

Isolationism, Internationalism, and the USA's "America First" Policy in Historical Perspective

Q & A

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Q: Does protectionism or populism necessarily mean isolationism?

A: Protectionism is certainly closely linked to isolationism historically and in the present. As I define it in my book, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age*, and in other works, there are two main types of isolationism in American foreign policy and political thought: political isolationism and protectionist isolationism.

Traditionally, Americans who opposed restrictions on national sovereignty—that is, any limits imposed by entering into global agreements, permanent alliances, and interventions in foreign conflicts—have advocated for *political isolationism*. Often aligned with liberal market-oriented economic views, political isolationism considered free economic exchanges to be independent of politics. Because they maintained that economic ties did not entail political entanglements and did not erode American autonomy, political isolationists viewed them as permissible and even essential to national progress. Unlike political isolationists, protectionist isolationists viewed economic exchanges as essentially political acts, arguing that these forms of commercial exchange eroded national autonomy and self-sufficiency, especially as they shored up the processes and policies of globalization, enhanced the strength of foreign powers and their capacity to damage U.S. standing, and increased the likelihood that the U.S. would be dragged into endless foreign conflicts.

Although both protectionist and political isolationism have been equally long-standing US foreign policy traditions, the protectionist iteration has ebbed in popularity as global trade and free-market capitalism came to dominate international relationships; it has therefore been more muted and less evident in the historical record in comparison to political isolationism. Broadly, isolationists avoided binding political, diplomatic, and military

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commitments to/or alliances with foreign powers (particularly in Europe); they opposed permanent global agreements, of any kind; and they generally sought to avoid foreign interventions and foreign conflicts.

Populism, on the other hand, has been only loosely connected to the ideas and policies that favor the core aims of isolationism—in U.S. history, at least. That is, populists have been active across the spectrum of foreign involvement, with some populists favoring “patriotic” wars or policies and some opposing them. With regard to binding security agreements or multilateral institutions, populists have not monolithically endorsed vital isolationist ideas. Isolationism can take the form of populism, as it did during the 1890s, in the 1920s, and arguably today. On balance, populist-leaning isolationists have prioritized perceived needs at home, privileging job growth, immigration restrictions, political reform, and economic sectors such as agriculture. They have also taken a more insular view of American politics and, thus, of the U.S.’s “proper” role in the world, eschewing “entangling alliances,” seeking to have fewer troops and bases abroad, and promoting national self-sufficiency.

Q: *Is isolationism inherently at odds with liberal values, as is often insinuated? (i.e. is it necessarily illiberal?)*

A: The answer to this question depends on your definition of liberal/illiberal values. If “illiberal” is centrally a condition of being anti-democratic or opposed to liberal freedoms, then U.S. isolationism is not essentially, or necessarily, illiberal, either in the abstract or historically. For example, anti-war cultural critic Randolph Bourne developed a liberatory theory of transnationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century that fused a soft type of isolationism to a pluralistic ideal. Bourne envisioned a cosmopolitan isolationism in which “transnational” Americans would share “a common political allegiance and common social ends but with free and distinctive cultural allegiances which may be placed anywhere in the world they like.” Grounded in a leftist critique of global capitalism and imperialism, Bourne’s program for a “transnational America” combined pluralistic and progressive reform at home, pacifistic internationalism abroad, and advocacy for a noninterventionist American role in the world.

I find that World War I marks an important turning point for the U.S. and the world in terms of the expectation that the United States would be engaged internationally, in some way. Bourne’s writing and efforts help to reveal this transition, in that he adapted the tradition of American isolationist foreign policy to the irrevocably interconnected twentieth-century global order. Bourne frequently suggested that the United States could no longer stand aloof from the world. In his view, the U.S.’s

historical separation from European affairs and the reality of its cultural hybridity had generated an unprecedented platform on which the U.S. could build this new kind of trans-national consciousness. Indeed, he argued, the U.S.'s "traditional isolation," combined with its "unique liberty of opportunity," made it the "only" country that could "lead this cosmopolitan enterprise." Though his ideas were not operationalized in policies during the 1910s or in the 1920s, many Bournian concepts informed and inflected U.S. political thought, debate, and policy thereafter. For example, we see echoes of Bournian isolationist pluralism in immigration policy (post-1965) and in critiques of nativism (especially after 1921 and 1924 – when draconian immigration restrictions were pushed and passed by many isolationist-oriented politicians), in democracy promotion and multiculturalism at home and abroad, and in later years, as I have argued in several essays and book chapters, we find Bournian push back about interventions in the western hemisphere and the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan along similar lines.

Q: *You once remarked that American isolationists did not historically seek to cordon off the country from the world, but instead sought to redefine how the US engaged with it. How does the current administration's "America First" policy seek to redefine how America engages with the world?*

A: Exactly right. As in the Randolph Bourne example, isolationist arguments have often been leveraged to make explicit the limits of U.S. power, as well as to make a case for foreign and domestic policies that recognize hemispheric and global interconnectivity without becoming embroiled in foreign wars or power politics.—Even Idaho Republican Senator William Boarrah, most associated with his "irreconcilable" stance against the Senate ratifying the Treaty of Versailles and U.S. membership in the League of Nations, did not draw a hard line in the sand against U.S. involvement in the world. Instead, he consistently argued that the U.S. should adhere to and make modest contemporary adjustments to George Washington's 1796 injunction to "steer clear of permanent alliance with any portion of the foreign world." That is perhaps the most fascinating insight from my archival research on the history of isolationism – it is not what most people think. Isolationism in U.S. political thought has come from across the political spectrum and has not been about building a wall around U.S. politics, culture, or commerce to insulate it from the rest of the world, but, rather, has tended to revolve around setting limits on the degree and type of U.S. global engagement. At their core, isolationist arguments can be reduced to debates about the meaning of America, the nation's long-standing traditions, and fulfilment of ideals as instantiated at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy.

Today, however, we have federal government budget, a foreign policy platform, a Political Action Committee, and a host of other policies and documents all travel under the banner “America First.” In its twenty-first century iteration, the “America First” orientation combines a nativist (white nationalist) position on restricting immigration, a protectionist position on trade, and a unilateral approach to foreign policy. In this context, in my view, Trump’s “America First” approach amounts generally to bluster in unilateral actions and bilateral relations with the aim of securing short-term policy or public rhetorical “wins” and most frequently involves negative gestures rather than positive ones (such as pulling out of the Paris Climate Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Iran Nuclear Accord Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). That is, in comparison to some of the earlier, “softer” forms of isolationism, Trump appears to be working within an isolationist tradition but he is taking it to its policy extreme (and, in most cases, ignoring the realist calculations—and expert advice—that usually undergird American foreign policy). Trump’s redefinition of U.S. aims in the world, therefore, seems to hinge on a narrow calculus of “benefits” in any given moment, while simultaneously working to obscure the optics when the administration fails to get the upper hand with other nations, and actively undermining the multilateral commitments of previous administrations and policies. This approach, in turn, logically extends to limiting U.S. exposure worldwide, for example, by withdrawing promises, troops, resources, and leadership wherever and whenever possible, circumscribing the possibility of being drawn into conflicts not in the nation’s best interest, or intervening in the affairs of other countries, which is very much in keeping with a long isolationist tradition in U.S. foreign policy thought and practice.

When considering the disposition of “America First” in the present, it is essential to understand two historical factors.

- First, Donald Trump did not initially come to embrace “America First” because he had a grasp of its historical significance and political appeal; he chose “America First” because it sounded good.
- Second, even though it was popularized in the twentieth century, any lucid analysis of “America First” as a movement must start with its ideological and material origins in the nineteenth century.

Starting with Trump: Trump first identified his policies with “America First” as the result of a question posed during a 2016 *New York Times* interview. According to the interviewer, “America First” signaled “a mistrust [of] foreigners,” adversaries and allies alike, and “a sense that

[foreigners have] been freeloading off of” the US for years.² And, historically, America First had been tied to the kind of xenophobic anti-Semitism that made the phrase anathema in mainstream politics for sixty years.

“America First,” Trump responded, “yes... I like the expression.”

Combined with the call to “make America great again,” “America First” tapped into a long-simmering discontent with the perceived outward direction of American priorities. This outlook—that Trump articulated—rested on the belief that the country’s leadership had squandered American money and prestige by propping up foreign nations, helping secure them and their economies at the expense of the American people. Namely, it argued that foreign countries had “no respect for our president” and “no respect for our country”—that our leaders had been suckers and that everyone in the world knew it, except for us. According to this view, the real problem with American diplomacy was not an impossibly complex international system with countless possible interventions, interconnections, and unpredictable outcomes. The real problems with American diplomacy were weak institutions, weak policymakers, and weak policies.

As Trump summarized: “We have been disrespected, mocked, and ripped off for many, many years by people that were smarter, shrewder, tougher..., [but] we will not be ripped off anymore... we’re not going to be taken advantage of by anybody.”

Since then, Trump has effectively deployed “America First” to justify a range of policies that disputably prioritized “American” interests, as he defined them. Recent economic analyses have revealed, however, a mismatch between rhetoric and aims on one hand, and effects on the other. Unfortunately, as in the past, it seems that recent 2017-18 protectionist tariffs, newly negotiated trade deals and “wars,” along with longer-standing trends of de-industrialization and automation, have combined to slow U.S. growth and more deeply impact members of farm labor and the working class whom these policies were supposed to assist.

² “*Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views,*” with Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger of The New York Times, March 26, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html>

Q: *How do current America First advocates differ from the America First isolationists of the 1940's? Is there any correlation between the two?*

A: Historically, the concept of “America First” emerged during the rapid industrialization, modernization, and urbanization that characterized the late nineteenth-century in the U.S. and internationally. These changes spurred massive un- and under-employment in the U.S., dangerously unregulated working conditions, an economy precariously roped to unpredictable foreign markets, and a crushing economic boom-and-bust cycle that generated excess and scarcity in equal measures (but benefited business owners and industrialists at the expense of workers and their families). Faced with massive nation-wide labor strikes and a populist insurgency, corporate executives and powerful politicians along with members of the middle class debated and ultimately decided that the best way to handle the volatile domestic situation—without giving up many of the privileges that they saw as their right—was to turn outward. They insisted that the American worker was not struggling because of inequality, or because corporations and banking interests enjoyed unregulated access to the country’s wealth; they were struggling, in President William McKinley’s words, because foreign powers, acting irresponsibly, damaged the “normal functions of [U.S.] business” and undermined the “prosperity” to which this country was “entitled.” It was time, according to one U.S. official, Secretary of Commerce William Redfield, to go out into the markets of the world and “get our share.”

At the turn of the twentieth century, getting “our share” meant securing U.S. trade with China and shoring up U.S. commercial interests in Latin America and the Caribbean. Under the cover of an expanded Monroe Doctrine, Republican presidents William McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt pursued an aggressive policy of unilateral economic imperialism, which included a war with Spain to end Spanish presence in the lucrative Caribbean markets, and to establish a beach-head for the U.S. navy and commercial and shipping interests in the Pacific. For Roosevelt, as well, placing America first entailed a strategic U.S. presence in “weak” nations (for example, Cuba, Venezuela, and Panama) that would bring their resources under American control and, at the same time limit European power in those places. Democratic President Woodrow Wilson described this policy as “the righteous conquest of foreign markets” and his Secretary of State, former Populist Party leader William Jennings Bryan, promised American businessmen that their administration would “open the doors of all the weaker countries to [the] invasion of American capital and enterprise.” The ideology behind these policies formed the basis of what would become the “America First” movement in the mid-twentieth century.

Woodrow Wilson popularized the phrase “America First” during an April 1915 speech promoting U.S. neutrality in the European war. During his ensuing presidential campaign in 1916, Wilson’s call for “America First” conveyed both his proposed policy orientation and a promise to the American people. In October 1915, Wilson struck a chord that resonated with many Americans (as today) when he argued:

“There have been some among us who have not thought first of America, who have thought to use the might of America in some matter not of America’s origination. They have forgotten that the first duty of a nation is to express its own individual principles in the action of the family of nations and not to seek to aid and abet any rival or contrary ideal.”

Addressing an audience at the United States Military Academy at West Point the following year, he clarified that “Americanism consists in utterly believing in the principles of America and putting them first above anything that might by chance come into competition with it.... nobody who does not put America first can consort with us.” Ultimately, Wilson’s commitment to protecting U.S. interests—specifically, U.S. business interests—compelled him to join the war effort. The public outrage in response to the loss of American lives on the *Lusitania* helped to authorize that choice. But in historical memory we often forget the Wilson of “America First” in favor of the Wilson of “making the world safe for democracy” – after he embraced liberal internationalism and the idealistic aim of establishing global order through a League of Nations.

Taking a step back from this moment in the past reveals to me that it is critically important to understand this history. Because if we explore how similar types of leaders can make comparable appeals, and deploy similar rhetorics, then we are less surprised by events like Brexit or the election of Donald Trump. A slow reckoning with the WWI crisis moment and the constellation of isolationist ideas at work then helps us to recognize how a narrow prioritization of the nation and putting it “first” can be very popular, invoking a tradition that goes back to Washington and Jefferson’s seemingly sage advice to avoid entangling alliances, made all the more poignant and appealing in times of conflict, crisis, and socio-political and economic dislocation.

Fifteen years later, publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst deployed “America First” to promote his populist primary challenger to FDR’s all-but-secured Democratic-party nomination for the 1932 presidential election. When that failed, he used his vast media empire to spread a fascist vision of “America First” that adapted some of the

principles of Nazi Germany to fight the “communist” or “imperial” threat embodied in FDR’s New Deal.

But the symbolic phrase “America First” did not really take off until the U.S. faced a second world war. Fearing another hawkish president in neutral clothing, Congress passed a series of Neutrality Acts in the 1930s, intending to provide a legislative bulwark against U.S. involvement abroad. These laws explicitly drew on WWI precedents: they forbade U.S. banks from lending money to foreign governments that had not paid their war debts, they established a trade embargo on all belligerent countries, and they banned U.S. citizens from traveling on belligerent foreign ocean liners. They also sought to bind the hands of 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. They were troubled that special interests, such as big banks and war-weapons industries, might be pushing U.S. foreign policy into an interventionist stance (a common critique back in 1898 and any other time that conflict loomed); and many across the U.S. were concerned about a president who had so much power, even more so in the midst of the New Deal and Depression, that he seemingly did not need to heed Congress or the people. Between 1940 and 1941, as German, Japanese, and Italian armies swept across the world, these critics converged in a movement that they called the “America First Committee” (AFC).

Unlike the menu-like policy range that the Trump Administration has associated with the phrase, America First was primarily a ONE ISSUE movement in the 1940s, dedicated exclusively to keeping the nation out of the conflict, while maintaining U.S. military-preparedness. Initially, the AFC included in its membership a truly strange set of bedfellows, as they might have put it then: isolationists, pacifists, Old Right Republicans, industrialists and business executives, labor organizers, and major intellectuals, as well as the progeny of wealthy families who would go on to become presidents, supreme court justices, ambassadors, and secretaries of state. This diverse group included Republican Gerald Nye, socialist pacifist Norman Thomas, aviator and Nazi-sympathizer Charles Lindbergh, Old Right Republican General Robert Wood, poet e.e. Cummings, animator Walt Disney, and writer/socialite Alice Roosevelt Longworth.

“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 United Kingdom 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 wealthy Chicago executive. The two agreed to help underwrite the organization, with Wood acting as chairman.ⁱ

They began as the Committee to Defend America First, established in direct opposition to progressive journalist William Allen White's Committee to Defend American by Aiding the Allies (CDAAA, formed in May 1940), and then abbreviated their name to the America First Committee (it seemed more catchy and appealing, then as now). As Lend-Lease and other maneuvers brought the U.S. ever closer to entry in the world war, the AFC worked hard to thread the needle between its right-wing and left-wing flanks. This bipartisan approach stands in sharp contrast to the present moment. Still, there was a reason that fascists and anti-Semites were drawn to the America First movement, then and now.

Lindbergh, who served as the public "face" of the AFC, embodied the "America First" ideal and, with it, the historical connection between white-nationalist visions for America and populist opposition to foreign entanglements. During his now infamous September 1941 rally in Des Moines, Iowa, Lindbergh suggested that the "Jewish race" wished to involve the U.S. in the war "for reasons which are not American." He warned the "Jewish race" that "tolerance" of their otherness would not be able to survive a war; and that they would be the first to "feel" the "consequences" of intolerance if the U.S. went to war.ⁱⁱ

Almost every major political figure, newspaper, and organization, including other anti-interventionist and pacifist organizations, called on the AFC to renounce Lindbergh. Socialist politician (ACLU co-founder) Norman Thomas refused to act as a public spokesman for the movement after Lindbergh's speech, reflecting a broader left-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 debate but, ultimately, they denied that either Lindbergh or the Committee were anti-Semitic and accused their critics of being rabid interventionists, trumpeting up false charges in order to discredit their anti-war message.ⁱⁱⁱ

In comparison with Trumpist calls for "America First," which include a domestic budget proposal, 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 summer 1940:

- The US should “concentrate all energies on building a strong defense for this hemisphere.”
- “American democracy can only be preserved by keeping out of war abroad.”
- “[O]ppose 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.”
- “[D]emand Congress refrain from war, even if England is on the verge of defeat.”^{iv}

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. They also had no 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 (see the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University) reveal clearly that, at its root, “American 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 in two ways: first, they argued the president was taking the nation to war without securing proper Congressional or broader public support, or eliciting sufficient debate; second, they depicted the twin menaces of American globalism and interventionism as far worse than the challenges posed by Nazism in Germany, fascism in Italy, or militarism in Japan.

At its height, these ideas were extremely popular. The AFC had hundreds of chapters across the US and nearly a million members—in spite of the fact that they began as a think-tank advocacy-group and were ill-prepared to establish so many local chapters or 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 7th changed everything.

Four days later, on December 11th, 1941, the AFC disbanded. But its xenophobic legacy continues to haunt anti-interventionist policies and the term “isolationism” itself, which is what I have sought to emphasize in my TED Talk and writings on this subject. The AFC passed into public memory as a right-wing, hyper-nationalist, racist organization with serious

ties to fascist and pro-Nazi movements. And this is why it was so surprising that President Trump picked up the term as a signature campaign and policy phrase along with all of its baggage. This longer history, though, also helps to explain why the term and many attendant ideas are so popular (certainly something Trump's usage has tapped).

A point I make regularly along these lines bears repeating, I think: Just as a foreign attack on US soil ended the American First movement on December 7th, 1941, it is ironic that a foreign attack on US soil revived isolationism six decades later, on September 11th, 2001. With significant similarities to the 1890s/early 1900s and to the 1930s/1941, an old order seems under threat. 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 have helped to drive the rise of America First sensibilities in the twenty-first century.

Q: *What are some key things to keep in mind when trying to understand and analyze populism? Protectionism?*

A: When grappling with various types of populism, we must consider the ways that populist politics fundamentally reflect deep-seated concerns, including the assertion of what historian Melvyn Leffler called “core values.” Generally, populism has an inward and nationalist orientation. Historically, such perspectives have tended to prize a core set of vital interests, which populists have leveraged to galvanize opposition against either national decline (real or imagined) or an “elite” that does not recognize and cherish those same values or seek policies to support them. Although it can be hard to pin them down, these “core values” signify key ideas about the meaning of national ideals and what constitutes “vital” interests, which manifest in political rhetoric and determine the kind of strategies that policy-makers deem effective in domestic and international arenas.

I think the second part of your question seeks to apply the same lens of analysis to protectionism: “What are some key things to keep in mind when trying to understand or analyze” protectionism? This is a great opening, in my view, and addressing this question provides an opportunity to clarify that populism and protectionism have a complicated relationship historically—and maybe that Trump's marriage of the two represents one of his most significant deviations from historical norms and patterns.

Because, as my colleague historian Danielle Holtz argues, “U.S. populist politics first gathered momentum among farm-workers, they catalyzed in

opposition to protectionist policies, specifically the 1890 McKinley Tariff.” This tariff was designed to benefit the country’s infant iron and steel industries by inflating the prices of foreign goods; it disproportionately impacted farmers—whose incomes fell faster than the costs of the goods they bought. We see clear echoes of this sort of targeted nationalist economic policy today. Present-day populist nationalism intersects with protectionism when populist leaders instantiate those values in foreign policy through high tariffs on foreign imports. Though these efforts in the recent past as in the 1890s were ostensibly designed to support domestic production and industries—as they had always been—they were implemented at the direct expense of domestic consumers, who have to pay the tariffs on goods they purchase, and those sectors of domestic industry and agriculture that rely on low-cost foreign goods.

More broadly, we must understand populist policies in the realm of ideas, particularly the language used to describe them, before we can analyze their implementation on the ground. Historian Michael Kazin’s 1995 book *The Populist Persuasion* offers a clear overview of nationalist populism as it developed in the U.S. context, which can contribute to our understanding of the current appeal and development of nationalist populist movements. Kazin explores populist rhetoric across a century of “popular struggle,” focusing on the language, images, and tropes that the Populist Party first made famous in American politics in the 1890s. Excavating the deep veins of American patriotism, Kazin identifies the values at the core of populist appeals as they emerge on both the political left and right—from the Gilded-Age-and-Progressive-Era People’s Party (led by men like Tom Watson and William Jennings Bryan), the pro-temperance Anti-Saloon League (1893), and the American Federation of Labor (1886), through the pro-fascist and anti-Semitic populist appeals made by Father Charles Coughlin in the “interwar” years, to segregationists like George Wallace, and extreme cold warriors like Barry Goldwater.

Their appeals pivoted around a notion of the United States as a nation comprised of noble, hardworking producers, whose independence was endangered by elites who were generally non-producers. (In more modern parlance, these elites were the “takers,” not the “makers,” though some conservative thinkers who oppose larger state welfare systems see this in reverse, depicting those who own capital and run businesses as “makers” in false binary opposition to recipients of social services as “takers.”) In virtually all cases populists set themselves against distant elites and racialized “others.” These spectral figures served as the crucial opposition for populists, often racialized in the U.S. and European contexts to depict “others” and “aliens” as not of the same racial group(s) as the inside authentic patriots.

Since the inception of populist politics in the U.S., populists have coded “the people” as a group of white men, alienating women, immigrants, indigenous peoples, and people of color, even as members of those marginalized groups fought on the front lines to achieve populist-party aims. By victimizing and casting others as the essential problem for the real “people,” populists effectively deployed the flexible languages of peoplehood and national belonging. In order to generate support for their causes, they encouraged their followers to believe in conspiracy theories and alternative facts. Ultimately, they presented real-world options premised on an existential threat to the nation that they had fabricated or grossly exaggerated. In all of these cases, populist leaders made the case that current conditions necessitated a peoples’ movement in politics to take power (under the banner of terms like “Americanism”) and thereby restore the nation to its original order, with “the people” at the center.

There is no doubt that in the world system there is rising nationalism mixed with populism and authoritarianism. There also are no simple answers to how and why this is going on and, in my view, this process has been a generation in the making, at least, going back as far as the end of the Cold War, if not before. However, as I suggest elsewhere in my responses, these trends have been exacerbated and amplified since 9/11 and over the first two decades of the 21st century.

Q: *From watershed populist electoral victories to increasingly powerful authoritarian regimes, and from President Trump’s America First policies to the recent death of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, it can sometimes feel like the LWO (along with the values and principles that underpin it) is falling apart.*

It makes us wonder though, what exactly is the Liberal World Order anyway? From a historian’s perspective, what does the term mean to you?

A: Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall, scholars perennially return to this concern about challenges to the so-called “rules-based” or “liberal world” order (RBO and LWO, respectively). Truly, whenever nations and peoples move from one balance of power to another—and especially when those shifts occur around the realignment of global powers—we historians and scholars ask the same sorts of questions about the system and the specifics that relate the whole to the parts (e.g., nations, peoples, organizations, flows of goods, ideas, groups).

But if we consider the historical context in which those questions are asked, we might find more clarity on the impulse behind those questions and the ontological assumptions they represent.

In the 1990s, for example, this impulse seemed natural, since the order at question was one developed during WWII to shape the post-war world and it had just unraveled alongside the Soviet Union. As historian Elizabeth Borgwardt depicts, the U.S.-led “New Deal for the World,” implemented through various interventionist policy initiatives after WWII (e.g., the Marshall Plan), came into question in the 1990s as the forces of fragmentation and integration reassembled a new world order. At the end of the Cold War, epochal transformations rocked the international landscape, with the consolidation of the EU and eventual adoption of a central currency, the expansion of NATO and collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and global objections to the IMF and WTO. Similarly epochal restructuring followed 9/11, repercutting most recently with the worldwide turn toward right-wing and racial nationalism and away from global organizations and alliances such as NATO, ASEAN, and the EU, with austerity measures in light of the Great Recession, and, especially, in the resurgence of white-supremacist politics in the United States, with Brexit, with the rise of Donald Trump, and with Russian involvement in much of the preceding.

So, what do scholars, politicians, and diplomats mean when they use this phrase? First, I should caution that as a term the “LWO” or “RBO” is problematic. Conceptual concerns arise first in its vagueness and second from the positive attributes or connotations it tends to project about privileging and maintaining a hierarchical system of international power. As such, the second main problem is that the LWO or RWO as an idea is premised on what is an often accepted and unacknowledged ideology: a shared commitment by all countries, as the United Nations Association of Australia puts it succinctly, to “conduct their activities in accordance with agreed rules that evolve over time, such as international law, regional security arrangements, trade agreements, immigration protocols, and cultural arrangements.”³ But obviously in practice there is significant asymmetry between nation states which, in turn, results in enormous differences in power and advantage no matter how they conceive and operationalize being equal members of the international community.

Furthermore, to address whether the “LWO” or “RBO” “worked” or “works,” we must imagine it to be more singular and more directed than it has ever been, accept the premise that it has generated great wealth and that wealth has benefitted the global order, and that it has produced less global conflict than we know to be the case. Such a position elides those policies and projects that impeded both peace and economic development,

³ “The UN and the Rules Based International Order,” United Nations Association of Australia, see: https://www.unaa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/UNAA_RulesBasedOrder_ARTweb3.pdf

much less democracy or social justice. It also misses some of the messiness of international organization and law. This system (to be generous) consists of a vast and diffuse network, with overlapping and oppositional elements, knit together as urgency required without a clear organizational structure or even a consistent method of implementation. For example, the World Trade Organization and the United Nations operate on different sorts of issues and different registers than the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; issues of international copyright law, freedom of the season, and national sovereignty all factor into the calculus of international relations, as do concerns, incentives, and actions related to bad actors as well as good ones (e.g., pirates, terrorists, public health groups, human rights, NGOs and INGOs). In this scattered atmosphere, accepted norms are in many ways as important as prohibitions.

Among the proliferation of articles in recent years making cases for and against this “order,” the key historical assumption at is that the U.S. was the engine that helped to maintain this system through its leadership and through its willingness to commit its treasure and blood. Such a proposition is not much debated. What is at issue, however, is how much the U.S. (and its allies) benefited from the order they built, and at what cost. Some argue that the benefits extremely outweighed the costs, others say they are closer to on par, a few make the case that this effort was a net loss for the U.S., and yet others question the stakes for the U.S. and the world – that is, they wonder if the U.S. is necessary at all, at least anymore, in this “order.”

As political scientist Paul Staniland rightly put it, "Proponents of the order, however, often present a narrow and highly selective reading of history that ignores much of the coercion, violence, and instability that accompanied post-war history." He elaborates very effectively that: "This history carries important implications for addressing today's policy challenges. Simply appealing to the order does not, for instance, tell us much about how to deal with a rising China: Since the liberal order included highly institutionalized alliances, loose “hub-and-spoke” arrangements, and coalitions of the willing, and was characterized by both preventive wars and containment, it is extremely unclear what the order suggests for America's China strategy. While “rules-based” order is a term in vogue, it doesn't tell us what the rules should actually be, or how they should be decided."⁴ I agree. In my view, the phrase is too slippery to be something to hang policy or analysis on, as a whole. On the other hand,

⁴ Paul Staniland, “Misreading the “Liberal Order”: Why We Need New Thinking in American Foreign Policy,” Lawfare, July 29, 2018: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/misreading-liberal-order-why-we-need-new-thinking-american-foreign-policy>

we are clearly facing a pivotal moment. The structures of the old order, LWO/RBO or otherwise, are cracking and it is an open question what will replace it. The resolution of this question will carry a global impact on everything from local politics to existential threats like climate change. Already, this dislocation in the world system is generating the kinds of anxiety and inward-orientation that stokes the fires of nationalism around the world.

Q: *How do the elections and actions of authoritarians and populists around the world relate to concepts and practices of the Liberal World Order (LWO), Rules-Based Order (RBO), and U.S. world leadership? In particular, is the Trump brand of international engagement that different from what the U.S. has experienced in the past?*

A: Rising nationalism, populist authoritarianism, and the dispersed benefits and clear problems of the LWO are interrelated. Rising “Euroskepticism” since the 1990s has been on the up-swing and goes hand-in-hand with authoritarian populist nationalism deploying nativist and anti-globalization rhetoric. We see an ascent of the far right in electoral victories and regime-entrenchment around the world, seeking in many cases to reject the LWO/RBO. Consider, at a glance, the following nations and leaders who cast themselves in opposition to key aspects of the trade and security constraints of the order: Hungary, Orban; Turkey, Erdogan; Brazil, Bolsonaro; Philippines, Duterte; China, Xi; Russia, Putin. And we should reflect, too, on the recent electoral success of right-wing political groups who depict themselves as populists in Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and in the United Kingdom. A recent study suggests one-third of the world’s population lives in a “backsliding democracy” as a result of these developments. Indeed, it seems to me that discontent with European Union economic policies, evidenced across Europe and exemplified by Brexit, is mirrored around the world in similar views about comparable economic-and-political organizations, and also appears in some of the most vitriolic popular criticism of NAFTA, the WTO, globalization, and NATO in the U.S.

Although some scholars would point to continuities from Bush to Obama to Trump, for me, the ruptures are more problematic. Trump’s legitimate and significant breaks with recent past precedent include: trade wars and protectionist tariffs, pulling out of the Iran Deal and TPP, renegotiating NAFTA, anti-NATO and anti-EU rhetoric, pro-Brexit stance, legitimizing North Korea via flawed nuclear diplomacy, and a rhetorical position regarding other nations and immigrants that strikes many in the U.S. around the world as racist. In addition, and perhaps even worse, Trump’s Administration has destroyed U.S. credibility in a way that is unprecedented. The in-credible rhetorical stance of this administration

presents a transactional, “me first”/“America First” form of diplomacy in which no U.S. government diplomat or official can be taken at their word until the president affirms it, and then the mercurial and “win” oriented transactional president might contradict himself. To say this dynamic is profoundly damaging is an understatement.

What this suggests to me is that the U.S. is not likely to be credible in either promises or threats – that is, it cannot be trusted as it once was; this reality is already shaping and orienting the ways in which other nations and groups view U.S. promises and agreements. Suddenly, U.S. allies must confront the certainty that a U.S. new administration just might not honor past agreements or might even reverse course entirely—an insecurity on the world stage expressed by Angela Merkel, Jens Stoltenberg, António Guterres, Emanuel Macron, Shinzo Abe, and other world leaders. Pledges may be torn up. New circumstances may lead to different outcomes. In my view, of course, this turn should concern the U.S. the most.

Even if the U.S. was never quite the “indispensable nation” it claimed to be, nor as credible as it aspired to be, American leadership has been crucial in the world system since WWII. And even if that leadership turned on realist, amoral, and even immoral foreign policies (so-called sins of omission and commission), it still stood as the kind of (relatively) honest broker many nations and peoples have counted on to arbitrate or balance international affairs. To now have a sitting U.S. president and Administration who so regularly ignores or applauds human rights violators and dictators, and seeks bilateral agreements, while pulling out or rejecting long-standing multilateral ones abrogates the U.S. commitment to world leadership. Even after Trump leaves office, the fact that this kind of turn can and has happened will haunt U.S. and world politics for decades to come, I fear. In the absence of the U.S., it does not seem likely other major powers—China? Germany? —will be willing or able to pick up the bulk of the slack of multilateral organization and leadership, from trade and security to human rights, that U.S. has relinquished while retrenching over just the past two years. One need look no farther than the notion pushed by China’s General Secretary Xi of a world order with “Chinese characteristics,” the Belt and Road Initiative and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and expansion of Chinese military capacity in the S. China Sea, across Asia and Africa, to see the contours of the transformation at work. China appears to have next to no human rights or world system leadership role in mind in steering this course but, rather, these are the actions of a largely self-interested power filling a power vacuum and securing benefits for itself (though one could argue that this description largely fits, albeit incompletely, for how the U.S. functioned in many places and ways during the Cold War).

Q: *Would you share a few words of advice for students studying international relations? In particular, what direction should they take with their studies in the face of rising nationalism and receding democracy? How important is history in understanding emerging international issues?*

A: My advice to students of international relations is keep it up! This is an amazing moment to be studying this subject. At no time in my life can I imagine the study of foreign relations to be any more relevant than it is today. The changes in nations, diplomacy, economics, politics, ideas, technology, international organizations, and so much more across the world system over the past generation have been monumental. We desperately need more skilled thinkers examining these changes and situating them in historical and theoretical contexts. The range of challenges and transformations facing us is also daunting, as well as inspiring – from climate change to nonproliferation, from rising powers to new technologies, and from terrorism to social-justice activism.

In my view, whether you study these phenomena with an eye to becoming a scholar or analyst, or toward diplomacy, foreign service, or nongovernmental work, the role of history must be a major part of any cutting-edge exploration of international relations. We simply must have a deep knowledge of the past of nations, regions, peoples, strategies and diplomacy, ideas, faiths, and so much more.

We historians often push back on straightforward arguments about the utility of history, the best example of which is the aphorism that if you don't know history you are doomed to repeat it. However, such a view does have merits. Even if history doesn't repeat itself precisely and historical comparisons and parallels are often imperfect and problematic, historical knowledge is power. As part of making that observation as a piece of advice, I'd also suggest that it is vital for advanced international relations studies to value cross-cultural literacy and language acquisition; thus, living, studying, and working abroad is essential. In the international arena assumptions are your enemy, while on-the ground and well-grounded knowledge, of the past through the present, is your ally in seeking to understand the present and shape the future.

Q: *Could you tell us a little bit about your forthcoming publication "Rethinking American Grand Strategy" and what other projects you are currently working on?*

A: Thanks for asking about this book, which has been a labor of intellectual love and dedication. I am hopeful that *Rethinking Grand*

Strategy will be out from Oxford University Press sometime in the first half of 2020.

Grand Strategy is an increasingly important area of focus for historians and political scientists as well as diplomats and policy experts. It is also a growing area of study in higher education around the world. The book seeks to establish the state of the field for the historical study of U.S. grand strategy. I helped conceive and organize a conference at Oregon State University with roughly twenty top scholars from around the world, commissioning new chapters and work on the topic for the conference and resulting book. We brought together scholars from a wide array of subfields—some well-versed in grand strategy and others entirely new to it—to rethink the history of grand strategy, to propose new approaches, to consolidate the state of the field and to propel the scholarship as well as conversations about U.S. grand strategy in new directions. Although most of our experts consider themselves historians, and this volume focuses on history, it also includes scholars of political science, public health, and women, gender, and sexuality studies who take an historical approach to their work. Based on their substantive areas of expertise, each contributor offers a concise but intensively thorough and historically grounded examination of specific eras, ideas, individuals, themes, theories, and inflection points at which the very concept of grand strategy was at stake. As a result, this volume of essays represents what we hope is a major step in rethinking the history grand strategy. The essays that comprise this book, taken together, seek to build up a robust account and analysis of topics that more traditional accounts often leave out: the relationship of authority to legitimacy, the role of human rights, issues relating to women, gender, and sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion, the importance of transnational actors and ideas, the environment, and the domestic and international politics of justice. The main objective here, then, is to expand the parameters of what counts as grand-strategic thought and action, historically and in the present.

The editors, Andrew Preston (Cambridge University) and Elizabeth Borgwardt, (Washington University-St. Louis) and I, based on dynamic exchanges at the conference that gave rise to this book and grounded upon the work in this volume, also propose some new ways to rethinking grand strategy based on the historical evidence.

This book's primary intervention is to offer a new approach to grand strategy as an epistemology—that is, as a theory of knowledge set in motion in terms of international relations that organizes outcomes around methods, means, and desired ends. When viewed as a way of organizing knowledge, situated within and emanating from a distinct historical and cultural context, the concept of grand strategy becomes more mobile, its

content and operation more readily apparent. This means we can better account for a wider array of grand strategies, strategists, and historical moments and examples. Such an analysis also recognizes the diagnostic, philosophic, prescriptive, and programmatic elements of grand strategy; it thus conclusively expands our historical reach beyond military means or state actors, both of which dominated the prior work that focused primarily on applications of hard power. And this conceptual approach begins to get us away from the problems of stricter or looser definitions that Nina Silove has suggested in *Security Studies* result in uses that center on three main types of assessments of grand plans, grand principles, and grand behavior.

In other words, *Rethinking Grand Strategy* seeks to redefine what counts as grand strategy, but also looks closely at the historical record, which usefully broadens the concept of historical and contemporary grand strategies to comprise sweeping strategic visions of race, gender, religion, law, transnational organizations, and core values. This expansive mode of interpretation downplays the centrality of power and moves beyond an emphasis on formal politics, “world powers,” and “orders” (but does not disregard their significance), combining planning, principles, and behavior, depending on the case. Therefore, this approach also presents a challenge.

In place of some of the more reductive perspectives on strategy that have been prominent in previous analyses, the book proposes to enlarge our view and deepen our understanding by looking closely at varied historical moments, actors, groups, and themes to rethink grand strategies. Take for example foreign missionaries or public health workers, social movements, black internationalism, and peace activism as major U.S. and global movement that clearly help us to see a new array of grand strategists and strategies which have had tremendous impacts on the U.S. and around the world. In this way, our methods in the book, or at least mine as an editor and author (I won’t speak for every author in the volume), fit what might be described as a historically-informed strategic cultural approach.⁵ Premised on the inherent relationship between culture and strategy, this perspective is one that I strongly suggest scholars and practitioners consider; it focuses on the historicized need to explore “the body of attitudes and beliefs that guides and circumscribes thought on strategic questions, influences the way strategic issues are formulated, and sets the

⁵ Alastair Johnston, “Thinking about Strategic Culture,” *International Security* 19 (Spring 1995), 32-64; Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. (Toronto: Meridian, 1991), 321-322. We see something similar in Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*, namely his view that the “political object” represents the original motive for war. Thus, what some term grand strategy neatly fits as wartime politics and might be extended to apply to a wider range of long term strategic concerns related to but not limited to war and conflict.

vocabulary and perceptual parameters of strategic debate.”⁶ Strategic culture, as Colin Gray suggests, “can be conceived as a context out there that surrounds, and gives meaning to, strategic behavior” and “should be approached both as a shaping context for behavior and itself as a constituent of that behavior.” Because culture suffuses us all, ideas and actions represent manifestations of culturally shaped, or “encultured” individuals, groups, organizations, concepts, procedures, and technologies.⁷

My main conceptual contribution here is to link the epistemological model to this strategic-cultural to the epistemological model, it seems to the editors that grand strategy rethought is well understood as what historian Hal Brands aptly terms an “intellectual architecture,” which lends structure to thinking about foreign relations, broadly defined.⁸ In this rethinking effort, we aim to move beyond the exaltation of far-sighted decision-makers from elite backgrounds struggling against the shortsighted constraints of the small-minded, and, instead, as the following chapters illustrate, we seek to reveal some of the most significant hidden grand strategies and strategists that abound in the historical record.

Q: *What’s on your current reading list?*

A: I read fairly voraciously and usually have a number of books going at once, in addition to those directly in use for research. As it pertains to the main topics in this conversation, I highly recommend James Lindsay and Ivo Daalder’s *The Empty Throne: America’s Abdication of Global Leadership*, which makes the argument that the Trump Administration’s positions on foreign policy represent the “greatest lurch” in U.S. diplomacy since the period just after World War I. Speaking of pivotal moments in past U.S. relations with the world, I recently finished a magisterial book that I highly recommend: William Hitchcock’s *The Age of Eisenhower: American and the World in the 1950s*. The book breaks new ground that I didn’t think was possible regarding interpreting Eisenhower over the span of his whole lifetime, but with a special emphasis on his time in the White House and a nuanced take on Ike within the broader domestic and international historical context.

⁶ This relationship has been postulated most effectively by Alastair Johnston. Here, Jack Snyder quoted in Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star Over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press), 156.

⁷ Colin S. Gray, “Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back,” *Review of International Studies* 25 (January 1999), 50-52.

⁸ Hal Brands, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1.

Similarly, exploring what we historians are increasingly focusing on under the rubric of the term “intermestic” – where the international and the domestic overlap – is Sarah Snyder’s brilliant *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy*, which puts forward a fresh new interpretation of U.S. foreign policy in the “long 1960s” by tracking how transnational connections and social movements responded to abject repression in the Soviet Union, ghastly racial discrimination in Southern Rhodesia, rising authoritarianism in South Korea, and political turmoil and coups in Greece and Chile.

Another book that I just wrapped up and highly recommend is Joanne B. Freeman’s *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War*. The book is a gripping account of violence and acrimonious politics in Congress and society in the tumultuous years leading up to the Civil War, which provides a useful counterpoint to those who think politics and partisan rancor in the U.S. has hit an all-time low today.

I am re-reading as I finish a review of a fascinating book on Woodrow Wilson and internationalism in the era of World War I, Trygve Throntveit’s intensively-researched, provocative, and capacious *Power Without Victory: Woodrow Wilson and the American Internationalist Experiment*.

Next up for me are the following four books:

- Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*;
- Keisha Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom*;
- Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *The Ideas that Made America: A Brief History*;
- Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer’s *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974*.

ⁱ 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); Justus Doenecke, *The Battle Against Intervention, 1939-1941* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Press, 1997); for a great overview, Justus Doenecke’s introduction to *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee*, Justus Doenecke, ed. (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), 2-78.

ⁱⁱ 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); text of Lindbergh’s Des Moines speech in 1941: <http://www.charleslindbergh.com/americanfirst/speech.asp>

ⁱⁱⁱ An insightful source in the Hoover Archives by the director of the AFC Research Bureau, Ruth Sarles, is now available in published form: Ruth Sarles, *A Story of America First: The Men and Women Who Opposed U.S. Intervention in WWII* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2003).

^{iv} Hoover Archives, summer 1940, initial memorandum statement of principles, for accessible printed version see: *In Danger Undaunted*, exact text of first set of four principles, 87.