

8-10-2009

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Recommended Citation

McAllister, Ted, "America's Vital Interests" (2009). Pepperdine University, *School of Public Policy Working Papers*. Paper 17.

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America's Vital Interests

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August 10, 2009

“Fate has brought it about that America is at the center, no longer the edges, of Western civilization. In this fact resides the American destiny.”

—Walter Lippmann, *U.S. War Aims*, 1944

Part 1

Near mid-century the most influential journalist of the age, Walter Lippmann, [1] appealed for a foreign policy rooted in American “vital interests” rather than a “fundamentalist” idealism. Even as he crafted a more realistic, less moralistic foreign policy, Lippmann was famously developing his controversial public philosophy grounded on a universal Natural Law. [2] At this intersection between a nation oriented around self-evident Truth and an international order ruled by naked power and interests, Walter Lippmann produced a hard-headed *via media* lamentably rare in an ideological age. We have much to learn from this great American stoic whose life’s work was to educate dispassionately a passionate public.

A review of Lippmann’s mature thinking about America’s role in the world, crafted in the midst of a world war and the subsequent and titanic shift in geopolitics, offers a useful primer on American foreign policy and vital interests that avoids the wild arrogance and self-deception of American idealism without succumbing to the simplistic positivism of the various realists. As we struggle to find a useful and politically viable strategy in a new global struggle for civilization, Lippmann’s work at mid-century supplies a much-neglected analysis from which we might critique contemporary foreign policy. To this end I want to offer a summary of Lippmann’s analysis of American strategic position and role before I offer an update for our own time.

The young Lippmann, enthralled by Theodore Roosevelt's muscular internationalism, offered sustained but tepid support for Woodrow Wilson's collective security, international law, and evangelical democratization. By the late 1930s the now hoary-headed dean of American journalism had rejected Wilsonianism along with his own long record of idealist internationalism. [3] In 1952 Lippmann characterized Wilsonianism with his usual candor:

The Wilsonian ideology was President Wilson's attempt to reconcile these new and heretical imperatives [by which he meant German violations of Wilson's understanding of international law] with the old, with his own deeply personal American orthodoxy. The Wilsonian thesis was, if I may put it this way, that since the world was no longer safe for the American democracy, the American people were called upon to conduct a crusade to make the world safe for American democracy. In order to do this the principles of the American democracy would have to be made universal throughout the world. The Wilsonian ideology is American fundamentalism made into a universal doctrine. [4]

This label, "American fundamentalism," is a bit elusive in Lippmann's works but nonetheless central to his analysis. A variant of American idealism, fundamentalism refers to a peculiar kind of provincialism—a tendency to take American political ideas and forms as expressions of universal truth. A more cosmopolitan grasp of the world and its history prevents the simple transformation of an American good to a human good. Lippmann's critique of Wilson rests heavily on his assertion that Wilson's "deeply personal American orthodoxy" prevented him from understanding the distinctions that matter and instead fostered a simple and declarative vision of America's role in the world.

The underlying problem toward which Lippmann pointed is that Wilson (and American fundamentalists generally) was incapable of innovating, of adjusting to changed circumstances. [5] Wilson took America to war by calling upon a deeply felt, little understood, and altogether antiquated "American fundamentalism" that was ill-suited to the world as it was really. American experiences in the nineteenth century had created habits of mind that no longer worked in the more globalized economy and politics of the twentieth century. In reaction to the "heresy" of international politics, Wilson and the Americans transformed a long-established national idealism into "a crusading doctrine" and made all American wars "universal" wars "against criminal governments who rebel against the universal order." [6]

II

As a young thinker, Lippmann was not disposed to rely heavily on history or historical imagination to shape his analysis of current events or needs. The failures or deficiencies in his own views and in American policies spurred Lippmann to examine history more closely, and in 1943, when he published *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*, he surveyed American foreign policy history, without which most of his analysis would have been seemed capricious or unsupported. [7] One cannot understand or seek to correct American foreign policy without asking the question of the

nature of the American republic and the kind of self-understanding that governs political choices. Is the nation constitutionally or “genetically” isolationist? Is it an imperialist nation? The two questions come bound together for Lippmann. The first generation of leaders—for whom Lippmann developed over time a grudging but deep admiration—focused their foreign policy attention on the vital interests of the new nation, which included the conquering of a continent and turning it into a great, self-governing republic. Their understanding of America’s vital interests and their “idealism” made the first generation anything but isolationists—they had a vast expanse to conquer. [8] To concentrate on this vast undertaking, they sought to avoid entanglements with European or Asian affairs on the ground that such involvement would distract them from securing their vital interests and would place upon them obligations for which they hadn’t the resources.

Meanwhile, they had an “empire” (of liberty, as Jefferson called it) to build, and to accomplish this they had often to engage seriously with European nations. But the imperialism of this enterprise was of a very specific variety. The object was to create a nation of self-governing people. The size of this conquest was determined not primarily by the presence of countervailing forces that would prevent U.S. expansion, but by the limits (probably unknown at the time) to producing states that were culturally and geographically capable of participating in a single republic. The empire of free, self-governing people, therefore, was not an abstract claim applied to all peoples everywhere, much less a political imperative of the United States. It presupposed limits (even if the exact nature of those limits was not clear yet) and it presumed that it was in the interest of the United States to become a great and hegemonic nation in the hemisphere.

In their wisdom, early American leaders identified clearly and prudently the “vital interests” of the nation and developed a foreign policy that secured those interests. They kept their commitments and their resources in balance. One of the great accomplishments in this balancing act was the Monroe Doctrine, which Lippmann asserted was the defining event in America’s nineteenth-century foreign policy. But the Monroe Doctrine was not about, as some have asserted, a weak United States asserting a claim to the western hemisphere that it could not defend. Rather, Lippmann emphasized the careful calculations that informed the proclamation. American leaders could not have, and would not have, asserted the obligation to protect the Americas from European incursions had it not had the support of Great Britain, along with the protection of the British navy. Indeed, for a time it seemed likely that what is known today as the Monroe Doctrine would come in the form of a joint declaration between the United States and Great Britain. At any rate, the salient fact is that American policy makers assessed well the strategic needs of the U.S. and Great Britain and declared a U.S. sphere of influence that was safeguarded by the British navy. The U.S. government determined America’s vital interests and through alliance (tacit though it was) it secured the necessary means of discharging its obligations.

The diplomatic success of 1823 provided the necessary conditions for the United States to establish its “empire of liberty” on the North American continent in splendid isolation

from heavy European influence. It also produced such complete and unusual (even unnatural) security that these halcyon years of the nineteenth century shaped for the next century American beliefs and habits concerning diplomacy. The American people and U.S. policy makers lost contact with the basic truth that the nation must balance its commitments with resources just as they forgot that the great era of “isolation” depended on an alliance with Great Britain. “Because the informal alliance with British sea power was concealed,” Lippmann wrote in 1943, “and was displeasing to their self-esteem, the American people lost the prudence, so consistently practised by the Founding Fathers, of not underestimating the risks of their commitments and of not overestimating their own power.” [9]

The long diplomatic peace had warped the ability of American policy leaders to assess their vital interests and to create the conditions that would best meet the obligations they incurred. This habituated stupidity, along with a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, would lead to American diplomatic failures from 1898 until 1941, of which Wilsonianism was the deformed reaction of a growing giant, naïve in the ways of the world. This American fundamentalism was the problem with American foreign policy. [10]

The Spanish-American War provoked the problem that Lippmann thought not yet solved as America entered World War II. Had it not been for this “splendid little war,” the American government would nonetheless have faced geopolitical changes that would force upon it a new foreign policy. One way or another, the time of American isolation was ending, but the war with Spain exposed the tensions within a nation dedicated to the idea of national independence and a peculiar kind of empire—an empire of liberty. The victory bequeathed to the United States a new kind of empire in the Pacific for which it didn’t have the necessary resources to protect. The Philippines could not be incorporated into the American republic and so the American government promised quickly to move toward Philippine independence—there was a difference between an “empire of liberty” and a liberal imperialism. [11] Meanwhile, the vast Pacific obligations could not be vouchsafed by the British navy. America was now strategically overexposed: “From the day when Dewey sailed into Manila Bay until the day when General Wainwright surrendered Corregidor, the United States never made a sustained and prudent, or remotely adequate, effort to bring its obligations and its power into balance.” [12]

Theodore Roosevelt, in Lippmann’s estimation, had begun to formulate the rudiments of an American strategic plan for this new age, and had his insights become the foundation for an emerging American strategy for the twentieth century, we would have experienced a very different century. But Roosevelt was an aberration, a cosmopolitan among American provincials. It would fall to the provincial Wilson, who confronted the unavoidable questions about America’s way with the world, to formulate an American strategy for this new century of global conflict and deeply entangled global economy.

The real reason that the U.S. went to war with Germany in 1917, Lippmann argued, was not to make the world safe for democracy or to defend international law. These were the

stated reasons, the moral justifications, the way that Wilson persuaded himself and his nation of the necessity for this conflict. The real reason was that the new German submarine offensive was “cutting . . . the Atlantic communication” and this would mean “the starvation of Britain and, therefore, the conquest of Western Europe by imperial Germany.” This victory would directly threaten American interests and make “the world unsafe for the American democracies from Canada to Argentina.” So American security rather than American idealism sent the United States into a European conflict, but the “legalistic and moralistic, and idealistic” justifications for American involvement obscured the compelling vital interests involved (the U.S. could not allow Germany mastery over the Atlantic) as well as distorted the kind of peace that would serve American security interests. [13]

Three-quarters of a century of blissful separation from European affairs had trained American policy makers to think that the object of foreign policy and of war is peace, and by emphasizing this erroneous objective, American leaders were distracted from the first object of a nation’s foreign engagement: security. Living for so long with an unearned peace and security, Americans were unwilling to think of the necessary defenses for their real needs and they were disposed to ignore their enemies. A distorted American idealism resulted in a pathetic effort to outlaw war following the Great War. Thinking that excessive armaments produced the recent conflict, they pushed to effectively disarm the major powers, seemingly unaware of the needs of nations to have the power to protect their vital interests. Giving nations commitments while taking away their capacity to fulfill their obligations produces more instability rather than less. Hating alliances as sources of conflict, the American fundamentalists undermined the means by which a nation might distinguish friend and foe and hampered the ability of a nation to use alliances to protect vital interests. To replace the decadently self-interested alliance system, the fundamentalist sought a more neutral system of collective security. In short, Lippmann stressed that the unusual experience of Americans in the nineteenth century produced a certain species of idealism and that they generalized from an atypical and unrepeatable set of circumstances which they universalized as moral principles for nations as such. [14]

The other side of this coin is that an emphasis on a neutral system of collective security, as well as efforts to produce an international environment that stresses idealism rather than self-interest, alters the proper focus of the American government. Stressing the importance of understanding and defining clearly the nation’s vital interests, Lippmann thought that the species of internationalism that emerged after the war not only clouded America’s understanding of its own interests but also made policy makers blind to the centrality of self-interest to all nations’ foreign policy. American policy makers were both incapable of developing a foreign policy that established the necessary resources to protect American vital interests and unable to understand the actions of other nations that did not operate with American fundamentalist notions.

This American idealism, this liberal fundamentalism, had made World War II possible. As Lippmann wrote in the middle of the war, thinking about what had caused this conflagration and what the nation should learn from this history, he sought to uncover

the appropriate goals of American foreign policy as well as the immediate war aims. Clearly Lippmann wanted policy makers to eschew the fundamentalism that had brought them to this state of affairs. Recognizing the peculiar challenges of policy decisions in a democracy, Lippmann called for leadership that educates the public and that creates consensus by producing sound policy and then educating the public as to its merits. [15] But Lippmann also had to acknowledge a basic idealism as central to the American character and therefore to any foreign policy that the people would tolerate. Lippmann's "realism" requires understanding the nature of the regime, especially for the person called to lead the nation in a ruthless international game of power politics, where power rather than ideals is the main currency.

Lippmann wrote often about American idealism, but rarely in any sustained fashion. What he did write emphasized a basic character, a living American tradition, but not a fixed position. American ideals, deeply held, are capable of many kinds of articulation and therefore they can change with public expressions of them, especially when attached to American fighting. Therefore, Lippmann thought it very important for American leaders to articulate the sources for our struggle, the ideals for our fight, in very careful ways because these public statements, when distilled through national sacrifice, will alter or shape the national character.

America's long history fighting colonial imperialism has produced a core belief in national independence. Lippmann wrote: "The American antipathy to imperialism is not a humanitarian sentiment acquired in some casual way. It is organic in the American character, and is transmitted on American soil to all whose minds are molded by the American tradition." [16] Americans are sufficiently evangelical about such matters to go to war in defense of their beliefs. As Lippmann understood American policy toward Japan in the years leading to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. pursued a policy designed to lead to war with Japan in the interest of Chinese independence. American policy toward China, beginning with the Open Door policy, was not a matter of American vital interest and it wasn't focused on profits or economic gain. Once Japan's intention to occupy much of China became clear and unchangeable, U.S. policy aimed at an equally unchanging course of defense of Chinese territorial integrity. While the timing of a war might be dicey (with the fate of Great Britain very much in doubt), American actions could only lead to war. Why? Was this an expression of American idealism controlling foreign policy?

Lippmann's answer suggests the complexity of the issue. Americans are, indeed, deeply idealistic with regard to the wrongs of imperialism. But the American principles at stake are not quite the same as those claimed by Woodrow Wilson or by Franklin Roosevelt in the Atlantic Charter, and certainly not what Truman would declare later. As Lippmann put it, "it would be quixotic and almost certainly obnoxious, to go crusading in order to impose American institutions and the American ideas of liberty and equal rights." Clearly the American character did not require, in its most basic form, that the world look like us. "We have come to realize," he stressed, "how long and troubled is the road to freedom and self-government." More like Burke than Paine in his defense of American ideals, Lippmann pointed out that this more restrained sentiment in favor of

national independence had been a long-standing position of the American people. “Thus, the Monroe Doctrine is not a guarantee that all the people of the American republics would enjoy freedom; it is a policy which vetoes the attempt of any other power to prevent them from trying to be free. We have not undertaken to unite the Chinese and to make them free and self-governing. Only the Chinese can do that. What we have undertaken is to prevent Japan from conquering them.” [17]

So American foreign policy, because it is American, will always reflect American moral commitments. The challenge for the nation is to develop an enlightened leadership that can “adjust, transform, and convert traditional American ideas to the new necessities.” [18] Clearly Wilsonian fundamentalism (which is the universalizing of American moral principles) was inappropriate. In the emerging world of American hegemony, what blend of realism and idealism should guide this democratic nation?

Notes to Part I

1. Walter Lippmann was one of America’s most independent public intellectuals. He belonged to no camp. Courted by almost every great political figure in America during his career, Lippmann sustained his influence by protecting his singularity. This independence of mind and spirit cost him the virtue of consistency, but in return he gained the precious capacity to learn from all evidence, even that resulting from his own failures in judgment. By the time the Second World War loomed, Walter Lippmann had been commenting on foreign relations for nearly a quarter of a century. From the late 1930s through the early 1950s he articulated a philosophy to govern American foreign policy that differed significantly from his earlier positions and from the emerging schools of thought.
2. *Essays in the Public Philosophy*. Boston, Little, Brown, 1944.
3. Lippmann stressed that the new century had brought about “revolutionary change” and that because the U.S. had not adjusted to fit these new conditions it “has for forty years been unprepared to wage war or to make peace.” Moreover, about his own defense for Wilsonian ideas, including the Washington Disarmament Conference, Lippmann wrote that “of that episode in my life I am ashamed.” (*U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1943, pp. vii, x.)
4. *Isolation and Alliances: An American Speaks to the British*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1952, p. 22.
5. George Bush is the most recent, and the most bombastic, example of a liberal fundamentalism that affirms the moral superiority of democracy (liberal democracy) and therefore justifies “crusades” to make the world safe for democracy. But beyond a stronger than typical predilection to attach both divine assistance and a sense of providential purpose to American actions, Bush stands very much in the American tradition of presidential pronouncements about the American mission, more or less unchallenged since Franklin Roosevelt.
6. *Isolation and Alliances*. pp. 22–23.
7. “This nation cannot, as Lincoln said, escape history. It can, however, at fearful cost misread its own history.” *U.S. Foreign Policy*. p. 108.

8. Lippmann warned that the label “isolationism” was prone to misinterpretation. The United States was never “neutral” and to the degree that the isolationist label has come to mean neutrality, it misrepresents American history. *Isolation and Alliances*. p. 14.
9. *U.S Foreign Policy*. p. 22
10. Lippmann words his claims in the strongest terms possible: “All American military commitments had been made by the end of the nineteenth century. The history of our foreign relations in the twentieth century is a story of failure. It is the story of our national failure to balance the commitments that were made in the nineteenth century. Because of that failure we have been compelled to fight two great unexpected wars for which we were unprepared.” *U.S Foreign Policy*, p. 26.
11. “Americans have never wanted to rule over any territory which could not be admitted as a state into the union or to govern the peoples who could not be assimilated.” *Isolation and Alliances*, p. 19.
12. *U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 28
13. Lippmann’s argument about the causes of American involvement in the war, however debatable, is not central to the issue here. For him the salient issue is that American liberal, fundamentalist habits of mind, American idealistic provincialism, controlled the way the American government settled the peace. The failure to identify America’s vital interests, the inability to recognize the singularity of the American republic, and the amazingly cavalier way that Wilson ignored the relationship between commitments and resources, produced a European catastrophe for which the United States bears considerable guilt.
14. See chapter five of *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*.
15. Lippmann assumed that there is no such thing as a serious public opinion until leaders present the people with options from which to choose. The obligation is then on leaders to educate rather than pander, to unite by the quality of their policies rather than the narrow self-interest of their constituencies. Probably, more than anyone else, Theodore Roosevelt remained his model for this kind of leader. But in his works on foreign policy, Lippmann seems to assert the importance of enlightened leadership rather than explaining what it might look like or how we might encourage it. With regard to the American founders he wrote that “they formulated a sound policy which the divided people came, because of its inherent virtue, to unite in supporting.” A bit later, in a rather desperate attempt to avoid making a detailed argument, he wrote that “the measure of a policy is its soundness; if it is sound, it will prove acceptable.” (Shield p. 85) However elusive one finds Lippmann’s efforts to explain the kind of leadership needed in a democracy, one cannot make sense of his views without recognizing his basic debt to Machiavelli on this subject, made much more important in a democracy.
16. *U.S. War Aims*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1944, p. 35.
17. *U.S. War Aims*, pp. 41–42.
18. *Isolation and Alliances*, p. 20.

Part 2

III

As Walter Lippmann espied the end of World War II in 1944, he wrote a book that he hoped would go beyond the diagnosis of the problem Americans had inherited from its liberal fundamentalism and chart a more hard-headed approach in the future. In *U.S. War Aims*, he stressed the importance of defining the nation's vital interests and establishing a "settled national policy" that would develop the "efficient means" to protect those interests. This was not a book fixated on American idealism, except as a fact to be managed by leaders. Rather, Lippmann returned to what in his mind was the first objective of foreign policy, security. [1] Emphasizing the natural groupings of nations around collective need, Lippmann stressed that the security of the United States would depend on building the necessary alliances with members of the "Atlantic community" just as we could expect that other systems would emerge around Russia and China. Moralizing about other governments, evangelizing for democracy, self-determination, international law, collective security, would only repeat the failures of the last generation, leading to a third world war. The most pressing question facing postwar policy makers was how to deal with the Soviets. In brief, Lippmann was appealing to these leaders to reject Wilsonian moralism in favor of a policy designed to form alliances and strike important power balances for a future to be governed by power not principles.

The distance Lippmann had traveled from his Wilsonian days is even more evident in a letter he wrote to the French philosopher Jacques Maritain. Maritain had expressed admiration for Lippmann's critique of "nineteenth-century idealism" but complained that the author should make a more ardent defense of "a heroic effort of leadership from nations to defend the ideals of civilized society." The philosopher wanted of Lippmann a "true realism" that accounted for the normative truths that were the foundation of all genuine civilization. Lippmann's response was direct:

This was not, as you realize, due to an oversight or to a lack of interest in such an ultimate end. It was due to a deep conviction on a matter of fundamental principle. I do not believe that this end can be approached unless military power has first been organized for security against the threat of great wars. But I believe no less that it is wrong to suppose that out of the necessary work of the police there can evolve the creative work of civilization. The policeman must not be regarded as a potential priest, teacher, and constructor of the good life. He should be confined to the limited task of preserving an order within which the priest and teacher and constructor can proceed. After prolonged consideration of the question you raise I concluded, therefore, that if I was to propose and discuss the ultimate temporal end of society, I would have to make an historical and philosophical argument against the notions that it was the mission of the allied powers to rule the world in order to promote that end. . . . My view is that by resting the case for the alliance on the limited ground of their own self-interest, I was offering the only insurance that could be depended upon against the insidious temptation of imperialism to act as if the ultimate ends of human society were entrusted to the foreign offices in London, Moscow, Chungking, and Washington. In view of the

fact that power corrupts men's minds, I was specially concerned to avoid the suggestion that the power we must exercise is an instrument for the attainment of ultimate ends. This could lead only, I believe, to a new version of Kipling and the white man's burden. [2]

Lippmann's argument rested on two principles: security is the first need of all (and this is true of all regimes) and civilization (liberal democratic principles) has no peculiar advantage in the world beyond the ability of its devotees to defend it. [3]

By emphasizing security needs in a world without moral codes to control nations, Lippmann was not rejecting a very potent form of idealism; he was simply emphasizing that the former (security) was a necessary condition for the latter (realization of idealistic principles). At the very end of *U.S. War Aims* Lippmann waxed idealistic. The "American task" was to make a "place where the ancient faith could flourish anew." Moreover, American principles represented the highest accomplishments of human civilization, and for now and in the foreseeable future, fate had placed into the hands of Americans the great moral accomplishments of Western civilization: "The Atlantic is now the Mediterranean sea of this culture and this faith." [4] The preservation of this culture and faith should be among our highest priorities rather than a quixotic effort to apply these beliefs and values to peoples or regimes not prepared to adopt them.

IV

Less than two years after World War II ended, a new war—a cold war—had begun between the Soviet Union and the United States. Lippmann predicted some war between these powers in 1944 if Wilsonian ideals controlled American postwar policy. From Truman through Johnson (the time left to Lippmann as a serious commentator on world affairs) the American regime chose ideological confrontation over the possible "long peace."

The year 1947 was a fateful one for clarifying the American role in an emerging bipolar world. Hostilities between the United States and the USSR over the fate of Germany and the disposition of Eastern Europe were dangerously high while economic ruin in Western Europe created instability that communists sought to exploit. The British government, too poor to honor its global obligations, notified the Truman administration that Great Britain could no longer support the politically weak rightist government in Greece. Fearful that Greece might fall to communist rebellion, Truman appealed, in March, for a \$400 million aid bill for both Greece and Turkey. Walter Lippmann, for his part, supported the aid bill because he considered it prudent assistance to allies in a part of the world that was in America's vital interest.

But if aid to Greece and Turkey was prudent, the larger policy that Truman outlined in his speech before the joint session of Congress was extravagant, moralistic, and the worst kind of American fundamentalism. Or so Lippmann believed. The problem with the so-called Truman Doctrine was that it had no limits to its idealist imperialism—the U.S. government would henceforth consider it national policy "to support free peoples

who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” The American crusade was now truly global. An unlimited crusade requires unlimited resources. Fundamentalists are driven by ideology, by a simple moral casuistry, that doesn’t work well with efforts to separate vital interests from ancillary interests. Lippmann’s reaction to Truman’s declaration of ideological war against the Soviets was strong, insistent, and sharp. In one column, written almost immediately following Truman’s speech, Lippmann warned that a “vague global policy, which sounds like the tocsin of an ideological crusade has no limits. It cannot be controlled. Its effects cannot be predicted. Everyone everywhere will read into it his own fears and hopes, and it could readily act as incitement and inducement to civil strife in countries where the national cooperation is delicate and precarious.” [5]

Lippmann believed that Truman had opened Pandora’s box and that as a result the United States would face problems and tasks for which it was not equipped or well-suited—problems that a prudent, hard-headed assessment of American vital interests and geopolitics would have avoided entirely. Truman’s mistake rested on a flawed conception of Soviet motives and designs. When, a few months after Truman’s speech, George Kennan’s earth-rumbling essay “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, Lippmann took this to be the theoretical foundation of Truman’s developing “containment policy.” He reacted with fourteen columns analyzing and answering Kennan; these very influential essays were almost immediately published in book form as *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy*. Lippmann’s essays were prescient.

Kennan argued that the Soviets were not open to persuasion through reason but would respond only to force. Driven by an ideologically motivated expansionism, the Soviets understood themselves to be in a war with noncommunist governments and therefore would not be open to compromise or peaceful coexistence. The only prudent strategy, Kennan and the Truman administration would spell out in due course, was to “contain” the Soviets by countering their actions with counterforce. Kennan wanted Americans to understand the inherently expansionist and irrational nature of the Soviet regime so that they would be prepared to see all Soviet expansion as a threat to American security. However, Kennan also stressed that the Soviet regime was weak and that, when faced with a united front of free countries willing to check its expansionist enterprises across the globe, it would be vulnerable to its own internal instability.

Lippmann, no dove, had no truck with pacifists like Henry Wallace. Like Kennan, Lippmann emphasized the necessity of American force in checking the Soviet Union. But Kennan and the Truman administration misunderstood the motives of the Soviet regime and the consequences of such a sweeping strategic vision for the United States. Kennan admitted that his was a theoretical rather than a historical or empirical argument, based on his understanding of the nature of the regime, not on the long experience of the Russian people. Lippmann preferred to rest American policy on the lessons of history rather than on improvable theory. Moreover, the containment policy would put the United States into a reactive strategic posture, giving the enemy the power to choose the ground of conflict and the weapons.

Containment required that the United States devote enormous resources so that it was prepared to react in the remote corners of the world, but the American regime and its constitutional system was not suited to this strategy. A large military in times of peace, ceding power to the executive to respond rapidly to provocations, the public will to apply patient and steady pressure in areas distant—these were neither a part of the American tradition nor a strength of the constitutional system. Militarily, containment misused American assets. Our geography and circumstances encouraged the United States to produce a powerful navy and air force, with an army designed for offensive action rather than an occupying force. A good planner “must use the kind of power we do have, not the kind we do not have.” [6] The containment policy committed American resources to conflicts that were not in our vital interests, for which we had the wrong assets, and required changes in domestic power relations that threatened to undermine our constitutional balances.

For decades Lippmann had emphasized the importance of developing “natural” alliances to protect vital interests. Mostly organized around the “Atlantic community,” [7] Lippmann’s emphasis on alliances concentrated American interests in Europe and the Americas, changing somewhat after the war to include a large part of the Pacific, but not the Asian mainland. By contrast, Truman’s containment policy, Lippmann emphasized, “can be implemented only by recruiting, subsidizing, and supporting a heterogeneous array of satellites, clients, dependents and puppets. The instrument of the policy of containment is therefore a coalition of disorganized, disunited, feeble, or disorderly nations, tribes and factions around the perimeter of the Soviet Union.” [8]

On this matter, Lippmann predicted the future very well. The barrier to contain the Soviets would then be made of weak allies who shared nothing in common with the United States except the shared desire to keep the Soviets, or their agents, out. “Satellite states and puppet governments are not good material out of which to construct unassailable barriers.” [9] In retrospect, Lippmann seems to be saying nothing more than the obvious.

Inevitably, the coalition of weak and often barbarous regimes would produce civil strife, pulling the United States into the defense of unpalatable regimes whose defense serves no real American interest. The Atlantic community, [10] by contrast, served as a natural bloc of interested nations that, together through careful alliances, could exert pressures appropriate to their collective needs—in the immediate context to secure the economic health and viability of Europe, ensure a neutral Germany, and negotiate the withdrawal of the Red Army from central Europe. Similarly, Lippmann emphasized the “natural” and understandable sphere of influence for a Russian-dominated Soviet Union. The Soviet leadership sought the same territorial gains that Russian leaders had sought for centuries. If ideology motivated them, then why did they not act in their first three decades in power? Perhaps, Lippmann averred, the real reasons for the Soviet expansion after 1945 were that they had won the war and they wanted the territorial security to prevent a fourth invasion from the West. In 1947 the Soviet sphere looked almost precisely the same as the one the Czarist regime had sought if they had won the Great War.

The history of long-standing Russian desires for conquest and security helped us understand Soviet behavior better than Marxist ideology. The threat from the Soviets was real because the power of the Red Army was real—a huge occupying army guided by a regime that was largely insulated from public pressure and therefore capable of patience no democracy could match. In 1947 the Red Army was a major threat to America’s vital interest because it allowed the Soviets to exercise “an abnormal and intolerable influence in the affairs of the European continent.” [11] This, then, should be the focus of American power and diplomacy. More precisely, the goal was to evacuate from Europe the armies of the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain, to use the Marshall Plan to foster stronger economic ties among principal partners of the Atlantic community, and to ensure a neutral and benign Germany that threatened neither the Soviet Union nor Western Europe. In defense of his own alternative to the Truman Doctrine, Lippmann declared:

We shall have written off the liabilities of the Truman Doctrine which must in practice mean inexorably an unending intervention in all the countries that are supposed to ‘contain’ the Soviet Union. We shall be acting once more in the great American tradition which is to foster the independence of other countries, not to use other countries as the satellites of our own power, however beneficent, and as the instruments of our own policy, however well meant. Our aim will not be to organize an ideological crusade. It will not be to make Jeffersonian democrats out of peasants of eastern Europe, the tribal chieftains, the feudal lords, the pashas, and the warlords of the Middle East and Asia, but to settle the war and to restore the independence of the nations of Europe by removing the alien armies—all of them, our own included. [12]

Lippmann wanted American policy makers to break free from simplified universal moral claims, born of a century of isolation and hardened in a new century of inescapable world conflict, and identify instead the nation’s vital interests while developing the resources necessary to protect those interests. The Truman Doctrine presented a virulent form of American idealism, so concentrated on containing communism and on promoting democracy that it lost sight of both America’s principled support for independence and the natural or logical community of alliances and relationships that should form our civilizational home and constitute the core of our vital interests. The liberal fundamentalism to which Truman gave voice would involve the United States in wars unconnected to our vital interests and would produce a form of democratic militarism in a time of peace that would alter the constitutional arrangements of power in the United States.

V

Historical comparisons come too easily today and we often lose sight of the particularity of each age, every event. I therefore risk a great deal as I offer some observations about Lippmann’s mature foreign policy (shaped from the late ’30s, when war clouds gathered, through the mid-’50s when the Cold War became a long-term reality) as applied to America’s policy today. Nonetheless, the policies and the justifying language of the Bush administration are consistent with the fundamentalism Lippmann decried in

Wilson and Truman. And in the partisan academic and policy battles of our time, an independent mind, distant from the provincialism of our own time, offers an attractive alternative for those of us who sometimes want to wish a pox on all the houses of our competing schools of thought.

Today, the most obvious expression of liberal fundamentalism is the Bush Doctrine, which bears a strong resemblance to the Truman Doctrine. The language with which George W. Bush presented the moral imperative of America's war against Islamic terrorists was grandiloquently democratic and imperially universalistic. Beyond a war for American security and the protection of her vital interests, the United States accepted her mission to promote democracy worldwide and with it the "freedom" desired by every human heart. As Bush noted in his second inaugural address:

We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom. Not because history runs on the wheels of inevitability; it is human choices that move events. Not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation; God moves and chooses as He wills. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul. When our Founders declared a new order of the ages; when soldiers died in wave upon wave for a union based on liberty; when citizens marched in peaceful outrage under the banner "Freedom Now"—they were acting on an ancient hope that is meant to be fulfilled. History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty. [13]

Expressing himself also in a Manichean language that declared the evil of American enemies, Bush appealed frequently to the liberationist role of the American people, a role we are meant to play in an unredeemed world.

To Lippmann, such declarations of America's role, alongside frequent references to the United States being the only superpower, not only distorted American idealism but also obligated the nation to causes it could not win and over which it had limited power. Lippmann insisted that Americans had a long tradition of loving independence and a willingness to fight for the independence of other nations, but that we could not impose a free or democratic order on a people once we freed them from foreign control.

As had Truman before him, Bush wed this hyperbolic idealism to American security needs, threatening both our true ideals and our genuine security. We would defeat our enemies and protect our nation, and we would bring order, democracy, and free enterprise to darkened corners of the globe. Because the lack of democracy, freedom, and capitalism in those areas promoted the very "extremism" that threatened our security, our fight could promote our security while fulfilling our destiny as an evangelizing force for democracy. Rather tidy.

Bush's moral imperatives, alongside the specific policies that he established as doctrine, thrust the United States into potentially interminable conflicts for which we were ill-equipped, both militarily and culturally. Bush declared that the United States had

the right to attack states that harbored terrorists and thereby expanded the reach of both American military power and the power of the executive branch beyond even what Truman had sought. Moreover, Bush determined that in the context of our present enemy preemptive war was justified, even if the threat to our national security was not demonstrably immediate.

Lippmann insisted that a proper foreign policy be true to American ideals, that it be focused on the nation's vital interests, and that the policy make best use of the resources available. Fundamentalists reject the complexity of this arrangement because it requires serious accommodation to circumstances and a flexibility to adjust to changing conditions. Fundamentalists react to a new threat with simple declarations, drawn from the American experience but shorn of the mass of historical accumulations. But when the nation declares that its purpose is to make the world safe for democracy, to protect democracies throughout the world, or to promote democracy where no democratic seed has ever sprouted, it has placed itself in a role that it cannot fulfill, and with a constitutional system that does not encourage the patience necessary for continuous conflict in parts of the world so distant from America's cultural experience. Even our military has been designed for quick victories, to win with overwhelming air and sea power, but not to occupy for long periods of time foreign lands hostile to American troops. In short, the Bush Doctrine is a classic example of what Lippmann meant by American fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism is a peculiar danger to democracies because a fundamentalist argument is a simple, abstract, and morally certain argument, which gives it force in a democratic debate—democratic politics do not encourage attention to details or complexity. Lippmann's frustration with the inability of the "public" to deliberate or to become meaningfully informed about complex policy matters goes back to World War I and found powerful expression in his classic 1922 book *Public Opinion*. The problem is that modern democracies cannot deliberate and this fact puts pressure on leaders to try to shape public opinion, especially in times of crisis or challenge, with simple and easily digestible characterizations of events and options. All public expressions of policies, at least insofar as they will get widespread support, must translate complex and even paradoxical matters into a form that will match the capacity of the public to comprehend. The tendency to abstract from the wildly heterogeneous American experience a bumper-sticker ideal is a ubiquitous challenge, particularly in times of war or extreme trial. Fundamentalist simplification and abstraction are therefore the raw material for demagogues and for intellectually weak and provincial leaders who themselves fall prey to the lure of the simple, abstract, and morally certain.

Our attention has necessarily focused on the Bush Doctrine, but we ought to note that the charge of fundamentalism, as used by Lippmann, applies to most of the vocal participants in our public debate about post-9/11 foreign policy. Antiwar advocates are as reductionist, as moralistic, and as certain of their position as the most bombastic supporter of the Bush Doctrine. The American experience is broad and complex enough to allow many abstracted versions of the American self to find expression. But the difference is that the Bush Doctrine, and especially the specific arguments developed by

neoconservatives, are very much expressions of a liberal fundamentalism that began with Woodrow Wilson and runs through Franklin Roosevelt's "four freedoms," the Truman Doctrine, to the current administration.

There are many fundamentalisms that vie for public support, expressing abstract, moralistic claims from most points on the American ideological compass. The one that provoked Walter Lippmann to devote great energy fighting is what I've called "liberal" fundamentalism because of its belief in the moral superiority of liberal democracy and the accompanying evangelical role for the United States. If Lippmann's critique has currency today it is because the same failures he examined in American foreign policy from Wilson through Truman are at work today. To the degree that he was correct, an attempt to give some systematic expression of Lippmann's principles for an American foreign policy offers an alternative way of thinking about America and her role, or way, in the world.

VI

Stated succinctly, Lippmann's foreign policy requires that American policy makers determine America's vital interests and cultivate the proper alliances and relationships necessary to protect those interests. In the process of determining our interests, American leaders need to understand the legitimate security interests of other great powers and they should expect those powers to take measures to secure their interests. This does not mean that regime type or ideology is unimportant, but rather that a deep understanding of both historical realities and perceived national interests are primary factors in understanding the motivations and the actions of great powers. The tendency to think ideologically—to define America by its most lofty ideals of universal freedom and to understand enemies solely in terms of their ideological statements of purpose—pushes American policy makers to plan for total victory, to end the conflict for good, rather than to plan for the ever-changing security needs. [14] Less ideological in their thinking, American leaders must also devise a security strategy that takes into account available resources, including a military that is designed primarily for offensive action rather than occupation or pacification, and a political culture that is both idealistic and impatient.

One discovers the truly interesting part of Lippmann's analysis, however, as one unpacks the meaning of "vital interests" and by exploring his persistent argument in favor of the "Atlantic community," to which America "naturally" belonged. A powerful blend of what we often label realism and idealism rests at the core of Lippmann's understanding of American foreign policy and even "American destiny." This dispassionate and analytical thinker, so long the distant and ironic observer of politics and culture, had begun to think more like a prophet as war ravaged most of the earth and then as rumors of war threatened an end to all civilization. At mid-century, Lippmann's writings on foreign policy hinted at his fears about a possible collapse of American civilization, and with it Western civilization. And in due course, after much delay, Lippmann published *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, sending his former progressive allies into paroxysm and Lippmann into the hospital. [15] Fearful that liberal

democracy was sick and that it had lost touch with the principles that nourished it, Lippmann wrote this strange book in an almost plaintive manner, calling for a recovery of the principles of Western civilization and natural law.

Lippmann's foreign policy and his political philosophy were part of the same project and were spawned by the same fears. The quotation with which Part I of this essay begins, written in 1944, introduced Lippmann's grave concerns. "Fate," he wrote, "has brought it about that America is at the center, no longer the edges, of Western civilization. In this fact resides the American destiny." Put more starkly, the fate of Western civilization depended on America and America's survival depended on promoting a healthy economic, cultural, and military alliance with the various members of the "Atlantic community" who now constituted the civilizational arc that radiated from American shores. As he noted, the Atlantic was the new Mediterranean and those cultures in this community of nations were the cultural descendents of the ancient humanism that sprang from the myriad experiences of the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Romans.

In language rather unusual for this agnostic, Lippmann evoked providence in several places and wrote: "The American idea is not an eccentricity in the history of mankind. It is the hope and a pledge of fulfillment." Moreover, he continued, "The American idea is founded upon an image of man and on his place in the universe, of his reason and his will, his knowledge of good and evil, his hope of a higher and a natural law which is above all governments, and indeed of all particular laws." [16] As a world war raged, Lippmann ruminated about America and the perils of Western civilization. However else one may describe these thoughts, they were most certainly idealistic.

So what are America's vital interests and what species of idealism is consistent with Lippmann's steely-eyed realism?

Our vital interests begin with economic ties and needs. When Lippmann began using the term, he noted that war with Germany in 1917 became a necessity because they threatened America's vital trading relationships and its economic health. No meaningful definition of our vital interests can exclude key trading relationships and natural security arrangements that connect the interests of several nations. However difficult it is to calculate or even to define these realistic (nonidealistic) parts of a nation's vital interests, the truly great challenge facing American policy makers at mid-century was to identify the idealistic, the civilizational or cultural parts of America's vital interest. Lippmann believed that Western and, by extension, American civilization was the product, perhaps of providence, but clearly of great genius, great effort, and thousands of years of experience. The results were astonishing, a civilization grounded on reason and individual freedom, connected to the highest expressions of human purpose and meaning, and to a compelling argument about the relationship between higher authority and individual autonomy and freedom. That civilization, and the liberal political regime it produced, cannot be transplanted easily to other parts of the world. It is a cultural species particular to a cluster of peoples and to a part of the world where such beliefs, habits, and values took root.

Lippmann's understanding of the highest objective of both contemporary American political philosophy and American foreign policy is the PRESERVATION of Western and American civilization, not its exportation. Lippmann's idealism was connected to his affirmation of the good of Western civilization and not to a very narrow and promiscuous idea about the universality of democracy and individual freedom. If the fundamentalists sought to evangelize the world with a very thin version of Western civilization, abstracted from the very complex historical and experiential sources, Lippmann argued instead for a foreign policy aimed at building the relationships that preserve the rich and complex patrimony of the West.

As a civilization and as nations with economic and geopolitical interests, the Atlantic community has interests and ideals that other nations or cultures will challenge and even disrupt. Policy makers must understand the needs of those other nations and cultures from the point of view of their history and circumstances and allow them the spheres of power and influence that are necessary, while building the military, the alliances, the willpower, to protect American interests when (as they inevitably will) these are threatened. If we are driven by a liberal fundamentalism and find ourselves involved in nation-building, in regional conflicts outside of our vital interests, and in alliances with puppet regimes or unsavory partners, the United States will not only forsake its vital interests but will also find itself involved in seemingly interminable conflicts with unclear objectives.

The case made by so many that our current conflict is unlike earlier wars is strong and the myriad questions about the applicability of Lippmann's mid-century foreign policy to the war against Islamic terrorists are difficult to sort out, and beyond the scope of this essay. Moreover, the always unresolved problem with Lippmann's analysis is that democracies do not foster understanding or appreciation of the complexity and nuance that he thinks necessary for any serious deliberation about policy. Lippmann's advice can only be directed to those few who have the power to make choices and to frame the meaning of those choices for a public that can only receive views, not construct them.

Nonetheless, Lippmann's critique of fundamentalists is strikingly applicable to the Bush administration and offers up a way of thinking about recent events that doesn't fit into the neoconservative or realist or isolationist camps. Lippmann's advocacy of a muscular defense of our cultural, economic, and security interests offers a valuable alternative to the battling books of our time. Clearly, Lippmann would not have found any end-of-history argument appealing while his own analysis aims at a somewhat different version of the clash-of-civilizations thesis. And if we take Lippmann's version seriously, then the United States, Western Europe, and other parts of the Atlantic community are risking their own cultural survival when they fail to cultivate properly the civilizational ties that bind them. Lippmann would have us to be defenders of the faith, not evangelists.

Notes to Part II

1. "General principles like those set down in the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms are not what we mean by war aims." (*U.S. War Aims*, p. 3)

2. Maritain's letter to Lippmann dated September 13, 1944, and Lippmann's response dated July 1, 1945. Walter Lippmann Papers, Sterling Library, Yale University.
3. Lippmann had become considerably more pessimistic about the future of Western civilization, and for more than fifteen years he ruminated on the problem of preserving civilization from ever new waves of barbarism. In 1955 he published his most controversial book, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, in which he exposed his own fears that the traditions and institutions that had produced Western civilization were threatened because they were not defended. Civilization, it seems, requires defense against barbarians without and within. Wherever one finds it, one must think of it as a delicate product of thousands of years.
4. The entire paragraph is illustrative: "The American idea is not an eccentricity in the history of mankind. It is the hope and a pledge of fulfillment. The American idea is founded upon an image of man and of his place in the universe, of his reason and his will, his knowledge of good and evil, his hope of a higher and a natural law which is above all governments, and indeed of all particular laws: this tradition descends to Americans, as to all the Westerners, from the Mediterranean world of the ancient Greeks, Hebrews, and Romans. The Atlantic is now the Mediterranean sea of this culture and this faith." *U.S. War Aims*, p. 209. Jacques Maritain could not have said it more directly.
5. "Today and Tomorrow," March 15, 1947
6. *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy*. Boston: Little, Brown, p. 19. With regard to the nature of the U.S. military Lippmann elaborated: "Yet the genius of American military power does not lie in holding positions indefinitely. That requires a massive patience by great hordes of docile people. American military power is distinguished by its mobility, its speed, its range and its offensive striking force. It is, therefore, not an efficient instrument for a diplomatic policy of containment. It can only be the instrument of a policy which has as its objective a decision and a settlement. It can and should be used to redress the balance of power which has been upset by the war. But it is not designed for, or adapted to, a strategy of containing, waiting, countering, blocking, with no more specific objective than the eventual 'frustration' of the opponent." Lippmann's argument about the nature of the U.S. military and its strengths and weaknesses sounds even more appropriate for 2008 than 1947.
7. While Lippmann defined the boundaries of this community differently at different times, in 1947 he said it included "the British Commonwealth nations, the Latin states of both sides of the Atlantic, the Low Countries and Switzerland, Scandinavia and the United States" (*The Cold War*, p. 24).
8. *The Cold War*, p. 20.
9. *The Cold War*, p. 23.
10. Lippmann wrote so often about the natural associations of these nations, but in 1947 he stressed not just their common security interests (the focus of most of his earlier commentary) but also their shared history and culture. Among these nations, he emphasized, "there exists a vital connection founded upon their military and

political geography, the common traditions of western Christendom, and their economic, political, legal, and moral institutions which, with all their variations and differences, have a common origin and have been shaped by much the same historic experience” (*The Cold War*, p. 25). By contrast, of course, Asian nations, to give the most pressing example, were not natural allies and so could not be part of such a community. For Lippmann, this would be a major problem in the conduct of the Cold War by U.S. policy makers, the most important problem being the Vietnam conflict, the development of which followed closely Lippmann’s 1947 analysis.

11. *The Cold War*, p. 34.

12. *The Cold War*, pp. 44–45.

13. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>.

14. If one believes that the liberal principles of modern, Western democracies are superior because they best fit the human condition as such, then the complete emancipation of all peoples from various traditional and tyrannical structures would lead to the cessation of serious military conflict. The idea of a war to end all wars rests on an anthropology and finds that the development of modern liberalism is not an expression of a particular cultural form that began in America and Europe but is suited to all humans, no matter their history or their cultural, epistemological, or ontological commitments. This anthropology was part of the fundamentalism that Lippmann argued infected American leaders.

15. Ronald Steel examines Lippmann’s turmoil and his breakdown in *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, New York: Random House, 1980, pp 492–3.

16. *U.S. War Aims*, pp. 208–209.