



What Is a Noninterventionist to Do?

Guest: Daniel McAdams

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Daniel McAdams is executive director of the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity.

WOODS: People who generally support Ron Paul and generally support non-intervention are torn over the current situation. So let's start off with describing the current situation. What's going on? What are the headlines telling us is going on over in Iraq?

McADAMS: Well, if you remember late last week, we first started hearing reports about this religious minority that was trapped in the Kurdish region on this Sinjar Mountain, just waiting to be slaughtered by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, a creation that did not exist before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Well, these people were on a mountaintop waiting to be slaughtered. The press reports were more and more salacious, and I think understanding the cynicism of not only the Obama administration, but all the U.S. governments of recent memory, they realized this was a tremendous opportunity. So whereas at first President Obama came out and said we may have to deliver airstrikes to protect our personnel in the U.S. consulate in the Kurdish region, very, very soon that morphed into: we've got to have a humanitarian mission to save these poor religious minorities.

I don't mean to make light of their plight there because, of course, it is horrible. Anyone who is killed is horrible. It was also horrible that 500,000 Iraqi Christians were killed as a result—directly or indirectly—of the U.S. invasion in 2003, and no American has said a word about them as far as I know. So now you have air strikes against the Islamic State, which is their new logo. They must have a PR team because the other one was too long. So now the U.S. is conducting air strikes, which they have said may go on for months. I always look for irony and hypocrisy, and one of the interesting ironies is that essentially the U.S. is bombing its own military equipment that has fallen into the hands of the Islamic State, either through their capturing it from the moderate rebels in Syria that the U.S. has supported for the last three years, or captured in bases in Iraq that the ISIS has overrun in the past couple of months in their blitzkrieg through Iraq.

WOODS: So you're telling me that a government program has gone wrong, Daniel?

McADAMS: Yes, it has, and now to solve the problem of the initial government program—I guess you'd have to go back to 1991, when incorrect U.S. signals, whether on purpose or by accident, led Saddam Hussein to believe that he could tap into Kuwaiti oil, led to the first Iraq war; and then, of course, the son picked up the mantle from his father and led us into the second Iraq war. And now we are starting the third Iraq War to clean up after the first two, and my guess is, judging from past practice, the result will be about the same as the first two.

WOODS: Let me quote for you or at least paraphrase things that have been said in recent days by John McCain and Lindsey Graham, and I want you to respond to each one in turn. John McCain says that what we're seeing is the cost of withdrawal from Iraq. This is what happens when you withdraw. The crazies fill the void. That's McCain. Lindsey Graham apparently said that unless we take decisive action, he can see an American city in flames. What are your thoughts?

McADAMS: Well, I think Graham is not wrong, but for the wrong reasons. This idea that we can somehow occupy every place on earth indefinitely, because someday something bad might happen: first of all, it's impractical, it's impossible; we'd be broke in a month. Secondly, what they conveniently fail to mention is that their very same cheerleading for the war in 2003 has led us to this mess. This is the reason why we're there and the reason why they don't want to mention it, is because of inconvenient facts, you know, there is a famous photograph of Senator McCain in the midst of these ISIS fighters hailing them as wonderful freedom fighters against the Assad government. Everywhere he goes he meets with these extremists. He did the same in Ukraine, and it essentially covers up his involvement in backing these people. And then when things go wrong, the problem is always too little U.S. intervention, not too much.

WOODS: Tell us, who is this group, ISIS? Where did they come from?

McADAMS: Well, a lot of the conditions that provided for their rise were provided by the United States itself. You know, I would recommend people read Justin Raimondo's column at antiwar.com on Friday which goes into it very, very well. It was the 2007 surge in Iraq and the so-called Arab Awakening, which was essentially the U.S. agreeing to arm and train a lot of these people and people friendly to them, to put down a Sunni rebellion against U.S. occupation in Iraq that led to their rise in the first place. It just shows you the insanity of U.S. interventionism, because if you look back 20 years prior, some 20 years, well, more than 20 years now prior, you see that it was the Brzezinski plan to arm and to create an armed al Qaeda in Afghanistan to go against the then Soviet occupation that created al Qaeda and 9/11. The U.S. has taken the page from the same playbook and essentially, maybe not directly, partly directly, but certainly indirectly, has created ISIS, has allowed them to have this power, and oh, no, they are using it against our interests in Iraq, although those aren't really our interests because the U.S. wants nothing more than to get rid of Maliki. As a matter of fact, on Sunday there was an attempted coup that he attempted to pre-empt. The U.S. has made no secret of the fact that it wants Maliki out, which was their guy—that person they chose, and round and round you go. Meanwhile, the U.S. is bombing ISIS, which is fighting Assad in Syria, which is the

U.S.'s great enemy. So is it dizzying? Of course it is. But this is interventionism. You have to tell a bigger lie to make up for the last one.

WOODS: Why are they upset at Maliki?

McDAMS: Because he's not playing ball—because he understands the delicate balancing act that's required to govern a state like Iraq, which is really no longer a country. I think that's the design of the U.S. and U.S. allies in the region, to turn a strong secular state like Iraq into a basket case. I don't think it's by accident. If you look at Libya, it was turned into a basket case. If you look at Syria, it's been turned into a basket case. I think there's a false notion that basket cases present less threat to U.S. allies in the region and the U.S. than functioning, secular dictatorships, pseudo-dictatorships, whatever you want to call them, and I think that's a fallacy.

WOODS: You know, since you mention Libya, let's take a brief digression and say something about Libya. That intervention was provoked by what we were told was sure to be a genocide, and then after the fact, independent investigators found that this was all made up, and there was nothing to it. Meanwhile, Libya is, as you say, a complete basket case, and yet several years ago the neocons thought it was a great example of U.S. intervention and the wonderful fruits that would flow from it. Well, what wonderful fruits have flowed from it?

McADAMS: Well, as you point out, to the people who live there who believed a lot of the lies of the U.S. and NATO and expected things to improve without the demonized monster Gaddafi—and I am not apologizing for him at all, but objectively you look at Libya now, and you will say it is much worse off than it was for everyone. Not even the Western looters can make any money off it, which is pretty sad. Usually the people like Joe Biden's son have gone into the chaos in Ukraine, and have found a way to make a ton of money. Not even Libya can, as far as I can see, provide them with the loot they were looking for from this intervention.

WOODS: All right, let's go back to the Iraqi situation. There are two related arguments that I need to hear your replies to, and they're similar, but there's enough difference that I think there are different answers. The first argument is, look, I may not have supported the war in Iraq in 2003, I may have thought it was the worst decision ever, but now I feel like, since we caused the problem, we need to fix it. That's one. The other one is, this situation is just so atrocious that it demands intervention. This particular moment, what we're seeing there is so bad—we're hearing stories of beheadings, we're hearing stories of people dying of thirst, of people marrying seven-year-old kids who are terrified, people being forcibly converted to Islam—that I'm sorry, you've got to leave your libertarian purity to one side and intervene. How do you take those in turn?

McADAMS: Yeah, well, this speaks to the extreme cynicism of the propaganda machine. They know exactly what buttons to push. These same, exact things have been going on in Syria for three years now against Christians; we never see it reported. Christians have been forced to convert or die in Syria for years. Monasteries have been blown to bits. Churches have been blown to bits. Religious shrines and important, sacred religious relics have been destroyed by

these same people, and the U.S. media has not said a word about it. The U.S. administration has not said a word. So they know what buttons to push with people, and unfortunately, the same buttons, they still work. They know how to, for example, get perhaps the religious right involved when they start talking about Christians and other religious people being persecuted this time. But the whole idea, and it really rankles me when libertarians make this argument—the same state that couldn't get it right in the first place is now to be trusted to bomb its way back into fixing the country. It's such an absurd idea, people should be ashamed of themselves for thinking it. It's like giving a knife to Charles Manson or something. These people can't get it right. It's impossible.

WOODS: Almost everybody is in favor of this intervention. Even the former noninterventionists. Almost all of them are in favor of it. One of the difficulties that a noninterventionist has is the problem that Henry Hazlitt described in *Economics in One Lesson*, of the seen and the unseen. He was talking about the domestic economy, that when the government spends money to build a bridge, well, everybody sees the bridge, and we all love the bridge. What we don't see are the avenues not taken, what would have been done with those resources in the absence of the bridge project. Well, likewise, in the case of nonintervention, of course, if there hadn't been an intervention in World War I by Woodrow Wilson, well, we'd be hearing nothing but atrocity stories coming from Germany. That's all we'd be hearing. And there were atrocities committed by Germany, but not nearly on the scale that people thought. That's all we'd be hearing. What we wouldn't hear is: but if you intervene, you're going to make every bad trend in Europe 100 times worse. There's no way to know that, because that's the scenario that never played out. So likewise here, we're at a disadvantage because we can perfectly well see with our own eyes horrible things that are going on. What we can't see are how the U.S. government in every single case seems to manage to take a terrible situation and make it unimaginably worse.

McADAMS: You're absolutely correct, Tom, and the question is, what is their goal? What do they want to see? What is the objective of the U.S.—

WOODS: Yeah, that was what I was going to ask you. What do they want? Is it that they think that this intervention will help to hasten the independence of Kurdistan, which they want to see? What's going on here? Certainly it's not that they are deeply moved by a humanitarian plight. That is not a description of the American ruling class.

McADAMS: Yeah, well, at the risk of stepping on some third rails and going back for Raimondo's piece, he makes a very good point that the U.S. has been very, very supportive of Kurdistan. They know that there's a lot of oil there, and they want to exploit it. The Israelis have also been extremely active and supportive. They have trained a lot of the Kurdish military, and so they have a huge stake there as well. So I think that's kind of a tag team that tends to get things done in the Middle East, or at least get things flowing. You get bombs falling. I think there's something to that, and that's one of the reasons why you see it there where, of course, there are terrible stories. But it sort of pales in comparison to other parts, even of the Middle East. So you have that, I think. What really gets me is hypocrisy, and I just—I can't stand it. It drives me

crazy. And you're seeing in Iraq—the U.S. is bombing Iraq again, supposedly to save a small, obscure religious sect. They call that humanitarian, and everyone jumps on board. But I'm sorry, a couple of weeks ago Israel killed about 2,000 people in Gaza—80% of them are civilian in what really is the world's largest open-air prison, and what does the U.S. do? It doesn't raise a finger. As a matter of fact, it starts helping Israel to reload in voting a quarter of a billion dollars more weapons for Israel. So it just shows the selectiveness of the U.S. government's humanitarian concerns. And we've already spoken about Syria with the humanitarian disaster, and the U.S. completely ignoring the disaster it made there.

WOODS: The same logic that would call for intervention here would call for it in many other places, and now you're back to liberal internationalism again, where the answer would be, yeah, I guess we do need intervention in a million other places. But what would be the big deal about just doing these air strikes, trying to do what can be done from the air to hit these ISIS bad guys—and everybody admits that they are bad guys. There's nobody defending these people. What's the big deal? Okay, so it's some air strikes, Daniel. What's to worry about with that? Maybe we can get some bad guys. Maybe we can take the pressure off of people who are suffering. What could possibly be the drawback to that, just a limited intervention because of this particular situation, leaving aside that the U.S. tends to screw things up and that there are a lot of other places we could intervene in, leaving all that aside, in this particular case, these particular people might have their situation alleviated by some airstrikes. Why would you not do them?

McADAMS: Well, we can go back to Lindsey Graham on that one. I was just reading a piece in the *Washington Post* today about fighters abandoning al Qaeda affiliates to join the Islamic State, U.S. officials say. So the U.S. intelligence community has noticed that because ISIS has been able to draw in the U.S. into a fight in Iraq, literally from Yemen to Indonesia to everywhere, everyone is dropping whatever little group they're involved in now and getting on the ISIS team. It's the opportunity to attack the U.S. So even if you buy the neocon line about how they hate us for what we are, we're doing a heck of a lot to recruit people, and who knows, maybe one of them will get through to the U.S. Maybe Lindsey Graham's scenario will come to pass. You simply cannot defend against every imaginable, and even unimaginable, possibility. So why on Earth would you hit the hornet's nest in that case? That's just from a pure, realpolitik perspective.

WOODS: What about the complaints that Hillary Clinton seems to be making about Obama's foreign policy, and that they've been implicitly attacking each other. What's that all about? Have you been following that?

McADAMS: Yeah, her complaint is that the U.S. did not go in hot and heavy enough in Syria at the beginning. So what does she expect the outcome would be in Syria? Even Obama said yesterday that the idea that there was a force in Syria, a homegrown force in Syria, that was powerful enough to overthrow Assad was "a fantasy." So why is the U.S. basing its policy in Syria on what it admits is a fantasy, and here is Hillary saying if we'd only gone in stronger.

What would have happened? What does she think should have happened? What is her expected outcome that would have happened if the U.S. had invaded and bombed Syria? She doesn't say.

WOODS: No, I think she's just positioning herself for 2016. But it seems to me she's already got the Democratic hawk vote cornered. Why does she want to be perceived as being an Obama opponent? I suppose because he's increasingly unpopular, but I think the average Democrat voter—doesn't he still like Obama?

McADAMS: Well, that's exactly the point. I think she's—I think forget the hawk vote. I think she had the Democrat dove vote covered. Look, Obama has been one of the most violent presidents in history, and how many Democrats have peeled off and said enough of this: I thought we were going to get an antiwar president? It hasn't happened. So I think she's already feeling like she's got these people in the bag. She's going to go gunning for any Republican who might come out and try to peel away. This is triangulation. This is their specialty.

WOODS: Yeah, it's the Clintons. That's right. Yeah, that's what the Clintons are best at.

McADAMS: So any Republican that had any sense and wanted to be president would look at this and say, okay, I'm going to fight fire with fire. There's a rising tide of noninterventionism. You see it in polls. From last October we saw this amazing Pew poll that for the first time in polling history, the majority of Americans don't want to go overseas looking for monsters to slay. You've seen several subsequent polls that indicated this. This is the rising tide. So I think any Republican with any sense would find a way to tap into this sentiment and fight back against some of this propaganda: this time it'll work, this time it'll be fine, this time we'll fix it.

WOODS: Yeah, and this time I think it's going to be harder to accept the apologies five years down the road: oh, we couldn't have predicted that such and such would happen. Really? You couldn't? Really? The last 12 years isn't full of all the evidence in the world you could possibly need to predict this? You're telling me that was not available to you? The testimony of your own two eyes for 12 years was not enough?

McADAMS: I wish that true, Tom. I am a little bit depressed, or I don't know what the word is because they do keep doing it. You still see people like Krauthammer on TV saying, well, what I would do is send in more weapons to the Kurds, which is exactly what Obama is doing. The same people who got these things terribly wrong are coming forward with new lies, with new propaganda, with new ridiculous ideas, and I'm sorry they are still getting all the airwaves. Nobody is calling us to refute them on CNN.

WOODS: Well, before I let you go, how is the Ron Paul Institute doing? I always recommend it to people.

McADAMS: Well, I tell you, Tom, we have had an explosion in interest, and I feel a little bit guilty because it feels like we're capitalizing on these terrible events, but to me it also makes me thrilled because it shows that people, when they see the propaganda that's out there in the

mainstream, they are turning to us. Yesterday we had the biggest single day that we've had on our Facebook page. We had over 1,000 new people follow us on Facebook yesterday.

WOODS: Wow!

MCADAMS: And it's incredible. People are turning to us. They want alternative sources of information that are responsible, that are not whacked out, but that are challenging the propaganda, and so we're thrilled. We're on a tight shoestring.

WOODS: Yeah, I know it.

MCADAMS: But we're working double time.