

American isolationism: a response to David Hastings Dunn

JOHN DUMBRELL

In an excellent and thoughtful piece in the April 2005 issue of *Review of International Studies*,¹ David Dunn draws our attention to seven myths about American isolationism. His points are well made and generally unexceptionable. However, since David Dunn takes an article I wrote in 1999² as the starting point for several of his criticisms, I thought I would take the opportunity to offer a response. I have three main points to make.

Firstly, there are a number of straw men hovering around Dunn's argument. Myths four to six in particular ('isolationism is the "normal" foreign policy of the United States'; 'the Founding Fathers advocated an isolationist foreign policy for the new Republic'; 'the isolationism of the interwar period shows how easy it is for the US to slip into its "traditional" isolationist foreign policy') would be accepted by hardly any serious scholars of the subject. Dunn is correct to note that US foreign policy textbooks print selective extracts from George Washington's Farewell Address without giving adequate contextual commentary. However, one needs only to consult, for example, the 2002 edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, edited by DeConde, Burns and Logevall,³ to appreciate that the academic consensus on American isolationism is much more sophisticated than Dunn implies. As Manfred Jonas puts it, in a piece precisely designed to reflect the current accepted wisdom, both Washington and Jefferson 'actually sought to increase American contacts with the outside world'.⁴ In a famous article published in 1954, William Appleman Williams, surely one of the most influential of all authorities on the history of US foreign policy, argued 'that the absence of genuine economic isolationism demonstrates the mythical nature of the entire concept'.⁵ Obviously, partisan political debate rarely achieves the sophistication of academic analysis. In such a context, the term 'isolationism' is (like the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative') used very loosely. Such imprecisions may also find their way into more scholarly writing. There, however, they hardly attain the status of consensual myth.

My second point concerns the purpose of my 1999 article. Like David Dunn, I was concerned about unsatisfactory uses of the word 'isolationism', in the US post-Cold

¹ David H. Dunn, 'Isolationism Revisited: Seven Persistent Myths in the Contemporary American Foreign Policy Debate', *Review of International Studies*, 31:2 (2005), pp. 237–61.

² John Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Post-Cold War American Isolationism', *Government and Opposition*, 24:1 (1999), pp. 24–43.

³ Alexander DeConde, Richard Dean Burns and Frederik Logevall (eds.), *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, vol. 2, 2nd edn. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002).

⁴ Manfred Jonas, 'Isolationism', *ibid.*, pp. 337–51, 338.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 351. William A. Williams, 'The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920s', *Science and Society*, 18:1 (1954), pp. 19–35.

War foreign policy debate. Like Dunn, I quoted Paul Weyrich's comment: that 'isolationism' was a 'conjuring trick by the internationalists, a hoodoo they call up whenever they feel threatened'.⁶ As Dunn concedes, I clearly distinguished 'isolationism' from 'unilateralism'. The point of the 1999 piece was to identify four 'impulses' which, at least potentially, called into question 'the general thrust of post-1945 US internationalism'.⁷ (My four were 'unilateralism'; 'nationalism, America First and the New Populism'; 'anti-globalization'; and 'anti-imperialism'.) In so doing, I, perhaps unwisely, attempted to rescue the term, 'isolationism' from the realm of invective and imbue it with a neutral, descriptive content. Understood in these terms, I do not see that the points made in my article are actually very different from those made by Dunn. I agree with Dunn that I probably exaggerated the force of the Pat Buchanan brand of (dare I write it?) 'neo-isolationism'. (It is still worth recalling, however, that Buchanan actually won the 1996 Republican Presidential primary in New Hampshire.) What is clear is that 'nationalism' in US foreign policy after 9/11 has been re-energised, not towards some form of neo-isolationism, but towards new assertions of global power. (Reading my pre-9/11 article again is akin to peering into a remote world of lost innocence.)

The third comment is more specific and relates to my interpretation of President Clinton's policy of 'multilateral restraint', and especially of his Presidential Directive 25. I am accused of besmirching 'multilateral restraint' with the 'isolationist slur'.⁸ I repeat that my whole purpose in the innocent days of 1999 was to use 'isolationist' in a neutral, descriptive rather than an abusive way. I was writing in the spirit of Eric Nordlinger's *Isolationism Reconfigured*.⁹ Clinton's policy had at least the potential to call into question 'the general thrust of post-1945 US internationalism'. In the heady atmosphere of the early post-Cold War era it was presumably intended to do just that. No slur intended! As for PD 25, I accept that I should have related my remarks more clearly to US relations with the United Nations and also made a clearer distinction between 'isolationism' and 'non-intervention'. However, in many parts of the world, US diplomatic engagement is not credible in the absence of the prospect of some willingness to deploy military forces. Like the general policy of 'multilateral restraint', PD 25 surely was, in the wake of the Somalian deployment, also a calling into question of 'the general thrust of post-1945 US internationalism' (not least the precedent of the Vietnam War).

To conclude, David Dunn has produced a valuable addition to the debate over American isolationism. On the debit side, although he himself alludes to the weakness of arguments that rely on 'straw men',¹⁰ such creatures also reside in the pages of his article. As has been remarked of contemporary US foreign policy, Dunn's putative de-mythologising gives the appearance of a hammer looking rather desperately for nails to strike.

⁶ Dunn, 'Isolationism Revisited', p. 244; Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Post-Cold War Isolationism', p. 24.

⁷ Dumbrell, 'Varieties of Post-Cold War Isolationism', p. 25.

⁸ Dunn, 'Isolationism Revisited', p. 247.

⁹ Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Dunn, 'Isolationism Revisited', p. 243.