

More Americans want government to stay out of international affairs

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Christopher McKnight Nichols is an assistant professor of history at OSU and the author of "Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age," which traces the origins of isolationism back to the debates over US imperialism at the end of the 19th century and its continuities over the next-half century. Credit: Photo by Spencer Lum

The number of Americans wanting their government to stay out of international affairs is higher than it has been since the Vietnam War, according to a new analysis.

In an article published this week in *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, Oregon State University historian Christopher McKnight Nichols notes that doubts about American involvement abroad are on the rise, up 10 percent in a decade. He connects current reluctance on the part of many Americans to get involved militarily and politically with foreign nations to a long-standing tradition in U.S. politics.

"Virtually all isolationists in the history of the United States have subscribed to some form of international engagement, whether that is economic, cultural, political or intellectual," he said. "There is no such thing as a complete isolationist. What we do have is a rich history of Americans who have taken on isolationist or anti-interventionist beliefs at different times, and helped transform or influence the political system and policy."

Nichols, an assistant professor in the School of History, Philosophy, and Religion at OSU, is an expert on isolationism, internationalism, and the history of U.S. roles in the world and military interventions abroad.

In his article, he links the "heyday" of American isolationism of the 1920s and 1930s to current events, including polls showing nearly 70 percent of Americans reject further U.S. efforts to intervene or to promote democracy abroad.

Nichols also wants to take back the term "isolationist" from its common stereotype of a conservative mindset that wants to wall off from the outside world. Famous figures, ranging from peace activist Jane Addams and racial reformer W.E.B. Du Bois to writer Mark Twain and former U.S. Sen. William Borah, a nationalist who opposed the League of

Nations, have all favored anti-war and anti-imperialistic isolationist policies.

"They say politics makes strange bedfellows, and we can certainly trace this with the isolationist movement, which tended to attract people on both the far left and far right," Nichols said. "Today we see that same sort of tendency with some young anti-war activists supporting someone like Ron Paul."

Most of these type of isolationist sentiments can be traced to three "policy pillars" – expressed by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Monroe – in laying out the relationship between domestic and foreign commitments, types of diplomatic and military isolation, and debates over foreign policy cautiousness that have had a deep impact on U.S. foreign relations for more than a century.

"These are the touchstones for all foreign policy debate, then and since," he said. "The key precepts were: no permanent alliances or binding foreign entanglements, peace and honest friendship with all nations, enhancing and protecting international commerce, heralding unilateral action, and asserting U.S. rights to hemispheric defense and a wide sphere of primary U.S. influence abroad."

Nichols said that isolationism as a strain of thought that informs how American citizens and policymakers evaluate options abroad and sometimes sways policy cannot be overstated. Eight years ago there were far more troops on the ground overseas than today, and he said President Obama has shown a reluctance to put "boots on the ground" in places like Libya and Syria, causing some of his critics to call him a "neo-isolationist."

"With President Obama, we are back to small-scale, multilateral interventions, more like those that we had in the Clinton era," Nichols

said. "During Clinton's presidency, the U.S. deployed forces abroad approximately 80 times in foreign humanitarian and peacekeeping operations, but these were mostly conflicts with small troop footprints, or Special Forces, characterized by few American casualties.

"In the wake of the Iraq War, in light of the drawdown in Afghanistan, and given pressing economic and political concerns at home, the U.S. public is increasingly reluctant to sacrifice American lives or to materially support intervention and aid abroad."

Nichols is the author of "Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age," which traces the origins of isolationism back to the debates over U.S. imperialism at the end of the 19th century and its continuities over the next-half century.

Provided by Oregon State University

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