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# THE GREAT WAR AND THE SHAPING OF CONTEMPORARY U.S. ISOLATIONISM

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# The Great War and the Shaping of Contemporary U.S. Isolationism

Kenneth D. Rose

Any discussion of isolationism must begin with the following question: Is the natural condition of the American nation isolationist or internationalist? It is a difficult question to answer. For large swaths of U.S. history Americans have viewed the political turmoils of the rest of the world (especially Europe) with distaste, bordering on contempt. Thanks to an outlandishly fortunate geographical position that provided an abundance of natural resources and two enormous oceans, for much of the nineteenth century Americans luxuriated in a distant remove from what they viewed as a corrupt Old World. Importantly, American isolationism has never been economic or cultural, but instead has focused on avoiding the intrigues of overseas governments. It is hard to improve upon historian Manfred Jonas' definition of isolationism as "unilateralism in foreign affairs and the avoidance of war."<sup>1</sup> Balanced against the desire to attend to their own affairs and let others do the same is the unmistakable tendency of Americans to believe that they have a mission that requires them to spread the blessings of American civilization beyond their own shores. This has often been referred to as "Manifest Destiny." These two aspects of the American character — to stand at a distance from the rest of the world and to actively export American values -- have been at war with each other since colonial days, and there is no indication that they can or will be reconciled any time soon.

## U.S. ISOLATIONISM BEGAN WITH GEORGE WASHINGTON'S *FAREWELL ADDRESS*

The alpha and omega of all discussions of American isolationism begins with George Washington's "Farewell Address." Washington argued that a nation that habitually involved itself in the affairs of other nations "was in some degree a slave." Why, he asked, should a nation

blessed by “our detached and distant situation,” “entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition rivalry, interest, humor or caprice?” The best policy was “to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world . . .”<sup>2</sup> Easier said than done. During the colonial era, European politics intruded on Americans in the form of the French and Indian War, then in the days of the early republic British impressments of American sailors resulted in one of the most stupid of conflicts: the War of 1812. It would not be the last time that British actions at sea alienated the American public.

Animating American suspicions of Europe was imperialism. As citizens of a nation that had once been a colony of what was viewed as an oppressive European state, Americans were especially sensitive to this issue. When there was talk in Europe of re-colonizing the New World after Napoleon’s defeat, the United States issued the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. President Monroe warned that the United States would consider it “dangerous to our peace and safety” should any European power expand into the Western hemisphere. He also emphasized that the United States would not interfere in European affairs.<sup>3</sup> The Monroe Doctrine was effective because it was in Britain’s interest to keep it so, but the critique of European colonialism would be an important part of American foreign policy for a hundred years into the future.

#### HOW THE GREAT WAR SHAPED THE ISOLATIONIST DEBATE

The Spanish-American War was certainly a departure from American foreign policy, but the fighting had mostly taken place in the New World rather than the Old. It was not until the Great War that the United States, with a great deal of reluctance, made the decision to involve herself in a European conflict. It’s this war and its aftermath that would shape the isolationist debate down to the present day. Before this event isolationism as a foreign policy had simply been taken for granted, afterward, it became subject to intense public controversy. Initially, the American instinct to avoid European entanglements was reinforced by the horrific nature of the Great War. For two-and-a-half years Americans watched the progress of this conflict with a combination of fascination and horror. In two battles, the Somme and Verdun, almost a million men were killed. It seemed that Europeans had thrown off all the trappings of civilization in favor of a savage,

mechanized slaughter. President Woodrow Wilson declared the war “a catastrophe,” while Walter Hines Page, Ambassador to Great Britain, condemned the “deplorable medievalism” that had blossomed in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

What could possibly prompt the United States to plunge into this bloodbath? In the end it was the German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare - described by historian Arthur S. Link as “one of the greatest blunders in history” - and Germany’s contempt for any action the United States might take, that convinced Americans that their basic values were at risk.<sup>5</sup> But beyond the sinking of American ships, Wilson asked for American participation in order to insure that the cataclysm of another world war would never happen again. Those who discount the power of idealism, especially when examining American society, do so at their peril, and the economic determinists who claim that the United States joined the fray to protect American business interests know little about what motivates a nation. As Wilson put it in 1916, the public was not won over by logical appeals but “by the impulses of the heart; it is moved by sympathy . . .”<sup>6</sup> It was sympathy for the victims of German aggression and a wish to make the world a better place (and not a desire to protect American capital outlays) that propelled Americans into the Great War. Wilson made a persuasive appeal to Progressive idealism, and Progressives responded. John Dewey credited Wilson with creating a bridge over “which many a conscience crossed . . .”<sup>7</sup>

#### THE PROFOUND IMPACT OF THE UNITED STATES ON THE COURSE OF THE WAR

American ambivalence aside, the impact of the United States on the course of the war was profound. The United States was the most heavily industrialized nation on the planet, far outstripping Germany in the production of such crucial items as coal, iron and steel.<sup>8</sup> American ship building increased by a factor of fourteen over pre-war levels, and the United States raised an immense army. There would be 2 million American troops in Europe at the end of the war.<sup>9</sup> Through \$10 billion in American loans (the equivalent of \$150 billion in today’s money) the United States became the chief supplier of Allied armaments and food. (A secret British report in October 1916 suggested that any disruption in American supplies would “practically stop the war.”)<sup>10</sup> The American war effort may have shortened the conflict by a year. When he addressed

the French Chamber of Deputies in December 1918, Georges Clemenceau said that “without America and England, France would perhaps no longer actually exist.”<sup>11</sup>

As stunned Europeans began to count the cost at war’s end, the destruction and loss of life was on a scale never before seen. In France alone over 4,000 villages and 20,000 factories were destroyed, and 1.3 million French soldiers were killed.<sup>12</sup> Total military deaths among the warring nations were over 10 million, with perhaps twice as many wounded. Because the devastation of this war was unprecedented, Wilson felt that the peace conference that was to be held at Versailles beginning in January 1919 must depart from precedent as well. In place of the usual scenario in which the victors punished the vanquished, a new formula must be found, otherwise there would be more wars of ever-increasing destructiveness. Putting himself at the head of the American delegation, Wilson believed that his “Fourteen Points,” enunciated earlier in the war, should be the basis of any peace settlement. Among the Fourteen Points was a provision for freedom of the seas (violated by both Germany and Britain during the war), “national self-determination” (an obvious swipe at European colonialism) and an end to secret negotiations. What was most important for Wilson, however, was the creation of a “League of Nations,” where countries could settle their differences peacefully.

#### SUPPORT FOR THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Contrary to much that has been written about the United States after the war—that the American public immediately turned away from international involvement in favor of a selfish isolationism—there was widespread public support both for Wilson and the League of Nations.<sup>13</sup> Thirty-four state legislatures and thirty-three governors endorsed the League in February 1919.<sup>14</sup> Countless journal and newspaper articles saw in the desolation of the Great War an opportunity to remake the world, often taking on a tone that verged on the millennial. Writing in *The Outlook*, Lyman Abbott detected in the trend toward a democracy of nations “marks of a divinely ordered movement . . .”<sup>15</sup> In *Current Opinion*, Frederick R. Coudert could see an international utopia taking shape, and the opportunity “to realize the dream of old-time idealists and philosophers, and create a new order . . .”<sup>16</sup> Individual Americans who came of age shortly before the war

shared this view. Future Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles remembered passionately believing that

The errors of the past were to be valiantly corrected; that human wrongs would all be righted; that the self-determination of peoples would end oppression; that human freedom and individual security would become realities; that war, in this new dawn breaking over the earth, was now a nightmare of the past.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, Americans were determined that the Versailles Conference not be a version of diplomatic business-as-usual. Wilson would be pressured by the Allies to sign off on territorial aggrandizement and punishing reparations, but the United States, pleaded one commentator, should resist any schemes “that disregard or violate the high ideals set forth in the name of the American people by the American President.”<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, this is exactly what France and Britain did. After giving Wilson a sop in the form of the League of Nations, they set about eviscerating his Fourteen Points one by one. At the end, they came up with a treaty that was the exact opposite of what Americans had hoped for. It was a vindictive treaty that heavily punished Germany, and assigned to her exclusive responsibility for starting the war. Secretary of State Robert Lansing described the treaty as “harsh and humiliating,” and Herbert Hoover was appalled by the “hate and revenge” that ran through it.<sup>19</sup> For *The Nation*, the treaty was an “international crime . . .”<sup>20</sup> It was also a shameless scramble for imperial loot as France and Britain, under the cover of the League of Nations “mandate” system, took the opportunity to expand greatly their colonial empires. France added a quarter of a million square miles to her imperial holdings, and Britain a million square miles.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE DEBT CONTROVERSY

All this was bad enough, but once the war was over the former Allies also set about trying to get out of the debts they owed the United States. Overnight, the loans that had much been celebrated during the war were condemned as usury, and Uncle Sam became “Uncle Shylock.” The chutzpah here was considerable, with the former Allies simultaneously trying to repudiate the American loans they already owed while asking the United States for more money. The logic seemed to be that because Europeans had killed each other wholesale for two-and-a-half years

before a single American soldier showed up, writing off the loans should be the United States' contribution to the war. Picking up the tab would be the American taxpayer, of whom Europeans seemed to be blithely indifferent. In one grotesquely inappropriate comparison, Georges Clemenceau whined that in the American insistence that France pay her war debts, France was "ruined by the Americans in peace-time after being ruined by the Germans in war."<sup>22</sup> These pleas of national poverty struck Americans as suspect, as France was making huge outlays for defense and was, in fact, maintaining the largest army on the planet.<sup>23</sup> To make matters worse, the Allied statesmen who had led the war effort now began to deprecate the role the United States had played. As noted earlier, Clemenceau had credited the American war effort with preserving the French nation, but in the post-war years the French leader had developed a bad case of amnesia, declaring America had pursued a "policy of procrastination that cost us dear . . ."<sup>24</sup> Put another way, "America was far away and took her time to come to the war."<sup>25</sup> In Britain, David Lloyd George compared the casualties suffered by European nations to those of the United States, and sniffed that they were not comparable. As far as war damage, not "a single shack [was] destroyed by enemy action" in America.<sup>26</sup> Rudyard Kipling, compared the United States to a laborer who showed up at the end of the day and demanded a full day's wages.<sup>27</sup>

The snide contempt expressed toward the United States may have been rational enough if the former Allies had decided to wash their hands of any further involvement with America. But there was near universal agreement that continuing U.S. participation in the affairs of Europe was crucial. British Foreign Minister Edward Grey referred to "the interracial jealousies of Europe," and claimed that without American involvement, "the old order of things will revive, the old consequences will recur, there will again be some great catastrophe of war . . ."<sup>28</sup> If Europeans deemed American participation in the affairs of their continent essential, their campaign to secure that participation left something to be desired. As a *Los Angeles Times* editorial put it, "We were stunned with surprise, when the smoke of the battle had drifted away, to be told that we were a greedy bunch of money-grabbers; that we had waited until the dangers were all over; then rushed in to try to claim the glory; that we not only did nothing to help win the war, but that we helped to save the Germans from their just deserts. Lastly, that we have an awful nerve to expect to get our money back."<sup>29</sup>



## U.S. ISOLATIONALISM AFTER THE WAR

The U.S. Senate rejected the peace settlement and the League of Nations because of concerns that they would compromise American sovereignty. Making it easier for them to do so was that the popular support that had been so pervasive at the beginning of the peace process had soured into disillusionment. Thus, the question of who was responsible for isolationism in America after the war has a simple answer: Europeans. They treated the nation from which they wanted help with contempt, discounting the American contribution to the war and trying to avoid their debts. They also heaped scorn on American idealism in favor of what they saw as *realpolitik*. But in the end it was power politics, not idealism, that crippled Europe. Rather than making common cause with France, Britain abandoned her old ally in favor of her traditional policy of playing one continental rival off against another. In pursuit of reparations, France pursued a pathologically vindictive policy against Germany. When France invaded the Ruhr in 1923, she failed to gain the reparations she wanted, but succeeded once more in making an enemy of Germany. As for the new German republic, it proved to be too weak to counter far-right political groups. Perhaps most fatally, there was no attempt to accept responsibility that all European nations bore in creating the conditions that led to the Great War. And so they set about creating the conditions for the next one.

Europeans made a shambles of their continent and along the way totally alienated the one nation that might have had a mitigating influence. American isolationism, at least for the fifteen years after the end of the war, was both reasonable and inevitable. It should also be emphasized that American isolationism between the wars was not limited to those on the far-right. While persons such as Charles Coughlin and Charles Lindbergh gained much of the limelight in their denunciations of European entanglements and their emphasis on "America First," isolationism was embraced by Americans on both the left and right, Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, rural and urban. The America First Committee claimed a membership of 800,000. What finally moved Americans away from isolationism was Hitler's rise to power in the mid-1930s. Increasingly, Nazi Germany was perceived as a threat not only to European democracies, but to democracies everywhere. But while Americans quite properly began to divest themselves of their

isolationism and to funnel supplies to the European democracies, there was sturdy resistance to the direct involvement of U.S. troops in another European war. Without the Pearl Harbor attack, and the declaration of war by Axis powers a few days later, it's debatable when and if Americans would have become fully committed. Franklin Roosevelt acknowledged the strength of pre-war isolationism at the "Big Three" conference at Teheran in 1943. The President noted that, "if the Japanese had not attacked the United States he doubted very much if it would have been possible to send any American forces to Europe."<sup>30</sup>

#### WHY BECAME AMERICA INTERNATIONALIST AFTER WORLD WAR II?

In a tribute to Roosevelt in 1948, Winston Churchill claimed that the President had "changed decisively and permanently the moral axis of mankind by involving the new world inexorably and irrevocably in the fortunes of the old."<sup>31</sup> This leads us to the question of why there was American isolationism after World War I, but American internationalism after World War II? The immediate, very real threat posed by the Soviet Union was perhaps the most important factor. Western European nations no longer had the luxury of pursuing foreign policies based on traditional tribal vendettas, and were forced to unite against a common threat. Americans also understood that they must actively engage with their European partners otherwise all would be lost. The result was a unanimity of purpose on both sides of the Atlantic, as expressed in the creation of NATO and the Marshall Plan. As is often the case, France was the odd man out, brooding on the humiliation of the collapse of her army (the Germans captured more than a million-and-a-half French troops), on the comfortable collaboration of a large number of French citizens with their Nazi occupiers, and on the galling necessity of being liberated by Americans and British.<sup>32</sup>

In her fifty year opposition to the Soviet Union, America achieved some of her greatest moments. Even so, there were still isolationist murmurings. In 1950, Senator Robert A. Taft asked for a reappraisal of military aid to Europe, and in the same year Joseph P. Kennedy demanded a withdrawal of America's "unwise commitments" in Berlin and Korea. The following year Herbert Hoover even revived the "ocean barriers" idea, which had seemingly been repudiated by the Pearl Harbor attack, by suggesting that the United States was "surrounded by a great moat."

America, said Hoover, could be economically self-sufficient, and need not involve herself in the affairs of Europe or Asia.<sup>33</sup> These years also revealed some very real limitations to the American mission. What was achieved in Korea was ambiguous, but it was better than the nightmare of Vietnam, and in the wake of that debacle isolationism resurfaced once again. In 1961, before getting the nation involved in Vietnam, John F. Kennedy said that “we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity, and therefore there cannot be an American solution for every world problem.”<sup>34</sup> In 1972, in the midst of American disillusionment about intervention in the Vietnam War, Democratic candidate George McGovern appealed to his fellow citizens to “Come Home, America.” Still, for the remainder of the Cold War the United States was mostly able to maintain a bi-partisan foreign policy and public support for a strong nuclear deterrence.<sup>35</sup> The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union beginning in 1989 left America with a victory without quite knowing what to do with it. Francis Fukuyama famously declared the “end of history”--that humanity’s ideological evolution had reached its final stage with the triumph of liberal democracy.<sup>36</sup> But challenges quickly emerged from China, a resurgent Russia and the Muslim world, and the West’s response, according to John le Carré, has been “mysteriously unfocused, still looking for some kind of identity, really, ever since the end of the Cold War.”<sup>37</sup>

#### THE RETURN OF ISOLATIONISM

The 9/11 attacks excited once again an activist foreign policy, and perhaps George W. Bush’s zeal for “nation building” was not that different from Wilson’s “national self-determination.” American power was extended abroad in wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but with little to show for this lavish expenditure of treasure and lives, isolationism has returned with a vengeance in our own era. As in the aftermath of the Great War, Americans are exhausted and skeptical about what international involvement can accomplish. In Bret Stephens’ *America in Retreat*, published in 2014, the author condemned the trend toward isolationism in America, and identified its chief proponent: Barack Obama. With widespread revulsion over American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama seemed to speak for much of the nation when he declared, “We should not be the world’s policeman.” Yet Stephens emphasized that isolationism was a bi-partisan sentiment. Far-right libertarian Rand Paul echoed Obama’s words when he

insisted that, “America’s mission should always be to keep the peace, not police the world.”<sup>38</sup> Both were drawing on a rich tradition, which can be seen in the 1939 statement of Senator Arthur Capper (R-Kansas) that, “It is not our job to determine the boundary disputes, nor the power disputes, or other Europe controversies, nor to attempt to police the world.”<sup>39</sup> In 2011, with another election in the offing, a number of Republican hopefuls went on record as opposing Obama’s air war against Libya. John McCain said, “This is isolationism. There’s always been an isolation strain in the Republican Party . . . ”<sup>40</sup>

Stephens fears that isolationism has become a one-size-fits-all foreign policy, with the left embracing it as a way to endorse pacifism, to demonstrate a reluctance to judge others, and to express liberal guilt over past actions. On the right, isolationism has become a way to avoid unintended consequences while reflecting a conviction that others cannot be saved by ourselves.<sup>41</sup> Condemning America’s “retreat doctrine,” Stephens held out hope that “as the consequences of Obama’s foreign policy become more evident” both the left and the right could make a strong case for internationalism.<sup>42</sup> In a poll taken in 2013, a majority of Americans expressed the belief that the United States “should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own.” In early 2014, after Russia’s invasion and annexation of the Crimea, 56 percent of Americans said that the United States should not become involved.<sup>43</sup>

#### THE NEW ISOLATIONISM OF THE TRUMP YEARS

How far the world of 2014 seems from our own world! In 2016, Republican internationalists Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio were routed in the primaries, while Hillary Clinton struggled against left-wing isolationist Bernie Sanders.<sup>44</sup> In Donald Trump’s election we produced a head of state whose hostility toward international involvement made Obama seem like a radical internationalist. No other president has been as reliably hostile toward America’s traditional European allies as Trump. Part of the problem was that in Donald Trump we had one of the most poorly prepared presidents in the nation’s history. In one example, Trump’s former national security adviser John Bolton claims that Trump seemed unaware that Britain was a nuclear power, and asked whether Finland was a part of Russia.<sup>45</sup>

If ignorance is bliss, then Trump came close to achieving nirvana. For America's allies, the outlook has been considerably grimmer. The president insulted them at international gatherings, withdrew from the Paris climate accord, and threatened to withdraw the United States from NATO. He walked away from the nuclear treaty with Iran, and abandoned the Kurds. His brand of "America First" nationalism eerily echoes a similar movement in the late-1930s and early-1940s.

At a meeting in Paris to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of the Great War, French President Emmanuel Macron warned that "giving into the fascination for withdrawal, isolationism, violence and domination would be a grave error that future generations would very rightly make us responsible for." Trump countered, "You know what a globalist is? A globalist is a person that wants the globe to do well, frankly, not caring about our country so much. And you know what? We can't have that."<sup>46</sup> In the wake of the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Trump's chief domestic adviser Stephen Miller defended the president and summarized Trump's global outlook: "Let's defend our national security. Let's put America first. Let's not spill American blood to fight the enemies of other countries."<sup>47</sup> No isolationist from the 1920s and 1930s could have put it better, and Trump would no doubt endorse the statement that Senator Pat McCarran (D-Nevada) made in 1939: "I think one American boy, the son of an American mother, is worth more than all Central Europe."<sup>48</sup>

When we look at the inter-war years, we are in many ways looking at what Barbara Tuchman called "a distant mirror." Isolationism, the huge gulf between haves and have nots, the hostility to immigration, the concern with foreign propaganda, and suspicion of market capitalism overshadowed both that era and our own. There is also the flourishing of conspiracy theories. One commentator has compared Trump's insistence that his loss in 2020 was due to dark forces bent on undermining the election, to the "stab-in-the-back" theory that was so popular in Germany after the Great War.<sup>49</sup> The rise of far-right leaders internationally and the prevalence of populist rhetoric in our own nation--Father Coughlin and Charles Lindbergh in the 1930s and Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in our own time--has left many feeling that their country is no longer recognizable. Sanders' questioning of "whether it makes sense to spend trillions more on

endless wars, wars that often cause more problems than they solve,” eerily evokes the views of many on the far right.<sup>50</sup> As Anne Morrow Lindbergh expressed it 1940, “In recent years, my generation has seen the beliefs, the formulas, and the creeds, that we were brought to trust implicitly, one by one thrown in danger, if not actually discarded . . . ”<sup>51</sup>

Consider the following quotations: “Nationalism--not ‘Internationalism’--is the indispensable bulwark of American independence.” A Trump supporter? In fact this was a statement made by isolationist Arthur Vandenberg (R-Michigan) in 1925.<sup>52</sup> “We must ignore the tears of sobbing sentimentalists and internationalists, and we must permanently close, lock, and bar the gates of our country to new immigration waves and then throw the keys away.” Likewise, this did not come from a Fox News commentator but from Congressman Martin Dies (D-Texas) in 1934.<sup>53</sup> Stephen Miller, the White House aide who was the driver behind Trump’s immigration policy, even supported a complete ban on immigration “like Coolidge did.”<sup>54</sup>

When Bret Stephens checked back in 2019, he found an “upsurge of nativist rancor, protectionist barriers and every-nation-for-itself policies, along with deep doubts about the viability of liberal democracy and the international order. Father Coughlin and the America Firsters then; Donald Trump and the America Firsters now.”<sup>55</sup> Meredith Crowley has proclaimed the end of “freewheeling markets and liberalism.” The return of autarchy seems to be at hand, with the public questioning international capitalism and supporting higher tariffs reminiscent of the Smoot-Hawley legislation of 1930.<sup>56</sup> The spread of the Covid-19 virus beginning in 2020 has only increased the national inclination toward isolationism championed by Trump.

Indeed, Trump is not a foreign policy outlier but represents widely held American views. Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group Foundation, notes that the foundation’s recent study on U.S. public opinion confirmed that Americans by and large supported Trump’s view of the world:

No matter what party they claim allegiance to, Americans favor a foreign policy that resists entanglements abroad . . . in many ways Trump’s views align with the ways in which a majority of American taxpayers would define the future U.S. role in the world.

'America first' isn't just a Trump catchphrase. When it comes to foreign policy, it's become a national world view.<sup>57</sup>

#### WILL THE ISOLATIONIST MOOD PREVAIL?

With the installation of Joe Biden as president of the United States, a shift in American foreign policy is inevitable. In the *New York Times*, Rick Gladstone writes that "Mr. Biden is expected to reverse many of Mr. Trump's isolationist and anti-immigration policies . . ." <sup>58</sup> While Biden has stated that "'America First' has made America alone," there will be both changes and continuity in how the United States engages the rest of the world.<sup>59</sup> When William and Mary's Global Research Institute surveyed over 700 university scholars in October 2020, the respondents noted that Biden had voiced support for NATO, membership in the World Health Organization, and a commitment to the Paris climate change agreement.<sup>60</sup> Still, an aggressively activist foreign policy seems distant because there is little public support for it. And while Trump's decision to draw down the number of troops in Afghanistan has been widely criticized, Biden's views are not that different. Biden noted that "Americans are rightly weary of our longest war; I am, too."<sup>61</sup> It seems highly unlikely that the Biden Administration would commit large numbers of troops to a foreign war, but the future is unpredictable. Many presidents who were elected on the basis of domestic issues—such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt—found that foreign conflicts dominated their administrations.

Isolationism will remain with us at least for the foreseeable future, with support coming from both liberals and conservatives. Robert Kagan despairs that, "We are moving back to an earlier conception of America's role in the world, looking out for ourselves, hoping the two oceans protect us, and when necessary saying the rest of the world is full of freeloaders who can go to hell if they don't get on board . . . It may be an era more destructive of the world order than in the 1930s."<sup>62</sup>

We have seen that what pulled Americans out of their isolationism between the world wars was the rise of a threat so vile they felt their own moral foundations under attack. A different threat, but one no less ominous, pushed Americans into international activism after the Second World War. Historian Charles A. Kupchan reminds us that, "For much of America's history, isolationism

served the nation well.”<sup>63</sup> But it has always been in tension with American idealism and a sense of mission. Will a newly empowered Biden Administration embrace an international role beyond the cautious multilateralism of the Obama years? Is it possible to rouse inward-looking Americans without a catastrophe, or will it take the rise of another Hitler, or Stalin, or 9/11 attack before they are once again willing to embrace an activist foreign policy? The answer will determine much about the nation’s future.

**Dr. Kenneth D. Rose** is the author of *American Isolationism Between the World Wars: The Search for a Nation’s Identity*, (Routledge, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935-1941* [1966] (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1990), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Joseph J. Ellis, *American Dialogue: The Founders and Us* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 201, 203-04.

<sup>3</sup> See Ronald E. Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance: American Isolationism, Internationalism, and Europe, 1901-1950* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Woodrow Wilson to Mary Allen Hulbert, Letter of August 2, 1914; Walter Hines Page to Woodrow Wilson, Letter of August 2, 1914, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, v. 30, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 328.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace* (Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing, 1979), 60.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Kenneth D. Rose, *The Great War and Americans in Europe, 1914-1917* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Paul U. Kellogg, formerly of the American Union Against Militarism, added that Wilson had “lifted the plane of our entrance into the war from that of neutral rights to an all-impressing fight for democracy.” See David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 50, 33-35.

<sup>8</sup> See Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 93.

<sup>9</sup> See Eric Dorn Brose, *A History of the Great War: World War One and the International crisis of the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 250; Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New



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York: Basic Books, 1999), 251; Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 437.

<sup>10</sup> Enclosure 1, n. 1, Edward Mandell House to Woodrow Wilson, with Enclosures, Letter of January 16, 1917, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, v. 40, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 496; Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 49.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2002), 32.

<sup>12</sup> See David Lloyd George, *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*, v. 1 (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938), 86-87.

<sup>13</sup> Selig Adler claimed that isolationism among Americans was rooted in "an innate selfishness [that] made them reluctant to share our good fortune with other peoples," while Robert A. Divine argued that Americans after the Great War "supported a foreign policy of self-indulgence that reflected the hedonistic mood of the 1920s." Selig Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth-Century Reaction* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1957), 95; Robert A. Divine, *The Reluctant Belligerent: American Entry into World War II* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), 2. Bernard Fensterwald, Jr., insisted that isolationism returned after the Great War because "there was no real intention on the part of most Americans to shake 'isolationism' permanently," and because "Americans were incapable of dredging up any new emotional enthusiasm for the League." Bernard Fensterwald, Jr., "The Anatomy of American 'Isolationism' and Expansionism," Pt. 1, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 2 (June 1958), 121.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Bonsal, *Unfinished Business* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1944), 282.

<sup>15</sup> Lyman Abbott, "The guide of the Nations," *The Outlook* 122, no. 14 (August 6, 1919), 531.

<sup>16</sup> Frederic R. Coudert, "The Freedom of the Seas," *Current Opinion* 65, no. 5 (November 1918), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Sumner Welles, *The Time for Decision* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Adams Gibbons, "The Armistices and Peace Negotiations," *The Century* 97, no. 4 (February 1919), 542.

<sup>19</sup> Robert E. Hannigan, *The Great War and American Foreign Policy, 1914-24* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 183-84; Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920* (New York: MacMillan, 1951), 461-62.

<sup>20</sup> "Editorial: the Madness at Versailles," *The Nation* 108, no. 2811 (May 17, 1919), 778.

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<sup>21</sup> Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 147.

<sup>22</sup> Georges Clemenceau, *Grandeur and Misery of Victory*, trans. F. M. Atkinson (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930), 177.

<sup>23</sup> George Wheeler Hinman, Jr., "Europe's Debts to the United States," *Current History* 19, no. 4 (January 1924), 571-72, 568, 569.

<sup>24</sup> Clemenceau, 176

<sup>25</sup> "The Tiger Speaks," *The Outlook* 121, no. 3 (January 15, 1919), 86

<sup>26</sup> Lloyd George, 87.

27. See Robert H. Ferrell, *Peace in Their Time: The Origins of the Kellogg-Briand Pact* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 42.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in "The Senate and the Peace Treaty," *Current History* 11, No. 3 (March 1920), 398.

<sup>29</sup> "Lay on Clemenceau," *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 1922. When he referred to Europeans in 1924, Henry Cabot Lodge said, "They forget that the United States only seven years ago went to the rescue of freedom and civilization in Europe of their own motion, unbound by any obligations." Henry Cabot Lodge, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1921-1924," *Foreign Affairs* 2, no. 4 (June 15, 1924), 538.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 679. Historian A. J. P. Taylor argued that "it is difficult to see how Roosevelt could ever have got his country into the European war, if Hitler had not gratuitously done it for him." A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), 12-13.

<sup>31</sup> "The Text of Roosevelt Tributes by Churchill and King," *New York Times*, April 13, 1948.

<sup>32</sup> Kershaw, 349; See Jean Guéhenno, *Diary of the Dark Years, 1940-1944: Collaboration, Resistance, and Daily Life in Occupied Paris*, trans. David Ball (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> See Jonas, 278-79.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* [1959] (New York: Delta, 1962), 7.

35. There was widespread public support for the nuclear freeze movement in the early 1980s, which was flattened by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1984. See Kenneth D. Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 222-23.

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36. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Terry Gross Interview, "Remembering John Le Carré, British Spy turned Best-Selling Novelist," National Public Radio, December 14, 2020.

38. Quoted in Bret Stephens, *America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder* (New York: Sentinel, 2014), xii.

39. Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, 76th. Cong., 1st. Sess., on S. J. Res. 84, "A Joint Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States for a Referendum on War," May 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 20, 24, and 31, 1939, 124.

40. Jack Kenny, "'Isolationism' Now Center Stage in GOP Tent? Oh My!" *New American* 27 (July 18, 2011), 21-24.

41. Stephens, 19-20.

42. Stephens, 228-29.

43. See Nicholas Wapshott, *The Sphinx: Franklin Roosevelt, the Isolationists, and the Road to World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 350.

44. See Robert Kagan, "'America First' Has Won," *New York Times*, September 24, 2018.

45. See Peter Baker, "Bolton Book Says Trump's Offenses Exceeded Ukraine," *New York Times*, June 18, 2020.

46. At the Paris Peace Forum, Macron wondered aloud whether the forum would be "a ringing symbol of a durable peace among nations or the photograph of the last moment of unity before the world goes down in new disorder." See "America First Gets a Rebuke at Ceremony," *New York Times*, November 12, 2018. At a United Nations gathering, Trump said, "The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots." Michael Crowley and David E. Sanger, "Trump Celebrates Nationalism and Plays Down Crisis With Iran," *New York Times*, September 25, 2019. At the 2018 Davos World Economic Forum, Trump insisted that, "America first does not mean America alone." According to Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, "Trump's goal in terms of trade is to promote what he sees as 'fair trade', not to create fortress America . . ." Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (United Kingdom: Pelican, 2018), 79.

47. Quoted in Mark Landler, "An Exit, A Leader Unbound and a Jittery Capital," *New York Times*, December 21, 2018. Even right-wing commentators have struggled to get a handle on Trump's brand of isolationism. In the wake of the provocative assassination of Iranian general Qassim Suleimani that Trump ordered, Charles Sykes claimed that "Trumpism is both isolationist and highly militaristic at the same time," while Stephen K. Bannon observed that, "One of the central building blocks of why he was elected president

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was to get out of these foreign wars.” Michael M. Grynbaum, “The Prospect of a New Military Conflict Divides Right-Wing Pundits,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> “Lifting Embargo Seen Step to War,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1939.

<sup>49</sup> Bret Stephens, “The President Contrives His Stab-in-the-Back Myth,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Charles A. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America’s Effort to Shield Itself from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 361.

51. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *The Wave of the Future: A Confession of Faith* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), 7-8.

52. See “Big Michigander,” *Time* 34, no. 14 (October 2, 1939), 13.

53. Quoted in Richard M. Ketchum, *The Borrowed Years, 1938-1941: America on the Way to War* (New York: Random House, 1989), 113. Likewise, the pleas for a more tolerant immigration policy also have echoes in the past. In 1941, Alfred E. Smith observed that “we have tended to forget that this country was built up by immigrants who, in the vast majority of cases, came here to escape poverty, oppression, social restrictions, and lack of opportunity at home. The American who does not realize this has neither mental honesty nor a knowledge of our history . . .” Quoted in Israel Lundberg, “Who Are These Refugees?” *Harper’s Magazine* 182, January 1941, 172.

54. Katie Rogers and Jason Ed Parle, “White Nationalists’ Websites Influenced Miller, Emails Show,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2019.

55. Bret Stephens, “WWII and the Ingredients of Slaughter,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2019.

56. Peter S. Goodman, “Shift in Trade Around Globe: To Go It Alone,” *New York Times*. December 15, 2019.

57. Ian Bremmer, “Worlds Apart,” *Time*, March 4, 2019, 18. In a 2019 survey by the Center for American Progress, researchers concluded, “American voters do not desire a full retreat from global affairs. They want to work with U.S. allies and international institutions to solve global challenges but only if the nation is also committed to putting its domestic house in order. They want to know that the United States is focused on its own economic and security needs first before tackling global problems it cannot control.” Quoted in Jennifer Rubin, “Six Ways Democrats Can Zap Trump on Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, May 7, 2019. See also David Brooks, “Voters, Your Foreign Policy Views Stink!” *New York Times*, June 14, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Rick Gladstone, “Biden to Face a Long List of Foreign Challenges, With the Chinese at the Top,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in David E. Sanger, “Looking to End ‘America First’ and Re-engage with the World,” *New York*

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*Times*, November 10, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> At Trump’s last G20 summit meeting, he claimed that the climate treaty was not designed to save the environment, but “to kill the American economy.” He skipped part of the meeting to go golfing. “G20 Meeting Ends, Leaving Wide Gulf Between Trump and Concerns of U.S. Allies,” *New York Times*, November 23, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, Candidates Answer CFR’s Questions: Joe Biden,” August 1, 2019, 1-2.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in David E. Sanger, “President is Left to Carry Out His Promise of `America First,’” *New York Times*, December 22, 2018. As François Delattre, for twenty years French ambassador to the United States and then to the United Nations, put it, “America’s disengagement started before the current administration. I believe it is here to stay.” François Delattre, “As the U.S. disengages, Peril Ahead for the World,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Kupchan, xv.

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## **The Cicero Foundation**

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