

ISOLATIONISM: NOT DEAD BUT SLEEPTH

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In the latter part of the 19th century when the United States began to expand its territory and influence beyond North America, the policy was called “Manifest Destiny.”

In the 20th century America’s active involvement in world affairs suffered a setback when the Senate failed to ratify that part of the Treaty of Versailles establishing a League of Nations. And while America’s isolationist sentiment was challenged by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, passage of the Neutrality Acts of 1935, 36 and 37 and the President’s failure to amend the 1937 act, together with passage of the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940 by a single vote, fairly represented the public’s wish to avoid foreign entanglements.

This policy of relative isolationism, however, ended with our entry into World War II and the subsequent leading role played by the United States in founding the United Nations.

From 1945 until the present, the American public has supported a policy of direct and dedicated involvement in international affairs whether by committing military forces or spending multi-billions of dollars in pursuit of stated diplomatic and humanitarian goals. Such policy was generally accepted by our allies and other world democracies. However, after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States many of our allies and friends characterized United States foreign policy as imperialist, i.e., building an American Empire. The result of such a policy, in their view, is an American military, political, economic, and cultural hegemony worldwide, a state of affairs they are loathe to accept. Specifically, they question America’s “go it alone” policy and the emerging policy of pre-emptive strikes against terrorist states.

Their criticisms and actions, however, are not without a price, the price being an emerging isolationist sentiment in the United States something that

critics of present American policy fear second only to an American hegemony. In this respect, consider the following questions.

*Is support for American intervention in any and every part of the world, and for any reason, declining?

*Will the American public support a permanent policy of being the world's policeman with the attendant sacrifices in lives and treasure?

*Will the public continue to support the United Nations as its rules are presently constituted?

*Will American patience run out as our allies pick and choose which actions they will support, which they will not, but at the same time expect an American commitment in situations where their perceived national interests are threatened?

Will Americans forget the cost they paid in lives and treasure to free and rebuild Europe after World War II and forgive the leaders of Russia, France, and Germany for refusing to contribute to the cost of rebuilding a democratic Iraq?

But in addition to questions about foreign policy, several issues which have isolationist implications are high on the list of voter concerns. Among them are the continuing export of American jobs overseas; an immigration policy that rewards illegals for their successful penetration of our borders. e.g. bestowing on them economic and social benefits normally reserved for citizens and legal immigrants—this at a time when unemployment is the highest in a decade; multi-billions of dollars spent on nation building. e.g. Afghanistan and Iraq, at a time when an infinite number of domestic needs are put on hold for lack of funds; international agreements which regulate foreign trade but rules which many view as unfair and contribute to billion dollar trade deficits.

During the run up to the 2004 presidential election, candidates ignore the above concerns at their peril. And equally important is that they understand that there is, and always has been, a latent isolationist sentiment, called by whatever name, in the American character. All it takes is a cursory examination of American history to confirm its existence.