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Ron Paul's America

The promise and peril of the isolationist strain in American conservatism.

**AIN'T MY AMERICA: THE LONG, NOBLE HISTORY OF ANTI-WAR
CONSERVATISM AND MIDDLE-AMERICAN ANTI-IMPERIALISM**

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Presidential campaign seasons are sometimes more noteworthy for what is not debated than for what is. For example, as I write these words in mid-January, the leading candidates of both parties have barely discussed the important question of whether terrorists strike at America because of “our freedoms” or because of specific policies we undertake. One would have thought this topic quite fundamental to how the next president approaches the most important international problem America faces. (Republican libertarian Ron Paul, to his credit, raised the issue often, but he was always quickly and thunderously dismissed by his opponents.) The reasons why this subject is off limits are clear enough and have to do with political timidity: Democratic candidates, who might genuinely think the answer has to do at least partially with our policies, are too terrified of blowback to state this truth, while the Republicans, to pass muster with their party's base, hew to George W. Bush's belief that we are hated because of our “freedoms.”

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Nor have we seen, among the Republican candidates, much of a foreign-policy debate at all. I know that some would disagree, pointing to Mike Huckabee's invocation, in an essay in *Foreign Affairs*, of the Bush Administration's "arrogant bunker mentality" in dealing with the rest of the world. Huckabee's use of this buzz-phrase certainly achieved its goal of receiving a lot of attention on the cable channels. But the rest of the article doesn't really depart, in hard policy terms, from the standard Republican line on Iraq (let General David Petraeus finish the job), Iran (negotiate, but only up to a point), and a host of other issues. In their respective *Foreign Affairs* essays, the others did much the same: Rudy Giuliani was the unleashed id of the Cheneyesque world view, John McCain was a close second, and Mitt Romney and Fred Thompson were to varying degrees riding on the same carousel and grabbing at the same ring. And this is the year the GOP is supposedly running away from its establishment.

The Republican Party has become, in short, a party of empire. The conservative movement is now a movement dedicated to American hegemonic dominion. And, given the lack of debate, both will likely remain that way for some time. These statements are true not only of the major presidential candidates, but of the vast majority of Republicans in Congress, most conservative foreign-policy think-tankers, and most high-level GOP operatives involved in policy-making. If the travesty that was our invasion of Iraq has not had the power to change these facts, it is difficult to imagine what set of circumstances could.

This angers me, but "anger" is far too gentle a word for the response it produces in Bill Kauffman. What would a better word be? Well, I don't quite know, but Kauffman sure would. In fact, I imagine he'd produce a hum-dinger. Just a few pages into *Ain't My America*, his biting history of conservative foreign policy, and all in the space of a little more than one printed page, he employs the words "coruscant," "nescience," temerarious," "adjuration," and, my personal favorite, "tribade." Goodness! As Casey Stengel said, you could look it up. I certainly had to.

One either likes this sort of thing or one doesn't. I mostly do, because a writer who uses words like these is, between the lines, admitting something about himself: Namely, that he has read quite a lot of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. And sure enough, Kauffman, a conservative writer—no, belletrist—whose mad concatenation of opinions and animadversions (there, I'm getting warmed up!) is not remotely captured by that single word, all but confesses to us here and there that he would have been much more at home in a previous century. Not for him the gargantuan, the exurban, and the ceaseless hunger for more and larger and greater and more homogenous, whether the issue under

consideration is overseas military bases or 24-hour hardware superstores. Kauffman—like one of his heroes who is oft-invoked in his pages, the conservative essayist and rural Michigan denizen Russell Kirk—aches for the old, the small, the singular, and the pastoral. The world, to his eye, began growing tragically out of scale round about the mid-twentieth century.

No fewer than five times in *Ain't My America* does he raise the specter of the Interstate Highway System—not a logical and efficient means of moving people and freight, but for Kauffman a monstrous imposition by the federal jackboot upon a once contentedly local America, happily incurious about remote destinations and properly suspicious of the need to get anywhere in such a damn hurry. Here in a few sentences is the world view, expressed as rebuttal to a colonel who employed a metaphor the author didn't like:

Ah, chaplain, dear sky pilot, war may be a frequent metaphor but let us not metaphorize war. The soldiers are not “stepping up to the plate” in the Middle East. No one plays baseball there. The place to step up to the plate is in your backyard, or on the local diamond, with your daughter pitching and your son heckling you from shortstop. In which case the family is intact, the children are not suffering, and all is well with the world.

What does all this have to do with empire? Everything, really. Kauffman's America is, or was, a place that was content to be small (he uses the phrase “little America” several times to represent his national beau ideal). He is among those who believe that the United States was born a republic, but that it relinquished its republican-ness—most specifically the absolute liberty of its citizens—the minute it started hankering for a piece of the global action. The thirst for power, writes Kauffman, perverted all else, disfiguring the national character, imposing vast taxes upon the citizenry, subordinating liberty to the penchant for loyalty oaths and Patriot Acts, and (not least among its crimes) sending young soldiers off to die for no good reason, creating generations of fatherless children and leaving wives, as Kurt Weill put it, to bewail their dead in their widow's veil.

That today's Republicans and conservatives support all this so reflexively and belligerently is what gets Kauffman, and the point of *Ain't My America* is to remind us that there is indeed an anti-empire conservative tradition in this country. “Just because Bush, Rush, and Fox are ignorant of history,” he writes, “doesn't mean authentic conservatives have to swallow the profoundly un-American American Empire.” Rooted in sources ranging from Washington's farewell address to Eisenhower's valedictory warning about “the military-industrial complex,” Kauffman argues that “the conservative case against American Empire and militarism remains forceful and relevant. It is no museum piece, no artifact

as inutile as it is quaint. It is plangent, wise, and deserving of revival. But before it can be revived, it must be disinterred.” Kauffman has certainly dug up the bones in a lively and edifying, if occasionally slippery and disturbing, fashion. But for those interested in what all this means for the future of the country, he fails to locate any sort of revival in the offing.

The Kauffman jeremiad is delivered in five long chapters. The first four are chronological, tracing America’s descent into the darkness of empire, while the fifth describes the domestic costs thereof. The story starts at the very beginning, with some Founding Fathers—Thomas Jefferson and James Madison among them—fretting about the implications of maintaining a standing army in peacetime. Their reservations did not, however, apply to territorial expansion. And so when Jefferson, now president, was presented with an opportunity to double the nation’s size for \$15 million with the Louisiana Purchase, he pondered only briefly his misgivings about whether the Constitution gave him the power to acquire territory. He considered presenting an authorizing amendment to Congress until he was persuaded by his treasury secretary, Albert Gallatin, that such a power was “implied”: “After a bit of throat-clearing, President Jefferson concluded that ‘the less that is said about any constitutional difficulty, the better.’ The amendment stayed in his desk.”

Kauffman then charges through history, illuminating the appetite for more territory and power and praising those noble few who stood up to say wait a minute. John “Black Jack” Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia is one of his great heroes, and one can readily see why. Not only was Randolph a devout foe of empire and evangel of little America, but he also “had been kicked out of William and Mary for dueling over the correct pronunciation of a word.” The type of man who “would not chitchat amiably around the muffin table at a Brookings symposium,” Randolph was veritably consumed by his opposition to the War of 1812, which he believed not to be fundamentally about British impressment of American sailors but “agrarian cupidity.” Or, as Kauffman can’t resist putting it, “The old land hunger was aiming its esurient maw northward, to British Canada.”

One interesting thing Kauffman does throughout the book is to give us, where applicable, the congressional votes on matters under discussion. In doing so, he shows that, while we tend to think that matters like war or territorial expansion

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were always a *fait accompli*, there was sometimes considerable opposition. The War of 1812 was approved by only 79 to 49 in the House and just 19 to 13 in the Senate. Support for the war was heaviest in the South and lightest in the Northeast. And most of the opponents were people who fit within the tradition of cantankerous conservatism that Kauffman describes and admires.

This remained the case throughout the nineteenth century. Manifest Destiny, the war in Mexican-American War, the misadventure in Hawaii in the 1880s and '90s, and of course the fateful Spanish-American War were all noisily opposed by forces that saw them as imperialist adventures, although not through the left-wing lens with which we associate such rhetoric today. Instead, their opposition—centered around the Anti-Imperialist League, which started in New England and had spread to a dozen cities by the time of the Spanish-American War—was isolationist, traditionalist, and constitutionalist (as they saw it). They were bankrolled in part by Andrew Carnegie. They were appalled at the way demagogic leaders and the yellow press carried on about God's part in and blessing over the slaughter of Filipinos. As the anti-imperialists' hero, President Grover Cleveland, put it in a statement we should have little trouble relating to today, the press had gone mad insisting that "anybody who says this is not a Christian nation or that our President [McKinley, at the time] is not the very pink of perfection of a Christian, is a liar and an un-American knave."

Things get a little more complicated in the twentieth century. I agree with Kauffman, in part, about World War I: Woodrow Wilson was a liar, an abominable foe of rights and liberties, and a racist to boot. At the same time, I think there was something dignified in his aspirations for the post-war world. More to the point, Kauffman's narrative is punctured here just a bit by the fact that a lot of the anti-war energy was now coming not from the nativist-isolationist right but the ideological left, some of whose figures (Randolph Bourne, for example) he admires as well and tries, with limited success, to herd into his corral.

Kauffman runs into far bigger problems, though, with World War II. It's not the lengthy defense of America First, the conservative anti-war group, or even the stout apologia for Charles Lindbergh, who Kauffman swears "was no more a Nazi than FDR was." History is written by the winners, and having witnessed in our time the mangling of not a few losers' reputations by a media eager to pigeonhole and be done with, I can believe that to some extent "the legend, or anti-legend, has become printable fact." The author describes the genesis of the movement—at Yale Law School, interestingly, by a group that included such moderates and liberals as Gerald Ford, Potter Stewart, Sargent Shriver, and

Kingman Brewster. He goes carefully through Lindy's infamous Des Moines speech of September 11, 1941, the one in which he charged that the war fires were being stoked by three groups, "the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt Administration." He allows that Lindbergh spoke "artlessly"—he does not discuss Lindbergh's medal from Hermann Göring or other dark allegations against the pilot—but concludes that "one passage in one speech by one orator is really the only stigma that the War Party could ever affix to America First."

Kauffman is entitled to his views, but a conscientious author who wants to argue that America would have done just fine to stay out of World War II cannot ignore the question of likely consequences. Kauffman basically ignores it all. His speculation about what might have happened amounts to two sentences: It might have been an epic disaster; on the other hand, Hitler and Stalin might have bled each other dry. That's all he has to say about the matter. And he says it with scarcely more gravity than if he were speculating on what might have happened if Lindsay Lohan had gotten someone else to take the wheel that fateful night of her most recent DUI.

His coverage of the Cold War years is not quite as shocking, but it's nevertheless wanting. Yes, the United States committed many unspeakable crimes in the name of freedom. But policymakers confronting a totalitarian state determined to rule the world had to deal with terrible questions for which there were no good answers. More important, contra Kauffman's "War Party" monolith, there were differing schools of thought within the Cold War consensus, and they deserve at least some parsing. I have to chuckle when I see Eisenhower praised by people like Kauffman for the way he left office (his farewell address), since he came into office green-lighting CIA coups that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had resisted on two hemispheres (in Iran and Guatemala), with hideous consequences. Every Cold Warrior was not for those things.

Withal—if you'll permit me that final Kauffmanism—I retain a certain soft spot for the author. There is something charming about a man out of time, especially when the man knows that he is a man out of time and shouts it defiantly from the mountaintops. And besides, he is trying to do good work here, showing contemporary conservatives that their intellectual forbears have not always been war-mongers and leading those who might be inclined to follow down a less bellicose path.

Ain't My America isn't likely to have much impact, though. Kauffman admits that he is too overwhelmingly outflanked and that he is, "perhaps, the least influential political writer since Wavy Gravy." This is ultimately a *cri de coeur* from one man, and an unusual man at that. His world—a world in which democratic

Europe might have been overrun, in which ethnic guerilla armies of the future are free to kill as many “enemy” civilians as they can with no fear of America lifting a finger—isn’t one in which either I or most Americans would want to live.

But it wouldn’t be a bad thing to see the Republican Party, and even a good third to 40 percent of the Democrats in Washington (the ones who voted for the Iraq War and continue to support it or the Bush doctrine to some degree), pay the man some heed. America needs first and foremost to back peddle from the Cheneyesque quest for hegemony that has driven foreign policy for the last eight years. Kauffman goes too far in that direction. Still, there is much to be learned from the historical arguments against empire that he presents; even though Randolph and other critics may have been motivated to take the positions they took by conservative impulses, the points they made were often progressive in essence by today’s standards. Liberals should have serious disagreements with Kauffman, but, as with the proverbial menu at a Chinese restaurant, we can find things to like. ■