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Book Guide

Isolationism

In his new book, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself From the World*, CFR Senior Fellow Charles A. Kupchan explores the nation's past to uncover the ideological and political roots of U.S. grand strategy, understand the recent return of isolationist sentiment, and examine how the nation can bring its foreign commitments back into line with its means and purposes.

Summary

In his Farewell Address of 1796, President George Washington admonished the young nation "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world." Thereafter, isolationism had a virtual lock on American grand strategy. From the founding era until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States shunned strategic commitments outside North America, making only brief detours during the Spanish-American War and World War I. After entering World War II, the United States changed course, embarking on an era of global engagement and taking on far-flung military commitments. Americans abandoned isolationism; they tried to run the world rather than run away from it, but they eventually overreached. The nation's "forever wars" in the Middle East, political polarization, and COVID-19's painful economic impact have taken a toll on the country's internationalist appetite. As the electorate tires of seemingly unlimited foreign commitments, isolationist sentiment is making a comeback, prompting Americans to rediscover the allure of nonentanglement and fueling President Donald J. Trump's America First foreign policy.

In this definitive analysis—the first account of isolationism across U.S. history—Charles Kupchan explores the enduring connection between the isolationist impulse and the American experience. He also reevaluates isolationism's record, arguing that it constituted dangerous delusion during the 1930s, but afforded the nation clear strategic advantages during its ascent. Dr. Kupchan credits isolationism's staying power to the ideology of American exceptionalism. Strategic detachment from the outside world was to protect the nation's unique experiment in liberty, which America would then share with others through the power of example. Since World War II, a much more activist and expansive version of its exceptionalist calling has sustained foreign ambition, but the pendulum has been swinging back amid public clamor for more focus on domestic priorities.

The United States is hardly destined to return to isolationism, yet a strategic retrenchment is inevitable. Moving forward, Dr. Kupchan recommends a judicious pullback toward the middle ground between doing too much and doing too little, observing that the United States will need to engage in a messy and imperfect world while resisting the temptation either to recoil from it or to remake it.

An excerpt of *Isolationism* can be read [here](#).

This book is suitable for advanced high-school students and undergraduate and graduate students in the following fields:

- U.S. History
- International Relations
- U.S. Foreign Policy
- Grand Strategy

Essay and Discussion Questions

Courses on U.S. History

1. In what ways has the idea of American exceptionalism fueled U.S. involvement—or lack thereof—abroad?
2. How have racial issues and concern about preserving social homogeneity evolved over time as motivating factors behind isolationism?
3. In what ways do the founders' views of U.S. statecraft affect U.S. grand strategy today? What strategic lessons can be drawn from the early days of the republic and what lessons are now outmoded due to changes in the nation and world?
4. How have exogenous shocks like the Great Depression or wars affected the appeal of isolationism?
5. In what ways does the current moment resemble past moments in U.S. history, like the interwar era or the early Cold War? Are we experiencing a period of pullback similar to the one that occurred in reaction to the Vietnam War? Does Trump's America First represent a break with U.S. foreign policy traditions, or a throwback to an earlier era?
6. How have American interests in foreign trade shaped U.S. statecraft over time? Have U.S. leaders seen projecting American power abroad as helping or hindering the nation's commercial objectives?

Courses on International Relations

1. From your point of view, is Dr. Kupchan's analysis of the trajectory of isolationism over time most grounded in a realist, liberal internationalist, or constructivist school of thought?
2. Dr. Kupchan identifies three broad eras in the evolution of U.S. strategy—1789–1898, 1898–1941, and 1941–2020. What developments led to major changes in U.S. strategy? Discuss the interplay between the domestic and international forces that led to inflection points in U.S. engagement with the world.
3. How does Dr. Kupchan's vision of judicious retrenchment compare with the work of other scholars, such as those in the so-called restraint school and those in the liberal internationalist camp?
4. Dr. Kupchan presents an anatomy of isolationism that reveals its multiple ideological variants. What factors best explain the salience of these variants and ideological change over time? Do ideological differences tend to run along regional and partisan lines?
5. Was the appeal of isolationism purely a function of relative power? The nation was isolationist when it was weak, and internationalist when it was strong. Does that argument explain much of Dr. Kupchan's historical narrative? Is this a realist story of shifts in the balance of power, or are domestic politics and ideology important factors driving change in U.S. strategy?

Courses on U.S. Foreign Policy

1. Was isolationism in the early days of the republic an ideological choice or a strategic necessity?
2. How has the meaning and practice of isolationism changed over time?
3. In what ways and under what conditions does public opinion drive U.S. involvement abroad? Give examples of decisive moments in which public attitudes shaped outcomes.
4. In what sense has the debate over isolationism in U.S. grand strategy highlighted the conflicting and changing roles of Congress and the Executive in formulating and implementing foreign policy? Compare the shaping of U.S. strategy in the nineteenth century with the situation today.
5. Of the six logics of isolationism laid out in Chapter 2, which are most responsible for the drive for retrenchment today? Discuss the contemporary manifestations of the original strains of isolationist thinking.

Courses on Grand Strategy

1. How did immutable factors like geography affect U.S. strategic choice? Was the U.S. able to be isolationist only because of flanking oceans? Do those flanking oceans still provide natural security? Can landlocked countries surrounded by other nations practice isolationism?

2. Various stakeholders in the U.S. policy process have differing views of U.S. interests and the best way to protect them. In particular, Republicans and Democrats have headed in different directions on core issues of grand strategy. What is the substance of their ideological differences and why did the bipartisan consensus on strategy erode?
3. How does the debate over isolationism in U.S. policy compare with similar debates in other great powers? Are their similarities with Britain's "splendid isolation?" What about Tokugawa Japan? What about Switzerland? Is there an overlap between isolationism and neutrality?
4. Compare Chinese grand strategy today with the grand strategy of the United States in the nineteenth century? Is China following a similar path? Is China destined to push other great powers from its neighborhood just like the United States did in the Western Hemisphere?
5. Has isolationism as a force in American political thinking affected U.S. effectiveness in distant conflicts? For example, has the isolationist impulse hampered the country's ability to successfully prosecute foreign wars—such as in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq?

Supplementary Materials

Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

Justus D. Doenecke and John E. Wilz, *From Isolation to War, 1931–1941* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019).

Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World From Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad Since 1750* (New York: Norton, 1994).

Melvyn Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920–2015* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012).

Peter Schrag, *Not Fit for Our Society: Nativism and Immigration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

Stephen Sestanovich, *Maximalist: America in the World From Truman to Obama* (New York: Knopf, 2014).

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

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