

# The Two Faces of American Isolationism

by John Lukacs

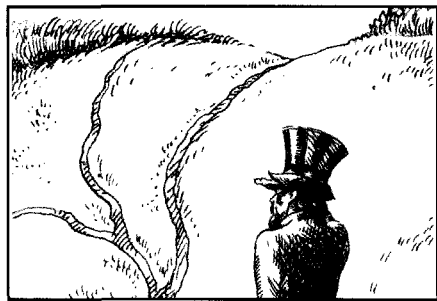
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**A** *Republic, Not an Empire: Reclaiming America's Destiny* is a pamphlet and a history. Some of the greatest compositions of the human mind were cast in the form of pamphlets, even when they were thrown at a public for immediate political purposes. There is nothing very wrong with Buchanan's pamphlet, which consists of two of the seven chapters of his book, framing the other five. They clang with the repeated sound of his hard-hammered points, sometimes imaginative but not unrealistic: indeed, worth thinking about. He is concerned with the—yes, often thoughtless—practices of international globalism, of excessive immigration, of American military and political commitments all around the globe, of insufficient concern with what the Russians think about their own security. He proposes (among other matters) that the principal task, and duty, of the army of the Republic is to defend its frontiers, especially on the Mexican border; that Puerto Rico should be allowed to become independent; that in the event of the dissolution of the Canadian state some of its provinces should be admitted to the United States; that the expansion of NATO is senseless, dangerous, and wrong. (In his previous book, he urged the merits of American industrial, though not agricultural, protectionism.) Every one of these propositions is worth considering. This book lauds the virtues of American isolationism—which is where the trouble comes in a volume that attempts nothing less than a history of American foreign policy over more than 200 years.

There is nothing very wrong with isolationism, so long as it is attuned to normal human aspirations to safety, privacy, integrity, and self-confidence. The trouble is with isolationists: a word that, according to H.L. Mencken and Patrick Buchanan, is merely a term of invective. But there is more to the matter than that. Isolationists, like pacifists (and Buchanan

is anything but the latter—indeed, he is very much a militarist), exist only in the abstract. Scratch an isolationist, and you will find an internationalist underneath. (The opposite is also true.) There are few pacifists, if any, who will not defend anyone or anything dear to them; there are few isolationists who are wholly uninterested in the relationship of their country to the rest of the world. Buchanan is not one of those few, being fiercely interested in the record of American foreign policy.

Of course no one can see the present independent from his view of the past, about which he may be mistaken. But what matters is the quality, even more than the quantity, of the mistakes in question—their purpose as well as their number. And Buchanan's mistakes are not just the expectable flaws (there are a few of those) of a nonprofessional historian. Their elements lie deeper.



The main trouble with almost all American isolationists in the 20th century has been their inconsistency—or call it selective patriotism, or special pleading. Many of those who were opposed to a war against Hitler's Germany very soon after it concluded became enthusiasts of an American crusade against Soviet Russia. This is not the place to compare the evils of Hitler with those of Stalin, or Nazism with communism—though it must be recognized that, for a long time, American ideological anticommunism was a primary force in both foreign and domestic politics, the cement that held the Republican party together for more than 45 years, eventually propelling their presidents into power: *the* nationalist party. (But no longer—which is Buchanan's present political problem.) During World War II, there were but two alternatives: Either all of Europe would be dominated by Hitler's Germany, or Western Europe would be liberated through Britain's alliance with America, with the possibility of Eastern Europe falling (partially and temporarily) into a Russian sphere of interest—and half of Europe was better than none. That was Winston

Churchill's perspective, from the very first hours of the war until its end. But in 1940 and '41, well even before Hitler's invasion propelled an unwilling Stalin into the conflict, America's isolationists were loud and clear against America standing by Britain. These isolationists are the heroes of Patrick J. Buchanan. And his arch-villain is Churchill.

Buchanan hates Churchill even more than he hates Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt (whom, of course, he does not spare). Churchill was a cynic and a liar—unlike Ronald Reagan, “an almost perfect blend of realism and idealism.” “By 1945 Germany had been destroyed and Churchill could poke about its ruins.” Buchanan says that in 1939 the British and the French should not have stood up for Polish independence. But when, in 1945, Churchill “sold out Poland to Stalin,” it was worth a Cold War—if not, indeed, more than that. Buchanan is convinced that it was wrong, and probably even criminal, for the United States to have fought the Third Reich. His pages glow with the inner fire of his belief: with his contempt for Britain and his allowance for Germany's plans for Eastern Europe in 1939. He writes that Hitler should have been allowed to invade Russia in 1939 (trampling Poland down on the way?), and that the Western democracies could afterward have made peace with him—and we would have been living in a better world. That is of course questionable—to say the least. But this is one of Buchanan's deepest beliefs.

In sum, Buchanan is as much of an internationalist as he is an isolationist—dependent on his choice of who the enemy is. And the same Buchanan who in this book attacks (not without reason) the ham-handed American intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo, in 1991 proposed that the Sixth Fleet enter the Adriatic to assist Croatia (a creation and ally of the Third Reich 50 years before that).

There is something to be said for nationalists and also for isolationists—at certain places and in certain times. But their cause must not be determined by one, and only one, element: by the selection—as visceral as it is mental—of their preferred enemy. There are estimably conservative elements in Buchanan's advocacy regarding the future of the United States, about its situation in the world. But in his vision of his country's past, he is neither an isolationist nor a conservative but a nationalist radical. c

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# Woolly Conservatism

by William Murchison

*"A Conservative is only a Tory who is ashamed of himself."*

—J. Hookham Frère

**The Paleoconservatives:  
New Voices of the Old Right**  
*Edited by Joseph Scotchie*  
New Brunswick, NJ:  
Transaction Publishers;  
212 pp., \$29.95



Plans to shuck the Tory Party's sacred name rattled the young Disraeli, who remarked that the replacement name, Conservative, sounded to him like "the invention of some pastry chef." Similarly, paleoconservatism conjures up the image—in my mind, anyway—of weight-lifter types in animal skins, flinging spears at woolly mammoths: Victor Mature meets Murray Rothbard. The paleoconservative movement might be advised one of these days to scratch around for a more compelling name than the one meant originally to distinguish its adherents from the neocons.

This is assuming such a movement actually means to move, and that it has a particular direction in mind. The impression that comes across from Joseph Scotchie's collection of essays by paleocon thinkers is of a formidable—mammoth would not be so bad a word—beast inclined to the stationary position, an animal whose brainpower merits more respect than its legs or trunk.

What I see in these essays (five of

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which appeared originally in *Chronicles*), in other words, is intelligent, pointed dissent from things as they are in a United States forgetful of its glorious heritage, more truly wedded to gold than God. What I do not see, at the same time, is a plan for doing much to rectify the situation.

Let that go. Anybody can draw up battle plans: Witness the army of political tacticians who fatten their stock portfolios at the expense of the major parties; adroit at showing how to carry states and precincts, clueless when it comes to defining what kind of country this should be.

The great, the consuming, virtue of *The Paleoconservatives* is the meticulous attention its contributors pay to how we should live and what we should believe: what ideas we should—gulp—offer to die for. Not a few of these essays are exhilarating. All are challenging. Bravo, Scotchie, I would say. Bravo, the well-

placed, literate concern for intelligence and dignity and honor and freedom.

I hope my spear-flinging brethren will not turn on me if I suggest that the paleoconservative *critique* is more important than the paleoconservative *program*—to the extent anyone would adduce the existence of a program. I do not think, just for instance, that the United States is going to accept Frank Chodorov's reprinted counsel that taxation is robbery. Chodorov, to know the true meaning of robbery, thou shouldst be living at this hour! In a hundred Texas school districts, the state takes locally raised tax monies and distributes them to districts of lesser "property wealth." Yet, with the whole American political system resting on government's power to act in just such ways, the tax system is not going to be reformed. A reform as innocent as the flat tax has virtually no chance of enactment.

Still, Chodorov's critique of taxation, with its echoes of old Bastiat, makes the gray cells dance. An America free to contemplate the possibility that government plunders us cannot be a lost cause.

So with Chilton Williamson, Jr.'s astute comments on multiculturalism and immigration ("Promises to Keep"), wherein it is brashly asserted that "there no longer is a United States in any save the legalistic sense." The people spigot, opened wide during Lyndon Johnson's regime, is not going to be turned off any time soon. I said "soon." We live in the most migratory moment since Rome fell. (A mitigating point: Some of these new fold—I speak from experience—are fine