

On the False Charge of Isolationism



An article in the summer issue of the *Wilson Quarterly* describes the Cato Institute as “a headquarters of isolationist sentiment.” What conceivable basis can there be for this charge? Cato scholars have long been the most principled supporters of free trade in this country. We support relaxing the controls on immigration. We support a strong national defense but have been consistently critical of unilateral sanctions as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. And we welcome the contributions of other cultures to the rich

diversity of life in the United States. The apparent basis for this charge is our lack of enthusiasm for several multinational actions and institutions in which prior U.S. administrations and other governments made a substantial investment.

More important, congressional Democrats and the leadership of some other governments have made a similar charge about the foreign policy of the Bush administration and on much the same basis. From our perspective, the record of the new Bush administration belies this charge. The administration has proposed negotiations toward a free-trade agreement in the Americas and another round of worldwide reductions of trade barriers. The administration is considering the legalization of several million undocumented Mexican immigrants and a substantial reduction of the barriers to migration across the U.S.-Mexican border. Again, the apparent basis for this charge is that the Bush administration has withdrawn from several multinational negotiations or insisted on reducing their scope as a condition for approving any treaty arising from such negotiations. On August 4, the *Washington Post* reported, “To the distress, and sometimes anger, of U.S. allies, the United States recently has stood alone when large numbers of nations concluded accords on such issues as climate change and arms control”; the *Post* also mentioned the U.S. conditions for agreeing to the OECD rules on financial disclosure by offshore banks and for participating in the September UN Conference against Racism, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance.

On these issues, I suggest, the Bush administration is correct, despite the irritation of people who have invested in these multinational agreements. It is not yet obvious that global warm-

ing is a serious problem or that the Kyoto Protocol would significantly reduce any potential problem. The Biological Weapons Convention addresses a serious threat but probably cannot be enforced against uncooperative governments or without sacrificing constitutional rights in the United States. The UN conference is structured to blame wealthy nations for the poverty of other nations and to demand reparations for slavery and colonialism.

The administration's one major commitment to a collective decision to date—the commitment to abide by a NATO decision on the deployment of U.S. troops in the Balkans—is likely to prove to be a mistake. The irritation of promoters of multinational agreements is not sufficient reason to either suffer their moral posturing or approve agreements that do not serve U.S. interests.

The problem of defining internationalism as the approval of multinational agreements is that it makes such agreements a goal, rather than merely an instrument, of foreign policy. Many such agreements acquire a scope and momentum that do not necessarily serve U.S. interests, often providing cover for some economic advantage in the name of some greater good. We should judge multinational agreements by whether they are likely to be effective instruments for achieving U.S. goals—that is, whether they address a serious problem that is best addressed on a multinational basis, whether the agreement can be enforced, and whether the benefits to the United States are likely to be greater than the costs. By this standard, I suggest, the Bush administration deserves high marks for recognizing that the several multinational agreements that it has addressed to date do not

serve U.S. interests, not the false charge that it is pursuing an isolationist foreign policy. The U.S. government can and should pursue an internationalist foreign policy but without an overriding commitment to achieving our goals through multinational agreements.

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—William A. Niskanen