

A Roundtable on Michael Kimmage, *The Abandonment of the West*

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Michael Kimmage

Whither the West? From Columbian Triumphalism to the first Non-Western Presidency: A Review of Michael Kimmage, *The Abandonment of the West*

Christopher McKnight Nichols

The title of this book evokes numerous Donald Trump tweets, statements, and threats over the past five years. It also raises questions: was Trump pro-West or not, and how does his administration and its policies compare to those of his predecessors?

Trumpism and the related, inchoate policies of “America First” were firmly positioned against the organizational structures and assumptions of the so-called liberal international order, or rules-based order. Trump’s targets ranged from NATO to the World Health Organization (WHO). From his speech at Trump Tower announcing his run for office to statements we heard during his efforts to contest the results of the 2020 election, Trump promulgated racist, particularist claims about which peoples and groups counted (white ones), which immigrants should be allowed in (northern European) and which should be banned (Muslims, those from “shithole” countries), and what wider heritages they fit into or “good genes” they were blessed with.

While Trump applauded certain ideals and figures in Western history, he eschewed alliances with Western and other nations and rejected universalisms of all kinds. In recent years, Huntingtonian perspectives on the “clash of civilizations” have intersected in haunting ways with renewed calls for championing Western civilization, particularly on the far right in the United States and in nations across Europe. Those intersecting ideas were seared into my consciousness when they were made concrete by the white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 chanting anti-Semitic, racist tropes such as “you will not replace us.”

These are precisely the contemporary and near-past referents that a skilled intellectual historian like Michael Kimmage, who also has experience in diplomacy and policymaking, likely wanted to understand in tackling their roots through a conceptual history of “the West” in U.S. foreign policy. In his deeply researched and erudite *Abandonment of the West*, Kimmage historicizes these elements of our contemporary moment. In doing so, like any good historian, he focuses on origins, proposing and exploring pivotal moments and conceptual turns in the march toward the present. The book takes us back to the late nineteenth century to understand the rise of the “West” as an animating factor in U.S. foreign relations and then

traces the rise, decline, and fall of many intertwined and often competing notions and reorientations of the “West” in foreign policy thought, debate, and practice.

At heart, this book is about how perhaps the most vaunted of Enlightenment ideals—a “Western”-centered set of concepts related to liberty and the definition, extension, and practice thereof—have and have not been embodied in the rhetoric and the practice of U.S. foreign relations. This is an intellectual genealogy. As such, it seeks to reveal the sinuous path by which we arrived at contemporary notions of the West and to point out which notions were rejected, adapted, and transformed along the way.

The book asks, in other words, how the United States got from the era of the Turnerian “closure of frontiers” and the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, which were characterized by encomiums to Anglo-Saxon civilizational hierarchy, conquest, and annexation, to the aspirational world-shaping “crusades of Wilson, Truman and Eisenhower,” to the “anti-crusade or the un-crusade of George W. Bush” (Bush used the term and then rejected it as defining the U.S.’s post-9/11 mission), and, finally, to Donald Trump as the first “non-Western” U.S. president (12–13). But whither the West now? What explains the seeming abandonment of the West as a causal or justifying notion in U.S. foreign relations thought?

There are no simple answers to these questions. And, to its credit, this book does not attempt any such simplification project. While readers may disagree with Kimmage’s interpretations and overall chronology, they will appreciate his discriminating eye for sources and texts, fascinating and figures and groups, theories and critiques, along with his attention to subtle changes over time and mapping of them across eras.

This book is palpably a product of the U.S. foreign relations intellectual milieu that arose after 9/11 and persisted through the Trump presidency. Indeed, the opening sections seem remote, as they address George W. Bush’s gaffe in calling the war on terror a “crusade.” This “now generation” long moment can be aptly characterized as a decentering of the West—in foreign policy and geopolitics as well as in scholarship and universities, as Kimmage shows effectively.

Yet *The Abandonment of the West* also tracks something much less bound to the twenty-first century: the West as a “place, an idea, a value—or places, ideas and values,” including “a range of cultural and philosophical constellations” (13). Kimmage rightly argues that the West as concept has long had an appeal for American policymakers and thinkers, stretching back to the Revolution but really generating momentum from the late nineteenth century through World War I. This book’s nuanced approach to these ideas and their often “mutually contradictory”

dimensions is part of what makes this analysis compelling. This is no triumphalist account of the West in U.S. foreign relations thought, but it is also not entirely a critique and is far from a complete rejection.

There are a number of definitions in the book and a recognition that, obviously, definition matters greatly for such a slippery topic, as does precision. The core of the West for Kimmage is defined as the “transatlantic idea of liberty” (16). What the book does so innovatively is to construct the first broad-based intellectual history of that idea. It tracks the West as “embedded in a Euro-American narrative of self-government and liberty, a history of liberty, a project of building liberty, a future-oriented heritage of liberty,” all of which also include the many undersides of such a project—settler colonialism, slavery and racism, inequality, and hierarchy (14–16). For Kimmage, the West serves as a category of analysis to travel a fresh path through the thought, the thinkers, and some of the major events of the last one hundred and thirty years in depth, although the book covers several hundred years overall.

The concept of “the West” can be best understood as arising in U.S. foreign policy thought and American public life in the late nineteenth century. This was a time of precipitous change, as I have noted in my own work. For Kimmage, the U.S. as “Columbian nation” was born again, in a way; by the fin de siècle it became a world commercial and military power and acquired the ability to take global actions that had consequences beyond the nation’s borders.

This crucial period of rethinking core assumptions about the nation and its foreign policy built on longer patterns of framing the United States as an extension of a Western set of ideals and practices; these were moored, of course, in antiquity, in city-state democracies and political theories of Greece and Rome and in the iconography and mythology of citizen-generals and philosopher-statesmen. It is no coincidence that American leaders were surrounded by neo-classical architecture, equipped with the trappings of classical learning, and visually represented in togas. It was not until the United States struck out on its own as a colonial power, extending and enforcing ideals abroad and accessing markets more directly and self-consciously, that the “West” was born as an ideological construct in U.S. foreign relations.

This book fits with new directions in the intellectual history of the United States’s role in the world, though it is unlike transmission and reception histories on a single author or theory, and more akin to global intellectual histories that track a concept (neoliberalism, the global) or even goods (salt, for example) over time. The source base is broad and deep. I particularly appreciated the eclectic nature of the many areas Kimmage draws upon for insight, from architecture and art to philosophy and political science. A real strength here is the engagement with Black American critiques of U.S. foreign relations throughout the study. We find the full panoply of foreign and domestic policy analysis and evolution in the lives of W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcom X, James Baldwin, and Alain Locke, among others. Readers encounter references to virtually every major thinker and work one might imagine relevant, yet Kimmage is never tedious, and often mentions details with a deft touch to distill just the most important claims or insights to propel the book.

One area of limitation, though I hasten to add that this book has a little of everything, concerns women. I would like to have seen more regarding the role of women in U.S. engagement with the West as a concept. There is virtually nothing, for example, on women’s activism in transnational peace and humanitarian movements. More on Jane Addams and Emily Balch, two figures I have studied extensively

and who were deeply significant as the first two American women to win the Nobel Peace Prize and pioneered international women’s peace activism, would be welcome; so, too, I longed to see attention to Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune, for example, to round out this otherwise very full account. Though, to be fair, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Madeleine Albright, Condoleeza Rice, and Samantha Power factor into the more recent analysis in the book. Those concerns aside, the book is perhaps best at combining and analyzing major books, arguments, theories, and thinkers and at blending domestic policy concerns with foreign ones.

The book has scores of superb insights, ranging from the nexus of domestic and foreign policy, to close readings of key texts, to new interpretations of events and sequences made possible through the eclectic source base and the lens of analysis on the West. The apotheosis of the West in U.S. foreign policy was, of course, during and immediately following World War II. I appreciated Kimmage’s even-handed approach to the many Wests in play in that era, from America Firsters seeing the United States as a paragon of virtue; to preserving FDR’s Four Freedoms in a universal Western world; to the critiques of Du Bois and others, especially in the wake of the war, when the fate of the non-

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West was determined by the parochial, racist, hegemonic civilizational logics still at play in the postwar organizations designed to reorient international relations. In turn, Kimmage insightfully shows how, within a half century, these organizations and the notions that shaped them supplanted the West itself, making the “liberal international order” the new West, with a comparable but more malleable set of commitments and ideals. It also had less long-term baggage, yet it remained a shibboleth for similar practices that propped up the central components and tenets of a U.S.-West-led world.

Universities, intellectuals, and policymaker-scholar-thinkers are crucial to this account, beginning with Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia. “In this linkage between learning and liberty and between politics and ideas,” writes Kimmage, “Jefferson was prescient. His contributions would prove crucial . . . and universities (of many kinds) would never cease to have a decisive impact on American foreign policy” (16). Universities, thinkers, disciplines, and theories have been the shaping force behind what David Milne has depicted as the crucial worldviews of American strategic thinkers, and Kimmage amply demonstrates their influence at the level of ideas.

The book hinges persuasively on four key moments, or “acts,” as Kimmage calls them, playing upon the stagecraft imagery that Bishop Berkeley used in his poem about the westward course of empire, “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America.” These acts extend from “the connections Jefferson established between . . . idea and foreign policy, foreign policy and idea” (19), to revolutionary notions of liberty (which excluded non-white peoples and slaves), and an ideological foreign policy project framed at first implicitly and later explicitly on notions of the West. From the late nineteenth century through 1963, according to Kimmage, the West was an ascendant cause in American society, politics, and foreign relations, often frequently invoked, and always under stress and critique.

The book generally moves chronologically, with some overlapping that is due to the flow of ideas, figures, and events. It opens with the United States as “Columbian Republic” in 1893 and shifts from largely continental westward expansion to a cultivated world-shaping based on both European connections and common Greco-Roman inheritance. Next, the book tracks the rise of the modern idea of the West from act one in the Wilson era through

act two in the 1920s and 1930s and through act three, at the zenith of the Cold War, in the 1950s to early 1960s. In the 1960s a critique of the West began to emerge, with 1963 as the pivot point. The transformation thereafter came in a period of questioning leading toward an end, or even a “suicide” of the West, that Kimmage details as spanning the period from 1863 through 1979 (157-201).

Act four was “an exercise in irony” (22), as the West “exits stage right.” That was the end of the Cold War moment, a time that might well have been the apotheosis of the West and yet, as Kimmage explains, everything coalesced, from the right and the left, to “move away from invocations of the West”: nationalism, internationalism, transnationalism, along with increasing polarization and the lack of a unifying existential enemy and a cause (23). Yes, there was a New World Order, a global order, and there were agreed-upon values related to freedom and liberty to pursue, but those values were no longer under the aegis of the West, and they were far from clear in application (NATO, Kosovo, Iraq War, Libya, Syria, climate change, nonproliferation, etc.).

It is a bit reductive to say it in this way, as this book draws on a vast array of sources, but looming over this book are a number of major works. W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is crucial in setting up the problem that the color line presented for Western goals and in showing the fundamentally self-destructive hypocrisy of a Western foreign policy based on freedom. Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918–23, trans. 1926), which epitomizes post-World War I disillusion, is also crucial, as is Mortimer Adler’s *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World* (1952), which juxtaposes the aftermath of World War II with the optimism and set of values Adler heralds in the “Western Civ moment” of the 1940s and 1950s. But it is William McNeill’s *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (1963), which plays off Spengler’s title and the World War I generation’s “credible pessimism” (113) and defines both a culmination and a conclusion, that looms over the era and marks a clear watershed.

In the 1990s, McNeill himself lamented his book’s naïveté. As Kimmage explains, by that time McNeill recognized that his book “retained more than a whiff of Eurocentrism” (133). But of course, this “lament predated the 1990s. It was the substance of Du Bois’s unheeded 1947 appeal” and of much earlier criticism of the American-and-Euro-centric hegemonic practices of American empire, from the Columbian Exposition and annexations of the 1890s, through the resolutions and the mandate system baked into the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations, to the international structures of world order that came in the aftermath of a second devastating global war in the 1940s. The aftermath of that war overlapped with Du Bois’s appeal to the United Nations on the “denial of human rights to minorities in the case of citizens of negro descent in the United States of America” (131–33).

The Rise of the West, however, came at the end of an era in American politics and foreign policy, according to Kimmage. The real intellectual marker of the era can be seen in the rise of Black American diplomats such as Ralph Bunche, who eventually received the Nobel Peace Prize, and the wide range of works critiquing the sources of U.S. foreign policy, including William Appleman Williams’s *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), Gabriel Kolko’s *The Politics of War* (1968), Noam Chomsky’s *American Power and the New Mandarins* (1969), and David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest* (1972). Taken together, these works offered a searing indictment of the war in Vietnam in particular,

but also of broader Cold War rhetorics on a U.S.-led West, illuminating motivations, influences, peoples, and groups that combined to exert immense causal forces in American foreign policy.

In contrast, by identifying liberals as the source of decline and central antagonists in the drama of Western expansion, James Burnham’s *Suicide of the West* (1964) excoriated figures like James Baldwin as much as JFK or Walt Rostow for unmoored universalism. Burnham saw “national belonging (his own country) as a bridge to civilizational belonging” (219). The internationalist liberal, in contrast, had developed “a generalized hatred of Western civilization and of his own country as a part of the West” (219). For Burnham, Eisenhower’s use of U.S. diplomatic power to defend Egypt in the Suez Crisis against Britain and France as well as the non-Western Soviet Union—and actions like it—were a clear sign that the United States was deeply implicated in the decline of the West. Though communism and decolonization were enormous problems for the West, according to Burnham, it was variations on liberalism that were leading to suicide and an end state.

Burnham’s prescription, of course, was a renewal of conservative Western values, inherently white and awfully supremacist (exactly the critique of Du Bois, Baldwin, Chomsky, et al.). He proposed to reassert “the pre-liberal conviction that Western civilization, thus Western man, is both different from and superior in quality to other civilizations and non-civilizations” (219). Kimmage believes these old ideas were given new form by people like Burnham and Barry Goldwater, people who had less in common with the optimistic William F. Buckley Jr. and more in common with the pessimistic Pat Buchanan of the 1990s.

The most important critic of the conservative idea of the West, in my view, was Edward Said, in whose book *Orientalism* (1978) the critiques by men like Du Bois, Baldwin, and Chomsky culminated, as Kimmage lays it out. Said responded to the backlash against 1960s critics of the United States—a backlash that was trying to redeem an imagined, glorious West and rally around it. Kimmage does a superb job of centering Said’s work as a crucial pivot away from the intellectual currents about the West in U.S. foreign policy and politics more broadly from the 1960s to the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, Said’s analysis in revised and updated forms continues to frame core animating elements of U.S. global aims and the concomitant reluctance to herald the “West” in abstract terms. His central East-West contrast and his rejection of facile binaries is paramount. The “essence of Orientalism,” according to Said, “is the ineradicable distinction between western superiority and Oriental inferiority” (189). In turn, Western or European identity was a problem because in relation to a real or imagined East or other, its cultural representations and other modes of exchange (commerce, diplomacy) have historically operated as not just a means of control but as a means of domination.

As Kimmage suggests, Said lined the United States up with Britain and France, and his “most devastating indictment was of the American-led West” (191). What stands out to Kimmage, as he deploys Said’s analysis to help frame subsequent critiques, is that it did not operationalize any reductive foreign policy paths forward. What it did do, in order to address why the West fell further from favor in U.S. diplomatic rhetoric after the Cold War, was to make a trenchant case against reductive conflicts that “herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like ‘American,’ ‘the West,’ or ‘Islam’ and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse” (191–92).

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In conflicts from the Gulf War through the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, American leaders have tried to follow this path, albeit imperfectly. Their halting rhetoric and George W. Bush's quick recanting of the language of crusade underscore this point. The United States has abandoned the West. Said's insights built on those of three generations before him, and now there are two that have followed. His efforts were integral to the conceptual tearing down of the "ideological fiction of the West" by the end of 1970s; and certainly, by the early 1990s, the central tenets of *Orientalism* had been so widely accepted that they "permanently undermined the prestige of Western Civilization curricula at American universities," "dethroned books like William McNeill's *The Rise of the West*," and thereby untethered the West from its "self-declared values and ideals."

Where will the United States turn now? While the liberal international order, or rules-based order, has been instrumental in replacing some of what the West stood for and in attempting that conceptual project with less of the imperial, racist, hegemonic baggage, what it is not and was not, according to Kimmage, is something most "Americans were necessarily ready to sacrifice for" (23). I was left to wonder what value the aggregating concept of "the West" has any more. Personally, I have tremendous interest in and even reverence for many of the individual authors, thinkers, and traditions that might be distilled from the West, but I am not interested in any abstract aggregation of the West, which seems problematic to operationalize at best, and offensive as a continuing of racialized-hegemonic practices at worst. As Kimmage rightly and vividly explains, the "West" as an aggregating concept was challenging after 1919; even more so in the 1960s; almost impossible after the Cold War; and certainly toxic in the wake of 9/11. Only in the heyday preceding World War I and especially during World War II and mid-century did it work, even then, only for a relatively small subset of policymakers and nations. If I were advising a president, or policymaker, and even in my own public writing, a return to the "West" is not where I would land.

Thus, I wondered why, in his conclusion, Kimmage advances modest claims about reviving Euro-American, transatlantic, or "Western" alliances to face down challenges from China and Russia. After traveling so far through a book that seems to land on a place where Western solidarity, even if understood primarily in terms of ideals and not geography, is no longer relevant and remains deeply problematic, I would have imagined a turn to the constituent ideas as a place to go. That is, in the wake of America's first "non-western" president, it seems like extracting FDR-esque "Four Freedoms" notions to underpin U.S. re-engagement via the WHO and the UN to fight the global pandemic and climate change, to pursue non-proliferation, and even to re-inscribe visions for collective security in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, would be more appropriate than any return to the freighted language and concepts of the "West."

Review of Michael Kimmage, *The Abandonment of the West: The History of an Idea in American Foreign Policy*

Heather Marie Stur

In search of a symbol of Western principles in the twenty-first century, Michael Kimmage made his way to the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC. At first look, this

trip seems odd—an unexpected conclusion to a scholarly journey that began at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and followed the rise and decline of the idea of the West. African Americans and other people of color had been some of the most articulate and forceful critics of the West, pointing out its relationship to white supremacy and imperialism, both physical and cultural.

But what Kimmage found in the NMAAHC were the Western values of liberty and self-government, the struggle for which shaped the museum's telling of African American history. At the museum's opening in 2016, President Barack Obama called it a shrine to "the deep and abiding love for this country, and the ideals upon which it is founded" (328). For Kimmage, the fact that America's first black president opened the NMAAHC validated his belief that Western values are forces for democracy and freedom despite their misuse by racists and colonialists.

Kimmage defines the concept of the West as "a Euro-American narrative of self-government and liberty, a history of liberty, a project of building liberty, a future-oriented heritage of liberty" (14). It is rooted in the Enlightenment, the European philosophical movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that inspired the U.S. founders to conceive of national independence and provided the language for the Declaration of Independence. The West gained salience as the embodiment of a foreign policy principle in the early twentieth century, particularly during World War I. That conflict brought the idea of "self-determination," at least for the parts of Europe under Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman imperial rule, into the international conversation. In Paris after the war, President Woodrow Wilson argued that a global commitment to national freedom was key to world peace. He believed so deeply in the power of an international collaboration of liberty-loving nations to "end all wars" that he risked his health to try and convince Americans to accept membership in the League of Nations.

The colonized world paid hopeful attention to Wilson's words, but African American intellectuals like W.E.B. DuBois were not surprised to learn that what Wilson meant was a Poland for Poles but not a Kenya for Kenyans. White supremacy already defined the international order, and "Western" Europeans and Americans had devised elaborate racial hierarchies to justify their subjugation of non-Western countries while purporting to uphold liberty and freedom. In the 1930s and 1940s, fascism in Franco's Spain, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany threatened the Western order and provided a common enemy to bolster an imagined Western unity.

With the establishment of Western civilization courses in the 1930s, U.S. universities offered the intellectual foundation for the Euro-American alliance that linked America, Britain, and France via their national affinities for classical antiquity and the Enlightenment. Hypocrisy also united the U.S. and Western Europe, as racism and imperialism remained central to their national identities and international behaviors. African American veterans who returned home after fighting against Nazi racism only to be told to sit at the back of the bus called the United States out on its pretense.

Out of the ashes of World War II the United States rose and stood as the leader of the West. American policymakers viewed the ensuing Cold War world as one of stark divides—East versus West, separated by an iron curtain that cut through Europe. Kimmage notes that America's Cold War presidents idealized the West more than their predecessors or their successors. Yet the Cold War world was more complicated than the East-West binary made it

look. Activists and politicians in the decolonizing world resisted the pull to either pole, preferring non-alignment and regional cooperation to entering the U.S. or the Soviet sphere.

Although the West claimed to champion liberty and freedom, America still held on to an undemocratic culture. Its violent racism left leaders in Africa and Asia wondering what kind of friend the United States could possibly be to them. The murder of Emmitt Till, clashes over desegregation, and international media coverage of U.S. race relations motivated President Dwight Eisenhower to launch a series of jazz tours, which were administered by the State Department.

Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and other musicians traveled throughout the decolonizing world and the Eastern Bloc and played concerts to showcase African American contributions to U.S. culture. Behind the scenes, the musicians also talked with locals about their shared experiences with racism, defying orders to only speak positively about life in the United States. The State Department caught on, and the CIA began monitoring the musicians while they were on tour.

By the time George W. Bush was president, the concept of an East-West clash of civilizations had fallen out of favor as a policy principle, thanks to critiques of the West launched by both the Left and the Right in the United States. Beginning in the 1960s, the academic Left and people of color denounced the West for its neoimperialist wars in places like Vietnam and for the racism that informed those interventions. Later in the Cold War and after, some on the Right rejected the West's liberal internationalism, warning that Americans should insulate themselves from the "cold winds of globalization" (19).

After the Cold War ended, the concept of a shared global commitment to liberty usurped the idea of the West, with its need for a polar opposite against which to define itself. That shared commitment is why Bush disavowed the word "crusade," which suggests a clash between East and West, to describe the war on terror, Kimmage argues. This is where Kimmage sees U.S. foreign policymakers abandoning the idea of the West. President Donald Trump continued that abandonment when he repudiated America's long relationship with NATO.

Despite recent rejections of the importance of Euro-American kinship, it remains central to Kimmage's definition of the West, and as he traces the idea of the West in U.S. foreign policy, he does not hide his belief in its promise. He writes in his conclusion that the West offers "a shared set of ideals" that could unify a divided U.S. public (320). However, for Americans to buy into the idea of the West again, he asserts that school and university curricula, public history, and the built environment must all emphasize Western values and make the case for why and how those values unite all Americans regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion. Kimmage argues that identity politics have run amok on both the Left and the Right and have made Americans forget that their nation and its rich multicultural identity exist because "self-government is neither a conservative nor a progressive cause" nor "the property of any one ethnic, racial, or religious group" (319). Americans are better, and truer to the principles of their founding, together.

Even Kimmage's discussion of the West's detractors serves to illustrate the West's potential for good—if its tenet of liberty is applied to everyone. Yet liberty and self-government don't necessarily support the common good. In the United States, Americans elected a right-

wing demagogue to the presidency in 2016, and European politics have taken a conservative turn within the past two decades. Politicians from Marine Le Pen in France to Viktor Orban in Hungary have won election to national offices after campaigning on far-right principles. Liberal internationalists tend to romanticize democracy, as though Europe's velvet revolutions of the late 1980s, not the populist discord of the 2010s, are the standard for how democracy plays out. The truth about self-government is that it includes the right to elect a dictator who might eventually strip away civil liberties.

The West's conservative turn might cause a cynic to reject Kimmage's vision of democracy, but to do so, the cynic would have to ignore the mobilization of African American voters in Georgia in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the 2021 Senate run-off elections, as well as other grassroots movements for more equitable politics and shared citizenship. The cynic would also have to ignore the elections of young and progressive congressional representatives like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, and Ilhan Omar. Although identity politics informed both the support for and the opposition to these politicians, the opportunities they had to run for office and citizens' rights to a choice of candidates from across the political spectrum is political liberty, the most cherished "Western" value.

Average voters and local activists may not know or care about what "the West" means, and they might never read the works of Oswald Spengler, Jacques Barzun, William McNeill, W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, or Edward Said. But they know and care about what the right to vote means for their lives, and it is not connected to America's relationship with Europe. The ideals embedded in the concept of the West may have originated in the European Enlightenment, but the United States was the first nation to build a lasting political system based on those ideals, and for all its many faults, the American experiment with Western democracy has not yet failed. Kimmage's call to ponder the African American struggle for civil liberties within the complicated, shameful, and hopeful history of the United States is a reminder that ideas are as good as the people who put them into practice.

Clinging to the West: Or, What is a Declining Hegemon to do?

Brad Simpson

It is perhaps fitting to review Michael Kimmage's *The Abandonment of the West* in the aftermath of the 2020 election, which many observers considered a referendum on the future of U.S. foreign policy and its relationship to a democratic Europe, and on the survival of a democratic West more generally. Trump's supporters likewise portrayed the elections as a referendum on the future of the West and the president himself as the "bodyguard of Western civilization," as right-wing activist Charlie Kirk inelegantly phrased it at the Republican National Convention in August 2020. Trump himself spent his term as president repeatedly declaring, as he did in Warsaw, Poland, in 2017, that Western civilization was under assault from "radical Islamic terrorism," immigration, globalism, and other ominous threats.

But what is the West that Trump claimed to defend and critics accuse him of seeking to undermine? And what is the West that the new Biden administration is self-consciously pledging to rejoin? Michael Kimmage argues that ideas of an imagined "West," defined as a set of transatlantic

ideals of “liberty and self-government,” guided twentieth-century U.S. diplomacy and foreign policy before coming under assault in the 1960s and that a revived, expansive, inclusive, and multicultural conception of “the West” still has utility as an animating framework.

We should note what Kimmage is not trying to do. He is not attempting to explore the persistence of a concept’s shifting frames of meaning, as Kristin Hoganson does in *The Heartland*; nor is he trying to reframe U.S. history around the violence of our ever-receding frontiers in a way that is constitutive rather than exceptional, as Greg Grandin does in *The End of the Myth*. Rather, Kimmage’s account seems squarely aimed at liberal foreign policy elites and educated readers for whom the “liberal international order” exists as a continuing aspiration rather than as a joke. It is not a historiographical intervention, as it employs a rather scattershot collection of great books and representative texts, and Kimmage visited no archives. It is, instead, an attempted resuscitation of an exhausted liberal internationalism, framed as a defense of a multicultural West rather than the ethno-nationalist West of Steve Bannon’s fevered imagination.

Kimmage frames the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a “Columbian Republic” (32) whose intellectual and political elites imagined themselves as culturally linked “to the cosmopolitan West and to a larger Europe,” especially after the United States emerged as an overseas colonial power in the 1890s. The 1893 Chicago World’s Fair makes an expected appearance, but Kimmel focuses his attention on neoclassical architecture, Western Civilization programs at major universities, and great engineering projects such as the Panama Canal as the clearest expression of fidelity to vague ideas of the West, alongside an emergent commitment to empire and worries about civilizational decline. Here W.E.B. Du Bois embodies the immanent critique of the Americans’ imagined West, offering “an inclusivity larger and better than white Americanism and the imperial sway of contemporary international affairs,” a vision Kimmel returns to throughout the book.

Empire, however, got in the way, ushered in by McKinley, Roosevelt, and Wilson with much florid rhetoric about the United States as an “arsenal of civilization and a guarantor of order” and, evidently, almost no violence. Businessmen seeking foreign markets or missionaries seeking souls to convert played no evident role, nor does capitalism more generally, except by vague reference (58). One would hardly know, reading this account, that the United States had already emerged as an industrial behemoth before 1919, pioneering models of mass production and consumption across leading sectors—models that alternately fascinated and terrified Europeans. Kimmage’s lack of engagement with existing historiography is especially acute here. He misses any number of opportunities to grapple with Michael Adas, Kristin Hoganson, Andrew Preston, Paul Kramer, Amy Kaplan and others.

After 1919, Kimmage argues, the United States was dominant but not prepared to lead; its elites were still mostly in thrall to “anti-immigrant sentiment and rampant Anglo-Saxonism.” Universities, architects whose tastes extended beyond the neo-gothic, and “educated Americans,” in contrast, “were solidifying a connection to European culture and history” beyond Northern Europe and Protestantism, while Nazism and Communism waited in the wings (73, 82–84). Great men (Coolidge, Kellogg, Stimson, Roosevelt, and Hull, Lippman, Eisenhower, etc.) drive the geopolitical story in these years. They gradually deepened U.S. involvement in European affairs, though in Hull’s case with no apparent concern for free trade. Elite

universities such as Columbia and Chicago, meanwhile, widened the horizons of a generation of elites with General Honors and Great Books courses that emphasized the contemporary relevance of European classics.

The early Cold War (1945–1963), in Kimmage’s rendering, represents the golden age of the West in the eyes of U.S. foreign policy elites. Again, Kimmage cites the widespread currency of textbooks such as William McNeill’s *The Rise of the West* (1963), which firmly located the United States within “Western civilization” and associated both with democracy and cultural vitality (114–15). Great men again make their appearance (Truman, Kennan, Marshall, Eisenhower, the Dulles brothers, Walt Rostow, JFK), forging transatlantic partnerships with German, British, and French colleagues while occasionally—very occasionally—engaging in covert operations in places like Iran and Guatemala. Great scholars, many of them European refugees (Carl Friedrich, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski) bridged the world between academia and policy in Aspen or Cambridge (142–43). Modern architecture (Dulles Airport, Foggy Bottom, window-filled U.S. embassies in Accra and Baghdad, and even the universally hated Penn Station) broke with the neoclassical past and suggested optimism about the future (146–48).

But there were questions, many revolving around whether the U.S. vision of the West could break with white supremacy and empire while embracing diversity. Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Martin Luther King posed them from the outside, while diplomats such as Ralph Bunche and Carl Rowan posed them from within, seeking to diversify the national security state and paving the way for Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice to wage war with multicultural armies. The U.S. wars in Indochina (176–78), myriad covert interventions, and alliances with authoritarian regimes serve as a vague backdrop for deepening pessimism about the moral valence of U.S. leadership of the West, but mostly they are bloodless abstractions, rendered in the passive voice and drained of any sense of the human toll they took. Inside the university, William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, Noam Chomsky, and especially Edward Said critiqued and demystified U.S. foreign policy, “detaching the West from its self-declared values and ideals” (192). Meanwhile, energy crises, revolutionary upheaval in the Middle East, and a sweater-clad Jimmy Carter “gave the impression of a West unable to control its own destiny” (197).

Many conservatives during this period, rejecting the sunny revivalism of Ronald Reagan, shared a deepening pessimism over the vitality and coherence of a West beset by secularism, social and cultural liberalism, multiculturalism, and university-based ethnic studies programs (233–35). Some veered into neoconservatism (James Burnham, Irving Kristol), others into culture war defenses of an allegedly beleaguered Western canon (Allan Bloom, Dinesh D’Souza, William Bennett), while Francis Fukuyama sought “to refute the theorists of malaise, decline, and suicide” (244). Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama, Kimmage argues, rejected such pessimism, embracing instead different strands of post-Cold War universalism that reflected a continuing belief in the epistemological and ideological coherence of a West embracing “liberty and self-government,” if not crusading triumphalism.

But the liberal international order was a chimera, as the backlash against neoliberal globalization, China’s resistance to political (if not economic) liberalization, authoritarian revival in the former Soviet Union, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, testified. Samuel Huntington’s *Clash*

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of *Civilizations* serves as Kimmage's ur-text for the era's pessimism (264–270), counterbalanced in the early 2000s by John Ikenberry's and Samantha Powers's emergence as "the conscience of [a] liberal international order" (281) that could "dispense with the racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural baggage of the West" (284).

Obama-era optimism, Kimmage argues, foundered in the face of the collapse of the 2011 Arab Spring, civil war in Syria, and challenges from Russia and China. Advocates of an "illiberal West" took advantage, "a dormant West defined not as liberty but as an ethnonationalist entity, a West defined in opposition to the liberal international order," universalism, immigration, and the like. The "illiberal West" delivered twin shocks to the liberal international order in the form of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, himself the ideological spawn of Pat Buchanan's racist, xenophobic, authoritarian brand of civilizational malaise.

Four years later, Kimmage laments, the United States "is no longer the swing-dancing Mount Olympus of democracy" (303). Europe and NATO are no longer as central to American security; a commitment to hoary ideas about "the West" no longer dominates the academy or structures U.S. political culture; and nobody reads the classics, if they read at all. Nevertheless, Kimmage insists on the foreign policy urgency of "reviving the West" through a recommitment to ideas of liberty and self-government, a vision of the West more diverse, more multicultural, perhaps a little less militaristic than before, all the better to engage in strategic competition with Russia and China (314, 318). Universities, he helpfully suggests, should continue to teach key Western texts (though evidently not histories of them), make everyone read Toqueville, and "train students in the foreign policy initiatives that have been derived from liberty and self-government," such as Wilson's Fourteen Points and the Atlantic Charter. Museums should look more like the African American history museum and less like the World War II memorial, to inspire visitors to be more confident about the country's democratic possibilities.

The Abandonment of the West is not aimed at historians, as Kimmage makes no historiographical interventions and consulted no archives. It is aimed, rather, at members of the foreign policy blob who are edified by revived ideas of a multicultural West and who need no explanations of the Atlantic Charter and Wilson's Fourteen Points because everyone agrees on their self-evident virtue. It is aimed at readers for whom the claim that "the essence of the West in American foreign policy has never been ethnic or racial" (317) inspires not sputtering gasps but knowing nods. Kimmage's breezy tour of a century and a half of U.S. foreign policy barely gestures at the violence of wars and interventions, U.S. economic interests, or the militarized structure of U.S. hegemony after 1945.

To cite but one of innumerable possible examples, Kimmage's emphasis on civilizational ideals as animating the impulses of U.S. officials at key moments, such as during the Second World War, relegates geopolitics, the world economy, and conceptions of world order to the sidelines (for an exception, see 107–108). "Leadership of the West fell into Truman's lap" (104) in 1945, he passively asserts, and U.S. officials, apparently untroubled by politics or differing conceptions of U.S. national security, simply chose to lead, an argument that Stephen Wertheim has persuasively demolished.

Kimmage's insistence on the urgency and utility of a pluralistic, tolerant, inclusive idea of the West will resonate with those who view the Biden administration's foreign policy as a restorationist project: restoring transatlantic partnership; restoring the credibility of U.S. global leadership; and restoring the putative power of America's example. But "the West" as a value proposition or as a set of ostensible political commitments makes no contribution

to understanding or grappling with the gravest challenges facing the United States, including climate change, galloping global inequality, pandemic disease, authoritarian revival at home and abroad, and the bipartisan commitment of national security elites to global military dominance for decades to come.

Review of Michael Kimmage, *The Abandonment of the West: The History of an Idea in American Foreign Policy*

Andrew J. Rotter

Michael Kimmage's new book is remarkable for its ambition: it offers a sweeping interpretation of how the idea of the West has influenced U.S. foreign policy for the last century and a half. Citing fiction and quoting poetry, sampling from the work of historians and biographers, Kimmage presents a "four-act drama" that begins with the Chicago World's Fair and Columbian Exposition in 1893 (but hearkens back to the early Republic) and ends with the presidency of Donald Trump.

Along the way, Kimmage describes how Americans have imagined the West; how they have fought over its definition, meaning, and importance; how their leaders have deployed it in the service of their policy decisions; and how, starting in 1992 but with breathtaking speed after 2016, they have abandoned it, either because of its increasingly problematic nature or in the name of a parochial nationalism that sees no virtue in respecting either the past or the transatlantic community that was built upon it after 1945. Kimmage regards the abandonment of the West as a tragedy. His concluding chapter combines elegy with exhortation; the West as an idea isn't quite dead but is seriously resting, and its revival is essential for the United States as a cultural, diplomatic, and moral touchstone.

Books that take on big issues deserve admiration and respect, and I offer mine. Yet they risk much too. Tracking a single theme over the full history of the Republic threatens to flatten a complex story, eliding other matters of importance and discarding evidence that gets in the way. When that theme is the West—an idea that is not only big but so vigorously grappled over that the buzzword "contested" hardly begins to describe its course—the complications grow. And when a historian has the temerity to defend the idea of the West, to consider but dismiss the scholarly criticism that it invites, and to end his account with a recommendation that all American university students should be required to read several "key texts" in U.S. history and something of their "foundation," including Locke, Kant, the Old Testament book of Amos, and "a touch of Greco-Roman antiquity" (320), as Kimmage does here, he is all but looking for trouble. He will find some here.

Start with his limited collection of secondary sources. Kimmage chooses wisely but too well, neglecting scholarship that might have enriched his case or made it more subtle. Since, for example, religion is at the core of what most people think the West means, it is surprising that Kimmage's endnotes do not contain references to important works on religion and U.S. foreign relations, including those by William Inboden, Andrew Preston, and Melani McAlister.¹ Similarly, while Kimmage recognizes the significance of race in the formation of the West as an idea, and does cite the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Martin Luther King, he relies almost exclusively for perspective on Thomas Borstelmann's *The Cold War and the Color Line*—an excellent source, but at nearly twenty years old hardly alone any more in its insight on the subject.² Far from fetishizing scholarly bulk or demanding recognition for the work of one's friends, this concern seems to me directly proportional to Kimmage's need to substantiate his admirably bold claims. The higher the wire, the greater the

need of a robust support system for the performer.

Kimmage builds his case through a series of biographies of eminent thinkers and policymakers and the books they wrote and read. He displays range and erudition in these excursions, seemingly comfortable with the poetry of Langston Hughes (and Dr. Seuss); the song lyrics of Bob Dylan; the fiction of Saul Bellow, V. S. Naipaul, and Graham Greene; and, most of all, influential nonfiction that confronts the idea of the West, including books by Du Bois, James Burnham, Hannah Arendt (virtually the only woman included in Kimmage's analysis), Edward Said, Francis Fukuyama, and Samuel Huntington. Impressive though it may be, this approach sacrifices linear narrative and invites digression. More than once, I had the impression of being an undergraduate in a lively but perplexing course in American Studies, taught by a popular professor whose enthusiasm for his vivid and various materials tended to outweigh his commitment to getting through the syllabus.

Kimmage's real love is for the architecture of Washington, DC, or most of it. He is at his best in describing the glories of David Adjaye's National Museum of African American History and Culture, "Washington's most vital and important public space," the embodiment of "a new West" (326, 328). He is at his most digressive when he notes that the capital's airport is named for John Foster Dulles, at the time the most extensively traveled secretary of state in U.S. history (137). A little of this goes a long way. There is more than a little of it here.

The East is a career, as Benjamin Disraeli wrote in his novel, *Tancred*.³ What is the West, according to Kimmage? An idea, yes; he says so in his title. But ideas have variants, subsets, forms they take, particular functions. They change over time. Is the West a logic, a roadmap, a set of rules meant to be followed? Is it an ideology, what Michael Hunt called "an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality"?⁴ Is the West a culture, rich with symbolic meaning, reflecting social significance, indicative not only of thought but feeling? Is it a construction or a discourse, the Occidental counterpart of Said's Orientalism? (If so, what is its relationship to power?) Is it a concept characterized mainly by its usefulness, there to provide a rationale for hubris or dominion, portable and fungible through time and space? George Kennan famously called Marxism a "fig leaf" of the "moral and intellectual respectability" of Soviet leaders.⁵ Has the idea of the West worked the same way for Americans? Frequently used in partnership with the word "civilization," is it for its enthusiasts just a synonym for that word?

One of the confusions created by any invocation of the West in U.S. history stems from its double meaning: it can indicate identification of the United States with the nations of Western Europe through their common origins in the Classical World, or it can mean the apparently yawning space roughly west of the Appalachian Mountains, the American frontier that has in its mythic form served as an inducement to movement, an outlet for class conflict, and a guarantor of democracy.⁶ Kimmage means the first, nodding only briefly to the second (Frederick Jackson Turner is relegated to parentheses, 35).

This is not a small distinction. It points instead to a fundamental tension in American identity and, by extension, U.S. foreign relations. The transatlantic West was an affiliation predicated on a shared civilization that was presumed to have started in Europe. The transcontinental West offered a vision of national identity that renounced

Europe as overcivilized, despotic, corrupt, ossified, and effete. As much as American elites may have wished to follow the intellectual and cultural fashions of their European counterparts, they were hesitant to embrace them too ardently, out of fear that they would lose what was uniquely theirs. Kimmage understands this, of course, noting that the West was still making its "case" to Americans before 1945. Still, the struggle between these two versions of the West has never fully disappeared. Belief in their own exceptionalism made Americans reluctant to join with their Western cohabitants in two world wars, to condone desperate acts of postwar imperialism (Suez, 1956), and to follow European leads on matters of trade and finance, even after Bretton Woods.

Kimmage is hardly unaware of the problems of the Western canon and the reasons why it has endured criticism from the left, even if it is made "new" by the addition of a few writers of color. Some argue that defenders of the West are parochial, asserting or assuming that only its historical luminaries have articulated ideas and values worth

The constructed West has struggled in particular with its history of spawning authoritarianism. Fascism and communism were born in the West. Kimmage seems uncertain as to how to handle this, implying at times that authoritarian systems are something outside the West, alien to it, able to exploit its moral letdowns and its genial defense of free speech in order to hijack its political institutions.

reproducing. They point out that those typically considered outside the West have in fact come by different paths to many of the same ideas and values, or have generated their own versions of these that depart from "Western" ones but are nevertheless worthy of respect. This is emphatically true in an increasingly globalized world. Lacking (say) Confucius and the Buddha, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Qu'rān*, or the *Popol Vuh*, the canon is radically incomplete. Other critics charge defenders of the West with hypocrisy. Ideals of justice, liberty, democracy, peace, and respect for law have been

too often compromised by Western practices of racial slavery, misogyny and discrimination, class exploitation, imperialism, and violence. The idea of the West has been built on oppression and exclusion; its seeming virtues are the result of its deepest vices. And the West is, after all, a constructed thing, its texts chosen by human beings of a certain standing and not by the finger of some deity.

The constructed West has struggled in particular with its history of spawning authoritarianism. Fascism and communism were born in the West. Kimmage seems uncertain as to how to handle this, implying at times that authoritarian systems are something outside the West, alien to it, able to exploit its moral letdowns and its genial defense of free speech in order to hijack its political institutions. Germany, he writes, descended "from civilization to barbarism" during the 1930s (103). The West's powers of resistance are limited; its borders are evidently porous.

Kimmage's spirited defense of the Western alliance is understandable and welcome in the current circumstances. His defense of the values it supposedly represents is murkier, and it isn't clear that the West as an idea was as pervasive and as powerful as he claims after 1945. Imagine a thought experiment: Americans are stricken with a highly selective anomia and forget the words "West," and "Western," as capitalized, altogether. What would be lost as a result? They would still, on the whole, support good things like democracy, decency, freedom, respect for the law, and the rest—they just wouldn't know to aggregate them under the label "Western." They would read, think, and talk about these values regardless of their historical or literary points of origin. They would deem them universal values, not Western ones. No one would celebrate the West over the East; all such comparisons would be invidious and now impossible. People would simply cherish what was good and right.

Kimmage writes with an evocative, aphoristic style that

sometimes soars, sometimes grates. He makes some small mistakes, twice misspelling “linchpin” (125, 281); giving Condoleezza Rice degrees from the University of Colorado (she went to the University of Denver); placing Gabriel Kolko in the “Wisconsin School” of diplomatic history (184); mucking out the “Aegean” rather than the “Augean” stables (210); neglecting to mention that William F. Buckley co-wrote *McCarthy and His Enemies* with McCarthy’s former speechwriter, L. Brent Bozell; and abbreviating Barack Obama’s private school to Puna (from Punahou, 271). He utters occasional banalities—William McNeill’s book *The Rise of the West* would have been different “had the Germans been victorious” in World War II (115)—and peculiarities—“World order was being hashed out not so much on the playing fields of American schools and universities as in their curricula and syllabi” (269).

I also have interpretive disagreements with Kimmage, on matters large and small. I struggle to understand his claim that the two World Wars and the Cold War were “all wars of East against West” (10); wonder whether the “strengths of Western enterprise were obvious” (11) in the 1990s, given the then-recent experience with Japanese and South Korean export successes; doubt that the British Empire emerged from the Great War “unscathed” (33), given the *Thawra* in Egypt and the aftermath of Jallianwala Bagh in India in 1919; and disagree that St. John’s College switched to a Great Books curriculum in 1937 out of a newfound commitment to the West (97) (it was trying desperately to save itself from bankruptcy). “God and Western man were invisible on Ivy League campuses” in 1960 (214)? Buckley complained about that, but it was hardly the case. And Kimmage’s epitaph for the book (308–9) seems to me premature: independent bookstores have shown surprising resilience in the digital age, and many of my students (and both of my daughters) cling determinedly to the printed page.⁷

Kimmage’s book is in the end a jeremiad, as calls to return to an allegedly forsaken West tend to be, though he seems on the whole to be more cheerful than many previous polemicists who have written in this vein. What I miss most in his account is a sense of irony. Reinhold Niebuhr gets just a mention in *The Abandonment of the West*, and there is nothing of Joseph Heller or Norman Mailer in the book. Yet it strikes me that much of what Kimmage is getting at has to do with the distance between intention and consequence—when, as Niebuhr wrote, the “apparently fortuitous incongruities of life . . . are discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous.”⁸ So it has been with the West: meant to summon what is good and right and of benevolent use to everyone, the invocation of the idea of the West has in fact always contained within itself the confounding, and thereby self-defeating, essence of hubris, the belief that what is “ours” is right, incontestably. That is not how Kimmage means it. Along with other well-intentioned scholars and advocates for the West, his intentions are pure. Consequences are, alas, another thing altogether.

Notes:

1. William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge, UK, 2008); Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York, 2012); Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York, 2018).
2. Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Era* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).
3. An aphorism made famous as an epigraph in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), np.
4. Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT, 1987), xi.
5. The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State, Feb. 22, 1946, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/docu->

ments/episode-1/kennan.htm.

6. See Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York, 2019).

7. I would also enjoy arguing with Kimmage about V. S. Naipaul’s novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. He thinks the book is “a fiction writer’s Bandung” (172). I find it a lot less grand than that. And its protagonist is deeply annoying.

8. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago, 2008 [1952]).

Author’s Response

Michael Kimmage

I was honored to receive and read the essays on my 2020 book, *The Abandonment of the West*, written with verve, care, and erudition by four distinguished scholars. I was especially grateful for the critical judgments they rendered, because many of these judgments strike me as correct and because they are such a good point of departure for a dialogue about what this book is, what it was intended to achieve and what it fails to achieve. I will take up each essay in turn, offering a response to the points raised and to the questions asked, and will conclude with a few thoughts on the genre into which I think *The Abandonment* falls. Mostly, I would like this essay to demonstrate my gratitude for the effort Christopher Nichols, Brad Simpson, Andrew Rotter, and Heather Stur took in their close readings of my book.

Christopher Nichols notes that “this book is palpably the product of the U.S. foreign relations intellectual milieu that arose after 9/11 and persisted through the Trump presidency,” which is exactly right. I began work on this book in 2012. I also spent two years working at the State Department’s Office of Policy Planning (2014–16), not quite writing this book but contemplating it from the seventh floor, as it were. If the Trump presidency came along midstream, it did a lot to shape *The Abandonment*. Nichols adds that the book “is not entirely a critique and is far from a complete rejection,” which is also correct, a framing that I might reword to say that this book is both a history and, with qualifications, a defense of the West in American foreign policy. He goes on to describe the book as “the first broad-based intellectual history” of the West. It is also a “global intellectual history,” which is a lovely label and one I wish this book did more to deserve.

Like several other respondents, Nichols rightly criticizes *The Abandonment* for not doing enough to address “the role of women in U.S. engagement with the West as a concept.” He points to a lack of material on women’s activism in transnational peace and humanitarian movements, for example, and calls for “more on Jane Addams, Emily Baluch, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Madeleine Albright, and Samantha Power.” Jeane Kirkpatrick, Madeleine Albright, and Samantha Power are all cited in *The Abandonment* (Samantha Power at some length), as are Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton, both in their capacities as secretary of state, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, in her capacity as director of policy planning at the State Department. Nevertheless, I agree with Nichols and with other responders in identifying a gender imbalance as one of the book’s debits.

In stimulating fashion, Nichols dissents from the conclusion of *The Abandonment*, outlining what he considers the obsolescence of the West and of any foreign-policy orientation with a pronounced Western component. Here he makes two interrelated points. First, he asks why I “advance[d] modest claims about reviving Euro-American, transatlantic, or ‘Western’ alliances to face down challenges from China and Russia,” given that “Western solidarity,

even in ideals, is no longer relevant and remains deeply problematic." Second, he proposes a post-Western or non-Western perspective for American foreign policy, a perspective that owes something to the policy thinking of the 1940s and 1950s. "In the wake of President Trump's 'America first' onslaught," Nichols writes, "extracting FDR-esque Four Freedoms notions to underpin U.S. reengagement via the UN and the WHO in to fight the global pandemic and climate change, to pursue non-proliferation, and even to reinscribe collective security in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe would be more appropriate than any return to the freighted language and concepts of the 'West.'"

Here I would stick to the (modest) claims I made in *The Abandonment*. China and Russia are a real challenge to the transatlantic alliance, Russia more in the national-security domain and China via its long-term economic statecraft. Alliance structures other than NATO will come into play for the United States *vis-à-vis* China, but challenges stemming from China will matter to the transatlantic alliance as well. Problematic as Western solidarity may be in this and many other regards, I still see it as necessary.

Nor are the Western ideals of consequence to *The Abandonment* (liberty and self-government) irrelevant for transatlantic Russia and China policy. Interestingly, the 2013–14 Maidan revolution in Ukraine was conducted explicitly in the name of Western ideals. A similar evolution is occurring in Belarus and has already occurred in many other post-Soviet states. Why would Washington, Brussels, Paris, Berlin, etc., choose to ignore these ideals where they are present and credible? Why would they not encourage them among the constituencies that are seeking such encouragement? What would one achieve with greater reticence or with a self-effacing silence?

Nichols's second argument conflicts with what was—for me—a key finding from my research: that there is an intimate connection among culture, ideas, and foreign policy; that foreign policy tends to work better when culture, ideas, and foreign policy are aligned; that political leaders, if they want their foreign policy to succeed, must find ways of articulating this alignment to their own and to foreign publics. Hence, the attention paid in this book to John F. Kennedy's 1963 visit to West Berlin and to the speech he gave there, which was the most effective way an American president has ever found to argue for "the idea of the West."

The West is a freighted concept. That is why the historian in me likes to write about it. But any alignment of culture, ideas, and foreign policy will be freighted, and the alternatives are not necessarily preferable. This is why the Obama administration's commitment to the "liberal international order," as I write in *The Abandonment*, never really took off. It was well-suited to handling the problems Nichols identifies, or at least better suited than the "America first" approach that came later. It helped in dealing with the Ebola crisis, negotiating the Paris Climate Accords, and the Iran nuclear deal, and expanding the perimeter of collective security in Asia and Europe – though not, alas, in the Middle East.

Outside of foreign policy circles, however, very few knew what the liberal international order was, and not many cared. It was a technocratic construct with the un-freighted purity of a technocratic concept. FDR himself was able to augment the liberal internationalism he absorbed from Woodrow Wilson (and others) precisely because it was linked to an alignment of culture, ideas, and foreign policy long in the making at universities and elsewhere—

and aligned in the 1940s in the name of the West. I know that we cannot go back to this; I know that the West is much more than a synonym for the achievements of liberal internationalism; that American culture has moved far away from what it was in the 1940s; that the challenges of 2021 hardly resemble those of 1945. But the West, no matter how old-fashioned and in need of modification, still provides the best vehicle I can think of for making this alignment. I know: it is a heavy lift.

Andrew Rotter's essay is a witty and thought-provoking reckoning with *The Abandonment*. I am not sure I regard the abandonment of the West as a "tragedy." Part of me sees it simply as an inevitability, because of the way most American universities have already abandoned it as any kind of organizing pedagogic principle. Part of me sees this abandonment as understandable, and perhaps even desirable, because of the multicultural imperatives of American society and because a great deal of harm can be done by dividing the world up into an East and a West. (The Cold War was a tragedy for this very reason, a tragedy for which the Soviet Union and the United States were both responsible.) I would settle for the abandonment of the West circa 2021 as the wrong choice.

I appreciate Rotter's descriptions of me as as an author with "the temerity to defend the idea of the West, to consider but dismiss the scholarly criticism that it invites." This kind of an author "is all but looking for trouble." I would never want to be a writer without temerity, and I sent my book out into the world looking for trouble rather than for easy agreement, though in my own mind I was not dismissing the scholarly criticism that amounts by now to the conventional wisdom about the West in academic circles. I was, more basically, disagreeing with some of it. The scholarly criticism is far too serious to dismiss. This may or may not have worked on the printed page, but I wanted to engage these critics by, in a sense, criticizing them. Are they not, perhaps, cutting the ground out from beneath our feet? Are they not, perhaps, alienating us not just from the shadows of the West but from the light it has also shed? In theory at least, such criticism can be a kind of homage.

Rotter is not alone in noticing that the author of this book has too thin a base of historical and historiographical knowledge. I can only agree, and I will take up this issue from another angle in my conclusion. As Rotter puts it, "the higher the wire, the greater the need of a robust support system for the performer." By support system he means mastery of the relevant bodies of scholarly literature. I was delighted by the following description, which is another version of the scholar-on-a-wire metaphor: "More than once, I had the impression of being an undergraduate in a lively but perplexing course in American studies, taught by a popular professor whose enthusiasm for his vivid and various material tended to outweigh his commitment to getting through the syllabus."

I would *want* to be this professor, a perplexed guide to the perplexed. So much of the history I tried to confront in *The Abandonment* perplexes me; that being the case, I suppose I could only write in a way that perplexes my readers; and there is a place, I think, for teachers and writers who perplex more than they explain. Rotter astutely intuits that this book—for good or for ill—follows more from my undergraduate teaching than it does from carefully amassed research. And I concede his point: too much of this book proceeds from associative rather than analytical connections (the syllabus, as it were). This is one of the ways in which *The Abandonment* falls short as a work of history.

Rotter also notes that my “real love is for the architecture of Washington, DC, or most of it.” I loved all the material that went into this book, from the policy formulations to the blockbuster books on the West to the poetry and fiction, but architecture did serve a special function. For one, architecture has a prominent place in books about civilization: Oswald Spengler, for one, finds endless historical meaning in buildings and derives real insight from this angle of vision. Buildings also do something that books cannot do. Even major books like William McNeill’s *The Rise of the West* or Edward Said’s *Orientalism* or Frances Fukuyama’s *The End of History* are read by relatively small groups of Americans.

The set-piece architecture of Washington, DC, by contrast, is known to everyone. That most of this architecture is neoclassical and meant to reinforce the bonds between American politics and the West (as I define it in my book) is therefore crucial. The National Mall is the national story in its official dimensions, and it is the National Mall that determined the periodization for *The Abandonment*. Its beginnings in the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, the Lincoln Memorial (as part of the McMillan Plan) in 1922, the Vietnam War Memorial in 1982 and, finally, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which President Obama opened in the fall of 2016, shortly before Trump was elected. The book’s main narratives, and its salient contradictions, run most visibly through the representative architecture of the nation’s capital. Historiographical inspiration for this organizational scheme came from Yuri Slezkine’s magisterial study of Moscow, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2017), in which the history of an entire epoch is related through successive residents of a single building.

Rotter traces several useful critiques of *The Abandonment* in his essay. One is that it does not do enough to explicate the two Wests of American history, the West of the NATO alliance and the transatlantic relationship, and the West of the *American West*. This second West is a “transcontinental West [which] offered a vision of national identity that renounced Europe as overcivilized, despotic, corrupt, ossified, and effete.” It fostered an American exceptionalism eager to separate American from European culture. It was the impetus, presumably, for the isolationist tendency in foreign policy debates that is often associated with the Midwest.

In many ways, the transcontinental West is more important to American culture than the Europhile West. It is certainly more important to American popular culture. I left this second West out of my book, though, because it has never gained much traction in American foreign policy proper. Even someone as self-consciously Western (in the transcontinental sense) as Ronald Reagan was an ardent Atlanticist as president; and George W. Bush, the self-styled Texas cowboy, was pushing to expand NATO to Georgia and Ukraine at the end of his second term. Historically speaking, for the makers of American foreign policy, the “European” West has been vastly more significant than the pioneer myth, the rugged individualism, the gunslinger nation, or any other association that could be derived from the America west of the Appalachian Mountains. One place where these two Wests converge, only hinted at in my book, is in the final paragraphs of Fukuyama’s *The End of History*, where he compares the spread of liberal democracy to the movement of pioneers from the East to the West.

Another of Rotter’s critiques concerns fascism and communism. He notes that “fascism and communism were born in the West. Kimmage seems uncertain how to handle this.” This is correct. I am uncertain about how to handle this,

though not, I hope, because I wish to isolate unnaturally a liberal West from the larger tapestry of Western history. It is more that I am not a historian of fascism and communism, not writing about these themes directly in this book, and limited, I would say, by having written a book on American history. The makers of American foreign policy for the most part defined American foreign policy *against* fascism and communism. That definition contributed to (or reflected) a notion of the West that has its roots in the eighteenth-century British colonies and is very different from notions of the West in Germany or Italy or the Soviet Union. To fascism and communism one could also add nationalism as an ideological construct of Western vintage, and a more capacious, more learned book about the West in American foreign policy would also take this into account.

A further critique is that I exaggerate the “idea of the West” and its scope in the 1940s and 1950s. “It isn’t clear that the West as an idea was as pervasive and as powerful as he claims after 1945,” Rotter writes. For national politics and history writ large, this is a good debate to have. Rotter conducts a thought experiment with “the West” taken out of American life, and finds that the story comes out more or less the same. The West is an ingredient, he implies, but not the essential ingredient, not the catalyst of change.

I do not agree. *The Abandonment* is a study of intellectual life and foreign policy, and it works off the assumption that foreign policy emerges not just as a response to international events or a tool for realizing national interests but from ideas, from culture, and from an airy abstraction we could call civilizational imagination. In the 1940s and 1950s, the idea of the West dominated both American intellectual life and American foreign policy. There might have been a NATO alliance without the idea of the West, but it would have been very difficult to explain and to justify; and it would have been impossible to provide the narrative for it that JFK did in his “ich bin ein Berliner” speech. For American policymakers, this West set the parameters of their mental map, provided them with certain insights, gave them their blinders and furnished them and the postwar leaders of Western Europe with a common language. In sum, the West was pervasive and powerful for the subjects of this book, though it was very far from all-pervasive and all-powerful for the nation at large.

I thank Rotter for his gentleness in pointing out that the author of *The Abandonment of the West*, who modestly proposes that twenty-first century American universities teach a handful of Western texts and ideas to their students, going back to Greek and Roman antiquity, wrote about the cleaning of the Aegean stables rather than, as he should have, the Augean stables. Setting the record straight can be a Herculean task, and my punishment for this error should be finding and tidying up some stables near Athens or Izmir. I thank Rotter for not capitalizing on this revealing slip of the pen.

I find myself not fully in agreement with Rotter’s concluding characterizations of *The Abandonment*. “Kimmage’s book is in the end a jeremiad,” he writes, “though he seems on the whole to be more cheerful than many previous polemicists who have written in this vein.” My aspiration was not to write a polemic or a jeremiad. It was to write a hybrid book, a work of history that culminated in some judgments and had a few recommendations for policymakers and universities alike—a definition of the problem followed by an attempt to “solve” the problem. If the book ended up being a jeremiad or a polemic, then it broke away from its author’s goals for it. “What’s most missing for me in his account is a sense of irony,” Rotter continues, mentioning the omission of Reinhold Niebuhr,

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Joseph Heller, and Norman Mailer. *The Abandonment* has its ironic touches here and there—not enough, no doubt – and I am an admirer of Niebuhr, Heller, and Mailer. (Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* is truly the perfect ironic foil to books like *The Abandonment of the West*, which belongs to a painfully earnest genre if ever there was one.) But irony is also a luxury. Irony entails the luxury of detachment.

Perhaps I would have availed myself of this writerly luxury had Trump not been elected in 2016. Perhaps I would have felt more comfortable with the luxury of irony had I not myself served in the Obama administration. At any rate, when it came to this book, detachment did not feel like an option to me, and it would have undercut my recommendations. Put differently, it would have been easier to write an ironic book about American foreign policy if it were entirely a work of history, ending, say, in 1980. By bringing my narrative all the way up to Trump, in a book published in the final year of his presidency (not that I could have known this when I was finishing the book) I had the chance to weigh in on questions in real time, to the extent one can in a book. Rotter has rightly assessed the intellectual costs of doing this.

I have one last, respectful disagreement with Rotter. His verdict on the West is different from mine. He believes that “the invocation of the idea of the West has in fact always contained within itself the confounding, and thereby self-defeating, essence of hubris, the belief that what is ‘ours’ is right, incontestably.” American foreign policy has long suffered from hubris. Some of it has followed from the arrogance and chauvinism that the idea of the West can inspire, or from the arrogance and chauvinism that can inspire the idea of the West. Both the Vietnam and the Iraq wars betray of hubris of this kind. Where I differ with Rotter is over two words: *always* and *incontestably*. I think the historical record bears out a more complicated dynamic.

Let me limit myself to the figure of George Kennan, the architect of American foreign policy for the second half of the twentieth century. Certainly he was enamored of the idea of the West. He too was present at the creation of the Marshall Plan and the NATO alliance. He warned frequently against hubris, however; and, from his reading of Gibbon on the decadence and overreach of the Roman Empire, which brought about its decline, he fashioned the containment strategy. It was no accident that he vociferously opposed both the Vietnam and the Iraq wars and never argued that what is “ours” is right incontestably. To the contrary, he was often as critical of American society and of American foreign policy as were Niebuhr, Heller, and Mailer.

Kennan was also a Russophile, contemptuous in many ways of the world outside the West, but capable of being educated by his own cosmopolitan curiosity. His invocation of the West was nuanced, and it was self-critical, showing that a modulated perspective is at the very least possible. Channeling Kennan and others like him in *The Abandonment*, I tried to appeal to the West with qualifications and criticism and thus to forestall its self-defeat.

At the core of Brad Simpson’s essay is a superb paraphrase of *The Abandonment*. It leads him to a series of critical judgments about the book itself and its intended audience as he envisions it. The book is, in his words, an “attempted resuscitation of an exhausted liberal internationalism framed as a defense of the multicultural West.” I am not quite sure of the word “exhausted” here. Liberal internationalism was robust under President

Obama; it is robust once again under President Biden. My impression in the fall of 2019, when I wrote the book’s conclusion, was that liberal internationalism was not so much exhausted as imperiled by the Trump presidency. But *The Abandonment* is surely a defense of the multicultural West. For Simpson, the book betrays scholarly deficiencies, a glibness when it comes to the evils of American foreign policy and a fundamental misunderstanding of what the West really is.

The core problem of *The Abandonment*, for Simpson, begins with the fact that this book is not a monograph. It does not delve into theory or into reflection on the underpinnings of the argument that it tries to make. Its theses were not spun from archival research, and its footnotes are minimal. These deficiencies, along with “Kimmage’s lack of engagement with existing historiography,” persuade Simpson that the book is not “aimed at historians.”

Here I would distinguish between reading and citing the existing historiography. One does not necessarily have to cite historiography to engage with it. In writing *The Abandonment* I stand on the shoulders of many, many historians, though there are sizable gaps in my knowledge. I could have rectified this by honing in on one piece of the puzzle: norms and images of the West, say, in Harry Truman’s State Department. That would be a worthwhile book.

I chose, however foolishly, to take on the whole puzzle, and I doubt there is time in a single lifetime to master the historiography of American foreign policy from 1893 to 2016, the historiography of American politics from 1893 to 2016, and the historiography of American intellectual history from 1893 to 2016. Nor could these subjects be comprehensively addressed in a book of some 100,000 words. Perhaps books like *The Abandonment* should not be written. If they are, though, they will have any number of scholarly inadequacies. (I will pick up on this point in my conclusion.)

More damningly, Simpson sees *The Abandonment* as a specimen of the foreign policy elite’s myopia. It seems “squarely aimed at liberal foreign policy elites and educated readers for whom the ‘liberal international order’ exists as a continuing aspiration rather than a joke.” *The Abandonment* abets the delusions of

such elites, providing fodder for “the foreign policy Blob who are edified by revived ideas of a multicultural West and who need no explanations of references to the Atlantic Charter and Wilson’s fourteen points because everyone agrees on their self-evident virtue.” Furthermore, he writes, “Kimmage’s breezy tour of a century and a half of U.S. foreign policy barely gestures at the violence of wars and interventions, U.S. economic interests, or the militarized structure of U.S. hegemony after 1945.” Almost an entire chapter of *The Abandonment* is devoted to the Vietnam War, and wide-ranging as this book is, it is not an investigation into economic or military history, both of which would be excellent subjects for historians examining the idea of the West.

I find it hard to respond—academically—to the other insinuations here. I would simply say that I find Simpson’s characterization of “the Blob” (a phrase that itself emanates from said Blob) to be a caricature, and whatever the shortcomings of *The Abandonment*, historiographical or political, it does not presume the self-evident virtue of the West. It consistently poses questions about the virtues and the vices of this idea in American foreign policy.

Like Nichols, Simpson disagrees with my concluding recommendations for the creation of a twenty-first-

century West. He has encountered an author “apparently untroubled by politics or differing conceptions of U.S. national security” circa 1945, but also more generally. With this worry in mind, he makes a normative argument for abandoning the West. “‘The West’ as a value proposition or as a set of ostensible commitments,” he writes, “makes no contribution to understanding or grappling with the grave challenges facing the United States, including climate change, galloping global inequality, pandemic disease, authoritarian revival at home and abroad, and the bipartisan commitment of national security elites to global military dominance for decades to come.” The phrase about national security elites committed (to a man and a woman) to global military dominance for decades to come suggests that I may not be the only one untroubled by differing conceptions of U.S. national security; but our key differences here are about the West.

I cannot see how the West as a value proposition or set of ostensible commitments makes *no* contribution to understanding or grappling with the challenges the United States faces. The West defined American foreign policy throughout the twentieth century. It figures in the rhetoric and policy prescriptions of presidents and secretaries of state from the 1930s to the present. As a word and a concept, it sheds considerable light on the presidencies of Obama, Trump, and Biden. One may hate what it stands for. One may see it as a reservoir of chauvinism and hubris, or as the rhetorical fig leaf that the foreign-policy elite uses to obscure its militarism and its lust for economic gain. But ignoring a word and a concept that is ubiquitous in the primary sources of American diplomatic history would limit rather than enhance understanding.

If history is relevant at all to the ways in which the United States grapples with its many grave challenges, then the history of the West is relevant. As for the present, why would one not want to delve into Secretary of State Anthony Blinken’s ideas of the West, which are rich and interesting, and try to assess their shaping force in the work he will be doing on climate change, inequality, pandemics, and authoritarianism while in office? Normatively, one can reject this framing, this lingering attachment to the West, but in American foreign policy it is an unavoidable concept. We should all be trying to understand it.

I am not sure what Simpson means by calling U.S. commitments to the West “ostensible.” Does he mean that the United States is merely pretending to be committed to the transatlantic relationship? To the NATO alliance? Without forgetting Trump’s animosity toward Europe, I would disagree. I would also disagree that the transatlantic relationship (a commitment to the West that is grounded, however problematically, in the West as a value proposition) is categorically incapable of contributing to a decent and successful American foreign policy. Each of the problems Simpson itemizes—climate change, global inequality, pandemic disease and authoritarianism on the advance—will be easier to handle if the transatlantic relationship is up and running, if the West is vibrant and functional. With several of these problems, there is a great deal the United States can learn from Europe and the European Union (not to mention other parts of the world) and could work on collaboratively: a transatlantic collaboration within other multilateral collaborations, precisely the foreign policy for which I argue in the conclusion of *The Abandonment*.

As for Simpson’s point about a national-security elite addicted to global military dominance for decades to come, I think it is both tautological and imprecise. Every country’s national-security elite tries to maximize available leverage, and the past decade or so has witnessed a lively

debate among those looking at national-security questions in the United States. There are the advocates of restraint, of a smaller military footprint for the United States, the inverse of global military dominance, who come from diverse places on the political spectrum: Will Ruge on the Right, for example, and Matt Duss on the Left. There are the liberal internationalists, like Obama, who would prefer to see conflict resolved through multilateral institutions, if possible, rather than with military force. There are the neoconservatives, like Robert Kagan, and the neo-neoconservatives who believe in the advance of liberal democracy through military pressure.

For the past four years, the most often invoked buzzword in Washington, DC, has been “great power competition.” This phrase presumes that the United States does not and will not have global military dominance. It must share the stage with China, Russia, and other powers that view themselves as adversaries or competitors to the United States, which, if true, is yet another way in which the West (the third great power in addition to China and Russia) is salient to today’s world.

Like Simpson, Heather Stur provides a superlative paraphrase of *The Abandonment*. Simpson is right to say that, as I trace “the idea of the West in U.S. foreign policy,” I don’t hide my belief in its promise, and Stur makes a helpful set of distinctions where liberty and self-government are concerned. By themselves they are not enough for a healthy political culture, she notes, as they “don’t necessarily support the common good.” She reminds us that “Americans elected a right-wing demagogue in 2016,” which is proof of a bigger problem. “The truth about self-government,” she adds, “is that it includes the right to elect a dictator who might eventually strip away civil liberties.”

This is all spot on. When the idea of the West was ascendant, in the 1890s, its exponents not only upheld liberty and self-government (blinker as their understanding of those ideals was, and far as the United States was from consistently honoring them in practice), they grounded those ideals in education. They built the Italian Renaissance Library of Congress (1897) next to a neoclassical Capitol building that was still unfinished in the Civil War. Of the urban planning and architectural schemes for the National Mall, which has more museums on it than government buildings, I write that “the lamp of learning, lit in European antiquity, was burning brightly in the modern United States,” meaning that this was the public of message of the National Mall at the turn of the century. For all that Americans of the 1890s got wrong about politics and international affairs, they got one big thing right: liberty must walk hand in hand with learning. The only protection against demagogues and dictators, in political systems lucky enough to enable self-government, is the power of discernment among the citizens charged with governing themselves. Effort must be expended, institutions cultivated, books assimilated, and ideas propagated for the mass of citizens to avoid the temptations of tyranny.

Stur and I concur in our conclusions. She relates events from after the publication of *The Abandonment* to the book’s argument, alluding to the “mobilization of African American voters in the 2020 U.S. presidential election and 2021 Senate run-off elections.” She goes on to write that “the ideals embedded in the concept of the West may have originated in the European Enlightenment, but the United States was the first nation to build a lasting political system based on them. For all its faults, the American Western democracy experiment has not yet failed.”

It has not yet failed. The challenge for American foreign

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policy, which has often enough been a projection of American faults and failures, is to incorporate that which is best in the American experiment, to push for enfranchisement in the fullest sense of the word and to resist the pull toward disenfranchisement, which has its origins in the founding of the republic and is not less palpable in 2021 than it was in 1921 or 1821. I agree with Simpson that meeting this challenge should not be a military project for American foreign policy and that clear distinctions should be drawn between the imperatives of national security and the problem-solving thrust of American foreign policy, to which the bulk of resources deserve to be devoted. Nichols, Rotter, and Simpson regard the West as an obstacle to a peaceful, internationalist, and enlightened American foreign policy. There is much to recommend their point of view. I remain convinced, however, that the West should remain a part of the ongoing story.

I would like to conclude this essay by reflecting on genre. *The Abandonment of the West* is not a monograph. It was not written with the aid of archival research. It has no scholarly apparatus. It covers 123 years of U.S. history, with excursions into the history of Europe and the Soviet Union. It is diplomatic history, intellectual history and political history. It encompasses a range of figures, from Woodrow Wilson to Henry Kissinger and beyond, about whom there are enormous bodies of scholarly literature in many languages. On one level, this might disqualify *The Abandonment of the West* from being scholarship at all, making it a popular history or a polemic or a pat on the back to the foreign-policy elite or merely something idiosyncratic and half-baked. I will leave that judgment to my readers. I can see why this book is frustrating, especially for readers who are versed in the relevant scholarly literature. Again, as Rotter put it, the higher the wire, the more exposed the performer is.

If *The Abandonment* is not quite scholarship, then what is it? When writing it, I thought of the book as an essay more in the tradition of Montaigne than the *American Historical Review*. Unlike monographs, essays can float ideas. They can ask questions and not answer them. They can make juxtapositions without pretending to work through these juxtapositions comprehensively. They can be playful. They can take liberties. Essays are also personal, quirky at times, subjective in essence, and conducted in the open air, out from behind the veil of omniscience. The word essay comes from the French verb *essayer*, meaning *to try*, and to try is not the same as to succeed. In so many ways, *The Abandonment* does not succeed. Still, I am very glad I tried to write about the West as expansively as I did, and this for three reasons.

The first is scholarly. As Nichols observes, there is no book about American foreign policy and the West per se. When researching this topic, I had the invigorating feeling of walking across open space. I know that my manner of filling this space is provisional, that this is a book with almost no brick or mortar. It is composed entirely of scaffolding, some of it very loosely held together. At best, the book allows the scholarly reader to perceive the outlines of a new subject, to recognize that the story of the West in American foreign policy does not begin in 1945, to accept the complicated interplay between “American” ideas and “global” ideas within this concept and to recognize a cumulative genealogy of ideas and foreign policy precepts, in which there is genuine continuity from the 1890s to the present and no end of discontinuity.

Secondly, I was glad to write for two distinct reading publics outside the academy. For the general public, sweeping narratives are often preferable to narrowly focused studies, and scholarly apparatus is only an impediment. This makes it impossible to write about historiography, but it opens up other possibilities, and I did what I could to exploit those. My other audience, as Simpson emphasizes, consists of policy experts and policymakers, and policy

writing that is purely analytical is beside the point. It has to be prescriptive.

Whether my prescriptions are right or wrong, I found it helpful to arrive at them through historical inquiry. This may skew the history writing in *The Abandonment* or render it suspect. It also tethers the book to a transient topicality, since policy prescriptions are always context-specific, and already *The Abandonment's* conclusion belongs to the long-ago era of the Trump presidency. Nevertheless, it felt right to me, in a book that highlights the productive relationship among ideas, policy, universities, and the institutions of policy formation to try for a book that in style and content bridges the academic world and the world of policy debate and policymaking.

Finally, I am glad to know that graduate students might read this book. They—and not the Blob—were my ideal audience. My hope is that a graduate student would pick up this book and be horrified by it. What an outrageously telegraphic book! What an outrageously foreshortened book! What an outrageously incomplete book! Kimmage never proves his arguments! What masquerades as narrative is really word association and concept juxtaposition pegged to various chronological developments, the march of ideas, and the march of events manipulatively merged into a book that purports to be the history of an idea, even a history of American foreign policy!

I would not want the outrage to end with these exclamations. I would want it to generate the key question for this hypothetical reader: how could I do it better? What would a wiser periodization look like? What about fascism and the West? What about communism? Which archival collections should be consulted to get deeper into this topic? How might one write a dissertation or monograph about the idea or concept of the West in American foreign policy? I do not mean, by picturing this mock horror or by posing these questions, to say that I sought to write a bad book so that others might write good ones. I mean that *The Abandonment of the West* is a first survey of the territory, an opening salvo. It is thus an invitation to younger scholars to add the refinement, the texture, the detail, and the wide learning that this subject so urgently deserves.

In the next issue of *Passport:*

- A roundtable on David Schmitz,
The Sailor
- A Roundtable on Vanessa Walker,
Principles in Power

...and much more.