Denizens of a Center: Anti-Wilsonian Internationalism in the Twentieth Century
By Ryan Irwin*

Did the Cold War mark a rupture in U.S. world history? This essay explores four moments in the twentieth century, and does so in a way that wrestles with this question. As the paper proceeds—as it creates a dialogue between these four episodes—an argument about liberalism will hopefully come into view. The Cold War marked a historical rupture, yes, but it didn’t overturn American assumptions about global governance. These assumptions had hardened decades earlier—and they’re the focus of this paper’s reflections.

Two claims orient this story. The first is about periodization. Scholarship about liberalism in the twentieth century is often organized by the struggle against communism, which makes 1945 a natural turning point. Narratives in this mold tend to follow a script tinged with tragedy. The literature has convincingly shown, for instance, that anticommunism created fear and insecurity and curtailed civil liberties. Moreover, U.S. military service molded citizenship in ways that stifled the country’s political imagination and exacerbated racial inequalities.

By shifting attention from anticommunism to the law, this essay departs from this script. On the one hand, my approach pushes our eyes backward in time, unsettling 1945’s centrality to the twentieth century by rooting liberalism in a story about American jurisprudence. On the other hand, this approach gestures

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* Colleagues, thank you for this invitation and the opportunity to share this essay. It’s a preliminary stab at articulating some themes that animate my current book project, and I look forward to your comments, suggestions, and criticisms. The thoughts here are a long way from polished, and the piece doesn’t feel ready for wide circulation. Thanks for you consideration.


toward a different understanding of the Cold War in U.S. world history—one with implications for how we think about American power.

Indeed, the essay’s second claim is about emplotment. The protagonists here were legal realists first and anticommunists second. Their political identities were shaped by their shared antagonism toward the natural law tradition, which they blamed for the excesses of the Gilded Age. By fetishizing contract and property rights, natural law had allowed American monopolies to run amok. This critique went hand-in-hand with a conversation about the “grammar of power”—one that drew upon pragmatism and sociology and propelled these protagonists into positions of influence, where they stayed until they were toppled themselves by a different rights tradition rooted in the movement against racism. Many of the assumptions explicated here were buried by the end of the late twentieth century.

Irony, in other words, undergirds this story. Framing a history of liberalism in this manner—sloting it between two distinct rights movements—adjusts our understanding of the Cold War and makes it easier to recognize continuities that stretched from the 1910s through the 1960s. To appreciate American global governance we might reconsider these continuities—they tell us something useful about the logic of American power during the mid-twentieth century.

Old man and the sea

We’ll begin this story in 1995 in a community called North Haven. Situated about half way up Maine’s coastline, North Haven is a small island, reachable only by ferry. Fewer than four hundred people live there year round, though the population swells in July and August for obvious reasons, and in August of that year, George Kennan retreated to North Haven for several weeks to enjoy the quiet and catch up on some correspondence and reading. “Among the books that our hostess left in this cottage,” he wrote in his diary on the evening of the 25th, was “a [volume] of taped interviews,” which he opened at random—he explained to himself (and anyone who might read his diary in the future)—whereupon he discovered interviews with Felix Frankfurter, Walter Lippmann, and Dean Acheson, “all older men and celebrities of the time when I was in my Planning Staff period” in the 1940s.4

The interviews prompted memories. Back then, in those “long-gone days,” Kennan wrote, he had been “impressed by the reputations and authority” of these three individuals. However, he was “now something of a minor celebrity [himself],” and one who regarded himself “as the intellectual equal” of any of them. “It amuses me to think back on the deference with which I treated them all.” Frankfurter, Kennan continued, was a “wily and formidable denizen of a political center dominated by lawyers, but neither a philosopher nor an impressive personality.” Lippmann was a “fine writer with a brilliant mind” who “wrote too often and too much, his formidable critical quality carrying him around in circles until he found himself

chasing his own tail.” (Lippmann also resented Kennan, Kennan wrote, because he had penned the famous X-article.) Meanwhile, Acheson was “in every inch a man of the law”—who knew nothing about the American Foreign Service and failed to defend those who had been maligned unfairly by McCarthyism. He could only operate in a world of courts and laws.5

The entry is both revealing and ironic. It is revealing because it confirms, in part, what many scholars have said of George Kennan. We tend to think of him at the center of the Establishment—the sage whose ideas “suffused” America’s Cold War grand strategy, as Henry Kissinger put it in his review of John Gaddis’s Kennan biography.6 Yet Kennan saw himself as an outsider, and it is not unfair to say that he carried that mark with some resentment. (Imagine yourself on a vacation a half century from now, stumbling upon a memory of a moment fifty years past, and feeling compelled to systematically lay out the flaws of three people you sort of knew in “those long-gone days.”) Even better, the passage hints at why Kennan saw himself as an outsider. Age was a factor; Kennan was an awkward, pensive, boyish-looking 40-year old, surrounded, in his own mind, by self-assured 50-and 60-year old “celebrities.” However, more important was Kennan’s craft. In his own words, Frankfurter and Acheson were men of the law, and Lippmann swam confidently in those waters. These were charismatic individuals, but more specifically they were denizens of a center dominated by lawyers. Kennan was not a lawyer.

The entry indicates that Kennan opened this book of interviews at random on that late summer day, and that he just happened to stumble upon these three entries, which prompted his reflections. Irrespective of whether this claim is true, it is most definitely ironic—because if Kennan indeed dumped these individuals together randomly, it was serendipitous. He may not have appreciated it, but the life paths of these three individuals were profoundly entwined. Frankfurter and Lippmann had lived together during World War I. They had met in Boston in 1914, and they corresponded regularly, mostly arguing about the New Republic, which was a magazine that Lippmann edited in those years and Frankfurter shaped behind the scenes. With America’s entry into the war in 1917, both men relocated to Washington to work for the Wilson administration. They had rooms together in the “House of Truth,” which was a home owned by a mutual friend, a name given to the property by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who frequently dined there with Lippmann and Frankfurter and other young progressives who hoped to change the world.7

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5 Ibid., 647.


It gets better. In this same period, Frankfurter was mentoring a young Dean Acheson, who graduated Harvard Law in 1918, which is where Frankfurter taught. Frankfurter loved Acheson. He got him a position clerking for Louis Brandeis at the Supreme Court, and then secured Acheson his first government job in Franklin Roosevelt's Treasury Department, and was single-handedly responsible for getting Acheson back into government just before World War II. When Frankfurter became a Supreme Court justice himself in the late 1930s, and relocated to Washington permanently, the two men walked from their homes in Georgetown to Foggy Bottom every morning, gossiping about their colleagues and debating the nature of law and the lessons of history.\(^8\)

Finally, it would not be an exaggeration to say that if you had lived through the early Cold War, Dean Acheson and Walter Lippmann loomed larger in public debates about U.S. foreign policy than any two Americans alive. Kennan had a nice article in an elite magazine, but Lippmann was America's most influential commentator and the author of widely read books about the Cold War. Kennan had a staff at the State Department, but Acheson ran the place—he was the face of Truman's foreign policy after 1947 and arguably the architect of U.S. grand strategy in these years. And Lippmann and Acheson did not get along, making Kennan’s pairing, if truly random, surprisingly evocative. These were the heavyweights of Henry Luce's “American Century.”\(^9\)

Kennan’s diary entry is useful because it reveals an assumption, which raises a question and clarifies this paper’s argument. The assumption is my own. In historiographical terms, this essay takes for granted Robert Beisner’s claim that: “It is clearly an error to lump Acheson with Kennan as coeval advocates of containment, or, worse, to see Kennan as its founder and Acheson its executor.”\(^10\) Kennan saw himself as an outsider because he was an outsider. And if you don’t share this assumption—which is admittedly contested—this essay’s intervention will be difficult. Because from this assumption comes the question: If Kennan wasn’t really an insider in the early Cold War, who was? And while this paper is interested in relationships and policy, it is principally a paper about ideas, specifically the ideas of Acheson, Frankfurter, and Lippmann, and I am going to argue that they were important insiders; and that the tension just framed for us by Kennan—a tension that hints at his own psychoses—also reveals the importance of law to a strata of elites during the twentieth century’s frenetic middle decades. Looking closely at this

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conversation illuminates an exchange about governance that saturated the early Cold War.

**Man of the law**

Which segues to a second moment. Not a diary entry but a public speech, delivered about thirty years before Kennan found himself in North Haven, Maine, reflecting on those long gone days. The year was 1965. Bloomington Indiana is often cold in March, and Dean Acheson found himself delivering a speech to some policy scholars at Indiana University that month. Acheson had chosen a relevant question to unpack that day: What did it mean to be a man of the law? He was talking specifically about the relationship of law to American foreign policy, and trying to explain the distinctiveness of U.S. world history. His theme was ambivalence—“Ambivalences in American Foreign Policy” was the talk’s title—and a good portion of what he had to say might be characterized as a lament against change.

It was not Acheson’s finest hour. To the extent that historians have lingered on his words, they have focused on the racism. Acheson told his audience that young people reached maturity faster in warm climates, and that the United Nations was becoming an orphanage run by “children whose development had been retarded.” He lectured that nonwhite people needed to control their populations, and give up their dreams of steel mills, airlines, and nationalized industries.  

Historians who have written about Acheson’s post-secretary days, who have cited this speech and others like it, have tended to zero in on these words. They are awkward, offensive, and quotable. Here you have an individual who is widely credited as a great statesman, whose racial paternalism is exposed warts and all.

The historiographical tendency to focus on Acheson’s racism is so pronounced, that his actual talk can be a little disorienting. Because the lecture, in his mind, was not about race—it was about law and power. He was complaining about change, especially in the decolonized world, but doing so to make a more capacious point, namely that the rapid expansion of the international community after the mid-1950s had left American elites disoriented. Stripped of pretense, his argument was that too many people were saying too many things, and in context of a truly global Cold War, his successors in Washington had become too comfortable accepting the path of least resistance—i.e. more aid, more guns, fewer conditions—rather than pursuing a coherent approach toward world affairs. Acheson’s message was not as subtle as he probably thought: “I did it better.” However, more noteworthy, perhaps, was his suggestion that Americans themselves were responsible for their own

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11 “Ambivalences in American Foreign Policy,” 5 March 1965, box 52, Dean Acheson papers, Yale University Manuscripts & Archives.

disorientation, and much of his talk was an attempt to explain how this confusion had come about.

For answers, Acheson looked to History. Since the nineteenth century, he argued, U.S. foreign policy had been organized around a project: the creation of an interdependent, rule-based community of sovereign states. Acheson introduced this claim with a quote from Tennyson’s *Locksley Hall*, and then laid out a fairly teleological narrative, underscoring the point that while the exact form of America’s commitment had changed, this project—the establishment of an interdependent, rule-based community of sovereign states—had remained a lodestar in U.S. history. His logic was somewhat muddled that day, but he had explained this lodestar clearly in other talks and articles. “Community making” resonated because of the lessons of the nineteenth century, when the United States had proved that a cross-section of sovereign states could—albeit with some difficulty—create a union of interdependent sovereign states. If one did not appreciate this historical context, one could not really grasp what it meant to be a man of the law, because the law, in Acheson’s formulation, is what held this interdependent world together.13

Which hinted at the source of American ambivalence in 1965. The legal profession in the United States had undergone a sea change during the interwar years, and not enough people, in Acheson’s mind, understood this transformation, hence America’s inability to orient itself vis-à-vis the tumult of the 1960s.14 Which does not negate Acheson’s racist words, of course, but it does raise the question: What was he talking about? Up until the early twentieth century, Acheson explained, American lawyers had tended to tackle “community making” through the prism of natural law. In layman’s terms, proponents of natural law claimed that certain truisms existed irrespective of regional context. This trope had propped up the civilizing mission in the nineteenth century and it had coalesced into a genre of law that fetishized the authority of property rights and commercial contracts. This tradition arguably allowed monopolies to run rampant during the Gilded Age, and Acheson was not a fan.15 “The disciple of Natural Law seemed to Justice Holmes”—Acheson’s muse in all things—“to be like the knight of romance.” It was “not enough that you agreed that his lady was a very nice girl.” No, “If you did not admit that she was the best girl that God ever made (or would make), you must fight.” Because truth was the Truth, resistance was futile.16

Acheson was a proud legal realist and a partisan in the fight against natural law. He disavowed knights of romance, or, more specifically, the presupposition that if enough people declared these principles as universally true it would be possible to

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13 Ibid. [Note: add Acheson’s other addresses on this topic.]
16 “Ambivalence.”
create some sort of "celestial city on earth." More often than not, this mindset prevented checks on the power of the powerful. It was wiser to begin from the premise that conflict was an inevitable feature of human existence. Law was not a set of self-evident principles that might bring about utopia. No, law was a tool created by man, wielded by men, and its highest purpose was to canalize conflict. Good lawyers therefore were consensus makers, not Truth tellers. And since their purpose was to create an environment where sovereigns accepted their interdependence—a departure from the natural law tradition—it followed that declarations, resolutions, and proclamations were useless. Legal realists needed institutions that cultivated "habits of productive dialogue." After all, it was only possible to create an interdependent, rule-based community of sovereign states if conflict and negotiation were woven into this project's sinews.

Which made Acheson's conclusion somewhat ironic, because the problem America faced, in his mind, was that too many people disagreed with him. Legal realism had not squashed the natural law tradition, and because Acheson's viewpoint was contested, disorientation was inevitable. The real nut was the U.N. Charter. Some Americans (incorrectly) saw the United Nations through prism of natural law—they viewed the Charter as coeval to a world constitution—while others (rightly) felt that it was merely a tool that massaged humankind's inherent tendencies. And if Americans themselves had not come to terms with this schism, how could policymakers adopt a coherent response to the demands of the decolonized world? Solving the ambivalences of American foreign relations did not require Americans to cast countries out of the United Nations, and Acheson did not want Americans to divest themselves from that organization. In this particular setting on this particular day, he cast himself as an educator with two points. First, the United States needed to eschew natural law. Second, United Nations was a tool not a sacred cow. "The ambivalence in our foreign policy," Acheson concluded, "did not come from our tendency to swing between idealism and Machiavellianism." American ambivalence stemmed from the fact that not enough people were realist. Not enough people understood the law correctly.

What did it mean to be a man of the law? Acheson's was a fairly thorough response: men of the law were leaders who used institutions to cultivate dialogue to avoid

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17 Ibid.
20 "Ambivalence."
21 Ibid.
cataclysmic war, thereby nurturing sovereign states into accepting the status quo. He wasn’t really saying, “The United Nations had become an orphanage,” even if the quip remains quotable. Acheson’s point was more nuanced. “People believe for some incomprehensible reason that the U.N. is some disembodied moral force apart from ourselves,” he had explained to President Truman in the late 1950s. “There can be no U.N. without guts and guns from us.” Acheson returned to this theme often in retirement, and he obviously sensed that his worldview was out of step with the times in 1965. Bloody Sunday—the turning point of the voting rights movement—unfolded just days before Acheson’s Bloomington talk, and civil rights activists were unquestionably rehabilitating the universal rights tradition with profound, important implications.

**Denizen of the center**

Which raises two questions. First, would anyone else—in 1965 or earlier—have grasped the distinctions hidden within Acheson’s lecture? Second, where did Acheson’s ideas come from? These are different questions, and we will take the second one first as we shift the setting somewhat. Because Acheson wasn’t just delivering speeches in 1965, he was also mourning his best friend’s death. Felix Frankfurter had suffered a stroke in 1962, and while he regained some of his mobility, his final years had been difficult. His wife passed away. He was forced to leave Supreme Court. His reputation was sullied by the perception that he’d delayed the Brown decision. Frankfurter passed in late February 1965, but throughout those final years, Acheson never left his side. Just days before traveling to Indiana, Acheson had written a friend: “I thought I was prepared—[Felix] had been ill for so long—but found that I was not.” In another letter, he wrote, “Ours was the most joyous association of my life . . . Almost every day something happens which I immediately remind myself to tell Felix about.”

Acheson’s ideas came from Frankfurter, which Acheson admitted openly and often. Although it may be more accurate to say that Frankfurter introduced Acheson to a contest—the fight against natural law—that Acheson embraced with considerable enthusiasm. Regardless, to appreciate the depth of their friendship, and peel back the next layer of this story, we need to transport ourselves back in time another twenty years to a moment in October 1943. Frankfurter was arguably at the height of his influence in 1940s. He had arrived in the United States from Austria as a child in 1890s—he spoke no English—and grew up in modest circumstances in New York City. Yet he distinguished himself in school and went to Harvard Law, and then

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22 *Brinkley, Acheson*, 301.
distinguished himself further as Henry Stimson’s right hand during the Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft presidencies, and then distinguished himself further still as a law professor at Harvard. From his nest in Cambridge, Frankfurter became one of Franklin Roosevelt’s most trusted advisors, and while he refused to return to Washington himself in 1933, he exercised considerable influence over the new president, especially when it came to staffing and policy considerations. Frankfurter’s influence landed him a spot on the Supreme Court Justice in 1939, and, as noted earlier, he had settled in Georgetown that year, buying a home just around the corner from Acheson.26

On this particular October day in 1943, the two men did what they did almost every day—they walked to work together. Frankfurter and Acheson did not record their conversations, but they occasionally sent notes to each other after they arrived at work, and on October 27 they’d evidently had a stimulating back-and-forth about the relationship between legitimacy and power. Frankfurter was an excitable, combative conversation partner, and he was still humming about a position he had evidently staked out that morning. “Even a people’s war,” he wrote, “precludes cognizance by the people—[defined as] the press—of the deliberations and decisions of the Joint Staffs.” Frankfurter and Acheson had evidently debated World War II that morning, specifically how the U.S. government should balance the ideal of transparency—a cornerstone of democratic governance—with the strategic imperatives of war. “All that the people are entitled to,” he continued, “is [an] assurance that the guiding considerations for military decisions is vanquishment of aggression ... [so that] democracy may proceed secure from aggression and the fear of its reappearance.”27

Which is a simple enough concept to grasp. Less straightforward was Frankfurter’s next point, because this same principle, he argued, could be extended logically to politics. The great travesty of World War I, Frankfurter suggested, had been Woodrow Wilson’s commitment to “open covenants openly arrived at.”28 For Wilson, legitimacy came from ideas, hence his emphasis on the Fourteen Points. And in Wilson’s mind, in Frankfurter’s retelling, if one laid down a True idea, foreign diplomats would be compelled to accept this principle as legitimate and coalesce around it, which would lead ipso facto to more power for the United States. This approach hadn’t worked; Versailles was a disaster. The Allies had rejected Wilson’s


27 Felix Frankfurter to Dean Acheson, 27 October 1943, box 19, Felix Frankfurter papers, Library of Congress.

28 Ibid
plan, voters had rejected Wilson’s treaty, and here were Acheson and Frankfurter, walking to work in the midst of a second “people’s war.” The unasked question of this note—which must have been focus of their morning walk—seemed to be: How does one lead in a way that’s both legitimate and effective? Wilson’s answer, lead from the front, had failed, and Hitler’s alternative was a non-starter.

Frankfurter seemed to be taking a bite at the apple, and he flirted with three distinct claims. First, legitimacy required communication and consistency. Week after week, American leaders had to establish a balance: “Precisely because so much [information] isn’t open to the public, enough knowledge must be conveyed so that confidence is established, and so that [the public] can be critical or at least raise questions, even though [the public] is disqualified from making constructive suggestions.” Second, it followed that legitimacy came not from ideas themselves, but from a style of exchange—or the act of being open without being transparent. “That’s the rub, Dean. Because—as no one knows better than you—[governance] does not consist of abstractions.” Maintaining this balance over time required a back and forth, not some unified theory or grand proclamation. No, America’s Grandest Strategy had nothing to do with ideas. It was, third, the establishment of an arena that cultivated conflict as a means to prevent aggression, nudging the public, in the process, to trust its leaders. “This presents us with one of the most exigent aspects of democracy, namely, how can the people be given enough knowledge to judge the validity of the policies pursued by their government when ... the material that makes up that policy is necessarily withheld from them.”

Frankfurter drove his point home with an example. “To be specific ... I should say that the success of the [United Nations] Food Conference”—which had taken place earlier in 1943—“was due to the treatment of the smaller nations as real sharers, and not merely as third party beneficiaries vel non.” This approach, this style of engagement, represented, in Frankfurter’s mind, a clear departure from America’s efforts in the previous World War. And “if I am right about the Food Conference, it indicates the kind of thing” that the United States might build upon going forward. To state the obvious, Frankfurter was giving his former student a lecture. Equally obvious is the fact that some of these lessons stuck, since Frankfurter’s phraseology animated some of Acheson’s later writing. Less obvious, Frankfurter’s comments hinted toward a playbook for achieving an objective that Acheson (and others) often acknowledged but rarely explained. If law was a tool created by man and wielded by men, so that smart leaders might avoid cataclysmic war and cultivate a community of sovereigns that accepted their own interdependence, Frankfurter was answering an obvious question with surprising candor: How do you use this tool? How might leaders foster habits of productive dialogue? The answer wasn’t straightforward but

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
it was clear enough: be open but not transparent, avoid declarations, and allow conflict to prevent aggression.

If we pause for a moment, Frankfurter’s logic actually sheds useful light on Acheson’s earlier distinction between idealism and Machiavellianism. If idealism was a code word for natural law—for this idea that truths were self-evident, and that their recognition would alter human behavior for the better—Machiavellianism evoked an era before Tennyson’s Locksley Hall. The phrase conjured a time before this quest for a rule-based community of sovereigns had taken hold of the American imagination. Machiavellianism suggested a ruthlessness that seemed unwise to these denizens of the center. Acheson did not juxtapose idealism and realism—the more familiar contrast for us today—because realism for him was tied to the conversation we’ve just excavated. Realism was what Frankfurter was talking about on that October morning. It was the middle way between having the wrong definition of law (a la Wilson) and a world without law (a la Machiavelli). Or in Acheson’s actual words, realism was the act of “keep[ing] one’s wits and perceptions sharp”—of “employing one’s native instinct for orderly work” by using the tools at one’s disposal. This formulation was quite distinct from Kennan’s realism, and it would have been unrecognizable to Henry Kissinger.

Bringing Acheson’s speech and Frankfurter’s note in dialogue gestures toward a wider claim. Despite the obvious differences between these artifacts—and they were written at different times for different audiences—there is a generational specificity to them. One can almost sense Woodrow Wilson’s shadow. It is present in the way Acheson framed his elaborate history lesson; it’s there in Frankfurter’s backhanded dismissal of Wilson’s record at Versailles. In the mind of its progenitors, this mindset—whatever we call it—did not exist in dialectic opposition to Wilsonianism, that would be an exaggeration, but it was quintessentially anti-Wilsonian. For Acheson and Frankfurter, American world power was an assumed given. These people did not need the twenty-eighth president of the United States to tell them that the United States was big and influential and connected to everything after World War I. The issue—the only issue that mattered—was how one governed. And Acheson and Frankfurter’s ideas about this question, expressed publicly and scribbled privately, were woven into a narrative that had 1919 at its center.

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34 A useful set of reflections on this point, which explores the intellectual genealogy of International Relations, is Michael C. Williams, ed, Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Chasing one’s tail

Which segues to some conclusions. Because at the center of this story is one final moment, plucked from World War I. Would anyone else have grasped these distinctions? An answer reveals itself if we turn to Walter Lippmann, arguably the most influential, widely read columnist of the twentieth century. He occupied a unique place in this milieu. Frankfurter and Lippmann were close friends during World War I. As indicated earlier, they met in 1914, thanks mostly to a New York State judge named Learned Hand, who saw Frankfurter and Lippmann as rising stars of the progressive movement.36 At 32 years old, Frankfurter had just joined the faculty at Harvard Law, and he was a force of nature—combative, connected, and confident. At 25 years old, Lippmann had just become an editor at the New Republic. His first book had won him wide acclaim; Theodore Roosevelt announced in a review that Lippmann was the “brightest young mind in America.”37 Lippmann and Frankfurter were enormously ambitious; they were both Jewish; they were progressive nationalists who took cues from Herbert Croly and James Bryce, and idolized Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.; and, most importantly, they saw themselves as intellectuals who could swim in the world of politics—in the world as it was.38

It’s not hard to see why they enjoyed each other’s company. Frankfurter had a brilliant sense of how things worked. He had served in government and he had an intuitive grasp of power and how the U.S. government really operated, as well as a sharp legal mind that got lost joyfully in the minutiae of complex problems. Lippmann, in contrast, saw the big picture effortlessly. He was a far better writer than Frankfurter and he used prose to clarify the stakes of the issues that interested him. If Frankfurter lost himself in details, Lippmann possessed that rare quality of being able to peer around new corners. When the United States entered the war in 1917, Frankfurter leapt at the opportunity to rejoin the War Department and he dragged Lippmann with him to Washington. The two men worked as special assistants to America’s War Secretary Newton Baker. Frankfurter dealt initially with labor issues in the American West and then traveled to Paris, while Lippmann got on the radar of Edward House and eventually ended up as an informal advisor to President Wilson, who made him the principal interlocutor of the so-called Inquiry, the super-secret committee tasked with drafting America’s peace plan.39

39 Useful overviews are Michael Parrish, Felix Frankfurter and His times: The Reform Years (New York: Free Press, 1982), chapters 5-6; Steel, chapters 10-13.
Lippmann and Frankfurter’s correspondence from this period dwarfed the exchanges they had in writing with other people, and in subsequent years, both men framed this period as formative. It was a time when their service forced them to explore their assumptions. In debating how to prevent a recrudescence of world war, for example, they elaborated arguments about American history. “Would it not be [wise] to take the specific countries involved [in the war] and study the nature and origin of Unions as well as the forces which call for separation,” Frankfurter suggested to Lippmann in October 1917. “If American history revealed anything it was how to organize a union.” Historically, he continued, successful unions had (1) protected their members against a common enemy; (2) maintained commercial relations or free trade; and (3) exploited conquered territory. This narrative of the American union—internalized by Acheson many years later—came within a free ranging back-and-forth about Frankfurter’s experiences in Arizona, where he had been dispatched to ensure that copper miners did not strike. In Frankfurter’s own mind, he was on the front lines of point three, since Arizona had joined the union only five years earlier.40 “I’d like to bring you back east,” Lippmann replied. “The moment I see a break in the line”—the moment a position opened on the Inquiry—“I will telegraph you.”41

Colonel House ensured that that did not happen—which is a separate story—and the war eventually left Frankfurter and Lippmann deeply frustrated about their president. In his Reminiscences, Frankfurter concluded, “Wilson was a great fellow for laying down postulates and avowing principles, but not for translating ... these general principles into actual governance.”42 Lippmann wrote an entire book about the events of 1918, which he published in the New Republic.43 The volume was an act of catharsis—he had been sidelined when Wilson arrived in Paris and he watched with dismay as the Fourteen Points were dismantled. His friend Harold Laski concluded that the “process of statesmanship left [Lippmann] ... more critical, less facile ... He possesses a deeper [appreciation] that you don’t find truth by skimming milk.”44 And there is no question that Lippmann returned from Paris in a critical mood. His New Republic set the progressive world on fire by announcing its opposition to Wilson’s peace treaty in May 1919, two months before Wilson returned home, and much of Lippmann’s public writing from the time focused on the peace treaty’s supposed fallacies: it blocked the triumph of industrial

40 Felix Frankfurter to Walter Lippmann, 3 December 1917, box 77, Felix Frankfurter papers, Library of Congress.
44 Harold Laski to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., in Mark DeWolfe Howe, ed., Holmes-Laski Letters.
democracy, entrusted France with mastery of mainland Europe, and employed America’s economic power to maintain this new status quo.\textsuperscript{45}

However, in private, Lippmann obsessed over a different issue—a deeper issue—the \textit{urgent} issue—of why Wilson had failed. This was the question that occupied Lippmann and Frankfurter’s exchanges during the summer of 1919. The former was in New York and the latter was still in Paris, and their private letters are this essay’s final moment. “The bottom fact,” Frankfurter wrote, in providing his autopsy of just finished treaty, “is that neither the President nor the Colonel had an adequate conception of what the problem of peace-making was.” He continued, “I do not mean the actual detailed questions”—the questions handled by Lippmann’s Inquiry in 1917 and 1918. No, for Frankfurter, America had failed because of Wilson’s “technique.” Wilson had no process to deal with the alternative schemes he encountered in Paris—no way to co-opt his rivals into America’s fold.\textsuperscript{46}

Lippmann’s response came a few days later. “You are quite right in saying that the bottom fact of the whole failure was a failure of technique.” Wilson’s intentions were “good enough,” but “Paris [had] demonstrated that you cannot . . . improvise a structure of good will.” Good will came from communication and consistency. “The United States should have secured a general agreement about the war’s aims before it entered the war,” rather than creating its postwar plans in secret, and the country desperately needed to create a “diplomatic service capable of diagnosing Europe.” Without steady contact it would be impossible to translate America’s economic influence into political power. “We never negotiated but simply enunciated,” Lippmann concluded, and “what diplomatic service we had was insulated from the President, who worked by intimation from Colonel House, who had his own irresponsible, haphazard diplomatic coterie.”\textsuperscript{47}

Many historians would take issue with this conclusion, with the premise that Wilson’s style had foiled the treaty. But I am not suggesting—I am not really interested in whether—Lippmann and Frankfurter were correct. What is more interesting is the fact that they obviously thought they were. And their conclusion about technique marked the beginning of an intellectual debate, one that resonated among young liberals and set in motion the story explored in this paper. “The bottom fact of the whole failure was a failure of technique.” This claim became a lodestar for denizens of a political center dominated by law, and it gestures toward a set of assumptions.

These assumptions animated midcentury liberal internationalism. Any knight of romance could invent a grand strategy, or some pristine concept on a piece of paper

\textsuperscript{45} Walter Lippmann to Raymond Fosdick, 15 August 1919, box 9, Walter Lippmann papers, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives.

\textsuperscript{46} Felix Frankfurter to Walter Lippmann, 11 July 1919, box 77, Felix Frankfurter papers, Library of Congress.

\textsuperscript{47} Walter Lippmann to Felix Frankfurter, 20 July 1919, box 10, Walter Lippmann papers, Yale University Manuscripts & Archives.
that claimed to be universally true. What the United States needed was a framework for being powerful. America’s factories, its mines, its farms, its banks—its conquered territory—ensured that it was an Essential Nation abroad. But there was a difference between having power and being powerful. This was the lesson of World War I, a lesson that politicized this cross-section of smart, ambitious, young lawyers. What the United States needed was a framework for engaging other countries or a technique to bind these countries into some functional union with the United States. This project was as old—as intuitive—as the Northwest Ordinances, and it was a project whose historical urgency had been proved by the United States’ rise after the Civil War. It was a project that rebuffed the Machiavellianism of a bygone age, just as it rejected Wilsonianism in 1919. The United States needed a workable union, not a celestial city on a hill. This community making project was rooted in institutions, yes, but anchored by a paradigm we now call legal realism: a paradigm that embraced openness (or public diplomacy) even as it eschewed transparency; a paradigm that treated smaller states as real sharers, not third party beneficiaries; a paradigm that welcomed conflict in order to avoid aggression.

At the center of this story is a question that every young generation asks of those who came before: How will we do it better? Why does this particular answer matter? If we circle back to Kennan, perhaps the utility of a story like this one comes into sharper relief. First, Kennan wrote the history, or at least the diplomatic history. And he has been the muse for some of the most influential diplomatic historians of the late twentieth century. There is some value in simply acknowledging an influential conversation that has faded from view because, as Kennan admitted, Acheson, Frankfurter, and Lippmann mattered. Second, this conversation invites us to reflect on the Cold War’s beginning stages, or the lessons of that time for us today. America’s antagonism with the Soviet Union was enormously important and containment obviously shaped midcentury Washington—no one can reasonably deny that. But American elites might have engaged the Cold War with a very different set of assumptions.

If we reduce the total sum of American strategic thinking to anticommunism and center our historical narratives on 1945, then it is too easy to miss the fact that Americans constructed a truly mad number of institutions during the mid-twentieth century. This effort was not the opening act of a new story—these people were halfway through their lives. Early Cold Warriors were builders determined to codify the United States’ power and they used institutions crafted by lawyers who had a very particular understanding of what they were doing. These were employees of Acheson, students of Frankfurter, and readers of Lippmann. There’s no doubt that American leaders used coercive methods to ensure that these institutions worked in very particular ways. But if we focus our energy on that fact alone, we overlook the fact that the Cold War was entwined with this bigger, older, more interesting question: How do you govern an interdependent world? Describing midcentury liberals as “pragmatic” without unpacking the intellectual legwork here—without explaining where these assumptions came from and why they resonated—distorts this past in profound ways. It makes complex things seem obvious.
Who cares? Midcentury liberals had blind spots, especially when it came to race and gender, and they had a hubristic streak. They were self-proclaimed anti-imperialists, committed unapologetically to American power. But they lived in a fact-based world, and their record—and perhaps the notion of a political center itself—invites examination today, especially for those invested in the question: How will we do it better?