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WAS JOHN QUINCY ADAMS A REALIST?
A DEBATE

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WRIGHT: Okay, I'd like to welcome everyone here. We have a very special treat for you, I hope, this afternoon. My name is Tom Wright. I'm the director of the Project on International Order and Strategy here at Brookings.

At Brookings we like to have events on the most topical and urgent issues of the day, so a few weeks ago when we were trying to decide what's the most pressing problem facing the President of the United States, of course we came up with John Quincy Adams and his impact on American and foreign policy.

But we're particularly pleased to have Jim Traub here to talk about his new book, which is "John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit." Jim, I'm sure, is no stranger to everyone here and needs no introduction, but I'll give him one anyway. He is a columnist and writer at Foreignpolicy.com, a professor at NYU, he was formerly at The New Yorker magazine. He's written many books which are really terrific, including "The Freedom Agenda," which was the last book before this one --

MR. TRAUB: Yes.

MR. WRIGHT: -- which I also highly recommend.

So his book "John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit" is on Amazon.com, but it will also be here after this event for purchase and I'm sure he'll sign a few copies, as well. But today it isn't just Jim talking about his book, actually, we're having a debate and that's sort of the title of the event, "Was John Quincy Adams a realist?" Of course, while this is of interest as an historical matter, also it really speaks to some very serious questions regarding the philosophy of American foreign policy, the whole realism versus liberalism or idealism, a debate that we see raging in the pages of The New Yorker even in the last couple of months with Jeff Goldberg's article on President Obama's world view.

So we're especially thrilled to have my colleague and friend, Bob Kagan, here to debate this proposition. It will come as no surprise to know that he is not saying that
John Quincy Adams is a realist, but will be taking on the thesis of the book. I also highly recommend Bob's book, the most recent one, "Dangerous Nation," in which he talks about the American foreign policy history in the 19th century. And his second volume in his series on American foreign policy, I believe it's called "America and the Collapse of World Order." Is that still the working title?

MR. KAGAN: When that book exists, that's what it will be called. (Laughter)

MR. WRIGHT: And that will be out next year, looking at American foreign policy from 1900 to 1941.

So what we're going to do is, we're going to start off with Jim talking about the thesis of the book and making the case for why John Quincy Adams was a realist and talking about that tradition in American foreign policy. And then Bob will make some comments and then we'll just have a very free-flowing conversation focused, of course, on Adams, but then, hopefully, also on American foreign policy in the current age. And then we'll go for questions and comments from the audience.

And so, with that, Jim, over to you.

MR. TRAUB: Well, thanks, Tom. I probably should say first that I can't really say that the thesis of this book is that John Quincy Adams is a realist. It is something that I say in the book, but I don't want to scare people away who actually like reading biographies. It's a biography and it says many things and it has many theses, and one of them is that.

So I want to spend a few minutes talking about two different things because I honestly don't know exactly where and to what extent Bob and I disagree about this. So I thought first I would talk a little bit about how I understand this word "realist," and then how I understand Adams's foreign policy.

So a realist, as I understand it, is somebody who believes that state behavior is shaped by interests and that those interests, in turn, are pretty much deducible from the geographic situation of the country, from its share of power in the international system, and from the nature of the international system itself. And the reason why that is an important theory is that it says that it is not beliefs that shape state behavior, that is, it is neither chiefly the beliefs of leaders nor the beliefs of people that cohere into what we would call political culture into the nature of that state.

So that, for example, if you were trying to explain the behavior of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, you would say that what matters most is not that one country was a democratic and capitalist country and the other was a communist and authoritarian country, but that both were global superpowers and continental nations in the post-war system.

Okay, that's descriptive realism, but realism, of course, is also a prescription for how you should behave. And what really matters, I think, for our purposes today is what policy prescriptions flow

from that?

And so the first one is if the internal condition of a state doesn't really do very much to determine its external behavior; it is vain to try to change its internal behavior in order to make it behave differently externally. That is, things that we do, like democracy promotion, all the forms of intervention, diplomacy, even development assistance, all these things that we believe will change a state's external behavior are wrong. It's a waste of time. So that would be one.

Two, foreign policy is not fundamentally a moral theater. Of course, there is moral importance to democracies defending themselves, but it is not moral decisions that impel state behavior. It is tactical decisions.

And therefore, three, since really this pertains above all to the United States, realism is an American creation and it was directed towards American policymakers. Three, the American habit of thinking of the United States as a supremely moral actor in the world and, therefore, acting in ways that are meant to propagate American values is not only wrongheaded, it's also often dangerous and reckless. It will neither achieve its immediate goal nor will it actually make the world a safer place to live. And there is a far greater danger from that kind of moralism than there is from restraint. So, realists in general counsel prudence, restraint, patience.

Okay, now how does that fit John Quincy Adams? The first thing I said having to do with states behave according to their external interests, Adams wouldn't have known what you were talking about. Simply, nobody in his time thought that because it was understood monarchies behave to advance the interest of princes. And so monarchies were perpetually at war in order to expand the resources available to the prince.

Republics tended to seek peace because they were there in order to protect and propagate the interests of individuals. So the famous theory of Kant that republics did not go to war with each other, that would have been seen as a truism, I think, by Adams and all of his compeers. So, in that regard, not a realist, but I think not an important point because the very idea didn't exist.

What is, I think, important is that Adams was a realist in the normative sense that I just talked about. Here's the interesting paradox: he was an intensely moralistic person. He was a passionately moralistic person. When I subtitled the book "Militant Spirit," that militant is a moral militant.

And yet, nevertheless, his counsel was always about restraint. He always warned against the exercise of American moral passion in foreign policy.

So, for example, in 1795, when he was serving as U.S. minister to the Netherlands, Adams grew extremely worried about the calls he kept hearing from the United States to retaliate against the British policy of impressing American sailors, the policy that ultimately many years later would lead to the war of 1812. He wrote to a friend the following, he said, "If resentment were a good or safe foundation for policy measures, few Americans perhaps would be disposed to go farther than I should." He being an incredibly resentful person, "But of all the guides a nation can follow" -- ooh, that's bad, I lost a sentence --

MR. KAGAN: Say it in English.

MR. TRAUB: Okay, what he did say was that of all the guides a nation can follow, prudence is by far the most important. So you'll have to take my word, that's the end of the sentence, more or less. That's the important part.

MR. WRIGHT: I hope you don't have other important quotes in that, (Laughter)

MR. TRAUB: We're going to find out, aren't we? Now I'm really worried. I just rewrote this a few hours ago and obviously something slipped out. Okay. And that tone continues up through a series of conflicts. Through the so-called quasi-war with France and through the skirmishes of the early years before the War of 1812, Adams is always taking that point. And so there you hear the kind of voice you would have heard from a Hans Morgenthau, a kind of classic realist.

As Secretary of State from 1817 to 1824, Adams had a chance to actually shape American policy. So by this time Spain's colonies in South America were in full revolt. Several had declared themselves republics; so many American leaders -- above all House Speaker Henry Clay -- believed the time had come for America to openly champion the cause of republics. Now, finally, America could be the leader of republics against the world of European autocracies.

Adams disagreed. He cites a conversation he had with Clay in 1821, when he said, "So far as they were contending for independence, I wished well to their cause. But I had seen and yet see no prospect that they would establish free or liberal institutions of government. They are not likely to promote the spirit either of freedom or of order by their example. They have not had the first elements of

good or free government. Arbitrary power, military and ecclesiastical, was stamped upon their education, upon their habits, and upon all their institutions."

So any of you who have read, say, Jeane Kirkpatrick's essay, "Dictatorship and Double Standards," would recognize that argument, that only a small number of states have the capacity to become, we would say, democracies. Adams would have said republics. And for the rest, one should be profoundly skeptical of that possibility.

So Adams' famous July Fourth oration in 1821 constituted, in effect, his public answer to Clay, who was a potential rival in the presidential election of 1824. And so this is the famous statement that many people will know: "America has abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when the conflict has been for principles to which she clings, as to the last vital drop that visits the heart." So, in other words, even when the principles are ones America profoundly cares about, it has abstained.

By the way, a phrase that is repeated in the Monroe Doctrine, for which Adams deserves a great deal of credit, "She goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," that's the famous sentence. "She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own." And so that is George Kennan to a fare-thee-well. So that is Adams' case for prudence, restraint, keeping out of the insides of other countries.

Now here, I think, is the interesting thing, and this may be where Bob will make the case that he's not a realist, so I'll be very curious to hear this. Because to me, the key difference between the Adams we speak of there and the realist we speak of today is this: Adams didn't counsel this kind of prudence, despite this passionate nationalism of his, but because of it. So realists in general are moral agnostics, I mean especially in the American case. They warn about the danger of American hubris and the idea of thinking that America is better than other countries. Thus the need to refrain from these crusades that seem so noble, but really are just as often exercises in imperial arrogance.

Adams didn't think that at all. Adams, if anything, thought the opposite. Adams assumed America's special providence. His real goal as Secretary of State was to hasten the spread of the nation across the continent, and thus to fulfill that destiny. And that was why he opposed intervention. He thought that intervention, the adventurous policy abroad, would jeopardize this special country that America was and, therefore, would jeopardize the nation's destiny.

So at the kind of peroration of that July Fourth oration he made this clear. He said, “Should the nation involve itself in foreign wars and intrigue, the fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force. She might become the dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit.” So, that is the kind of realist I would say Adams was and wasn’t.

MR. WRIGHT: Terrific, thank you. Bob, over to you.

MR. KAGAN: Well, that was terrific. And let me say what Jim alluded to, but in his modesty didn’t fully say, which is that this book is not about whether John Quincy Adams was a realist. This is a biography and let me also say it’s a terrific biography. And it is wonderfully written, easy to read, and covers every aspect of John Quincy Adams’ life, from his personal to his professional, and he was a fascinating and important figure.

And what I think is most wonderful about the book is it pays at least equal attention to Adams’ second career, which is as a member of Congress -- can you imagine after being president, then running to be a member of the House of the Representatives even, not a Senator? -- from where he waged an incredible battle against slavery and really was, I would say, Lincoln’s intellectual godfather. I don’t think Lincoln ever said anything that John Quincy Adams hadn’t said first, including, very importantly, as Jim points out in his book, that the principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence had to occupy a higher position than the Constitution, which was sort of inherently violative of those principles. And this was a key concept of Lincoln’s and Seward’s and others who decided that the Constitution should not stand in the way of extirpating slavery from the country because that was in such violation.

So I just want to make it clear that that is the sweep of this book and, therefore, worth reading and also worth talking about. And, of course, I can’t help but think about that second Adams when I think about the first Adams. We do change our views in life, but it’s hard to think of a man as deeply moralistic as John Quincy Adams was and imagine that somehow morals didn’t play a role in everything that he did, including in thinking about foreign policy. And I know that Jim is not actually arguing with that. He’s making a somewhat different point.

I would like to take this wonderful phrase which has been plucked out, as is so often the case, out of historical context and try to put it back in its historical context. And Jim has done that to

some extent, but I'd like to do it some more. We tend to do this all the time and we need to be very careful.

It is not history to go back and find a quotation from someone and say that quotation is all you need to know. "We go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," "Make the world safe for democracy," these tend not only -- they're not even shorthand. They're bad shorthand. They're misrepresentative of the complexity of history. And in the American context, that complexity includes not only what's happening in the world, but what's happening in terms of domestic politics. These are almost always politicians we're talking about. They're engaged in the debates of the day. And we need to understand that rather than think we know what American foreign policy was because someone said, "Go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy."

So the context that I'd like to set up for thinking about this is twofold. One has to do with what's going on in the world and one has to do with what's going on in the United States.

And what's going on in the world at that time, and I think is generally forgotten by most people who even think about this period, what was going on in this world was a major global ideological conflict. You might even call it a cold war except that sometimes it was a hot war. And it stemmed from the end of the Napoleonic Wars when the frightening revolution unleashed in France, which then Napoleon took and turned into a foreign policy of revolution, was finally crushed by a grand coalition going from Great Britain at one end to Russia at the other end. And the immediate mission of that grand coalition after the Napoleonic Wars was to make sure not that there would be stability in Europe that was not their number one concern. Their number one concern was to make sure that no liberal revolution would ever erupt again. In the case of Russia and Austria under Metternich, Russia under Tsar Alexander I, France under the restored Bourgogne dynasty with England as a kind of outlier -- I'll get to them in a second -- that was their number one goal. They were afraid of revolution and the goal of the settlement was to prevent revolution.

Britain was also nervous about revolution because their aristocracy was also afraid of the French Revolution and Britain became a somewhat repressive power briefly as a result of that fear. The aristocracy sort of imposed all kinds of limitations, although it didn't ultimately last.

But in pursuit of that goal they ultimately established something called the Holy Alliance.

And this was really Tsar Alexander's term and it's laughable in many respects, but its goal was very clear, and that was to suppress revolution. And, of course, it was failing because revolutions were erupting all over Europe. There was a revolt in Greece, there was a revolt in the German principalities, there was a revolt in Italy. And in each case the Eastern autocratic powers intervened. There was revolution in Poland. Each case the Eastern autocratic powers physically intervened to suppress these revolutions. And that was the big goal, to suppress liberal revolution.

And then when the Spanish monarchy collapsed or was collapsing and there were revolts in Latin America now from the former Spanish colonies who were seeking their independence and fighting against Spain, Alexander very clearly said this is also important. What's happening on the other side of the ocean is just as important as what's happening in Europe and we need to stamp out those revolutions, as well.

And so the idea that this Holy Alliance might actually take action in the Western Hemisphere was not farfetched. It's certainly something that Alexander talked about and that not only Americans, but also the British were worried about. So that's the context.

And you can see John Quincy Adams is in Europe for part of this period. He's the ambassador to Great Britain. And he writes to his father, "All the restored governments of Europe are deeply hostile to us." Because, in fact, they all feared that now the United States was the great threat, the great ideological threat, the great believer in this liberal poison that was spreading around Europe and that was taking root, also, in Latin America. He said, "The royalists everywhere despise us as Republicans and view the United States as the primary causes of the propagation of those political principles which still made the throne of every monarch rock under him as would the throws of an earthquake."

And they worried, and this is where I got the title of my book, they worried that the United States would become a very dangerous member of the society of nations. So this global cold war is on, it's got both geopolitical and ideological implications, and the United States is invariably involved in it. It is regarded as a threat by the European monarchies. It regards itself as antithetical to those European monarchies. And as Jim says, John Quincy Adams saw the world exactly in those terms. He did not think at all that the internal politics of other governments was not important. He believed, as all

Americans did at the time, that internal politics shaped foreign policy.

So you go to his speech, his great Fourth of July speech, and Jim points this out in his book, the phrase we remember or have had plucked out for us is, "We go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy." I would guess, and I think the indications are, I don't know that anybody in the time or at least a lot of people at the time paid attention to that.

MR. TRAUB: Not in the least.

MR. KAGAN: They paid attention to something else that he said in the same speech, which was a celebration of republican and individual rights versus monarchy. He is very critical, as was always the case, if you're going to do a July Fourth speech in those days you attacked Britain for being a monarchy or at least for having always been engaged in the oppression of individual rights until possibly just recently. But he also spoke out to all the monarchs and, more importantly, the peoples of those countries, talked about America's revolution. And then in a phrase that I'm sure everyone remembered he said to the peoples under those monarchies, "Go thou and do likewise." So essentially inciting, at least if rhetoric is to be taken seriously, inciting revolution in Europe.

And I can assure you that it caught the attention of the European monarchs. The Russian foreign minister was outraged that an American Secretary of State would call for revolution in the European monarchies.

So, that's one thing that's going on. That's one way that the world is being seen by someone like John Quincy Adams. But there are, obviously, also other things going on.

He has just been engaged in negotiating this amazing agreement with Spain, which basically was going to give the United States the entire continent. Interestingly, he was negotiating over territory that neither Spain nor the United States controlled in many respects because they were still basically under the control of the British, but, in any case, they drew a line across the continent. It's called the Transcontinental Treaty. And at various different moments there was some question as to whether the Spanish would agree to it.

Now back to the political situation in the United States. Henry Clay's running for President. John Quincy Adams, although he never wants to admit it, is also running for President in 1824. John Quincy Adams is hoping to run on his treaty, which will be an incredible boon for the United

States and a great victory. Henry Clay would love that treaty to fail. And Henry Clay, who is a man of the West and is certainly speaking for the vast majority of Americans when he's saying let's recognize those republics down there.

John Quincy Adams sees this as a distinct effort to destroy his treaty. Clay, who I'm sure he also believes that we should be recognizing these governments, but is also clearly hoping that it will destroy his treaty. And that's what's going on when John Quincy Adams gets up and delivers this forceful rejection of what Henry Clay is proposing.

Now, I would have to think, also, that since what Henry Clay is recommending is that the United States recognize the independence of these Latin American republics, that when John Quincy Adams says, "We go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," Henry Clay probably said, hey, chill. (Laughter) I'm not talking about sending troops to Latin America. I'm not talking about going to war with anybody. I'm simply saying we should recognize these republics who are dying for us to be recognized, and you're talking about going abroad in search of monsters to destroy.

And I will just say as a footnote to that, America is never going abroad in search of monsters to destroy. We are always going abroad and finding monsters, who we then either decide to destroy or not to destroy. But the notion that it has ever been anybody's policy to go search for monsters to destroy is ridiculous.

Now, the treaty is passed. John Quincy Adams has his victory and he's still Secretary of State. And here to me is what is interesting when you're trying to understand John Quincy Adams. And there is this moment when we've recognized the governments, we've dispatched ministers down to those governments -- this is in 1822 -- and John Quincy Adams is then instructed to provide instructions to these ministers on how to conduct themselves. And you quote some of this, but you don't quote all of it because you had a bigger task involved in trying to figure out exactly what John Quincy Adams --

MR. TRAUB: And because the instructions often run to 20,000.

MR. KAGAN: Exactly, exactly. (Laughter) But I will pick out what I want to pick out from those instructions. (Laughter) And I will read them among the things that he said.

He said, "The emancipation of the South American continent had opened to the whole race of man prospects of futurity in which the United States will be called in the discharge of its duties to

itself and to unnumbered ages of posterity to take a conspicuous and leading part." Sorry about his writing. (Laughter)

It was America's duty to establish relations with South America upon "principles of politics and of morals that were new and distasteful to the thrones and dominations of the elder world, principles that were coextensive with the service of the globe and lasting as the changes of time."

Now, that's just rhetoric, but here was his specific instructions. He told ministers to push for republican constitutions in these states and push back against any local "hankering after monarchy." He hoped that "a constitution emanating from the people and deliberately adopted by them will lay the foundations of their happiness and prosperity on their only possible basis, the enjoyment of equal rights," and he urged ministers to "promote this object."

So was he instructing ministers to promote republican government in Latin America? Yes, he was. And, in fact, he said, "They should all be governed by republican institutions, politically and commercially independent of Europe."

And, in fact, beginning then and onward there was a competition; there was a three-way competition, to see which way the Latin American governments would go. The French, in particular, were trying to place Bourbon princes on Latin American thrones and they ultimately, by the way, succeeded in Mexico briefly. The British were trying, shockingly enough, mixed monarchy, constitutional monarchy. So the French were trying to impose their view, their kind of system, the British were trying to impose their kind of system, and the Americans were trying to impose their kind of system. And this was an intense and heated competition that goes on throughout the 1820s and 1830s as the United States, and I would say (inaudible) Michael Mandelbaum, who thinks we never did anything about internal politics of other countries until 1989, in which the United States was engaged in the 1820s. Okay? And John Quincy Adams was a major part of that.

So, therefore, in my view, John Quincy Adams' famous statement was more a response to a particular political moment and a particular policy which he thought was both dumb and injurious to him. And as politicians always do, he went a little overboard in expressing how strongly he felt about that, and that when he reestablished his basic position, he was more in line with trying to have governments that were more in keeping with American government.

Now, let me just -- I know I've gone on a long time, but we have some time. Let me move to the next phase of his career, which is related to the Transcontinental Treaty.

A very interesting thing about the Transcontinental Treaty, it winds up excluding what is ultimately the state of Texas. Is this because the Spaniards didn't want to give up the state of Texas? Yes, they didn't want to give up the state of Texas. But John Quincy Adams didn't give the Spaniards a single thing that they begged for except for this. At the very end they begged to draw the lines in middle of rivers. Right? This is from your book, very well done.

This whole treaty was the worst humiliation in Spanish history. It led to the fall of their government, among other things. But they said could we just draw the line in the middle of the river? He said, no, we're not drawing a line in the middle of rivers. They basically asked him 10 different things, he said no. He gave up Texas like a shot.

Why did he give up Texas? He gave up Texas because he was worried, as James Monroe was worried, as most people in the North were worried, that Texas was going to be a slave state, a slave territory. And this gets to the other key thing that Jim also writes about that is going on at this moment, which is that the issue of slavery in '18 and '19 as a result of the Missouri Crisis, you all remember from your history training; the issue of slavery had emerged in the United States as never before. It became, as Jefferson famously said, the fire bell in the night was over the Missouri Crisis as it became very clear that the North did not want any further extension of slavery and the South realizing for the first time in their view that the North was out to get them. And this, of course, is the beginning of the end really. It'll take another 40 years before the Civil War erupts, but this is when the Civil War effectively starts.

And by the way, it is a consequence of transcontinental expansion. It's a consequence of the Louisiana Purchase and it's a consequence of the Transcontinental Treaty.

But here is this moment, if you were thinking only in terms of sort of basic American national interests, which most realists do when they look back on this period, you would have said why not take Texas? And when, by the way, James Polk does take Texas, you go read the realist historians, particularly Norman Graebner, who was the first to say that John Quincy Adams was a great realist, he thinks that Polk thing was absolutely -- the taking of New Mexico and Texas and the rest of that territory

was obviously in America's national interest. It gave us the outlet to the sea. It was productive territory. It strengthened us in the world.

John Quincy Adams did not think it was in America's interest to take that territory. And not only did he oppose the taking of Texas when he had the power himself, but flashing ahead to the 1840s and the battle with Mexico, which was about Texas, not only did he oppose that conflict, opposed using American power to take Texas, not only did he not want to see this territory incorporated, but he actually preferred to see the British in league with Mexico take control of Texas rather than have it go to the United States because he was so worried that what this would lead to was the expansion of slavery, which he considered to be morally abhorrent.

And, of course, in a quotation that I think is more telling about John Quincy Adams than anything, which Jim also talks about, he says this first in 1819, I believe, and then he continues to say it, he says he would rather see the country torn asunder, go into a terrible war, and even be dissolved rather than see the perpetuation of slavery. So, to my mind, only the most enlightened understanding of national interest, which is not -- and Jim did a good job of illuminating what realism is about, which would not fall under a realist category, he was ultimately a moralist, who was willing to sacrifice territory and any normal definition of national interest in order to see slavery abolished in this country.

And so that's my rebuttal, such as it is.

MR. WRIGHT: Terrific. Thank you both. I mean, that's really terrific and fascinating openings, and I think really shows the relevance of history and shows the continuing importance, I think, of both of yours really to understanding what's happening today in American foreign policy more generally.

Jim, before we get into sort of exploring different aspects, I'd like to give you an opportunity to come back just to highlight particular areas of disagreement and maybe agreement with Bob's comments.

MR. TRAUB: Well, yes, I did locate the one point of disagreement. So let me first say the point of agreement, which is I think Bob made a very important point, which is that Adams' nationalism was a deeply moralized form of nationalism. It wasn't just expansion. It was expansion in a way that would perpetuate American greatness.

Adams was a big expansionist and in the 1840s, in the same period, championed expansion in the Northwest in the area that was then held by the British because that would be free territory and, as Bob rightly said, opposed expansion when it would change the balance of slave to free. So there we agree.

Where we disagree is how to understand this expression, “We do not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Adams would have said, Adams did say a few years later, when the debate over what became the Monroe Doctrine was happening, Adams played a very stringent role because there these deep questions about intervention and America’s ability to propagate its view abroad very much arose amongst the cabinet members and with Monroe himself. Monroe deeply wanted to rebuke the Holy Alliance powers for their attempts to destabilize the republican government in Spain and elsewhere. Was Portugal also involved? Perhaps. That was one.

Two, he very much wanted to come down strongly on the side of Greece in their war against Turkey. This was kind of -- it was the first CNN war or could have been the first CNN war in American history because people heard all the horrible things that “the Turk” was doing to Christians in Greece, the birthplace of democracy. And there was a big passion in America; we have to do something to help these Greeks. It was a little bit like the question with the Spanish republics, but much more inflamed because it was Greece.

And Adams argued against the cabinet and against Monroe that the United States should not say, Europe, don’t do that, because the whole transaction of the Monroe Doctrine would be we’re going to keep out of your business and you keep out of our business.

Specifically on Greece he said, it is not for us to be seeking to intervene there. We can state our approbation just as he did in his July Fourth oration. To him, that would have been going abroad seeking a monster to destroy. And he argued vehemently on both of those cases and in both cases he won.

So I think it is possible to be the kind of deeply moralistic figure who Bob and I are agreeing that Adams was while, at the same time, being acutely aware of the dangers of moralism as a spur to action, being deeply aware of the bad consequences of apparently good acts, and believing that in all such decisional balances prudence needs to weigh far more heavily than it would otherwise. And so

that is the very important kernel of what we would now call realism.

And by the way, it is the reason why George Kennan in an essay on the Spanish-American War, which he thought was the beginning of the end for American policy for the same reason Adams did, because we might be the dictators of the world, but we would no longer be the commander of our own spirit, he began that essay with that expression, "We do not go abroad seeking monsters to destroy."

MR. WRIGHT: Bob?

MR. KAGAN: Another wonderful historical argument to be had about the Monroe Doctrine and what it all meant. And again, let me just say, as with the monsters quote, I don't know exactly -- he wasn't arguing against intervention in the Greek independence movement because no one was talking about intervention. And I'm going to get back to this in a second. There is a question of how much power you have to do anything. And the United States at this point did not have the power to do anything that it was later going to be capable of, so these were arguments over what we should say.

MR. TRAUB: No, no, no, no. Calhoun wanted -- Calhoun wasn't sure how he wanted to intervene, but he wanted to do something.

MR. KAGAN: Right.

MR. TRAUB: It's certainly clear from Adams' journal. Calhoun, who was the Secretary of War --

MR. KAGAN: There was no way --

MR. TRAUB: -- wanted to do something.

MR. KAGAN: We had no Army to transport. We had no real serious naval capacity to intervene in Greece. Whatever Calhoun thought he might have wanted to do, Monroe was not contemplating military intervention. And what Adams was arguing against was -- and on these grounds, by the way, his argument was if we say this is how we feel about what's going on in Europe, the European powers can say, well, this is how we feel about what's going on in Latin America. And that was what he was trying to head off.

But this wasn't a black-and-white do we intervene or are we prudent? I would say it was much more arguing around the margins of how should our language sound?

And I would argue, by the way, that he did not win. He toned down Monroe's statement, but in the Monroe statement, if you go back and look on it, there are all kinds of discussions about what's going on in Europe, including the statement that America has a very great interest in how these things turn out. He didn't say we were going to do anything about it. He also said, and, by the way, you stay the hell out of our area. But he did not refrain from saying some of those things, particularly about the Spanish revolution that was occurring at that time.

And so what Adams had done -- and, as I say, I just feel like much too much has been made out of this by Kennan ad others who were seeking very hard to find a usable past where they can say this was the tradition and this we departed from, which is what his argument is and many others' argument is about what happened in 1898. And I believe that they have read too much back into some of these discussions.

Imagine a speechwriter and various secretaries of this and that all engaged in toning down, toning up the language of a presidential statement. That's what happened on the Monroe Doctrine. It didn't go from black to white. It went from one shade of gray to another shade of gray.

But then we get to this other -- if we're talking about how should we think about this period and its relevance to later periods, it is critically important that the United States was still a relative pigmy in a world of superpowers at this time. The notion that we had anything we could possibly do in Europe that somehow we were going to go and intervene in Europe or for that matter in any part of Latin America below Mexico or some island in the Caribbean, was inconceivable. And so a lot of this discussion is really about how we should feel about it. And there were many debates about what we should say about these things.

The problem that comes later, and this is what I think Kennan and others fail to understand, is that with the accretion of power what you feel and what you think you ought to say becomes more than a rhetorical discussion. It becomes a discussion about what to do. And, you know, if you look at what William McKinley said about 1890 about the Spanish-American War, about going to war, which he did not particularly -- was not eager to do, by the way, but what he ultimately said effectively was with all the power that we have with something that's happening 90 miles from our shores, how could we not act on the principles that we've always upheld?

And what I would say had happened in American foreign policy is the principles were always being enunciated. There were arguments about exactly when to say them and how to say them, but the principles were always there. The problem arrived when the power arrived. And then the question became do we act or do we not act? And it was often felt to be the case that if we don't act, it's shameful because we could, but we've chosen not to. That's when the real dilemmas start to sink in. There weren't many dilemmas in this period.

MR. WRIGHT: So that gives a good opportunity to turn to sort of a broader question, which I guess I would pose as follows. What lessons -- it's not what lessons can we learn from John Quincy Adams, per se, but what lessons in general can we take, you know, today from American foreign policy in the 19th century, given that, as Bob says, it was in such a different context? And what is the meaning of sort of trying to find these strands of realism or strength?

I mean, I'm reminded on the Kennan essay on the Spanish-American War that both of you mentioned, I mean, he was very critical later, obviously, for what he saw as U.S. overextension, lack of realism. But a lot of that book was motivated by the opposite. It was a belief that the U.S. was underextended, was not sort of balancing enough against the Soviet Union toward the end of World War II and really was not being prudent because it was being restrained. I mean, he was a more -- obviously with the X article and Long Telegram, but well before that, was a much more stringent advocate of a tougher balancing position. So realism can sort of work in both ways.

I mean, today we look at it in terms of maybe a little more sort of retrenchment than U.S. foreign policy, but that's not always been the case. So how does this sort of realism debate, what's its significance really in trying to understand where we are today?

MR. TRAUB: Well, you know, I need to specify that the fact that I'm saying Adams thinks this does not mean that I think Adams was right. So I think Bob is championing a view of Adams that I probably would prefer as Adams. I'm just not entirely agreeing that that's right.

And so when people say to me, well, what would Adams have done about blank, the answer is not, well, this is what I think should be done about blank and, thank god, Adams would agree with me. So today I was talking to students at NYU and so one of them said, well, you know, would Adams have gone into Libya? (Laughter) And I said, no, Adams wouldn't have gone into Libya.

The part of realism that I take to heart and the part of Adams' realism that I take to heart is this recognition of how our moral certainties lead us astray and how in American history it is more often the sins of omission than the sins of commission that we come to regret. So it is not the United States, for example, who has to live with the fact of appeasement in 1938, though it certainly is the United States that has to live with its choice of inaction in the case of Rwanda and, I would say, in the case of Syria today.

So the idea that we need to recognize how our own hopes lead us astray is one that I think has been embedded in us certainly since Iraq. The danger of that, and Bob mentioned this book by Michael Mandelbaum, who is an archrealist and who argues the United States shouldn't have gotten involved in anything, whatever we call an intervention, that means it's bad, we shouldn't even have gotten involved in Rwanda. Thank god, we didn't. We shouldn't have gotten involved in Kosovo. I'm sorry we did. The danger of prudence, becoming a kind of all-powerful and tyrannizing judgment, is you say there's nothing you can do about the inside of other countries. It's better to not even try.

Well, I would say in Adams' day that was mostly a moot question for the reason Bob says and maybe even later. The insides of other countries didn't matter very much to America then. They matter enormously now. And so we are stuck in this situation that the thing we know matters greatly is also a thing which we keep discovering we can do less about than we think.

And so you can either say stop doing it, that's the realist Mandelbaum view, or you can say we're just going to keep doing it. I mean, the place where I think Obama kind of is, though I wish he was active, is we have to really, really be modest and humble about this thing without totally surrendering the possibility of doing it.

MR. WRIGHT: Yes, I mean, it's really interesting to even talk about realism in the 19th century given that European countries that are regarded as quintessentially realists were also empires, and so they very much cared about how other societies were organized. They just wanted to completely control them.

MR. TRAUB: Yes.

MR. WRIGHT: Realism was vis-à-vis other major powers. It was certainly not vis-à-vis small sort of countries or territories, which they didn't even recognize. So we talk about that tradition of

realism, but it mainly was sort of a great power realism as opposed to a sort of non-interventionist realism.

MR. KAGAN: But there's a whole -- I'm sorry, but the whole realist account of the 19th century is mistaken because the idea that these countries behaved in a realist fashion, which is to say non-intervention in other countries on ideological grounds, is, of course, absolutely false. There was almost constant intervention on precisely ideological grounds: the squashing of the 1848 revolutions that were sweeping Europe, which Russia and Austria stepped in to quash. And the British stayed out mostly because they didn't feel like they had many options. But there was no question that when you have the Polish revolution of 1830, the revolutions of 1848, the increasing rise of liberalism and nationalism was a major, if not the major, concern of the governments of Europe at the time.

Which is why, you know, in the standard account, the standard sort of realist account, of American foreign policy with John Quincy Adams as an alleged outrider, it's the silly Americans who are constantly talking about ideology and their beliefs and whatnot without understanding that that was what the whole world was talking about at that time.

And I would disagree in the way you formulated one point, Jim, which is I would say it's not that the nature of the other governments didn't matter to us in the 19th century. In fact, it mattered to us a great deal because those that were hostile to the United States were potentially a threat to the United States. And one reason Monroe made the kind of forward statements he did about what was going in Europe was that he and everyone around him deeply believed that a victory for republicanism in Europe was going to improve American security and victories of monarchy and absolutism were going to threaten American security. So we did have a stake.

The real question and real conundrum and I think the real problem that realism has had, we've all had it, but realism also has it, is it's not whether it matters, it always matters. It's whether you can do anything about it and should you, and that is about relative power.

It always cracks me up, the realists are always talking about how -- it's a fundamental realist point that nations try to acquire and use as much power as possible, but they're constantly telling the United States to acquire less power and use less power as if somehow the United States should be different from what they describe.

So getting back to the question, what would John Quincy Adams do, the simple answer is

we have no idea based on the evidence we have, and I don't just mean that in an obvious sense. We don't know how John Quincy Adams would have felt about the world if he was wielding the kind of power that the United States wields today.

We do know, and this is where I don't think I'm trying to shape a John Quincy Adams in my own image, I think I'm trying to understand what I think he was, we do know that he was a deeply moralistic person, who did feel that the United States was superior, we were superior morally. And to the degree that it was cautious, it was caution based on lack of power. So the question would be what would John Quincy Adams be like if he had that power? And I don't know what he would say about Libya or Syria or any of those other things given that situation.

MR. TRAUB: I'll just one thing because, you know, I do think that until essentially 1898, these are, as Bob says, essentially rhetorical questions. And from 1898 afterwards, they're really, really meaningful.

If I asked myself not the Libya question, but to me the sort of first time these issues really arise is the debate over whether or not the United States will take the Philippines as a colony because the Spanish-American War debate actually was quite rapid. And events in many ways forced the Americans' hand to the point where a very large fraction of the country said yes.

Then the debate over whether or not it is within not the rights, the nature of the United States, the country we want to be, to have a colony. That was a huge question and a tremendous debate, and a big debate in the Senate at the very end. There it's a little easier to imagine Adams because for Adams it is so contrary to the nature of America to have a colony. And he was extremely explicit about this in the July Fourth speech and in many documents after that. I do think he would have felt, if one can imagine him moving forward, that this is not America as I understand it.

MR. KAGAN: Right, and for our next session we will have our discussion about the Philippines because that's a very interesting thing, too. I don't think almost anybody in the United States, including Theodore Roosevelt, ever wanted the Philippines. The question was once you had --

MR. TRAUB: What you got when you got it, yes.

MR. KAGAN: -- got there what do we now do with it? And that was not an easy answer.

MR. TRAUB: Yes.

MR. KAGAN: So there was a lot of ideological debate over an issue that was really almost a practical question.

We do know that John Quincy Adams thought Cuba eventually had to be part of the United States.

MR. TRAUB: Yes, absolutely.

MR. KAGAN: He thought it would fall like a ripe apple from the tree.

MR. TRAUB: Eventually, though, it was something else.

MR. KAGAN: Whether he thought an entirely Spanish -- and I think he would have, as all Americans at the time would have seen, not people who looked exactly like us in Cuba, would have been another state or what kind of relationship it would have brought. He didn't have to answer that question. I don't know how he would have answered it since he believed that Cuba was a natural appendage, as he put it, of the United States.

MR. WRIGHT: Great. I think we have about 30 minutes. I think we should open it up to the audience because I know we have a lot of people who know -- some scholars of American foreign policy and others. And so we have a microphone at the back, and so the gentleman three rows in. Just wait for the microphone.

MR. HOROWITZ: Thank you, gentlemen, for a very good presentation. Mr. Traub, I've read a lot of your work in *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times Magazine*.

You didn't mention tactics as an important point. I'm Elliot Horowitz. I'm a military historian and so on and former State Department and intelligence community official. Wouldn't strategy à la Kosovitz be a more appropriate term to use?

MR. TRAUB: You're right. Yes, I should have said strategy, so I stand corrected.

MR. WRIGHT: Could you pass the microphone just two rows up to Mr. Mitchell here. Right here.

MR. MITCHELL: Thanks. I'm Garrett Mitchell and I write The Mitchell Report. And I want to ask about, if I have this right, I thought I heard you say at the outset, and I'm simplifying it, that we understand realism as nations acting on interests as opposed to beliefs. And then Bob later on talks about another sort of set, which is what I would call the can we/should we. Do we have the power and

should we?

And I'm trying to understand whether when you have the construct of interests versus beliefs, it seems to me those are so often intertwined that they're hard to tease apart, A; and, B, when you talk about can we/should we that is not clear, it seems to me, whether the "can we" is arguably a more quantitative objective measure -- arguably -- but the "should we" is not at all. And it seems to me that, again, "should we" is about some mix of interests versus beliefs. So I'm trying to understand that.

MR. TRAUB: Let me take the second part first because I think that question arises so often. So let's take the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, okay? The idea that we would transform Afghanistan, at least in a limited way, because only by doing that could we create sufficient stability in Afghanistan that we could assure our own security. And so if you say, you know, the only way, and this is what Obama in a limited way was persuaded of by Petraeus and McChrystal, the only way that we can actually secure our national security objectives in Afghanistan is by this quite ambitious effort not simply to kill bad guys, but to actually change Afghanistan so that the people who live there are going to say, you know what, I like the government more than the terrorists.

Now, once you've said we have to do this, then it becomes much harder to ask can we do this? Because if we have to do it, then, of course, we can do it. But if we can't do it, it's a problem. Now, I would say the realist tendency in these matters is begin with what you can do, not with what you have to do. And if you can't do it, then don't say you have to do it.

And so I was very much in favor of the counterinsurgency strategy because I hoped it would work. I think we've seen in retrospect, actually, it didn't work. And so it may be in a case like that we need to, when we formulate this problem, to not start with we have to, therefore, we must, but to start with can we do it? And if not, therefore, we shouldn't.

On the first one, I'm going to let Bob answer that because I think he just knows the realist literature so much better than I do.

MR. WRIGHT: Well, could you answer that, but also on Jim's point of the sort of can it be done? I mean, that, it seems to me, if you asked in 1945, '46, could you reconstruct Europe, the answer will be no, because of the domestic constraints. But that became a yes in 1947. So to some degree these things are fungible.

MR. TRAUB: Well, I wouldn't actually agree with that. I mean, I think a reasonable answer would have been yes, but anyway, we can't know that. But one can think of reasons why one worked and the other didn't.

MR. KAGAN: Well, I think as you said at beginning, the can is not always as obvious as we think it is. And just since you raised that the realist position in the 1930s, and these were realists, was that, A, it didn't really matter to us who was running Europe, that Hitler would trade with us just the way everybody else has to trade with us. But this was enforced by, B, do you know what it would take for us to intervene and do something to stop Hitler?

And there's a wonderful article written by the sort of strategic military brain of the *New York Times* of those days, writing in a very realist vein, saying do you know what we have to do? We would have to take 8 million men, send them across in ships; they'd have to do a landing on a heavily fortified beachhead controlled by, dah, dah, dah. So, therefore, isn't that insane? So the joke is, of course, it's exactly what we wound up doing. It was exactly as hard as he said it was going to be, but we were able to do it.

And, again, I would say George Kennan's answer, as we know, post-World War II was not to stay in Europe. And why did he think we should not stay in Europe? Because he thought the United States was utterly incapable of doing what was necessary to stabilize and stay in Europe and be reliable and, therefore, we should let Europe go -- we should pull out of Europe and work things out with the Soviets to neutralize it.

So, you know, every time we do an intervention that fails, it's realist heyday; and it's realist heyday right now. We never have to remember the things that the realists told us not to do because when you don't do something, you don't know exactly what the disaster is. And since the realists don't take credit for the realist position in the 1930s, we don't know enough to blame realism for the 1930s, we blame it on isolationism, but it wasn't just isolationism.

But, look, on the question of, again, can we/should we depends on what your perception is of America's role in the present international environment. If you think that the United States is sort of just another country like other countries only more so, you could say that there's a hell of a lot of things that go on in the world that are none of our business. Setting aside "can we," they're not our business.

And if you take the view that I take, which is that the United States' role after World War II was to be the preserver and defender and, if possible, extender of a liberal world order, which I think has served us very well, then it's a much harder question because a lot of things that happen that are potentially threats to that liberal world order, including genocides. So when a genocide happens, it's not just that I feel bad about the people who were the victims of the genocide, although I do feel bad about it, but I also worry that it is a chip out of the liberal world order. And, if not, if you proceeded along that way and didn't do anything about any of them, you would gradually see this liberal order -- now, the big problem, of course, is I don't have a mathematical formula that tells you when and where. In fairness, the realists don't have a mathematical formula that tells you where and when.

And usually you're talking about people who think we should be leaning forward versus people who think we should be leaning backward. And that's usually where this argument is taking place.

Since Iraq and Afghanistan, the leaning backward position won. After the Jimmy Carter period and the election of Ronald Reagan, the leaning forward argument was successful and sort of dominant right through Iraq. I mean, you look at the presidencies of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, those were interventionist presidencies, all of them. And the alleged distinction between George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton is alleged. If you just look at their policies, they're highly consistent in their general interventionism. And now we've swung back in the other direction.

MR. WRIGHT: Great. So I'm sure that provoked a few realists in the audience.

MR. KAGAN: Are there realists in the audience?

MR. WRIGHT: So the gentleman in the middle there, yes. And then the gentleman in front of him next.

MR. MARSHALL: Hi, Will Marshall, Progressive Policy Institute. Great discussion.

Norman Graebner was one of my most entertaining professors in college, but none of it took, and so it's very hard for me to sort of project this whole debate between realists and "ideal politik," whatever the other side is, back into the early days of the American republic. You could look at the Monroe Doctrine and I suppose you could interpret it as a realist document or as an idealist document, but you can't really do that with all the battles surrounding the Constitution and the apportionment of the war-making power and the splitting of the war-making power and the antipathy to standing armies in the

early days of the republic. People thought that princes had too much power, they felt that there was something intrinsic to monarchy, as you said Jim, that made it outwardly aggressive, and they didn't want any part of it nor the constrained -- they constrained American officials and the power to do things.

But my question, I guess to you, Jim, is did foreign policy in any way figure into the 1828 election? Was Adams' restraint of his more circumscribed view of America's role in the world in any way an issue in 1828? Because if it wasn't, then that suggests that his views were of a piece with almost everybody else in the founding generation, who were merely reflecting a consciousness of American weakness and inability to project power even if they wanted to.

MR. TRAUB: Well, no, except -- I mean, it's an interesting question, but I think the answer is that by 1828, the phase of American history, which really had begun with Washington, where the United States saw itself as a weak and vulnerable power in danger of becoming a plaything in European conflicts, had come to an end. And so the United States enters into a long phase where foreign policy almost never dominates a presidential election. And instead, the issues that ultimately come to a head in the Civil War become much more predominant.

So, for example, questions of states' rights versus an activist federal government were extremely important in 1828, though, alas, I have to say the chief issue in 1828 was that people thought that John Quincy Adams was, A, completely incompetent because he had accomplished virtually nothing; and, B, was illegitimate because he had gotten there by virtue of what was called the "corrupt bargain," which was a deal with Henry Clay that he may or may not have explicitly reached in order to basically win the 1824 election with the result that Clay would become Secretary of State.

So there were other issues, the tariffs, things like that, but actually foreign policy had ceased to be a presidential issuance. I mean, to me, Bob obviously knows about this far more deeply and has written about this a great deal, I mean, I don't feel that much interest in foreign policy after 1824 until 1898.

MR. WRIGHT: Bob, do you want to come in?

MR. KAGAN: Yes and the reason for that is that the dominant issue from 1820 on is slavery. But it's interesting what happened to poor John Quincy Adams because I'll put a little wrinkle in your description of the -- there was the period when America felt it was a plaything, but then the War of

1812 happened. And even though we didn't actually win the war, we felt like we won the war and it gave a big boost to nationalism, actually. And the great consensus that existed at that point, after the federalists died because they opposed that war, is the sort of national Republican consensus, which is in favor of a strong nation state, a lot of money, even John Calhoun is there.

And that is then shattered by the Missouri Crisis. And poor John Quincy Adams is what we in -- this is why, you know, it's hard to have the right image of him now, he was what we would -- in the context of the times, he was a progressive. He believed in the use of federal government resources to do all kinds of things. He had this great, wonderful agenda which Jim writes about. You know, he wanted to have observatories and rivers and canals and all this incredible government expenditure, including, by the way, the increase of American military power and setting up an academy, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Just at the time when the South goes berserk over the fear that strong national power meant that eventually the North control of the national power would come in and do something to their control of their situation as far as slavery was concerned, so they repudiate every detail of it.

Now, there was a foreign policy dimension, little remembered. Those states rights people regarded not only a sort ebullient foreign policy, but even what had already been done, as excessive. They considered the Monroe Doctrine excessive. They ran against the Monroe Doctrine. And there was a huge issue, it's almost impossible to imagine, at the time of whether to send American ministers to a conference that was being held in Panama. This became a huge political issue because by doing so we were violating Washington's dictum and farewell address.

So foreign policy was wrapped up in everything else seen entirely from a domestic prism. And Jim is right, foreign policy doesn't become an issue again until the South gains control of the union in the 1840s and begins trying to expand southward, which is what happens under Polk, which then leads eventually to the Civil War.

But you cannot understand anything about America in this period, including its foreign policy, unless you know that slavery is the issue that is driving everything.

MR. WRIGHT: Just on the Monroe Doctrine, did you know that John Kerry repudiated the Monroe Doctrine officially three years ago?

MR. KAGAN: He's not the first. I think it's been repudiated in the past. (Laughter)

MR. WRIGHT: I just opened up the paper one day and it was there, John Kerry repudiates the Monroe Doctrine. I didn't know quite where it came from, but it was interesting.

So we have this gentleman over here. And please raise your hand if you want to come in. So, this gentleman over here.

SPEAKER: Thank you very much. It's a fabulous conversation.

I'm kind of new to all this realism stuff, but I'd like to take it back one step further. Would realism or the realists have -- it seems to me the realists would have prevented us from even engaging in a revolution against the British at the time. True or false?

MR. TRAUB: No, I think this is the point where it becomes a parlor game, you know. (Laughter) But bear in mind, you know, realists do not say -- it is easy to think realism means Dr. Strangelove, it means having no moral sympathies at all. No, no, realism is a moral doctrine. It is a doctrine that says the most just way -- because really it was a Cold War doctrine that was advice to American leaders. If you keep doing this moralistic stuff, you will do terrible damage to the republic. Therefore, the best way of preserving the glorious nation that we are is this doctrine of restraint.

MR. KAGAN: But I would answer your question differently. And you're right, to take realists back to this, but there is -- part of the debate over the Constitution was what kind of country we're going to be, which included what kind of international power we were going to be because they were thought to be intimately related.

So the people who favored the Constitution, the Federalists, favored it I would say 60 to 70 percent on foreign policy grounds. It was a correction to the Articles of Confederation, which everyone believed had led the war to be fought ineffectively against the British. And it was a way of saying the reason we have power centralized in the Executive is so that we can have an energetic capability in foreign policy. There was the check in terms of the power of the Congress to have war and raise armies and that. That was the check sort of imposed by the anti-Federalists.

The anti-Federalists argued that if you even united the country this way with a strong central government, you would have created an empire which would have undermined the basic core attributes of American Republicanism that even creating a strong government was going to undermine liberty at home. That was the argument against the Constitution. It was very much a foreign policy

argument, and that argument has continued to this day.

And throughout most of American history people who tend more toward let's say a libertarian or a concern about big government, throughout history, have almost always favored what you would call a small foreign policy, a less interventionist foreign policy. This was true of the Democratic Party in the late 19th century, driven much by Southern concern for states' rights. Well, I'll use the term, I don't like the term, but I'll use it, very isolationist. Who were the big foreign policy guys in that period? The Progressives: Roosevelt, ultimately Woodrow Wilson.

In the '20s, conservative Republicans were the driving force behind isolationism. It was ultimately a Democratic Progressive President who led the country into war. And this sort of continues on.

Ronald Reagan was a kind of a turning point, in a way, for modern Republicanism. And guess what, I think we're turning back in the party. A small government attitude does not fit easily with a big foreign policy attitude.

I don't know if that's the question you were getting at. I hope it was because I just went on for 15 minutes. (Laughter)

SPEAKER: If I could follow up just with something else. It appears, you said it yourself, Mr. Kagan, that back in the Colonial times, we just didn't have the power to be out there. I have this conversation with my son all the time. He's a Marine Corps Reservist and I keep telling him the reason that we won the Revolutionary War was because we were fighting -- we, who were a ragtag country at the time, beat the world's most superior military force of all time at that time, and we beat them.

Come to Vietnam, we are the most powerful country in the world. Vietnam is just a bunch of ragtag, you know, people wearing pajamas. They whipped us.

What is realism being filtered through? When we look at our foreign policy today, I mean, was it wise to go into Iraq? Was it wise to go into Afghanistan?

Dick Cheney's promise that we were going to be greeted with rose petals, you know, in front of our tanks was totally ridiculous from a point of people fighting for their homeland, and we being seen not as liberators, but as invaders. So how does realism fit into that? And I'm going to give up the microphone. Thank you.

MR. KAGAN: Okay. Well, I'll set aside how I would not necessarily disagree with you exactly about how Iraq unfolded, but let me just set that aside. What I would say is that I don't know of a doctrine that you can practice that will not lead you to error. We go back and we look at the Cold War and we say containment was a great strategy, right? Generally we believe containment was a great strategy. Containment got us into Vietnam. The same people who were promoting containment, and not George Kennan's containment, but the containment that Harry Truman implemented, which was to resist Communism wherever, got us into Vietnam.

I would say that the intervention in Iraq was driven by an -- and, you know, two administrations had exactly the same view of Iraq, the Clinton administration and the Bush administration that followed. It was fundamentally about nonproliferation. It was fundamentally about a serial aggressor, which is what Saddam Hussein was. So right or wrong, it was all part of -- and this is something I guess Mandelbaum says in his book -- it was all part of a general effort on the part of the United States to promote a liberal world order.

Is promoting a liberal world order a good strategy for the United States? I think it is. Are we going to make mistakes and miscalculations which can have some very bad results? Yes. The only thing that I would ask is you tell me the doctrine that doesn't lead to mistakes because you can have the offshore balancing doctrine, which is the doctrine we had in the 1930s and you can make that kind of mistake. So I think that it's this search for the perfect foreign policy that gets us into trouble.

MR. WRIGHT: Before we go --

MR. KAGAN: Let Jim respond to that.

MR. WRIGHT: -- can I just make one point, though?

MR. KAGAN: Yes.

MR. WRIGHT: Which is, I mean, the realism, you know, we're talking about a sort of post '45 realism here. E.H. Carr, Morgenthau, and Kennan all articulated a classical form of realism, the main critique of which was about collective security and the notion that you could not intervene and sort of the world would be self-correcting and you could have cooperation amongst nations to deal with certain sets of problems. And they were arguing for a more aggressive type of great power intervention, for getting involved in great power security competition in Europe, or at least being attentive to it and not leaving it to

sort of international institutions.

And so there is a modern realism which tends to be more sort of non-interventionist, but classical sort of realism and really some of the richest writings on realism are from the opposite point of view. Which I guess just gets to Bob's point about not sort of viewing doctrine through the lens which sometimes it's presented today.

But with that, does we have any final questions for Jim we might take and then we'll go back for sort of closing comments.

MR. TRAUB: I only have a small thing to say about that anyway. Go ahead.

MR. WRIGHT: Okay, but I think we're --

MR. KAGAN: This lady has been having her hand up for a very long time, I feel.

MR. WRIGHT: Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see. Yes, sorry.

SPEAKER: I don't really know what I'm talking about, but I do have a question.

(Laughter)

MR. TRAUB: That wouldn't stop any of us.

MR. KAGAN: I don't know why you should feel differently than the rest of us do.

(Laughter)

MR. WRIGHT: That hasn't stopped anyone before.

SPEAKER: Thank you. This is one remarkable presentation, so thank you so much.

What interested me quite a bit was in terms of the alignment of the moral dimension and the practical application during Adams and during that period of time in which it's not that hard to take a moral position when you're talking about anti-colonial activity or decolonization or something of that nature if you're not a prince. And so it's a remarkable alignment that just so happened to occur at just the exact right moment in time, historically speaking. And I like that very much and I like it very much in the context of attempting to apply such today in our era.

And I also accept, perhaps support, the principle of promoting a liberal world order. I think that makes sense, as well, and sort of aligning moral principle with policy.

So in the context, for example, of, say, how does one do that today? Looking at capability, et cetera, all those issues that you've brought into play, how does one do that today outside of

an ideological lens or prism that we have a new one it seems that's been evolving?

And if I can be somewhat specific without sounding like heretical is about five or so years ago when Syria started to unfold and Vladimir Putin said to our administration we really need to all sit down at the table and our response was what? You know, we're not going to sit down with him. And he said, well, you can bring him to the ICC later, but right now he's in power, you know. And we didn't. And five years later, here we are and how many people are dead?

So I wonder how does one look through, take the principles of the Adams period of time, and make application today so it doesn't just have some sort of kneejerk response depending upon what we think our power alignments might be at this moment in time?

MR. WRIGHT: We have, yes. So, Jim, any final thoughts?

MR. TRAUB: I think if anything, yes, this just shows the difficulty of mapping this incredibly old, unfamiliar world onto the one we have today. So I can't give you a very good answer to the Adams question about that.

I can say specifically on I think the Syria-Russia question the fact -- I mean, it's an interesting realist question because a realist would say you're absolutely right. Putin has the ability to prevent the United States from doing whatever the heck it wants to do, so let's cut a deal with Putin. And if that deal means that Assad stays in power, so be it, that's going to be in our interest.

We didn't do that because we didn't accept the fact that Assad should be able to stay in power. I would have been horrified if we had done that. I'm upset about our policy now. I'm not that kind of realist and then I have no idea what John Quincy Adams would have done, but if what he would have done was cut that deal with Putin to keep Assad in power, I'd be agin' him. (Laughter)

MR. WRIGHT: Bob?

MR. KAGAN: Well, I mean, to me, here's the relevance of all this discussion of history. It's less about what we should do because we all have to make our decisions at the moment about what we should do. For me, it's more of an analytical question, which is what does America tend to do?

And for me, what I've tried to argue, rightly or wrongly, is that this impulse to view the world through an ideological lens, to view the world as if we have received truth about human existence which has to do with the principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, my argument is that

has always been with us. There's never been a time when that hasn't been a driving element of American foreign policy.

And one of the things I try to do in "Dangerous Nations" is explain why we didn't act on that before, and that has to do with the fact that throughout most of the 19th century we were consumed with the issue of slavery at home.

You know, John Quincy Adams, when he says, "We are the well-wisher of freedom for others, but we are the vindicator only of our own," I think he very consciously meant that we still were in the process of vindicating those principles at home. And I actually believe that when he says, "We go not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," I think implicitly the next sentence was because we've got plenty of monsters right there in the South.

But that having been said, once we had accomplished that objective, and you look at the takeoff of American foreign policy not only in terms of power, but also in terms of increasing moralistic approach to international relations, it comes after the Civil War, after Reconstruction, and then I think it's the old principles reasserting themselves, but in a new context where the internal problem has been solved. And the variable throughout all this period fundamentally is levels of power.

So, we are living in a period of great power, whether it's -- you know, it's a little less than we might want it to be, it's a little less than it was 10 years ago, it's more than it was 30 years ago, what have you, but it's still enormous power. And what we are continually wrestling with is that power, our continuing ideals and morality, and how to put the two together. And there is no formula for it and we are going to have to have the arguments that we're having, but I think there's no escaping the dilemma. The notion that we can sort of say we're not going to let our ideals shape us, that is a prescription for a patient that can't take the pill.

America is what it is. We have to try to be as wise as possible in steering this America along a good path.

MR. WRIGHT: Thank you. Thank you, Bob. Thank you, Jim. That was really a wonderful discussion and I got to say one of the most enjoyable that I've been a part of or at in Washington in some time and I think really shows the relevance of history, particularly history as rich as both of you have been able to put on the page and articulate here.

I'm still reading this book. I highly recommend it. It will be on sale at the back now after this event and, of course, now on Amazon, as well, for purchase. And I'd like to thank the audience, all of you, for coming today and for just thoughtful and interesting questions and comments. And we look forward to proceeding to another part of the 19th century maybe later this year or even the 20th century when your book comes out next year, Bob.

So, Jim, thank you again for coming. We hope you will come back and visit us again soon. And with that, we are adjourned. (Applause)

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