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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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With *Promise and Peril*, Christopher McKnight Nichols has provided a stimulating survey of key foreign policy debates between the Spanish-American War and the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928. Nichols's approach is particularly noteworthy because, as a distinct era, this period has rarely been singled out for historical analysis. This focus is actually programmatic and indicative of Nichols's historiographical and political agenda. Rather than trying to render the foreign policy debates in this period in their entirety, the author concentrates on protagonists who would have kept the United States out of excessive overseas entanglements–he seeks to analyze the "rich complexity of the origins of isolationism"(p. 1). Given this remit, it might seem awkward at first glance that Nichols eschews the 1930s, after all the high tide of isolationism, but again, this omission is indicative of the author's intentions. Choosing isolationism's origins and "antecedents" enables Nichols to rehabilitate a strand in foreign policy thought that has been discredited and vilified since the 1930s. The author demonstrates that the tradition is much more multifaceted and varied than its Cold War and post-Cold War caricatures would have us believe and that various types of internationalism can actually go hand in hand with isolationism. In addition to that, he reminds us that isolationists of many political stripes, particularly progressives, focused on domestic improvement and reform. Some of them believed that an improved America would be of more service to the world than an interventionist one.

In order to keep his study manageable, Nichols centers each chapter on one historical figure, whom he uses to showcase different strands and the development of isolationist thought. This approach allows him to portray and compare such diverse figures as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, William James, Randolph Bourne, Eugene Debs, and Senator William Borah. Related voices emerge as well when Nichols embeds his main characters within their respective intellectual and political contexts.

The author proceeds from an understanding of isolationism that is both restrictive and expansive and thus ideally suited to encompass the many strands he analyzes. On the one hand, he narrowly follows the arguments of Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in postulating that the rejection of "permanent" or "entangling" alliances forms the core of all isolationist beliefs.[1] His definition becomes much more expansive, however, when he distinguishes between "political" and "protectionist isolationism." The protectionist variant most closely resembles what we commonly associate with isolationism, that is, not only a rejection of binding alliances, but an instinctive mistrust of other international relations as well, including economic ties. Within the United States, this particular isolationism frequently goes hand in hand with a narrow understanding of nationalism or "Americanism," nativism, and anti-immigrant fervor. Nichols defines political isolationism as a much "milder" form, which rejected only "political entanglements" in favor of "American autonomy" (pp. 18-19). Advocates of this form often explicitly encouraged international free trade and other forms of trans- and international engagement. In a useful appendix, Nichols develops these positions and related subsets of isolationist beliefs in more detail (pp. 347-352).

It is this form of an almost cosmopolitan isolationism that Nichols reserves most sympathies for and that he spends most time analyzing throughout the book. He therefore dwells particularly on the liberal anti-militarism, anti-imperialism, and anti-interventionism of Bourne, Debs, and their allies such as Borah–at least to a certain extent because Borah also exhibited key traits of protectionist isolationism. Because of Nichols's obvious sympathies, it is perhaps not surprising that the chapters on these towering figures–and thereby on the later period of analysis–are the strongest in the book. They yield fascinating insights into a tradition of foreign policy thought that is otherwise most frequently identified with the narrow-minded and even xenophobic approach

of protectionist isolationism.

Particularly in the two chapters on Bourne, Debs, and those closest to them, Nichols demonstrates the progressive side of isolationism and the idea that isolation did not have to amount to a rejection of the outside world or indeed of outsiders in the form of immigrants. According to the author, Bourne's conception of "transnational America" encapsulated this idea of an "isolationist pluralism" (pp. 15-17). While Bourne rejected political alliances and particularly entry into the First World War, he enthusiastically championed cultural and intellectual global engagement. He believed that this, rather than military intervention, would improve the world. At the same time, Bourne rejected neo-nativist Americanism and instead pleaded for an inclusive composite rather than assimilationist American culture. In other words, political isolation and cultural international engagement were highly compatible in Bourne's mind. Such ideas were shared by Eugene Debs, particularly the strident antiwar stance. Because of his status as a leader of the Socialist Party, Debs's internationalism had, of course, a much more socialist hue than Bourne's.

Nichols also seeks to rehabilitate the complex and sometimes contradictory thoughts of Idaho Republican senator William Borah, who has often been characterized as the quintessential isolationist and irreconcilable, dead set against U.S. participation in the League of Nations after the First World War. As in the chapters on Bourne and Debs, however, Nichols emphasizes that there was much more to Borah's positions than narrow-minded nationalist isolationism. On the contrary, Nichols elaborates on the progressive elements in Borah's thought–particularly his anti-imperialism and his support for what Nichols, in his last chapter, refers to as "new internationalism." Some of these arguments, however, I found only partially novel or convincing. First of all, Borah already emerged as something of an anti-imperialist hero in William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (3rd ed., 1988). Secondly, Nichols's attempts to move Borah closer to the "new internationalism" of the late 1920s by describing the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact as the "middle ground" (p. 314) between nationalist isolationists like Borah and international peace activist Emily Greene Balch fails to convince this reader. Even though they may have agreed on this particular treaty, which sought to ban war, their avenues to pursue international peace and to involve the United States in international affairs were far too different. After all, Nichols himself acknowledges that Borah agreed with the pact in part because it did not commit the United States to any joint action or alliance abroad (p. 312). Balch, on the other hand, championed American entry into more binding international compacts, such as the World Court. In this instance, I think that the author's desire to rehabilitate and "internationalize" isolationism obscures the fact that Borah and Balch were more dissimilar than similar in their foreign policy outlook.

But if this attempt to weave the wider story of developing U.S. attitudes towards internationalism and isolationism into the story of Nichols's main characters was less successful, I found the chapter on Debs and his links to southern Populists, isolationists, and First World War draft resisters much more convincing. In this chapter, suggestively entitled "Voices of the People," Nichols qualifies the traditional understanding of a narrow nationalist and xenophobic isolationism in the South and Midwest. Instead, the reader learns that southern and midwestern opposition to the intervention in the First World War amalgamated "conservative and radical persuasions, which linked farmers and industrial workers" (p. 227). The ideology behind their opposition was not solely characterized by racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigration rhetoric, but also by radical suspicion of big business involvement in the move towards intervention in Europe and increasingly by the undemocratic government-led suppression of dissent. It is particularly in this chapter that Nichols manages to portray the rich and multifaceted origins and legacy of American isolationism.

Despite such considerable achievements, the book contains a couple of minor weaknesses. In terms of the larger argument, I found the first two chapters about Lodge and James the least convincing. While the idea of tracing debates about isolationism and internationalism back to the imperialism debate in the wake of the Spanish-American War is certainly a sound one, it is not really as novel as Nichols suggests in his introduction (p. 9). To name but one example, Manfred Jonas has already suggested such origins of twentieth-century isolationism in 1978.[2] What is more, these chapters, which revolve around Massachusetts Republican senator Henry Cabot Lodge and philosopher William James as representatives of imperialist and anti-imperialist opinions, provide a rather conventional narrative of the debate about overseas annexation in the wake of the Spanish-American War rather than a focused analysis of the "isolationist content" of that debate. In relation to Lodge's positions, the link to isolationism is slightly confusing. Perhaps because Nichols is trying hard to account both for Lodge's early "large" foreign policy, its interventionism and imperialism, and his later opposition to membership in the League of Nations, he sometimes refers to Lodge as either an isolationist or an advocate of international inter-

vention (e.g., pp. 50-51; 57-61). In my view, the consistency that bridges the "younger" and the "older" Lodge is unilateralism–a trait that Nichols acknowledges as one ingredient of American isolationism (p. 348), but which has also traditionally been an important trait of American interventionism–witness the policies of the late George W. Bush administration.

What I found myself wishing for in this instance was more context for the discussion of isolationism around 1900, context which I believe could help explain Lodge's (and other imperialists') contradictory rejection and embrace of traditional isolation. As Nichols rightly observes at the outset and throughout his book, "isolationism" now carries largely negative connotations, which date back to the isolationists' unwillingness to confront Nazi Germany and imperial Japan in the 1930s. The "lessons of Munich" have colored historiographical and political discussions of the subject. Nevertheless–and this is something that Nichols does not sufficiently take into account in the early chapters (although he is certainly aware of it)–isolation(ism) was initially discussed as something positive and a key legacy of American history when the United States embarked on more sustained participation in world affairs at the dawn of the twentieth century. What we see in the imperialism debate, therefore, is an imperialist camp under pressure to justify why they were willing to give up this supposedly unique historical advantage. The requirement to occasionally pay lip service to the nation's tradition of isolation perhaps explains best why Lodge and other imperialists often seemed to contradict themselves.[3]

On the whole, more rigorous editing could have streamlined this voluminous tome of more than 340 pages of text. Particularly in the early chapters on the imperialism debate and on Bourne, there are a number of repetitions. Some of the chapters could also have been structured more effectively. Frequent subchapter headings tend to cut from one theme to another, sometimes abruptly, which can interrupt the flow of the argument. In the chapter on William James, for example, a discussion of the links between progressivism, imperialism, and anti-imperialism gives way quite unpredictably to the discussion of religiously motivated imperialism. After this digression, Nichols returns–chronologically confusing–to the first activities of the Anti-Imperialist Leagues (pp. 80-84). Finally, in order to make best use of this volume, I would also have wished for a bibliography, but these are, of course, decisions that are frequently beyond an author's control.

Nevertheless, none of these concerns should detract from Nichols's immensely interesting and valuable book, which succeeds in conveying a very complex and rich tradition of American isolationism. He has rehabilitated a way of thinking about international relations, which is often relegated to the "lunatic fringe" of U.S. foreign policy thought, particularly by emphasizing that many isolationists did not mindlessly reject contact with and "contamination" by the outside world, but that they wanted to resolve long-standing domestic issues and perennial dilemmas of democratic government first–not least in order to turn the United States into the "city upon a hill" that would radiate to the outside world.

Notes

[1]. George Washington, "Farewell Address," September 19, 1796, available online at Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project,* http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65539. The more famous reference to "entangling" alliances is actually from Thomas Jefferson, "Inaugural Address," March 4, 1801, ibid., http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25803 (accessed September 7, 2012).

[2]. Jonas, "Isolationism," in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy: Studies of the Principal Movements and Ideas*, ed. Alexander DeConde (New York: Scribner's, 1978), 499-500; compare also the updated version, DeConde, Robert Burns, and Frederik Logevall, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy* (New York and London: Scribner's, 2002), 341-42.

[3]. On the discussion of "isolation" in the imperialism debate, compare Fabian Hilfrich, *Debating American Exceptionalism: Empire and Democracy in the Wake of the Spanish-American War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 83-86.

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