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Likely the Same Overextended American Empire From the Next President

By Ivan Eland

June 22, 2015

Although the 2016 election is a year-and-a-half away, the verdict is already in on the continuation of post-World War II interventionism as the policy of choice. After the hysteria in the media induced by ISIS's beheading of a few Americans in retaliation for U.S. bombing of the group in the Middle East, American public sentiment, still exhausted by the long counterproductive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, demanded some action against ISIS – as long as it didn't involve another protracted war or any US military personnel getting killed.

Thus, President Barack Obama gave the public an ineffective air war against the group and a few thousand "non-combat" military advisers. However, president's restrained posture has allowed all of the Republican candidates to posture that they would be tougher than Obama on ISIS – and on most other foreign policy issues. And of course, Democrat Hillary Clinton – who would like to be the first woman leader of the United States since Edith Wilson took over for her medically incapacitated husband from late 1919 to early 1921 – has long believed that she has to be as foolishly macho and jingoistic in foreign policy as the men. Hillary voted for George W. Bush's disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq. Also, as Secretary of States, she couldn't resist the opportunity created by Arab Spring unrest in Libya to advocate taking out Muammar Gaddafi, a dictator who had actually made nice with the West. The result has been chaos, tribal warfare, and new Islamist terrorist bases, including those of ISIS – all fueled with the huge quantities of weapons in Gaddafi's stores.

Even Rand Paul, a libertariansque Republican who is supposed to be somewhat less hawkish than the other serious candidates, was recently quoted in the American Conservative magazine, "The enemy is Radical Islam and not only will I name the enemy, I will do whatever it takes to defend America from these haters of mankind."

Although Mr. Paul (The Younger) has a better recognition of the ill-effects of and blowback from unnecessary overseas wars than the rest of the pack, he still needs to get through Republican primaries that likely will be more jingoistic than the last few election cycles in which hawks were chastised because of their cataclysmic failure in Iraq. Not lasting very long, the more restrained foreign policy views of about half of the Tea Party have now gone out of style after the ISIS beheading hysteria.

Perhaps Paul's actions as president might be better after he got elected, but campaign rhetoric does matter, because some people actually hold politicians to their promises. Like the other Republican candidates, Paul has demonized ISIS (which is admittedly easy to do) to the point where he would need to take counterproductive military actions against the group once in office. Yes, ISIS consists of radical Islamists who do evil things. However, radical Islamists have existed since the 1800s and before, and sometimes – as during the Cold War – the United States actually has supported them. More recently, the United States likely at least indirectly supported ISIS in Syria against Bashar al-Assad, a dictator the US wants out of power. When seeing such sensationally hyped threats, such as ISIS, on television, average viewers should ask – which of course few do – "what is the threat to the United States?"

In the case of ISIS, it is currently limited to a few incompetent "lone wolf" amateurs, in sympathy with the group, trying to carry out lame missions on US soil. In the future, it is alleged that ISIS could use territory occupied in Iraq and Syria to launch more well-funded and professional attacks on the United States. Yet ISIS, a relatively worldly group, should learn from the Islamist Taliban's experience in Afghanistan: when territory is held, it makes one vulnerable to attacks. Even air attacks that are ineffectual in deposing the group can make impossible their governance of occupied territory – the group's main goal, in contrast to that of al Qaeda, which has a primary objective of attacking the United States and is thus a bigger threat. ISIS, although wicked, should be dealt with by regional countries, such as Turkey, who will not do so when the United States is there to do it for them. If ISIS would begin to become a threat to the United States in the future, US air power could be used to take out terrorist training camps and make life miserable for the group.

What of Paul's other foreign policy positions? He is a little better when moving away from ISIS hysteria. Laudably, he opposed the wars in Iraq and Libya, the aborted war against Syria, and arming of Syrian rebels – correctly judging those unnecessary conflicts as merely stirring up unnecessary anti-U.S. sentiments in and blowback from the Middle East region. Strangely, however, Paul does not apply the same convincing logic to ISIS. The student who confronted Jeb Bush was right: his brother, George W. Bush, did create what is now ISIS in opposition to his invasion of Iraq. Therefore, more counterproductive US military interventions in the Middle East may create groups that make even the brutal ISIS look tame.

One major problem that Paul has is that even if he wanted to behave moderately after being elected, system pressures, which he actually proposes to exacerbate, might push him toward more military interventions. Paul has shockingly advocated hiking the already massive \$640 billion per year defense budget by almost a whopping \$200 billion over the next two years. The United States already spends on defense what the next nine highest spending nations do combined, with no major threats even justifying the already bloated \$640 billion. Sustaining this massive defense budget, or increasing it if Paul gets his way, merely allows irresponsible policy makers, such as Bill Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, to ask the generals, "You have this big, beautiful military, so why not use it?" And of course, people who make lots of money in the military-industrial-congressional-media complex eagerly look toward new wars to fight and new weapons and resupply contracts to be had in doing it.

So much for the hope that any presidential candidate, in the face of the economic growth-stifling \$18 trillion national public debt, would retract the empire, undertake fewer unnecessary military adventures overseas, reduce the defense budget, and return the money to allow rejuvenation of the civilian economy – the true root of all long-term US military, diplomatic, and cultural power. President (and former General) Dwight Eisenhower would be sad that no one taking office in early 2017 is likely to carry forth his enlightened foreign policy legacy.