

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXIII-23

**Charles A. Kupchan.** *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-19-939302-2 (hardcover, \$29.95).

31 January 2022 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT23-23>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux | Production Editor: George Fujii

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## INTRODUCTION BY PETER TRUBOWITZ, LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

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For decades after World War II, liberal internationalism was so dominant in American political life, and in the Ivory Tower, that little was said, let alone written, about isolationism.<sup>1</sup> Most diplomatic historians and international relations scholars left it for dead. Those days are over. In the past decade and especially during Donald Trump's turbulent presidency, the lid on the foreign policy debate inside Washington and the country at large has blown off. This has fueled renewed interest in isolationism and in understanding its implications for American statecraft.<sup>2</sup> Charles Kupchan's sweeping new history of isolationism is the latest entry, and it is sure to figure prominently in the debate to come.

The genesis of Kupchan's *Isolationism* is telling in itself. He began working on it in 2012. He set it aside to join President Barack Obama's National Security Council and then picked it back up in 2017 when he returned to teaching and research at Georgetown University and his post at the Council on Foreign Relations. Like a number of other international relations scholars and diplomatic historians, Kupchan recognized that something was afoot in America — that growing numbers of Americans were having second thoughts about trade liberalization, institutionalized cooperation, democracy promotion, and other liberal internationalist policies. Calls for retrenchment, restraint, and selective engagement were in the air, raising afresh old questions about America's international purposes, the most appropriate means for achieving them, and how to strike a balance between the two.

Kupchan is not the only one writing about American overreach and calling on America's leaders to rebalance international ends and domestic means.<sup>3</sup> But he has adopted a novel approach, mining isolationism's past to see why America's leaders once considered it wise and prudent strategy and to identify clear 'do's' and 'don'ts' for contemporary policy-makers. In so doing, he elevates isolationism to the heights of grand strategy and asks readers to reconsider its *strengths* as well as its weaknesses. The editors at H-Diplo took Kupchan up on this challenge, asking four diplomatic historians to weigh in on *Isolationism*: John Milton Cooper, Jr., Justus Doenecke, Andrew Johnstone, and Christopher McKnight Nichols.

In the essays that follow, the reviewers laud *Isolationism*'s historical breadth and the timeliness of its contribution to contemporary foreign policy debates. Each reviewer also identifies concerns and missed opportunities. Some of these are

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<sup>1</sup> Some notable exceptions include Selig Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth-Century Reaction* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1957); Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt & the Isolationists, 1932-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917* (Westport: Greenwood Publishers, 1969); Justus D. Doenecke, *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists in the Cold War Era* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979); and Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Other important recent contributions include: Brooke Blower, "From Isolation to Neutrality: A New Framework for Understanding American Political Culture, 1919-1941," *Diplomatic History* 38:2 (April 2014): 345-376; Bear Braumoeller, "The Myth of American Isolationism," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6:4 (October 2010): 349-371; Andrew Johnstone, "Isolationism and internationalism in American Foreign Relations," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 9 (March 2011): 7-20; Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, "The Liberal Order Is Rigged: Fix It Now or Watch It Wither," *Foreign Affairs* 96: 3 (2017): 36-44; Jennifer Lind and William C. Wohlforth, "The Future of the Liberal World Order Is Conservative: A Strategy to Save the System," *Foreign Affairs* 98:2 (2019): 70-80; Margaret MacMillan, "Which Past is Prologue? Heeding the Right Warnings from History," *Foreign Affairs* 99:5 (2020): 12-23; Jack Snyder, "The Broken Bargain: How Nationalism Came Back," *Foreign Affairs* 98:2 (2019): 54-60; and Peter Trubowitz, and Peter Harris, "The End of the American Century? Slow Erosion of the Domestic Sources of Usable Power," *International Affairs* 95:3 (May 2019): 619-639.

matters of historical interpretation that Kupchan responds to. Others have to do with how best to understand isolationism and explain why isolationist sentiment, which ran strong in the nineteenth century, was overtaken by internationalism in the twentieth. Yet most of the discussion in the reviews focuses on the term isolationism itself, and specifically, on how Kupchan defines and uses it to tell the story of U.S. foreign policy over the past two and a half centuries.

Cooper thinks Kupchan's conception of isolationism as grand strategy is too formulaic; Johnstone and Nichols think it is too static. Isolationism, they suggest, should be understood less as a fixed strategic doctrine (for example, non-entanglement in European affairs) than as patterns of ideas or, as Cooper puts it, "habits" of the mind that shift and change over time. One implication is that today's calls for America to 'come home' are too different from the isolationist demands and pressures that weighed on U.S. policy-makers in the 1870s or 1930s to be meaningfully lumped together. Another, Johnstone argues, is that too much expansionism flies under the radar in Kupchan's account. From this vantage point, the reason America appears to have been isolationist during the nineteenth century is that it was too busy pursuing continental, as opposed to global, expansionism.

To some extent, these differences come with the territory. Few terms in the study of American foreign policy are harder to pin down, or more loaded with political baggage, than isolationism. However, the differences also arise from different assumptions about what grand strategy is — whether it is best understood as a strategic doctrine, as Kupchan would have it, or as a pattern of behavior.<sup>4</sup> For Kupchan, isolationism is a set of guiding strategic principles that have helped the country navigate great-power politics beyond North America's shores and to keep its commitments in line with its capabilities. As Doenecke observes, this move has its analytic advantages. It allows Kupchan to weave together a highly focused, reflective analysis of isolationism's strategic advantages as well as its downside risks.

What of isolationism's origins? Kupchan grounds his strategic doctrine of isolationism in American exceptionalism — a deeply held view that America is a "city on a hill," standing above and apart from a quarrelsome world."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps. However, a strong case can be made that America's doctrine of non-entanglement with foreign powers actually had more to do with the country's exceptional *material* circumstances. Internationally, America enjoyed what C. Vann Woodward famously called "free security."<sup>6</sup> Protected by two large oceans and bordered by weak neighbors, Americans enjoyed abundant security for most of the nineteenth century. Domestically, continental expansionism made it possible for American leaders to meet the needs of a growing (white, immigrant) population without 'going international.' In the absence of such favorable international and domestic conditions, it is not obvious that America's leaders would have considered isolationism to be judicious strategy.

Thinking about American statecraft this way helps explain why isolationism eventually faded as the country's strategic lodestar. In the twentieth century, America became more reliant on the world economy, and, not unrelatedly, more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of great power politics far beyond its shores. International and domestic conditions that once made non-entanglement in the affairs of great powers good strategy gave way. As a result, isolationism became less appealing as doctrine and, for that matter, as habit. To be sure, as the America First movement in the run-up to World War II made clear, this did not stop the shrinking numbers of Americans who saw little domestic advantage in internationalism from trying to block its ascendancy in the corridors of national power. However, America's deepening integration into the world economy generated too much political momentum to be stopped.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of these issues, see Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy,'" *Security Studies* 27:1 (August 2017): 27-57.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica T. Matthews, "Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World," *Foreign Affairs* 99:6 (November/December 2020): 177.

<sup>6</sup> C. Vann Woodward, "The Age of Reinterpretation," *American Historical Review* 66:1 (1960): 1-19.

Is the political ground shifting? Will the current backlash against liberal internationalism's excesses force the U.S. to realign its strategic ends and means once again? In closing out *Isolationism*, Kupchan argues that it will. That much is certain. The question is whether America will do so purposively or haphazardly. The great danger is that the country will overcorrect by embracing a myopic, self-defeating nationalism, unwisely squandering its many international advantages. To avoid such a damaging outcome, Kupchan argues that America's leaders must begin mapping out a new middle course between internationalism and isolationism. That is a tall order given how polarized the country is domestically. But it would not be the first time that United States overcame its domestic differences by redefining its international purposes.<sup>7</sup> If Kupchan is right, America will have to find the gumption to do it again.

#### Participants:

**Charles A. Kupchan** is Professor of International Affairs in the School of Foreign Service and Government Department at Georgetown University, and Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. From 2014 to 2017, Kupchan served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European Affairs on the National Security Council in the Obama White House. He was also Director for European Affairs on the National Security Council during the first Clinton administration. His most recent books are *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (Oxford University Press, 2020), *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (Oxford University Press, 2012), and *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

**Peter Trubowitz** is Professor of International Relations and Director of the Phelan United States Centre at the London School of Economics and Associate Fellow at Chatham House. His published work includes *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton University Press, 2011) and *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in US Foreign Policy* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), which won the American Political Science Association's annual J. David Greenstone Book Prize for best book in history and politics. Before joining the LSE, he was Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin.

**John Milton Cooper, Jr.**, is an emeritus professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His first book was *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917* (Greenwood Publishers, 1969).

**Justus D. Doenecke** is Professor Emeritus of History at New College of Florida. He received his B.A. from Colgate University (1960) and Ph.D. from Princeton University (1966). Among his books are *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (Hoover Institution Press, 1990); *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941* (with John E. Wilz, 3rd ed., Harlan Davidson, 2002); *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); *Debating Franklin D. Roosevelt's Foreign Policies* (with Mark A. Stoler, Rowman and Littlefield 2005); and *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of American Entry into World War I* (University Press of Kentucky, 2011). He is currently writing a study on American debates concerning US engagement in World War I, the Paris Peace Conference, the League fight, and the 1920 presidential election.

**Andrew Johnstone** is an Associate Professor of American History at the University of Leicester. His publications include *Against Immediate Evil: American Internationalists and the Four Freedoms on the Eve of World War II* (Cornell University Press, 2014) and (as co-editor with Andrew Priest) *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy: Campaigns, Candidates and Global Politics from FDR to Bill Clinton* (University Press of Kentucky, 2017). His articles have appeared in *Diplomatic History*, the *Journal of Contemporary History*, the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, and the *Journal of American Studies*. His

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

current book project examines the relationship between the rise of the American public relations industry and the rise of the United States as a world power.

**Christopher McKnight Nichols** is Director of the Center for the Humanities at Oregon State University, where he is Associate Professor of History and Sandy and Elva Sanders Eminent Professor in the Honors College. Nichols is an Andrew Carnegie Fellow and an Organization of American Historians Distinguished Lecturer. Nichols is a frequent commentator on the historical dimensions of contemporary politics and foreign policy. Nichols is author or editor of five books. He recently published *Rethinking American Grand Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2021), co-edited with Elizabeth Borgwardt and Andrew Preston, and his most well-known book is *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Harvard University Press, 2011, 2015). Nichols is completing a sixth book project entitled *Ideology in U.S Foreign Policy: New Histories* (forthcoming from Columbia University Press), co-edited with David Milne, and working on a book on early Cold War domestic and foreign policy and a sweeping history of global anti-imperialism.

REVIEW BY JOHN MILTON COOPER, JR., UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON,  
EMERITUS

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*The "Habit" and the Ism*

Some names outgrow their pejorative origins and go on to become proud self-identifiers and badges of honor. For example, "Quaker" started as a seventeenth-century English slur on the Society of Friends. Likewise, "intellectual" began in France at the turn of the twentieth century as an epithet flung at the defenders of Alfred Dreyfus. Other names, however, never seem to shed their derisive beginnings. One such name is "isolationist" and its accompanying noun "isolationism." They first arose in this country in the 1920s and '30s as charges against the people who eschewed entanglement and intervention outside the immediate environs of the Western Hemisphere. The advocates of that foreign policy almost never accepted that designation, preferring to call themselves "non-interventionists" or "continentalists."<sup>8</sup>

The persistence of such pejorative connotations has had a deleterious effect on efforts to interpret and evaluate isolationism. Nearly all of the writing about it *per se* has taken a pathological turn, equating it with ignorance and xenophobia and seeking its origins in provinciality and ethnic prejudice.<sup>9</sup> More serious scholarly and non-pejorative treatments have tended to take smaller bites out of its history, concentrating on specific periods such as World War I and the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> It is only now, with this book, that someone has treated the full scope of isolationism with true insight and understanding. Charles Kupchan has told for the first time the entire history of this foreign policy phenomenon from its inception at the founding of the American republic down to the present time.

Kupchan is a political scientist, not an historian, and his disciplinary affiliation has had a special impact on this book. I am not insinuating that political scientist cannot write good history—far from it. The examples of James MacGregor Burns, Clinton Rossiter, and, more recently, Mildred Elizabeth Sanders and Tony Smith come readily mind.<sup>11</sup> Also in the area of foreign relations, Robert Endicott Osgood's *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations: The Great Twentieth-*

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<sup>8</sup> The single instance I am aware of when an advocate of these policies embraced the term came in 1934. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, one of the premier isolationists, Senator William E. Borah, declared, "But in all matters political, in all commitments of any nature or kind, which encroach in the slightest upon the free and unembarrassed action of our people, or which circumscribe their discretion and judgment, we have been free, we have been isolationist," quoted 293).

<sup>9</sup> I discuss these treatments in John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 1969), 250-257.

<sup>10</sup> Among several works I would point to Justus Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Ralph Stone, *The Irreconcilables: The Fight against the League of Nations* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1970); Robert David Johnson, *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), and, perhaps immodestly, the book cited in the preceding note. An excellent, broader study is Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), which covers the period from the 1890s to the 1930s.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1956), and *The Vineyard of Liberty* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), and Mildred Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999); Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2017).

*Century Transformation* stands among the truly great histories of the last century.<sup>12</sup> With the partial exception of Osgood, all of these political scientists readily adopted the easy blend of narrative and analysis common to historians. Osgood's book opens with a chapter in which he sets out concepts and categories that require close reading to remember, but then he slips into the familiar historian's mode of writing.

Kupchan's book is different. He uses the schematic and didactic approach that prevails in the social sciences. In his first two chapters he states the main arguments of the book and goes step-by-step through what he will do in the remaining chapters. He does the same thing with each succeeding chapter, laying out in advance what is to come and at the end recapitulating what has been said. This approach has its advantages. For someone who feels pressed for time, such as a graduate student preparing for prelims, she or he can get the gist of the book by reading the opening chapters and then perusing the beginnings and endings of the remaining chapters. If people read this book that way, it will join such other notable works as Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* and Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Decline of the Great Powers*, which have rarely been read in their entirety.<sup>13</sup> It would be a shame, however, to read this book that way, because its journey through the long career of isolationism is rewarding in its particulars.

Kupchan's approach also has the virtue of keeping the book's focus tight, thereby avoiding digressions, no matter how tempting they might be. In the second chapter, "An Anatomy of Isolationism," he spells out what he calls "The Logics of Isolationism." There were six such "logics," which were "distinct, but interlocking . . . : 1) *capitalizing on national security*; 2) *serving as redeemer nation*; 3) *advancing liberty and prosperity at home*; 4) *preserving freedom of action abroad*; 5) *protecting social homogeneity*; and 6) *promoting pacifism*" (34-35; italics original). Kupchan adds that these "logics" were present at the creation of isolationism and figured in its evolution over time; also, various elements had greater salience in different parts of the country and at different times. This concept of the "logics" lends an interpretative spine to the book's coverage of over two centuries of the career of isolationism.<sup>14</sup>

The approach works best in "Part I: The Era of Isolationism, 1789-1898," which comprises about a third of the book. Necessarily in a work of such scope, Kupchan draws on the work of previous historians, which he acknowledges, with frequent reference to printed primary sources. Following in the footsteps of Felix Gilbert and others, he begins with the Revolution and the Continental Congress's Model Treaty and carries on through Washington's Farewell Address, the War of 1812, and the Monroe Doctrine to show how non-entanglement could be all things to all people.<sup>15</sup> It appealed to both the Anglophilic nationalist Alexander Hamilton and the erstwhile Francophilic state rights advocate Thomas Jefferson, the theocratic High Federalist Timothy Pickering and the free-thinking radical democrat Tom Paine, and all manner of others. He continues through the nineteenth century to show how this stance dovetailed with continental expansion but placed limits on venturing farther afield. In all, this is a good treatment, and, although Kupchan does not make the point explicitly, it shows why isolation could show such staying power and prove so hard to overcome during the twentieth century.

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Endicott Osgood's *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations: The Great Twentieth-Century Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

<sup>13</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* 2 vols. (Boston: Little Brown, 1892); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Kupchan derives these "logics" from Nichols's better developed "Strains of Isolationism," *Promise and Peril*, 347-352.

<sup>15</sup> See Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

Still, the closer Kupchan gets to that time, the more he displays the defect of his schematic approach. He begins to attribute too much to isolation and to slight other elements in the picture. The best way to illustrate this conceptual overreach is to cite a quotation from Senator Henry Cabot Lodge in 1898, at the outset of the imperialist fling that followed the Spanish-American War. “Isolation in the United States,” Lodge observed, “has been a habit, not a policy. When circumstances change the habit perforce changes too and new policies are born to suit new conditions.”<sup>16</sup> Such dismay at outmoded attitudes and inattention to foreign affairs was not new for Lodge. Nine years earlier, he had written in a biography of George Washington, “Our present relations with foreign nations fill but a slight place in American politics and excite generally only a languid interest. We have separated ourselves so completely from the affairs of other people that it is difficult to realize the commanding and disproportionate place they occupied when the government was founded.”<sup>17</sup> What is missing in Kupchan’s account of the period following the Monroe Doctrine is a sense of how little interest most people, including elected officials, educated elites, often even secretaries of state, showed in foreign affairs. This unconcern loomed far larger in American politics than self-conscious devotion to doctrines of isolation. In some ways, the great transformation of the twentieth century would be from indifference and inattention to awareness and vigilance, rather than from isolation to internationalism.

When Kupchan comes to that transformation, the perils of his schematic become even more apparent. This is in “Part II: The Defeat of Realist and Idealist Internationalism, 1898-1941,” which is the longest section, comprising well over a third of the book. “Realist internationalism” refers to the experiment in empire and great power politics conducted under Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, and “idealist internationalism” refers to the justification for entering World War I and the attempt to reform international affairs under President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>18</sup> Kupchan advances a plausible interpretation for why neither venture could break through ingrained resistance to overseas commitments. Here again, however, his reliance on clear-cut categories and his insistence on the primacy of isolationist attitudes get in the way of understanding how things really happened.

The realist/idealist antinomy has a certain intellectual allure, but it does not fit the facts of either venture into internationalism. As Kupchan notes, when McKinley asked Congress for war in 1898, he made his plea on idealistic, humanitarian grounds. Likewise, Roosevelt, despite his zest for the great power game, did not consider himself primarily a realist. Much of his case for imperialism rested on what he saw as the tonic it would offer to America at home. War and empire would elevate politics from sordid material concerns and class-based divisions by offering opportunities for heroic adventure. Later, when he clashed with Wilson during World War I, nothing infuriated him more than hearing Wilson called an idealist. To Roosevelt, Wilson was a hypocrite who disguised his selfishness and cowardice in bogus language of idealism, which later prompted Robert Osgood to liken them to Friedrich Nietzsche’s Warrior and Priest.<sup>19</sup> Roosevelt’s strongest reason for yearning to enter the world war did not lie in fear of Allied defeat and consequent danger to American security; it lay in what he saw as the Allies’ heroic defense of civilized ideals. He hated the prospect of his countrymen (and himself) not playing their destined role alongside Britain and France in this greatest and noblest of conflicts.

By the same token, Wilson’s idealism should not be exaggerated. He was capable of making cool-headed, realistic calculations. In Mexico, he retreated from regime change after learning the hard way how intractable conditions were there.

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<sup>16</sup> Lodge quoted in Nichols, *Promise and Peril*, 66-67. Kupchan quotes a snippet from this statement on 185.

<sup>17</sup> Lodge quote in Nichols, *Promise and Peril*, 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> These terms and concepts are also borrowed, without attribution, from Nichols, *Promise and Peril*, which develops them with greater insight.

<sup>19</sup> See Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest*, 144-45. Reading that passage in graduate school planted the seed for what later became the book with that title, John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).



In choosing to go to war, he reasoned that armed neutrality would entail all the travails of belligerency with none of the advantages, particularly a chance to shape the peace settlement. At the peace talks in Paris, he acknowledged the facts on the ground and power realities in East Asia in the case of Shantung, when he appeased Japan, as Roosevelt had done before him. As a disciple of Edmund Burke, Wilson believed in practical, evolutionary change, and he argued for the League of Nations in those terms. He was a bold, often visionary leader, but he never harbored notions of utopianism or messianism.

As for the question of why both Roosevelt's and Wilson's internationalism failed to prevail, I think Kupchan overestimates the strength of isolationism. The debates over "realist internationalism"—*i.e.* playing the great power game—never engaged the matter of departing from traditional non-entanglement. Republican advocates waved the flag, particularly after Filipino rebels fired on American troops, while anti-imperialists concentrated on infidelity to the country's anti-colonialist origins and libertarian example. Despite his disdain for the "habit" of isolation, Lodge never attacked it head-on, and when he shepherded Hague conventions through the Senate he pointedly denied that they entailed any entanglements. When TR mediated the Russo-Japanese War, he worked in secret among the big powers and allowed his efforts to be sold to the public as a disinterested act of international benevolence. Even the bloody conflict in the Philippines failed to generate much interest in the populace at large. The true winner in this tussle over empire and great power politics was the "habit" and the attendant inattention to foreign affairs, which never cut much ice in politics or public discourse.

In the fight over Wilson's "idealist internationalism," isolationism prevailed by default. When the public discussed membership in the League of Nations under the Versailles Treaty, surveys of opinion showed substantial majorities in favor, though Republicans generally wanted some kind of reservations to safeguard American sovereignty. In the Senate, only a cohort of sixteen members, dubbed "Irreconcilables,"<sup>20</sup> rejected the proposition outright and espoused true isolationism; some others found the reservations attached severe enough to nullify any obligation under the League Covenant. Still, taken together, they did not add up to the one-third needed to block consent to the treaty. The true conflict lay between the two brands of internationalism: Wilson's reformism and Lodge's great power politics as usual. Kupchan is correct when he notes that Lodge's preference for unilateralism squared with one of the "logics" of isolationism, yet Lodge was no purist in that preference. He supported the mutual security pact with Britain and France that Wilson had endorsed to accompany the peace treaty. The deadlock between Wilson and the Republican senators led by Lodge guaranteed an outcome that satisfied only the isolationists, but it is significant that majorities were willing to accept a departure from non-entanglement overseas.

The rest of this section, which takes the story of isolationism down to Pearl Harbor, is a disappointment. The two chapters that cover these twenty years are briefer and much less inclusive and insightful than what came before them. In the chapter covering the 1920s Kupchan borrows from Nichols the term "isolationist internationalism" to characterize Republican foreign policy in that decade.<sup>21</sup> Despite its seeming self-contradiction, it is an interesting concept and has some applicability. Warren Harding does seem to have harbored genuinely isolationist convictions, but aside from rejecting League membership he did not do much to act on them. His "normalcy" was more a matter of going back to the good old days of the "habit" and not paying too much attention to the rest of the world. One measure of the difference between this attitude and genuine isolationism was the suspicion displayed by such true believers as Senators William E. Borah and Hiram Johnson, among others, toward the activist foreign policy of Harding's secretary of state, Charles Evans Hughes, and their diehard opposition to attempts to join the World Court.

The clearest manifestations of "isolationist internationalism" occurred under Harding's successors, with the Kellogg-Briand Pact and the foreign policy of Herbert Hoover. Kupchan correctly labels outlawry of war treaty as a "pact of inaction" (262), and he makes much of the way Borah sponsored it in the Senate. What he does not do is probe its isolationist origins. The

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<sup>20</sup> On the Irreconcilables see Ralph Stone, *The Irreconcilables: The Fight against the League of Nations* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> See Nichols, *Promise and Peril*, esp. 284 ff. Nichols does not use this term to characterize all Republican foreign policy in the 1920s, as Kupchan does.

movement to outlaw war was the brainchild of a Chicago lawyer, Salmon Levinson, who during the League fight had served as an advisor to some Senate Irreconcilables. Oddly, Levinson's name never appears in this book. The apogee of this blend of isolationism and internationalism came at the end of the decade when Herbert Hoover became president. Hoover combined well-thought isolationist ideas with a wide range of international and diplomatic experience, both unmatched in a president since John Quincy Adams. He pursued disarmament agreements and tried to mount an international response to the Depression. But when it came to security matters with implications for the use of force, he drew the line, as demonstrated in 1931 with his response to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. This led to a rift with his secretary of state, Henry Stimson, a Roosevelt-Lodge great power internationalist. Nothing about the Hoover-Stimson alienation appears in this book.

The chapter covering the rest of the time down to Pearl Harbor is even more disappointing. This was the heyday of isolationism, and it deserves fuller, deeper coverage than it receives here. Kupchan begins by noting that 1930s isolationism went much further than its predecessor in its fear of involvement in another overseas war and in its consequent willingness to make commercial sacrifices "in order to build a moat around the nation" (270). That is true, but a larger change was afoot. The 1930s were when isolation completed its metamorphosis from being a "habit" to becoming a full-fledged mainstream "ism."

That metamorphosis had begun under comparable circumstances and had spawned the same ideas during World War I, when the threat to traditional isolation required a self-conscious, fully articulated defense. An appropriate analogy is to Fundamentalism among American Protestants. Both the term and the movement did not arise until the first decade of the twentieth century because before then the "old-time religion" could be taken for granted. It is fitting, though probably only coincidental, that William Jennings Bryan stood in the forefront of both Fundamentalism and isolationism. Kupchan correctly emphasizes the threat of renewed strife overseas as the major factor, along with the Depression, in the upsurge of isolationism in the '30s. One reason the "habit" could persist before then was that few people had believed war-ravaged Europeans would ever again resort to large-scale armed conflict. Also, disillusionment with the World War I experience was far less widespread in the 1920s than the literary prominence of the "Lost Generation" and the voices of early "revisionists" would later make it seem.

In the '30s isolationism achieved broader popular and congressional support and greater intellectual eminence than it had done before or would do again. Kupchan examines Congress and public opinion a bit, though further interesting material could be presented. Isolationism's salience among intellectuals, however, goes largely ignored. Three names that do not appear in the text are Charles A. Beard, Edwin M. Borchard, and Robert Maynard Hutchins. Beard, who was the leading historian at that time, wrote books and magazine articles extolling a "continentalist" basis for foreign policy and one that eschewed overseas adventurism.<sup>22</sup> Borchard, who was a luminary of the Yale Law School faculty, wrote an influential book upholding American neutrality and advised leading congressional isolationists.<sup>23</sup> He also helped make Yale one of the two main intellectual centers of the isolationist side in the post-1939 debates. Hutchins, who was president of the University of Chicago, made his institution the other main intellectual center.<sup>24</sup> Both campuses had important ties to the America First Committee.

In my view, what has most eluded historians of 1930s isolationism is not how and why it flourished in the middle of the decade. As noted, the danger of another great war and the insecurities and inward turning bred by the Depression receive

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Charles A. Beard, *The Open Door at Home: A Trial Philosophy of National Interest* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

<sup>23</sup> See Edwin M. Borchard and William P. Lage, *Neutrality for the United States* (New Haven: Yale, 1937).

<sup>24</sup> There is no biography of Hutchins. For the debates between isolationists and advocates of aid to the Allies, see James C. Schneider, *Should America Go to War?: The Debate over Foreign Policy in Chicago, 1939-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989).

their due here as causal factor, but what eludes Kupchan, as it has eluded everyone else, is accounting for how and why this isolationist flood tide receded so swiftly once President Franklin D. Roosevelt began to move against it. Kupchan correctly shows how opposition to entering World War II persisted right down to Pearl Harbor, but he does not deal with the public split-mindedness in which majorities could see an Axis victory in Europe as a threat to American security and yet oppose going to war even if the Allies should be beaten. Likewise, the total collapse of isolationism immediately after Pearl Harbor still needs a satisfying explanation. Also in my view, there appears to have been a lasting residue of conviction from the previous war that Americans must somehow involve themselves in matters of international order and world peace.

The role of Franklin Roosevelt in the rise and fall of isolationism and the reasons why “liberal internationalism” came to supplant it receive adequate coverage. Kupchan is the latest interpreter to try to penetrate the mystifying mind of Roosevelt. Though never a deep or complex thinker, he had an amazing capacity for psychological denial and convincing himself of what might currently be expedient. That trait aided him greatly in dealing with his physical handicap and in confronting the Depression. In foreign affairs, that trait left lasting questions about whether he really believed in isolationism in the mid-’30s, as he sometimes professed to do. Some interpreters think he did, but I have doubted this because his whole background was Wilsonian and Theodore Rooseveltian. Similar questions linger about whether he really believed his aid to the Allies short of war would suffice to defeat the Axis and his saber-rattling and economic sanctions would deter Japan. Only on the second matter does there seem to be a straight answer. Roosevelt evidently did think he could push the Japanese around with impunity, and he was tragically wrong.

On the demise of isolationism and the rise of liberal internationalism, Kupchan strikes the right notes. In the first place, Pearl Harbor supplied a sense of clear and present danger that had not existed before. In the second place, this new internationalism merged the earlier brands of realist and idealist internationalism. This suited FDR’s wonted casualness about theories and doctrines and enabled him to mix Wilsonian rhetoric with TR-style actions. Personally, I have always found the kinship influence stronger, and I have thought, anti-colonialism notwithstanding, his war-time diplomatic leadership smacked of the elder Roosevelt’s and Lodge’s yearning for a great power directorate managing world affairs.

There is a further point about how liberal internationalism prevailed over isolationism that I wish Kupchan had raised. This new dispensation could match the old one in its comprehensive appeals. It, too, had something for everybody. On the one hand, there was the security threat that satisfied realists; on the other hand, there was the ideological threat that satisfied idealists. Really, from around 1939 onward, Americans would reconcile themselves to a permanent role of international involvement by having an enemy or group of enemies that threatened not only their security but also their values---the “American way of life.” First it was the Axis with their Nazism and Fascism, and then it was the Soviet bloc, with their Communism. After a little fumbling right after 1945, it proved comparatively easy to transfer from one crusade to another and make the Cold War a continuation of World War II.

The great question since the end of the Cold War has been how to find a different way to justify international involvement and leadership. Much of the drift and confused thinking of the last three decades has stemmed from the vacuum left by the evaporation of a combined security-ideological threat. Neither the terrorist attacks of 9/11 2001 nor the rise of China has filled the bill as yet. Twenty-first century Americans are facing anew the challenges of the TR-Wilson era: how to behave as a great power in more or less ordinary times.

In his briefer final section on the period after World War II, Kupchan notes the persistence of isolationist thinking among some figures, notably (add a label or title for him please) Patrick Buchanan and libertarians such as Murray Rothbard and Ron Paul. He also comments on unilateralist stances principally among Republicans from Robert Taft to George W. Bush. But most of this section is not really about isolationism. It is about the fraying of the bipartisanship and optimistic assumptions that sustained liberal internationalism through the Cold War. He agrees with a number of other writers who condemn overreach and call for strategic retrenchment, particularly in the Middle East.

Kupchan’s final attempt to introduce isolationism into the recent past comes, predictably, with Donald Trump. He correctly points to Trump’s proudly brandishing the old isolationist watchwords “America First,” his unabashed

xenophobia, his unapologetic desire to maintain social homogeneity (i.e., white supremacy), his disdain for multilateralism, and his abrupt abandonment of commitments—which were congruent with “logics” of isolationism. But there are two problems with painting Trump as the exponent of isolationism redux. First, it attributes to him a depth and consistency of thought that simply are not there. Second, it ignores the most glaring departure from isolationism that Trump shares with virtually every other American leader and impedes any strategic withdrawal from the Middle East: Israel.

That country and American policy toward it go unmentioned in this book. Given the touchiness of this subject—as revealed in the avalanche of abuse that fell on John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt when they raised it—it is understandable that Kupchan might choose to give it a pass, but any book that deals with isolationism and seeks to relate it to recent times cannot ignore America’s ties to Israel.<sup>25</sup> Has there ever been a more striking example of what Washington warned against in the Farewell Address? In its most famous words, he avowed “It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.” But he went further, he denounced “passionate attachments” and “habitual fondness” for another country as making a nation “in some degree a slave.” Such “passionate attachment toward another produces a variety of evils,” particularly by opening “avenues to foreign influences.”<sup>26</sup>

Those words describe America’s relationship with Israel. Every presidential candidate in recent memory has pledged undying devotion to that country and declared the United States’ bonds with it inviolable and indissoluble. The former Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has repeatedly injected himself into American politics, particularly to tout Trump, and, at the invitation of Republicans, he appeared May 3, 2015, before a joint session of Congress in an attempt to scuttle President Obama’s overture toward Iran. Trump welcomed Netanyahu’s backing and repaid it by moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, which enraged Israel’s Arab neighbors. All of this is in blatant violation of the founding document of isolation, and it is worthy of at least passing mention in a book that tries to tell the story of that policy up to the present time.

Despite this book’s shortcomings, anyone who wishes to understand American isolationism should turn here. The temptation to read only the opening chapters and the introductions and summaries of later chapters should be resisted. There is much to be learned from the coverage of the long sweep of this policy, especially in the earlier years.

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<sup>25</sup> See John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, Farrar Straus, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp).

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 REVIEW BY JUSTUS D. DOENECKE, NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA
 

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During the past year, two excellent books have appeared dealing with the phenomena popularly known as ‘isolationism.’ Stephen Wertheim’s *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (2000) focuses on the period 1938-1999, when the United States began to see itself as the world’s “redeemer nation,” seeking to police the globe in its effort to maintain global supremacy.<sup>27</sup> This second work, Charles A. Kupchan’s *Isolationism: A History of America’s Effort to Shield Itself from the World*, casts a much wider net, tracing the entire course of the nation’s diplomatic history from (add label/title) pamphleteer Thomas Paine to (add label/title) President Donald Trump.

Kupchan conceived of this work in 2012, when he saw a breakdown of bipartisanship that had begun in 1994, when the internationalist compact of centrist Republicans and Democrats began to unravel. President Bill Clinton’s reluctance in the Balkans was followed by the ‘forever wars’ in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was, however, undoubtedly President Trump’s withdrawal from a number of international agreements and agencies (for example, the Paris climate accord, the Iran nuclear deal, UNESCO), his accompanying ‘America first’ rhetoric, and threat to leave NATO and the defense pact with Japan that gave greater relevance and urgency to the study.

Leading historians of isolationism have given the term various definitions. In 1957 Selig Adler saw it as the coupling of “a determination to stay out of foreign wars with an unwavering refusal to enter into alliances.” The sheer use of the word “impulse” in Adler’s book title, *The Isolationist Impulse*, reveals the author’s own negative attitude.<sup>28</sup> Twelve years later, John Milton Cooper, Jr. declared, “The essence of isolationism is the refusal to commit force beyond hemispheric bounds, or absolute avoidance of overseas military alliances.”<sup>29</sup> To Wayne S. Cole, writing in 1983, the term centered on “nonintervention in Europe and unilateralism.”<sup>30</sup> A major reference-book entry, contributed by Manfred Jonas in 2002 to the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, speaks of “the avoidance of political and military commitments to or alliances with foreign powers, particularly those of Europe.”<sup>31</sup> Kupchan calls isolationism “a grand strategy aimed at disengagement with foreign powers and the avoidance of strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland.” Corollaries include avoiding “foreign of entanglement” with other nations, shunning territorial possessions outside the continent, and assuming only temporary obligations outside the United States (6).

Despite possible subtle differences amid all such definitions, one thing remains certain: in the popular rhetoric isolationism is bad, a destructive force connoting abdication of international responsibilities. As Kupchan writes, “Today, to call someone an isolationist is to tar them as a heretic” (18). Because of this negative connotation, by the 1980s this reviewer has used the term ‘anti-interventionism,’ though -- for purposes of this review -- he finds the word isolationism quite acceptable. The contemporary foes of New-Deal and Fair-Deal diplomacy called themselves ‘nationalists’ or occasionally ‘neutralists.’

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Selig Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth-Century Reaction* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1957), 28.

<sup>29</sup> John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and World War I, 1914-1917* (Westport: Greenwood, 1969).

<sup>30</sup> Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt & the Isolationists, 1932-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), ix.

<sup>31</sup> Manfred Jonas, “Isolationism,” in Alexander DeConde, Richard Dean Burns, and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, Vol. 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Scribner’s, 2002), 337.

Historian Charles A. Beard called himself a “continentalist.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as Wertheim notes, only during the 1930s did the word “isolationist” become part of the nation’s political discourse, being first mentioned in Congress in 1935 and in the *American Historical Review* in 1938.<sup>33</sup>

To understand the phenomena itself, one needs a firm grasp of the American past. In his path-breaking study, Kupchan spends 90% of this book on a political and intellectual account of isolationism throughout the entire span of U.S. history, in the process refurbishing its reputation by stressing its strategic advantages from 1776 to the 1930s. He argues that “for much of American history, isolationism served the country well” (xv). Admitting that we now live in a world of cybernetworks and ballistic missiles, Kupchan writes, “It is time to reclaim the enduring truth that standing apart from trouble abroad often constitutes wise statecraft” (9). He concedes that American behavior overseas “has not always lined up with the nation’s virtuous sense of self” and that “material interests, threats, and opportunities have played at least as important a role as ideology” (13).

Kupchan finds two elements essential to comprehending the isolationist phenomena. First is “unilateralism,” which in one sense is the flip side of isolationism. Unilateralism stresses the use of the “free hand” in foreign policy over the avoidance of conflict per se. Second is “exceptionalism,” the belief that “the United States represents a unique experiment in political and economic liberty that it is destined to share with the rest of the world” (13). For the past eighty years interventionists made much use of exceptionalist ideology in the efforts to extend overseas commitments. Yet, before that time, it was the isolationists who had relied on this belief in their call for insulating the nation from ‘alien’ and ‘corrupting’ influences.

The book ably analyses major documents, events, and movements in American diplomatic history, some in considerable detail, from the French and Indian Wars to America’s inward turn during the years 2017-20. If some readers may already be familiar with Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776) and President George Washington’s Farewell Address (1796), they could well profit from learning more about the Model Treaty of 1776 (“a template for formalizing the country’s relations with other nations” [52]); John Jay’s *Federalist No. 4*, which warned against engaging in endless conflict; Alexander Hamilton’s *Federalist No. 6*, which denied that democracy and commerce lead inevitably to a peaceful world; and the abrogation in 1793 of the French alliance of 1778. Similarly, one may know much concerning the Monroe Doctrine but be ignorant of John Quincy Adams’s 1821 challenge to Henry Clay over supporting Latin American revolutions or America’s reluctance to participate in the Panama Congress of 1827.

During the Gilded Age, isolationism started to take a more aggressive turn. As the United States became a major producer of iron, steel, and manufactured goods, it sought to establish a role at sea that was commensurate with its economic power. The Naval Act of 1890, prompted by the doctrines of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, approved three major battleships for a ‘blue ocean navy,’ though political exigencies forced their being called ‘coast line’ ships. The Spanish-American War in particular brought the era of isolation to “an abrupt halt” (163). The United States suddenly annexed Hawaii and the western Samoan islands, took possession of Wake Island, and controlled Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

Yet such an effort at great-power politics soon created a backlash. Though Kupchan does not use Samuel Flagg Bemis’s term “the Great Aberration of 1898,” his message is clear.<sup>34</sup> The United States made a quick retreat from major imperial commitments, partly because of an anti-imperialist ideology, partly because of sheer racism. The Philippine insurrection

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<sup>32</sup> Justus D. Doenecke, *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists in the Cold War Era* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 12; Charles A. Beard, *A Foreign Policy for America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), chapter 2.

<sup>33</sup> Wertheim, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Title of chapter 13 in Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Holt, Winston, and Reinhart, 1955).

served as a particularly jolting event for a population that saw itself as heirs to an anti-imperialist tradition and in addition opposed assimilation of ‘inferior peoples.’ If America exercised informal control over much of Central America and the Caribbean, it sought to shed direct rule over foreign peoples as quickly as possible. By the time of the Taft administration and through the next two decades, ‘dollar diplomacy’ would suffice quite nicely. Taft’s biographer Henry Pringle succinctly expressed the matter: “every diplomat a salesman” in the continual quest for markets and investment opportunities).

Kupchan notes that President Woodrow Wilson’s activities in Haiti, Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Panama showed that he could be as heavy-handed as his predecessors. Admittedly, when World War I broke out, the president first spoke in highly isolationist terms. He increasingly focused, however, upon a new international order, one seeking to globalize such American ideals as democracy, justice, and international cooperation. In September 1919, he conflated the national and global mission in the stark claim that America had “the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world.” (246) His wartime efforts to sell internationalism on idealistic grounds, a kind of republican imperialism or “liberal internationalism” (20), involved commitments for which the American public was not yet ready.

Until this point, Kupchan sees isolationism serving the United States well, as binding foreign commitments could only sap its strength. The stress on “banks rather than tanks,” to use the phrasing of historian Bear Braumoeller,<sup>35</sup> enabled the United States to seek “geopolitical clout without strategic liability” (256). During the 1920s, the policy reached a climax in arms control agreements and the Kellogg-Briand Antiwar Pact (1928), the pinnacle of seeking to shape world affairs while remaining aloof from any responsibility.

Kupchan finds isolationism taking an irresponsible turn in the 1930s, its darkest era, as manifested by the neutrality acts of 1935-37. By this legislation, the United States violated its long-standing tradition of trading with all belligerent powers, rather putting severe limits on any such commerce. The United States was engaging in a geopolitical retreat just when efforts to check Germany and Japan were sorely needed. In the period 1939-41 President Franklin D. Roosevelt was able to reverse such legislation, thereby supplying needed aid to nations fighting the Axis powers. Yet only after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 did America quell its isolationist proponents. Even on the eve of the Japanese strike, most Americans opposed entering World War II. Yet henceforth, policymakers, and most of the general public as well, saw America’s very preservation lying in far-flung commitments overseas.

To Kupchan, the period 1941-2000 marked the era of ‘liberal internationalism.’ In a marriage of American power and partnership with Western allies, the United States sought to promote an open trading order, extend the democratic way of life, and, most important of all, prevent domination of Eurasia by a hostile power. By 1991, it had successfully won the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Although it experienced a severe setback in the Vietnam War, relatively few citizens desired a pullback to the Western Hemisphere. For half a century, despite periodic strains, a bipartisan consensus prevailed.

With the Republican victory in the 1994 congressional elections, this consensus began to unravel. The Republicans stressed ‘realism’ (power and unilateralism), the Democrats idealism (multilateralism). Kupchan blames Clinton for dragging his feet concerning Bosnia and dismissing Moscow’s legitimate concerns over expanding NATO’s eastern frontier to the Russian border. If, in the wake of 9/11, a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was necessary, similar action in Iraq produced only instability and bloodshed. President Barack Obama wanted his liberal international lite, revealing his own ambivalence as to where to draw the line in such places as Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya.

In Kupchan’s eyes, Trump represents “America First Redux” (339). His foreign policy, however, was no “bolt from the blue.” Rather, it was deeply rooted in the country’s identity, resonating with much of its history. Trump effectively dismantled central elements of liberal internationalism, forging “a more isolationist, unilateralist, protectionist, and racist approach to statecraft” (344). Yet the policy of withdrawal had its limits. Anxieties concerning Russia caused the United States to increase its presence in Poland and to spend more on European defense. Similar tensions with China and North

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<sup>35</sup> Bear Braumoeller, “The Myth of American Isolationism,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6 (2010): 341-379.

Korea prevented reduction of the American presence in Asia. Only modest troop withdrawals took place in Syria while a sizable military presence remained in Iraq and additional forces were sent to Saudi Arabia.

Kupchan sees retrenchment as inevitable. Even such strident Trump critics as Democratic Senators Elizabeth Warren (MA) and Bernie Sanders (VT) speak in terms of sharp restraint, both attacking any policy of “endless wars” (361). Public opinion surveys continually show that most Americans want their leaders to reduce strategic commitments overseas and concentrate on domestic matters. They think their nation’s overseas partners should take up a greater share of international burdens. Moreover, global realities assure that in the twenty-first century no country or region will dominate the world.

Therefore, to Kupchan, the fundamental issue centers on whether varied withdrawals should be arbitrary or planned. Pulling out of Eurasia would intensify rivalries and invite further arms races. If, however, the United States should remain the “principal pacifier” of great-power politics in Europe and Asia, it must stop “spinning its wheels in wars of choice in the strategic periphery,” that is, the Middle East (368). Moreover, it should continue its role as “beacon of republican values and institutions,” tipping “the scales toward freedom and human dignity” (369-70). Such problems as climate change, global pandemics, and cybersecurity require global cooperation. America should undertake this task with restraint, acting by example and abjuring force. It can only retain its credibility by putting its own house in order, that is by addressing economic inequality, instituting an effective and pluralistic immigration policy, and returning to Congress the ultimate power to make decisions concerning war and peace.

Some of Kupchan’s phrasing is particularly telling. After Pearl Harbor, the U.S. sought “to make the world safe for an America that was no longer seeking to shun it, but instead to run it” (21). In the early twentieth century, it wanted “to turn Afghanistan and Iraq into Ohio” (323). To Trump, “Making America great again meant making it white again” (344). There are, however, several questionable statements. The South did not totally back American entry into World War I (17). Twelve southern representatives -- including majority leader Claude Kitchin (D-NC) -- were among the fifty that voted against the president’s war resolution. Among the six opposition senators were such powerhouses as James K. Vardaman (D-MS.) and William J. Stone (D-MO.). Wilson did not justify entering the war “exclusively on idealistic grounds” (19). His war message devoted much attention to Germany’s sinking of American merchant ships, the prevalence of espionage and sabotage, and efforts to entice Mexico as its wartime ally. At stake, he said, were “the most sacred rights of our nation and our people.”<sup>36</sup>

Senate rejection of League of Nations membership might be more subtle than Kupchan suggests (19-20). Though it turned down Wilson’s version of the League Covenant on both November 19, 1919 and March 19, 1920, in both instances a majority of the Senate had voted for some form of League membership. It’s just that the president could not obtain sufficient votes for an unmodified Article X, which involved preserving the territorial integrity and political independence of League members. Wilson’s leading biographer John Milton Cooper, Jr. finds it striking that large majorities of Americans would voluntarily, if only partially, break from “the hallowed policy of avoiding international commitments outside the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>37</sup>

Occasionally the names of historical actors need modification. Social theorist “William Sumner” was always referred as William Graham Sumner (109), legislator “Edith Rogers” as Edith Nourse Rogers (277), and historian “Robert Smith” as Robert Freeman Smith (213) much in the same way one refers to poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, clergyman Harry

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<sup>36</sup> Wilson, war message, *Congressional Record*, April 2, 1917, 103.

<sup>37</sup> Cooper, Jr., *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5, 425. See also James Dill Startt, “American Editorial Opinion and the Main Problems of Peacemaking in 1919” (Ph.D. diss.; University of Maryland, 1965).



Emerson Fosdick, and U.S. president William Henry Harrison. Arthur Schlesinger should always be identified as Junior, for his father of the same name was also a distinguished historian (290).

The book contains minor factual errors. The Virgin Islands were purchased from Denmark in 1917, not 1916 (223). Because of his notoriety, Henry Ford's name was dropped from the America First Committee's (AFC) national committee within four months after the organization's founding; he played no role in AFC activities (289). It was Joseph Kennedy, not Robert, who served as U.S. ambassador to Britain (312). Candy manufacturer Robert Welch, not prominent attorney Joseph Welch, founded the John Birch Society (315).

One wishes that Kupchan had done more to flesh out his claim that Axis control of Eurasia would have imperiled America's "own security and way of life" (298). He cites Roosevelt's fireside chat of December 29, 1940, in which the president warned of Axis control of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the high seas (287). Moreover, addressing the Pan-American Union on May 27, 1941, Roosevelt pointed to Germany's economic challenge, embodied in the ability to undersell U.S. goods to such a degree that America's entire economic system would be crippled.<sup>38</sup>

The isolationists countered in turn that hemispheric defense, based upon sea and particularly air power, could ward off any invasion. Conversely, an American Expeditionary Force in Europe would create at least a million casualties. Once Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, a bloody stalemate between the two dictatorships might have bled both nations white, thereby making direct American intervention unnecessary. One might further argue that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor resulted from botched American diplomacy. Isolationists also maintained that the American economy could maintain itself through autarchy, barter, hemispheric integration, and the ability to undersell Axis goods.<sup>39</sup> Such scenarios do not prove that the isolationists were right, only that their claims could use more discussion.

It is hard to discuss isolationist thought without some reference to Charles A. Beard. Through such books as *The Open Door at Home* and *The Idea of National Interest* (both 1934), Beard maintained that American continent could sustain itself provided that the United States abandon its 'frontier-expansionist' theory of history and allocate its human and material resources in a more rational and equitable fashion.<sup>40</sup> Such works were highly influential during the 1930s and experienced a revival among the students of William Appleman Williams in the 1960s-70s.

Taken in all, Kupchan has produced a first-rate account. The style is readable, the research thorough, manifesting a superior mastery of primary sources and the scholarly literature. By and large, Kupchan's treatment is masterful, essential reading for policymakers and a public that is prone to cliché thinking. Professors of American diplomatic history would do well to assign this work; at the very least, they should update their lecture notes. Hopefully, this work will force Americans to leave the world of polemics for that of reflection and responsible analysis.

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<sup>38</sup> Roosevelt, *New York Times*, May 28, 1941, 6.

<sup>39</sup> For defense of this position, see Bruce M. Russett, *No Clear and Present Danger: A Skeptical View of U.S. Entry into World War II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Wayne S. Cole, "What Might Have Been," *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture* 15 (December 1991): 20-22; anti-interventionists cited in chapters 8, 9, 15 of Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Beard, *The Open Door at Home* (New York: Macmillan, 1934); Beard, *The Idea of National Interest* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).

## REVIEW BY ANDREW JOHNSTONE, UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

The earliest use of isolationism as a description of America's worldview that I have ever encountered comes from England in March 1919. As the *Manchester Guardian's* correspondent wrote regarding the ongoing debate in Washington regarding the League of Nations, the Senate was broadly composed of two groups "which may for convenience be called Hamiltonian and Isolationism." The definition of isolationism provided was very context specific and included four groups. The isolationists included "a very strong anti-British current." Yet the unnamed correspondent felt it necessary to highlight a particular grouping within this current: "the real virus of this opposition comes not from tradition but from Sinn Fein." While the Irish were the "spearhead," behind them were the "whole force of irreconcilably pro-German and disaffected sentiment." More broadly, a third group was "simply anti-European, and opposed by instinct to participation." A fourth and rather different group from the west coast was "worried about the raising of the Japanese immigration question." Focused mainly on the League debate, even this early definition of isolationism had diverse influences and struggled for coherence.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike the *Manchester Guardian* story, Charles Kupchan's ambitious new book attempts to define isolationism throughout the United States' entire history. *Isolationism* provides a sweeping and very readable narrative of most the nation's foreign policy history (the Cold War is treated relatively briefly, but it has received plenty of attention elsewhere). In the broadest terms, I agree with some of the arguments made here. It is important to study the reasons why Americans have – and have not – engaged with the wider world. In contemporary terms, I agree that the United States has overreached, that some kind of retrenchment is necessary, and the relative lack of domestic consensus makes it difficult for the U.S. to maintain the type of grand strategy that it held during the Cold War. I do not agree that trying to define what is happening now as isolationism is helpful or accurate, especially given the static model of isolationism presented here. Most importantly, the book does not change my view that isolationism is a simplistic and misleading term for describing American foreign relations.

The book has three objectives. The first is to tell the story of isolationism in full. Here, Kupchan is correct that no overarching history of isolationism across U.S. history exists, though many historians have examined it in part.<sup>42</sup> The second stated objective is to rehabilitate isolationism. This is not in order to make a case for an isolationist foreign policy, but to look for guidance as the "the United States needs to pull back from an excess of foreign commitments if it is to bring ends and means back into alignment" (13). The third objective is to provide "a fresh account of the sources of isolationism and internationalism" (13).

Crucially, Kupchan defines isolationism as "a grand strategy aimed at disengagement with foreign powers and the avoidance of enduring strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland" (6). In a related footnote, he clarifies that he defines isolationism as being against alliances, intervention, foreign wars, and strategic commitments outside North America (374). This definition allows for commercial and territorial expansion, but is primarily concerned with the lack of

<sup>41</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 21 March 1919, 7.

<sup>42</sup> For works on isolationism that are willing to engage with the term, see Selig Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth Century Reaction* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1957); Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-45* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). For works that are more critical of the term, see William Appleman Williams, "The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920s," *Science and Society* 18 (Winter 1954): 1-20; Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Bear Braumoeller, "The Myth of Isolationism," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 6 (October 2010): 349-371; Andrew Johnstone, "Isolationism and internationalism in American Foreign Relations," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 9 (March 2011): 7-20; Brooke L. Blower, "From Isolationism to Neutrality: A New Framework for Understanding American Political Culture, 1919-1941," *Diplomatic History* 38 (April 2014): 345-376; Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

engagement and alliances with other great powers. It builds on President George Washington's farewell address which stated "it is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world" (87) and Thomas Jefferson's inaugural which called for "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none" (93).

With a focus on those classic texts, and an emphasis on high government policy with respect to great powers, the definition of isolationism offered here is a very traditional one. A more original approach to the concept of isolationism can be found in chapter two which outlines six 'logics' of isolationism that provide greater depth to the concept of isolationism: capitalizing on national security, serving as redeemer nation, advancing liberty and prosperity at home, preserving freedom of action abroad, protecting social homogeneity, and promoting pacifism. These logics or themes resurface occasionally at various points during the book, notably at the end, but it is unfortunate that they do not appear more frequently and explicitly throughout. Of course, this would have led to a slightly different book than the narrative-driven one produced here. However, the six themes have the potential to offer a more dynamic and complex understanding of America's place in the world, even if most of them have also been used to justify American action overseas. Instead, the book's defining feature of isolationism remains George Washington's "great rule" (34).

Kupchan acknowledges that not all historians and political scientists like the concept of isolationism. He criticises objections to "the isolationist moniker" as "off the mark," but this is because those who voice the objections do not agree with his particular definition of isolationism (30-32). He argues that "from 1789 until 1941, with notable departures in 1898 and during World War I, the United States *was* strikingly isolationist" (30). Kupchan admits that the United States expanded over the North American continent during this period and that it was economically expansionist, but maintains that it was still isolationist because the United States was unwilling to take on "enduring strategic commitments" (31).

The question of definition is important and at the heart of much of the historiographical disagreement. This is because the term isolationism is not intuitive. It implies that the United States cut itself off from world affairs, which it has never done. Kupchan does not explain why isolationism – a word that he concedes only came into use in the twentieth century, and one that has been used mostly as a slur since the late 1930s – is the best word to describe a policy outlook that included extensive economic and cultural exchange, as well as an awful lot of territorial expansion. Still, if you accept the narrow definition provided here, the first part of the book is an extensive and largely uncontroversial synthesis. The book is generally sound on the revolutionary era, the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine, the antebellum era, and the late nineteenth century. America's limited international role in this period means that the static definition of isolationism just about holds, though events that do not fit the definition such as war with Mexico are rather rapidly glossed over.

The second section of the book covers the 1898-1941 period, as the United States grew in power and played a more enhanced international role. At this point, it becomes clear that the book's static definition of isolationism is far more rigid than the book's narrative, which reveals whatever isolationism is to be far more evolutionary than the definition offered on page six. This part of the book focuses primarily on the 1898 war and its aftermath, and U.S. involvement in World War I. Those wars clearly reveal the limits of isolationism during this period. Yet the title of this section – "The Defeat of Realist and Idealist Internationalism, 1898-1941" – indicates the apparent persistence of isolationism. While U.S. involvement in European affairs in 1917-18 initially appeared to be a rejection of more than a century of isolationism, the subsequent rejection of the League of Nations saw the United States move strategically backwards in the 1920s and 1930s.

The biggest issue with this part of the book concerns its treatment of U.S. involvement in Latin America. With reference to the interwar years, Kupchan argues, "The United States continued its heavy-handed engagement in the Americas, but it effectively retreated to a grand strategy of hemispheric isolation" (8). Again, this is not at all intuitive: how can isolation be hemispheric? How can U.S. intervention in numerous republics over three decades still represent 'isolationism'? Perhaps American interventions in Latin America do not fit Kupchan's definition of 'strategic commitments' but this is at odds with his acknowledgement that "the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 heightened the region's commercial and strategic importance to the United States" (222).

The argument is hindered by terminological slipperiness regarding exactly where the United States can engage while remaining an isolationist nation. The definition of isolationism on page six refers to the “North American homeland,” which one assumes refers to the United States itself. Yet on page 31, strategic engagements do not count against isolationism unless they are beyond America’s “immediate neighbourhood.” On the following page, the definition of isolationism spreads to include intervention “outside North America” and in the next sentence it widens out to “the Western hemisphere” (32). In the end, it seems that none of these geopolitical entanglements count against isolationism because American ambition in the Western hemisphere was, in Kupchan’s own words, “foreordained” (32).

Yet even if you accept Kupchan’s definition of isolationism, the main problem with his argument comes in the final chapters as the narrative focuses on the post-Cold War world and the last decade in particular. If you take the narrow definition offered in the first part of the book, then it is impossible to make a case for “isolationism’s current comeback” (24). The definition is simply too static to cover the vastly different current circumstances compared to the nineteenth century. The United States has not disengaged with other great powers or left its most significant strategic commitments. It still has alliances. It still intervenes in foreign wars outside of North America. The United States has military bases around the world. For all of the rhetoric of the past decade, it has not left the United Nations Organization. It has not left NATO. Its relationship with those organizations is complicated, but it was at many times during the Cold War too. I agree that President Donald Trump’s policies and rhetoric were highly problematic, but by the book’s own definition, Trump’s foreign policy does not qualify as isolationism. There are inconsistencies in the argument on Trump’s policies: for example, Kupchan criticises Trump for a number of policies (notably on trade) that he would not have considered strategic commitments earlier in the book. For all his many flaws, Trump certainly did not provide a “nineteenth century grand strategy” (340).

The penultimate chapter is entitled “The End of the Cold War, Overreach, and the Isolationist Comeback.” Here, Kupchan acknowledges that the United States has carried out more military interventions in this period than during the Cold War, has enlarged NATO, and has been fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which hardly add up to isolationism however you define it. Kupchan rightly argues here that this has led to a sense of overreach (323). However, Kupchan does not explicitly consider whether it is possible to step back from overreach without retreating to isolationism until his final pages. At this point it is notable that he suggests that the United States “end its endless wars in the Middle East” despite criticising presidents Barack Obama and Trump just pages earlier for trying to do exactly that (368). For most of this final part, it seems that any step backwards is an isolationist step, which is at odds with the author’s attempt to rehabilitate isolationism. The final section of the book reads far more as a critique of isolationism than an attempt to learn from it.

Of course, this is all assuming that one accepts the book’s definition of isolationism. For many historians, myself included, the term is not a suitable one to describe the foreign relations of the United States (though a history of how the term has been used as a weapon remains to be written).<sup>43</sup> One word cannot capture the entire history of the nation’s suspicion of foreign entanglements, and nor should it. It is simply misleading. This is obviously the case beyond 1898, but it is true even in the nineteenth century. Kupchan’s narrow definition leaves out too much of the history of U.S. foreign relations. It downplays the interaction that came with westward expansion. The rigid separation of commercial and strategic interests diminishes the importance of trade as a driver of America’s world role. The strategic focus on the state means that non-state actors such as nineteenth century missionaries and international lawyers who counter the idea of a nation looking to avoid entanglements are omitted from the narrative.<sup>44</sup> The geographic focus on Europe and Asia means that hemispheric dominance is taken for granted. What is left is a term that is limited as both a descriptor and an analytical tool.

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<sup>43</sup> See the more critical works in footnote two.

<sup>44</sup> See for example, Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Benjamin Allen Coates, *Legalist Empire: International Law and American Foreign Relations in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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*Embracing Isolationism*

I will begin with a confession. As I began my studies of the role of ideas in U.S. foreign policy and politics, I focused initially on debates about empire in the late nineteenth century. I became fascinated with how different communities of thought engaged, adapted, updated, and rejected ideas about isolation, making them ‘modern’ and often compatible with emerging conceptions of internationalism. As I researched and wrote what became *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (2011), I found isolationist ideas across the political spectrum and I came to the conclusion that the caricature of isolationism as a philosophy advocating a walled-and-bounded United States obscured the variety and extent of isolationist ideas in U.S. history. I did not imagine that I would become a proponent of historicizing and embracing the term ‘isolationism.’ But here we are.

On those grounds I welcome Charles Kupchan’s *Isolationism: A History of America’s Efforts to Shield Itself from the World*, which is the first full sweeping U.S. history of isolationism in statecraft. From early American Republican expressions urging ‘non-entanglement’ to debates over expansionism and empire at the turn of the twentieth century, from the pushback against entry into both world wars to the unilateralist U.S. responses to the attacks of 9/11 up through President Donald Trump’s invocation of ‘America First’ in his January 2017 Inaugural Address, the book firmly establishes the importance of isolationism and isolationist ideas throughout the course of U.S. history and in American diplomacy.

Maligned and mangled in public discourse, isolationism can seem to have lost meaning. Even in scholarly circles we lack clarity about definitions. And yet there it remains, an ever-present term and a live concept in politics and intellectual life. Every presidential administration since the end of the Cold War has been accused of ‘neo-isolationism.’ In virtually every political debate over foreign policy during the past several generations we find the epithet ‘isolationist’ bandied about, often to tar opponents of any given ‘internationalist’ stance (from military intervention to binding economic agreement and beyond). In my view, given the term’s ambiguity, scholars should engage the term and excavate its multiple meanings and historical contexts. It seems clear that this is exactly what Kupchan intends in his ambitious book. I applaud that.

Written by a renowned political scientist with policy-making expertise, *Isolationism* rejects the analysis of those who object to the “isolationist moniker” (30-32). This is the first big move of the book; it is the very ground upon which the project stands. In turn, Kupchan’s analysis relies largely on a synthesis of existing scholarship with fresh insights drawn from across history, political science, and primary sources.

## Definitions

It is incumbent on anyone writing about the history of isolationism to put forward a clear definition, to defend it, and to trace change over time. The first two goals are accomplished very well in this book, the latter is achieved into the early twentieth century but is less effective later on, as Kupchan does not spend much time on shifting ideas about isolation from World War II through the Cold War.

Advancing a fairly static and traditional guiding definition of isolationism, Kupchan’s book hearkens back to President George Washington’s ‘great rule’ of extending commercial relations while prioritizing non-entanglement and neutrality to guide U.S. foreign policy. The “book defines isolationism as a grand strategy aimed at disengagement with foreign powers and the avoidance of enduring strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland” (6).

Six “distinct but interlocking logics” of isolationism are crucial to the definition and structure of the isolationism at the heart of this history (34). Kupchan suggests all the logics were present from early on and “figured as elements in the evolving narrative of American exceptionalism.” They are uniquely arranged but still should be familiar to historians of foreign relations and international relations scholars, as follows: “1) Capitalizing on natural security; 2) serving as a redeemer

nation; 3) advancing liberty and prosperity at home; 4) preserving freedom of action abroad; 5) protecting social homogeneity; 6) promoting pacifism” (34). I would have liked to have seen these logics more frequently and directly analyzed throughout the book. They do recur often and the ideas are present and, as Kupchan rightly notes, their salience changed over time and “depended on domestic as well as international developments” (35). In that vein I would have appreciated more attention to the intersection of domestic and international factors as a driving force in those changes.

Admittedly, one major challenge is generating a *longue durée* account of isolationism that can accommodate sometimes rapid and at other times gradual change over a long swath of time and to distill and categorize those core tenets with precision while remaining sufficiently flexible. My solution was to argue for a constellation view of isolationism, more of a plural rather than a singular principle or policy position, one that was always in motion like the night sky, yet also fixed in important ways. I found two main types of isolationism across U.S. history—political and protectionist—and singled out eight points of emphasis, or “strains of isolationism,” and a hierarchy.<sup>45</sup> In my view, what virtually all isolationist ideas share is a core commitment to non-entanglement; neutrality is a second most-crucial point of emphasis, right alongside unilateralism. Other stars in my isolationist-intellectual firmament include: self-sufficiency, hemispherism or continentalism, a temporary/ad hoc approach to treaties and agreements, an exceptionalist view of domestic mission, and the effort to minimize war (including conditional and absolute pacifism). My definitional framework for isolationism generally accords with Kupchan’s, though it emphasizes more change over time and conditionality. As I argue in a piece entitled “The Enduring Power of Isolationism,” “Traditionally, Americans who opposed the restrictions on national sovereignty imposed by entering into global agreements, permanent alliances, and interventions in foreign conflicts have advocated for political isolationism.”<sup>46</sup> Like Kupchan, I see isolationist arguments in the historical record as a kind of malleable stance, or persuasion, with clear referents and explicit invocations of historical precedents (particularly what I term the “three policy pillars” established by presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Monroe) as guiding concepts, as means of generating legitimacy, and as mechanisms for updating and refining attendant ideas to meet contemporary challenges.<sup>47</sup>

What have scholars said?

Scholarly debates over isolationism have centered on two main issues, one conceptual and one in the historical record: battles over defining isolationism and whether or not it had any fundamental coherence as a political philosophy; and arguments about whether or not the U.S. was ‘isolationist’ after WWI and during the ‘interwar’ years.

In a persuasive article in *Diplomatic History* Brooke Blower tackled both of these issues. She argued that neutrality and neutralism are better ways to understand the United States’ guiding principles and debates about relations to and with the world in the 1920s and 1930s, which were once thought of as the ‘heyday’ of isolationism. Blower notes that the U.S. was very much engaged with the world throughout the period and that we do not find frequent use of the term until the 1930s.

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011, 2015), see “strains of isolationism,” 347-352.

<sup>46</sup> Nichols, “The Enduring Power of Isolationism: An Historical Perspective,” *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* 57:3 (Summer 2013): 390-407.

<sup>47</sup> Nichols, *Promise and Peril*, 4-6; Nichols, “Untold Story of American Isolationism (aka Why History Matters Today),” TEDxPortland, April 2018. URL: [https://www.ted.com/talks/christopher\\_nichols\\_the\\_untold\\_story\\_of\\_american\\_isolationism](https://www.ted.com/talks/christopher_nichols_the_untold_story_of_american_isolationism).

Blower observes that journalistic coverage in that period had generally ‘negative connotations’ and did not embody much of a clear political philosophy.<sup>48</sup>

In a recent book Stephen Wertheim confirms elements of that analysis but moves the needle later, rejecting the value of isolationism as an analytical tool because he finds that mid-to-late-1930s advocates of collective security “invented this category as an antonym for internationalism, using it to characterize their opponents as wholly antithetical to intercourse among nations. Despite drawing on a long-standing discourse of isolation, the –ism, connoting a worldview, was new.”<sup>49</sup>

Kupchan does not address these works but does briefly acknowledge related critiques of isolationism as ideology, as policy, and in the ‘interwar’ years. He cites Robert Kagan as emphasizing the United States’ perennial “aggressive expansionism” and “acquisitive materialism” as a dangerous nation. Kupchan singles out political scientist Bear Braumoeller, who called U.S. isolationism a ‘myth.’<sup>50</sup> Similarly Kupchan notes the arguments of Warren Cohen and Melvyn Leffler who have emphasized the U.S.’s global influence and commitments rather than isolationist constraints, particularly after World War I (30).<sup>51</sup>

I would add a few more critics. Perhaps most famously, William Appleman Williams argued in the 1950s that the 1920s were not isolationist but “marked by express and extended involvement with – and intervention in the affairs of – other nations of the world.”<sup>52</sup> Paul Johnson, forty-one years later, argued that “the United States ... has always been an internationalist country.”<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, as Kupchan touches on largely in the notes, it was in vogue in historical and political science scholarship from the 1950s through the 1970s to examine isolationism’s geographic and regional dimensions, its ‘impulse,’ and the roles of isolationism especially leading up to both world wars, with an eye to how and why isolationists/ism slowed U.S. involvement in the Second World War. Simultaneously, in that same period, other scholars sought to reject facile accounts that pitted isolationism against internationalism or as a singular causal factor in U.S. foreign relations. Here we find isolationism cast as myth, as legend, as imprecise, as outright incorrect, or as politically corrosive and vacuous. Writing in 2011 during yet another recurrence of public debates about isolationism one of the scions of the intellectual history of international relations, Michael Hunt wrote, “It’s time to retire isolationism as a bit of pseudo-history

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<sup>48</sup> Brooke Blower, “From Isolation to Neutrality: A New Framework for Understanding American Political Culture, 1919-1941,” *Diplomatic History* 38:2 (April 2014): 345-376, here, 351.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 32.

<sup>50</sup> Bear Braumoeller, “The Myth of American Isolationism,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6:4 (October 2010): 349-371.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Foreign Policy from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Warren Cohen, *Empire without Tears: America's Foreign Relations, 1921-1933* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Melvyn Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920-2015* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>52</sup> William Appleman Williams, “The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920’s,” *Science and Society* 18:1 (Winter 1954): 1-20, here, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Johnson, “The Myth of American Isolationism: reinterpreting the past,” *Foreign Affairs* 74:3 (May 1995): 159-164, here, 159.



that gained wide currency half a century ago under extraordinary circumstances.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Hunt’s assessment was even more biting; he said “isolationism is poor history” and hence “today few serious historians employ the term.”<sup>55</sup>

Kupchan’s bold project offers something different. He lines himself up with another body of scholars, like myself, Selig Adler, Ray Allen Billington, Wayne S. Cole, John Milton Cooper Jr., Justus Doenecke, Manfred Jonas, and Ernest May, to name a few, who have focused their work on the history of isolationism, often with differing (even competing) definitions, approaches, and eras of study.<sup>56</sup> Some prefer to emphasize unilateralism rather than isolationism, an approach for which Walter McDougall compellingly made the case in *Promised Land, Crusader State*.<sup>57</sup> Other scholars have been comfortable arguing for more wholesale positive assessments of isolationism, as Samuel Flagg Bemis did when he asserted “[s]urely the history of our foreign policy in relation to the successive postures of power in the world shows that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the United States profited adventitiously from the highly favorable circumstances of a secure and prosperous isolation.”<sup>58</sup>

This is a view with which Kupchan seems to agree. *Isolationism* thus aims to connect with this previous work not just to generate a definitive sweeping study of isolationism, but to present a policy-relevant useable past. For him, isolationism and isolationists abound in the historical record. His book, therefore, seeks nothing less than “the rehabilitation of isolationism” (9). The previous brief recapitulation of the ebbs and flows of scholarship, which aims to clarify the meaning of isolationism or to reject the term outright, reveals that rehabilitating such a fraught term and related set of ideas is a difficult, perhaps impossible, mission.

Undaunted, Kupchan’s audacious book aims to do so by advancing two other core objectives: First, it aspires to compile a/the first sweeping history of the subject, with an emphasis on “isolationism’s long hold on the practice of U.S. statecraft” (8); Second, it aims to relate a “fresh and arresting” account as well as “reinterpretation of isolationism and internationalism” (13). This final objective is multi-faceted, with historical sub-claims—illuminating the “enemy within,” isolationism as “national creed,” the transition from “from isolationism to internationalism,” and a final emphasis on “the end of the Cold War, the Onset of Strategic Excess, and the Isolationist backlash”—that are laid out in the introduction (13-24). They

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<sup>54</sup> Michael H. Hunt, “Isolationism: Behind the Myth, a Usable Past,” *UNC Press Blog*, June 29, 2011. <https://uncpressblog.com/2011/06/29/michael-h-hunt-isolationism-behind-the-myth-a-usable-past/>.

<sup>55</sup> Hunt, “Isolationism: Behind the Myth, a Usable Past,” *UNC Press Blog*.

<sup>56</sup> Nichols, *Promise and Peril*; Ernest May, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966); John Milton Cooper, Jr.’s *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1969); Felix Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse*, Adler, *The Uncertain Giant, 1921- 1941* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1965); Wayne S. Cole, *Charles A. Lindbergh and the Battle against American Intervention in World War II* (New York, 1974); Cole, *Roosevelt & the Isolationists, 1932-45* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Justus Doenecke, *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (Lanham: 2000); Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>57</sup> Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Mariner Books, 1998). McDougall terms it “unilateralism, or Isolationism (so called),” as one of eight main American diplomatic traditions. As Kupchan remarks, Andrew Johnstone also pursued alternatives in examining the “conceptual limitations of the isolationism versus internationalism dichotomy (376, note 7), in “Isolationism and Internationalism in American Foreign Relations,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 9:1 (2011): 7-20.

<sup>58</sup> Samuel Flagg Bemis, American Historical Association Presidential Address, delivered December 29, 1961, published in the *American Historical Review* 67:2 (January 1962): 291-305.



provide much for readers to consider and are elaborated in compelling ways and generally well-supported by evidence throughout the book.

### *The United States was Strikingly Isolationist*

Opening the book with the enduring influence of isolationism and definitions in the introduction and “an anatomy of isolationism” section (29-60), Kupchan puts it bluntly: those “considered objections to the isolationist moniker are, simply put, off the mark. From 1789 until 1941, with notable departures in 1898 and during World War I, the United States *was* strikingly isolationist” (30). He recognizes Americans acting “in the world” in commerce, in cultural exchange, and in politics, and he admits that continental expansionism as well as later hemispheric interventionism might seem counter-intuitively isolationist, yet his emphasis is clear: “when it came to pursuing geopolitical ambition farther afield, Americans were decidedly opposed. Indeed, their primary geopolitical focus until World War II was on countering adjacent challenges” (31).

The book makes its case in three chronological sections which also reveal the central contours of the book’s main arguments: The Era of Isolationism (1789-1898), The Defeat of Realist and Idealist Internationalism (1898-1941), and The Rise and Fall of Liberal Internationalism (1941-2020). The focus here is largely on major leaders, politicians, policymakers, presidential administrations, and high-level diplomacy. As such, in arguing for the fundamental isolationism of U.S. foreign relations from the early Republic through World War II, the book is largely focused on political thought along with formal processes (treaties, agreements, conflicts), situating isolationism as “an end as well as a means, a fundamental maxim of U.S. statecraft and not just an instrument in practice” (34).

*Isolationism* does an especially good job grounding ideas and policies related to isolationism in the founding era, with an emphasis on Washington’s 1796 Farewell Address (87), on President Thomas Jefferson’s First Inaugural in 1801 (93), and on the “limits of hemispheric ambition” (100). However this grounding also reveals some of the limits to a ‘disengagement’ tradition-based definition of isolationism as it is less flexible when applied in other eras.

The book’s coverage of the ‘imperial moment’ of the 1890s, and the author’s deployment of the lens of isolationism to understand American expansionism and the annexations of Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam is illuminating. I particularly appreciate Kupchan’s connection between Republican imperialism and isolationist backlash (chapter 8, 177-216). I also found it refreshingly clear how the book unpacks nineteenth-into-early-twentieth-century assertions of hemispheric ‘free hand’ doctrines (usually unilateralist) as a developing constitutive part of later isolationism rather than a seeming contradiction. This history also emphasizes the fundamentally internationalist dimensions of emerging new notions of isolationism, which to my mind is crucial to any comprehensive analysis of the changing dimensions of isolationist ideas and debates over time.

### *The Mid-Century Moment and Beyond*

In 1939, former Governor, anti-League of Nations ‘Irreconcilable’, and sitting California Republican Senator Hiram Johnson reminisced that “we became used to this in 1918, 1919 and 1920” and accepted the name isolationist “as a badge of honor,” but back then it was “never applied with such malevolence ...as of today.”<sup>59</sup> In this single pithy recollection we can discern a key aspect of the history of isolationism as a term, in policy, and as a changing set of ideas.

As Justus Doenecke has established in his work and as we see in Kupchan’s ambitious book, many at mid-century may have spurned the terms ‘isolationist’ and ‘isolationism,’ but they had adhered to isolationist positions and a surprising number still seemed to identify as such. Sure, they often favored more politically-advantageous (strategic) phrases, terms that were

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<sup>59</sup> Recollections of Hiram Johnson quoted in Boake Carter, “The Calling of Names,” *Wilkes Barre Record*, 29 June 1939.

less freighted, and less clearly pejorative—anti-interventionist or non-interventionist, nationalist, continentalist, or policies of Americanism or hemispherism, to name just a few of the many in circulation. But there were many of them, from all walks of life, advancing arguments against binding diplomatic and military commitments, trying to bind the war-making capacities of the presidency, seeking neutrality and non-entanglement, and advocating to restrict new immigrants and focus on the depression-ravaged economy at home.

The mid-century period—or, more specifically, the 1930s through U.S. intervention in World War II at the end of 1941 and in early 1942—features prominently in Kupchan’s book. It is this era that is essential for understanding the history of isolationist ideas and debates as well as the historiographical controversies about the meaning and impact of isolationism as any sort of coherent political philosophy. To Kupchan the “tragic staying power of interwar isolationism” is vital to understand as a brake on President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the interventionists (292). And, as he argues, this fit with longer patterns as well as a renewed “headstrong unilateralism” that had wide appeal not just for politicians, such as archetypal isolationist Republican Senator from Idaho William Borah, as well as pundits, journalists, activists, and scholars but also for the rank and file of both political parties, but especially Republicans (293).

Kupchan observes that the 1920s and 1930s ‘march of fascism’ was met with ‘interwar retreat.’ To him it is critical that this era be understood as one that was fundamentally characterized as isolationist, despite all the ways in which the U.S. was involved with the world. As such, he argues that “all the variants of isolationist logic that had informed the nation’s identity and statecraft since its founding were in full swing, contributing to its political appeal.” Thus, “[i]solationism’s allure was neither sectional nor partisan, but instead enjoyed support across the political spectrum and across the country. With so many versions of isolationist logic in play, virtually all Americans could find much to like in steadfast adherence to a policy of neutrality and strategic detachment” (292).

What is more, and to embellish the earlier point, although Kupchan relies more on a synthesis of secondary sources and does not explore grassroots isolationism in depth, the archives reveal that during the mid-1930s through 1941 a tremendous number of those from across the political, socio-economic, racial, gender, and regional spectrum called themselves ‘isolationist.’ This clinches Kupchan’s claim about the popularity of explicitly isolationist stance(s). Those who believe that there was no such thing as isolationism or isolationists, would be well served by exploring letters to senators on the foreign relations committee and to the editors of newspapers, GIs’ letters, the organizational files of the America First Committee and the American Legion, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, along with assorted memoirs and dairies. In them you will find many of the people whom historian David Goodman refers to as the “ordinary isolationists.”<sup>60</sup> We not only see letter after letter to the editor from 1938 through 1941 in which scores of people write to identify as ‘isolationist’ and also express clear foreign policy principles, articulations of vital interests and approaches, and draw on historical evidence (largely lessons learned from U.S. entry into World War I, asserting a need to more closely match foreign policy means to proposed ends). Take, for example, Dr. J.G. Berneike who wrote to the *Santa Ana Register* to say: “I am an isolationist ... I am pro-American first of all. I believe that we can serve the cause of democracy best by keeping out of the European war.”<sup>61</sup> There were many self-avowed isolationists at all levels.

Along these lines, as Doenecke has observed, isolationism and non/anti-interventionism changed over time and are not the same thing. At the margins I think Kupchan might have done more to clarify this more consistently throughout the book. In particular, the section devoted to the America First Committee (AFC) might be usefully reframed to grapple with this

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<sup>60</sup> With thanks to David Goodman, with whom the author has collaborated on SHAFR panels and on a draft article and forum. Goodman ms draft in the author’s possession. Goodman has an important new book manuscript forthcoming which will lay out, among other things, a case for a grassroots understanding of isolationism as part of a broad range of ‘ordinary Americans’ views about and advocacy for particular foreign policies and approaches to the U.S.’s relations to and with the world.

<sup>61</sup> *Santa Ana Register*, 7 June 1940, 25.

overtly and to take a stand on how characteristically ‘isolationist’ we should understand the AFC and its aims to have been (288).<sup>62</sup>

The vast majority of the book (to chapter 12) covers the period up to World War II, leaving isolationist ideas in the post-1945 period relatively unexplored. I, for one, would have liked to have seen Kupchan grapple with anti-interventionism from the Korean and Vietnam Wars through the ‘forever wars’ to disentangle some of the thorny strands of isolationist ideas at work in the politics and activism from across a wide swath of society—from Robert Taft and Russell Kirk to Martin Luther King Jr. and Noam Chomsky to Ella Baker and Mary Clarke and Eva Helen Pauling to Andrew Bacevich and David Dellinger, and from wide range of organizations and elected officials as well.

In my view Kupchan should be specifically commended for grappling with the logic of repugnant versions of isolationist concepts. That is no mean feat. He carefully makes legible immigration restriction, racism, and efforts to protect social homogeneity which were often critical to isolationist positions. He does not succumb to facile vilification or caricature in understanding the historical development of isolationist ideas, policies, and debates. However, Kupchan mostly explores a different binary, the clash of realism-idealism, seeking especially to clarify the relationship between realist assessments of the U.S.’s strategic position in the world and isolationism, with a focus on inflection points related to idealistic internationalism, for example “realist expansionism” in the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War era (184-187), and in chapter 9 on Wilsonian idealism and the isolationist backlash.

#### *A Path Forward?*

So what is at stake in this book? It is not so much history as the present and the future that *Isolationism* aims to address. ‘America First’ and the reactionary, transactional, largely unilateralist presidency of Donald Trump looms over this book like the sword of Damocles. But the animating impulse goes farther back, and extends from the end of the Cold War to the wake of 9/11. The transformations of this era set in motion first a series of debates about the United States’ guiding principles as hegemon for a ‘unipolar’ world and then, after wars in Afghanistan and Iraq challenged any possibility of the U.S. serving as a ‘global policeman’ or achieving the aims of democracy-promotion, as rising and risen powers, most notably China, portended a new balance of geopolitical power. With an eye to the policy relevance of his research, Kupchan takes a daring step in this book to attempt to locate a ‘middle path’ between isolationism and liberal internationalism. He seeks, it seems, to moor a new policy direction in some of those oldest bedrock ‘isolationist’ notions in U.S. history, going back to Washington and Jefferson. For a world in which some retrenchment is not only inevitable, but wise, Kupchan provides a useable past that might help to chart a path between the Scylla and Charybdis of the “isolationism [that] ruled for much of American history” and the “unstinting internationalism [that] followed” to generate a new “grand strategy that is still idealist in vision and voice—even if more realist in practice” (371). For Kupchan, this requires accepting a more pluralistic world order but also a U.S. effort to “reclaim its exceptionalist mantle and mission while pursuing judicious retrenchment” by explicitly building on much older notions of the U.S. as an exemplar and not a crusader state (370). But is that really possible or preferable? And what of the myriad problems caused in the past by hubristic visions and versions of exceptionalism?

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<sup>62</sup> I also think there is a major opportunity to do more here regarding the ideas underlying “America First,” which is so vital to this book’s over-arching framing as well as the so-called “Trump era.” I am thinking of Sarah Churchwell’s *Behold America* which demonstrates the late nineteenth century origins of the term “America First” in addition to the AFC in the 1940-41 period, and in so doing this might have cemented some of the book’s insights about isolationist commitments to social homogeneity that often took the form of racism and xenophobia. Sarah Churchwell, *Behold America: The Entangled History of “America First” and “the American Dream”* (New York: Basic Books, 2018). See also multi-authored special issue of “America First: The Past and Future of an Idea,” Melvyn P. Leffler and William Hitchcock, eds. *Passport* (September 2018),: <https://shafr.org/sites/default/files/passport-09-2018-america-first-essays.pdf>

As these questions and this lengthy essay suggest, *Isolationism* is likely to generate thought and debate. It will greatly benefit general readers and students. Published with the imprimatur of the Council on Foreign Relations, where Kupchan is a fellow (and full disclosure I am a member), it also is likely to reach and influence policymakers. In terms of the book's three main bold aims, the goal of 'rehabilitating' isolationism is the most controversial one and will no doubt provoke the most dispute among U.S. foreign relations historians and international relations scholars, including those in this roundtable. To my mind one of the great achievements of the book is just that: it pushes us to reconsider the enduring significance and long history of isolationism.

Looking at the world today, in light of the United States' chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, with innumerable worldwide military and diplomatic involvements, amidst the devastation of a global pandemic, and with climate change casting an ominous shadow over the present and future, it seems to be the perfect time to (re)consider the merits of at least some isolationist ideas about the limits of American power. It is a good moment to take stock. Frankly, it is past time to contemplate the path by which the U.S. and the world arrived here, including a thorough exploration of alternatives, potential guiding principles and ideologies, and, in particular, ideas about appropriate constraints on collective security and strategic commitments as well as multilateral engagements. But one of the perils of embracing the term 'isolationism' in order to do so—and seeking to clearly define and track it historically, with nuance—is that this seems to be a near impossible task. It may be a worthy effort, but it remains tremendously hard to shake off the misconceptions and caricatures that comprise the long train of baggage weighing down and slowing the forward movement of scholarship as well as policy advocacy aiming to take isolationism seriously.

## RESPONSE BY CHARLES A. KUPCHAN, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY AND COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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I am honored and grateful to have such a distinguished group of historians review *Isolationism*. As a political scientist, I particularly welcome the engagement of historians with my work. I hoped that my effort to tell the important story of isolationism across the arc of American history would speak to scholars of the nation's past as well as experts and general readers interested in contemporary U.S. foreign policy. I would also like to thank Peter Trubowitz, a political scientist who is a leading authority on the domestic sources of U.S. statecraft, for writing an introduction to this roundtable.

### *Defining Terms*

The reviews focus considerable attention on the term 'isolationism' itself, which is not surprising given its political and historiographical baggage. In the book, I define isolationism as "a grand strategy aimed at disengagement with foreign powers and the avoidance of enduring strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland" (6). As a guiding strategic doctrine, isolationism has had significant merits under some geopolitical circumstances and significant drawbacks under others – just as liberal internationalism has at times served the nation well and other times led the United States astray. My goal is to tell dispassionately the story of America's isolationist past, and to examine isolationism's eclipse by internationalist alternatives, in order to leaven debate at a critical time in the nation's history. As I note in the introductory chapter, the book "seeks to extract the wisdom of American's isolationist as well as its internationalist traditions to bring purposes and means back into balance . . . [and] help restore prudence to U.S. statecraft." (13)

To be sure, isolationism is a loaded term; as Christopher McKnight Nichols writes, "maligned and mangled in public discourse, isolationism can seem to have lost meaning." But I align myself with Nichols's robust defense of confronting isolationism head-on. The term's use as a pejorative distorts debate and scares scholars and strategists alike away from tackling the inescapable conceptual and policy issues at stake. Students of grand strategy seeking to understand the past in order to shed light on the present and future cannot run away from the term; it looms too large and is too central to understanding the trajectory of U.S. statecraft. As Nichols writes, "scholars should engage the term and excavate its multiple meanings and historical contexts."

Justus Donecke and John Milton Cooper, Jr. share Nichols's appreciation of the need to tackle isolationism head-on. Donecke recognizes "subtle differences" in how scholars define isolationism, but agrees that "to understand the phenomena itself, one needs a firm grasp of the American past." Cooper compliments the book for treating the full scope of isolationism "with true insight and understanding," yet also maintains that isolationism was more of a "habit" than a policy, a habit that produced an "attendant inattention to foreign affairs, which never cut much ice in politics or public discourse." That interpretation is by no means incompatible with my own. I write that isolationism "became part and parcel of the nation's political creed, not just a foreign policy strategy" (18) Indeed, it is precisely because the isolationist impulse was central to the nation's identity that it shaped public discourse and guided U.S. statecraft for so long.

Along with many other scholars, Andrew Johnstone firmly takes a different stance, contending that "isolationism is a simplistic and misleading term for describing American foreign relations." Johnstone contends that my definition of isolationism

"downplays the interaction that came with westward expansion. The rigid separation of commercial and strategic interests diminishes the importance of trade as a driver of America's world role. The strategic focus on the state means that non-state actors such as nineteenth century missionaries and international lawyers who counter the idea of a nation looking to avoid entanglements are omitted from the narrative."

Stephen Wertheim in his important new book, *Tomorrow, the World*, makes a similar argument, maintaining that United States was never isolationist; prior to World War II, it just practiced a far less militarized brand of international engagement to which he hopes the nation returns.<sup>63</sup>

But these terminological contortions do more to muddy than to clarify historical and strategic debate. Far from omitting from my narrative the multiple dimensions of U.S. engagement raised by Johnstone, *Isolationism* chronicles westward expansion and explores the role that traders, missionaries, lawyers, and bankers have played in shaping America's role in the world. However, the efforts of American citizens to trade and proselytize abroad should not be confused with the efforts of the American state to project its military power and extend its strategic reach far from the North American homeland. From the founding era until the end of the nineteenth century, the United States shunned strategic entanglement abroad. Today, the United States has a panoply of strategic commitments and hundreds of military bases around the world. When, how, and why that evolution in U.S. grand strategy took place is worthy of direct inquiry – and is the core subject of *Isolationism*.

Debate over the merits and liabilities of foreign entanglement has roiled political debate across the nation's history. In his Farewell Address, President George Washington aptly asked, "why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground?"<sup>64</sup> That warning against foreign entanglement went on to anchor U.S. grand strategy during the nineteenth century and to influence strategic debate ever since. When he accepted the Republican nomination in July 1920, Senator Warren Harding proclaimed that, "we stand for the policies of Washington . . . and against the internationalism and the permanent alliance with foreign nations proposed by" President Woodrow Wilson.<sup>65</sup> Warren won in a landslide with some sixty percent of the popular vote, clearing the way for the isolationist retreat and the America First movement of the interwar era. In his inaugural address, President Donald Trump proclaimed that, "from this day forward, it's going to be only America first," and proceeded to downsize military commitments in the Middle East and question the need for the nation's many military alliances.<sup>66</sup> A strategic doctrine counseling against foreign entanglement has been central to the American experience and remains central to contemporary political debate. It warrants forthright evaluation, not conceptual obfuscation.

Johnstone also critiques my definition of isolationism as "static" and "rigid." But he then goes on to acknowledge that the historical narrative treats isolationism as "evolutionary." Indeed, I lay out in the second chapter six core logics of isolationism and spend much of the book chronicling their evolution. As Nichols notes in his review, these logics "do recur often and the ideas are present and, as Kupchan rightly notes, their salience changed over time and 'depended on domestic as well as international developments'." I go into considerable length to explore how domestic and international developments combined to weaken and transform the isolationist impulse after 1898 – and eventually to replace it with a robust internationalism starting in 1941. For example, belief in American exceptionalism was long a justification for shunning foreign entanglement in order to protect the nation's democratic experiment from the corrupting influences of the outside world. The success of that experiment was to serve as a model for other nations; America would change the world, but only by example. Yet that same belief in the nation's exceptionalist calling later became a justification for trying to run the world rather than run away from it. Temporarily at the time of the Spanish-American War and, more durably after entry into

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> George Washington, "Washington's Farewell Address," *Yale Law School Avalon Project*, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp).

<sup>65</sup> Warren Harding, "Statement of Candidate Harding," July 22, 1920, *Advocate of Peace*, vol. 82 no. 8 (August 1920), 281–83.

<sup>66</sup> Donald Trump, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 2017, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/320188>.

World War II in 1941, Americans were ready to export Manifest Destiny and change the world through the projection of American power and purpose rather than by example.

Johnstone takes particular exception to my treatment of U.S. involvement in Latin America from 1898 through the interwar era, questioning the notion of “hemispheric isolation.” “How,” he asks, “can isolation be hemispheric?” President Franklin Roosevelt himself eloquently answered that question in his 1939 Annual Message:

“Fortunate it is that in this Western Hemisphere we have, under a common ideal of democratic government, a rich diversity of resources and of peoples functioning together in mutual respect and peace. That Hemisphere, that peace, and that ideal we propose to do our share in protecting against storms from any quarter. Our people and our resources are pledged to secure that protection.”<sup>67</sup>

Isolationism thus evolved from a doctrine advocating the restriction of strategic commitments to North America to one advocating that the United States extend its reach to a hemispheric zone of security – but go no further. This shift of course entailed an expansion in the understanding and practice of a strategy of non-entanglement – a primary reason that I devote a separate section of the book (Part II, 163-298) to this era. Nichols nicely summarizes the intent of this dynamic and evolutionary perspective: “I also found it refreshingly clear how the book unpacks nineteenth-into-early-twentieth-century assertions of hemispheric ‘free hand’ doctrines (usually unilateralist) as a developing constitutive part of later isolationism rather than a seeming contradiction.”

Finally, several of the reviewers take issue with my claim that the isolationist impulse has made a comeback, as demonstrated in particular by the Trump presidency. Cooper comments that “painting Trump as the exponent of isolationism redux . . . attributes to him a depth and consistency of thought that simply are not there.” I do not disagree. But I do maintain that Trump’s isolationist, unilateralist, protectionist, and nativist inclinations were, to good political effect, tapping into older but still relevant traditions in U.S. statecraft – “habits,” to use Cooper’s term. Trump was responding to widespread political pressure to back away from the expansive brand of liberal internationalism that has guided U.S. statecraft since the 1940s – the same pressure that has affected President Joseph Biden’s statecraft. Many aspects of Biden’s “foreign policy for the middle class” – his withdrawal from Afghanistan, his adherence to economic protection, his pushback of immigrants from the U.S. border – resonate with Trump’s ‘America First.’

Johnstone questions the utility of examining the current moment through the lens of isolationism. He is of course correct that the United States remains globally engaged and has alliances and bases around the world. But in the aftermath of the ‘forever wars’ in the Middle East and amid widespread economic insecurity that many Americans associate with globalization, the U.S. electorate and its representatives are asking probing questions about the costs and benefits of global engagement. For the first time since the World War II era, the scope and character of America’s role in the world are very much in political play. Arguments and impulses that were part of America’s isolationist past are again exercising influence on U.S. politics and statecraft. The nation’s inward turn makes particularly important a better understanding of isolationism’s role in the American experience.

I find it puzzling that Johnstone interprets my final chapter as suggesting that “any step backwards is an isolationist step” and that the final section of the book “reads far more as a critique of isolationism than an attempt to learn from it.” On the contrary, I devote the book’s conclusion to finding a middle ground between underreach and overreach, laying out a strategy of “judicious retrenchment” aimed at bringing means and purposes back into alignment. The title of my concluding chapter indicates as much: “Where Isolationism and Liberal Internationalism Meet: The Search for a Middle Ground.”

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<sup>67</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, “Annual Message to Congress,” January 4, 1939, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucs.edu/node/209128>.

As Nichols accurately notes, I seek “to moor a new policy direction in some of those oldest bedrock ‘isolationist’ notions in U.S. history, going back to Washington and Jefferson.” At the same time, cognizant of the mistakes of the interwar era, I recognize the dangers of a disruptive retreat and call for a “grand strategy that aims to do less while still doing enough” (367). I thus draw lessons from the nation’s isolationist and internationalist traditions to articulate a more modest and discriminating brand of internationalism – one that can serve as a check against the precipitous and dangerous return to isolationism that could stem from a political backlash against overreach. “Moving forward,” I argue, “the United States will need to engage in a messy and imperfect world while resisting the temptation either to recoil from it or to remake it” (370). Contra Johnstone, I explicitly call for the United States to step back – but not to step away.

### *Historical Interpretations*

The reviewers devote relatively little attention to my treatment of the founding era and the nineteenth century – even though it represents roughly one-third of the book. Nonetheless, I hope that readers will pay keen attention to the first section of the book as well as the portions dealing with the more recent past. Isolationism served the nation exceptionally well during its first century, enabling it to rise in a mostly unmolested fashion. This history not only yields important lessons, but also, as the reviewers point out, sheds light on the logics of isolationism and internationalism that dueled during the nineteenth century and continue to shape statecraft today. The nation and the world have obviously changed dramatically over the past two centuries. But the Founders and the leaders that came soon thereafter engaged in deliberations over America’s role in the world that are of direct and immediate relevance to contemporary debates.

Turning to the reviewers’ more extensive comments on my treatment of the post-1898 era, Cooper takes issue with the realist/idealist antinomy that I use to examine America’s first forays into foreign entanglement, arguing that “it does not fit the facts.” He maintains that my portrayal of the Spanish-American War as having been driven by realist incentives is belied by the humanitarian and ideological bent of President William McKinley’s justification for the war.

Yes, McKinley used idealist rhetoric when he requested a declaration of war from Congress, as have most presidents when they have gone to war; doing so plays well. But actions speak louder than words. Did the United States start a major battleship program during the 1890s for humanitarian purposes? If the sole objective of the war was to liberate Cuba from Spain’s oppressive grasp, then why did the United States proceed to expel Spain from the Caribbean and Pacific and take control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam, the Wake Islands, and Samoa? Was the United States on a humanitarian mission when it sought to suppress an insurgency in the Philippines – a war that took the lives of some 4,000 U.S. soldiers, around 20,000 Filipino fighters, and hundreds of thousands of civilians? Realist incentives – the nation’s mounting geopolitical ambition and its growing maritime commerce with Asia – were behind the Spanish-American War and the imperial moment it produced.

In similar fashion, Cooper challenges my treatment of President Woodrow Wilson’s internationalism as idealist in orientation, warning that his “idealism should not be exaggerated.” To be sure, Wilson had a realist side, as evidenced by his heavy-handed interventions in the Western Hemisphere. But it was his idealist aspirations that marked his presidency, aspirations which arguably reached their peak in his effort to birth the League of Nations and secure U.S. membership. Had he succeeded in winning Senate ratification, he would have pulled off a radically idealist turn in U.S. statecraft, beating back both isolationism and unilateralism. And even though Wilson lost the battle over ratification, important elements of his idealism survived. During the 1920s, the United States embraced naval arms control, concluded the Kellogg-Briand Pact to outlaw war, and turned to “banks rather than tanks,” in the words of Bear Braumoeller, to influence the geopolitical setting in both Europe and Asia.<sup>68</sup>

Americans ultimately rejected both McKinley’s realist imperialism and Wilson’s idealist internationalism, setting the stage for the interwar pullback. Doenecke suggests that I see isolationism “taking an irresponsible turn in the 1930s.” He is right

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<sup>68</sup> Braumoeller, “The Myth of American Isolationism,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 6, no. 4 (October 2010), 350.



that I interpret that decade as isolationism's "darkest era," but I see the abdication of responsibility beginning in the 1920s, when the United States sought "geopolitical clout without strategic liability" (256). Americans naively believed that they could rely on financial leverage and a "pact of inaction" (262) like the Kellogg-Briand Pact to wield geopolitical influence. If the United States had joined the League of Nations or stayed more strategically engaged in Europe and Asia after World War I, it might have been able to help forestall the chain of events that spawned Nazism, fascism, and militarism. Even so, it is by no means clear that America's strategic engagement in Europe and Asia during the 1920s would have survived the Great Depression, which triggered a sharp inward turn on both economic and geopolitical fronts.

As for the 1930s, Doenecke takes issue with my argument that the United States embraced "delusions of strategic immunity" during this decade, waiting far too long to enter the war. He argues that I should have done more to flesh out the claim "that Axis control of Eurasia would have imperiled America's 'own security and way of life'" (298). Doenecke entertains the possibility that the isolationist camp was correct to bank on hemispheric defense. He suggests that a "bloody stalemate" may have emerged between Germany and the Soviet Union and that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor may have resulted from "botched American diplomacy." "Such scenarios," he writes, "do not prove that the isolationists were right, only that their claims could use more discussion."

Doenecke's provocative questioning of the wisdom of America's entry into World War II is ample evidence of ongoing controversy over isolationism and the durability of its appeal. I do not share his perspective, instead ascribing to the widely shared view that the domination of Eurasia by a hostile power would indeed threaten America's security and its way of life. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, if aligned and in control of most of Europe's and Asia's economic and military potential, would have been able to marshal preponderant and threatening power against the United States, even if America aligned with its hemispheric neighbors. The isolationist camp argued otherwise, playing an important role in keeping the United States out of the war until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Nichols nicely augments my own analysis in his review, documenting what he calls the "grassroots isolationism" of ordinary Americans as expressed in their letters, memoirs, diaries, and the files of groups like the America First Committee and the American Legion.

The lights went out in the isolationist camp with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Thereafter, Roosevelt responded with alacrity to the physical and ideological threats posed by America's adversaries. Here, Cooper and I are in agreement that Roosevelt blended realist and idealist strains in fashioning a durable brand of liberal internationalism. The United States would not only turn back threats to its physical security, but also pursue its redemptive mission by defeating liberal democracy's ideological competitors. Realists and idealists alike found much to like in liberal internationalism, contributing to its political durability during the balance of the twentieth century.

It was to prevent the domination of Eurasia by a hostile power that the United States justifiably entered WWII, even if it did so woefully late. It is for this reason that the United States was right to contain the Soviet Union during Cold War and that the ongoing rise of China warrants U.S. alarm and efforts to counterbalance Chinese power. And it is for this same reason that I call for a strategy of judicious retrenchment aimed at ending and avoiding wars of choice in the Middle East so that the United States can rebuild political and economic strength at home and return to its traditional strategic vocation as the world's great-power pacifier.<sup>69</sup>

The United States needs is to find a middle course between doing too little and doing too much. Isolationism ruled for much of American history. An unstinting internationalism followed. It is now time to find a stable middle ground. I am grateful for the contributions of Cooper, Doenecke, Johnstone, Nichols, and Trubowitz to this important debate.

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<sup>69</sup> I do not share Cooper's view that longstanding U.S. support for Israel constitutes a strategic mistake. The United States went off course in the Middle East by fighting wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria that have produced little good.