

BERNATH LECTURE

From Triumph to Crisis: An American Tradition

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to address you all today. I would like to start with a shout-out to Stuart L. Bernath. I have been a big fan of Bernath ever since I was hunting for a transatlantic Civil War dissertation topic back in grad school. It was then that I first came across *Squall Across the Atlantic: American Civil War Prize Cases and Diplomacy*, a meticulously researched and perceptive study of maritime law during the Civil War.¹ Half way through reading it I concluded that I better look for a different way into my topic of choice, such was the quality of Bernath's study.

Since we are here in Chicago, I also want to give a shout-out to the Midwest, my home. I was born and raised in Salina, an I-70 town in central Kansas. After a great run in the UK, I was lucky to have the opportunity to repatriate to Columbia, Missouri, some four hours east on the same interstate where I grew up. Spanning from the rolling Flint Hills of Kansas to the great river basin of mid-Missouri, this corridor of I-70 includes the first section of interstate built in America in the 1950s. I think it is the world's most beautiful stretch of motorway.

SHAFR members might disagree with that aesthetic judgement, but all here today will know that this span of I-70 produced a disproportionate number of leaders in the formative period of the so-called "American century." The short-list is remarkable: John J. Pershing (Laclede, MO), commander of the American Expeditionary Force in the Great War; Amelia Earhart (Atchison, KS), one of the most accomplished aviators of her day; Omar Bradley (Moberly, MO), who, among other things in a distinguished career of public service, commanded the Twelfth Army Group after the Normandy breakout, the largest army overseen by a single commander in U.S. history; Chuck Berry (St. Louis, MO), a rock and roll pioneer who blazed new transatlantic trails in what was to become a global art form—the British rock that came to America in the 1960s and 1970s riffed off of the UK tours of the 'father of rock and roll.'

The best-known historical attractions of this stretch of I-70, of course, are the presidential libraries of the consecutive administrations that oversaw the

1. Stuart L. Bernath, *Squall Across the Atlantic: American Civil War Prize Cases and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, CA, 1970).

U.S. formulation of the post-1945 world order: Harry Truman (Independence, MO) and Dwight Eisenhower (Abilene, KS). But there is more. The segregated school under review in *Brown v. Board of Education*, a case whose outcome advanced the global cause of racial equality, was located in Topeka, Kansas, roughly midway between the Truman and Eisenhower libraries. The National World War I Memorial, dedicated in the 1920s, is to be found in Kansas City. The great U.S. public monument of the Cold War is the St. Louis Arch, America's answer to Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower. I can keep going. I'm sure SHAFR members needn't be reminded that World War II ended aboard the *USS Missouri*, nor that Winston Churchill delivered one of the most important orations of the Cold War—the 1946 “Sinews of Peace” (or “Iron Curtain”) speech—in Fulton, Missouri, which now houses the National Churchill Museum.

What has surprised me upon returning to this great region of the world is how little the broader public—including very smart college-age students—know about America's international past. Forget the “distant” past of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which is just as important. Most of the public these days are even unversed in the “glory days” of the post-1945 period. I want to do my part to change that. Along with colleagues at Missouri's Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy and its History Department, my shoulder is to the wheel to introduce the next generation to the United States' international past, from the eighteenth century forward.

I

What we see in the past changes with time—sometimes even relatively short amounts of time. Earlier this week, at the beginning of a long, fourteen-hour drive back to Missouri from Colorado (along I-70!), I noticed that I could not see the Rocky Mountains in the rearview mirror until they were some distance behind me. Indeed, I couldn't appreciate the full scope of those awesome landforms until I was east of Denver. Where I'd been hadn't changed, of course, but what I saw behind me did as I moved forward. Surely something similar happens when we study the past.

I started off as an historian in the days of “Peak America,” that ephemeral moment of post-Cold War triumphalism. What stood out back then was the sheer power of the United States. This is what demanded explanation. Historians raced to account for America's ascent “from colony to superpower,” as the era's master synthesis called it.² Among other things, we found evidence of a powerful central state in the nineteenth century; we demolished what was left of exceptionalism and empire-denial; we probed how imperial power was entwined with the globalization of liberal capitalism; and we continued

2. George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York, 2008).

unearthing the myriad ways in which empire is entangled within cultural forms and social hierarchies.³

There is every reason to believe that the heyday of these lines of enquiry remain ahead of us. But as we motor along these historiographic pathways, we ought to take note of the new environment in which we find ourselves. The United States is a declining power in an unstable world system. What is more is the volatility of our domestic politics, the red ink that bathes our national finances (at the end of an economic boom no less), and the imbalance in our socio-economic structure, which looks like it might be teetering toward some kind of tipping point.

This new landscape has changed what I see when I look up into the rearview mirror of history. If it was U.S. attempts to remake the world in its image that needed explanation twenty years ago, what demands my attention today is how the United States bears the imprint of the incoming traffic of people, capital, and security threats. These volatile and uneven inflows have molded the internal institutions of the United States like the hands of a potter. Twenty years ago, I would have said it was the incremental and seemingly inexorable ascent of the United States that stood out—that path from colony to superpower. Today I'd say that it is just the opposite that requires explanation: the halting, haphazard, and contingent course of U.S. history. Far from a linear rise, the historic path taken by the United States is notable for its zigs and zags, and no few changes in direction.

Amid all these twists and turns, there is a curious pattern: geopolitical reconfigurations that enhanced American power have devolved into periods of internal instability and crisis. If you step back to look at the greatest periods of crisis in each century of U.S. history—the eras of the Revolution, the Civil War, and the Great Depression—the trend is impossible to miss: each of these were preceded by international triumphs.

Let's start with the great tectonic shift of the mid-eighteenth century: Britain's victory over France in the Seven Years' War. The outcome of this early world war was nothing less than a "geopolitical revolution."⁴ The results could be seen around the globe but were most visible in the eastern third of North America, where Britain and her native allies staked their claim to preeminence. Yet, a mere dozen years after the triumph of 1763, Britain's Atlantic empire devolved into civil war with the "shot heard round the world" at Lexington and Concord.

Fast forward to the mid-nineteenth century, which witnessed a geopolitical shift that was every bit as momentous. The U.S. conquest of northern Mexico

3. One example of each, in order listed above: Brian Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2007); Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton, NJ, 2018); Amy Kaplan and Donald Peace, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC, 1993); Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism* (New York, 2015).

4. John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400–2000* (London, 2008), chap. 4.

in 1848, which followed on from the annexation of Texas and the settlement of the Oregon boundary, established a new transcontinental empire. The geopolitical position and security of the post-1848 United States was enhanced by the weakness of regional rivals and the spread of liberal political movements in the Old World. But this triumph was also ephemeral. A dozen years after 1848 came the election of Abraham Lincoln, which soon led to the bloodiest war in American history.

There are echoes of this arc in the twentieth century. The Great War reshuffled the geopolitical deck, dealing the United States an exceptionally favorable hand. As the traditional powers of Europe inflicted untold destruction upon one another, the United States surged into an advantageous international position. By 1917 the United States was exporting capital, not to mention mobilizing and transporting a million-man army across the Atlantic. This alone was a triumph for the de-centralized republic. What was more was that American exports, ideas, and icons gained traction around the world—this was the “Wilsonian moment,” the expansion of Hollywood cinema and Fordism, and the high-tide of the posthumous celebrity of Abraham Lincoln.⁵ But once again, this moment was to be short-lived. Twelve years later came the implosion of Wall Street in the 1929 crash. By the dark winter of 1932–33, the once surging American economy was on its knees, bringing global capitalism down with it.

What I will do in the time that remains is to make three observations about common denominators within these historical arcs from triumph to crisis. I will then conclude with two reflections on why this foray into America’s “distant” past matters to SHAFR’s core constituency of scholars of the post-1945 era—a period of U.S. history that looks more and more unusual with every day that passes. While making these points, I promise to limit my I-70 references and to make only one reference to my favorite British motorway, the M40 that connects London and Birmingham.

II

My first observation: geopolitical shifts that enhanced America’s international position have been destabilizing because they unleashed volatile and disruptive economic growth spurts. Booms can be every bit as perilous to political establishments as can busts.

Let’s again start with the eighteenth century. The key to understanding the origins of the American Revolution is the dramatic growth of British North America in the mid-eighteenth century. Even before the Seven Years’ War began in 1754, the population, trade, and consumption of the colonies was fast increasing. Anglo colonists probed deep into the interior of North America,

5. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York, 2007); Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City* (New York, 2010); Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton, eds., *The Global Lincoln* (New York, 2011).

testing the power of France's imperial outposts and Native alliances, most famously in George Washington's ill-fated 1753–54 expedition into the Ohio Valley—the immediate trigger of the war that was to follow. Meanwhile, the Atlantic shrunk like a contracting accordion, not least because of the trebling of transatlantic shipping. British exports increased in this period by more than threefold as a new consumer society was born that drew the disparate North American colonies together in an integrated, British marketplace.⁶

This growth is the backstory to that transformative shift in the eighteenth century geopolitical system that unfolded with Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War. The defeat of France kicked down the door that previously had limited British access to the interior of North America. Intensified conflict with powerful Native peoples immediately ensued. Britain's new position primed the pump of economic growth, not least because it opened new lands in the West to the restless American colonists. The supply chains and military infrastructure developed during the war now transitioned to commercial purposes. A manic boom ensued. It was in the decade after 1763 that transatlantic trade and colonial consumption most dramatically skyrocketed—this is why consumer boycotts became such potent political weapons in the 1760s and 1770s.⁷

In sum, the British victory in 1763 released the pent-up pressures that had built up in the preceding decades. Here was the problem. As the colonies expanded at a breakneck pace, London struggled to maintain imperial control of the colonists, preserve peace with Native peoples, and pay off its crushing war debts. Everyone knows what happened next: in a contingent process of political sorting, a majority of colonists in thirteen of Britain's mainland American colonies came to believe that London's ham-fisted attempts to exert its imperial authority posed an unacceptable threat to their English liberties. A messy civil war ensued, the result of which hinged upon the Americans' successful 1778 alliance with their old French enemy.

The mid-eighteenth century is not the only example in U.S. history of an advantageous geopolitical shift unleashing a politically disruptive boom. The 1848 conquest of northern Mexico triggered a race between the North and South to control one of the modern world's most frenzied booms—the colonization of the American West. What followed was the radicalization of the pre-existing debate over slavery as both sections sought to gain the upper hand.⁸

The seemingly favorable geopolitical reconfiguration of the 1840s disrupted the internal dynamics of the Union in two other ways. The first was in the realm of political economy. Thanks to the transatlantic tariff reductions of 1846

6. T. H. Breen and Timothy Hall, *Colonial America in an Atlantic World* (New York, 2004), 302; Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (New York, 2016), 25.

7. T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York, 2004).

8. Michael Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

(the U.S. Walker Tariff and Britain's repeal of the Corn Laws), American exports of wheat and cotton surged, as did its imports from the emerging industrial behemoth of Victorian Britain. British investment in America also soared in this early era of railroad mania on the London Stock Exchange. These booms in transatlantic economic activity thrust divisive questions of political economy onto the center stage of American politics. The result was more sectional rancor, this time over debt repayments and tariffs; the latter issue loomed large in the aftermath of the Panic of 1857.⁹ Second, and less appreciated: the newfound security and power that the United States attained with continental dominion paradoxically accelerated the decent toward civil war. No longer united by the specter of foreign threats, the sectional divide deepened into an unbridgeable chasm. Sometimes foreign threats are good things to have in that they foster internal unity.

In the twentieth century, the newfound power of the United States in the aftermath of the Great War fueled a volatile period of economic expansion, imperial consolidation, and cultural diffusion. The "roaring twenties" rumbled beyond the nation's borders as America exported as never before its capital, culture, and industry. But the United States struggled to adapt to the responsibilities that came with this power. In the age of Victorian globalization, America had grown accustomed to freeloading on Britain's global power, not shouldering international burdens itself.

To make matters worse, the political winds of the 1920s blew the U.S. ship of state into troubled waters. At home, conservative calls for a "return to normalcy" gained ground as progressivism lost steam. When it came to foreign relations, U.S. diplomats creatively sought to resolve thorny problems related to international debt repayments, European stability, and naval competition.¹⁰ But this activity should not obscure the trendline of 1920s U.S. foreign relations: the ferocious resurgence of the old traditions of unilateralism, imperialism, protectionism, and—perhaps most of all—nativism.

III

This leads to my second observation: economic booms triggered by seemingly advantageous geopolitical reconfigurations contributed to sharp shifts in migration patterns, which in turn conditioned the origins and courses of the political crises that ensued.

No one here will need to be reminded that migration patterns are responsive to economic stimuli and yield unanticipated political consequences. But I bet

9. Marc-William Palen, *The "Conspiracy" of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalisation, 1846–1896* (Cambridge, UK, 2016); Jay Sexton, *Debtor Diplomacy: Finance and American Foreign Relations in the Civil War Era, 1837–1873* (New York, 2005).

10. Joan Hoff Wilson, *American Business and Foreign Policy, 1920–1933* (Lexington, KY, 1971); Melvyn P. Leffler, *The Elusive Quest: America's Pursuit of European Stability and French Security, 1919–1933* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1979).

many of you do not know that two of the periods that witnessed the largest proportionate increase in the population that was foreign born occurred just before the two civil wars in American history. The decade after the Seven Years' War saw the arrival of some ten percent of the population of the thirteen colonies (including enslaved Africans transported against their will).¹¹ There was an even larger immigration wave in the decade of the Irish potato famine and European revolutions (1845–1854), in which new arrivals totaled a remarkable thirteen percent of the population of the Union.¹² These sudden bursts of immigration intensified social conflict, in the process destabilizing the political establishments of the day and contributing to the breakdowns that were to follow.

In the causation of the Civil War, the collapse of the Whig Party in the early 1850s stands out as a point of no return because it cleared the way for the emergence of a new anti-slavery coalition, the Republicans. This political realignment was principally powered by the debate over slavery, but the sudden surge in Catholic immigration played a pivotal role. The meteoric ascent of Know-Nothing nativism stunned the Whig establishment, which was of two minds on how to respond to the increase in immigration. The Whigs found themselves split along ethno-cultural lines over immigration at the very moment that Stephen Douglas pulled the pin from the grenade of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. When the dust settled, the new Republican Party had emerged from the wreckage, setting in motion a chain of events that led to civil war.¹³

Perhaps the most dramatic change in cross-border migration in U.S. history happened in the 1920s. The end of the Great War set the stage for another surge of migration to the United States. Push factors abounded in this war-torn world, while the roaring economy of a booming United States sucked in foreign labor like a vacuum. But this post-1919 wave of migration never came into being as a result of the nativist lobby in the United States, which rammed racist immigration restrictions through Congress in 1921 and 1924 (as well as tariffs, it should be pointed out). The vacuum was abruptly turned off. By the 1930s, the average annual net inflow of people to the United States was but a two days' total in the decade before 1914.¹⁴

These immigration restrictions had an unintended political consequence. With the stream of new immigrants reduced to a trickle, and with the gradual transition from first to second generation at home, the ethnic divisions that long had plagued the American working class slowly gave way to an emerging

11. Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1986), 26; James Horn, "British Diaspora: Emigration from Britain, 1680–1815," in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2, *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, UK, 1998), 32.

12. David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York, 1976), 241.

13. Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978); Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville, TN, 1997).

14. Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants 1882* (New York, 2004), 45, 59.

collective consciousness. When the depression hit in the 1930s, the American working class was positioned as it had not been before—nor since, for that matter—to become a political force. This is an argument made by Jefferson Cowie in a book I highly recommend, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*.¹⁵ The upshot was the transformation of American political life: the rise of organized labor, the extreme makeover of the Democratic Party, and the social welfare legislation of the New Deal. And here was a great irony: intended to preserve the dominance of America's Anglo Protestant racial "stock" and to curb the inflow of leftist politics, the immigration restrictions of the 1920s paradoxically empowered organized labor and fueled the development of the U.S. version of the welfare state.

The New Deal was not the only time in which immigrants and their offspring shaped the outcome of political crisis. Here is a curiously underappreciated statistic from the Civil War: one in four Union soldiers was foreign born. Indeed, more than half of the Union army was composed of immigrants, those with a foreign-born parent, and African Americans. "The war for freedom and the Union has been carried on by the whites and negroes born on this continent, by the Irish and the Germans, and indeed by representatives of every European race," acknowledged Massachusetts Republican George Boutwell in 1865.¹⁶

Immigrants did more than just fill the muster sheets and labor ranks. Some recent arrivals became transformative political leaders. Who was the single most important individual in the run up to the Revolution? With apologies to Monticello, it is not Thomas Jefferson, but rather an immigrant: Tom Paine, who was part of that post-1763 wave of migration from the British Isles to North America. The English-born and raised Paine had been in Philadelphia for less than two years when he published the blockbuster pamphlet that ignited the Patriot cause: *Common Sense*, the byline of which read "written by an Englishman."

IV

My third observation concerns the compression of time—and the proliferation of possible outcomes—during the transformative crises that followed on the heels of America's international triumphs.

This is the essence of crisis: the world turned upside down; the known replaced by the unknown; panic reigning as people struggle to maintain their balance amid shifts in the very ground beneath their feet. What is more is that

15. Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 2016). See also the classic Liz Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990).

16. Boutwell in Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era* (Ithaca, NY, 2009); Don Doyle *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (New York, 2014), 154–184.

there is a point in which crisis became contagious, spreading like a virus from one realm of public life to another: geopolitical reconfigurations yielded disruptive economic booms, which in turn altered migration patterns, social relations, and political outcomes.

In such moments of dizzying change, unexpected turns became the norm. “I never had heard in any conversation from any person drunk or sober the least expression of a wish for separation,” reported Benjamin Franklin in 1775.¹⁷ But just a year later the united thirteen colonies issued a Declaration of Independence. In 1935 the United States sheltered its economy behind protective tariffs, while passing neutrality legislation aimed at isolating itself from the gathering storm outside of its borders. A decade later America boasted a global conception of national security that led it to promote free trade and international engagement around the world.

No U-turn was more abrupt than that which occurred in the mid-nineteenth century when the United States shifted from being the world’s greatest proslavery power to joining the ranks of anti-slavery nations. Civil War emancipation is surely the most revolutionary moment in American history. Two things stand out about the end of slavery. First, enslaved peoples did not wait for high policymakers to deliberate about their fate. They fled their oppressors whenever the opportunity emerged, most often because of the nearby presence of the Union Army. Placed under the pressures of a massive military invasion, the nineteenth century’s greatest slave empire imploded.¹⁸

This leads to the second point: moderate and even conservative Union leaders, not least President Lincoln, were in the grand scheme of things surprisingly quick to embrace what had been an unimaginable set of policies.¹⁹ Crisis makes the hitherto unimaginable not only possible but also necessary. Consider this contrast. Just before the outbreak of war in the spring of 1861, the incoming Lincoln administration signaled that it was open to signing an amendment to the Constitution that forever forbade the federal government from abolishing slavery from within the states in which it currently existed. Fast forward two years to the spring of 1863: armed African Americans in blue coats were marching through the heart of the cotton kingdom, reducing the Old South to smoldering rubble. This was revolutionary change on a revolutionary timetable. Crises empower the disempowered.

They also give leverage to those often-neglected actors in U.S. history—foreign powers. In those rare moments in which the very fate of the nation was up for grabs, foreign powers have stormed onto center stage, determining the denouement of the dramas that unfolded. The United States owes its existence

17. Quoted in Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (New York, 2016), 4.

18. For the classic introduction to this argument, see Ira Berlin, “Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life,” *Reconstruction* 2, no. 3 (1994): 41–44.

19. Adam I. P. Smith, *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics, 1846–1865* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

to France, which not only provided desperately needed material support and naval power in the war of independence, but which also—in its potential to support the war effort—incentivized the establishment of the political union between the thirteen colonies. A century later, Britain’s neutrality in the Civil War allowed Union power to overwhelm the slaveholders’ rebellion (this was the topic explored by Stuart Bernath nearly a half century ago). In the mid-twentieth century, one can’t help but to wonder if there would have been an “American century” had not Britain withstood the blitz in 1940 and had not the Red Army prevailed in the tide-turning slaughters of 1942–43, Stalingrad and the great tank battle at Kursk.

V

The Red Army brings me to more recent times. Let me make two points about the relevance of these observations to SHAFR’s bread and butter, the post-1945 era. Point number one: the “American century” looks very weird when placed in the *longue-durée* continuum of U.S. history.

The pattern of triumph to crisis did not play out after 1945. The seismic geopolitical shifts of the 1940s unleashed an unprecedented economic boom that brought relative stability to the United States. When one takes the long view of U.S. history, the decades after 1945 appear unusual for their political stability, foreign alliance building, and peaceful social adjustments—the high point of which was the civil rights movement, whose achievements look more and more remarkable with each day that passes. The point is not to nostalgically pine for this period of U.S. history, which is littered with its share of disappointments, abuses of power, and persistent forms of exploitation. Rather, the point is comparative: to ask why the geopolitical changes of the 1940s brought stability, rather than volatility, to the United States.

To explain why this period is different, one must start with the historically anomalous position of the United States in the world system after 1945. For most of its existence—and once again today—America has been the world’s greatest debtor nation, akin to a black hole sucking in capital from abroad. This position on financial markets has made the U.S. economy vulnerable to the volatility that has been an inescapable feature of global capitalism. The exception is the mid-twentieth century, when America was a net capital exporter.

Or consider trade. The nineteenth century’s most notorious protectionist power—a title that the United States might well reclaim in the twenty-first century—became the champion of free trade after 1945. The story is similar with migration patterns. America has exerted a magnetic pull on migrants, attracting labor from around the globe in the nineteenth century and once again today. The exception, as we have seen, is the mid-twentieth century when—as a result of those 1920s immigration restrictions—the percentage of the population that was foreign born reached its all-time low of 4.7 percent in 1970.

Let's turn toward foreign policy, which will bring out in me the naturalized British subject that drove along the M40, rather than the American citizen who champions I-70. For much of its history, the United States has been a disobedient member of the international community, with a penchant for being most uncooperative in those moments that matter most—like a bratty kid that misbehaves at a funeral. This is the nation of broken treaties with Native peoples, filibustering, repudiation of foreign debts (in the aftermath of the Panic of 1837), the rejection of the League of Nations, and, most recently, of resurgent “America first.” The exception, once again, is the mid-twentieth century, when America took the lead in constructing a formidable international order, one that was nimbler and superior to that of its plodding, command-control communist adversary. Any explanation of why the U.S. won the Cold War surely must begin with its superior alliance system, which was anchored by partnerships with the mighty island powers that flank Eurasia: Britain and Japan.

The internationalist America of this period did not always live up to its promise. Of course not. But it left lasting legacies: the Atlantic Charter, the Bretton Woods system, the Rio Pact, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the dynamic NATO alliance, and (back to I-70) Harry Truman's folksy embrace of internationalism in his 1953 farewell address, for my money the most underappreciated speech in presidential history—one that articulated the foreign policy tenants of its era as effectively as George Washington's farewell had done for its time.

These geopolitical anomalies—America as a creditor, not a debtor; free trade as opposed to protectionism; low immigration rather than high; internationalism instead of unilateralism—shaped the domestic institutions, policies, and culture of the ephemeral American century. Projecting power rather than importing it insulated the United States from the geopolitical tremors of the global reconfigurations of the Cold War, while giving it a disproportionate say in what happened abroad. America's economy was sheltered by the privileged position of the dollar in the Bretton Woods system, as well advantaged by the devastation the war had wreaked on foreign industrial rivals. At home, America's nationalist political culture was another form of protection, snuffing out potential foreign threats with missionary zeal—though this insulation had a cancerous asbestos in it in the form of McCarthyism. And, not to be forgotten, the unparalleled naval and air power of the United States not only shielded mainland America from conventional threats, but it also enabled America to project its power around the globe.

After 1945, the triumph was America's. Crisis was offshored, outsourced far beyond its borders to the contested Cold War battlegrounds of Germany, Korea, Iran, Guatemala, and on and on. This wouldn't last long. Indeed, the “American Century” might have been only two decades long given what we are learning about the profound transformation of the global system in the 1970s.²⁰

20. Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York, 2015).

Even before the Cold War had come to an end, the United States was returning to its traditional positions on global flowcharts. America became a net debtor in the Reagan years; immigration began to increase and diversify, thanks to the 1965 Hart-Celler Act; and critiques of liberal globalization popped up across the political spectrum, particularly in wake of the neoliberal reforms like NAFTA and the creation of the WTO that followed the Cold War's conclusion.

VI

This brings me to my final point, which concerns our present moment of volatility. Our current troubles look less unusual when viewed through the prism of America's "distant" past than when seen in relation to the peculiar era of U.S. power that followed 1945. Shifting the benchmark to the distant past raises a question: might we be in the midst of another rendition of triumph to crisis?

A strong geopolitical case can be made. It would go something like this. The disruptively liberating globalization of capitalism began well before America's Cold War triumph—just as British North America boomed before the Seven Years' War. Then came the stunning collapse of communism in 1989, which set off a transformative shift in the tectonic plates of the geopolitical system.

The frenzied boom of neoliberal globalization that followed skewed the distribution of wealth in favor of the holders of capital, as Thomas Piketty has so persuasively demonstrated.²¹ Immigration to the United States also surged, with the percentage of the population that is foreign born now within striking distance of its all-time high (13.5% in 2016; 14.8% in 1890²²). New technologies of communication accelerated these trends, in the process placing unanticipated strains on old ways of life. Meanwhile, as America's wealthiest voters received generous Cold War dividends in the form of tax cuts, its public services, national finances, and military power began to buckle under budgetary pressures.

The domestic results of this volatile, post-Cold War boom are readily apparent for all to see today: resurgent nativism, protectionism, and even isolationism; widening social inequality and intensified culture wars; looming fiscal crisis; and unexpected, contingent turns in finance and politics—not least the 2007–8 financial crisis and the 2016 election. The nationalist political system created in that peculiar age of the mid-twentieth century has struggled to adapt to the post-Cold War context in which the United States has returned to its traditional position of importing, rather than projecting, power. The nation has lost the insulations that cushioned it from the shocks of global integration during the heyday of the "American century." Meanwhile, new security

21. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

22. Migration Policy Institute, "U.S. Immigrant Population and Share over Time," 1850–Present, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/immigrant-population-over-time>.

vulnerabilities have emerged in the forms of terrorism, cyberwarfare, renewed international rivalry, and climate change. It is no surprise that nostalgia dominates contemporary public life.

What lies around the corner is anyone's guess. I ended my recent book by emphasizing the stamina and resilience of the political and economic establishments that had taken root during the "American Century."²³ They so far have weathered the storm, which might be breaking on the horizon: Trump's insurgency has lost steam, and even Brexit is now in doubt. Even so, the challenges of our era require more than a simple rearranging of the deck chairs of the ship of state. The sputtering engines below deck that power our political economy and ballast our social structure need a thorough overhaul. Maybe a crisis is necessary. After all, U.S. history shows us that crises have their upsides.

One thing is for certain: a glance at those past trips from triumph to crisis serves as a reminder that Americans alone do not determine the nation's fate. Geopolitics matter. Economic changes yield unanticipated results. Immigrants shape political outcomes, as do foreign powers. Most of all, the road taken by the United States is not smooth and linear, so much as it is filled with potholes, sudden swerves, and unexpected pit stops—very similar, come to think of it, to the drive I took along a crumbling I-70 earlier this week.

23. Jay Sexton, *A Nation Forged by Crisis: A New American History* (New York, 2018), 185–98.