

Conceptualizing Early U.S. Grand Strategy

Abstract: How should we characterize early U.S. grand strategy? Many scholars portray the first century or so after American independence as a period of “isolationism,” whereas others complicate this narrative by examining patterns of U.S. territorial expansion. In this review essay, I examine three recent books that address early U.S. grand strategy in an effort to make sense of these seemingly contradictory narratives. I ultimately argue that while isolationism does not correctly describe early U.S. grand strategy, we need not replace that term with a single descriptor for all of U.S. grand strategy through 1898. Rather, I argue that relational theory can offer productive pathways for future work by helping us think of grand strategy as a process, by pushing us to consider exactly which relations with others constitute a state’s grand strategy, and by directing our attention to the opportunity structures that make constrain or enable different grand strategic practices.

Erik Grynawski, *America's Middlemen: Power at the Edge of Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018). 320 pp. \$99.99 (hardcover). \$29.99 (paperback).

Charles A. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020). 464 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover).

Richard W. Maass, *The Picky Eagle: How Democracy and Xenophobia Limited U.S. Territorial Expansion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020). 312 pp. \$39.95 (hardcover).

Now American history is brief. ...And in remarkable degree, the ideas with which we approach foreign affairs are still those of provincial America. They are the ideas which became habitual during the century and a half before the American nation became a Great Power. The traditional and fundamental themes of American foreign policy are now known as isolationism. That is a term, however, which must be handled with the greatest care, or it can do nothing but confuse and mislead. (Lippmann 1952)¹

Introduction

Much IR scholarship on U.S. grand strategy provides a now-familiar narrative of American diplomatic history that dates American activism in world politics to the Spanish-American War in 1898 and that explicitly or implicitly characterizes the period before 1898 as one of isolationism. By 1945, American policy-makers had the means, motive, and opportunity to pursue an unprecedented expansion of U.S. alliance networks and military presence around the globe; a particular sort of activism often labeled liberal internationalism had triumphed over isolationism even if the occasional politician tried to harness lingering isolationist tendencies in the public to their advantage.

But does this conventional reading of American grand strategy get the pre-1898 period right? Is isolationism the right way to characterize early U.S. grand strategy? If not, what are the alternatives? In this essay, I review three recent books that provide different views as to how we can answer those questions. In so doing, I conclude that isolationism is not a satisfactory description of early U.S. grand strategy, and I argue that bringing relational theory to bear on the study of grand strategy offers a fruitful way forward.

The central point of contention here is how to reconcile the U.S. desire to remain relatively insulated from European politics with the patterns of U.S. engagement and territorial expansion that complicate any notion of the United States as having sought isolation. Grynawski (2018), Kupchan (2020), and Maass (2020), offer productive disagreements on this point. Kupchan (2020) maintains that the period from 1783 to 1898 was defined by isolationism, the emergence of and adherence to which he attributes to a variant of American exceptionalism. Grynawski (2018) and Maass (2020), by contrast, portray early U.S. grand strategy as more activist in nature while differing as to how exactly they characterize it. While Grynawski (2018) emphasizes the role of “intermediaries,” well-placed individuals who bridged divides between social networks to help craft an American empire, Maass (2020) emphasizes xenophobia and

¹ Lippmann (1952) is a published version of remarks Walter Lippman gave to a British audience in 1940.

domestic political concerns as factors that combined to shape the direction and limits of American territorial expansion.

The books on which I focus here are not the first to address early American grand strategy. Even if other authors have not always framed their work as being about “grand strategy,” scholars of varying disciplinary backgrounds have provided a number of important insights about early American grand strategy that I will come to throughout this piece.² But these recent works by Grynaviski, Kupchan, and Maass point to a broader rethinking of early American grand strategy that is currently underway, and when put in conversation with each other, they offer an opportunity to more clearly conceptualize early American grand strategy.

In the next section, I outline the debate as to whether the United States was ever isolationist and the ways that these different authors address the question. As Kupchan (2020) offers the most direct, sustained engagement with this question, I will generally use this work as my first point of reference before contrasting it with Grynaviski (2018) and Maass (2018). After examining the various conceptions these authors have of isolationism and their views on whether that term can be applied appropriately to early U.S. grand strategy, I explain why I do not believe that isolationism is the right term. I then draw on relational theory in IR to consider how we might better conceptualize early U.S. grand strategy.

American Isolationism?

Was the United States ever isolationist? For many authors, Kupchan (2020, 5) included, George Washington’s farewell address serves as the definitive statement of early American isolationism. “The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations,” as Kupchan quotes Washington’s 1796 declaration, “is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible....It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.” This “great rule,” Kupchan argues, “prevailed for over a century” (2020, 63). Washington himself did not use the term “isolationism”—that was a later innovation—but Kupchan finds in Washington’s address “a grand strategy aimed at disengagement with foreign powers and the avoidance of enduring strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland” (2020, 6). This laudably precise definition provides Kupchan with clear standards for assessing whether the United States was indeed isolationist.³ Did the United States seek “disengagement with foreign powers”? Did it avoid “enduring

² My understanding of grand strategy draws on Posen’s (1986, 13) definition thereof as “a political-military, means-ends chain, a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself,” though I believe Silove (2018) to be correct in arguing that “grand strategy” can be productively studied as “grand plans,” “grand principles,” or “grand behavior”.

³ While I use Kupchan’s definition of isolationism here, I believe my argument against conceptualizing early U.S. grand strategy as isolationist would hold even given another reasonable definition. See, e.g., Holsti (2003, 274): “*Isolationism* [emphasis in original] refers to policies that seek to limit or reduce the country’s international engagements to the extent that it is possible to do so.” By contrast, Narizny (2007, 11) seeks a definition of isolationism that could potentially be applied outside the American context, and he defines it as “a strategy of inactivity in which the executive decision maker chooses not to devote resources to expanding and protecting the influence of the state outside of its borders”. Braumoeller (2010, 354) takes a similar approach in defining isolationism “as the voluntary and general abstention by a state from security-related activity in an area of the international system in which it is capable of action”.

strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland”? Kupchan answers both of those questions in the affirmative.

“In the years during and immediately after the struggle for independence,” Kupchan (2020, 67) contends, “two defining elements of U.S. grand strategy clearly emerged.” The first of these was “strategic dominance in their own neighborhood,” while the second, which “seemed to contradict the first,” was “geopolitical isolation from the rest of the world”. Kupchan is thus sensitive to the tension I have already noted between the purported isolation and expansion of the United States. Ultimately, however, he argues that the United States hewed to this isolationist grand strategy until a more internationalist—or even imperial—impulse started to erode support for isolationism in the 1890s. Until the Spanish-American War, in Kupchan’s telling, isolationism kept the United States from acquiring more territory in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific than a more activist power would have, and acquisitions that eventually occurred—of Alaska, Hawaii, and Guam for example—were significantly slowed by isolationists in Congress (or by the perception of those in Congress that their constituents supported isolationism) (Kupchan 2020, 132-134, 135-136, 150-155).

Kupchan argues that isolationism had a strategic logic for some (such as Washington) even if it was not always about geopolitics for its supporters. Rather, a cross-cutting coalition of sorts was comprised of individuals who had very different reasons for their positions, among the most widespread reasons being a theologically informed sense of America’s unique role in the world and its need to remain untainted by interaction with the corrupt Old World as well as xenophobia as manifest in “the nation’s effort to preserve social homogeneity and the dominance of its white population” and “the sectional divide over slavery” (Kupchan, 56, 125). Regardless of the reasons isolationism received support, Kupchan (2020, 367) argues that isolationism served the United States rather well in its early history: “Isolationism succeeded in enhancing America’s security and prosperity during the nineteenth century and helped the nation resist the imperial temptation after 1898.” By contrast, he advises only minor retrenchment—including no substantial changes to American postures vis-à-vis Europe and East Asia—for today’s policy-makers facing a different domestic and international environment.⁴ Rather, he argues, the United States should reduce its commitments elsewhere in “the periphery” while sustaining “the enthusiasm for international partnership that [it] embraced during the second half of the twentieth century” and reaffirming “its role as a beacon of republican values and institutions” yet serving only “as an exemplar rather than a crusader” (Kupchan 2020, 367-370).⁵

⁴ Indeed, others who have sought to burnish isolationism’s tarnished reputation have similarly made the case that it served the United States well in its early years (Nordlinger 1995, 11-12, 49-51) while others who argue for a more restrained American grand strategy have argued that “isolationism” is less useful for understanding American foreign policy than it is for stifling any serious debate as to how the United States ought to engage with other countries (Wertheim 2020, 4-5, 10-11).

⁵ This proposed grand strategy of “judicious retrenchment” is given little space, but the policy recommendations amount to a sort of chastened liberal internationalism similar to that espoused by Lissner and Rapp-Hooper (2020) and Colgan (2019). Despite his engagement with the work of advocates of “retrenchment” or “restraint” and his own interest in arguing that “isolationism” is not necessarily bad, Kupchan’s (2020) framing of U.S. foreign policy as having a history of isolationism—one to which the United States ought not to return—ultimately suggests that advocates of further retrenchment are indeed “isolationists” or the modern inheritors of that now-imprudent legacy.

If, again, the questions here are whether the United States once sought “disengagement with foreign powers” and avoided “enduring strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland,” Grynaviski (2018) and Maass’s (2020) portrayals of a more activist American grand strategy suggest that the answers are not so straightforward. For Grynaviski, IR scholarship’s habitual overlooking of early American grand strategy—or, on the other hand, an isolationist reading thereof—does not comport with the activism of early U.S. policy-makers. That this activism was often concentrated relatively close to home does not make it any less active, he suggests. “The United States concentrated on the western hemisphere in the nineteenth century, especially the American West” Grynaviski (2018, 12) writes, “because it presented the most compelling security threats and the largest incentives for intervention and occupation.” If one brings a focus on hard power and political elites to the historical record, however, one might miss the extent of this activity. “American material power was important for the country’s rise, but the actual process by which the United States expanded saw the federal government rarely using its military forces to effectively subdue local or foreign populations” (Grynaviski 2018, 12). Rather, Grynaviski argues, American expansion was made possible in large part by intermediaries who bridged “structural holes” and facilitated cooperation between U.S. policy-makers and various “non-state allies” that abetted American expansion (Grynaviski 2018, 21-23, 46-47). For Grynaviski, these intermediaries help to explain how the United States, even as it “was not a great power,” nevertheless “competed globally beyond its weight class” and ultimately “wove together an empire” (Grynaviski 2018, 281-282). While Grynaviski does not offer a single word or phrase meant to capture the entirety of early American grand strategy, one gets the impression that he would not label such an activist grand strategy “isolationism” even if policy-makers had relatively limited means and ends when compared with the more expansive ones of today.⁶

Similar to Grynaviski (2018), Maass (2020) portrays early American grand strategy as more activist than isolationist. He focuses on the question of why the United States did not expand more than it did, however, so he is concerned not to overstate either activist or isolationist impulses in American foreign policy. “Mark Twain’s country was ten times larger than the colonies that declared independence in 1776,” he notes, yet “U.S. leaders were neither greedy conquerors targeting everything in sight nor calculating materialists seizing every profitable opportunity” (Maass 2020, 1, 10). The characterization of early U.S. grand strategy as isolationist thus sits uneasily with him, but nor does he see U.S. history an undifferentiated mass of expansionist projects. “The United States has never been truly isolationist...but by overselling continuity in the history of U.S. foreign policy, the American Empire literature has helped obscure meaningful variations within that history” (Maass 2020, 17).⁷ Maass is also more hesitant to label the United States an empire than Grynaviski.⁸ Maass (2020, 3-4) distinguishes annexation from imperialism, the former being a process that more fully incorporates new communities and territories into a domestic order rather than leaving them as separate but subordinate polities. But even if the United States was “picky” and rarely formally imperial in the way it incorporated new territories into its union, Maass (2020, 81-82, 119, 197-198) leaves the reader with a depiction of a quite activist United States that sought domination in its

⁶ Unlike Kupchan (2020), Grynaviski (2018) does not outline any proposals for today’s policy-makers. His concluding recommendations are instead oriented toward IR scholars.

⁷ Maass’s critique here is aimed primarily at the Wisconsin School of Diplomatic History (2020, 219, n. 64, 65).

⁸ Both Maass (2020, 10-11) and Grynaviski (2018, 282) draw on Doyle (1986) in discussing empire.

hemisphere by way of the assimilation and “removal” of Native nations, the acquisition of sparsely populated territories in the Pacific Northwest and American Southwest, and a mixture of annexation and informal imperialism in the Caribbean and the Pacific all before 1898.

For Maass, the policy implications seem to be that the United States ought to eschew any further annexations (including, e.g., the purchase of territories like Greenland) while presenting U.S. grand strategy as largely non-threatening to others. To the extent that U.S. grand strategy has involved “self-abnegation” (in rhetoric and/or in practice), this has “greased the wheels for the acquisition of client states under hierarchical economic and security relationships,” and annexation (or non-punishment of annexation by others) could “quickly dissolve the norm” against territorial conquest that the United States has an interest in maintaining (Maass 2020, 204, 212).

Against Isolationism

Grynaviski (2018) and Maass (2020), I argue, offer useful correctives to Kupchan (2020). That is, by Kupchan’s own definition, isolationism is not a satisfactory rendering of early American grand strategy. While early U.S. policy-makers generally sought to avoid any political commitments in Europe that could lead to their involvement in European wars, Grynaviski and Maass’s works draw our attention to three problems with characterizing early U.S. grand strategy as isolationist.

First, to say that early American grand strategy aimed at “disengagement with foreign powers” overstates the extent of any such aspiration. The United States sought to avoid binding alliances that might drag it into wars—a common, well-founded fear in world politics (Edelstein and Shiffrin 2018)—while consistently seeking more transitory alliances alongside sustained economic and social engagement around the world, including on the North American frontier as U.S. territorial claims expanded. The isolationist reading of early U.S. grand strategy equates a relatively narrow avoidance of particular kinds of commitments for specific reasons with a broader desire for “disengagement”. As one historian puts it, “American statesmen had no qualms about engaging with the powers of the Old World,” to say nothing of the politics of the New World, “when U.S. interests demanded” (Sexton 2011, 29).

It is thus hard to sustain the argument that early U.S. grand strategy was guided by strict adherence to Washington’s “great rule”. Maass (2020, 10) offers a less straightforward but ultimately more accurate account:

U.S. leaders...were driven by a mix of power, institutions, and ideas: excitement about geopolitical opportunities, desires to increase their wealth and power, concerns about the domestic political balance and their own enduring influence over federal policy, visions of the grand republic they sought to build, and colored perceptions of other peoples’ identities relative to their own.

The concatenation of these factors sometimes led policy-makers to oppose expansion, to be sure, but they also often led to expansion, a process that involved engagement with foreign powers. Moreover, to the extent that much U.S. engagement took place outside the realm of high

diplomacy, this may lead IR scholars to overlook practices that were nonetheless important to early U.S. grand strategy. As Grynawski (2018, 81-82) describes this non-traditional engagement:

[F]rom its earliest days, the United States depended on unusual, bicultural figures to recruit and sustain alliances with non-state allies to fight its wars. ... The politics of brokerage *was* international politics in the eighteenth century.

Illustrative of this engagement with foreign powers are early U.S. commitments to the security of Hawaii and New Granada (Davidson (2020, 46-53). The Tyler Doctrine as it came to be known essentially designated Hawaii a protectorate of the United States.⁹ When the government of King Kamehameha III sought American protection against a perceived French threat, Tyler would ultimately declare in an 1842 address to Congress that the United States sought “no peculiar advantages, no exclusive control over the Hawaiian government, but is content with its independent existence and anxiously wishes for its security and prosperity,” with any foreign threats to it liable to face “a decided remonstrance” (Tyler, quoted in Weeks 2013, 139). While this might not exactly constitute a permanent military alliance, this soon led to land reforms that made it easier for American citizens to buy land in Hawaii, the result being the creation of U.S.-based (largely agricultural) interests that would ultimately pave the way for the territory’s annexation (Weeks 2013, 139-140; LaFeber 2013, 16, 86-89, 139-141). Moreover, just four years after Tyler’s proclamation, the United States would sign (and, two years later, ratify) the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty, which entailed a U.S. guarantee of the international right to travel across the Isthmus of Panama as well as the “rights of sovereignty and property which New Granada has and possesses over said territory” (Davidson 2020, 50). Maass (2020, 181) treats these early U.S. interactions with Hawaii as engagement that does not easily fit the isolationist narrative, though Kupchan (2020, 106) cites LaFeber (1989, 136-137) to downplay such mid-century engagement: ““Out of the smoke and excitement of American expansionism in the 1850s, only the Gadsden Purchase actually emerged, although Cuba, Central America, Canada, and Hawaii were heatedly discussed.””

Second, one might argue that the United States did engage with foreign powers where necessary, but it did so—to come to the latter part of Kupchan’s definition of isolationism—to avoid “enduring strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland”.¹⁰ As Kupchan (2020, 31) argues, “Westward expansion, determined efforts to ease European powers out of America’s neighborhood, and neutralization of the threat from ‘savage tribes’ were generally deemed to be strategic imperatives...in the service of isolation”.¹¹ This argument, however, elides the extent to which the question of what constituted the U.S. “homeland” was constantly

⁹ At the request of American missionaries in Hawaii, King Kamehameha III blocked Catholic missionaries from further entry. France, the sender of most of those Catholic missionaries, then threatened Hawaii with the use of force and ultimately compelled it to sign a treaty guaranteeing the free practice of Catholicism and missionary activity on the islands (Weeks 2013, 138). When Hawaii requested American assistance with this French threat and suggested that they might look to Britain if the United States would not help, John Tyler acquiesced.

¹⁰ This sort of argument is relatively common in the historiography of American expansion. See, e.g., Weinberg (1935, 454): “Expansionism, seemingly a reaching toward the outside world, really was long a major expression of isolationism. Almost from the beginning the Americans adopted expansion as a means of freeing the United States from the entanglements threatened by European neighborhood.”

¹¹ The phrase “savage tribes” is Alexander Hamilton’s from *Federalist* No. 24.

debated and expanded throughout this period, not to mention the commitments the U.S. government was willing to make in North America and beyond. As Maass (2020, 47) notes, for example, early “U.S. leaders relieved Britain of Transappalachia, France of Louisiana, and Spain of Florida,” within the country’s first four decades of existence as an independent state, and in the 1840s, the United States “continued to remove eastern Indians to the West, annexed Texas, acquired Oregon South of 49°, and conquered and obtained New Mexico and California” (Hietala 2003 [1985], *ix*). This process surely entailed “enduring strategic commitments” to an ever-expanding homeland.¹² Moreover, even if one maintains that early U.S. leaders believed a broad swath of the North American continent to constitute their proper homeland from which their isolated polity could remake the world through its virtuous example, American policy-makers also laid claim to numerous overseas territories even before 1898. Between 1856 and 1860, for example, the U.S. pursuit of guano (seabird and bat manure typically used as fertilizer) led it to claim 53 Pacific territories as its own, including Baker Island, Christmas Atoll, Midway Atoll, Kingman Reef, and Palmyra Island, many of which have indeed constituted enduring strategic commitments ever since (Evers and Grynawiski n.d., 31).¹³

This notion of the “North American homeland” seems to project today’s borders on to an early American state whose claims were still unsettled.¹⁴ Historians have noted the need for caution in delineating the “domestic” and the “foreign” in early U.S. history. Weeks (2013, *xx*), for example, offers a broad statement to this effect: “More generally it can be said that the boundary between the ‘domestic’ and the ‘foreign’ is itself an evolving, semipermeable barrier with political, economic, and psychological components.” This is a consequential distinction if a state’s “foreign” or “overseas” interventions or commitments constitute the evidence as to whether it was truly isolationist, and the projection of today’s borders on to the past allows for a contiguity to stand in for the “domestic” character of certain actions. As Hietala (2003 [1985], 263) argues, however, “The fact that the United States acquired contiguous rather than noncontiguous territory makes American aggrandizement no less imperial than that of other empires of the mid-nineteenth century.” Indeed, Kupchan (2020, 45) claims that the “supporters of foreign intervention were repeatedly overruled by those insistent that the United States should encourage the export of democracy only by example,” but this becomes less supportive of Kupchan’s argument if we consider “foreign” intervention to include federal actions in Florida, Texas, or other such territories before they became American possessions.

To focus on a single case all three authors discuss, we might consider whether U.S. relations with Samoa provide evidence for or against the notion that the United States sought to avoid enduring strategic commitments beyond the North American homeland. For Kupchan (2020, 142), the fact that the United States declined to annex Samoa at the request of the Samoan government itself is evidence in support of his argument. For Grynawiski (2018, 145), this overstates the case by eliding the efforts of some to acquire Samoa:

¹² Indeed, U.S. expansion is often assessed with reference to the proliferation of U.S. military posts and government-subsidized transportation and communication infrastructure across the continent (see, e.g., Sparrow 2018 and Adler 2021).

¹³ See also Immerwahr (2019), for whom the “guano islands” constitute an important part of his case for discussing the United States as an empire.

¹⁴ Like Kupchan (2020), McDougall (1997, 86) argues that “Indian policy and slavery were not foreign policy issues” even as he acknowledges that “the federal government’s agonized and futile efforts to deal with those issues gave rise to patterns of thought and behavior toward alien peoples that would carry over into U.S. foreign policy.”

The conventional wisdom regarding US imperialism is that it emerged in the 1890s, around the Spanish-American War and the Boxer Rebellion, and quickly faded by 1914. The case of Samoa, however, shows that imperialists in the US Senate and within the State Department were aggressively and successfully pushing for American expansion three decades earlier.

If the president and a large minority in Congress were willing to acquire Samoa in the 1870s, their failure to do so is surely not decisive evidence that the United States was wholly committed to an isolationist grand strategy at the time. Indeed, there was enough support for the United States to establish a naval station in Samoa in 1878 (Kupchan 2020, 150), and as Maass (2020, 188) notes, when Samoa would eventually become one of America's "unincorporated territories," it joined many such preexisting possessions, the existence of which raises doubt as to whether "imperial" U.S. behavior of the 1890s and early 1900s was the aberration Kupchan makes it out to be.¹⁵

One might argue that what I have depicted as "enduring strategic commitments" were not strategic commitments as Kupchan would define them insofar as they were not lasting military alliances. However, Kupchan (2020, 31) seems to acknowledge that expansion—the acquisition of new territory and its incorporation into the polity—constitutes an enduring strategic commitment in its own right. "What the United States did not do—and what qualifies it as an isolationist nation par excellence—was take on enduring strategic commitments beyond its immediate neighborhood. Until 1898," he continues, "Americans repeatedly turned their backs on opportunities to expand beyond North America." Alternatively, one might argue that these commitments were more incidental than part of a self-consciously expansive grand strategy. Kupchan (2020, 136-137) notes of the U.S. acquisition of the Midway Atoll, for example, that the island "ended up in U.S. hands more by accident than by design" when a U.S. ship's captain "obtained the island for the United States under the Guano Islands Act of 1856". But to treat this acquisition as an accident is to overlook the fact that the federal government had already provided a legal framework for such acquisitions to ease the process of expansion, a process that led to many other such acquisitions in the Pacific and in the Caribbean.

Third and finally, Kupchan (2020) acknowledges the role of military force in early U.S. grand strategy even as he downplays its significance. Thus, for example, Kupchan (2020, 104) can characterize the Adams-Onís Treaty in which Spain ceded Florida to the United States as a victory for "diplomacy rather than violence" ultimately consistent with an isolationist grand strategy despite the violence that Andrew Jackson and local militias wrought in Florida in the aftermath of the War of 1812, the continued threat of force that Spanish officials did not believe they could credibly and profitably withstand (Maass 2020, 62), and the enduring strategic commitment that the acquisition of Florida constituted. Likewise, Kupchan (2020, 160) argues that the influence of isolationism waned throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century such that, e.g., "between 1890 and the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States intervened in Latin America eight times," but he maintains that we should not think of the United States as truly (albeit temporarily) abandoning isolationism until 1898. The Latin American interventions of the 1890s, he says, were "limited in scope and duration, focused

¹⁵ Grynawski, Maass, and Kupchan all characterize the U.S. relationship with unincorporated territories as imperial.

narrowly on protecting U.S. commercial interests and citizens” (Kupchan 2020, 160).¹⁶ In summarizing his findings, Kupchan (2020, 354) writes that, “The United States began life effectively surrounded by extra-regional powers—France, Great Britain, Russia, and Spain. But one by one, these powers exited or were ejected from America’s neighborhood. American hegemony took on a taken-for-granted character as the countries of the region submitted to American power because they had little choice.” This suggests a degree of activism and willingness to use (or threaten) force that is hard to square with the “isolationist” label.

Consider also U.S. relations with Native nations, a topic that both Grynaviski (2018) and Maass (2020) discuss at length. Even as Kupchan (2020, 6) acknowledges of Americans that “Native Americans in their way were ruthlessly eliminated or shunted aside,” his narrative generally treats this as an aspect of U.S. domestic politics—as action on the “North American homeland” that does not truly counting for or against the record of isolationism. On the one hand, this ignores the extent to which U.S. relations with Native nations approximated typical foreign policy. American intermediaries, as Grynaviski (2018, ch. 2 and ch. 4) notes, brokered many alliances with Native nations as the United States (and the colonies that originally constituted it) went to war with the British, with the Confederate States of America, and even with other Native nations.¹⁷ On the other hand, this ignores the extent to which these “foreign” relations took on an increasingly “domestic” character over time precisely because of the U.S. willingness to use military force to subordinate Native nations. While early U.S. policy-makers such as Washington thought Native peoples could be assimilated into the United States if given the tools deemed necessary to become “civilized,” removal quickly became the more politically expedient option, and the military was the primary tool by which such removals were effectuated and maintained (Maass 2020, 74, 82).

Kupchan (2020, 7) concedes that early American grand strategy was indeed rather active and engaged in world politics, a point that others such as Lippmann (1952, 11) have likewise acknowledged and that some use to argue for continued activism of one sort or another (Kagan 2006; Miller 2016; Green 2017).¹⁸ Yet despite the myriad exceptions apparently made to Washington’s “great rule,” Kupchan adheres to his definition and maintains that the avoidance of “enduring geopolitical commitments” overseas suffices to establish American isolationism:

This record of commercial activities overseas, territorial expansion across North America, and republican messianism abroad may seem at odds with the claim the United States long adhered to a grand strategy of isolationism. But amid these

¹⁶ Grynaviski (2018, 192) describes this activity in Latin America as follows: “In Latin America, the United States had begun to form what modern scholars often describe as an empire, using military force and economic leverage to determine who ruled in Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and elsewhere. ...The United States formed alliances with local partners, such as Panamanian separatists fighting against the Columbian government.”

¹⁷ My statement that the United States “went to war” with Native nations here is not meant to elide the acts of genocidal violence that also occurred in these relations, sometimes amid the sort of organized political violence that IR scholars would typically characterize as war. For further discussions of what constituted “war” in relations with Native nations, see Urlacher (2021).

¹⁸ Lippmann (1952, 11) states that, “The United States has never been neutral in the European sense. It has always had a very active foreign policy, of which the central purpose has been the determination to expand across the continent from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific Ocean. ...It has been a policy designed to open up the continental territory, to consolidate that territory firmly within the American union, and to make that territory and the approaches to it invulnerable secure as against all other powers.”

expansive impulses, Americans remained dead set against taking on enduring geopolitical commitments outside North America, preferring to bank on the natural security afforded by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to keep them safe from the dangers of involvement in great-power rivalry.

In a telling shift, however, Kupchan goes from describing early U.S. grand strategy as one of “hemispheric isolation” (2020, 8) to “hemispheric dominance” (64). Indeed, hemispheric domination would be the more apt description, and one does not dominate in isolation.¹⁹

Rethinking Early U.S. Grand Strategy

If early American grand strategy was not isolationist, what was it? Others have provided a variety of alternative conceptualizations, some of which emphasize hemispheric domination. Cumings (2009, 39), for example, describes early U.S. grand strategy as a sort of “exclusive continentalism” that kept the country oriented away from Europe and “toward the West and the Pacific”. Others focus on expansion. For Weeks (1996, *xi*), “An expansionist consensus unified the nation and provided the ultimate rationale for its existence,” and for Paolino (1973, *xi*), there was a “fundamental continuity of American foreign policy between 1861 and 1900” in the form of intertwined “expansionism” and “imperialism”. Others have concluded that the predominant practice in American grand strategy—early and recent—is a sort of unilateralism. Herring (2008, 6), for example, argues that the United States has consistently sought international engagement on its own terms, and he even notes that unilateralism is “often mistakenly called isolationism”. Restad (2015, 2-3) similarly argues that the predominant American self-conception as an “exceptional” state has led it to consistently enact “unilateral internationalism”. Alternatively, some have portrayed early U.S. grand strategy as possessing both isolationist and internationalist impulses. Gilbert (1961, 72), for example, posits the coexistence of “internationalist” and “isolationist” impulses in U.S. foreign policy from the beginning, and for Sexton (2011, 7), “There were interventionist aspects of the allegedly non-interventionist foreign policies of the early nineteenth century, just as elements of nonintervention and anti-imperialism persisted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” Meiser (2015, *xxix*) asserts not the coexistence of dueling impulses but wholly different grand strategies through and then after the Civil War: “American grand strategy between its founding and the Spanish-American War should be divided into two distinct periods: a period of unabashed continental expansion (1787-1865) and a period of unambiguous external restraint (1865-1898).”²⁰

Why not use one of these ready-made labels for early U.S. grand strategy? Or, as Reich and Dombrowski (2017, 41) would have it, why not think of American foreign policy at any given time as being comprised of multiple grand strategies applied in different domains and regions rather than as a singular, all-encompassing framework? Is there any way of more clearly conceptualizing early U.S. grand strategy? Can we go beyond the truism that there was “continuity and change” therein?

¹⁹ I prefer the term “domination” to “dominance” here insofar as it suggests an ongoing, active effort to retain one’s superordinate status in relations to others rather than a more static situation (cf. Jackson and Nexon 1999).

²⁰ Meiser’s (2015) focus, however, is the period between 1898 and 1941, so he does not linger on this pre-1898 distinction.

To help better conceptualize early U.S. grand strategy, I would suggest bringing a relational perspective to bear on the topic.²¹ A relational (or “processual relational”) account, as Jackson and Nexon (1999, 291-292) put it in arguing for IR scholars to bring the relational sociology into their work, “treats configurations of ties—recurrent sociocultural interaction—between social aggregates of various sorts and their component parts as the building blocks of analysis”.²² In other words, relationalism takes “social interaction as logically prior to the entities doing the interacting” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 301). Importantly, “Relationalism...is not a ‘theory’ in the same sense as structural realism or Wendtian constructivism” (Nexon 2010, 100), and it is “methodologically neutral” (Jackson and Nexon 2019, 585). Rather, relationalism is a sort of ontological wager that can be cashed out in various ways—often as field theory, network analysis, or actor-network theory (McCourt 2016, 475)—and it stands in opposition to substantialism, an often tacit approach in which “entities exist before interaction and all relations should be conceived as relations between entities” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 291).²³ Relationalists, as McCourt (2016, 479) argues, take issue with substantialism because it “offers an undertheorized conception of agency. Treating social processes as essences leads to the view that action is undertaken not by individuals but by forces, like interests, preferences, or institutions, that propel essences into action.”²⁴ In contrast, relationalism involves a commitment that “a substantial part of social reality consists of transactions among social units, that those transactions crystallize into ties, that they shape the social units involved, that they concatenate into variable structures” (Tilly 2002, 75).²⁵ In taking this approach, “Relations become the primary unit of analysis” (Adler-Nissen 2015, 295).

²¹ Not all relationalists embrace the constructivist label (see fn. 24), but relationalism is often identified as a constructivist approach—even as part of the “new constructivism” alongside practice theory (McCourt 2016). See also Srivastava (2020, 337), for whom the “varieties of social construction” include a sort typified by Nexon’s (2009, 14) “relational-institutionalist” account of how transnational Protestant movements changed the patterns of authority in early modern Europe. This relationalism is distinct from (but could conceivably overlap with) the “relational approach” that Long (2017) develops in an effort to situate the category of “small states” in asymmetric power relationships.

²² The relational sociology on which this builds is most often identified with Emirbayer’s (1997) programmatic statement. Emirbayer, who taught at the New School in the late 1990s and early 2000s, has come to be identified with the “New York School” of relationalism alongside others at Columbia University (where Charles Tilly and Harrison White taught and where Ann Mische, after receiving her Ph.D. at the New School, managed the Workgroup on Networks, Culture, and Social Dynamics). On this intellectual history, see Jackson and Nexon (2019).

²³ Following Jackson (2011, 34), I use the term “ontological wager” rather than something with a more definitive connotation to indicate the uncertainty inherent in any such effort to make sense of the world.

²⁴ While McCourt argues that “relationalism” and “practice theory” are essentially new forms of constructivism that allow authors to move past some of the perceived limitations of earlier constructivist theory, especially variants that were wedded to neopositivist modes of hypothesis-testing, Goddard (2017, 6) rejects the label of constructivist for her own relational work. As she writes in a forum on McCourt’s piece, “Many of us believe we have a substantial stake in redrawing boundaries of the paradigm debates. We want to argue that ‘strategic’ action need not be ‘rational’; that to theorize agency is not necessarily to focus on individuals; and to argue that ideational and ‘rhetorical’ politics are, in fact, power politics. ...If avoiding or at least downplaying the label ‘constructivist’ helps these approaches resonate more broadly across the field, then many of us are comfortable with that position.”

²⁵ Beyond the relationalism associated with Emirbayer, Mische, Tilly, and White, relationalism has also gained traction with some China- and Taiwan-based scholars for whom, as Yaqing Qin (2016, 33-34) argues, “relationality” is already “embedded in Confucian cultural communities”. When deployed in IR theory, Qin (2016, 33-34) contrasts relationality with the “individualistic rationality” that underlies many of the theories developed in the Anglo-American academy. A relational theory of world politics, he argues, would begin with three assumptions—that “the IR world is a universe of interrelatedness,” that “actors are and can only be ‘actors-in-relations,’” and that

What would a relational approach mean for the study of early U.S. grand strategy?²⁶ As I have already noted, relationalism is a rather broad category of theorizing, but Grynaviski's (2018, 21) focus on social networks—he “treats social structure as the configuration of personal ties between individuals across and within borders”—offers the most explicitly relational account of the three books examined here.²⁷ Most basically, however, a relational approach to early U.S. grand strategy draws our attention to the fact that no grand strategy sprung fully formed from the mind of George Washington, nor did any such thing loom over later policy-makers.²⁸ Rather, early U.S. grand strategy was constituted and constantly reconstituted through relations with others, and there are at least three directions in which relationalism might push the study of early U.S. grand strategy.

First, relationalism would push us to think of grand strategy itself less as a discrete thing with certain properties (e.g., as more or less active), albeit as something that might change from one administration to another, and more as a process. That is, a relational approach to early U.S. grand strategy would turn our attention to the perpetually ongoing process of grand strategizing.²⁹ Strategy documents and doctrinal statements aside, there is never really a discrete “grand strategy” out there in the world even if some sets of policy-makers manage to impose relative stability on grand strategizing over some periods of time. Goddard and Krebs (2015, 9-11) take such an approach in arguing that there are “four constituent elements” of grand strategy: “Defining the national interest,” “Identifying threats,” “Selecting remedies,” and “Mobilizing publics and resources”.³⁰ These are processes that may produce relatively stable actions from policy-makers over time, but this also emphasizes the mutability of grand strategy and the difficulty of encapsulating a state's grand strategy with a single word or doctrine (the multiplicity of grand strategy for which Reich and Dombrowski [2017] argue would thus fit rather well in a relational framework, though they do not embed their claim in any such theoretical apparatus). Insofar as grand strategizing involves defining one's interests and identifying threats in relation to others, the practice of grand strategy may change from day to day to the extent that relations with one or more others change for reasons endogenous or exogenous to the relationship(s).³¹

“‘process,’ a key concept in the relational theory, is defined in terms of relations in motion” (Qin 2016, 35-37). See Jackson and Nexon (2019) for a discussion of points of contrast in Anglophone and Sinophone relationalism.

²⁶ I focus on relationalism here because of the infrequency with which it has been applied to the study of grand strategy despite the paths it opens for interventions in theoretical and policy debates (Nexon 2021; Pampinella n.d.). My argument for bringing relationalism “in” is not an argument for pushing other approaches out.

²⁷ Indeed, Grynaviski (2018, 21) cites Jackson and Nexon (1999) in explaining his approach. Maass's (2020, 27-30) emphasis on the intertwined perceptions of political elites and the general public and the ways in which state actions can transform the state could lend itself to a more explicitly relational approach. By contrast, Kupchan's (2020), more (implicitly) substantialist approach takes U.S. grand strategy to be a reasonably coherent thing that directed policy-makers. As previously noted, relationalism is methodologically neutral, and while Grynaviski (2018) and Maass (2020) make use of qualitative case studies, relationalism is not bound to this or any other method.

²⁸ This bears some resemblance to Popescu's (2018, 446) work on “emergent strategy,” which he defines as “a process of navigating through an unpredictable world by improvisation and continuous learning”.

²⁹ As applied to grand strategy, practice theory entails a similar commitment to the notion of grand strategizing “as a collective process of meaning making and ordering the world” (Bueger and Gadinger 2021, 145).

³⁰ Goddard and Krebs have independently done much work in this relational idiom. Like Jackson and Nexon, they did their doctoral work at Columbia University and can be placed in the New York School of relationalism.

³¹ Endogenous change in international relations is often associated with constructivist theory such as Wendt (1992), for whom the “Hobbesian anarchy” in which states seek their security at the expense of others is a contingent social fact that could be transformed into more other-regarding “Lockean” or “Kantian” systems. Systemic theories,

Relationalism would thus suggest caution in the act of categorization itself given that this risks unnecessarily overstating the stability of grand strategizing or other such processes.

Second, relationalism would push us to rethink the question of which relations shape a state's grand strategy. That is, grand strategy—or strategizing—is indeed relational, and it is not immediately obvious whether we should assume that a relatively narrow or broad array of relations shape a state's grand strategy. While we might still conceptualize grand strategy as “a state's theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself” (Posen 1986, 13), security is not sought in a vacuum; it is sought in relation to particular others, the salience and characteristics of which may vary over time. The question of why any given set of relations are most significant in any given state's grand strategizing is an empirical question that can be subjected to appropriate scrutiny. Policy-makers in the newly independent United States, as Weeks (2013, 37, 56-57) details, believed threats to emanate primarily from three other powers—from Britain, Spain, and Native nations, and at least in Washington's lifetime, the first two “ultimately proved less threatening to the United States than the ongoing resistance of Native American tribes along the western frontier,” a threat that would be most costly for the United States in the Ohio War (or Northwest Indian War) of 1790-1795.³² Indeed, I would take early U.S. grand strategizing to have been constituted primarily by relations with European powers—primarily with Britain, Spain, and I would add France given the disagreement between Anglophiles and Francophiles in the early republic—and with Native nations. By contrast, the view of early U.S. grand strategy as isolationist rests on a view of U.S. grand strategy in which its primary locus was Europe. Kupchan's (2020) argument ultimately places much weight on the observation that the United States did not form permanent military alliances with European powers for many years. But relations with Native nations were simply a more significant part of early American political life than this suggests. As Grynaviski (2018, 143) notes, “By any reasonable method of counting, most American military history is a history of wars against American Indians,” and Maass (2020, 83) adds that after decades of assisting in the pursuit of Native lands, the Bureau of Indian Affairs apologized in 2000 for “its role in ‘the ethnic cleansing... and destructive efforts to Indian cultures,” efforts that we should indeed see as partly constitutive of early U.S. grand strategy.³³

Third, a relational approach highlights the opportunity structures that enable and constrain political action, grand strategizing included. For early U.S. policy-makers, the day-to-day work of grand strategizing and putting strategy into practice occurred in a context of significant constraints on crafting and maintaining connections with others. Indeed, to the extent

however, generally do allow for at least some degree of change through unit interaction even if they do not foresee any equilibrium outcome in which sovereign political entities will reshape the international system to the extent that units come to see the security of others as functionally equivalent to their own security (Braumoeller 2012; Fearon 2018). Bull (1977, 9-16), for example, distinguishes between an international system and an international society, his premise being that the former (which only entails enough unit interaction such that all units must consider the potential actions of the others) can and often does develop into the latter (which entails at least a minimal set of rules to ensure common interests and values can be attained). Similarly, Waltz's (1979, 100) structural realist theory explicitly starts with unit interactions from which homogenizing but non-deterministic systemic constraints arise.

³² See Parent (2011, ch. 3 and ch. 4) for a discussion of the perceived threats from Britain that motivated U.S. union and the deepening of its union with its move from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution.

³³ As Maass (2020, 67) notes, early U.S. political elites largely thought that expansion could and should proceed through treaties and purchase, something most explicit in a 1783 letter from George Washington to James Duane: “There is nothing to be obtained by an Indian war but the soil they live on and this can be had by purchase at less expense.”

that there is a case for the United States as having practiced isolationism before 1898, this surely has something to do with the relatively weakness of the United States at the time and global practices that offered fewer opportunities for connection.³⁴ As Maoz (2011, 11) notes, the “interstate system” in 1816 “had ‘only’ twenty-three states. Much of the interaction between these states was either political or economic (with ties being conflict, alliances, diplomatic relations, and some trade). But in 1816, there was only one international organization: The Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine,” which had only six members. “In 1910,” he continues, “the number of states was forty-six, exactly double the number of states in 1816. Yet, there were also forty-six IGOs, and nearly all states participated in at least one of them,” and IGOs have further proliferated since then as technology has enabled easier communication and transportation (Maoz 2011, 11). Kupchan (2020, 352) recognizes this change, and this is one of the reasons he argues against a “return” to isolationism—because the “economic, social, technological, and strategic interdependence” of today’s world would make any such turn self-defeating.

On the other hand, the North American continent offered relatively low barriers to expansion. Benjamin Franklin predicted in a 1751 pamphlet, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind,” that U.S. population growth would naturally lead to westward expansion (Dahl 2018, 26-27), and early political elites generally saw their expansion across the continent as something that would be relatively easy to pursue. The social environment was similarly conducive to U.S. expansion. U.S. policy-makers were able to successfully legitimize their expansion domestically and internationally by appealing “to both revolutionary and European principles, deploying a heady mix of republican and legal language to justify their increasingly aggressive aims” (Goddard 2018, 49). The domestic institutional environment was also conducive to expansion in some ways. As Paolino (1973, 25) notes in his discussion of Thomas Jefferson’s authorization of the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson and other presidents were willing to dismiss constitutional hurdles when they stood in the way of territorial expansion that could receive sufficient Congressional support. In short, a relational approach to early U.S. grand strategy would call our attention to changes in both international and domestic network structures and could thereby help us to understand how unthinkable options became thinkable (or *vice versa*).

Conclusion

Was early U.S. grand strategy isolationist? I have argued that it was not. By Kupchan’s (2020) own standards, the list of exceptions to this purported isolationism is so long that it is not clear whether the concept is at all useful. To the extent that Americans—policy-makers or members of the general public—saw their country as pursuing an isolationist grand strategy, this may be an interesting phenomenon in its own right, but it does not speak to an accurate or useful conception of early U.S. grand strategy.

In considering where literature on early U.S. grand strategy might go from here, I have argued that relationalism offers a fruitful path forward. This may productively unsettle some of our long-established narratives of U.S. foreign policy and complicate the received wisdom of

³⁴ Kupchan (2020, 33) also identifies Japan during the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1867) as having practiced isolationism, and he may have a stronger case there.

what constitutes “grand strategy” while also providing a clearer understanding of the relations and processes that have comprised American grand strategizing.

To return to Lippmann’s (1952, 12, 14) understanding of isolationism, after his admonition to treat the concept with care, he argued that it “is not pacifism and withdrawal. It is a deposit of ideas from the experience of conquering, consolidating and securing the national homeland. ... The principle of the policy was to keep a free hand in order to expand westward to the continental limits. ... The isolationists of the twentieth century have wished to isolate not merely to the American continental domain and the Western hemisphere. In the last analysis they have wanted to isolate American decisions and actions, to have the final word wherever Americans are involved.” In other words, for Lippmann, isolationism in American history has been about the desire for as much freedom of action as possible—on the North American continent and beyond. While I remain unconvinced that “isolationism” is the right term for this desire, relationalism can indeed help us think through the ways that U.S. policy-makers have sought freedom from the constraints others might impose. “The term ‘isolationism’ has been inherited rather than invented,” historian Christopher McKnight Nichols notes in a study of this rhetoric (2011, 18). “This inheritance,” he argues, “has provided a great wealth of meaning, and yet it also has yielded a host of thorny problems.” As a concept applied to early U.S. grand strategy, isolationism creates more problems than it is worth.

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