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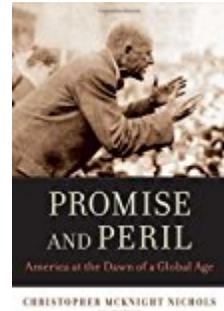
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher McKnight Nichols. *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of a Global Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 464 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04984-0.

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Isolationism and the Reform Tradition

For at least three quarters of a century, certainly since Japanese bombs were dropped on Pearl Harbor, most opinion makers have portrayed isolationism as a most irresponsible way of coping with an increasing complicated and dangerous world. In his 2006 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush, warning of retreating within our own borders, accused isolationists of abandoning “‘an assaulted world to fend for itself’” (p. 1). His successor, Barack Obama, speaking to West Point cadets, boasted that because the United States had underwritten global security for over six decades, walls had come down, markets had been opened, the frontiers of human liberty had advanced, and billions of people had been lifted from poverty.

Recently, however, following years of setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American public has manifested major reservations concerning global involvement. In December 2009, for example, 49 percent of respondents asserted that the United States should “mind its own business internationally”; 44 percent called on Americans to “go our own way internationally, not worrying about whether countries agree with us or not” (p. 343).

Yet, in the popular mind, isolationism (better defined as anti-interventionism) has long been linked to political reaction. In the popular mind this stance was more associated with Senator Robert A. Taft than with pacifist leader A. J. Muste, Herbert Hoover than with Socialist Norman Thomas, the *Chicago Tribune* than with the *Progressive* magazine. Certainly from the 1930s through

the early Cold War, many of its proponents reflected a xenophobic, parsimonious, provincial view of the world. Indeed, the basis of much congressional support lay in the rock-ribbed Republican strongholds of the farms and small towns of the Middle West and Great Plains. Yet, as Christopher McKnight Nichols aptly notes, “the isolationist perspective was far from monolithic,” offering far more complexity than the stereotype of a “wall-bound, protectionist” stance (pp. 325, 328).

In a clearly written and highly perceptive work, Nichols focuses on certain liberal and radical political leaders and opinion makers, often articulate proponents of liberalism and radicalism, to show a different face to this highly diverse movement. He covers a wide variety of reform-minded Americans, among them philosopher and psychologist William James, African American writer W. E. B. Du Bois, Socialist leader Eugene Victor Debs, social critic Randolph Bourne, Protestant official John R. Mott, peace activists Jane Addams and Emily Greene Balch, and Senator William E. Borah. Only in the case of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge does Nichols cover an isolationist who was markedly more conservative on domestic policy. In each case, the author shows himself steeped in the relevant manuscript collections and the rich secondary literature as well. Certainly *Promise and Peril* can serve as a “usable past” for people seeking a liberal pedigree in espousing withdrawal from current commitments.

Admittedly some of Nichols’s material has long been

known to specialists, but certain observations are particularly perceptive. Nichols wisely begins his narrative in the 1890s, when Americans debated their nation's proper role in the Venezuelan and Cuban crises. He shows how James's staunch anti-imperialism lay rooted in his general fear of "bigness." Conversely, Du Bois's opposition to imperialism lay in its concomitant racism. Bourne's dream of an "isolationist pluralism" embodied a vision of a multicultural society though the critic did not live long enough to articulate clearly what he meant by "transnationalism." Borah's position was grounded in an abhorrence of a predatory American capitalism motivated by sheer greed. Nichols is especially strong in showing how deeply isolationist sentiment permeated the South during American participation in World War I, its strength shown predominantly in areas where the Farmers Union was strong.

Some asides are most interesting. Lodge believed in trust-busting. Du Bois mentioned Jews and white immigrants unfavorably in his first edition of *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). He made a "Faustian" bargain with the Wilson administration in endorsing the American effort in World War I, doing so in the expectation that greater opportunities for blacks would emerge. Many progressives initially supported participation in the Spanish-American War. Such Social Gospel ministers as Shailer Mathews, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Washington Gladden endorsed expansion as a vehicle in creating God's kingdom on earth. Borah opposed federal anti-lynching and woman suffrage legislation, not because he favored injustice but out of a firm belief in states' rights. In dealing with the 1930s, he makes a sound distinction between the more aggressive isolationists (e.g., Borah and Representative Hamilton Fish Jr.) who stood for full trading

rights with belligerent nations and those (e.g., Senators Arthur Vandenberg and Gerald Nye) who were willing to forego such practices so as to avoid war.

The book contains minor flaws. Some material is repetitive, including material on James, Bourne, and Borah. Certain errors should be rectified in a second printing. Misspelled names include Charles Eliot, Raymond Robins, Dwight Macdonald, and Elting E. Morison. William Burgess was always known as John W. Burgess, M. Hoke Smith as Hoke Smith, P. Jeff McLemore as Jeff McLemore. It was Ed Smith, not Tom Helfin, who bore the nickname "Cotton." The proper name of the Boston-based missionary group is the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Albert Shaw and Whitelaw Reid were respectively publishers, not merely editors, of the *Review of Reviews* and the *New York Tribune* (mistakenly named in one place the *New York Herald Tribune*). In 1915 Balch could not have opposed selective service legislation, for none yet had been introduced. The American Legion could not have claimed hundreds of thousands of members by mid-1917 as it was only organized in 1919. The *New York Daily News* was founded in June 1919 and hence could not have reacted to Debs's position of May 1918. Theodore Roosevelt never endorsed the League to Enforce Peace, finding it "discreditable folly." The William Edgar Borah Outlawry of War Foundation is located in Idaho, not Iowa. Borah voted against the Neutrality Act of 1947, opposing its cash-and-carry provisions.

In all, however *Promises and Peril* is a provocative study, demolishing many stereotypes and offering new patterns concerning liberal anti-interventionism. It deserves a wide readership.

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