

[Peterson on Nordlinger, 'Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century'](#)

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Eric A. Nordlinger. *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. x + 335 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-04327-2.

Reviewed by Harries-Clichy Peterson (University of Hawai'i at Manoa) **Published on** H-Diplo (September, 1996)

Eric Nordlinger, professor of political science at Brown University, died in June 1994. His passing leaves a significant gap in international relations at a time when the theme of this book is rapidly becoming front page political news in America. *Isolationism Reconfigured* is one of the most important contributions to the great debate: Whither American post-Cold War foreign policy?

Nordlinger's masterful arguments for a non-interventionist "national strategy" (emphasis on national) belie the facile words of Clinton administration United Nations ambassador Madeleine Albright, who recently argued that "Unfortunately the trend toward isolationism in America is stronger than it has been in 70 years. The justification that proponents of this approach offer is that they speak for most Americans. The truth is that most Americans recognize that we live in an interdependent world and isolationism is not an option." (Reuter news report 1 April 1996)

Although polling data leave much room to debate how isolationist the American people really are, there is no doubt that the traumas of humanitarian intervention in Somalia, democratic facilitation in Haiti, the uncertainty over the use of American armed forces in the former Yugoslavia, the prospects of war (again) in Korea, of finding the Seventh Fleet between China and Taiwan, of ongoing air combat patrols in the skies of Iraq--have left many wondering about the structure, purpose, and indeed vision of America's post-Cold War foreign policy.

Nordlinger moves into this debate with a clearly articulated, historically and theoretically reasoned, comprehensive presentation of a reconfigured form of isolationism. His new isolationism also allows for plenty of international activism--but not in the realm of security. The key to his vision is a three-track foreign policy.

In security matters it is minimally activist, with a distinctly defensive military configuration, and an exceptionally narrow security perimeter (basically the United States and a few Caribbean islands--excluding Canada and Mexico). No other part of the world is of *security* interest to the United States.

This detaching of security concerns from the rest of the world allows America to participate freely (Nordlinger is no come-home-and-stay-home isolationist) in the second track, which involves assertive economic diplomacy (lots of trade, with aggressive use of tariffs, embargoes, and other tools), without the reluctance to confront erstwhile allies over trade practices. The third track is one of moderately ambitious activism furthering human rights and democratization, without the security-driven need to befriend tyrants to get them on our side. One critical purpose here is to build on the finding in

political science that well-established democracies do not make war on each other--so America can help expand the zone of peace in the world.

So how can America's national security rest on "the belief that just about whatever happens abroad will not prove harmful to the nation's highest values" (p. 239)? Nordlinger's entire project rests on the premise that America is strategically immune, and he devotes a lengthy chapter to explain that the United States is: 1) invulnerable (geopolitics is bunk, and except for Albania, and the Arab oil embargo in the mid-1970s, no country has refused to do business with America since 1945); 2) insulated (the expansion of opponents fails due to their incompetence and the resilience of other nations); 3) impermeable (no rival could accomplish a breakthrough that could not be countered in time); and 4) impervious (even if a rival had superiority, it could not be used effectively).

Once this immunity is understood, then strategic superiority is superfluous and strategic inferiority irrelevant. From here a truly minimalist security strategy can be constructed that defends only the core with military force. With no security requirements for overseas bases, entangling alliances, a vast military machine, or extensive military aid, the defense budget can be slashed in half, saving many tens of billions of dollars. Furthermore, the end to foreign military adventures rescues the Constitution from executive aggrandizement, ends the civil illiberties of the national security state, and polishes the tarnished image of America as an exemplary nation.

This is all inspiring stuff, but Nordlinger's book is by no means a mere rhetorical exercise. He carefully lays out his national strategy, explaining its foundational premise (strategic immunity), outlining its dimensions, and contrasting its ideas with the current paradigmatic alternatives. His survey of these alternatives is sketchy and perhaps simplistic, especially in light of the rich ongoing discourse within and between the schools of realism and liberalism. But there is also tremendous power in simplifying things, and Nordlinger is persuasive in his discussion of the basic American foreign policy choices.

He arrays these choices along dimensions (low to high) of activism and firmness. Since the early 1900s America has eschewed the choice of low activism, assuming the need for high levels of internationalism, and has centered its foreign policy debate on whether to be conciliatory (as with doves, accommodation, and liberal internationalism) or adversarial (as with hawks, forcefulness, and aggressive containment). Nordlinger revives the activism dimension, arguing that a reasonable choice is toward the lower end, as with strategic disengagement. Many will rush forth saying that America cannot turn its back on the world, but one of Nordlinger's most important points is that involvement with the world does not necessarily mean security activism. Indeed, his entire project of reconfiguring isolationism centers on returning security concerns to the simple, minimal, restrictive, core configurations that marked American foreign policy from the birth of the country until the 1890s.

Because America need only defend its core and a very narrow security perimeter, he argues, it requires a much smaller military structure, a defensive military strategy, and a disengaged security policy. He tests this policy of reconfigured isolationism against the variations on a paradigm of contemporary activist-internationalist American foreign policy, contrasting his national policy with the hawk viewpoint (which assumes aggressive rivals), the dove perspective (which assumes benign or defensive rivals), and the owl perspective (set forth by Graham Allison, Albert Carnesale, and

Joseph Nye in their 1985 book *Hawks, Doves, and Owls: An Agenda for Avoiding Nuclear War*; its focus is on strategic mismanagement leading to inadvertent violent conflict). He finds that his national strategy deals adequately with aggressive rivals without provoking them, is more reassuring to fellow doves than any American conciliatory policies, and avoids misperception and mismanagement errors much better than even the owls.

So Nordlinger argues that America should not be a predatory hawk, a conciliatory dove, or a wise but too-narrow-minded owl, but rather a "powerful, keen-sighted, high-flying, remotely perched, and thus eminently well-protected eagle" (p. 6). Nordlinger waxes so eloquent on the grandiose eagle that one hesitates to point out that the eagle is just another raptor; perhaps Benjamin Franklin's choice of national bird--the wild turkey--might be a better symbol of reconfigured isolation.

In his second part, Nordlinger moves beyond the security realm to examine his national strategy in light of three enduring American themes. In each he reviews historical isolationism with cases, relevant quotes from political figures (Washington's Farewell Address is a frequent source of inspiration), and some of the isolationist literature. One wishes he had expanded these sections, which provide a fascinating glimpse into America's diplomatic past as well as a connection to its foreign policy future. He provides just the right empirical sauce for the political scientist, but not enough main course for the historian.

His first theme is that America's international ideals can be freed from any imperial legacy and the distortions of must-win security concerns. Nordlinger outlines his "moderated liberal project" wherein American ideals can be pursued unfettered by the dirty tricks and containment imperatives that have sullied America's image for so long. Since this project is disconnected from security concerns, America can mediate conflicts honestly, provide peacekeeping forces without ulterior motives, provide moderate amounts of military aid to non-tyrannical nations, and play with a full deck of political and economic incentives. He sees a foreign policy without Iran-Contra shenanigans and with no more support for the Pinochets and Saddam Husseins of the world.

The second theme is the national welfare, and his national strategy, he argues, helps enormously in two ways. First, the straightforward reduction of military spending would allow money to be retained by the economy, and to fund domestic programs; second, America's competitiveness would be improved by not having to sacrifice sound international economic policies to the exigencies of national security. This is an America that can fight Japan and Europe economically without having to worry about keeping up alliances and security agreements. He points out that during the Cold War, whenever economics clashed with military security policy, the United States instinctively gave precedence to security, often at great economic cost.

His third theme concerns the illiberal consequences of active internationalism, hearkening back to Randolph Bourne's observation that war is the health of the state. Nordlinger observes that the national security state brought about tremendous internal divisions in which opponents were seen not just as different but as disloyal, the exaggeration of internal threats leading to the abuse of civil liberties, and the distortion of constitutional balance in favor of the imperial presidency, with its attendant abuses of executive power. This chapter is particularly well-written and thought-provoking, and on the strengths of this argument alone Nordlinger's proposal deserves widespread study.

Finally, Nordlinger notes that American foreign policy culture is a result of four longstanding tensions: the United States is both isolationist and internationalist; astutely realist yet also hopefully idealistic; self-confident yet fearfully anxious regarding the rest of the world; and always expects to be successful at minimal cost. His national policy does not obviate any of these dualisms, but it maximizes the positive aspects while meliorating the negatives. This is an America that is deeply involved with the world, yet can say no, tries to do no harm, and does not hide its beacon of hope under the basket of dark security concerns.

Is Nordlinger instructive? Given the paucity of reputable modern isolationist work, this book becomes a central pillar in foreign policy studies. The author approaches his subject methodically, laying out his theory in a well-organized manner, with considerable empirical support. He is prescriptive without being inflammatory. There are some minor irritants, such as the lack of a bibliography (although the book is well end-noted), and that Nordlinger did not come up with a more catchy name for his "national policy" (also referred to awkwardly as "the concurrent design" and even "the concurrent dispensation"). Some of his historical analysis is thin, and alternative explanations are seldom discussed. But as a textbook for post-Cold War foreign policy, it is excellent. As much as one may disagree with him, any discussion of future U.S. foreign policy that excludes this book will be deficient.

Is Nordlinger convincing? His sweeping dismissal of the entire project of geopolitics is exciting and well done, but does little to overcome the wariness of realists who maintain that someone somewhere means to do America harm, and that they might have the capability to do it! Hawks will like his call for a strong America, but will find his security perimeter too narrow (after all, didn't that cause the Korean War in 1950?). Doves will wonder why he recommends cutting the nuclear arsenal only in half (why not the standard absolute minimum of about 200 weapons?). The Left will be suspicious of his aggressive and assertive economic nostrums, fearing that the government will remain a facilitating organ for the interests of American corporations. The Right will be apoplectic about his dismissal of communism and terrorism as threats. Allies will worry about severing ties and canceling commitments. Enemies will wonder what the real agenda is.

One need not agree with Nordlinger to recognize that his book should move the post-Cold War policy debate to new ground. Isolationism will never be the same again. Under Nordlinger's reconfiguration it is decidedly not the caricature that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., makes of a neo-isolationism (in the July/August 1995 *Foreign Affairs*) that "promises to prevent the most powerful nation on the planet from playing any role in enforcing the peace system." Collective security is not the only alternative to becoming an ostrich. To the contrary, Nordlinger's reconfigured isolationism offers the United States the opportunity to play a decisive role in world peace, but on its own terms, and at times and places of its own choosing. For its first 150 years America practiced isolationism, avoided entangling alliances, prospered at home, engaged the world without the burdens of empire, and upheld liberal ideals. Learning many lessons from our just-ending century of an aggressive rise to globalism (in Stephen Ambrose's descriptive words), Nordlinger's reconfigured isolationism offers a vision of the resurrection, not (as Schlesinger asserts) the abandonment of a magnificent dream.

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