the U.S. economy is by far the world's largest and has been since the turn of the twentieth century. It has not been challenged and is not likely to be challenged in the near future. Neither Germany nor Japan has the population base to match its economic production. Only China seems likely to have an economy as large or larger than that of the United States, though when and to what degree that transition occurs remains to be seen.

Second, economic strength has enabled the United States to create and sustain powerful military forces. Granted, during the periods before each of the world wars, the United States chose not to invest heavily in military preparations, so in the early days of those wars its enemies had temporary military superiority. Critics indict isolationism for that lack of military preparedness, but they miss the mark. In 1917 and 1941, the United States was prepared to defend its territory; it was unprepared to fight in Europe and Asia, and properly so. Furthermore, all parties understood that American military potential made it the decisive player whose entry would determine the eventual outcome. Therefore, Britain did its best to draw the United States into both wars while Germany sought to keep it neutral.

U.S. military dominance through most of the twentieth century greatly exceeded its national security requirements. To prevent military attack or intimidation, the United States need not be able to defeat its enemies in any conceivable war. Rather, it merely must be strong enough to deter an attack, that is, to deny any enemy hope of victory at an acceptable cost. Even China someday passing the United States economically and militarily would not endanger national security. The United States must continue to be well armed, but only to defend the zone of security and nothing else.

The third pillar of national security is geography: The United States "faces almost no discernible security threats. To the north and south are weak, friendly neighbors; to the east and west are fish." The oceans are tremendous moats safeguarding "fortress America." Distance attenuates military power, especially over water. Large-scale

* Some isolationist writers would include the sea lanes and air space through which the United States engages in international commerce or Europe, but the latter only to the extent that the United States must prevent any rival hegemonic power dominating the Eurasian landmass.
amphibious operations, which an attack on the United States would require, are extremely complicated and require absolute control of the seas and the air. Combined with naval power and coastal air defenses, the oceans make the United States impregnable. Were Canada or Mexico to align with a hostile power, the protection provided by the oceans would be negated to a large degree and American vital interests would be threatened. But the odds of that happening are miniscule. Moreover, under the logic of isolationism, the United States would act to prevent such a shift.

Fourth, power balancing among the other major powers most likely will prevent the emergence of a dominant power in either Europe or East Asia. The rival nations of those regions will tie each other down, so none will be able to project power into the U.S. zone of security. The main obstruction to such balancing behavior, interestingly enough, is the United States. Its security guarantees to its allies relieves them of any need to take care of their own security. Thus acting as an offshore balancer to prevent the emergence of an Asian or European regional hegemon is both unnecessary and counterproductive.

Even if the first four pillars were to fail, the fifth would be sufficient: nuclear weapons. So long as the United States has them, no rational adversary would consider attacking it. The scenarios for fighting a nuclear war are absurd. Nuclear weapons, in other words, render the United States absolutely safe from military attack by another state.

Sixth and last, the United States is largely immune to the supposed dangers of instability abroad. The contagious effects of international instability are gravely exaggerated. “If history has taught us anything,” write two scholars, “it is precisely the contrary of the lesson drawn by those who urge us to be the world’s policeman. It is that peace is normally divisible and that conflicts, whatever their origin, are normally of merely local or regional significance.”

The proposition that the United States is fundamentally safe from foreign dangers defies conventional wisdom, which holds that the United States was sucked into the world wars, thus proving that it simply cannot stand aside while the world is in turmoil. But in 1917, the United States declared war primarily in response to Germany’s program of unrestricted submarine warfare. Two alternatives could have allowed the United States to stay out of the war. First, it could have been truly neutral before 1917, rather than favoring the British. Then Germany might not have adopted unrestricted submarine warfare. Second, it could have kept American shipping out of the war zone. “After all, one logical if unlikely response to the submarine was to retreat to our shores.” Most importantly, national security did not require entry into World War I. The war would have ended within a year or two anyway, with either a German victory or a negotiated settlement. Either outcome would have left Germany dominating the European continent but not threatening the United States. Germany had neither the intention nor the means to act against U.S. interests, especially since it would still have had to contend with the land power of Russia on the continent and the naval power of Great Britain at sea.

Similarly, the United States could have stayed out of World War II. It did so from the war’s start in September 1939, until December 1941, when Japan and Germany blundered—Japan by attacking Pearl Harbor, Germany by declaring war on the
United States. The Japanese and German decisions, in turn, were made in response to prior American policy. The Japanese would not have attacked Pearl Harbor had the United States not made itself a virtual ally of China and adversary of Japan nor would the Germans have declared war had the United States not made itself a virtual ally of Britain. Nor did Japanese or German power endanger the safety of the United States. By December 1941, Japan’s army was bogged down in China and Germany had failed to conquer all of Europe. Absent American entry to the war, “[p]robably World War II would have ended in some sort of draw and negotiated settlement, or would have continued on for a decade or two with occasional truces for breathing spells—not unlike the Napoleonic Wars.”

Limited Interdependence in Economics

Both political and protectionist isolationism deny that the economy requires extensive foreign policy commitments. Protectionist isolationism’s reasoning is straightforward: Because international economic ties endanger U.S. sovereignty and well-being, they should be curtailed, not promoted by political commitments. Political isolationism takes a different tack: Economic interdependence is relatively insignificant, so it does not create dangerous vulnerabilities. Therefore, even expanded interdependence would not jeopardize U.S. autonomy. Because protectionist isolationism focuses on the costs of an internationalist foreign policy, its line of thinking will be presented in a later section addressing costs. The rest of this section develops the rationale of political isolationism.

One standard measure of economic interdependence is the volume of foreign trade. In absolute terms, such trade is substantial; in 2001 exports amounted to $731 billion and imports cost almost $1.2 trillion. But in relative terms, trade is less significant. The U.S. economy is huge; in 2002 it was about $10.5 trillion. Foreign trade constituted about 22 percent of the U.S. economy, a significant amount but still small compared to the total economy. In the inconceivable worst case, if the United States suddenly were to be cut off from all trade, the economy would have to make a tough adjustment, but it would survive. During the Cold War, if the USSR had gained control over western Europe and Japan and then abruptly cut off trade, the U.S. economy would have shrunk by 3 to 4 percent. That would have been painful but on average would not have seriously lowered the American standard of living.

Indeed, the United States could be self-sufficient. It has abundant resources and a huge internal market. Goods not sold abroad could be sold at home; domestically produced resources could be developed as substitutes for imported ones. Sectors of the economy that have become overly dependent on export markets—agriculture, higher education, and financial services, for instance—would suffer were those markets to be lost. Others, however, would benefit from reduced foreign competition. Adjustments would entail some expense for the entire economy, but the net cost would not be prohibitive, and after the period of adjustment had passed, perhaps not even noticeable.

Most importantly, though, economic interdependence does not necessitate political commitments to prevent serious disruption of foreign economic ties. Most trade is with friendly and secure countries. Canada is its largest trade partner, with
about 21 percent of total trade. Mexico comes second and Japan third, both at about 11 percent. U.S. trade with other countries is highly diversified. China represents about 6 percent of trade; Germany and the United Kingdom are both at 5 percent; France and South Korea represent about 3 percent; about 2 percent of trade is with each of Italy, the Netherlands, Singapore, and Taiwan. If some partners were to sever trade with the United States, others would fill the gap. Most countries, moreover, could not afford to cut trade with the United States; they are dependent on their trade ties with the United States.

Limited Petroleum Dependency

Economic interdependence does not require political protection even in the most difficult case: oil. Dependence on petroleum imports does not dictate that the United States maintain a political and military presence in oil-exporting areas of the world, the Persian Gulf in particular, nor did it warrant war against Iraq. Granted, imported petroleum plays a crucial role in the U.S. economy. A sudden disruption of oil imports would unsettle the economy and maybe trigger a severe recession. Fortunately, that will not happen.

First of all, it would be impossible to cut off oil exports to just the United States and a few other countries.

Oil, like any other commodity, is fungible. In the same way that water in the bath flows around the duck, oil flows around embargoes. OPEC [Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries] and anyone who chooses to join it in a production cut may succeed in lowering that great bath that is the international oil market for a time and in raising prices. But any act of hostility directed at a specific country or region by another does not achieve the desired isolating effect.

When the Arab petroleum exporting countries embargoed the United States in 1973 they failed. The market redirected to the United States the petroleum that otherwise would have gone to other countries and sent those countries the petroleum that would otherwise have been sent to the United States. The flow of petroleum products to consumers was disrupted, but not because of a real shortage of crude oil. Refiners, distributors, and the government, thinking that the embargo would be successful, took actions that created shortages at various points in the production and distribution system.

Matters would be different, of course, if the petroleum exporting nations were to cut production. OPEC has done that several times, but with only limited success. Production cuts raise the price of crude oil, but that creates new incentives that subvert the production cuts. Pumping oil from less efficient wells becomes profitable, which brings forth increasing supplies from other countries. It also tempts OPEC members to exceed their production quotas. Many of them desperately need revenues from oil sales and increased prices create an overwhelming temptation to make windfall profits by cheating. Collective efforts to raise prices by cutting production, in other words, are successful, but only in the short term, and even then the price increase is tolerable; in the long run, they are self-defeating.
This position holds even for the worst case scenario offered in support of the 1991 Persian Gulf War: Without the war, Iraq would have controlled all the oil in the Persian Gulf. Even then, vital U.S. interests would not have been at risk. Assuming that Saddam Hussein wanted to maximize oil revenues, he would have cut Gulf oil production by 40 percent, a 7 percent decline in world oil production. Oil prices would have risen from $20 to $30 per barrel and gasoline prices would have risen by 24 cents per gallon; on average, it would have cost each American about $112 per year. Those cost increases, though unpleasant, would have been something less than a disaster for the economy.

Furthermore, U.S. vulnerability to disruptions in petroleum imports is not an unavoidable fact. Nature dictated that the bulk of the world's known petroleum reserves would be located in the Persian Gulf region; policy choices, not nature, dictated that the U.S. economy runs on petroleum. The United States created its dependency; over time it can reduce it through policies to achieve energy independence.

Ultimately, U.S. policy has sought to ensure not access to supplies of oil, but access to supplies of cheap oil. The problem is, the policies designed to keep oil cheap are expensive. In addition to troops killed in combat, in training for combat, and by terrorists seeking to drive them out of the Persian Gulf, there is simply the financial cost of military preparations for protecting access to oil. The military force created for intervention into crises in the Persian Gulf “has cost more than $40 billion a year to protect $14 billion of current oil imports from the Persian Gulf.” Even in purely economic terms, that is a bad bargain.

Interdependence, Foreign Policy, and the National Interest

The United States can never be totally immune to harmful effects of interdependence. Global depressions or cuts in oil imports would cause economic pain; international terrorism endangers some American lives; the closing of international markets would cause some American firms to lose money and some American workers to lose jobs. Those effects, however, do not warrant political engagement in the world, for three reasons. First, the amount of harm from international economic disruptions is not fixed and uncontrollable. The level of U.S. interdependence substantially results from government policies that (sometimes unintentionally, but often intentionally) increased interdependence. For instance, reliance on imported oil results from support for industries that consume oil, especially automobiles. The volume of foreign trade also derives from foreign policy choices; for over a century, the United States has used diplomatic muscle, foreign aid, gunboat diplomacy, and other means to open foreign markets and increase exports. U.S. foreign policies increase vulnerability to terrorist attacks. Changing policies, then, can lessen vulnerability.

Second, when individual Americans or American firms find themselves threatened abroad, often it is due to their own choices. People who choose to travel or live abroad and businesses that choose to invest overseas place themselves in jeopardy. That does not oblige the community, acting through the foreign policy of the state, to protect them. “Certainly it was a terrible crime [for the British] to enslave American seamen,” wrote Harry Browne, about the War of 1812. “But why was it the U.S.
government’s business? Private companies had chosen to send those ships into foreign waters, and were responsible for the safety of their employees. If they couldn’t provide safe passage (either by arming the ships or by negotiating with the British), they should have stayed out of the area.”

Third, the harms of insufficient foreign involvement pale in comparison to the harms of overinvolvement. Overinvolvement follows directly from an unwillingness to tolerate certain unfortunate events. Unless the United States carefully differentiates vital interests from other interests or purposes, it will have no basis for refusing international commitments. To consider every situation in which the United States, its citizens, or their interests might suffer harm as an occasion for some foreign policy response is a recipe for unlimited international adventurism. And that carries far greater harm to the community than the losses from foresworn involvement.

The Costs of International Commitments

The costs of internationalism cannot be calculated precisely because they vary with the type of internationalism. Moreover, political and protectionist isolationists would disagree vigorously over some of the costs listed here. Nonetheless, an inclusive inventory of the costs of internationalism would include these seven: the creation of new threats to U.S. security, the expense of war and preparation for war, the weakening of the U.S. economy, the exacerbation of social tensions, the diversion of resources from social needs, the erosion of constitutional order, and the loss of national sovereignty.

Creation of New Threats to U.S. Security

Internationalism makes the United States less secure. Ironically, internationalist strategies that most seek to increase security most degrade it. They make the United States a party to others’ disputes. Because it is impossible to act in a way that is purely neutral (that is, does not benefit one party more than another) and that is seen by all as purely neutral, internationalism leads to the United States being seen as an adversary by one or even both parties to the dispute. Internationalism, then, creates enemies who, although unable to attack and conquer the United States, do serious harm. The phenomenon is called blowback; terrorism is the clearest example.

Terrorism by definition strikes at the innocent in order to draw attention to the sins of the invulnerable. The innocent of the twenty-first century are going to harvest unexpected blowback disasters from the imperialist escapades of recent decades.

The crimes of September 11 showed how great the danger of blowback can be; the danger is amplified by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction with which those enemies can massacre Americans. American vulnerability also is increased by the globalization encouraged by internationalism, which gives enemies greater access to American society and to Americans abroad. Isolationism avoids that danger. “If nuclear threats are to be directed at the United States, there need be a reason.
Reasons plummet with the abrogation of entangling alliances. Maximum safety lies in getting out of harm’s way.”

The Expense of War and Preparation for War

Ultimately, a foreign policy that does not eschew militarism means fighting wars. Even if the policy aims to create stability, “if the United States goes out into the world to prevent hypothetical wars, it will surely find some real ones.” So “we are almost always at war—cold or hot, but a conflict nonetheless—a war in which Americans will die, or a war that Americans will be taxed for, or a war that could easily erupt into wholesale destruction.” Indeed, the costs of war call into question the very meaning of security:

More than 100,000 Americans died in Korea and Vietnam; over 300,000 were wounded. The extent of these losses cannot be mitigated, as they sometimes are, because they occurred abroad rather than at home, because they were suffered by soldiers rather than civilians. These enormous casualties detracted as much from our “physical security” as if they had been suffered in an attack upon the homeland.

Weakening of the U.S. Economy

Foreign commitments harm the economy in four ways. First, they are expensive. Preparing for war in distant places adds tens of billions of dollars to the defense budget beyond what would be needed to defend the United States. Isolationists of different political persuasions clash over what to do with savings from defense budget cuts. Those on the political left prefer that the money be put into domestic policy programs; those on the right want tax cuts. They agree, though, that the share of the defense budget devoted to supporting an expansive foreign policy “clearly constitutes an enormous amount of foregone national welfare.” Second, military spending draws top scientific, technical, and engineering talent away from the civilian economy, thereby hurting its competitiveness. Third, national defense costs get added to the tax bills of U.S. corporations, which gets tacked onto the costs of their products, which places them at a disadvantage with companies from countries who spend little on national defense because they are already protected by U.S. military might. Fourth, the pursuit of influence leads the United States to give other countries trade concessions that also place U.S. businesses at a competitive disadvantage. One summary finds that “the consequences of the sustained diversion of state monies to empire building over the past decade and a half for the U.S. national economy have been catastrophic: deteriorating social programs, disintegrating public health and educational sectors, rising homelessness, worsening unemployment, and spreading poverty.”

Exacerbation of Social Tensions

Because the costs and benefits of international involvement are shared unevenly across social classes, foreign commitments accelerate fraying of the social fabric at home. The uneven impact is clear in the case of trade. Free trade, whatever its
long-term benefits, in the short term hurts workers in many industries. Placed into competition with workers in low-wage countries, they see their wages and benefits drop and often lose their jobs as factories are closed because the work is sent abroad. Whole cities can be devastated. As class and regional differences are heightened, even a sense of membership in the same nation erodes. “Social stability depends on a rising standard of living for all our people, those who work with lathes as well as those who work with laptops.”

Diversion of Resources from Social Needs

Internationalism, furthermore, diverts resources from domestic needs. This concerns more than money. To some extent, government can increase the pool of money available for both domestic and foreign programs by borrowing or by raising taxes. Rather, the most serious cost is the drain on two absolutely limited resources: the time and attention of policy makers. No policy gets adopted unless the president and key legislators invest their time, energy, and political capital to get it adopted and implemented. When the government is seized with foreign policy matters, domestic policy making is put on automatic pilot. Virtually nothing gets done and problems fester and become more intractable.

Erasing Constitutional Order

Internationalism leads to the corruption of the constitutional order. As James Madison observed, “Perhaps it is a universal truth that the loss of liberty at home is to be charged to provisions against danger, real or pretended, from abroad.” An activist foreign policy necessarily leads, first of all, to a strengthening of the state over the private sector, with a consequent loss of freedom. For example:

- Individuals are liable to be conscripted into military service, a severe erosion of liberty;
- when the government imposes economic sanctions, it in effect forbids private firms from doing business with potential partners in targeted countries, an infringement on their economic liberty;
- individual liberties are abrogated when the state prohibits travel to enemy countries;
- freedom of the press is restricted when state secrets must be preserved.

An activist foreign policy also shifts power from the legislative to the executive branch. It is widely believed that only the executive branch can act with sufficient dispatch, coherence, and, when necessary, secrecy to carry out international affairs. To the extent that the United States is committed to an activist foreign policy, Congress will abdicate its constitutional role and the executive will design ways around constitutional restrictions. Executive agreements will be struck when treaties would be politically difficult. Covert operations will be carried out when overt forms of pressure would be politically inopportune. Undeclared wars will proliferate as the “Commander in Chief” clause trumps the provision that Congress shall declare war.
Loss of National Sovereignty

Finally, an activist foreign policy feeds the erosion of U.S. independence from control by external forces. For protectionist isolationism, the loss of sovereignty is inherent in and an intended result of free trade policies. Patrick Buchanan develops this thesis most starkly: The United States, by its loss of self-sufficiency, is becoming “a colony of the world,” its free trade policies amounting to “the surrender of national sovereignty” and “the potential loss of nationhood itself. . . . Once a nation puts its foot onto the slippery slope of global free trade, the process is inexorable, the end inevitable: death of the nation-state.”

Even were trade not to endanger national independence and identity, the multilateralism necessitated by internationalism erodes sovereignty. Beyond the protection of limited and vital interests, involvement in international affairs will require collaboration with others. The terms of collaboration—goals and objectives, strategies and tactics, burden-sharing arrangements—must be negotiated among the partners. The United States will not be able to dictate the terms of the partnership (if it could, it would not need partners), so it will have to adjust its goals and actions to conform to the wishes of other countries. Hence a loss of freedom of action.

Worse, multilateralism leads to treaties and to membership in international organizations. Treaties suprceede the laws passed by Congress and state legislatures. The decisions of international organizations bind the United States. Even giving the United States a veto does not protect its sovereignty, because of the pressure to make concessions to the majority in order to form a compromise agreement.

Like a shipwrecked, exhausted Gulliver on the beach of Lilliput, America is to be tied down with threads, strand by strand, until it cannot move when it awakens. “Piece by piece,” our sovereignty is being surrendered. By accession to NAFTA, GATT, the UN, the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, America has ensnared itself in a web that restricts its freedom of action, diminishes its liberty, and siphons off its wealth.

U.S. POWER

While the United States has more than sufficient power to defend itself from organized attack by hostile states, its ability to achieve more ambitious goals is quite limited.* Two of the many limits on U.S. influence abroad are restrictions on the use of military power and the intractable internal sources of problems abroad.

* That logically has to be part of isolationist thinking: If the United States were to be strong enough to command obedience from other countries and accomplish its goals with little opposition, the costs and effort to influence international affairs would be quite small, the dangers would be proportionally reduced, and the rationale for limited involvement would be weakened.
Restrictions on the Use of Force

The logics of hegemonism and realism hit the mark in recognizing that national power rests on military power. They err in ignoring the real limitations on the ability of the United States to use its armed forces and thus the real limitations on its power. The limitations have both foreign and domestic sources.

Domestic Resistance

Resistance at home includes the military establishment, which opposes involvement in anything other than wars capable of quick and decisive victories. Public disinclination to use force abroad commonly is called “the Vietnam syndrome.” That phrasing is misleading. The Vietnam War intensified but did not create such public resistance. Many political theorists have argued since the late 1700s that public opinion in a democracy would stop the state from going to war.* Much data from U.S. history conforms to that idea: Public opinion turned against the war to suppress the Filipino insurgency of 1899–1902; public opinion delayed U.S. entry into the world wars of the twentieth century; opposition to the war in Korea (1950–1953) grew as the war grew longer and stalemated and the number of dead rose; and in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson had to deceive the nation, contriving a crisis to maneuver the country into the Vietnam War.

Since Vietnam, the United States has successfully used military force in Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), the Persian Gulf (1991), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1995), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001–), and Iraq (2003). Each of those operations supposedly showed the end of the Vietnam syndrome; after each the syndrome’s continued strength became clear. The Reagan and Clinton administrations terminated interventions in Lebanon (1982–1984) and Somalia (1992–1994) after spectacular incidents that killed U.S. troops.35 The military operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo were delayed, small in scale, and designed to avoid U.S. casualties in order to avoid public opposition. Public opposition also deterred military action to stop genocide in Rwanda and East Timor. A substantial majority of public opinion supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but only after a concerted effort by the administration to shape public sentiment. Moreover, large numbers of people continued to lodge public protests against the war.

Foreign Resistance

There are two types of foreign resistance. The first is adverse public reaction that could inhibit foreign states from supporting U.S. efforts. Opposition from the publics of friendly Western nations is especially troublesome as it feeds domestic opposition.

The other and more important is armed resistance to U.S. military operations. The global spread of ideologies of resistance, such as revolutionary nationalism or radical Islam, and the diffusion of modern military technologies have robbed war and threats of war of much of their utility. Ideologies of resistance

* See the discussion in Chapter 5.
have transformed peoples and nations who previously were under the thumbs (or heels) of dominant nations. Instead of being submissive in the face of apparently overwhelming power, they have the will to resist, even at very high costs. The diffusion of modern military technologies has given them the means with which to resist.36

Together, those two changes have overturned the calculus of power. “Strong” states must anticipate that wars will be prolonged. They will achieve no decisive victory. Rather, their battlefield superiority will merely lead to guerrilla war and urban terrorism. As the war continues it becomes increasingly costly, in tangible resources, in lives, in international diplomatic capital, and in domestic political support. The “strong” state will be less willing to bear the costs of fighting over an extended period of time and therefore will make more political concessions sooner than the “weaker” one. The weak party wins. Having seen this pattern played out in Algeria and Indochina for France, in Vietnam and Somalia for the United States, in Afghanistan for the Soviet Union and Chechnya for Russia, and in Lebanon for Israel, powerful states are much less willing to use their forces. Moreover, targets of military coercion are much less likely to be cowed into submission. Superior military might becomes decoupled from actual political influence, and therefore much less valuable.

This point—that the use of military force is impeded—complements rather than contradicts the earlier point about the costs of war. In essence, foreign policy activism is caught in a dilemma. An effective activist foreign policy must be backed by force. If force cannot be used, policy will be less successful. If, on the other hand, force is used, then the costs of war must be borne, making the costs disproportionate with the policy’s benefits.

The Intractable Internal Sources of Problems

The basic cause of many foreign problems is other countries’ deficiencies. Civil wars grow out of racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts deeply rooted in their histories. The outside world cannot establish peace in those places. Other problems, such as poverty, famine, and environmental degradation, are caused by deficiencies in the governments of the countries that suffer them.37 Indeed, many places lack a government that actually governs. In those places, the only hope would be for the United States, or the world community acting through the United Nations or a regional organization, to occupy them, to place them into receivership, and to effectuate imperial rule until the country is ready for independence. That is not going to happen. Other options are half-measures that cannot solve the problem and indeed are likely to make it worse.

The constraint imposed by the internal sources of problems is illustrated by the aftermaths of the successful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. One year after the victory in Afghanistan, the U.S.-backed Karzai regime faces rising challenges from regional warlords and reorganized fighting units of Taliban.38 Almost immediately after organized Iraqi military resistance ended, the United States faced widespread and fervent Iraqi political resistance to its forces remaining in the country and
contributing to its political reconstruction. Most ominously, leaders of Iraq's majority Shiite Muslims mobilized to establish an Islamic republic. Evidently, compared to the task of creating a democratic Iraq, defeating Saddam Hussein's armed forces would be a cakewalk.

MORALITY

The United States has no moral obligations toward other people. It cannot and should not assume any responsibilities beyond the protection of its own vital interests. That conclusion rests on all the points made in the realist critique of morality in foreign policy plus one additional point.

The United States has only one compelling moral obligation: to preserve the experiment in "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" inherited from preceding generations, to improve domestic political, economic, and social institutions, and then to pass them on to future generations. Any activist foreign policy subverts that obligation in direct proportion to the degree of activism. An "imperial" foreign policy, write two scholars, "so often justified as a vindication of the American purpose, represents its betrayal. It prefigures, in fact, the end of American history. . . . The proud boast of American statecraft was once that . . . we would not forget the admonitions of the Founding Fathers and their successors, nor suffer the basic principles of the American experiment to undergo corruption. American history will come to an end when these sentiments no longer animate our political life." Pat Buchanan goes further; he calls the sacrifice of national sovereignty for the sake of globalization "treason."

This renunciation of moral obligations applies even to the hardest case: the Second World War. The United States was not morally bound to fight consummate evil. In 1941, the full horror of Hitler's rule was not known, nor was it known that the United States and its allies would manage to win a decisive victory and then reform the defeated enemies. The track record for moral crusades has not been particularly good. Indeed, had the United States not entered World War I there would have been no World War II. Nor were all the fruits of World War II sweet. Victory came too late to save 80 percent of Hitler's intended victims. While Nazism, Italian fascism, and Japanese militarism were all sent to the dustbin of history, Stalin's Soviet Union, hardly a model of humane government, came to dominate a larger chunk of the world. The war left the United States with a larger permanent military than it had ever had before; it also made the country confident it would get its way on the field of battle, which contributed to the tragedies of Korea and Vietnam; and the bombing of German and Japanese cities, ending in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, eroded the prohibition on directly attacking civilians, which culminated in the napalm bombing of villages in Vietnam. Finally, if there was a moral obligation to fight in World War II, is there not also a moral obligation to go to war to stop the genocides and massacres in any of the too many places where men with power do evil against masses of victims? It is good to recall that those who led the United States into Vietnam justi-
Isolationism and U.S. Diplomatic History

ISOLATIONISM AND U.S. DIPLOMATIC HISTORY

Until the 1890s, American foreign policy was guided by the logic of isolationism. The Founders articulated the doctrine and their successors implemented it. Isolationism did not mean inactivity. Indeed, the country had several periods of rather intense military and diplomatic activity, during which it expanded its commercial relations, fought wars, and acquired territory. Those expansionist phases, however, respected the limits defined by isolationism and were followed by periods of lowered activism and greater attention to internal matters.

The thirty years between 1890 and 1920 saw a sharp departure from isolationist practice. Having acquired the resources of a great power, the United States began to think of itself as mandated to act as a great power. Largely as a result of the Spanish-American War of 1898, it seized a substantial empire in Asia and the Caribbean. It also began to play an imperial role within the Americas, intervening in several Central American and Caribbean countries. The United States built up its naval power in order to be able to participate in the balances of power in Asia and Europe. Finally, it joined World War I to restore a balance of power in Europe and to remake and reform the world order.

Nevertheless, isolationism influenced foreign policy debate and behavior during those three decades. Imperialism was severely criticized on isolationist grounds. So were deviations from neutrality between the 1914 outbreak of World War I and the U.S. declaration of war on April 4, 1917. Six senators and fifty members of the House of Representatives voted against war, justifying their opposition with isolationist reasons. Isolationism even affected the conduct of the war: President Wilson refused to have the United States labeled an ally of Britain and France, insisting that it join the war as an “Associated Power.”

Following the war, isolationism staged a comeback. The Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, because it created the League of Nations, an international organization embodying the commitment to collective action to keep the peace. Isolationist sentiment inspired laws requiring scrupulous neutrality in any war. The neutrality acts severely limited the efforts of President Franklin Roosevelt (1933–1945) to help Britain in its war against Germany. Eventually, supporters of American involvement in the war were able to have the restrictions removed, but only incrementally and only after defeating vigorous resistance from large numbers of persons, like Senator Robert Taft, who opposed entering another European war on isolationist grounds:

* Chapter 3 claimed that the foreign policy of this period conformed to realism. That claim and this one do not contradict each other. During the nineteenth century, the distribution of power in the world led the logic of realism and the logic of isolationism to identical strategies.
While I certainly do not consider myself an isolationist, I feel it would be a great mistake for us to participate in the European War. I do not believe that we could materially affect the outcome . . . and I do not believe we have shown any ability to make peace after the war is over . . . . In the meantime [by going to war] we would certainly destroy democracy in this country.44

Pearl Harbor gravely weakened isolationism for the next twenty years. Still, isolationism had not been extinguished. Senator Taft, for instance, led opposition to much of the infrastructure of containment, especially the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a mutual defense pact that certainly constituted an entangling alliance. Also, Congress nearly passed the Bricker Amendment, which would have restricted the administration's capacity to use executive agreements with other countries to evade the Senate's authority to advise and consent on treaties.

The late 1960s saw the apparent resuscitation of isolationism. Policies adopted or seriously considered represented isolationist themes: withdrawal from commitments in Indochina, withdrawal of forces from Europe, ending conscription, and re-dressing the imbalance of power between the executive branch and Congress by, for instance, limiting the president's authority to commit forces, to undertake covert operations, and to make foreign policy commitments.

The shift, though, was far more complicated than simply a movement along a single isolationism-internationalism continuum. Studies of public attitudes found a complex structure with more than one variety of internationalism and, in some studies, more than one variety of isolationism.45 The term neo-isolationism came into vogue, but that concept was misleading. Those who were labeled as neo-isolationists did indeed favor terminating or reducing of certain foreign policy commitments. At the same time, they reaffirmed other commitments and proposed the adoption of still others. Neo-isolationism, in other words, was a selective internationalism, not a principled isolationism.

The unambiguous end of the Cold War in 1989–1991 raised internationalists' fears of a surge in isolationism and a consequent U.S. withdrawal from international affairs.46 The 1992 presidential election gave them cause for worry, given that Clinton's campaign indicted the Bush administration for emphasizing foreign affairs at the expense of domestic policy. The 1990s certainly saw less money devoted to international affairs, as the military shrank rather dramatically and foreign aid and other foreign programs received a smaller share of the government budget.

Still, it is hard to assess the degree to which isolationism is resurgent. Public opinion data are uncertain; the level of measured isolationism depends on how questions are phrased. For instance, questions asking about support in principle for international engagement find that large majorities of the public are internationalist, but ones posing a trade-off between domestic and foreign commitments uncover substantially lower levels of internationalism.47 Moreover, fluctuations in those statistical data do not necessarily indicate fluctuations in the level of isolationism as the term has been defined in this chapter. The public could very well accept that the United States has to be involved in the world in the sense of trading with it, yet still be isolationist if trade were the only form of involvement they favored.
A prominent study makes the portrayal of public attitudes even more complex. It concludes that the public in reality is internationalist but appears to be isolationist only because they are misinformed. The public favors reducing the levels of U.S. involvement but only because it thinks that involvement is much higher than it actually is. For instance, the public favors cutting foreign aid, an attitude consistent with isolationism. But that does not mean that they are opposed in principle to substantial foreign aid programs. On average, Americans favor allocating about 5 percent of the federal government’s budget to foreign aid. They favor cuts in foreign aid because they also believe, on average, that foreign aid consumes 15 percent of the budget. In fact, foreign aid is much less than 1 percent of the budget. So, if the public knew the facts, they would support substantial increases in foreign aid. In principle, then, public opinion is internationalist, but in practice, it favors reductions in international commitments. The public’s internationalism is latent and will continue to be, until the leadership class can get the public to attend to foreign affairs and provides the public with a clear and accurate portrayal of reality. In the meantime, though, the policies it favors are isolationist and elites perceive the public to be isolationist.

Protectionist isolationism was on the wane during the 1990s. With opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as one of his main issues, presidential candidate Ross Perot won 17 percent of the popular vote in 1992. In 1996 and 2000, though, with the national economy functioning much better than in 1992, Perot and then Patrick Buchanan saw that support dwindle. Free trade advocates were able to push the Senate to ratify the World Trade Organization. On the other hand, Congress denied President Clinton his requested “trade expansion authority,” which would have allowed him to negotiate an extension of NAFTA to other countries in Latin America without having to worry about Congress destroying the agreement by amending it. It did not give President Bush such authority until well into his second year.

CONCLUSION
The logic of isolationism calls upon the United States to minimize its political and military commitments abroad. One strain of isolationism—protectionist isolationism—also would have it reduce its economic involvement in the world, but the other strain—political isolationism—would not. Isolationism calls for pruning foreign commitments because they are unnecessary for protecting vital interests; the United States is powerful enough to take care of its vital interests by itself. Moreover, the United States lacks the power to bring about substantial improvement in the conditions of the world. Most important, curtailing foreign commitments is necessary to save the United States grievous harm to its social and political structures.

Isolationism was the dominant logic in the nineteenth century and strongly shaped American policy until World War II. Since then, it has largely been a marginal perspective in U.S. foreign policy debates.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. Is the United States as secure from foreign threats as the logic of isolationism contends?
2. Considering isolationism’s renunciation of permanent alliances with other countries, does this logic offer a viable strategy for dealing with terrorism? While it allows war against states
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that have attacked the United States or are responsible for such attacks, could such a war be effectively waged under this logic?

3. Does the logic's analysis of the restraints on the use of force have any continuing validity in the wake of the military victory in Iraq?

4. Does the logic of isolationism, by emphasizing safety from objective threats and ignoring the risks of subjective ones, construe national security too narrowly? How would Americans react if Asia or Europe were under the control of hostile powers?

5. How feasible would it be for the United States to retrench on its existing international political commitments? What obstacles would it have to overcome in making a significant disengagement? What harmful consequences might disengagement produce?

6. How politically viable would a foreign policy based on the logic of isolationism be? Would the U.S. public be willing to support a policy that renounces an exalted U.S. world role and foreign policy driven by moral principles?

ENDNOTES


15. Ibid., 87.


22. Partial estimates are provided by Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured*, 220, 228; and Johnson, *Blowback*, 87.


27. This case is made with amusing and appalling effects in Michael Moore’s documentary film “Roger and Me.”


39. Tucker and Hendrickson, Imperial Temptation, 211.
40. Buchanan, Great Betrayal, 230.
41. Russett, No Clear and Present Danger, 72-77.