

A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise

By Robert W. Tucker¹

Book Review by Eric A. Belgrad

Professor Robert Tucker's book, which was released during the height of the presidential fever amidst a welter of national publicity, attempts to re-examine the basic premises in which American policy has been based since the end of the Second World War. The endorsements on the back of the book by Senators Fulbright and Church indicate that Professor Tucker shares the doubts expressed by these critics and others of the fundamental perceptions of the American role in world affairs which have undergirded the foreign policies of the Nixon Administration and of its immediate predecessors: it promises "to think the unthinkable" about the validity of neo-isolationist thought.

Unfortunately, the Tucker analysis suffers from an abundance of straw men which are set up and brilliantly knocked down, thus weakening an otherwise valuable re-examination of American foreign policy. For example, Professor Tucker begins with a discussion of President Nixon's recent contention, in 1971, that "the great internationalists of the post World War II period have become the neo-isolationists of the Vietnam War period and especially of the period accompanying the ending of the War." Professor Tucker then poses the question as to whether presidential fears of a revival of isolationism is not in fact a rhetorical diversion to serve to obfuscate the real issue of American policy in South-East Asia. Dr. Tucker relates that critics of the president claim that to equate a redefinition of America's role in the world with neo-isolationism is to confuse the issue. Since Professor Tucker makes no attempt to rebut this point of view, we must assume that he shares it, and in sharing it, he makes common cause with such critics as Professor Abram Chayes and other foreign policy brain-trusters who serve the McGovern camp. While it is true that these critics of the Administration's foreign policy claim to advocate a "new internationalism," their recommendations, which include a massive cutback in U.S. military capability, the unilateral withdrawal from various parts of the world without consultation, massive reduction in American troop levels in Western Europe contrary to the expressed desires of NATO – all these indicate that the "new internationalism" contains rather important elements of the old isolationism. As Professor Tucker points out, one of the hallmarks of isolationism is unilateralism and it is precisely this unilateralism, linked with an out of hand rejection of any mutual security arrangement based on old or new treaty commitments, which marked the hey-day of classical isolationism (from Washington's farewell address to the America-Firsters) and which underlies one aspect of the new isolationism.

Professor Tucker states that "a new isolationism might well develop under the banner of a new internationalism. However, it is termed, it would still be isolationist if characterized by the refusal to entertain certain relationships and to undertake certain actions." The problem here is

¹ Robert W. Tucker, *A New Nationalism: Threat or Promise* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

that Professor Tucker confronts us with a fundamental semantic problem. If the new isolationism is different from the old, the only visible feature of that difference can be found in the name. Granted that isolationism today can be tolerated better than in 1940 by the United States because of the present nuclear stalemate and that traditional mutual security systems no longer hold the promise of deterrence by virtue of the decreasing credibility of the threat of retaliation, granted that economic necessities weight more heavily for those nations presently in the American sphere of influence than on the United States itself, the question remains whether the aspirations of America in securing a world which conforms to a particular desired image can be abandoned forthwith without creating incalculable changes within the very fabric of the American peoples.

More important, it can be argued that the new isolationism does not differ materially from the isolationism of the period 1919-1939. While it is true that the continued existence of strategic thermonuclear weapons in the hands of the United States would protect far better the physical security of the country than was possible in the Inter-War period, the conditions of strategic stalemate, whether involving two, three, or more parties, nevertheless recreate the possibilities of approximating the conditions of isolation of pre-nuclear days. If, as Professor Tucker admits, the old isolationism represented an unwise policy then, its lack of wisdom remains evident today, a problem which the Tucker argument does not meet. On the other hand, if the present nuclear context does provide some arcane variant to a policy of isolationism, then a further problem arises. Professor Tucker recommends neo-isolationism only because the physical security of the United States cannot come into question; underlying this contention are two highly questionable assumptions: (a) the threat of use of the thermonuclear deterrent in defense of the United States is entirely credible to an opponent and (b) the United States deterrent has achieved such a plateau of effectiveness that at no time in the future will it again be subject to challenge. The first of these assumptions implies a willingness on the part of the United States to respond to *any* threat to the national security with massive nuclear strikes at the challenger. Yet the evidence is clear that the United States is not willing to accept the onus of a nuclear first strike in defense of even a vital interest – and much less to protect a marginal one. If the United States no longer wishes to jeopardize New York or Chicago in defense of London and Paris, why would such a risk be assumed for San Juan or Pago Pago?

The second assumption is based on a dangerous conception of strategic realities. While Professor Tucker's analysis of American first and second strike capabilities is correct (in fact, it is vindicated by the American position in the SALT I talks) for the present, it takes no account of future technological possibilities. If any of the members of the nuclear club should develop effective counter-measures against a missile attack, they will immediately gain an immense strategic advantage against the other members of the club in that they would no longer have to fear retaliatory strikes. While it is true that under these circumstances alliance would not be of any consequence, it is equally clear that active cooperating between the United States and its allies also provides the benefits of joint benefits from the kind of research which will prevent too great a technological gap from developing.

Finally, one of the benefits which Professor Tucker anticipates from any American policy of neo-isolationism is that erstwhile allies will be forced to look to their own security, thus realizing their own strategic potential instead of relying on the American nuclear shield. The difficulty here is that one cannot contemplate this broad proliferation of nuclear weapons and delivery system with any degree of optimism. The greater the number of nations having a nuclear capability the greater the chance of political miscalculation in the use of these weapons. Therefore, the withdrawal of major powers from the international scene, which stimulates the development of nuclear capability on the part of smaller nations may be seen as a stimulant to the kind of adventurism which inevitably leads to the outbreak of cataclysmic world conflict.

If complete American isolationism does not seem advisable, what remains of the Tucker thesis? Most important is the insight that the alliance systems, which today ties the United States to all parts of the world, was designed in an earlier era, when the American strategic advantage was unquestioned, when the antagonism between East and West was total and implacable, and when Western Europe depended for its political, military, and economic survival on the United States. None of these circumstances hold true today, and yet the alliance system remains unchanged for all intents and purposes. Clearly, present circumstances require a review of United States commitments throughout the world. To the extent that the threat to Western security has lessened, the totality of American commitments to the defense of the West can be lessened. To the extent that the monolithic nature of Russian communism has eroded, the largely “anti-communist” position of the United States is subject to dilution. To the extent that the Western Europeans equal the United States in economic power, the cost of defense rightly becomes a matter of partnership in which the Europeans must assume their fair share. To the extent that the United States has come to realize that its resources are limited, it must measure more carefully the scope for development of these resources, and especially when contemplating any act of intervention in a marginal area. Professor Tucker’s thesis then should be seen as a catalyst to a re-examination of the premises of American foreign policy and not as a retreat from all the United States has represented in the post War world.

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@inproceedings{Fedder1974ANI, title={A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise? By Robert W. Tucker. (New York: Universe Books, 1972. Pp. 127. \ \$6.00.)}, author={Edwin H. Fedder}, year={1974} }. Adler, Selig. The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth Century Reaction. London and New York, 1957. The classic early work that regards economic self-sufficiency and the illusion of security, as well as some ethnic prejudices, as the causes of isolationism. Clemens, Diane Shaver. Tucker, Robert W. A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise? New York, 1972. Weinberg, Albert K. "The Historical Meaning of the American Doctrine of Isolationism." Tucker, A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise? , p. 12, writes, "As a policy, isolationism is above all generally characterized by the refusal to enter into alliances and to undertake military interventions." Similarly, Nordlinger, Isolationism Reconfigured , p. 6: "The national strategy is neither naive nor simplistic." Isolationists undeniably played some role in the politics of the era, but they hardly dominated the political scene; they can best be described as "a voluble and vehement minority which on occasion could make its influence effective" in combination with disaffected internationalists of one stripe or another.