America First: The Past and Future of an Idea

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America First: Introduction

Melvyn P. Leffler

Like many historians, I was stunned a couple of years ago when Donald Trump started campaigning on the platform of America First. For me, America First was associated with the insularity, isolationism, unilateralism, nativism, anti-Semitism, and appeasement policies that President Franklin D. Roosevelt struggled to overcome in 1940 and 1941.

Why, I asked myself, would anyone want to associate himself with that discredited movement, a movement that seemed eviscerated after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941? Did Trump understand or know about that movement?

Whether he did or did not, I quickly came to see that America First resonated with a sizeable swarth of the American population. It sounded commonsensical. The slogan had deep roots in our past. It was employed long before the late 1930s: Woodrow Wilson, the godfather of American internationalism himself, uttered it in 1915, when he was preaching the cause of American neutrality during World War I. Who, then, could argue with Trump when he asserted, "My foreign policy will put the interests of the American people and American security above all else. It has to be first. Has to be."[1]

Commonsensical though it was (and is), America First connoted something deeply loathsome in our past, a xenophobic nativism—a fear of foreigners—that punctuated our history. Worse yet, it was interlaced with the racist, white supremacist ideology of the Ku Klux Klan when it reemerged in the 1920s as a major cultural and social force in American life. And a decade later, America First symbolized the amalgam of groups and ideologues who displayed callous indifference to the rise of fascism, Nazism, and militarism in Europe and Asia and who naively believed that the United States could be secure, safe, and prosperous in a world dominated by totalitarian foes who despised the liberal democratic ethos undergirding our nation's foundations.

Deeply perplexed about why anyone would resurrect such a slogan, I went to my colleague Will Hitchcock and suggested we hold a conference to investigate the history and implications of America First. Hitchcock was enthusiastic, and, together, we approached Bill Antholis, the director of the Miller Center at The University of Virginia. Antholis embraced the idea and allocated funds from the Stevenson family bequest to the Miller Center. We then outlined the issues that we most wanted to examine, and we invited eminent scholars to write short papers analyzing these issues.

We wanted to interrogate the meaning of America First. What are its key ingredients? Have they changed over time? What are the cultural, economic, social, and political sources of these ingredients? How and why did America First resurface after it seemed to be crushed in the wake of Pearl Harbor? In what ways did globalization and neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s provide a framework for the recrudescence of America First, especially as the Cold War ended and the threat perception receded? Did Republican challengers to George H. W. Bush, like Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot, adumbrate the reincarnation of America First in the guise of Donald Trump? How have growing inequality, skyrocketing immigration, religious fundamentalism, and racial tensions reshaped political dynamics inside the United States and catalyzed support for America First? And finally, we wanted to explore the current durability of America First and its implications for the future.

As Will Hitchcock and I read the papers and listened to the discussions at our conference in April 2018 we came to see more clearly the time-worn, tangled threads of America First. We could discern its deep roots in the traditions and practices of unilateralism, nativism, exceptionalism, ethnocentrism, and free enterprise capitalism. We could see that thinking about America First strictly in its heyday, in 1940 and 1941, did not encourage understanding of its appeal, resonance, and implications. Its roots were deeper than we thought.

Yet we fear that understanding the history of an American slogan may serve to normalize it. The essays that follow probe deeply and incisively into the American past to identify the wellsprings of America First. We can see that it is inextricably woven into the fabric of American history. We can now argue over whether New Deal and Cold War liberal internationalism may have been the exception and whether America First may be the norm. We can debate whether America First is the inevitable outcome of the critiques of liberal internationalism emanating from the right and the left, whether it means America alone for the foreseeable future, or whether it will galvanize a quest for constructive partnerships that will reconcile American interests and values with those of our allies and adversaries.

We hope these insightful contributions will ignite debate about the meaning and implications of our own history and where America First fits in that history. Can the threads that fashioned the reincarnation of America First in the America of Donald Trump be rewoven to form another tapestry? If so, it will take creativity, artistry, action, and courage.

Note:

1. "Transcript: Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Speech," April 27, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html.

America First in American History

Andrew Preston

For someone with such an obvious disregard for the study of history, it's striking how much Donald Trump's political rhetoric owes to the past. With the possible exception of the bizarrely dark phrase "American carnage" that featured in his inaugural address, none of Trump's messages are original: "the silent majority" was pilfered from Richard Nixon's November 1969 speech on Vietnam; "Make America Great Again," probably *the* signature Trump slogan, was first aired by Ronald Reagan in 1980.

The most meaningful Trumpian phrase, one that has more substance, policy relevance, and historical resonance than any of the others, is "America First." Usually but wrongly attributed to the anti-interventionist organization founded under the same name in 1940, America First is powerfully nationalist and populist, and it speaks to concerns that are both foreign and domestic in nature.

Taken strictly at face value, America First simply means that American leaders should put American interests before those of other countries. As Trump put it to applause from world leaders in his September 2017 speech to the UN, "As president of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always, and should always, put your countries first." That's very unlike Trump: banal in its obviousness.

What Trump didn't say at the UN is that America First is fueled by anger and resentment. It embodies a worldview that perceives a constant struggle against corrupt elites who are abusing their power at the expense of the people. In this populist vision, foreign-policy elites put the interests of other countries, or of the world system itself, ahead of the needs of ordinary Americans. This is why the counterpart to America First is the ultimate populist insult for elites: "globalists." It's this populist rage that gives America First its hard, menacing edge.

Like many new but seemingly timeless phrases, America First came about as a way to stake a claim to an old order that wasn't necessarily dying out but was under threat. It first came into wide usage in the late nineteenth century to express concerns about the influence of global capitalism and trade. By the turn of the twentieth century, as Sarah Churchwell reminds us in her recent book *Behold, America*, America First had become a nativist rallying cry and was adopted by the Ku Klux Klan in its rallies against immigrants, Jews, Catholics, and African Americans. Trump's father, Fred, attended one such rally in 1927.

The phrase has always had a similarly nationalistic tone when applied to foreign affairs, and America First has rightly been interpreted as the antithesis of another loaded, equally slippery catchphrase, "liberal internationalism." In foreign affairs, it couldn't be more ironic that the originator of the slogan America First is the father of liberal internationalism himself, Woodrow Wilson. But in October 1915, when Wilson first used the phrase in a speech to the Daughters of the American Revolution, neutrality was the objective, not a new architecture for a U.S.-led world order.

When Wilson did an about-face and brought the United States into the war, he did so on a revolutionary set of principles that have become known alternatively as "Wilsonianism"—when historians refer to Wilson and his ideas—and "liberal internationalism"—when they refer to the terms on which Wilson's successors since Franklin Roosevelt have (mostly) engaged with the rest of the world.

Intervention in the Great War was initially popular, a noble cause earnestly supported even by antiwar peace crusaders like William Jennings Bryan. But, crucially, it was a never a war of self-defense. Wilson spoke of protecting America's honor, upholding "civilization," maintaining international rights and liberties, and reforming world order. Just not defending the United States.

This might seem odd to more recent sensibilities, when virtually anything can be tied to the dictates of national security. But not invoking self-defense in the Great War was perfectly natural in 1917, for the integrity of U.S. territorial sovereignty was never at stake. Yet after the war, this also meant that American leadership of a Wilsonian new world order rested on unstable foundations of apparent selflessness rather than national self-interest. If the new system was to work, the United States had to be at the center of it. It had to be what the British Empire had once been: *primus inter pares*, or first among equals. The motive wasn't self-defense, but something altogether grander. It would serve American interests, but the link wasn't all that direct.

In response, America First surged to the fore as the rallying cry for a foreign policy of non-entanglement. Wilsonianism, then, was the fundamental disjuncture in American history that impelled some Americans to rally for America First. Ever since, the idea has evoked a desire to free the United States from foreign entanglements that require Americans to do the heavy lifting for policies that might not actually be in their own best interests.

Here, history was actually on the side of the America Firsters who opposed U.S. membership in the League of Nations and, later, entry into World War II. As an idea, America First is part of a long tradition of unilateralism stretching back to John Adams's Model Treaty, Washington's 1796 warning about permanent allies, and Jefferson's 1801 admonition against entangling alliances. The most famous unilateralist dictum in American history, the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, divided the world into two separate spheres. The United States did indeed intervene frequently around the world before 1917, but the costs borne by such interventions had to have clear reasons and produce clear results.

Wilsonianism passed this test in 1917, thanks to the depredations of German U-boats. But it failed the test after the war, when the reasons for American world leadership became less clear and the promised results more abstract. Why should Americans uphold a largely European international system? Why should they bear the costs when Europeans seemed unable, at times even unwilling, to bear the burden themselves?

American elites remained persuaded of Wilsonianism's necessity, and they did all they could to maintain a liberal international order through piecemeal measures like the Washington Conference on naval disarmament and the Dawes and Young plans for rebalancing reparations and loans. They attracted little popular opposition at the time because the costs seemed low. When the prospective costs rose to include the possibility of being dragged into another European war, opposition returned—in 1940, under the literal banner of America First.

Franklin Roosevelt's genius was to steer the United States into a world war, and then build a new world order, under nearly the same terms that had once eluded Wilson. He was able to succeed where Wilson failed because he made it a fight not for civilization per se, but a war first and foremost for America. However strained his logic could be at times, FDR's cause was one of self-defense—"national security," to use the more capacious phrase that only then came into common usage—not selfless leadership of global hopes and dreams. Liberal internationalism might benefit the world, but it had to benefit Americans first. FDR and his successor, Harry Truman, made that crystal clear.

This formulation worked as long as liberal internationalism asked Americans to pay reasonable costs to combat reasonably clear adversaries. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union ably played this role, and containment was underwritten by unparalleled domestic prosperity. After the Cold War, American supremacy—

and an even greater economic boom—made the costs seem slight even as direct adversaries faded from view.

The "war on terror" might have been expected to continue liberal internationalism's long bull run, but the disastrous wars in Afghanistan and especially Iraq called into question its baseline assumptions. The Great Recession, coming hard on the heels of these expensive and pointless wars, then ruined for many the notion that American leaders were acting in the national interest.

Not surprisingly, America First was reborn. Trump has built his political success by tapping into some of the deepest traditions of American political culture, one of which is exemplified by America First. He has realized that sometimes the most successful politicians are the least original.

America First, American Isolationism, and the Coming of World War II

Christopher Nichols

America First is neither a twentieth- nor a twenty-first-century term in origin. That the cry of America First emerged in the nineteenth century's era of rapid industrialization, modernization, and urbanization should not surprise us. In this period, Americans from many walks of life confronted the myriad challenges of modern industrial society. Poverty seemed to follow progress, as one commentator remarked. New ideas and new solutions seemed necessary, especially as the United States became a global power. How would the United States, born from democratic revolution, operate in the world, given its new-found commercial and military power? How would national priorities be defined? What determined who and what "counted" as American? These questions animated turn-of-the-twentieth-century debates and continue to test policymakers and citizens alike.

In general, movements for America First focused their answers to such questions on non-entanglement, non-intervention, neutrality, and unilateralism. They often were fueled by notions of exceptionalism. Yet the range of those advocating these ideas—expansionists and anti-imperialists, industrialists and labor advocates, race and gender reformers and hyper-nationalists, nativists and settlement house leaders—underscores how these core isolationist precepts have had a remarkable appeal across the U.S. political spectrum over time. The assertion of America First emerged in the late nineteenth century from populist critiques of capitalism and inequality, calls to advance American industry, fulfill ideals, and enhance culture "at home and abroad," as well as invocations of the policy pillars established by Washington, Jefferson, and Monroe.[1]

While those questions and alliances emerged in the nineteenth century, the period between the world wars might as well be called the heyday of "isolationist" thought and policies. The ideas of this era undergird our modern understandings of the constellation of ideas in which America First rests.[2] "Lessons learned" and revisionist views of the causes of WWI were prime movers in the new firmament of ideas; they shaped the debates over U.S. interventions abroad after 1919, suggesting most fundamentally the ways in which involvement in foreign conflicts was due to special interests and significantly affected domestic life. The result was a policy of caution (which the later "America Firsters" thoroughly supported). This approach sought to balance the nation's vital interests in foreign trade with the desire to avoid getting further entangled in foreign affairs. It was an era of selective U.S. engagement with the world, far from fully walled and bounded retrenchment, and it was characterized more by commercial and cultural exchange than formal U.S. diplomacy or use of hard power.

Woodrow Wilson deployed the phrase America First during the United States' "neutral" years during the war in Europe in 1915 and 1916, yet he came to be known as a champion of liberal internationalism. Because he had seemingly driven the United States to war via a commitment to protecting U.S. business interests abroad, and the American public responded with increasing belligerence after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Congress passed a series of Neutrality Acts in the 1930s. These laws explicitly draw on WWI precedents; they forbade U.S. banks from lending money to foreign governments that had not paid their war debts, imposed a trade embargo on all belligerent countries, and banned U.S. citizens from traveling on belligerents' ocean liners. They also sought to prevent Franklin Roosevelt—or any president—from taking the nation into war without wider national consent (some suggested a national referendum). Many critics, and not just from the Republican ranks, worried that FDR was driving the nation into war, just as Wilson had.

It was at this moment—in the desperate effort to keep the United States out of the next world war—that the symbolic phrase America First took off and gave rise to the meanings many of us associate with it today.

Between 1940 and 1941, as German, Japanese, and Italian armies swept across the world, a movement known as the America First Committee (AFC) developed to keep the United States prepared for war but out of the conflict. These 1940s America Firsters were akin to the anti-imperialists of the turn of the twentieth century. Together they became the two largest, and most diverse, foreign-policy lobbying organizations ever formed in the United States.[3]

The most extreme form of anti-interventionist isolationism made allies of Republican Gerald Nye, socialist pacifist Norman Thomas, aviator Charles Lindbergh, Old Right Republican General Robert Wood, poet e.e. cummings, animator Walt Disney, and writer/socialite Alice Roosevelt Longworth, all under the banner of the AFC. Between 1940 and 1941, the AFC included in its membership a truly motley crew of isolationists, pacifists, Old Right Republicans, industrialists and business executives, labor organizers, and major intellectuals, as well as the progeny of wealthy families—young men who would go on to become presidents, Supreme Court justices, ambassadors, and secretaries of state.

Actually, America First started out among those future leaders at Yale Law School. Thanks to the inspiration of R. Douglas Stuart, scion of the Quaker Oats fortune, the initial organizers included future president Gerald Ford, future U.S. Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart, future director of the Peace Corps Sargent Shriver, and future president of Yale University (and Jimmy Carter's ambassador to the UK) Kingman Brewster. They appealed to General Robert E. Wood, the chairman of Sears, Roebuck; and Wood reached out to William H. Regnery, a conservative publisher and another wealthy Chicago executive. The two agreed to help underwrite the organization, with Wood acting as chairman.[4]

They began as the Committee to Defend America First, established in direct opposition to progressive journalist William Allen White's Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDAAA, formed in May 1940). It was later abbreviated to the America First Committee. As Lend-Lease and other maneuvers brought the United States ever closer to entry into the war, the AFC worked hard to avoid alienating either flank, right-wing or left. Its attempts to thread the needle contrast sharply with what is going on today.

Still, then as now, there is a reason that fascists and anti-Semites were drawn to the AFC. Lindbergh, the "face" of the AFC, came to epitomize that ideology. During his now infamous September 1941 rally in Des Moines, Iowa,

Lindbergh suggested that the "Jewish race" wished to involve the United States in the war "for reasons which are not American," lumping them in with the British in a way that reinforced the notion that members of the Jewish race should not be considered American. He warned the "Jewish race" that "tolerance" would not be able to survive a war and that they would be the first to "feel" the "consequences" of intolerance if the United States went to war.[5]

Almost every major political figure, newspaper, and organization, including other anti-interventionist and pacifist groups, called on the AFC to renounce Lindbergh. Socialist politician (and ACLU co-founder) Norman Thomas refused to act as a public spokesman for the movement after Lindbergh's speech, reflecting a broader leftist and liberal retreat from the movement and from core isolationist ideas when it came to WWII.

Instead of a more full-throated condemnation of Lindbergh, the AFC's press releases generated even more tumult. Internal documents reveal the AFC was riven with conflict, but ultimately they denied that either Lindbergh or the committee were anti-Semitic, and they accused their critics of being rabid interventionists, trumpeting up false charges in order to discredit the AFC's antiwar message.[6]

The AFC also fell back on arguments based on American foreign policy traditions. They turned to Washington, Jefferson, and especially Monroe's hemispherism.[7] Their public documents—Speaker's Bureau releases, position papers, bulletins, and broadsides—consistently argued that the United States should remain entirely neutral in words and deeds; that aid to allies "short of war" only weakened America; and that no foreign nation would attack America if the nation pursued a robust preparedness plan of coastal defenses and air power. Others in the movement took different positions. There was more moderation than one might expect (i.e., fewer FDR "haters").

The New York AFC leadership was diverse. It included not only Norman Thomas and former president Herbert Hoover, but also historian Charles Beard. Beard hoped to enhance national morality through reform and to achieve greater equality of citizens and workers (i.e., more New Deal rather than less, unlike many in the AFC). He stressed a noninterventionist, "continentalist" or "hemispherist" path; and he generally rejected most forms of military preparedness (unlike Lindbergh, whose "Fortress America" vision is often thought of as epitomizing the hawkish nationalist isolationism of the AFC). Still, theirs was a difficult set of arguments to advance, as the war increasingly came to be seen as a just one against evils that menaced good peoples and groups around the world—evils that were very likely to ensnare the United States one way or another.[8]

Although the AFC's public efforts stand out as more diverse than one might expect, they were also relatively limited, particularly in comparison to the America First program of 2016 through the present (which include a domestic budget proposal, an immigration policy framework, and even a political action committee). The original AFC aimed to advance four core principles, as noted in its first internal policy statement in the summer of 1940:

- The United States should "concentrate all energies on building a strong defense for this hemisphere."
- "American democracy can only be preserved by keeping out of war abroad."
- We "oppose any increase in supplies to England beyond the limitations of cash and carry," because such a policy "would imperil American strength and lead to active American intervention in Europe."
- We "demand Congress refrain from war, even if England is on the verge of defeat."[9]

Members of the AFC debated internally but ultimately rejected being "political"—that is, the National Committee did not officially support or endorse parties or candidates. Nor did they have any formal stance on trade protectionism; in fact, many leading AFC members pushed for the "free hand" and disdained protectionist tariffs.

The many public statements by AFC members as well as internal memos (available at the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University) reveal clearly that, at its root, America First made a powerful appeal to an insular, nationalistic American exceptionalism, loaded with xenophobia and references to the lessons learned from WWI. The AFC waged a rearguard action to slow (but could not stop) FDR's pro-ally policies. They did so by depicting the twin menaces of American globalism and interventionism as far worse than the dangers posed by Nazism in Germany, fascism in Italy, or militarism in Japan.

At their height, these ideas were extremely popular. The AFC had hundreds of chapters across the United States and nearly a million members. In fact, they began as a think tank-advocacy group, were ill-prepared to establish so many local chapters, and become a membership organization. Polls as late as November 1941 supported their cause, or so they thought; even then most Americans still did not want to go to war. But Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 changed everything.

Four days later, on December 11, 1941, the AFC disbanded. However, its xenophobic legacy continues to haunt anti-interventionist policies and the term "isolationism" itself. The AFC passed into public memory as a right-wing, hyper-nationalist, racist organization with serious ties to fascist and pro-Nazi movements.

Just as a foreign attack on U.S. soil ended the America First movement on December 7, 1941, a foreign attack on U.S. soil revived isolationism six decades later, on September 11, 2001. An old order now seems under threat, and there are significant similarities to the 1890s/early 1900s, to the 1930s, and to 1941. The combination of wars abroad, demographic change, cultural instability, intensifying receptiveness to populist, nationalist, and xenophobic appeals, along with rising economic inequality, rapid globalization, and cyclic recessions over the past two decades, has helped to drive the rise of America First sensibilities.

Notes:
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1. Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, 2015). See introduction and chap. 1.
2. On the main typologies of isolationism see "Strains of Isolationism" in Nichols, *Promise and Peril*, 347–52. See also Christopher McKnight Nichols, "The Enduring Power of Isolationism: An Historical Perspective," *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* 57, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 390–407. On the longer history of America First see Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: The Entangled History of America First and the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).
3. I have written about this in *Promise and Peril*, chapters 1-2; see also work of William Appleman Williams, Robert Beisner, Eric Love, Kristin Hoganson, Paul Kramer, and others on American anti-imperialism.
4. On the AFC, see Wayne S. Cole, *America First: The Battle Against Intervention, 1940–1941* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953); Michelle Flynn Stenehjem, *An American First: John T. Flynn and the America First Committee* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1976); and Justus D. Doenecke, *The Battle Against Intervention, 1939–1941* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Press, 1997). For a great

overview of anti-interventionism see the introduction to Justus D. Doenecke, ed., *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940–1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), 2–78.
5. On Lindbergh, see Wayne S. Cole, *Charles Lindbergh and the Battle Against American Intervention in World War II* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974); and A. Scott Berg, *Lindbergh* (New York: Berkley Books, 1998). For the text of Lindbergh's Des Moines speech in 1941, see http://www.charleslindbergh.com/american-first/speech.asp.
6. An insightful source in the Hoover Archives by the director of the AFC Research Bureau, Ruth Sarles, is now available in published form; see Ruth Sarles, *A Story of America First: The Men and Women Who Opposed U.S. Intervention in WWII* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2003).
7. For instance, see Robert E. Wood's speech heralding the importance of the U.S. hemispheric sphere of influence and of adhering to the tradition of the Monroe Doctrine as a rationale for keeping out of the war in Europe. General Robert E. Wood, Acting Chairman, America First Committee, "Our Foreign Policy: The Course We Are Pursuing Leads to War," October 4, 1940, reprinted in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, Vol. VII (New York, 1941), 130–33, also available at "*1940 documents relating to WWII*," https://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1940/1940_Documents_relating_to_World_War_II.html.
8. On Beard and the AFC, see Thomas C. Kennedy, *Charles A. Beard and American Foreign Policy* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1975); Ronald Radosh, *Prophets on the Right: Profiles of Conservative Critics of American Globalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975); David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 123–167; Christopher McKnight Nichols, "Beyond Hemispherism: Charles Beard's Vision of World Order," in *Progressivism and US Foreign Policy between the World Wars*, eds. Molly Cochran and Cornelia Navari (London: The Palgrave Macmillan History of International Thought, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 241–67.
9. Hoover Institution Archives, America First Committee Papers, summer 1940, initial memorandum statement of principles. For a more accessible version see Doenecke, *In Danger Undaunted*, 87.

Walking with a Ghost: FDR and America First

David Milne

On June 10, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt travelled to Charlottesville, Virginia, and delivered a speech of moral force and political courage before a backdrop of acute crisis. That morning the French government had declared Paris an open city, ensuring that it would fall into German hands intact rather than in pieces. Scenting blood and easy treasure, Mussolini's Italy declared war on France soon after; FDR learned this news just before boarding his train. Ignoring State Department requests to proceed cautiously, FDR delivered a commencement address that assailed Italian duplicity: "On this tenth day of June, 1940, the hand that held the dagger has struck it into the back of his neighbor." He also portrayed America Firsters as Flat Earthers. The notion that the United States could retain its independence and values as "a lone island in a world dominated by the philosophy of force," Roosevelt said, "was an obvious delusion."

At a moment when opinion polls suggested that only thirty percent of the American public thought an Allied victory possible, Roosevelt aligned his nation with the supposed losers. "We will extend to the opponents of force the material resources of this nation; and at the same time, we will harness and speed up the use of those resources in order that we ourselves may have equipment and training equal to the task. Signs and signals call for speed—full speed ahead."[1] For a president often characterized as indecisive (a few months later, Admiral Harold Stark mused, "[H]ow much a part of our democratic way of life will be handled by Mr. Gallup is pure guess") this was a powerful and purposeful speech.[2] It galvanized the nation and its allies and can be slotted into a wider Rooseveltian pattern of thrust, parry, retreat, and repeat. His ability to lead his nation was predicated on a keen sense of when the time was right to lead public opinion and when it was wiser to wait for it to catch up.

In this respect and others—how U.S. strategic interests were framed and packaged; the necessity for bipartisan support; the medium of communication—Roosevelt's decisions were shaped by his attentiveness to Woodrow Wilson's accomplishments and travails a generation before. FDR had served in Wilson's administration as assistant secretary of the navy and had become a sincere Wilsonian after the president fully revealed his foreign policy hand in 1917 and 1918. But he also drew appropriate lessons from the crushing disappointments that followed Wilson's defeat in the Senate. Roosevelt was able to transcend America First, in other words, because he applied the lessons of a recent history in which he was a fully vested participant.

Of course, there are many other factors that help account for Roosevelt's success in bringing the United States into closer alignment with Great Britain. In Hitler and Mussolini, FDR confronted more obvious villains than Wilson ever did. In 1940, Roosevelt also had the good fortune to run against a Republican internationalist, Wendell Willkie, who shared many of his views on the looming crisis. The America First Committee gathered real momentum through 1940 and 1941, and Charles Lindbergh was a charismatic, celebrated spokesman. But his notorious anti-Semitic speech in Des Moines on September 11, 1941, was met with fierce condemnation from all quarters. "Instead of agitating for war," Lindbergh had warned darkly, "the Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way, for they will be among the first to feel its consequences." Dorothy Thompson noted that Lindbergh had "attracted to himself every outright Fascist sympathizer and agitator in this country" with a view to running for political office himself. Less predictably, William Randolph Hearst's papers also denounced him.[3]

Beyond being fortunate in his foreign and domestic adversaries, Roosevelt was also helped by non-governmental organizations such as Fight for Freedom, the American Committee for Non-Participation in Japanese Aggression, and, most notably, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies.[4] The journalist and interventionist Herbert Agar later wrote that the work of such groups helped Roosevelt "move gingerly in the direction of saving his sleeping country."[5] He also had a powerful ally in the form of Walter Lippmann, the most trusted journalist of that era, whose "Today and Tomorrow" columns often anticipated and shaped presidential action. Finally, in Eleanor Roosevelt, FDR had a political partner able to reach constituencies that were simply beyond his reach.

But it is the strategies that FDR himself employed, as he drew from Wilson's struggles to achieve similar ends, that best explain how he overcame anti-interventionist sentiment. During his presidency Wilson was unable to communicate to the nation through the radio—and what a difference it might have made if he had. Poignantly, Wilson delivered the first-ever live, remote radio broadcast (in which he lamented the nation's "descent into a sullen and selfish isolation") from his home in 1923, long after his battles had been lost.[6] FDR's first "fireside chat" on the banking crisis, during the first week of his presidency, was a transformative political event. "When millions of people can hear the President speak to them directly in their own homes," wrote a *New York Times* editorial, "we get a new meaning for the old phrase about a public man 'going to the country'."[7]

In his efforts to undermine America First and chart an interventionist path, Roosevelt used this medium to brilliant effect. Estimates suggest that 75 percent of the entire U.S. population either listened to or read FDR's fireside chat of December 29, 1940, when he declared, "No man can tame a tiger by stroking it" and "We must be the great arsenal

of democracy." In this broadcast, Roosevelt also spoke ominously of German fifth columnists working within the United States, noting that there "are also American citizens, many of which in high places who, unwittingly in most cases, are aiding and abetting the work of these agents." His meaning was clear and powerful.[8]

Where Wilson deployed grandiose rhetoric to justify U.S. intervention in the First World War, Roosevelt employed a more homespun vernacular to rationalize plans, such as Lend-Lease, that would keep peril an Atlantic's width away. During a press conference on December 17, 1940, he famously compared Lend-Lease to providing a neighbor with a hose when his house catches fire. "Now what do I do?" asked Roosevelt, "I don't say to him 'Neighbor, my garden hose cost me fifteen dollars; you have to pay me fifteen dollars for it.' No! I don't want fifteen dollars. I want my garden hose back after the fire is over." Who could disagree with such logic? That the United States was actually lending the hose *and* the water to douse the fire, and that used water was a difficult thing to return, was neither here nor there. Polls suggested that the metaphor resonated. It sung.

At times, FDR also used Wilson as a foil to demonstrate how circumstances had changed since his predecessor's administration, and he was not slow to point out how wrong his Democratic predecessor had been to demand moral and political neutrality from his fellow Americans. After the British and French declarations of war on Germany in 1939, FDR noted that "even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience." This was a pointed repudiation of Wilson's 1914 admonition that Americans must be "impartial in thought as well as action." From an early stage, FDR did not equivocate about which party was at fault.

Finally, FDR was acutely aware of Wilson's failure to co-opt Republicans to support his war aims and of the dire consequences that followed. When he travelled to the Paris Peace Conference, Wilson invited no Republicans to accompany him. After the fall of France, FDR appointed Frank Knox, who was the 1936 Republican vice-presidential candidate, as his secretary of the navy and Henry Stimson, Herbert Hoover's secretary of state, as his secretary of war. Roosevelt gave Stimson a free hand with his appointments, and Stimson chose John McCloy and Robert Lovett as assistant secretaries. None of these men had ever voted for FDR.

America Firsters were undermined and the GOP's foreign policy divisions were exposed, prised farther apart, and salted, on the eve of their convention. Crucially, just prior to their appointments, both Knox and Stimson had publicly called for the repeal of the Neutrality Acts, the reinstitution of the draft, and the use of naval convoys to supply Great Britain. In pursuing and realizing these goals, President Roosevelt merely followed the lead of these widely respected Republicans who now sat in his cabinet.

In all of these actions FDR walked with the ghost of Woodrow Wilson. His attentiveness to Wilson's presidency would only deepen through the course of the Second World War. Although his record was marred by significant failures in regard to race (the politically expedient renewal of Jim Crow) and human rights (the internship of 117,000 people with Japanese ancestry, the majority of whom were U.S. citizens), Roosevelt's accomplishments were testament to attributes that have fallen out of fashion: political experience, an attentiveness to history, and a willingness to remember it and learn from it.

Notes:
1. Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 448–49.
2. Harold Stark, quoted in Charles A. Beard, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941: Appearances and Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 427.
3. See Sarah Churchwell, *Behold America, A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 285, 288.
4. For a recent study of these three citizen groups, see Andrew Johnstone, *Against Immediate Evil: American Internationalism and the Four Freedoms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
5. Herbert Agar, *The Darkest Year: Britain Alone, June 1940–June 1941* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 56.
6. http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2015/10/politics/woodrow-wilson-house-history/.
7. Quoted in Roy Jenkins, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York: Pan Books, 2003), 315.
8. Smith, *FDR*, 486.

J. Edgar Hoover, Anticommunism, and America First

Beverly Gage

On May 21, 1940, White House aide Stephen Early dispatched a fresh stack of telegrams to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. "The President thought you might like to look them over, noting the names and addresses of the senders," Early suggested.

Five days earlier, reacting to Hitler's invasion of France, Franklin Roosevelt had warned of "ominous days" ahead for Europe, and he called upon Americans to act before it was too late. Three days after that, on May 19, famed aviator Charles Lindbergh had taken to the radio airwaves to denounce Roosevelt's preparedness drive. The missives in Early's stack came from those who agreed with Lindbergh that the United States should have no part in the latest European debacle. Many of them would eventually rally under the banner of the America First Committee, the country's inchoate but prominent anti-interventionist organization, home to some of Roosevelt's fiercest foreign-policy critics.

Roosevelt's request that Hoover "look over" those letters, and keep tabs on their senders, has often been told as a story of presidential overreach: a demand for a naked political favor, in an election year, from an executive-branch appointee duty-bound to stay out of the electoral fray. This speaks to a long and rocky history of FBI enmeshment in presidential politics. Though Trump's current crisis stands out for its sheer animosity and mismanagement, dilemmas over the White House/FBI relationship are hardly new.

The request also hints at a broader shift underway from 1939 through 1941, as mobilization for World War II began to transform practices of federal surveillance and homefront policing. In the two years before Pearl Harbor, the FBI more than doubled in size, expanding into new areas of political investigation, espionage and counterespionage, and global intelligence. Much of that shift took place in secret, as the White House and the FBI worked together (and with British authorities) to build a wartime intelligence infrastructure, all the while keeping an eye on the president's isolationist foes.

Hoover's cooperative relationship with Roosevelt underscores one of the central paradoxes of the FBI director's career. As a bureaucrat and state-builder, Hoover came of age in the heyday of the liberal state. The tiny Bureau of Investigation became the mighty FBI during the Roosevelt years; in effect (if not in every detail) it was a New Deal alphabet agency. At the same time, Hoover had little patience for many of the New Deal's ideological presumptions, including the liberal internationalism at the heart of Roosevelt's war effort. With the end of the war, the vast bureaucracy built to secure Roosevelt's political vision became a vehicle for promoting Hoover's own America First mes-

sage, in which the struggle against the Communist Party and its left-liberal allies reigned supreme.

Hoover's mixed engagement with America First—as an organization and as a concept—highlights some of the complexities of that term. Though often portrayed as a conservative counterweight to liberal internationalism, the general concept of putting America First could be remarkably flexible, alternately espoused or dismissed depending upon circumstance. Like many political actors, Hoover rejected the notion in one guise (anti-interventionism) but embraced it another (anticommunism), neither of which was particularly easy to categorize along a linear political spectrum.

Hoover's experience also suggests the importance of considering the state in any historical analysis of America First as a political phenomenon. Often used as shorthand for populist anti-statism, America First could also be a powerful state-building language, especially in the realms of intelligence and national security. It was perhaps most useful in prioritizing particular forms of state activity over others: surveillance and military over diplomacy and social welfare, for instance. In a political twist that Roosevelt himself might have appreciated, the domestic intelligence service that Hoover created to serve the president's idea of an expansive liberal internationalism—a "New Deal for the World"—ultimately became one of the greatest state-centered constraints on New Deal liberalism and on Roosevelt's postwar domestic legacy.

Far more than any other president, Franklin Roosevelt made J. Edgar Hoover. Though appointed in 1924, Hoover did not begin to attain significant levels of bureaucratic influence and public celebrity until the 1930s. In 1934, Roosevelt supported a major expansion of federal law enforcement powers in areas such as bank robbery and kidnapping. Over the next few years, he encouraged Hoover to publicize this work through cutting-edge techniques of public relations and propaganda. Beginning in 1934, Roosevelt also quietly licensed the FBI to renew forms of political surveillance that had been banned a decade earlier, requesting that the bureau start keeping tabs on communists, fascists, and other alleged subversives. The president made this role official in September 1939, just after the German invasion of Poland, instructing the FBI "to take charge of investigative work in matters relating to espionage, sabotage and violations of the neutrality regulations."

The result was the single swiftest expansion in FBI history. In early 1940, the FBI employed 2,432 men and women, roughly a third of them special agents. By February 1941, it had 4,477 employees, with plans to reach 5,588 by June. Left-wing critics foresaw a danger in the development. "The creation of a super secret service body in a democracy is injecting our democratic institutions with the virulent toxine [sic] of an antidemocratic activity under the guise of so-called protection of so-called national defense," Congressman Vito Marcantonio warned in early 1940.

Roosevelt and Hoover pressed forward nonetheless, simply including surveillance of such critics as part of their wartime policing practices. In May 1940, just after the German invasion of France, Roosevelt secretly overturned a Supreme Court ban on wiretapping, licensing the FBI to wiretap in the name of national security. In mid-June, he authorized Hoover to launch intelligence operations in South America, where it was feared that the Germans were building an espionage network to prepare for invasion and occupation. Throughout this period, he encouraged the FBI to work secretly with British intelligence to support interventionist efforts within the United States and to train a new generation of agents in the venerable imperial practices of counterespionage and political intelligence.

Hoover's investigation of Roosevelt's anti-interventionist critics, including the America First Committee, occurred in this context of uneasy preparedness. In the months after Early's request, Hoover passed along reports and updates not only about Lindbergh and America First, but about union officials and civil rights activists, about communists and socialists and members of the Bund. Though these reports tended to remain vague about their sources of information, any reasonably astute reader could see that they contained details acquired through extra-legal and potentially illegal methods: wiretaps, microphone plants, undercover operatives. Roosevelt appreciated these efforts. "Thank you for the many interesting and valuable reports that you have made me regarding the fast moving situations of the last few months," he wrote to Hoover on June 14, 1940. Far from being an isolated instance of overreach, the FBI's response to Early's request fit with a broader pattern of expanding intelligence and espionage operations.

These efforts continued—indeed, expanded yet again—after Pearl Harbor. Though the America First Committee officially dissolved in December 1941, the FBI continued to track its activities, warning of members' "hope that the America First Committee can again be a political force." Instead, it was the FBI itself that emerged from the war as a formidable and increasingly independent political force, with its own interpretation of what America First might mean. "Let us be steadfast for America, work and live for America, and eternally be on guard to defend our Constitution and our way of life against the virulent poison of Communistic ideology," Hoover urged the American Legion in September 1946. By that time, he had acquired both the bureaucratic power and political influence to help make his vision a reality. After six years of wartime expansion, he found himself in a position to realize his own America First agenda and to prod the country into its next great home-front battle.

America First and International Trade Policy in the Cold War Era

David Farber

In 1943, almost two years after the America First Committee had disintegrated in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack, a former member and speaker for the committee, Senator Ellison "Cotton Ed" Smith (D-SC), a rabid white supremacist, declared that he was "for America, first, last, and always, and against internationalism, first, last, and always."[1] Smith made his declaration not in opposition to wartime alliances but out of fear that postwar planning by the Roosevelt administration would include free trade policies that would strengthen America's allies but that also would, Smith believed, upend his state's textile industry. Opposition to free trade and reduced tariffs, even more than concerns over international alliances, became central to post-World War II America Firsters. Donald Trump's version of America First is redolent of that era's economic nationalists, who carried forward the postwar banner of America First.

Ohio Senator Robert Taft led that fight until his death in 1953. Right up until December 7, 1941, "Mr. Republican," as his supporters called him, had been an outspoken opponent of American war preparedness and Roosevelt's internationalist policies. After the war, he would continue to oppose efforts by both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to dramatically expand U.S. international commitments.[2]

Taft and his allies opposed an international turn in American foreign policy for several reasons. They feared that internationalism would greatly strengthen and expand the power of the federal government; they dreaded the budget-busting costs associated with an interventionist, internationalist foreign policy; they worried that international, multilateral commitments would constrain American policymaking and even force America to bow

down to international laws and agreements; and they believed that international commitments would push America into foreign wars that had nothing to do with safeguarding the United States (during the Vietnam War, Taft was posthumously praised by the New Left).

All these factors are critical to understanding the trajectory of the America First movement in the post-World War II, early Cold War era. They help to explain why Taft and others opposed NATO, the largesse of the Marshall plan and aid to Europe more generally, and a large peacetime military. But these factors were not the most important in explaining why Republican Party leader Taft and many of his congressional allies opposed the internationalist turn that dominated the Democratic Party and the Willkie-Dewey-Eisenhower—and then Goldwater-Reagan-Bush-Bush—wing of the Republican Party. Taft abhorred the free trade, anti-tariff-oriented policies that he believed were foundational to the policy regime of internationalists of both political parties. Like most American politicians, he cared far more about domestic affairs than he did about foreign policy. Or, as he put it, he cared more about Americans than he did about foreigners. And a generous international trade policy, he believed, was bad for the American people.

In July 1943, Taft—like "Cotton Ed" Smith—spoke out against Roosevelt administration plans for a postwar free—or freer—trade policy. Before the Ohio Federation of Republican Women's Organizations, Taft spoke bluntly: "The Republican Party believes in protection. We are not free traders. It is self-evident to me that a general policy of free trade would destroy the standards of living in America. Whether free trade would raise the average of the world as a whole I doubt, but it is obvious to me that it would drag down our own wage level and our own standard of living in this country."[3]

Taft continually repeated this line of attack in the years that followed. In 1945 he opposed extending the New Deal's Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act unless the act specifically forbade the president from using it to lower tariffs. "The additional opportunities which may be stimulated by complete free trade," he wrote, "do not seem to me to be a very material amount compared to the damage which would be done by destroying various established American industries."[4]

While Taft began to think harder about foreign affairs by the end of 1947, the advent of the Cold War did nothing to change his mind about the value of an America First trade policy. In 1952 he wrote that "if an American industry is threatened with destruction by the importation of foreign goods, it is almost impossible to give some protection to the workmen in that industry . . . I don't think any political party is going to adopt a policy that would put them out of business." He went on to say that "[the] tariff today is much lower than the Underwood tariff of 1913," and "still the Europeans weren't able to live under it. I believe it is their own fault, and not ours."[5]

In January 1953, as Taft prepared, with mixed feelings, for the advent of the Eisenhower administration, he wrote a list of his legislative priorities. First on that list was the issue of "Reciprocal Trade." Taft opposed it. Immediately after that notation, Taft listed "Scope of point 4," then "Encouragement of American investment abroad," and then "extent of foreign aid."[6] He opposed every effort to build up the economies of other nations at the expense, as he saw it, of the American taxpayer, manufacturer, and worker.

Taft, of course, was not alone. In 1947, as the Truman administration was negotiating trade liberalization, creating the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, Pennsylvania congressman Robert Rich (whose family happened to own the Woolrich Textile Mills) angrily echoed the 1943 claim of "Cotton Ed" Smith. He denounced GATT, as well as the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, on the floor of the House: "Brother, I am for America, first, last, and always."[7]

The Republican Party, like the Democratic Party, was by no means of one mind on the question of free trade and its relation to America's broader role in the world. Senator Taft knew that members of his own party, including that Johnny-come-lately, Dwight Eisenhower, felt differently. In February 1951, before a joint session of Congress, General Eisenhower directly repudiated Taft. In a January Senate speech, Taft had laid the groundwork for his presidential run by declaiming that "[The] principal purpose of the foreign policy of the United States is to maintain the liberty of the American people. It is not to reform the entire world or spread sweetness and light and economic prosperity."[8]

Eisenhower, before both the House and the Senate, rejected Taft's America First line. The United States, Eisenhower insisted, must provide global leadership: "The cost of peace is going to be a sacrifice, a very great sacrifice, individually and nationally."[9] *President* Eisenhower later explained a key aspect of that sacrifice before an audience of nervous Republican congressional leaders, when he insisted that they support favorable trade terms for the penurious nation of Japan. "[A]ll problems of local industry pale into insignificance in relation to the world crisis . . . Japan cannot live, and Japan cannot remain in the free world unless something is done to allow her to make a living."[10] Taft, who had died six months after Eisenhower's inauguration, was surely spinning in his grave.

Along with other political leaders affiliated directly or indirectly with an America First vision of the world, Taft did adapt to Cold War realities. He was a fierce anticommunist, and to contain the Soviets he begrudgingly accepted the need for greater military spending, extra-territorial defense (though only at sea and in the air), and even the arming of American allies at key defensive spots around the globe. While he thought the Soviet threat was exaggerated by his internationalist foes, he did not dismiss it, at least not to the extent that he and his allies had downplayed the Nazi threat. Still, Taft remained highly suspicious of the United Nations and multilateralism of almost all kinds. He scorned the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and GATT. Most of all, he remained firmly opposed to any concept of international trade that belied his fervent belief in mercantilism.

Taft was not alone in his opposition. Even as a broad consensus emerged in both political parties about the need to defend and strengthen America's global allies against the threat of Soviet communism, politicians across the ideological spectrum continued to demur at the wholesale adaptation of a free trade regime. Still, they often folded before the Cold War demands made by presidential administrations, from Truman onward, for international economic stability and shared prosperity. They generally accepted an international trade regime that often favored America's allies over its domestic producers and workers. George Ball, President Kennedy's undersecretary of state for economic affairs, cavalierly expressed the new conventional wisdom in 1962. "[W]e Americans could afford to pay some economic price for a strong Europe."[11] In the economic downturn of the 1970s, that sentiment began to sour, and an ideologically diverse set of political actors began to challenge it, wondering who, among the American people, would actually pay that economic price.[12] But not until 2016 did a major party presidential candidate absolutely reject the trade policy formulated during the Cold War and declare, once again, that he was for "America First."

Notes:

1. Smith's remarks were quoted in newspapers all over the country via the International News Service feature "What Noted People Say." See, for example, the *Times* (Munster, Indiana), Septem-

ber 7, 1943, 8.
2. For a fine account of Taft's foreign policy views see Clarence E. Wunderlin, *Robert A. Taft: Ideas, Tradition, and Party in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005). I also draw on my chapter on Taft in David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and on Melvyn Leffler, *Preponderance of Power* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992).
3. Robert A. Taft and Clarence E. Wunderlin Jr., *The Papers of Robert A. Taft: 1939–1944* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 436.
4. Ibid., 229.
5. Ibid., 439–440
6. Ibid., 448.
7. Quoted in Thomas Zeiler, *Free Trade, Free World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 79–80.
8. Robert A. Taft and Clarence E. Wunderlin Jr., *The Papers of Robert A. Taft: 1949–1953* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 233–34.
9. Quoted in William Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 51.
10. Quoted in William Lovett, Alfred Eckes Jr., and Richard Brinkman, *US Trade Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 64.
11. Quoted in Judith Stein, *The Pivotal Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.
12. Judith Stein makes the same point on page 8 in *The Pivotal Years*, and her influence is felt throughout this essay.

Conservative Intellectuals and Critique of Cold War/ New Deal/Great Society America

Geoffrey Kabaservice

Most accounts of the America First Committee (AFC) end with its dissolution in December 1941. George H. Nash, in his comprehensive history of the post-World War II American conservative intellectual movement, notes that many of its prominent leaders had been isolationists or even members of the AFC, including William F. Buckley Jr., Russell Kirk, Henry Regnery, and the founders of *Human Events*. Even so, Nash declares that while the occasional "desperate call for a return to Fortress America" surfaced in the '50s and '60s, the postwar movement "was not predominantly isolationist."[1]

And yet . . . In 1963, Buckley recalled that his father "was a devout non-interventionist who carried to his grave his conviction that we should have never been in the war." And, he added, "I have never altered my belief that we made a disastrous mistake in doing so."[2]

The young liberals who founded the Emergency Committee to Defend America First at Yale University in the summer of 1940—including future Yale president Kingman Brewster Jr., future Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart, and future U.S. president Gerald R. Ford—came to repent of their isolationism after Pearl Harbor (if not before) and became staunch internationalists. Most of the conservative intellectual followers of the AFC, however, felt no such penitence and underwent no such conversion.

The conservative intellectuals' views continued to be colored by the AFC experience long after World War II. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (a prewar interventionist) observed in a perceptive postwar article, the war destroyed isolationism as a doctrine and a program. But isolationism survived as "a set of intense emotions . . . deeply founded in the American experience and sharply etched on the American psychology. And, in this deeper sense, isolationism has never died."[3]

For starters, the America First Committee had given many conservatives their first taste of grassroots political activism. Buckley, the founder of the conservative movement's ideological flagship, *National Review*, had been a young but enthusiastic AFC member. He attended the AFC's New York City rally in the fall of 1941, featuring speakers Charles Lindbergh and John T. Flynn, and in hindsight considered it "quite the most exciting evening of my life."[4] The AFC was not just a shared bonding experience for many of the future founders of the conservative movement. It also convinced them that there was a mass participatory audience for right-wing beliefs—a conviction that Joseph McCarthy's anticommunist crusade would strengthen.

The AFC experience further suggested to postwar conservatives that a majority of Americans would sympathize with their movement. After all, polls prior to December 1941 had shown that most Americans opposed becoming involved in the European conflict. From this premise sprang the conviction that there was a "hidden majority" of Americans who were waiting for a conservative alternative (such as Sen. Barry Goldwater's presidential candidacy in 1964) to the indistinguishable policies of Democrats and "me too" Republicans.

However, conservatives believed that popular opposition to intervention had been thwarted by the machinations of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Buckley maintained that Roosevelt had drawn the United States into an unnecessary war by fortifying Britain rather than Pearl Harbor, thereby inviting a Japanese attack.[5] Other conservatives averred that the perfidious Roosevelt had failed to communicate his advance knowledge of the attack on Pearl Harbor—an early instance of the conservative appetite for conspiracy theories about the treachery of liberal elites.

Conservatives also believed that grassroots anti-interventionism had been overcome by the relentless, coordinated attacks of an interlinked array of prominent institutions, which Buckley would label "the liberal establishment." Government officials from both parties, the prestigious universities, the great metropolitan newspapers and opinion journals, even the mainstream Protestant denominations—all combined to shower the isolationists with vituperative condemnation. *Time* magazine called the AFC a collection of "Jew haters, Roosevelt-haters, England-haters, Coughlinites [and] demagogues," while interventionists labeled the organization "the first fascist party in this nation's history" and Roosevelt questioned its members' patriotism.[6]

At the time, Buckley tried to strike back by (pseudonymously) asking the FBI to investigate *Time* for un-Americanism.[7] After the war, he and other conservatives targeted the media—and the liberal establishment as a whole—as anti-populist totalitarians to be brought down by any means necessary. Historian Fred Siegel is correct to identify Joe McCarthy as the isolationists' "tribune of revenge."[8] The revenge sought, however, was not just against the foreign policy establishment but against the liberal establishment as a whole.

In the eyes of conservative intellectuals, Pearl Harbor was the liberal establishment's primal, foundational error, and from it emerged a world order that was fundamentally illegitimate. Liberals, however, were unwilling to tolerate any criticism that adverted to this original sin. That was why they ostracized revisionist scholars of the war, in the first manifestation of the coercive conformity that later became known as "political correctness."[9]

Anticommunism legitimized conservatives' return to participation in the foreign policy debate. Anticommunist conservative internationalism, however, retained many characteristics of isolationism—notably, a suspicion of outsiders that revealed itself as a nationalist preference for unilateral action, skepticism toward free trade, and mistrust of alliances and international organizations, particularly the United Nations.

Conservative opposition to foreign aid stemmed from skepticism about nation-building as well as (in some cases) racism. The "Asia First" orientation of many conservatives obviously harkened back to the isolationists'

traditional suspicion of Europe. But Schlesinger, writing in 1952, noticed "the glassy boredom which overtakes the New Isolationists when India is mentioned, or Point Four. Isolationism has always been most interested in the foreign countries that have already been lost to the enemy."[10]

Conservative internationalism also retained the isolationists' skepticism toward the state and the huge, expensive, intrusive government that U.S. global leadership entailed. Few conservative intellectuals, apart from a handful of extreme libertarians, went as far as Senator Robert Taft, who believed that the Cold War was a ploy to internationalize and institutionalize the New Deal. Neo-isolationism peaked with the For America organization of the early '50s and its campaign for the Bricker Amendment.[11] But conservative skepticism toward strong, Roosevelt-style executive leadership in foreign policy resurfaced in the form of opposition toward Henry Kissinger's policy of détente with the Soviet Union and Richard Nixon's opening to China, and even conservative criticism of the draft and advocacy of an all-volunteer military.

The isolationist impulses of postwar conservative intellectuals often were subsumed under the broader conservative movement's need for unity, or mere partisanship. Both factors could explain conservatives' overall quiescence during both the Vietnam and Iraq/Afghanistan wars.

But isolationism has remained a latent tendency of conservatism, one that reappears at intervals. Both Pat Buchanan's and Donald Trump's invocations of America First drew upon the isolationist view of America as a racially unified nation whose purity must be protected from outsiders. At the same time, they also invoked Robert Taft's critique of the "tendency to interfere in the affairs of other nations, to assume that we are a kind of demigod and Santa Claus to solve the problems of the world."[12]

In the final analysis, isolationism persists because conservative intellectuals, for the most part, have never really come to terms with the world created by postwar internationalist liberalism. This ambivalence is likely to persist unless (or until) conservatives make peace with that order or break from it entirely.

Notes:

1. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996), 254.
2. William F. Buckley, Jr. to Harry Elmer Barnes, Nov. 25, 1963, I-24, "Barnes, Harry Elmer (1963)," William F. Buckley Jr. Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, New Haven, CT (hereafter, Yale).
3. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The New Isolationism," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1952): 35.
4. William F. Buckley, Jr. to Sterling Morton, Nov. 13, 1959, I-8, "Morton, Sterling (1959)," William F. Buckley Jr. Papers, Yale.
5. William F. Buckley, Jr. (writing as "Emma Pattinson") to editor of *Lakeville Journal*, Jan. 17, 1942, III-II-116: "William F. Buckley, Jr. from others," William F. Buckley, Jr. Papers, Yale.
6. Justus D. Doenecke. ed., *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940–1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), 35–37.
7. William F. Buckley, Jr. (writing as "Elmer Wing") to the FBI, Jan. 14, 1942, III-II-116: "William F. Buckley, Jr. from others," William F. Buckley Jr. Papers, Yale.
8. Frederick F. Siegel, *Troubled Journey: From Pearl Harbor to Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 76.
9. Justus Doenecke observed that revisionist scholar Harry Elmer Barnes's critique of New Deal foreign policy made him "almost a pariah among his fellow historians." Justus D. Doenecke, "Harry Elmer Barnes," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (Summer 1973): 312.
10. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The New Isolationism," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1952): 36.
11. Cathal J. Nolan, "The Last Hurrah of Conservative Isolationism: Eisenhower, Congress, and the Bricker Amendment," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1992): 337–49.
12. James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 437.

American Workers First? The Politics of Blue Collar Nationalism in an Age of Decline

Jefferson Cowie

Few scenes capture the impotent rage of the American working class better than the United Auto Workers' picnics of the 1980s. There, for a small donation, an angry union member could work out his or her rage at the new global order by heaving a sledge hammer down on an innocent Toyota Corolla. In the parking lot, bumper stickers claimed, "Buy American: The Job You Save May Be Your Own," while only U.S.-made cars were allowed access to spots near the plant—the benighted drivers of Japanese and German brands found their cars relegated to the back forty. Symbolic nationalist responses to the emergence of the transnational economy like these made noise but resulted in very little legislation. Still, we dismiss them at our peril.

While the phrase America First is associated with the committee that sought to thwart the United States' entry into World War II, it actually has earlier roots of the type that those autoworkers would have understood: the politics of tariffs. A *New York Times* editor argued in 1891 that protectionist tariffs meant "America first; the rest of the world afterward." The phrase went on to be a Republican political slogan for a high tariff economy in the 1890s, a system that, by 1900, had become known as the Republican politics of "the full dinner pail."[1]

The Toyota-pounding nationalist mood of the 1970s and 1980s hides the fact that the battle lines these workers faced were a lot less clear than they had been previously. Non-union Japanese "transplants" were landing in the United States and employing American workers, while cars imported from Germany and Sweden were built under some of the best union contracts in the world. Transnational labor solidarity with union sisters and brothers around the world turned out to be a political flutter in the trade winds when it was this job, in this town, that was on the chopping block. The old battle line between "us" and "them" in labor history had become difficult to redraw. Robert Reich mapped out the confusion of the new global age in a pair of smart articles in 1990 and 1991 with the revealing titles, "Who Is Us?" and "Who is Them?"[2]

One way to encapsulate the broad sweep of labor and working-class history is to tell the story of unions (based on "locals") breathlessly chasing after the ever-widening geographic command of capital since the dawn of the market revolution. They almost always found themselves trying to catch up, except during the postwar "Golden Age," when the United States was over-dominant in the world economy and the workers were buoyed by a host of New Deal legislation and union power. Wages went up, inequality went down, union density went up, and economic liberalism was robust. As the recipients of much of the bounty of trade liberalization under GATT, labor even supported agreements like the Trade Expansion Act of 1962. While much of this bounty privileged white male industrial workers, the formula proved beneficial across the board.

A dozen years later, however, foreign cars, electronics, steel, and garments (and, more to the point, the offshoring of the production of domestic brands) rattled the domestic dimension of the postwar trade regime. The sense of workers' fall from economic grace was not mere American anxiety, paranoia, racism, or metaphor. It was quite real.

Not surprisingly, when the postwar settlement began to unravel, workers sought to reestablish national control

over the globalizing labor market. Like farmers seeking "parity doctrine" based on the pre-World War I agricultural golden age, workers, union leaders, and liberals frantically struggled to shore up the old system. Advocates of the Burke-Hartke Foreign Trade and Investment Proposal in the early 1970s sought to impose quotas, eliminate tax provisions for overseas investment, and regulate international investment. The ILGWU relentlessly sang the "Look for the Union Label" jingle in television ads, and "Buy American" campaigns emerged in a number of industries. Other tools, such as anti-dumping agreements, currency manipulation, voluntary trade restraint agreements, and agreements by other nations to import certain quantities of American goods, all tried to prop up the rickety system. The battle lines between laissez-faire cosmopolitans and working people grounded in place began to be drawn.

In 1979, when Ronald Reagan launched his candidacy for the presidency, he declared himself in favor of a new idea: a "North American accord" on trade and development. The concept would eventually be signed as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by his successor, George H.W. Bush, in 1992, and passed through Congress by Bill Clinton. Reagan's populist magic allowed him to own the rally-around-the-flag nationalism (while blocking or destroying any domestic economic security dimensions and simultaneously promoting a global market in labor and other commodities). The 1980s then kicked labor's few remaining teeth in with a direct assault on the residual legal protections workers enjoyed, leaving industrial workers ravaged and with little more than pounding claims of being "Born in the USA."

In the 1990s, when NAFTA advocates sought to codify the new world order, labor launched a "just say no" campaign against the trade deal. But they were hemmed in by fast track authority, and they failed to generate alternative ideas or to note that hundreds of thousands of "U.S. jobs" had already relocated to Mexico. The anti-NAFTA struggle ended largely as an America First rally, with occasional flickers of solidarity with workers in Mexico and Canada. The "Battle in Seattle" in late 1999 offered a fleeting glimpse of labor's capacity to "Act Globally" (and environmentally) that never took root in American political culture. By then, "NAFTA" and "Clinton" became toxic terms throughout the heartland as industrial workers felt that the Democrats had betrayed them.

The Democrats stumbled on the same problem that had tripped up many reformist and social democratic parties around the world: jumping on a cosmopolitan, laissez-faire global position and denying the central fact that the nation-state was and would remain the place where workers' rights are recognized, infrastructure is built, and wealth redistribution can happen. Social democracy, where liberals make their mark, is a national project and cannot be robust if capitulation to the transnational order is the essence of politics. A critic of the floundering German Social Democrats correctly noted that it was a "convenient self-delusion of the 'neoliberal' decades . . . that you could strengthen both national democracy (including welfare-state capitalism) and transnational policymaking."[3] Trump's message that the cosmopolitan "Hillary Clinton will escalate the war against the American worker" became a credible political message.[4]

The most recent mobilization of America First by Donald Trump was a long time coming, and maybe not quite as crazy as it initially sounded. Trump was right, after all, on two important and often ignored points: American workers were sold out, and they were right to declare that the "system is rigged." The lesson of Trump's America First appeal is not that white workers are irredeemably provincial and racist (though many are), but that the nation state remains *the only imaginable place of redress* even in a global age. Nationalism and populism are on the rise, but they need to be understood within the claustrophobic global determinism that mocks national governments, political identity, and the capacity for people to act on their own and on their communities' behalf. The problem is far more complex than the question "Trade expansion, yes or no?" allows for.

Ethnocentric nationalism needs to be feared, deeply, but the concept of shared national fate and commitment can be harnessed. It used to be called "civics." The possibility of a dynamic "outward-looking" version of national economic strategy might be able to place the full cultural, racial, and geographic diversity of "American workers first" in a place between, on the one hand, the combination of free trade plus the nationalist rebel yell from Republicans and, on the other hand, the weak-kneed neoliberal diversity of the Democrats.

The key is to transcend the dominant backward-looking protectionist impulse (or any attempt to capture the labor market in the period of arrested decay that prevailed in the eighties and nineties) and to harness the state for the public good. The fact that the nation remains prostrate before Wall Street's demands for ever faster paybacks and bigger bonuses while it actively shuns long-term experimentation, research, worker training, product development, infrastructure construction, green economy development, health care access, education, and wealth redistribution is among the worst symptoms of the problem.

Progressives have conceded the fight for national identity for fear of the dark side of the problem. But, to paraphrase Tip O'Neill, all working-class politics are national. To ignore that aspect of America First and not recognize the pragmatic path it offers for a national developmental vision is simply to invite desperate and empty calls to "Make America Great Again."

Notes:

1. "Political Notes," *New York Times*, June 19, 1891. See also Sarah Churchwell, "End of the American Dream? The Dark History of 'America First'," *The Guardian,* April 21, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/21/end-of-the-american-dream-the-dark-history-of-america-first.
2. Robert B. Reich, "Who Is Us?" *Harvard Business Review* (Jan.-Feb. 1990), https://hbr.org/1990/01/who-is-us; and "Who is Them? *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 1991), https://hbr.org/1991/03/who-is-them.
3. Jochen Bittner, "What Happened to Germany's Social Democrats?" *New York Times,* December 28, 2017.
4. "Trump Attacks Clinton on Energy Stance," *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2016, transcript, https://www.wsj.com/video/trump-attacks-clinton-on-energy-stance/63FDBAA8-AA3D-421D-A009-D041CA196ED7.html. For the significance of the idea of a partisan switch on working-class loyalties, see "RFK's Visit to Appalachia, 50 Years Later: How Kennedy Country Became Trump Country," *USA Today*, February 12, 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/02/12/rfks-visit-appalachia-50-years-later-how-kennedy-country-became-trump-country/310267002/.

Competing Visions of America First in U.S. Immigration Policy

María Cristina García

[The Hart-Celler Act] that we will sign today will really make us truer to ourselves both as a country and as a people. It will strengthen us in a hundred unseen ways.

Lyndon B. Johnson, October 3, 1965

The time has come for a new immigration commission to develop a new set of reforms to our legal immigration . . . We need a system that serves our needs—remember, it's America First.

Donald J. Trump, August 31, 2016

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, more popularly known as the Hart-Celler Act, set into motion a series of changes that facilitated the arrival on American shores of over 59 million people from all over the world, with significant demographic consequences for the United States. The law eliminated the racist national origins quotas that had been in place since the 1920s and replaced them with a system of hemispheric—and later, global—caps that prioritized family reunification and certain forms of labor.

It is this system that President Donald J. Trump has been trying to overhaul since he took office, because, according to him, it has authorized the admission of far too many immigrants from "shithole countries."[1] Trump has also overhauled the refugee admissions program (USRAP), reducing refugee quotas to their lowest numbers since 1980; and he has expanded the surveillance, detention, and deportation regime to deter and detain asylum seekers and unauthorized immigrants. In his estimation, immigration policies have endangered our national security.

Trump's views on immigration have precedents in U.S. history. Since the early nineteenth century, immigrants, though vital to nation-building, have been accused of stealing jobs and undermining wages; of serving as spies, saboteurs, and terrorists; of undermining democratic institutions; and of refusing to assimilate culturally. The stakeholders who have crafted the immigration restriction regime have all claimed to be acting on behalf of American interests; but their understandings of who the American people are—and which ideals and interests merit protection—have always been hotly contested. Today's debates about who is worthy of admission and citizenship are echoes of earlier discourses.

Since the early national period, race, national origins, and religion have been key markers of eligibility for citizenship and for admission to the United States. The 1790 Nationality Act restricted citizenship by naturalization to "free white persons" and resulted in the legal category "aliens ineligible for citizenship," which affected property and immigration law for generations, as well as voting and civil rights. The first major battles to control entry to the United States came in the second half of the nineteenth century, when immigration flows shifted and immigrants came increasingly from Asia and southern and eastern Europe. Americans who traced their ancestry to northern and western Europe regarded immigrants from these areas of the world as racially different, politically dangerous, intellectually and morally deficient, and incapable of assimilating.

Congress enacted the first federal immigration controls beginning in the 1870s. The Chinese were the first targets of these immigration restrictions, but not exclusively. Over the next few decades, legislators passed a wide array of legislation to restrict admission based on race and national origins, but they also barred entry based on socioeconomic class, literacy, criminality, political beliefs, physical and mental health, and sexuality. In tandem, federal policymakers created institutions to enforce the new immigration laws, such as the Immigration Bureau (1891); immigrant inspection and detention stations on Castle Garden (1855), Ellis Island (1892), and Angel Island (1910); and police forces such as "Mounted Guards" (1904) and the Border Patrol (1924).

The rapid succession of laws culminated in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which reaffirmed the bar on all Asian immigration (established in 1917) and placed a cap on European immigration. The law also instituted a system of national origin quotas that privileged migration from northern and western Europe. Great Britain and Germany, for example, had quotas of 65,721 and 25,957, respectively, while southern and eastern European countries like Greece and Albania were limited to tiny quotas of 307 and 100 each.[2] In many years the quotas went unfilled. Legislators relied on embassies and consulates overseas to deny visas, and these "remote control" practices further helped to cull immigrants.[3] With the Johnson-Reed Act, the first great era of immigration came to an end, but during the short period between 1880 and 1924, 20 million people had entered the United States.

The period between the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 is portrayed as an interlude between two great eras of mass migration to the United States. Critics of the current immigration system point to this period in U.S. history as a model for the future: a time when immigration policy successfully stemmed the tide of unwanted immigrants, allowing the United States to absorb and Americanize all the undesirables that they had inadvertently allowed into the country.

Immigration to the United States did decrease in the wake of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, but it did not stop altogether.[4] From the start, Congress exempted from the quota U.S. colonial possessions and countries in the Americas so that these could provide cheap labor for factories, fields, mines, and railroads. When these populations proved to be insufficient, Congress authorized the entry of laborers from other parts of the world. During World War II and the early decades of the Cold War, Congress was repeatedly forced to amend immigration policy in the interest of international goodwill, positive foreign relations, economic competitiveness, and racial equality. Recognizing the need to honor wartime obligations, for example, legislators lifted the bars to Chinese, Indian, and Filipino migration and granted nationals of these countries the right to naturalize. Congress also passed the War Brides Act of 1945, the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 (renewed in 1950), and the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, which facilitated the entrance of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who were inadmissible before the war. Because it served American Cold War interests, policymakers even fast-tracked the admission and citizenship of former Nazi scientists to the United States to prevent them from using their expertise to help the Soviet Union. However, the most significant legal shift occurred with the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. The law included provisions for "humanitarian parole," ended racial restrictions on citizenship, and extended small immigration quotas to every nation.

The America First vision represented in the Johnson-Reed Act did have significant demographic consequences for the United States. By 1965, the percentage of foreign-born Americans had dropped to 5 percent, down from 13.2 percent earlier in the twentieth century. But despite the draconian numerical quotas, the racial bars, and the remote control policies, labor shortages and diplomatic imperatives forced Congress to establish pathways for select groups of immigrants because it was deemed in the national interest. These policies paved the way for the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, especially the commitment to family reunification and the privileging of certain types of labor.

Despite the act's nods to egalitarianism, however, the architects of Hart-Celler never imagined the demographic changes it would bring about. European migration to the United States fell in the final decades of the twentieth century, for a variety of reasons. Meanwhile, demands to emigrate increased in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Improvements in health care and education created highly mobile populations who sought better wages in industrialized nations; while revolution, economic displacement, and environmental disasters drove others to migrate. By 2014, the percentage of the U.S. population that was foreign-born was once again 13.2 percent. Sixty percent of the new immigrant population has come from Mexico, India, the Philippines, China, Vietnam, El Salvador, Cuba, South Korea, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala—countries considered undesirable by a new generation of nativists and isolationists.

Immigration restriction is once again the centerpiece of a new America First campaign. "We should have more people from Norway," said the president, echoing the calls of early twentieth-century American policymakers. Through executive orders and policy proposals, Trump has once again tried to bar entry based on racial, cultural, economic, and national origin criteria. But history suggests that he will not be entirely successful. Even during periods of war, economic contraction, and isolationism, when Americans have been particularly vocal about shutting the door and expelling "foreigners," competing understandings of the role of immigrants in nation- and state-building have resulted in parallel and often contradictory policies that left the door to immigration partway open.

It is yet unclear what our immigration system will look like after Trump. What is clear is that the United States cannot afford to shut itself off from the world. The challenges of the present—seventy million refugees and displaced persons, for example—and the challenges of the future—forecasts of hundreds of millions displaced by accelerated climate change—require international cooperation to find durable solutions to the problem of displacement.

Notes:
1. "Trump decries immigrants from 'shithole countries' coming to the US," *CNN*, January 12, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/11/politics/immigrants-shithole-countries-trump/index.html.
2. Mae Ngai offers one of the best discussions of the Johnson-Reed Act. See "The Architecture of Race in Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (June 1999): 67–92.
3. Aristide Zolberg, "The Archaeology of Remote Control," in *Migration Control in the North Atlantic World: The Evolution of State Practices in Europe and the United States from the French Revolution to the Inter-War Period*, ed. Andreas Fahrmeir, Olivier Faron, and Patrick Weil (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003).
4. This argument is developed in a co-edited anthology to be published in 2018. See Maddalena Marinari, Madeline Hsu, and Maria Cristina Garcia, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants Reconsidered: U.S. Society in an Age of Restriction, 1924–1965* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming). The introduction, co-written by the editors, provides a more detailed history of immigration policy in the 1924–1965 period.

America First in the Waning Age of Evangelicalism

Darren Dochuk

American evangelicalism is at war with itself. One might find that hard to believe, considering that eighty-one percent of evangelicals—a virtual consensus—voted for Donald Trump. Yet crisis is pervasive, especially among the nineteen percent of Bible believers who cast different ballots. What does "evangelical" even mean, they ask, when principles so easily give way to base politics? Some of them pledge to fight wayward brethren and their "bronze-aged warlord" and reclaim a "Christ First" instead of an America First doctrine. The more cynical are abandoning the tarnished evangelical label and hoping their compromised community collapses on itself.[1]

The recent death of Billy Graham produced a spate of op-ed obituaries that reinforced this sense of Trump-era calamity. "If you want to understand the evangelical decline in the United States," one prominent scholar editorialized, "look no further than the transition from Billy to Franklin Graham." Unlike Billy, the bridge-builder, Franklin is "a political hack, one who is rapidly rebranding evangelicalism as a belief system marked not by faith, hope, and love but by fear." The writer downplayed the two Grahams' shared DNA. Billy may have disarmed Americans with his southern drawl and Hollywood smile, but he often railed against social ills in racially coded terms and against foreigners in the type of jeremiads that stir his son's followers today.

Still, the irked scholar rightly highlighted evangelicalism's current rupture. When the senior Graham rose to fame in the 1940s, he purposefully distanced himself from his fundamentalist predecessors, whose pulpits during the interwar years reverberated with the sectarianism, isolationism, and jingoism of a populist Right. Despite ongoing opposition from those hard-edged America First sympathizers who extended their anti-internationalist agenda during the Cold War, Graham's enlivening and globally focused faith flourished for decades. Alas, the forces of fundamentalism and America First-ism have resurfaced with a vengeance.[2]

Why? The leadership of unbending clerics like Franklin has a lot to do with the turn, as do the single issues that have animated the Religious Right since the "Let's Make America Great Again" culture-war campaigns of the Reagan eighties. Many Christian apologists continue to explain their endorsement of Trump strictly as a vote for principles (religious freedom, the right to life, support for Israel) and friendly court justices. Yet broader theo-political dynamics have precipitated the generational shift toward Franklin Graham and Donald Trump's gospel.

Whereas Billy Graham's imperative was revival—a New Testament impulse to awaken America to its better self—Franklin's modus operandi is reconstruction. In its purest form, reconstructionism is the theology of shadowy minister-author R.J. Rushdoony, whose writings from the 1960s spawned an underground movement in the 1980s that called for a reordering of society according to Old Testament patriarchal law. Rushdoony believed Christian men had to "reverse the curse of the Fall and 'take dominion' over the planet and 'reconstruct' all of life in Christ's image," replacing "ungodly, secular forms of governance with decentralized theocracies and rule as Christ's vicegerents on earth." His was no modest revolutionary call.[3]

Quietly, evangelicals answered it and erected an institutional infrastructure to realign society with God's sovereignty. Evangelicals have always been prolific institution-builders; their America First moment of the interwar period was characterized by rapid construction of religious schools, associations, and mass media. But what has occurred since 1980 is unmatched. Through subtle diffusion, reconstructionist thought has propelled the home school movement, media programming, and an educational empire that underscores a patriarchal social order and teaches faith-friendly science and history to people in the pews. Best-selling author David Barton—head of the WallBuilders organization, whose writings reframe U.S. history as a product of divine destiny—is but one captain in an army of activists whose primary aim is to recast the nation's past and present as blessed struggle for a future millennium of godly rule.

If David Barton rules evangelicalism's classrooms,

Bruce Barton and the Babbitts of the corporate world control its pocketbook notions of political economy, which align with the policies and fantasies of the businessman-president. Billy Graham was certainly a bootstrap capitalist at heart, and a fierce defender of free-market Christianity. Yet the born-again 1970s, a decade animated by globalizing markets, deregulation, and the dawn of a neo-liberal order, redefined evangelicalism's money management in a way he would not have imagined possible.

Or considered healthy. Whereas Graham exuded Max Weber's Protestant ethic and preached calculation and control in the name of Christian stewardship, the prosperity gospel that arose during his later years justifies risk-taking, accepts the volatilities of chance, and pursues profits as if there is no tomorrow. Place your trust in God, the logic goes, and ride the capricious markets to happiness and success. A "get-rich" scheme in sacred guise, this formula is also therapeutic for Americans caught in the "calcified" inequalities of late capitalist society. It "explains away the deep societal problems that individuals are powerless to change" by insisting that "personal responsibility reigns supreme" and "faith is responsible for everything that happens to you." "Get going. Move forward. Aim High. Change your attitude and gain some altitude." These words, which Trump has uttered, are what prosperity gospel preachers deliver to their parishioners on a weekly basis.[4]

Warrior heroes of late-stage capitalism, today's evangelicals also see themselves as warrior heroes of the nation. Evangelicalism's ascent during the Cold War was in part a function of its tightening relationship with the military, something Billy Graham acknowledged by regularly paying tribute to the Christian commitment to national defense. But the evangelical takeover of U.S. military culture accelerated after 1980. In 1983, Ronald Reagan thanked evangelicals for shielding their society from those who would place it "in a position of military and moral inferiority." America was at war with an "evil empire," he declared, and he called for more of their religious patriotism.[5]

Evangelicals answered that call, staffing military posts and the chaplaincy in unmatched quantities. Between 1994 and 2005, the number of evangelical chaplains in the U.S. Air Force doubled, while Catholic and mainline Protestant contributions dropped. At a 2005 "Spiritual Fitness Conference," hosted by the Air Force in Colorado Springs, a reporter noted "there were personal testimonies about Jesus from the stage . . . a band performing contemporary Christian praise songs," and "hundreds of Air Force chaplains" singing, "with palms upturned, in a service with a distinctly evangelical tone."[6]

As the military turned evangelical, evangelicalism turned militaristic. Today, evangelical mothers praise the courage of their soldiering sons while their husbands attend male-only conferences to hear testimonials of godly GIs, praise Jesus ("the ultimate man"), and digest sermons that warn of a "once-powerful nation" becoming "soft and feminine" and now in desperate need of virile fighters. In Trump they have found their general. "I want the meanest, toughest, son-of-a-you-know-what I can find in that role," one pastor charges, "and I think that's where many evangelicals are."[7]

For all their bravado, evangelicals are vulnerable. A final shifting course for them involves demographics and a reversed narrative. When Billy Graham appeared on the national scene, he was a fresh face from the small-town South, representative of a region and religion on the rise. His ministry basked in a glow of optimism; despite the threats of Cold War annihilation they faced, evangelicals perceived good times ahead and built their movement to be America's lodestar as it climbed to new heights. Demographics offered them reasons to believe they would be successful. By the 1970s, scholars were hustling to explain why conservative churches were flourishing while progressive ones failed.

Billy's buoyancy has been replaced with Franklin's dark despair, and statistics justify his dire tones. Religion is in decline in the United States, and though slightly more resilient, evangelicalism is too. Over the past decade, white evangelicalism's proportion of the U.S. population has dropped from twenty-three percent to seventeen percent. Meanwhile, "A Quiet Exodus" is occurring, as black conservative Protestants flee white churches and separate themselves altogether from the "evangelical" label. That is no surprise, really, as the church of Trump is a predominantly white one. And then there are the growing numbers of Americans (now twenty-seven percent of the population) claiming to be "nones"—religiously unaffiliated citizens who say they are "spiritual but not religious." As frustrated conservative Protestants survey the landscape, they sense that evangelicalism's right-wing political attachments have corrupted it beyond repair, making the "none" camp a more comfortable fit.[8]

Statistically and symbolically, the eighty-one percent of evangelicals who voted for Trump reinforce one image of contemporary evangelicalism even as they belie another. In their rush to champion Trump's America First agenda, evangelicals have brought to fruition a generation of theo-political change that has seen them become more theocratic in their aims, "post-truth" in their dependence on alternative media and education, and blustery in their muscular, authoritarian doctrines and populist backlash. Yet in doing so, they have also marked the end of their movement's age of authority; their overwhelming support for their leader has weakened, not strengthened, their long-term lot. Evangelicals have always looked out onto the world through anxious eyes, measuring current events against expectations of apocalypse. They now face a bleak and bloody reckoning of their own creation.

Notes:

1. Russell Moore, "Why This Election Makes Me Hate the Word 'Evangelical,'" *The Washington Post*, February 29, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/02/29/russell-moore-why-this-election-makes-me-hate-the-word-evangelical/?utm_term=.df848d527d7b.
2. Stephen Prothero, "Billy Graham Built a Movement. Now His Son is Dismantling It," *Politico*, February 24, 2018, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/24/billy-graham-evangelical-decline-franklin-graham-217077.
3. Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstructionism: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 4–5.
4. Drew Pendergrass, "The Televangelist-in-Chief: Trump and the Prosperity Gospel," *Harvard Political Review*, November 12, 2017, http://harvardpolitics.com/culture/tevangelistinchief/.
5. Ronald Reagan "Evil Empire Speech," http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/.
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America First, A Second Time

Nicole Hemmer

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the Cold War was crumbling to an end, the ties that had bound the conservative coalition snapped. The democratic triumphalism, the embrace of free markets, the commitment to foreign intervention—features of Cold War politics that knit together the disparate parts of the conservative coalition—lost their magnetic pull. The Reagan era was over; what would replace it had not yet been born.

Enter Pat Buchanan.

Buchanan had been a staple of Republican administrations since joining the Nixon team, though he had never himself run for office. And by the late 1980s, his reputation was less politician than personality: a pundit who made a name for himself as the conservative voice in countless political sparring forums, from *The McLaughlin Group* and *Crossfire* to his three-hour daily radio show and op-ed pages across the country.

Then, in late 1991, he announced he was running for president on an America First platform. Protectionist and isolationist, his campaign was an overt rejection not just of President George H. W. Bush, his primary opponent, but also of Ronald Reagan. With an enormous geopolitical shift looming, Buchanan seized the opportunity to rewrite the meaning of American conservatism along the lines of an exclusionary, pessimistic nationalism—one that resonates sharply in the Trump era.

It is, in fact, the resonances between Buchanan and Trump that help us better grapple with Buchanan's legacy. For a quarter-century, Buchanan was Goldwater without Reagan, the trounced candidate whose political ideas supposedly died with his presidential ambitions, with no redeemer waiting in the wings. Paleoconservatives, as Buchanan's tribe would be called, seemed to be a footnote, Buchanan himself a leader unable to find followers.

Then came Donald Trump, signaling that while America First conservatism may not have been the majority view of the Republican base—may still not be, in fact—it nevertheless persisted as a minor note in the years between Buchanan and Trump, and indeed, in the years between the first America First Committee and Buchanan.

What explains this persistence? And why is America First a slogan ostensibly about a posture of non-interventionist foreign policy and protectionist economics, but constantly packaged with other, far more objectionable politics: a racist, misogynistic, antidemocratic nationalism?

Here the commonalities between Buchanan and Trump are illuminating, especially their shared media backgrounds. It matters that both men launched their presidential campaigns from a base in media, not electoral politics. That is, in fact, their most important shared quality, because it allowed them to build a base outside formal party structures. That external base was crucial, because both Buchanan and Trump were challenging party orthodoxies that traditional politicians, for reasons of personal conviction or self-preservation, were unwilling to breach.

But their media backgrounds also help account for their incendiary choice of America First to describe their politics and help explain why the Buchanan and Trump campaigns share a virulent toxicity. Both men emerged from media environments that incentivized provocation, that rewarded shock and contrarianism. For Buchanan, it was a blended background in conservative media and the pugilistic left-right sparring shows of the 1970s and 1980s. For Trump, it was the mix of conservative entertainment (he was a regular contributor to the morning show *Fox and Friends*) and competitive reality television.

These incentives were different from those of politicians in the Republican Party, where by the 1980s and 1990s a conservative establishment was emerging. Newt Gingrich, for instance, came to power in 1995 not on the back of a series of divisive culture-wars policies, but rather on a platform comprised of "sixty-percent issues"—that is, policies that the polls showed had at least sixty percent of the public supporting them. Even as the GOP became more and more ideologically rigid and tribalistic, leading Republican officeholders to back increasingly unpopular policy proposals, its members still sought to appeal, at least rhetorically, to a broader electorate.

Not so Buchanan and Trump, outsiders who expected to provoke, not govern. Both men saw themselves as anti-establishment disrupters. Both were as interested in making headlines as in unsettling party orthodoxies. They were not looking to build majorities but to build brands.

Their shared comfort with racism, anti-Semitism, and antidemocratic politics helps explain why they both reached for the America First label. A politician seeking to build broad majorities, or seeking to avoid associations with racist nationalism, would not seek to forge linkages with the America First Committee. For while the original iteration of the AFC was indeed a broad-spectrum movement, attracting pacifists and German American Bund devotees, Republicans and Democrats, left-wingers and right-wingers, it soon became associated with proto-fascism, anti-Semitism, and Nazi admiration. Consciously choosing to echo that legacy indicates a political worldview that goes well beyond tariffs and sharply curbed foreign intervention.

But reaching for a controversial label was part of both the Buchanan and Trump brands. Their populism is defined by a willingness to say things that "shouldn't" be said. They hold out their willingness to be offensive as evidence of their commitment to telling the truth. Their opposition to "political correctness" is of a piece with that approach. They argue that people avoid saying racist and sexist things not because those things are false—which they are—but because they are impolite. As a result, offensiveness and truth are conflated, and the more controversial and discredited an idea, the more power it has.

That embrace of racist and sexist ideas helps explain why, despite apparent opportunities for cross-party, cross-ideological alliances (like those featured in the original America First Committee), neither Buchanan nor Trump has been able to build a base outside the American right. A broader populist coalition that traverses the lines of Democrat and Republican, left-wing and right-wing is almost certain never to appear in the United States under the America First banner, no matter how much pundits fantasize about it. (And fantasize about it they do, whether they be Buchanan and anti-WTO protesters in the 1990s or Sanders-Trump voters in 2016.)

That is because while America First Republicans may share policy preferences with the left— on trade, on foreign policy—they have radically different goals. The goal of exclusionary nationalism is to protect white men, something the multicultural left overtly rejects. Which means that if there is to be a meaningful politics of enlightened (rather than exclusionary) nationalism, one that embraces tariffs and has a "Come Home, America" foreign policy, one that crosses party lines and ideological divides, it will not happen under the label of America First.

America First, America Alone or America Left Behind?

Michael Froman

Much has been made of the Trump administration's stated policy of America First. On the one hand, it is not a remarkable concept. Every country puts its interests first, and no U.S. president ever thought he was

putting the interests of the United States anything but first. The question is how to define U.S. interests.

President Trump's advisers have defended the America First approach by arguing that there is no such thing as an international community. We cooperate where we have common interests. We compete or conflict where we don't. On the one hand, that is true, and it's a rather obvious restatement of realism. On the other hand, it suggests a transactional theory of international relations rather than a vision of international cooperation based on a sense of shared values and purpose. That doesn't mean we always agree with our partners on specific policies, but it does mean that that we are working to advance a common set of broad objectives. The practice of international relations, after all, is the ultimate reiterative, multidimensional, cross-cutting negotiation.

For the last seventy-plus years, we have defined U.S. interests in an enlightened manner: support for an international system that reflects our values and promotes collective action consistent with those values. Not a Hobbesian, unilateral, every-country-out-for-itself system; but one in which nations work together—through alliances, regional trade agreements, or multilateral regimes—to promote common values.

By opening up our markets and financing the reconstruction of Japan and Europe, we contributed to the most significant period of peace and stability in modern history. By encouraging economic reforms, we helped developing countries become emerging markets, precipitating the most significant reduction in poverty in global history. We created middle- class markets for our goods and services and became a major exporting nation.

Even with this rather remarkable set of outcomes, we recognized that our policies came with certain costs. We saw a fair amount of free-riding on our efforts and sowed the seeds of competition against our own businesses. And that competition has not always been conducted on a fair basis. In response, and for some time now, we have made it clear that our relationships would need to be rebalanced, trade would have to be more reciprocal, and other countries would have to step up their support for their own and our collective defense. And that has been the focus of the work of several administrations, Democratic and Republican alike.

President Trump and his advisors have made it clear that, from their perspective, America First does not mean America Alone. There is no reason to doubt their sincerity or intent. But the problem is, regardless of their sincerity or intent, whether we have company or are traveling down this path alone depends on the reaction of other countries. Trump and his advisors have underscored their preference for negotiating bilateral trade agreements; so far, no country has taken them up on their invitation.

Historically, in general, there has been a tremendous amount of goodwill toward the United States and its leadership. Allies, partners, and even our competitors and, at times, our adversaries want U.S. engagement and leadership. But the international response to our current approach thus far has not been encouraging. Pulling out of agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership or the Paris Accord; threatening to pull out of other agreements, from NAFTA to KORUS to the Iran deal; and questioning the fundamental tenets of our military alliances, such as NATO's Article V—all these actions have raised real questions about U.S. credibility and reliability as a partner.

There is a widespread perception that the United States is retreating from the position of global leadership that it has held for the last seventy years. But the rest of the world is not standing still, and, at least in the trade arena, the U.S. retreat has mobilized others to move forward more aggressively so as not to allow the momentum toward economic reform and market liberalization to be slowed. The TPP-11 countries have decided to move ahead with TPP without the United States, and additional countries have expressed interest in joining it once it is in place. The EU has negotiated agreements with Canada, Singapore, Vietnam, Japan, and Mexico. Now they are focused on Australia, New Zealand, ASEAN, MERCOSUR, India, and the GCC. The Pacific Alliance is deepening and broadening its trade relationships across the region, adding new members to their already strong group. Africa is making progress on tripartite and continental free trade agreements.

America First and the Rules-Based Trading System

One of the key issues is what the America First approach will mean for the rules-based system itself. Does America First mean that, resisting any perceived constraints on U.S. sovereignty, we ignore the rules, take unilateral actions contrary to our international obligations, lose the moral high ground to hold others to their obligations, and spur on retaliation, trade wars and perhaps, most damaging, imitation?

The United States has benefited greatly from the rules-based system. We pressed for the WTO and its binding and enforceable dispute-settlement process precisely to hold other countries accountable, to prevent others from acting unilaterally, to avert trade wars and worse, and to advance transparency and the rule of law that underpin open, democratic systems. Now there is talk in Washington that the WTO is outdated and that we should withdraw from its dispute settlement process if it rules against us. While the WTO could certainly be updated, if we open the door to pulling out of such international commitments when they are inconvenient, we might find others will follow suit, and not just in the trade arena: consider China and the South China Sea; Iran and nuclear non-proliferation; Russia and respect for its neighbors' borders and sovereignty.

America First: Making us more like China

When it comes to trade and international economics, the U.S. retreat has come at precisely the time when China has become more sophisticated in its use of hard and soft power. Between the One Belt/One Road initiative, the Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the efforts to establish facts on the ground—or ground itself—in the South China Sea, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), China has a regional strategy and is executing it. Starting with President Xi's assertion in Davos last January of China's role as the defender of the open trading system, China has sought to claim the moral high ground on trade, the environment, and regional cooperation. And, with the United Sates in retreat, other countries are increasingly responding to China's overtures or modeling China's behavior.

Ironically, the Trump Administration's America First policy is uniquely Chinese in its characteristics. China is nothing if not disciplined about pursuing its own national interests, narrowly defined. No country has benefited more from the open, liberal trading system, supported and maintained by others, while adhering to a nationalist policy—a China First policy—as much and as long as possible.

China has an interest in supporting a rules-based system, but that would mean making a series of important changes: removing barriers to trade and investment; fully following through on its WTO commitments; bringing an end to predatory industrial policy; stepping back from forced technology transfer and IPR theft, including theft via cyber-intrusion; and eliminating overcapacity. Such actions would all be good down payments by China on support for the rules-based system.

Opportunities to Shape the Future

As nations around the world move on—pursuing their separate regional strategies, negotiating their own trade agreements, redefining their security interests—we might find that America First not only looks like America Alone, but risks becoming America Left Behind.

It doesn't have to be that way. One way to view these initial years of the Trump administration is as a conditioning exercise. There is a new sheriff in town, with a new perspective. Other countries are on notice to be ready to rethink their assumptions.

Now the administration needs to turn that conditioning into effective negotiating leverage. It needs to lay out a vision that reflects this new perspective, specify a strategy for achieving it, and develop discrete negotiating objectives that are clear-eyed and systemically important. Step-by-step, it has to do the very hard work of bringing other countries on board, using every bit of diplomatic capability and capacity to build international coalitions of support. It is doable, but tough. It requires disciplined execution.

Ultimately, we put America first by promoting American interests and values through proactive and effective American leadership. It is the ultimate exercise of U.S. sovereignty to secure support from the rest of the world for what makes America great.

You'll Never Walk Alone

Philip Zelikow

Twenty-six years ago, in the summer of 1992, I held the pen for the drafting of and arguments over the foreign policy platform of the Republican Party. It was not an important policy document. It was only an illustration of how, in a political process, the Republican Party chose to describe its views.

I was not regarded among Republicans as some great thought leader. I just happened to be out of government, and my old colleagues in the Bush White House felt they could rely on me to represent and look out for the Bush administration's views.

That 1992 platform used the words "America first." The party promised that it would "put America first." Earlier in 1992 Pat Buchanan had made his bid for the nomination with an agenda couched in language that was pretty similar to the rhetoric Trump used in his campaign.

But Bush 41 and his team did not mean America First in the way Donald Trump means it. It is worth a bit of reflection on the difference, because it is about much more than temperament or style.

Earlier in 1992, there had been a little dustup in the papers about a draft defense policy document that was very blustery about desiring to fend off any competitors for world leadership. The drafters of that document were men of large visions but modest influence over the actual policies of that administration.

Brent Scowcroft thought the draft defense policy was "arrogant." He later told a biographer, Bartholomew Sparrow, "that this never became the national strategy for the Bush 41 team. It was the 'wrong approach.'" The drafters were admonished. The document was brought back down to earthly platitudes.

Of course, the document ended up extolling American strength and the need to contain hostile rivals. Meanwhile, in the realm of real policy, the defense and intelligence budgets were being cut—a lot. Forces deployed overseas, nuclear and conventional, were also being rolled back—a lot.

Scowcroft later explained why he thought the draft defense guidance was so wrong. His view of grand strategy emphasized that America should pursue its interests, "wherever possible, within a framework of concert with our friends and the international community."[1]

This was our view at the time, in 1992. So, for instance, in that same platform that used the term "America First" and bragged about American world leadership, we chose, as a topic heading, to describe our approach as: "Leadership Through Partnership."

Some scholars see such differences as cosmetic. They refer to the grand strategy in 1992 as one of "international hegemony," or "unipolar primacy," or "empire," or just plain "dominance." Donald Trump or John Bolton would have no problem with these labels. Yet there is a vital difference between the grand strategy of a John Bolton and the grand strategy of a Brent Scowcroft.

I have thought a lot about how to explain why such labels are so profoundly misleading. It is not just cosmetics. There are quite deep, substantive reasons why Scowcroft (and Baker, and their president) did not like such labels, even though they thought America had and should retain great power. They wanted America to be central, not dominant.

Labels like "hegemony" are unrealistic. They do not express how effects are attained outside America's borders. America does not build much in the world by telling others what to do. It has to form partnerships for common action in which the foreigners usually have the final say on what happens in their country. Not only is this true in diplomacy, it is actually also true in war.

The Trump version of America First is a conception that does not need others. It does not need them either because its imagined America is so dominant, so confident in its brute power, or because the government does not actually want to build anything outside of America's borders. This is the version of America First that seems synonymous with "America Alone."

To get anything done in American foreign policy, it has to get done in foreign countries. The foreigners live there. The foreigners control almost all of what goes on. This seems like a rather basic point. But most Americans, including most of those who work on national security, have never actually had to negotiate an agreement with foreigners. They have never had to build anything, or any institution, in foreign lands.

Nor do most Americans adequately appreciate that every foreign war we have ever won was won in an international coalition in which our foreign allies did much of—and sometimes even the majority of—the fighting. Even during the Cold War, the majority of the NATO troops holding the line in Europe, and specifically in West Germany, were foreign, not American. If you don't see the foreigners doing a lot of the effective fighting, you're probably studying either the history of a war America lost or the history of a war America is losing.

For many Americans on both the right and the left, conceptions of American interest in the world are abstract. Americans have a purpose; others react. Americans are the subject and foreigners are the object. Sometimes academics will, in an unconsciously patronizing way, concede that the foreigners in the story have some "agency." You bet they do.

Instead of seeing American power from the inside out—American purposes and foreign objects—it is usually better to start off in the opposite way, by seeing American power from the outside in—foreign purposes and their American objects. What do *they* want from *us*? If we can do that, the realistic possibilities for American leadership begin to emerge.

Often, the foreigners are divided, uncertain, or don't have all the capabilities they need. In other words, often they are just like us. In that situation, is there something Americans can do that, at the margin, makes one outcome more likely than another? That helps one of their factions

prevail? Helps crystallize a common purpose? Helps provide a critical enabler for common action? Helps organize a durable institution for common work?

If we can answer such questions constructively, American leadership can happen. I have just described the essence of the story of the Marshall Plan. And the origins of NATO. And the essence of what America contributed to the diplomacy that ended the Cold War.

Consider, for example, the American agenda in the summer of 1992. We were then trying to help reconstruct a transformed Europe and a former Soviet space that was now the home of fifteen new states. To create a North American Free Trade Area. To create a Pacific economic community, called APEC. To be constructive in the European Union building project. To create a global trading structure in the Uruguay Round. To tackle the North Korean nuclear problem, then in its first crisis stage, with the two Koreas seemingly making a promising start. To help along a Middle East peace process that America had helped restart in Madrid. To support the United Nations at work policing and inspecting a defeated Iraq. Notice how much of this involved works of construction, and contrast that world with this one.

After more than twenty-five years of complacency and distraction since 1991, the time may at last have come when Americans seem to really be confronting a void of constructive purpose in the post-Cold War world. The Trump administration's National Security Strategy, released in 2017, has a worldview *entirely* about threats. There is literally nothing in the document about constructive opportunities. Our government's default mode for sizing up the world is now called a "threat assessment."

When the world is reduced to a set of menacing abstractions, like monsters that need to be kept at a safe distance, it is easy to foster the illusion that little needs to be constructed. (Except for the weapons.) And, of course, America First can start to sound like America Alone. But there are other ways to fill the void.

There is a constructive agenda for the digital age, which is the great economic revolution of our time, and I have joined in some of the work on that. There are other major issues, many of them transnational. There are pivotal opportunities on every continent that could go either way in countries like Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, and the European Union itself. None of them can be addressed by America alone.

The American role in the world should be reconceived in ways that are more natural, more organic, and more sustainable. The basis for this is a profound and historic shift in the relation of ordinary Americans to the rest of the world, especially in the last twenty to thirty years. For example, globalized commerce is now all over America, in small cities, towns, and farms. Throughout the American heartland, Americans go to work using components from foreign suppliers, in firms owned by foreigners, and selling to foreigners, often through digitized networks. This is a big change. Quite a few people out in rural America grasp their globalized connections; they get it very well. Many intellectuals do not follow the business developments in local communities closely enough to be aware of how deep this penetration has become and how well many Americans understand it.

Another deep change in America involves the way ordinary Americans are now connected, socially and culturally, to a variety of transnational phenomena, including energy, environment, terrorism, and cyber concerns. They are also aware of the significance of those connections and of how those connections affect them. This is also a historic shift.

The time is ripe for a reconception of the American role in the world, a reconception that would carry with it an emphasis on the functional partnerships that enable common action on most of the major issues that are of lasting interest to ordinary Americans. Those reconceived partnerships, and their practical value, then need to be symbolized in some vivid ways and explained. These partnerships and coalitions will overlap with post-1945 institutions, but they will not be the same.

Note:
1. Bartholomew Sparrow, *The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 486.

The Future of America First

Robert Kagan

The future of America First is bright, and there are two reasons why. The first is that it is normal. The second is that the alternative, the wielding of American power on behalf of a liberal world order, has been discredited, and by many of those now fretting over the resurgence of America First.

The first thing to ask is what is so unusual about America First? Most nations throughout history have viewed their interests narrowly and have placed those interests first. Normal nations do not view themselves as having responsibilities beyond their own immediate interests. And of course, for much of America's history, and certainly from the days of the early republic to the late nineteenth century, few expected Americans to take responsibility for anything beyond their protection, prosperity, and territorial expansion. Some, like Henry Clay, looked to make the United States the leader of the Western Hemisphere, presumably not only for its own benefit but also for the benefit of the other newly independent nations, and later this benevolent "pan-Americanism" would influence the thinking and policies of James Blaine and other Republicans.

However, it wasn't until the McKinley administration and the humanitarian crisis in Cuba that Americans began looking at the well-being of others as a proper object of American foreign policy. That was when the notion that Americans had a "responsibility" to something beyond themselves—to help others who might be suffering, to preserve peace, to play a part in supporting a certain kind of world order—first gained some traction not just as an ideal but as a guide to actual policy.

And in a way it was at that moment that America First was born, at least in spirit. What some Americans regarded as accepting responsibility, others denounced as imperialism or emotionalism or irrationalism. When Woodrow Wilson proposed to impose international responsibilities on the United States through the mechanism of the League of Nations, his critics, led by Henry Cabot Lodge, appealed to "Americanism" as the antidote to an "internationalism" that had foreign and subversive connotations. In the 1920s and 1930s, what people like Robert Taft and others who were both formally and informally part of the America First movement insisted upon was simply normalcy—the normalcy to which Americans had returned after the First World War, the normalcy they had chosen in rejecting the responsibilities of the League.

Today America First is again appealing for normalcy. And make no mistake: American foreign policy since World War Two has been highly abnormal. During and after the war American leaders chose to define America's interests so broadly as to transcend all traditional definitions. In taking on what they regarded as "international responsibilities," they made the United States the central provider of economic, political, and strategic security in distant parts of the world—the "locomotive at the head of mankind," as Acheson put it—in the service of a liberal world order.

Those who opposed this approach prior to December 1941 were called isolationists, but that was unfair. They were isolationists only if not being an isolationist required embracing the most extensive global involvement ever undertaken by any nation in history. Today, America First is seeking normalcy again. It is asking Americans to unshoulder the heavy moral and material burdens of the last seven-plus decades and let other nations manage their own problems as much as possible.

If one had been a supporter of the broad thrust of American foreign policy since 1945, then this would be objectionable and alarming. But why should it be objectionable to the many different varieties of critics of that foreign policy over the years? Today we see many on the liberal left and among self-described realists complaining about Trump's America First policies. But why? Other than the fact that it is associated with a brand of conservatism they find odious, it is not clear what exactly they object to.

America First in its heyday was not only a conservative phenomenon. To be sure, there was always a significant strain of white ethno-nationalism in the movement, both in the early twentieth century and today, which could be found generally, though not exclusively, on the right. Yet among the intellectual leaders of the anti-interventionist movement in the 1920s and 1930s were people who could variously be described as anti-imperialists, moralists, "realists," and even liberal internationalists of a certain type (like those who supported the "outlawry of war" and the Kellogg-Briand Pact as an alternative to intervention). They joined the America First cause, formally in some cases, not because they were racists and xenophobes (or at least not only for that reason) but out of opposition to what they regarded as a mistaken and immoral exercise of American global power.

Charles A. Beard, A.J. Muste, Howard K. Beale, and others favored a policy of America First because they feared involvement in the war would lead Americans to overreach, to seek "world domination," and to practice an "unadulterated imperialism" not very different from that sought by Germany. Taft and others believed themselves to be realists, and they were making an essentially realist case that American interests, traditionally understood, did not require "tilting like Don Quixote against the windmills of fascism," as Taft put it. Beale argued that if trade was the problem, the United States could trade as well with Germany and Japan as with Britain. Beard argued that instead of solving the problems of capitalism through war, the United States would do better to socialize its economy.

This, too, was America First, and such critiques have resonated ever since. Indeed, there is many a scholar today who would say that those old America Firsters were right to warn of the consequences of American involvement in the war and of the victory that followed. Like Richard Hofstadter in 1968, they would retrospectively endorse Beard's "pertinent warnings against the global Messianism which has come to be the curse of American foreign policy."

So why are we caviling? We should be celebrating. Today's realists and left-revisionists may not enjoy being in the company of Trump and Bannon, just as Beard may not have enjoyed being in the company of Lindbergh. But if these critics don't have much else in common, they do share a common enemy—and that is American foreign policy as it was conducted during the seven-plus decades after World War II.

If America First is in the ascendant today, it is not just because white nationalism has returned to the fore. It is because American global engagement in defense of a liberal world order has been discredited in the eyes of many Americans. It has been discredited in part by its own excesses and misjudgments. But those inevitable failures—for what foreign policy in the real world is without failures?—have occurred against the background of a decades-old intellectual and moral critique that has amplified them to the point of drowning out whatever positive results have been achieved. Americans have been taught not only that American global involvement is prone to error, but that defense of the liberal world order itself has only been an exercise in capitalist hegemony, that the deployment of American power in defense of that order has been imperialism, and that whatever international responsibilities the United States claimed to be carrying out all these years was hypocrisy, with lofty rhetoric masking selfishness.

If the American global involvement of the past seventy years has been as much a mistake as its critics claim, and as the vast majority of those in the academy believe, then we should not be surprised to see Americans falling back to America First. Did we think they would choose world federalism instead? Or radically reform the capitalist system? Or seek to recreate the Concert of Europe? America First's critique of American foreign policy may lack the sophistication of the realist or left-revisionist critique, but its approach offers the most likely antidote to the capitalist exploitation that Beard warned of and to the messianic utopianism that Hans Morgenthau condemned.

If Americans looked only to their own narrow interests, would they not be less likely to wield power over others for any purpose, whether exploitative or messianic? Or, to ask the question another way, is there a plausible way for Americans to accept global responsibilities without wielding power selfishly and without all the material and moral failures that wielding power leads to? It is one thing to murmur about America First, but since we are no longer willing to defend the foreign policy that America First was born to critique, America First is what we are going to get.