America First: 1940-2016

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I am speaking today about the life and times of “America First” as a political idea. Three quarters of a century ago, it was seen by hundreds of thousands of Americans as a means of mustering popular support through a vigorous public debate to resist powerful forces, seen but mostly unseen—for example, British and Communist propaganda and influence operations—seeking to drive, pull and trick the United States into the second world war. Reading about the 1940 formation of the America First Committee, one is impressed by the wide cross section of notables drawn into this cause of strong defense but anti-intervention; from the original contingent of students at Yale, including future Yale president Kingman Brewster, future president Gerald Ford and future Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, to New Dealers and anti-New Dealers, to socialist party leader Norman Thomas. There were many other political figures, from Sen. Burton K. Wheeler, Democrat, to Sen. Gerald P. Nye, Republican, many leading business men, from Hormel meat to Morton salt to railroad

and steel tycoons, William J. Grace, head of one of Chicago’s largest investment firms, newspaper publishers Col. Robert J. McCormick (Chicago Tribune), Joseph Patterson (New York Daily News), also William Regnery, whose son Henry would later found Regnery Books.

We see a lot of military brass—the chairman of America First was General Robert E. Wood, sergeant quartermaster in World War I and innovative head of Sears Roebuck, a West Point grad and actually an early New Dealer; at least one movie star, Lillian Gish; heroes such as Eddie Rickenbacker and Charles Lindbergh; Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, and novelists, journalists and celebrities of the day, including architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Outside the group itself, but within the same anti-intervention cause, were such leading Republicans as former President and world class humanitarian Herbert Hoover and “Mr. Republican,” Sen. Robert Taft. A lot of star power, a lot of people power, too.

When we look at “America First” today, we see the idea as manifested in the highly unusual political instincts of one national figure—a one-man political movement, to be sure—but still, one individual, Donald Trump, who has revived the slogan as a battle cry against the global system and obligations the United States entered into really ever since the America First Committee disbanded after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. For the America First idea then, a steep downward trajectory even to this point of unexpected revival.

This suggests that the notion of putting America first—giving priority to American interests over rest the world’s; even recognizing that America has separate interests from the rest of the world—has become antiquated, and, to many, nothing less than anathema, certainly among political professionals, journalists, and academics. Then again, there are those many millions of Americans who have already cast a vote for “America First,” having made Donald Trump the presumptive GOP nominee.
If we stop and think, is it not the most natural thing in the world for a politician to put his country first? I would say yes, but not so much in our world. How did such a world come to be?

This latest chapter in the annals of America First probably began as a set up, when a New York Times reporter asked Donald Trump if it was correct to say that what Trump was describing was “if not isolationist, then at least something of ‘America First’?” Trump replied that he was not “isolationist,” but he was “America First.” “So I like the expression,” Trump said. “I’m ‘America First.’”

Thus, a thousand screeching headlines were born: stories about “noxious,” “isolationist,” “defeatist,” “anti-Semitic,” “pro-Nazi,” “America First.” Herbert Hoover, Robert Taft, Norman Thomas, and the rest? This doesn’t parse. Even Trump-friendly Breitbart News ran a story called: “Trump Risks Charles Lindbergh Label with America First.” “America First,” the story says, “soon became associated with isolationism, anti-Semitism, and short-sightedness ....”

But even the Lindbergh story of America First and anti-Semitism doesn’t hold up under scrutiny—certainly not on delving into the details of the organized smear campaign against the famous aviator. What is important to note is that these recent debate-stopping buzz words are the same ones that dogged “America First” back at the beginning.

Reading into the documents and speeches and letters of the America First Committee and wider movement, however, I see none of these poisons driving the principals. They did see an officially neutral America as having separate interests from the rest of world – and very likely, they would relate to Trump’s border wall and Muslim immigration moratorium, but would fail utterly to understand how we ever came to need them – but their concerns, agree with them or not, were not to appease Hitler and advance anti-semitism, as we are incessantly told.

They discussed constitutional matters; American liberties and their loss during a state of “war socialism” and regimentation; Congress’s war powers, which they saw being seized by a usurping chief executive. They also discussed their sons’ lives, which they did not want to see lost by the ten
thousand. After Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, they were also gravely concerned about an American alliance with one totalitarian monster, Stalin, to defeat Hitler, another totalitarian monster. Better to let them fight each other, some said.

Certainly, as former President Hoover pointed out in his one of many speeches, for Uncle Sam to go to war allied with the dictator Stalin “makes the whole argument of our joining the war to bring the four freedoms to mankind a gargantuan jest”—particularly, as he would also point out, since the Communist Party, and also Stalin’s secret agents, were already conspiring in a dirty, covert intelligence war against the United States, as partly revealed in prewar investigations by the House Un-American Activities Committee. (In my book, American Betrayal, I ponder the impact on US policy-making and war-making that this same Soviet intelligence army of over 500 confirmed agents inside our government and related institutions might have had. It was considerable. It was also cataclysmic.)

As for the charge of shortsightedness, Sen. Robert Taft sounds not a little clairvoyant when in 1941 he asked: “Will that part of the world which Stalin conquers with our airplanes and tanks be consecrated to freedom [of speech and religion and the rest]? Or, after a Russian victory with our aid, must we step in with our armies to impose the four freedoms on 200,000,000 people 10,000 miles away…?” At the very least, the name-calling is not the full story, then or now; nonetheless, it always ends the discussion.

This pattern is typical. It begins with buzz words and the strictest platitudes. For example, one is “Islamophobic” if one rejects the statement, “Islam is a religion of peace”; one is a “Red-Baiter” or “McCarthy on Steroids” if one demonstrates that the “Red Scare” was no “scare” at all but rather a Red Reality subverting our republic. Just so, one is a Nazi or a “nativist” (whatever that is), if one is for America first. Chilling effect follows. But not for Donald Trump.

Trump’s course of action was to double down on “America First,” trumpeting the slogan at campaign rallies. A few weeks later, in his first formal foreign policy address, he
announced that “America First” would be his guiding policy as president. Here’s what he said:

My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people and American security above all else. It has to be first. Has to be.

That will be the foundation of every single decision that I will make.

America First will be the major and overriding theme of my administration.

More poison protest headlines followed. But consider for a moment what it means when the presumptive Republican nominee for president of the United States makes waves by declaring he will put America first in formulating his policies; and, further, has to explain what it means to do so; and, then, on the whole, is met with derision, outrage and fear on the part of commentators and politicians and academics and the like – no matter where on the political spectrum they may have located themselves.

I submit this as proof of how extremely far along on the continuum between nation-state and global system the United States of America really is. This tells me that the most revolutionary thing Donald Trump said in this same address is the following. He said:

We will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false gods of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation of for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring American down and will never enter [them].

This is nothing less than a declaration of war on globalism—on the New World Order, on One-Worldism, internationalism, and multilateral this and that. It seems to echo some long lost chord of anti-Communism, too, and even buck unseen Marxist currents. At least so it strikes me. But we don’t talk about such things anymore. What Trump has done is revive an old struggle in American politics. It is a struggle the adherents
of America First have always lost. Trump’s completely unexpected political success to date, however, tells us this is not an idea whose time is indisputably past—as we have all been so forcefully taught.

But why were we taught this? Why did all notions of America First disappear into the maw of giant global projects—and due to the efforts of the Right, as much, if not more, as to the Left? I recently came across a clever website archiving presidential speeches where I was able to search the phrase “new world order” and found that George Bush, the father, used the phrase nearly one hundred times in his single term as president.

I mentioned this obsession to Vladimir Bukovsky, whom I’m sure people will recall co-founded the Soviet dissident movement, spending 12 years in Soviet labor camps and psychiatric hospitals before coming to the West four decades ago. In addition to being a fearless critic of Russian dictatorship, Bukovsky is just as outspoken on the totalitarian dangers of the European Union—a centerpiece of this same world order system—even as the EU cracks and buckles under strain of Brexit and other European state sovereignty movements. Bukovsky replied that he thought Bush’s Secretary of State James Baker used the phrase ten times more often—earning the following assessment from Margaret Thatcher, who once said of Baker to Bukovsky: “Jim Baker is preoccupied with an idea of creating fool’s paradise from Vancouver to Vladivostok.” From Vancouver to Vladivostok. The fever dream of a world order never stops. Or does it?

With the rise of Trump at home, and the recent success of Brexit in the UK, we seem to be finally looking with open eyes at what might be the dawn of a new age of sovereign states, or their final death throes. This is the ultimate battle for “normal”—whether “normal” is to be infinitely global, or fundamentally national. It is a big question that has never come before us for open debate. Of course my ears pricked on listening to former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, following last month’s great Brexit victory, tear into the European Parliament and explain: “We want
to be an independent, self governing, normal nation.”

Back in 1990, even as the Soviet Union appeared to be disintegrating before our eyes, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, former UN Ambassador under President Reagan, published an essay in The National Interest called “A Normal Country in a Normal Time.” The “normal time” she referred to was what appeared to be the end of the Cold War. Kirkpatrick’s idea of a “normal country,” both what it does—and, as important, what it doesn’t do—complements some of the policies and ideas Donald Trump has taken with him onto the hustings.

I’m not trying to make a case regarding the presidential preferences of the late Jeane Kirkpatrick, who died in December of 2006. But it is indisputable that her thinking as set forth in 1990 bears some striking similarities with Trump’s today, even in regard to US government responsibilities to negotiate favorable rules for American business internationally, reminiscent of Trump’s muscular America First trade policies; also her belief that the US should not spend American money to defend an affluent Japan, for example, which is in sync with some of the Trump’s ideas on this subject.

Kirkpatrick in 1990 was writing at the moment in time Trump said he believed America’s foreign policy went awry – at the end of what we know as the cold war. She offered a different way forward—not that there were any takers in Bush I’s New World Order administration. Kirkpatrick wrote: “One of the most important consequences of the half century of war and Cold War has been to give foreign affairs an unnatural importance.” (Emphasis added.) It was time, she believed, to recalibrate American foreign policy. She explained: There is no foreign policy mandated in our founding documents—no mystical American ‘mission’ or purposes to be ‘found’ independently of the US Constitution and government.” She went on in this same vein: “There is no inherent or historical ‘imperative’ for the US government to seek or achieve any other goal—however great—except as it is mandated by the Constitution and adopted by the
people through elected officials.” Among the goals that we do not have she included: “the establishment of democracy around the world,” “a stable world order” (which sounds like “new world order” to me); “a global trading system,” etc.—“unless,” she wrote, “such issues were discussed and endorsed by majorities of voters.”

This small-d democratic point of requiring the voters’ endorsement—or at least that of their elected representatives in the Congress—was also central to anti-interventionist arguments circa 1940. It was in this run-up to World War II where Congress’s constitutional powers to make war were first usurped by the President, as FDR took the country into war, step by step, without authorization, and later pushed for legislation that would give him new and unprecedented powers to make war—the Lend Lease bill.

Secretary of State Stettinius described the foreign aid bill’s revolutionary properties. The change was in making “any country’s defense vital.” Stettinius wrote:
To favor limited aid to the Allies as an expedient device for saving friendly nations from conquest was one thing. To declare that the defense of those nations was “vital” to our own national security was quite another. *If we adopted the bill with those words, we would, in effect, declare the interdependence of the American people with the other freedom-loving nations of the world …* (emphasis added).

We did indeed adopt the Lend-Lease bill with those words, which, of course, provided aid to the Soviet Union—not a freedom-loving nation to be sure. This makes March 11, 1941, the day the Lend-Lease bill passed, America’s Interdependence Day. It no longer draws comment when American presidents declare the destinies of far-flung peoples “vital” to that of the United States, whether in Saudi Arabia (FDR), Iraq (Bush), or Afghanistan (Obama). And so many other places. Lately, it seems that the president doesn’t even bother as, for example, he sends more and more troops back to Iraq without even so much as a comment from Congress.

I think it’s important to note the godfathers of Lend-Lease, which might well be seen as a founding document of the new world order. They were Armand Hammer, Harry Hopkins and Harry Dexter White. All three men were at the very least pro-Soviet to the core. White, a high-ranking Treasury official, has been confirmed as a top Soviet agent, the most important agent Soviets had inside the US government, say some—although others believe that Harry Hopkins, FDR’s closest aide who lived inside the White House for three years, earns that treasonous honor. Certainly, Hopkins’ apparent use of Lend-Lease to send uranium and other atomic materials to the Soviets, thus breaking the embargo placed on uranium by Gen. Leslie Groves of the Manhattan Project, would seem to fit the bill. Then again, White’s successful insertion of language into the US diplomatic cable flow to Japan—language written in Moscow to bring the US and Japan to war—is stiff competition. But these
and so much more were post-war revelations—and rather soon forgotten. More lost history.

I’d like to mention another point of concern for “America First” and the anti-interventionists. They did not like the idea of going to war for an ideological mission, as FDR put it, for “our responsibility to build a democratic world.” Such crusading is something Jeane Kirkpatrick quite specifically disavowed some fifty years later—at least sans popular support—just as Trump has done today more forcefully. In his recent address, Trump identified as “dangerous” the “idea that we could make western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interests in becoming a western democracy.” He promised: “We’re getting out of the nation-building business.” To that end, he also declared he was looking for a whole new set of foreign policy experts with practical ideas “rather than surrounding myself with those who have perfect résumés but very little to brag about except responsibility for a long history of failed policies and continued losses at war.” For Washington’s entrenched and heretofore empowered—catastrophe.

In 1990, Jeane Kirkpatrick also reflected on the foreign policy elite, writing: “It is frequently argued that foreign policy is so different from domestic policy that majority rule should not apply.” She believed, though, it was “more important than ever that the experts who conduct foreign policy on our behalf be subject to the directions and control of the people. “We should reject utterly any claim that foreign policy is the special claim of

Former UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick advocated a foreign policy bounded by national interests and popular assent. Photo: Wikimedia Commons
special people—beyond the control of those who must pay its costs and bear its consequences.” She continued: “This means that discussion of the broad issues of foreign policy should have an important place in any election campaign.”

But Kirkpatrick had more than desire for a more perfect union. She explained: “Maintaining popular control of foreign policy is especially important because foreign policy elites often have different views than those of popular majorities.”

Aha. The experts vs. the people. Where did they come from, these experts? In Kirkpatrick’s telling, it was all a function of world war and cold war when “the United States developed a foreign policy elite based in bureaucracy, academics and heavily associated with nonprofit institutions.” Further: “They grew accustomed to thinking of the United States as having boundless resources and purposes which transcended the preferences of voters and apparent American interests.” In this way, she wrote, we see the development of what she called “a disinterested global attitude ….”

But notice the verbs Kirkpatrick chose: The United States “developed” this elite, whose members “grew accustomed” to thinking past voter preferences and American interests. Just like that? I don’t think so. Not that these globalist attitudes didn’t become prevalent; they most certainly did. But I don’t it just happened. I don’t think it was … natural.

Let’s take another look at the creation of the post-World War II world in which these global attitudes, per Kirkpatrick, just “developed.” It is a fact that the central institutions of this, yes, new world order, which defines and perpetuates these same global attitudes, were set up by some of the literally hundreds of Communist agents confirmed to have been working under cover inside the federal government and related institutions. Take the United Nations, fostered and helmed in 1945 by decorated Soviet military intelligence officer Alger Hiss, also of the US State Department. Take the International Monetary Fund, fostered and helmed in 1946 by confirmed Soviet agent Harry Dexter White,
also of the US Treasury. Hiss and White are but two of the most famous Kremlin infiltrators, whose confirmed numbers, as noted above, top 500, and are estimated to reach the thousands.

When we couple this globalist infiltration and influence with the fact that the nation-state and its sovereignty, particularly our nation-state and our sovereignty, are the greatest obstacles to the continued spread of Marxism-Leninism and its multitudinous offshoots, it seems logical to study, to wonder about, the impact of the ideological war waged by Marxists on the American mindset. This war certainly seems to have been a stunning and stealthy success.

Several months ago—26 years after Kirkpatrick’s “Normal Country” essay—the editor of The Washington Free Beacon, Matthew Continetti, who is also the son-in-law of The Weekly Standard’s Bill Kristol, sought to explain the threat that Trump poses to the Republican Party for his rejecting the Republicanism that Continetti says has defined the GOP since Ronald Reagan. This Republicanism, he wrote, includes being 1) internationalist in outlook; 2) pro-free trade; 3) pro-immigration; 4) supporting American leadership in global institutions. I can’t look at these markers without noticing that not only do they define a mindset that is the opposite of “America First,” but, at one time, these same positions defined the Left wing of the American political spectrum, even the far Left wing—even the Communist Party USA! This is in not an exaggeration.

In Toward Soviet America, the 1932 book by Communist Party USA Chairman William Z. Foster, Foster lists his predictions for Soviet America, many of which have actually come true, as Marxist ideology has subverted our institutions. He writes: “A Communist world will be a unified, organized world.” (Remember Soviet agent Hiss, the first UN secretary general.) “The economic system will be one great organization, based upon the principle of planning now dawning in the U.S.S.R.” (Remember Soviet agent White, first executive director of the IMF in 1946.) Foster continues: “The American
Soviet government will be an important section in this world organization. In such a society there will be no tariffs or the many other barriers erected by capitalism against a free world interchange of goods. The raw material supplies of the world will be at the disposition of the peoples of the world.” Here we see it: free trade as just another weapon to break down the nation-state—the ultimate globalist / Communist / progressive / Marxist / Democrat and, now, GOP goal.

I will not promise here to tie everything up neatly, but I note that no one really tries to make sense of these ideological connections anymore. We don’t seem to think there are any. And if someone does, the response is to fall back on buzz words such as Red-baiting, McCarthyism, Fascism, and “isolationism,” which do not help us learn how better to protect and preserve our country.

Kirkpatrick also debunked the isolationism rap. She wrote: “The isolationism v. internationalism debate is in reality the debate among the various types of internationalism.” The first type “aims to serve the national interest as conventionally conceived (to protect its territory, wealth and access to necessary goods; to defend its nationals).” The other variants of internationalism she saw circa 1990 aim to preserve and defend democracy, or advance a “disinterested globalism, which looks at the world and asks what needs to be done—with little explicit concern for the national interest.”

In recent years, these latter two seem to overlap if not also merge, which helps explain why so many Republican foreign policy elites, particularly neocons, are trumpeting their support for Hillary Clinton. The “national interest as conventionally conceived” is just not enough for them, even as serving American interests first is plenty for the many Republicans who have made Donald Trump their presidential nominee. It’s really as simple as that.
“America First” is a concept, a creed, with a particularly stormy past. In a few months, we will find out if it has any kind of a future.

Presidential Contender Donald Trump, August 2016—Gage Skidmore