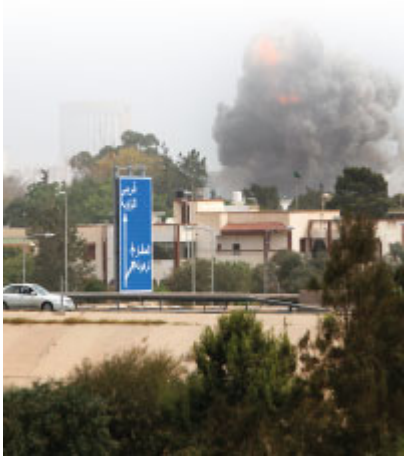
Written by **Jack Kenny** on July 15, 2011

"Isolationism" Now Center Stage in GOP Tent? Oh My!



Libya has, so far as is generally known, committed no recent offense against the United States or our NATO allies, nor threatened to do so. The African nation poses no threat to America and her interests abroad, nor has it made any assault on our nation's honor. Yet President Barack Obama has waged an air war against Libya without any authorization by Congress, let alone a declaration of war, which power the Constitution assigns to Congress. He has gone past the time allotted by the 1973 War Powers Act for either obtaining the support of Congress or ceasing the military action.

You might think all of that would trouble the senior Senator from Arizona and Republican nominee for President in 2008. But no, what troubles McCain is that some members of his party, and particularly its presidential contenders, are opposed to the Libyan intervention and want to end it. Less than a week before House Republicans, with the help of 70 Democrats, defeated by a vote of 295-123 a measure giving President Obama authority to continue the mission in Libya, McCain was asked on ABC's *This Week* if he were concerned about the words and actions of Speaker John Boehner concerning the Libya campaign.

"Well, I was more concerned about what the candidates in New Hampshire [said] the other night," McCain said, referring to the June 13 gathering of Republican presidential hopefuls at Saint Anselm College in Manchester in a forum broadcast nationally on the Cable News Network. While some candidates argued the Libya adventure is unconstitutional, McCain told ABC's Christiana Amanpour, "This is isolationism. There's always been an … isolation strain on the Republican Party — that Pat Buchanan wing of our party. But now it seems to have moved more center stage, so to speak.… If we had not intervened, Gadhafi was at the gates of Benghazi. He said he was going to go house to house to kill everybody. That's a city of 700,000 people." We simply could not allow that to happen, McCain contended.

"Well, you were one of the key supports," Amanpour said. "And what you're talking [about] is all the Republicans on the stage of that debate on Monday seeming to waver from what's a traditional Republican position on national security."

"Yes, I wonder what Ronald Reagan would be saying today," McCain replied.

"What would he be saying today," Amanpour asked, "if he heard, for instance, Michele Bachmann or Mitt Romney?" McCain, who no doubt fancies himself even more skilled at channeling dead Presidents than in winning electoral votes, did not hesitate to speak for "the Gipper."

"He would be saying: That's not the Republican Party of the 20th century, and now the 21st century. That is not the Republican Party that has been willing to stand up for freedom for people for all over the world, whether it be in Grenada — that Ronald Reagan had a quick operation about — or whether it be in our enduring commitment to countering the Soviet Union."

Well, Grenada showed that military action against a largely absent enemy is likely to be successful, but Reagan realized in Lebanon — too late, alas, for more than 240 U.S. Marines killed in a bombed barracks there — that a willy-nilly show of force in a war not of our making nor of the American people's choosing makes no sense, and he had the troops "redeployed offshore." Had a commander-in-chief of the other party done the same, McCain and other Republicans might have called it "cutting and running" and even a betrayal of our commitments.

What Is Isolationism?

It is both difficult and unwise to take seriously a term so ill defined and lightly tossed about as "isolationism." To many, it suggests the mythical America of the 1920s and 1930s, when the nation supposedly withdrew from the world and let Europe and the Far East go to hell in a handbasket until it was too late for deterrence and war was forced upon us. Or it may bring memories of the opposition to the Vietnam War, when Sen. George McGovern and others, mostly Democrats, issued the call to "Come home, America." More recently, as McCain suggested, Pat Buchanan and his revival of an "America First" campaign led many Americans to reconsider our nation's far-flung commitments around the world and the proposition that America should be, in effect, an entire nation of Marines, "first to fight for right and freedom," regardless of whether the fight had any bearing on any legitimate interest of the United States. "Isolationism" was described as a "recessive gene" in Republican politics by Texas Sen. Phil Gramm when he dropped out of the 1996 presidential campaign on the eve of the New Hampshire primary and endorsed Bob Dole against Buchanan.

Yet what is this "isolationism," really, but the foreign policy of the Founding Fathers, whose wisdom is still applicable to America in the 21st century? The term "isolationist" is a straw man, even a bogeyman used to scare voters away from candidates like Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, who has consistently championed a foreign policy that serves America, rather than an America that serves an internationalist foreign policy. The "neocon" Right is marvelously flexible. A few short years ago, the "War of the Month Club" Republicans were dumping all over France for not joining us on the bloody joyride to another war with Iraq. A few short months ago, a leading "neocon" hawk, Col. Oliver North, named French President Nicolas Sarkozy the new leader of the free world, because Sarkozy was ahead of Obama in leading the way to the NATO air war on Libya.

The Democrats are no less capable of flipping and flopping, having gone from anti-war under President George W. Bush to supporting unconstitutional war as waged without congressional approval by Barack Obama. Just as Republicans may be counted on to rescue the "big government" welfare state from any serious threat in domestic politics, so the Democrats seem determined to rescue a failed foreign policy of the Republicans, perpetuating a "new world order" with talk of an "Arab spring."

But just when did this "recessive" gene of Sen. Gramm's description, the "isolation strain" McCain deplores, become evident? When was America ever isolationist? Was it when our first President warned in his Farewell Address against foreign influence and permanent alliances? Was it when our third President, Thomas Jefferson, enunciated among the "essential principles" of good government, "peace, commerce, honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none"? Was it when we decided it was not in our interest to get involved in a war between the French and the English, even though the French thought we owed them for their help during our War for Independence?

Was it when we stayed out of that French-Anglo war until the British continually violated our rights as neutrals? Was it when our President declared the Monroe Doctrine, warning the powers of Europe to stay out of the Western hemisphere? Was it in the middle of the 19th century when we went to war with

Mexico over Texas and annexed New Mexico and California as well? Or at the end of that century when we fought Spain over Cuba and came away with Puerto Rico and the Philippines? Was it during President Theodore Roosevelt's second term, when the U.S. President successfully negotiated an end to the Russo-Japanese War with the Treaty of Portsmouth? Was it when the United States initially stayed out of World War I and entered only when it appeared that Germany had forced our hand?

According to the popular and widespread myth, the high-water mark of American isolationism came between the two World Wars, as the America First sentiment overrode concerns about Hitler's rise to power and subsequent rampage across Europe and Japan's expanding and aggressive empire in the Pacific. But in fact, the Republican decade that began with the election of 1920 was anything but isolationist. It was, truth be told, during that decade that America was more proactive in dealing with other nations than it was during the pre-war years of the Roosevelt regime that began in 1933. Consider but a few of the developments that accompanied the ascendancy to the White House of Warren G. Harding on March 4, 1921.

Even before the change of administration, the same Senate that rejected Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations, voted approval of a resolution calling on the new President to convene a world conference on arms limitations. The House endorsed the measure by a vote of 332-4. Accordingly, Harding began his administration with the Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armaments. Throughout the 1920s, the United States continued to lead the world in peace conferences and disarmament negotiations, hardly a sign of a nation withdrawing from the world to ignore the plight of nations and the threat of war.

When Republican Calvin Coolidge succeeded to the White House on the death of Harding, one of the first things he did was to conduct naval maneuvers aimed at the defense of Pearl Harbor. At that time, a certain critic who had been assistant Secretary of the Navy in the Wilson administration claimed the maneuvers were needlessly provocative. "It is hardly tactful," the former Navy official wrote, for America to give the impression "that we are trying to find out how easy or difficult it would be for the Japanese Navy to occupy Hawaii." As Pat Buchanan noted in *A Republic, Not an Empire,* the identity of that critic is most interesting. His name, forever linked to Pearl Harbor and the Japanese attack there, is Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Roosevelt's advice on another front is worth noting when considering his role in the deteriorating relationship between the United States and Japan. Roosevelt endorsed an important piece of legislation that came out of the Harding-Coolidge era, the 1924 bill limiting immigration to two percent of each foreign-born resident group in the United States as of 1890. The bill excluded Asians entirely, however, enraging Japan. Roosevelt opined in his newspaper column that "the mingling of Asiatic blood with European and American blood produces, in nine cases out of ten, the most unfortunate results." Those words would not be forgotten by the Japanese when the mingling of American and Asian blood took place for four years on various islands of the Pacific.

In 1928, the Kellogg-Briand treaty was signed by 15 nations, all vowing to abandon war-making as an instrument of national policy. President Calvin Coolidge, uncharacteristically extravagant in his praise, declared the new covenant offered "more for the peace of the world than any other agreement ever negotiated among nations." The U.S. Secretary of State whose name the treaty bore, Frank B. Kellogg, became the fourth American to win the Nobel Peace Prize. It was, indeed, a strange kind of "isolationism."

Another diplomatic triumph of the "isolationist" Republicans occurred at the five-power London Naval

Conference of 1930, when Great Britain accepted parity with the United States in all categories of warships, while Tokyo, locked into the short end of a 5-5-3 ratio of battleships with Britain and the United States, got a better 10-10-7 ratio in destroyers, and equality in submarines. "We must naturally expect opposition from those groups who believe in unrestricted military strength as an objective of the American Nation," President Herbert Hoover acknowledged at the time. "Nevertheless, I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of the American people are opposed to the conception of these groups." Roosevelt's administration called for a second London naval conference in 1935, but by that time the Japanese had grown tired of the restrictions and rejected anything less than parity with the United States in naval power.

Dispelling the myth that "isolationism" had been a key part of the Republican "return to normalcy" in the 1920s, historian William Appleman Williams wrote in 1956: "A closer examination of the so-called isolationists of the 1920s reveals that many of them were in fact busily engaged in extending American power."

Republican Internationalism

Nonetheless, the label stuck and many conservatives in the post-war years were eager to show they had shed their alleged "isolationism" and were ready to do battle against communist aggression in the Cold War. A few remained adamant, however, and did not cease to be non-interventionists, even if it meant bearing the false and demeaning "isolationist" label. Their leader was Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio, whose pursuit of the Republican nomination for President repeatedly fell short, as the party turned again and again to its internationalist wing. In 1940, Wendell Willkie, the author of *One World*, pretended to be against Roosevelt's maneuvering of America into World War II, but it was clear there was nothing he could or would say or do to stop it. He merely accepted it as a *fait accompli*. If Roosevelt's promise to keep us out of foreign wars was as solid as his commitment to balance the budget, Will-kie quipped, the boys might as well already be on the troop transports to Europe. His assessment was more accurate than his opposition was genuine.

At the end of the worldwide bloodbath, the United Nations would supplant the League of Nations as the upholder of international law and "the last best hope" for peace on Earth. This time America was overwhelmed. The patchwork of treaties and peace conferences had failed to prevent the Second World War. This time, statesmen would create a bulwark for peace that would represent the hopes and aspirations of all nations. Even Robert Taft voted reluctantly for membership in the United Nations. He opposed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, however, claiming it was one thing to be armed and prepared to halt Soviet aggression, but something else to threaten the Soviets with a hostile alliance that played on Russian fears of encirclement.

Robert Taft died in 1953, and he took Old Guard conservatism to the grave with him. The Republicanism that survived during the Eisenhower years and after would not be called "isolationist." Eisenhower himself mainly did the bidding of the Eastern establishment internationalists who got him the nomination at a fiercely divided Republican National Convention and won him the election over fellow global interventionist Adlai Stevenson. Richard Nixon, mentored and promoted by former New York Governor and two-time presidential loser Tom Dewey, was as thorough-going an internationalist as his Democratic opponent for President in 1960, Sen. John F. Kennedy. And while critics called Sen. Barry Goldwater, the 1964 GOP presidential candidate, a great many things, none accused him of being isolationist.

But because Ron Paul and other Republicans are moving the Republican Party once again in the

direction of non-interventionism and a growing number of Americans see no rhyme or reason to be bombing Libya and want President Obama to obey the War Powers Act and the Constitution of the United States, John McCain is once again warning of the dangers of isolationism. In truth, isolationists have never been any more prevalent in the United States than the Viet Cong John McCain fought in Southeast Asia were on the streets of New York and Los Angeles. We must not be complacent about our national security. But we don't need Sen. John Quixote of Arizona tilting at the windmills of "isolationism" he discovered with great alarm at a candidates forum in New Hampshire.

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