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THE IMPLICATIONS OF NEO-ISOLATIONISM ON MILITARY POLICY

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2 January 1974

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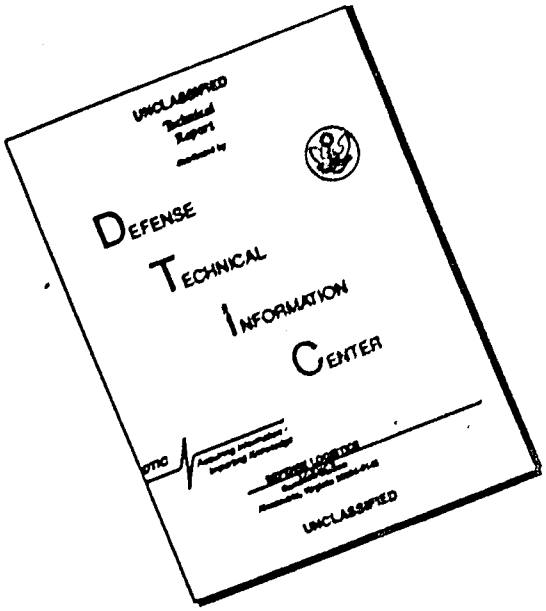

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by

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The roots of isolationism, as a major theme in our foreign and military policies over the years, are traced to the earliest days of our national history. The aspects of present-day isolationist tendencies, and their effect upon military policy over the years, are examined and briefly critiqued. Background and divergent points of view were collected from a variety of sources. Neo-isolationism, as a principal aspect of our foreign and military policies would be extremely dangerous in today's world

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environment; however, military planners must be prepared for some adjustments in the future to the global policies of the past quarter century.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF NEO-ISOLATIONISM ON MILITARY POLICY

If there is one significant theme which has, for more years than not, permeated U. S. foreign policy--and keeps recurring in varying forms even today--it is the theme of isolationism. Inevitably, this policy has had, and continues to have, its effects upon U. S. military policy and strategy. The neo-isolationism evidenced in some quarters today, although containing some unique aspects, is firmly rooted in the past.

Tracing its origins back to the colonial period (one author has even stated that, "before the colonists sailed from Europe they had become isolationists in spirit."[1]), the basic doctrine was enunciated by highly-respected American statesmen in the early period of nationhood. The warnings of Paine ("It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions..."[2]), Washington ("...steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world..."[3]), Adams ("I think it ought to be our rule not to meddle."[4]), and Jefferson ("...entangling alliances with none..."[5] are often cited, and they are illustrative of a strongly-rooted and inherent desire of the American people throughout much of their history. The constitutional requirement of a two-thirds Senate vote for the ratification of treaties tended to help institutionalize the concept.

Given the context of history from which these statesmen spoke, and, indeed for many years to follow, this self-centered and introverted policy of isolationism was unquestionably sound. As a matter of fact, it was probably the only policy which the United States could--with prudence--pursue. The United States was a relatively weak and insignificant infant nation--militarily, and in every other sense. It had an enormous

frontier region yet to conquer and, furthermore, the oceans which separated it from its potential enemies were, in those days, significant protective barriers. The United States needed peace to preserve its national integrity and to consolidate the financial structure built by the genius of Hamilton. Also, as an exporter of foodstuffs and certain other agricultural products, the U. S. was bound to profit from neutrality.

The only departure from such a policy during those early years was the French Alliance of 1778. Born of necessity (but even then opposed by many), it was denounced at the first opportunity and died prior to the 19th century.

The purchase of the Louisiana Territory intensified the American or Continental view and an aloofness from European troubles. Jefferson's Embargo was also based on the idea of withdrawal from the Old World.

President Monroe's Message to the Congress of 2 December 1823 (later to be institutionalized as the "Monroe Doctrine") went a step further. Not only had we isolated ourselves from the Old World, but we would now not allow interference in the affairs of the New World by the Old. (Quite a presumtuous position for a fledgling nation to take). The fact that it was to the advantage of Britain at that time to support such a policy--thus making it effective (Britannia ruled the waves)--does not alter its significantly isolationist overtones. The isolationist policies of the U. S., at that point in history, meshed with the balance of power politics pursued by Britain. "Except for the Farewell Address, no pronouncement made by an American statesman was ever more influential"[6]--not only upon our own subsequent foreign and military policies, but upon those of much of the world.

Our economic policies also tended to complement and reinforce isolationism. The high tariffs, designed originally to encourage the development of our infant industry, and later to "protect" our full-grown industrial capacity from "unfair" foreign competition, not only

made us virtually self-sufficient, but they prevented the United States from becoming involved in "entangling" commercial dealings with other industrial powers.

For most of the remainder of the 19th century, interrupted only by the Civil War, the United States concentrated on winning the West. Her face was turned away from Europe and toward the Western part of the American Continent. The Army, of course, played a key role in making it possible for this great westward expansion.

Shortly before the turn of the century, however, many Americans began to perceive that the frontier was "running out." Their attention was beginning to turn toward areas beyond the continental United States. "Manifest Destiny," the theory that it was inevitable--the "destiny" of the United States to expand to the Pacific Ocean--, now began to be given broader application. The Spanish-American War, fanned by "yellow journalists" of the day (we had them even then), served as a convenient excuse to establish an "American Colonial Empire." Military strategy was taxed, however, to make the rapid transition. Our Army was geared for fighting Indians on the plains. The possibility of fighting a different type of war in a different climate was, unfortunately, given little prior planning, let alone financial support or understanding by the Congress. Logistically, the Spanish American War (the first time American troops had been sent "overseas"), was a disaster. The amateurism of our Army was exceeded only by the ineptness of the Spanish. The Army learned valuable lessons, however, as it has from all of its wars.

Isolationism appeared dead--at least as far as such leaders as Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, Elihu Root, Albert J. Beveridge,

A. T. Mahan, Herbert Croly, Leonard Wood, Henry Adams, and Brooks Adams were concerned. One author characterizes this period and these men as "neo-Hamiltonian."[7] The period combined elements of military and civil-thinking, and was neither liberal in the Jefferson-Jackson-Wilson tradition, nor completely conservative in the sense that Calhoun was. Whatever else it was, this period was more overt and outward-looking than ever before in United States history.

The United States had been suddenly catapulted onto the world stage. Her strength became a factor to be reckoned with. When President Roosevelt later sent the "Great White Fleet" around the world to, among other things, "show the Flag," the world knew that here was no longer an isolationist state. The coming of age of American diplomacy (e.g., the shrewd manipulation of the "Open Door Policy" by Secretary of State John Hay), plus the aggressive leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt, gave ample evidence to the chanceries of Europe that the United States was no longer the provincial country bumpkin state they may once have perceived her to be. The United States had, indeed, become a world power and was flexing her muscles.

The Chinese Relief Expedition involved U. S. troops on foreign soil in the far east and assured the U. S. of a decisive voice in the affairs of that area of the world. Our Philippines stewardship had made us a "far eastern power." The position taken by the United States regarding the territorial integrity of China illustrated the beginnings of a principle (territorial integrity) for which the U. S. would later become involved in wars in order to uphold.

Presidents McKinley (reluctantly), T. Roosevelt (enthusiastically),

and even Taft (at least commercially with his "Dollar Diplomacy") followed policies that were anything but isolationist. As World War I approached, however, the predominent tendency of isolationism began to surface again. Most Americans desired to avoid being drawn into the conflict, and looked upon it as "Europe's problem." In 1914, President Wilson appealed to his countrymen for neutrality "in thought as well as action,"[8] and later, in 1916, stated, "I shall do everything within my power to keep the United States out of war."[9]

Unfortunately, the military strength of the United States, at this time, was not such that it commanded a great deal of respect by either side vis-a-vis the rights of a neutral state, and both sides violated those rights. The build-up of our military power was all too gradual--even when it became increasingly apparent that we would be obliged to enter the war. German military strategy, in fact, relied heavily on our prolonged neutrality and, failing that, our inability to mobilize in sufficient time to prevent her victory.

World War I, as a departure from isolationism, did not set well with the American people. It was not nearly as exciting and adventuresome as the Spanish-American War (which was over almost before it began). As a consequence, the United States reacted by making a 180 degree turn in policy. Not only did she reject the Treaty of Versailles with its League of Nations, but she also renounced interventionism entirely and returned to the isolationism of the 19th century. Wilson's mistakes (e.g., failure to attempt a bipartisan approach to his post-war dreams) notwithstanding, the prevailing mood of the American people was again introverted.

Isolationism, as represented by such leaders as Senators Nye and Borah, and John Bassett Moore, was again in the driver's seat.

Although perhaps understandable, this was obviously an over-reaction. The conditions which had made isolationism a viable policy in the 1800's were, if not completely gone, at least rapidly disappearing. Naturally, as was the case following all our previous wars, a benign neglect of the American military needs was the standard procedure. The failure of the League, although possibly preordained, was certainly hastened by the non-participation of the United States.

The United States did participate, however, in attempts between the two World Wars to limit armaments,[10] outlaw war,[11] and establish a workable mechanism for the peaceful settlement of disputes between nations.[12] In fact, the conscientiousness with which the United States pursued her part of the Naval Disarmament Agreements was reminiscent of the idealism (if not the impracticality) of Wilson. Neither these attempts, nor the League of Nations itself, however, were successful in preventing the debâcle of World War II.

In spite of the isolationist warnings of such people as the Lindbergs, the U. S. again became involved in a world war. After Pearl Harbor, the American people were virtually united in their determination to see the war through to a successful conclusion.

Following the Second World War, the United States, although hurriedly demobilized, did not again retreat into an isolationist shell. We had learned that security is not attained by turning one's back on an insecure world.

U. S. policy insured that we would not again repeat the "mistake" of

non-involvement in the world organization--successor to the League of Nations--now called the United Nations. By the end of the war, approximately forty "unofficial" groupa of Americans were urging that the U. S. participate actively in organizing the world for peace and security. Even prominent leaders with isolationist leanings, such as Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan, spoke out for a positive U. S. policy of international leadership and cooperation. The United States did, indeed, exert a leadership role in the establishment and support of, not only the United Nations, but the postwar International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

American policy continues to support the United Nations as representing a hope for world peace, in spite of its shortcomings and failures, and despite the fact that sometimes, certain other major member states do not lend appropriate financial support. As a result, there is disproportionate burden placed upon the United States. There are groups in this country currently calling for our withdrawal from this organization.

The Marshall Plan, "Point 4", and similiar programs helped to rebuild the war-devastated economies of Europe and Japan. In fact, nations and peoples throughout the world looked to America for postwar aid. These programs represented the most unselfish and non-isolationist policies of any nation in history--let alone, the history of the United States. (The success of these international programs is painfully evident today as, ironically, these same nations compete--often ruthlessly--with the United States, not only in the world markets, but in the domestic markets of this country itself). The rewards of "globalism" have, however, admittedly been meager.

It became obvious in this post-war period, however, that the United Nations alone (for several reasons) could not be counted on to provide the necessary security and to protect certain areas of the world from being swallowed up by the spectre of world Communism (at that time led by the Soviet Union). This realization gave rise in the late forties and the decade of the fifties to various multilateral and bilateral collective security arrangements which today bind the United States with over forty other states in what might well be termed "entangling alliances," or mutual defense pacts.[15] A far cry from the warnings of our early leaders--but the world environment was vastly different than it had been in the 18th and 19th centuries. Who could have foreseen then the worldwide Communist threat?

American military policy in those days relied heavily and primarily on the nuclear capability of the United States--"massive retaliation" as it became known during the Eisenhower administration. The theory was that, although our conventional forces might be considered less than adequate under other circumstances, no potential aggressor would dare to attack us (or our allies--the "nuclear umbrella" extended to them, as well), because of our capability to absorb a first strike and retaliate by devastating such an enemy. This was certainly true, as far as a major confrontation between the super powers (a third world war) was concerned. Even after we lost our monopoly of nuclear power, we continued to maintain a healthy superiority in nuclear arms. This does not hold true today.

The Korean War, where only conventional forces and weapons were used, was considered at the time, to be a classic exception to the ability of the policy of primary dependence on massive nuclear power to deter

aggression. We had, however, stationed sizeable ground forces (for that time) in Europe, as a visable demonstration of our support for NATO. We continue to maintain considerable forces there; even though pressures for their recall mount in this country.

Although perhaps unfairly labeled an "isolationist" (he might more accurately have been described as a "pragmatist"), the late Senator Robert A. Taft opposed the stationing of large numbers of U. S. ground troops in Europe in defense of NATO. His objection was based on his belief that it would tie our hands and might commit us to fight a war in a place and under conditions which might not be advantageous to the United States. For those reasons (not because he opposed the principle of collective security--which would have made him an isolationist), he voted against the Atlantic Alliance in the Senate. His following in this country, although substantial, and probably greater than was then imagined, still apparently represented the minority viewpoint.

In the sixties, the administration concluded that because of the devastating effect of nuclear weapons, on friend and foe alike, these weapons might never be used in future wars. The nuclear shield had not prevented numerous conventional and guerilla-type "brushfire" wars. The Kennedy administration responded with the policy of "flexible response." Under this policy, it was reasoned, the U. S. should be able to respond to several types of threats to her national security--not putting all her eggs in one basket, as it were.

Then occurred what may well be looked back upon in later histories as the most telling blow to this nation's security posture that it had ever experienced. Not only did the Viet Nam War drain the United States

in terms of men and materiel, but it triggered a series of reactions in this country and abroad which brought us to our present state and bodes only ill for years into the future.

The longest war in our history and, depending upon one's perception, the first one America has ever lost, Viet Nam caused a backlash in this country which is still being felt today. Americans are impatient people. Many do not understand the "political war" with its often indecisive conclusion. The strategy of "gradual response" which was employed in Viet Nam was felt by many to have prolonged the war unnecessarily. Furthermore, our purposes for being there were not clearly understood, nor supported by many (often very vocal) elements of our citizenry.

The sum total of these reactions, or pressures, evolving out of the period of our Viet Nam involvement (differing in rationale and motivation--from each other and from the historical past) may be loosely lumped together as an emerging neo-isolationist tendency in today's society. Perhaps not yet the predominent mood, it is, nevertheless, one which appears to be gaining strength. It is a mood which is being reflected on sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious, ways in our military and foreign policies. It is a mood which minimizes the threat of world Communism ("...the very success of the policy of containment tempers the modern view of the 'enemy'"[14]) and stresses the "vital domestic needs" of our society (the "butter vs. guns" argument).

While it is difficult to generalize, today's neo-isolationists differ in several important ways from their isolationist predecessors. In the first place, they are often found at the liberal end of the political spectrum; while isolationists of former days were often classed as

conservatives--a strange ideological flip-flop. In addition, they are often oriented and sympathetic to the non-military needs of other areas of the world. They are, by and large, under thirty, idealistic, and (the pragmatic military-oriented mind would say) impractical--even naive. By and large, they are not nationalistic nor patriotic--certainly not "America Firsters" or advocates of "My country, right or wrong." They see many things wrong with the American society--considering it to be a "sick" society, but one which should be "saved," or "greened."

The effects of this neo-isolationist mood on military policy is, however, similiar to the effects of former isolationist thinking: benign, even hostile, neglect.

The military in general--of necessity maintaining a high and visable profile--has suffered in recent years in the eyes of some sectors of public opinion, as a backlash of the Viet Nam War. The disillusionment engendered by the conflict found vent in an anti-military atmosphere. While this feeling may have crested, it is still prominent. Many Americans were, and are, unable to see the distinction between the formulation of foreign and military policy on the one hand (done by the civilian political leaders as influenced through the democratic process), and the execution of it on the other (done by the military). Despite the built-in protections against the "military" crossing this line (e.g., the "ten year rule" for the Secretary of Defense and the civilian service secretaries), many Americans perceived the military (or more often, the "Military-Industrial Complex") as the perpetrators of the Viet Nam "fiasco." For the first time since the Second World War, the United States was, by 1972, spending more in the domestic sector than it was on national security.

All of this, against the backdrop of the increasing capabilities of our potential enemies, creates a very bleak picture for the future of our national security. During the decade of the sixties, and into the seventies, while preoccupied with Southeast Asia, the United States has allowed the Soviet Union to catch up and surpass it in almost every area of military capacity, including nuclear defensive posture.

The Nixon Doctrine, promulgated prior to the conclusion of the Viet Nam conflict, marked a turning back from what many considered to have been a high water mark--perhaps an over-extension--of U. S. commitments around the world. It was an attempt to more realistically assess our commitments in relation to our capabilities (and/or our resolve), and to preclude the United States from becoming involved (in the sense that it was in Viet Nam) except where our national interests clearly dictated. True, we will honor our current treaty commitments; but, we will rely more heavily on our allies for a greater share in their own defenses and on the more industrialized of our allies for a greater share of the common defense.

While the Nixon Doctrine cannot be called a retreat to isolationism, there is no question that it is a backing off from a quarter of a century of globalism. The role of the United States as the "world's Policeman" is being shelved. The Nixon Doctrine might be said to be a movement in the direction of what the late Senator Robert A. Taft described as the policy of the "free hand."[15]

After the Korean War, the United States continued the draft in peacetime to maintain the necessary manpower levels required by national security. Universal military training was considered unnecessary and

too expensive; however, no completely equitable system was evolved, despite experimentation with several variations. Opposition to the draft became increasingly vocal and overt during the Viet Nam conflict. Perhaps succumbing to the pressures of neo-isolationism, and recognizing the inevitable, the Nixon Administration proposed an all-volunteer force. This system, presently in its early stages, has yet to prove its effectiveness, and Congress has been slow to appropriate sufficient funds to make the service appealing to large numbers of our youth. It is questionable, in any event, that Congress would have renewed the draft authority beyond 1973.

Several attempts by the Congress in recent years to limit the powers of the President in the area of foreign and military policy, culminated in the War Powers Act of 1973. While not as restrictive in actuality as it was symbolically, the significance of this law lies in the fact that Congress mustered sufficient votes at this point in history to override a Presidential veto (and that, as my students of government will tell you, required a two-thirds vote of both Houses). The Legislative Branch served notice thereby to the Executive, in effect, that it intends to exercise its Constitutional prerogatives in the areas of foreign and military policy more aggressively in the years ahead. The atmosphere of Watergate may have contributed somewhat to this; however, it is felt that the surge of neo-isolationism was the principle causal factor.

The current atmosphere of detente with the Soviet Union and the normalization of relations with the CPR, while providing great hope (particularly to the neo-isolationists), can be deceiving. It would be unfortunate indeed, if these noble efforts were allowed to lull us into a

false sense of security. The SALT[16] talks proceed; although, the results are not as dramatic as had been hoped for at this point in time. The MBFR[17] talks may be similiarly endangered. For the United States no longer deals from strength (at least the preponderent strength of a decade ago). The Soviet Union, sensing the current mood in this country, may drag her feet. Time will be on her side. As the military or other potential balance continues to shift in her favor, who can predict what adventures she may now risk, which before had been ruled out as valid alternative courses of action by our nuclear superiority? As the President's Blue Ribbon Defense Panel has so succinctly put it, "The road to peace has never been through appeasement, unilateral disarmament, or negotiation from weakness. The entire recorded history of mankind is precisely to the contrary. Among the great nations, only the strong survive."[18]

Mr. James Johnson has said, "The central issue for the neo-isolationists is the use of American military power."[19] The new isolationists do not understand--or concur in--the truism that, "power, like justice, has to be seen to exist."[20] Furthermore, the determination to use its power to further its national interests is a roughly measurable aspect of that state's power (the creditability of power). The neo-isolationists, on the other hand, far from being ready, willing, and able to use great power, tend to be apologetic about it.

Military policy must be prepared in a democracy to adapt to the will of the people as expressed through their elected and appointed officials. If the current of neo-isolationism cannot be checked, military policy must be prepared, among other things, to operate within severe budgetary constrictions into the foreseeable future. "...Literally no international

crisis or threat to national security could generate support for defense appropriations at the (FY 1970) level,"[21] by the neo-isolationists. Priorities must be established as they have not had to be done for many a year. Our military forces must become "lean and mean." We must be prepared to sacrifice certain aspects of the defense program which heretofore may have been considered to be "sacred cows." If the gradual retreat from "globalism" continues in the years ahead, we can anticipate that the world-wide missions given our armed forces will correspondingly diminish. Whatever these missions may be, our armed forces must, as the instrument of our vital national security, be prepared to meet them.

Neo-isolationists might do well to ponder some additional words of two of the leaders of our early history, whose above-cited quotations were used as justifications for a policy of isolationism: George Washington: "If we desire to secure peace, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war."[22]; Thomas Jefferson: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."[23] President Nixon brings these words into contemporary applicability: "Peace requires strength. So long as there are those who would threaten our vital interests and those of our allies with military force, we must be strong. American weakness could tempt would-be aggressors to make dangerous miscalculations."[24]

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FOOTNOTES

1. Thomas A. Bailey, A Diplomatic History of the American People, p. 4.

2. Thomas Paine, Common Sense, 1776. (Ibid).

3. George Washington, Farewell Address, 17 September 1796. (from Henry Steele Commager, Ed., Documents of American History, p. 174).

4. John Adams, Diary. (from Dexter Perkins, The Evolution of American Foreign Policy p. 28).

5. Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1801. (Commager, p. 188).

6. Perkins, p. 34.

7. Samuel P. Huntington, The Soldier and the State, p. 270.

8. Woodrow Wilson, Message to Senate, 19 August 1914. (Commager, p. 276, Part II).

9. Woodrow Wilson, Letter to Senator Stone, 24 February 1916. (Ibid, p. 290).

10. Washington Naval Disarmament Conference, 1921. Resulted in treaty which established ratio in capital ships among the 5 leading naval powers. Agreements were extended as a result of conferences in Geneva (1927), and London (1930).

11. Locarno Pact, 1925; Kellogg-Briand Pact, 1928.

12. The World Court or Permanent Court of International Justice, established under Article XIV of the Covenant of the League of Nations. (Despite the failure of the U. S. to join the Court, a position on that bench was held in turn by four prominent American jurists).

13. E.g., NATO, SEATO. OAS, ANZUS, etc.

14. James A. Johnson, "The New Generation of Isolationists," Foreign Affairs, October 1970, p. 159.

15. Robert A. Taft, A Foreign Policy for Americans, p. 12.

16. Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT).

17. Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR).

18. President's Blue Ribbon Defense Panel (Supplementary Report).

19. Johnson, p. 137.

20. Walter Laquer, Neo-Isolationism and the World of the Seventies, p. 35.

21. Johnson, p. 144.

22. Louis Martin Sears, George Washington, p. 431.

23. Thomas Jefferson, specific source document unknown.

24. Richard M. Nixon, "The Real Road to Peace," p. 39.

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