**Demetri Kofinas:** [00:00](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=BBsEAvpwpCs4hty3GsXOo3ZjTiXvq-WOV1-jm2c9huPusYsXJ2UEOzOafrefkF6iKMi99GiM1hM8XLXFe-E7Nrx3b64&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=0.32) Today's episode of Hidden Forces is made possible by listeners like you. For more information about this week's episode, or for easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you listen to the show on your Apple podcast app, remember, you can give us a review. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community. And with that, please enjoy this week's episode.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [00:29](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=bmNiHakR14h2aAO707IavNFgPe9XSBau6wzyzb6pZTDYSUDaQnqk37ezxF2s68FJXAN7WL4aBGu6YX4wRDYwUEmaBdE&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=29.71) What's up everybody? My guest on this episode of Hidden Forces is Charles Kupchan, a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, a Professor of International Affairs at Georgetown University and served as Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs in the Obama White House, and also served on the National Security Council under President Bill Clinton. He's here today to talk about the subject of his latest book, Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World. Professor Kupchan, welcome to Hidden Forces.

**Charles Kupchan:** [01:22](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=gL1h-wqkYhSQAu5rvcigomwUplUsUXQO5o5bvA1LG7jBxe9hc3F-bR3gvAD628TyPZxNzCr4qkgMlM5e-o0qg_8Im28&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=82.01) Very nice to be with you, Demetri.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [01:23](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=nbkiE_uY7CkqnIasl7f8aeO3q0k8KtMzD5u0mtOzjfaWSDBnFnvBf8UFX13mTpI3OXa_LzYS3fAv13g5Ye674Qp3ztQ&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=83.94) It's great having you on. So, for those who haven't read your book, because I think ... Is it already officially out?

**Charles Kupchan:** [01:31](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=VuIuzPRX9pugSh0DWPChmizyxnJg0pfqd4S8N8DA_8uFPank9M44XJE2C_pHkAQZNwyiYX9MTT1JZAR7J90DQ-mWTp0&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=91.18) Yes, it officially came out on the 1st of October.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [01:34](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=yJjaGKR2FPunN-pmEnCktzc9amshN0j5F_27SBnq8vyTkJ3aoU_Ej690KW2E5LS_FmD9Z1zoK_GoE2hF_HA2ugyx6Kc&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=94.09) Okay. So, we're actually recording this today on the 7th. For those who haven't read your book, how would you describe it for our listeners? And what was your objective in writing it?

**Charles Kupchan:** [01:45](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=OBuyimzVm5V7kObLwV5y2Dz-ZeXuFlclXBG2SaIetWn7GOk3sYc5vNF3XQ1wN3cTLLjEt0YdeSG-KwmPV0vEjXyIrgs&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=105.94) I would say it's the first book to tell the story of isolationism across US history. I start with the French and Indian wars in the 1760s, and go right up to the Trump administration and the 2020 election that we're about to witness. So, for starters, it's simply a historical overview of this impulse that has been with the country since the very beginning. And that is to avoid for an entanglement to operate on the principle that getting involved in the troubles of others only invites them to come mess around with us. Nobody, interestingly enough, had ever really told that story.

**Charles Kupchan:** [02:34](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=EJAcxPCwDZ6xQwm5cxbqDyFWPEP5rZIxEUJ6At1Te0eNvDHhG8KT2jfYxmH-5J9A9N_gXnU8Olu-C_b4dJ0aQuRw99w&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=154.03) There's a story about the founders, there's a book on isolationism in the 30s. Actually many books. There's a book about Woodrow Wilson, and the defeat of his effort to bring the country into the United Nations. But nobody kind of did the soup to nuts book. And my purpose was really to bring this history to Americans at a time when I think we all need to know more about the country's foreign policy before Pearl Harbor. I started this book almost a decade ago, because I began to sense that there was an inward turn in the United States.

**Charles Kupchan:** [03:14](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=CJ0HfJENFyR8f4K6NoyFdWQmrzW3moCjM5zCs2enLutcLuwYpG8X3umZNFR-10mJ-p7C0aeHepty8Qfoy6w8VjyCtFY&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=194.28) It started after the end of the Cold War. I sensed it when I was in the Clinton White House. It was put into abeyance to some extent by 9/11. But then came back in spades once the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan didn't go so well, to put it mildly. And I began to wonder this robust internationalism, this willingness to run the world, this America with almost 800 military bases, is this more fragile than it looks like? And that's really the question that I wanted to explore. And I decided to do so by going back and trying to tell the story of the American experience through the lens of the isolationist impulse. That's what the book is really meant to do.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [04:05](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=vk4RLprBeqzOaIbLAeMMCE1XLHumebnms8Nz6p9Gzb61PA6mInEAJHOyLfFNlxZZNmSTXLDtDVgCbfWeG4H1q3JkcUg&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=245) Well, that was actually going to be my next question or one of my next questions, which was when did you we and when did you first began to see signs of a return of isolationists sentiments in the US? And the period for me, where I saw it was really I put between 2004 and 2007. Exactly to your point when the war in Iraq started not going so well, or the public opinion began to turn a bit against the war, and right up until the surge. And also in the early 90s, I think most notably with the popularity of Pat Buchanan's message. Those were kind of the two periods that I remember. But when did you first begin to see signs and what were those signs?

**Charles Kupchan:** [04:51](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=boLlrgZwjGro6FsBMomZgEPzHS-4KnjHfXP3bSk7w3K7r9GAU113vJIL_uiEYNvNlGyJGXGQvIh209GPnaqyQK61ypo&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=291.28) I think that the biggest clunk on the head for me was Clinton's reluctance to engage in the Balkans. You'll remember that not soon after the Cold War ended, Yugoslavia began to fall apart. And the George H. W. Bush administration basically said, we don't have a dog in this fight. We're going to stay up out of the Balkan Peninsula. Clinton, when he was a candidate said, we're not going to let that happen. We're going to do something about this. This is a humanitarian disaster. And then he gets into office, and I was there at the beginning, so really the first couple of years, and he was quite reluctant to get involved.

**Charles Kupchan:** [05:41](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=3a8A5TT-NDJe7VzXKkw56T2v1I_qoJWH4WIQjRcLVXipABJSK4T2zF66YcD3_xUVinK97CvhYxQ4Yasq03YIdsAAgH4&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=341.27) There was a lot of pushback from the Pentagon. And eventually, he did get involved. And we had the war for Bosnia and the Dayton accords, and eventually, the intervention in Kosovo to push out the Yugoslav army and stop the ethnic violence between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians. But that's when I began to say something's going on here. And you're right, Demetri, to point to again, which a turning point, because I think that it's in the 1994 midterms when the Republicans did well, that you really begin to see the collapse of what I call in the book, the bipartisan compact between moderate Republicans and moderate Democrats behind liberal internationalism.

**Charles Kupchan:** [06:33](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=K-2CXqx8hlcSb-z6uI-IIJgcUE8EoaZRluYh8YmR-FahZBtEMahlMzFU4RIn46fZDonFNvkBJvt_MpkdvIDMcMlP2vc&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=393.95) Behind a formula of combining American power with partnership. Power plus partnership, that was the formula of liberal internationalism that really emerged under Roosevelt during World War II, and was alive and well right through the Cold War up until the 1990s. That compact starts to come apart after the '94 midterms. And ever since then, I think Democrats and Republicans have really gone in different directions on foreign policy, which is one of the reasons that I think the country has been adrift. And one of the reasons that there is a kind of isolationist comeback of a sort that that is very important, and I think it's quite visible in Donald Trump's America First.

**Charles Kupchan:** [07:27](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=EL-oYHT4ESyntAm-ClqT2DoDdMILCZhuN_as2gW1coJWPMMMF2pwwER57zIwXd_H4zwGKpA5H8u_sZwR-8o6TuIzOso&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=447.27) After all, when he said, America First, it's only America First. In his inaugural address, he was going back to the mantra of interwar isolationism. The America First Committee was born in 1940 to stop Roosevelt from sending aid to the victims of Nazi aggression. They fought tooth and nail to keep the US out of World War II. And so Trump harkening back to the America First days, was to me a strong sign that the isolationism, the turn inward that I saw in the 1990s, was really gaining steam, and in fact, taking root in the White House. And in my mind, Trump is not the cause of it. He is more of the symptom, the visible manifestations of a country that at least from his mind, wants to step away from having bitten off more than it can chew.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [08:30](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=98Laid-CY_Dr5fjInTCvdVXUZb2Wcon6YCmzRcz0PKlvXfjwIeYbL0W9qi-vqYP-vy6EgFly_IAHlDqRjSIqcsaQqiE&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=510.15) So isolationism has tended to have a bad name, certainly during this period of liberal internationalism. I guess one of my questions is, is that merited, one? Two, where does that narrative come from? And that maybe, three could open the door to really explore the history before the 1940s, which you document so well in all of these different stories, whether it's the Spanish-American War or the Monroe Doctrine, and maybe, explore how isolationism actually served the nation well during that period.

**Charles Kupchan:** [09:06](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=CR4bgJP0wQSljtd26d8sIU98xa_DrwlAcaH4gr36gqROEneSmrZA3GWcipa-76LfgbDkgfZIgpsk7eRHJAwr_zrN9Lo&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=546.9) You're right to point out that isolationism is today a dirty word. And if someone calls someone else as an isolationist, it's really an epithet. It's an attempt to denigrate them and isolate them politically. And one of the things I wanted to do in the book is to refurbish isolationism reputation, not because I'm an isolationist, I'm not. I'm sure we'll get to that later. But because I think that the country needs to have a searching, open debate about the future of its role in the world. And that anybody who says, hey, let's lighten the load, let's step back, let's let others do more, they shouldn't be called an isolationist.

**Charles Kupchan:** [09:57](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=oP0E756cUgpbMaqIGAUqsHuC3CJCAOqRuuLNAUX5fAM-bUck1lBTUtkCzAloZlFsKtXNDZBD-apc_gs968AS-LADN-U&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=597) So I think it does a disservice to the quality of debate in this country, to continue to use the notion of pulling back of lightening our load abroad as some sort of insult. But that's the way it's been since 1941. And that's because the isolationists were pushed to the margins of American politics during World War II. And were seen as the fringe elements who made the big mistake of keeping the United States behind a moat fortress America, while fascism and militarism and virulent nationalism and Nazism were sweeping Europe and Asia. And I agree with that. I think that that isolationism of the 1930s was a diluted bout of a search for strategic immunity, that led to a disaster, the bloodiest, most costly war in the history of the world in which 400,000 Americans lost their lives. I mean, it was a big mistake for the United States not to engage earlier.

**Charles Kupchan:** [11:11](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=IQCy2Va7WnN0t2babxPVm0ZZMYZVQumrtPBaEAS4uTrLAttaBdibCPUp03sw5MuSG1NMt6KvqnSO4cjGFc6aD_8LjVg&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=671.6) That having been said, I think if you go back to the 19th century, you see a brand of isolationism, which serve the country well. And the isolationist impulse goes right back to the founding days. And the guiding advice came from President George Washington in his farewell address of 1796, in which he said, "The Great rule of conduct for us is to have commercial relations with everybody and entangling alliances with no one." And for the rest of the 19th century until the Spanish-American War, the United States stayed home. Now, the US was extremely expansive in North America, trampled on Native Americans, grabbed a whole lot of land from Mexico, tried several times to take over Canada. But it didn't go further. And that's because there was a consensus that the United States had no business expanding beyond North America.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [12:22](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=-EmCltJ23_IODccSe_SDL6b4Q3C3egLlLzCawgd9r5D6--ADt1jKag3hmZNHtNDAHLpqGljvdk_b36TVMsO6TdZYyFw&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=742.15) Actually, if I'm not mistaken, it was in your book, as I do so much reading for this program, sometimes I confuse different authors. But I think in your book, you made the argument that those who argue that westward expansion was a form of internationalism were making a faulty argument, is that correct?

**Charles Kupchan:** [12:43](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=n0q9WkvRV0eX_Kr_Rx6gy442-zt1OGz28VYOQPb_cugZPuxdExx0kYe6KYd1DQqFakmq3t7mwFySNVQ-5aXStlc8PyQ&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=763.3) It's a form of internationalism, if internationalism is equated with expansion. Because we certainly engaged in territorial expansion. It's not internationalism if it means intermixing with foreign people. Because in general, the United States western boundary followed the extension of white settlement. And there was a racial quality to American identity, there still is for some Americans. And therefore, the idea was that the Union would expand in step with the frontier of white settlement. And then when it came to going beyond that, one of the reasons that the government and the public kept saying no was in part because they were not deemed to be part of the American experiment.

**Charles Kupchan:** [13:41](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=5reRkLfgkF_78Y7HDQl8jvFHutmBQYakXBSw37ziZdAGWfv7G7Qi2pIseIZ_viJUvqerRLFqTc3tlGZFfX40ukPznwI&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=821.61) Blacks, Latin-Americans, Hawaiians, Asians, they were not American in the more ethnic sense of the word. And as a consequence, that was a brake on expansion. There were also other motivations, such as, we don't want to entangle ourselves in great power politics, we want to be an exceptional nation and not go down the path of empire. But certainly the question of race and who participated in the American experiment was part of the explanation for why the US went to the Pacific Coast, but did not go further.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [14:23](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=WggC569caiUDnvDBSFRBPOZ1Wno17oW2FvuODyH2prJjV6jamRebvR2aAMSgxsILHUh2b140DaPcCUdEX9f4nPkl2FA&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=863.8) I mean, that part of the history is actually very fascinating, the racial components because of America's history with racism, with slavery, and the sorts of populations that existed in Latin-America. And I have a lot of really great illustrations in the book from Puck and some from ... Are you familiar with these illustrations of Dr. Seuss that he did during the interwar period.

**Charles Kupchan:** [14:47](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=k9FaKj9IbkPLharfGVyLiVDknm-brtn9-ZWL91FGSQooyGWoKgh08KvwVRRbjhDNxE2O-osiNvw5BkRZS12HQD0_tg0&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=887.64) No, I'm not. Do they have racial content?

**Demetri Kofinas:** [14:50](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=jGMJqqdsCV2nBoZz8hCQCqSQ_LlIyYzg0mEMJaKDjbnP85PZNgX3SXjWZwUwh8vjRXtm_JAbbutGb5c2dur2DuY49Mw&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=890.68) Well, those are not racial. Those are related to sort of isolationism and they have these great images of ostrich putting their heads in the sand. And Uncle Sam sleeping in a bed next to Europe as they're sort of suffering under Nazi fever. But the racial component and xenophobia and the correlation between isolationist impulses and those qualities I think is interesting and something to explore. I want to actually drill in a bit more about this point about Western expansion. And then that could maybe, lead us into a definition of isolationism. How do we define isolationism? Because, again, for me, it's a bit complicated.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [15:29](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=kWzbbByV-4GqvANZ-RWsA0j8wiEitkypNXtD8X2LAXs_GCkJScwgWhnLBv8vm6afWX6w87376h4TQj_8_Nh8S8MyRf0&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=929.88) Is it fair to say that the reason that the United States was fundamentally from the beginning isolationist was because it had more than enough to chew on in North America? If it wanted to expand territorially, which is one reason why countries engage internationally, at least during that period of time, they could do that. They had plenty of resources to extract from those territories. And they were able to engage diplomatically with the Native American peoples in the territory. So, there was some level of cohabitation with the external world and engagement. And obviously, there was commercial engagement, which doesn't speak to the political component. But how do we define isolationism in a way that separates it from what I'm describing here?

**Charles Kupchan:** [16:17](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=GBN0qFPeii0bXkUaRuAJ5Yemughi1R29LKng0wacB3JY0bgf7aAVJAZWzQfGhN5p9KbJXgbEgENg3gvqt9_la6ArdKs&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=977.27) The term means different things to different people. And there are historians out there who would say that the United States never was isolationist because number one, it was a trading state from the beginning. Number two, the US was never culturally isolated. Ideas from Europe, from Asia, were coming and going. And others would say that the US was expansionist in North America and that disqualifies it as isolationist. For me, isolationism is a lack of readiness to extend strategic commitments beyond the mothership.

**Charles Kupchan:** [17:01](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=F29zv0ex3ZPirGEYD_G_ooH2LzlhJSYtbBEqjoa2fQZ1d8bYCZMpsW6gpx4H2_R1b3w6e6ypQsiI0lRb4TupikTd4-c&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1021.69) And it has an enduring geopolitical slash geographic logic to it, which is ever present during the founding era. And that is that the United States has to its east and west, big flanking oceans. It has to its north and south, smaller, relatively mild neighbors. And as a consequence, the United States should bank on that natural security. Yes, during the early decades, we didn't have natural security because we were surrounded by the British, the French, the Spanish, and also the Russians that had the territory up in the north, Alaska.

**Charles Kupchan:** [17:47](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=57P6gNHL7hfbPyfy0wih0_fleBossdr8ExqJBCmz7nRycLSDcT8R7ZJG-zNpFg75MFNU8LHrZgpOMBEx7wgAjzmIdlA&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1067.63) And so part of realizing isolationism was to gradually push one by one, European powers out of the Western Hemisphere. And that, to me, was really the sort of double-edged goal of America over the 19th century. One, to expand westward and become a formidable North American readout. And two, while that process moves forward, to gradually unseat all European powers from their strategic presence in North America. And that generally worked. The French left, early on. The Spanish stuck around until 1898. But then we booted them out in the Spanish-American War. And then the British left relatively early in the 20th century, after Anglo-American rapprochement pulling out their last troops from Canada right around 1905/1906.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [18:55](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Q7H6aRTEVmkGHCUn2qMd-7pjKiVf-nJufWdKGaRbpRaT2N-1HC7EzJ-u3G_QrZwHcNYPqTDIg7WU3JM_HgI9py1QkKo&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1135.54) So what I actually the part of the book that I found most illuminating and interesting is not the geographical or natural security conditions that would make isolationism a viable or intelligent or strategically advantageous strategy, but rather the way in which American political history and culture told stories about itself and its own relationship to the world that ultimately became a self-fulfilling prophecy. First of all, would you agree with that interpretation, that this was the strongest source of the isolationist impulse in American life is actually a cultural one?

**Charles Kupchan:** [19:39](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=gg65eDVkffZ4A5_SlGEnejOEGCy4sx4nJ4wwyp0aZw0zefOuSnlA4Ip0mI2dAkQKV0F-_xw8yXPxSOM7IKkJGBp4UC0&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1179.55) I would agree with that. And culture is a slippery concept, and I think the geographic dimension ended up being part of our culture and our identity. And in my mind, it all can be wrapped up in the concept of American exceptionalism. This is going to sound bizarre to most listeners, because ever since 1941, American exceptionalism has basically been a justification for running the world. The US sees further, the US knows better. Everybody in the world in the end of the day wants to be a liberal Democrat, it's our responsibility to let them find that outcome.

**Charles Kupchan:** [20:28](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=EQdApvib45x1BYKYPOQk9McbO3HabvrZXObUmpR_t2WkFo36A5GHOIrhyC0bJuqIJzfi1rHIpWZS_uxRWiDae6uinGQ&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1228.9) Before 1941, and certainly before 1898, American exceptionalism was exactly the opposite. It was a justification for running away from the world because Americans believed that even though they had an obligation to share their experiment with others, that they would do so only through the power of their example. And the fear was that anything more ambitious than playing in the role of exemplar would threaten that experiment itself. One, because early Americans were terrified of domestic tyranny. And they feared that if we aspired to be a great power, we'd have an overweening federal government, large military establishments, high taxation, and that our ambition abroad would come at the expense of our liberty at home. And that, in many respects, was one of the guiding lights.

**Charles Kupchan:** [21:31](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=mmvB2b8yadkJHu6CypYcSyC-CZh_R7aB0GKjO5zmgVDr1ZLMSqbk6XSOIiv5hVGTgSzodYeDSyX8cqpa_zmAHODemEo&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1291.85) Another part of the narrative that's very important here. And again, it is, I think, captured by the notion of exceptionalism is that the United States is going to defend not just liberty at home, but liberty abroad. Does not want to be entangled, does not want to let other countries tell it what to do. And I'll just give you two quick historical examples to demonstrate the degree to which isolationism and this unilateralist impulse were very difficult to disentangle.

**Charles Kupchan:** [22:10](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=4DmuXkw6bI_4vJgeuj61HYOfDcb3l3VJqhkWO_yUaQ5ssuLh_Ki5JJ-dqKUPueyWEqzlPke9qTbOEtLLpn2nESu2W3o&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1330.03) In 1778, we were losing the Revolutionary War. And even though the founders were reluctant to look to others for help, they reached out to the French because they were afraid that if they didn't find an ally, the war would fail. The United States would remain under the tutelage of the British Empire. The French say yes, they come across, and they help us defeat the British, and lo and behold, the United States is born as an independent country. In 1793, Britain and France go to war again. And the French say to the United States, you are our ally, we took your chestnuts out of the fire in the Revolutionary War. Now it's your turn to come help us.

**Charles Kupchan:** [23:04](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=F3ksA4HkBAF2gT0uqxOwCoEyBL_ZMKy88QRw_Fl6LRHgAohfAr8mZRGQMRTCfa6m4iAcIJLp4Dj5_MkzNIeFt9gx-9Y&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1384.92) What does George Washington do? He issues a proclamation of neutrality, in which he basically says to the French, good night, and good luck, you're on your own. This was a bald act of infidelity. That Alliance was on the books. The French were right that they bailed us out and they expected us to do the same. When Washington reneged on the French Alliance, it was the last Alliance that the United States had until after World War II. That gives you some sense of how averse successive administrations were to tying American foreign policy to others.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [23:48](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=UE7_OSiPpFJIHKInUGjVR-a1vapbSvxVqLVdKBeuorHDpqdeyJqAa_ZdPOWPzXjfHpQJOaZzej6bX03evflc-2MnWM4&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1428.42) Do you think Washington would have terminated the Alliance had the French monarchy not been toppled?

**Charles Kupchan:** [23:56](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=GnT2GbZ7XmPnjKr2H6MUjVxQeIWaRWFsZ4paLCeBjhWBvuYWuhSDl5GV9dwVbI7FG_VtoQqdc1SzoMqzigTr8h4ZMSE&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1436.41) No. Basically, no. The issue was that Washington along with just about everyone else, did not believe it was in the interests of the United States to get involved in another war with Britain. Simply put. The other example is from Woodrow Wilson, that we have in 1898 the turning point in which the narrative of American exceptionalism shifts. And Admiral Mahan, Teddy Roosevelt, a historian named Frederick Jackson Turner, they all argue that the United States has made it to the Pacific, that the frontier has closed, and that if the United States is going to maintain its exceptional character, it must take Manifest Destiny abroad. It's time to go global.

**Charles Kupchan:** [24:55](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=r3ZYKSPSBH7ujWQnaVPMPxR_cHwFcxBrYSVgU0i0OXOMpYAPih1ai_xgs86DgzlOTyRFmf9eIYW0EIH1R3Ol8FbcY_k&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1495.44) That leads to the Spanish-American War and also World War One, both of which the United States won. But interestingly, despite the success, Woodrow Wilson then tries to guide the United States into the League of Nations, a body that would commit the United States to play a role abroad moving forward. And what happens? He goes down in flames. The Senate voted three times on the League of Nations, all three times it voted no. Then Wilson says, well, the problem is that there are unilateralists and isolationists in the Republican Party, so I'm going to take my case to the American people. And he said the 1920 election is a referendum on American internationalism.

**Charles Kupchan:** [25:47](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=VwwLN9kdc5zDM1a4bCreJEUoeWb-hKqAAxwR7pCFWV44ueIt-o6CZoFYGjJFSzWN627cWqt-hDb9C3CrM_NM9vkSeLA&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1547.21) The Democratic candidate, James Cox was in the Wilsonian camp. The Republican candidate, Senator Warren Harding said, "Make my day. I stand for the policies of George Washington. I stand against foreign entanglement." What happened in that election? Warren Harding won in one of the most lopsided elections in American history. So, basically, you go through this interregnum of internationalism from 1898 to 1919. And then the American people say, hey, we need this like a hole in the head. And that sets the stage for the stubborn isolationism that you see in the 20s and the 30s.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [26:35](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=jb04-u_qguVna4URbXE_qjL93R9i2Wbyqy4MP__eGDD31_CB4cQzMQogSp9cPWd5-KjK_5rMDvcrFCyorHiF4-SsihI&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1595.63) One of the things that came to mind while you were talking about Woodrow Wilson in the League of Nations, which came after world war one, which is that certainly, the experience of fighting two world wars must have driven some percentage of the country towards the more isolationist. But then I also thought about the Vietnam War, and that the reaction to that war was not so much isolationism, but rather increased levels of pacifism. So, how do we think about isolationism as it relates to things like pacifism? Like the desire not to engage in foreign wars, but not a desire to pull away from the world. And why did, let's say, the reaction to Vietnam elicit one but not the other?

**Charles Kupchan:** [27:20](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=6MbF5S9opB5L2w5CBRPmwk2s_AiItLq4bMlD8ckVlR40BCqPUDX-boN04WZmrvvAbFIZr3JdinAYeG3UKpVVybOq87I&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1640.81) Well, pacifism was part of the isolationist narrative from the get-go, particularly in New England, where you had a lot of religious communities who did not believe in the use of force. And they opposed the Revolutionary War. They opposed the war of 1812. They opposed the Mexican-American war. Thoreau famously went to jail in opposition to the Mexican-American War, because he said he wasn't going to pay taxes to support a bloody act of aggression. But I would say that over the course of American history of the various elements that we've been talking about, the exception list narrative, Manifest Destiny, race, liberty, and unilateralism, pacifism is probably the least influential.

**Charles Kupchan:** [28:18](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Y-9YSgT48nkYQkI4I9B3OcYLXGs0zV_aJHxX0P6ysgRpYDOw9wKWkLId7egeuiRR8D9AnmhPb0j-hq57MQ8CztSTKyE&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1698.9) And that's part because even though there are worse, large pacifist communities in New England, much of the country was not pacifist. And as a consequence, even though you had by the 1820s an American peace society, you didn't really see a strong movement. The one exception would be after the Spanish-American War, when the United States takes a whole lot of territories from Spain, including the Philippines. And we end up with a very difficult insurgency in the Philippines against the American occupation. Some 4,000 American soldiers died, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos died. That's when you begin to see a strong pacifist movement that digs in right up interwar period.

**Charles Kupchan:** [29:13](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Wbb6BzZgn7GRyM7iq0UBiOrbN8OW_Jr_mOzWoelYrhhEIoNOeuDZ7ta78GVbpUVy2LGopQYUFvNFhOpd-r01gOPBLWM&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1753.47) And one of the factors that led to the defeat of the League of Nations, as we were talking about is this unusual alliance between the pacifist left and the libertarian right. Interesting that we're beginning to see that kind of coalition come back today. But we can get to that later. And in regard to the Vietnam War, there was a pacifist movement, and there also was a stepping away, but I wouldn't call it isolationism, I would call it retrenchment. Richard Nixon put forth what was called the Guam Doctrine, which was we will let our partners abroad do the fighting for themselves. And that led to the Vietnamization of the war and the US essentially ending the fighting.

**Charles Kupchan:** [30:04](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=01vKw2oJRPNZ15FCmFU1Wq4oEDgtEU4Z0Vc4wDNzY1v8Pz64pO1ODIrxsaGfS1SXbWKW9vZauLZZQqiBp7pI7n1JZsE&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1804.07) But I think it's safe to say that after the Cold War, isolationists were never really able to get a foothold, there was a push at the end of the 1950s because of the Korean War, because Truman decided that he was going to send several divisions, army divisions to Europe. There was a push to try to get isolationism back in the game. But that really died out by 1953 in 1954. And after that point, isolationism was essentially in the same place that internationalism had been before World War II. That is to say, it was really at the margins of American politics.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [30:50](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=kfyVfys32sSwvQwUL7mx3MZ4ybWjMWbLMcDhk0gkeWJTuT8URfaGnpY1v7JCyeM1cUH7TdzsV0wMdBqXXEYGaz7SoLY&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1850.41) Do you think that if the Soviet threat had not emerged after the end of the Second World War, that American politics would have allowed the sort of expansion of military power that we saw during the course of the Cold War? In other words, could the United States from its place where it was culturally and politically in 1945, could it have seized a unipolar moment like it attempted to seize in 1991 in the absence of the Soviet Union. Would Americans stood for that?

**Charles Kupchan:** [31:24](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=drkJ6C6_yK91tTxiPjLI2W_UhUFz6ajXLeuFOx263T6ya8Ua1taQDtxGOpsQ29RO2qsOOAC2-XCK12E4wNVAn5MwpXE&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1884.47) It's an interesting counterfactual. And in some respects, the answer is that there was a see change in American attitudes toward the world that took place during World War II that was irreversible. I would point out that, in 1945, before the Soviet threat emerged, the Senate passed the United Nations, the post-World War II Order, The Bretton Woods institutions. What you witness there is that the coming to life of the bipartisan center, with Republicans and Democrats together, buying into a large peacetime presence abroad to help keep the peace.

**Charles Kupchan:** [32:11](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=EzXd6VipOye6YYkZwoK36ePRo575mQAj4Ttdwxy2ZNqRkITGtxENlRex3vV4j_R1uEnjOMzoResZ5KUXv0uEXtXooxQ&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1931.04) And this was in part because this exceptionalist narrative had, in fact, gone global. And the Roosevelt era had basically taken the realist bent of the war of 1898, combined it with the Wilsonian idealism of World War I, and created this amalgam of what we call liberal internationalism. Now, that having been said, if you look at what was happening in the mid 1940s after the end of the war, there was a clear downsizing of the defense budget, there was demobilization, and then once the communist threat starts to emerge, Truman actually has to scare Americans into taking it seriously. This was the Truman Doctrine when he was asking for assistance to Greece and Turkey to prevent the spread of communism.

**Charles Kupchan:** [33:08](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Zei19Z_q6vdzdZqE7Y61QozMbp9nTAlo3nrsAZowezxdqvkNOBrGqhlinT8YRdZmecqrMSSIEMyhZ0uSYY-mV7L_HcA&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1988.03) So yes, there are signs that the US was settling back towards disengagement, but that was stopped in its tracks by the Soviet threat. And the Soviet threat also played an important role in silencing the libertarian right. Because the America first movement during the interwar period, a lot of those people were hardcore, right wing libertarians, American nationalists. What happened once the Soviet threat came along was that anti-communism trumped anti-internationalism and it trumped this hard right libertarian sentiments.

**Charles Kupchan:** [33:51](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=dDz4-n6GspBSk_xXWkMTI6C_FBnzU3b6sZ_hi1zQJeFPJQoZKUinaS6k82y1de8wzDoH7wDQa_zTqharByeyGx36X0I&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2031.56) So that's when you get the John Birch Society and these other kind of libertarian leaning, and I would say, somewhat racist and anti-Semitic groups becoming internationalist. They weren't multilateral. They didn't like the UN. They didn't like alliances. But they were ready to send American soldiers abroad, because they thought that the real threat was communism.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [34:17](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=bqma18ebBVwCmPyIxNaPQpoAl40_ZcJopA9wwTnKobnHQ-7u7FAJ6OG-SIIVS0zWgauC4acd0C2KtvP5pWbovAFqTjs&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2057.37) Communism became the unifying force. Here's another thought experiment. Do you believe that the United States could have entered either world war without a cataclysmic event like Pearl Harbor or the sinking of American ships by the Germans? Would we have entered either one of those wars without something like that? Is that how powerful the isolationist impulse is?

**Charles Kupchan:** [34:40](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=zF_tji6K5PiQgWmMPTzF9XfvyFAMrpojT8DV9Iaqem7gq-ce_OPPxl9AByYFcEc8N5jfwTGg949ZkbgsoT84obLG65M&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2080.08) Yes. Those are good examples in the sense that Wilson is remembered as this idealist World War I, League of Nations. But from 1914 to 1917, he was a hardcore isolationist outside the Western Hemisphere. One of the interesting things about Wilson is that he was an imperialist and an interventionist in Latin America in the Caribbean. That started in 1898 and it continued right through the 1930s. Some would argue right through to today. But when it came to commitments outside the Western Hemisphere, and in particular, to inserting the United States into World War I, Wilson was, we don't have a dog in this fight. I see moral equivalence in the Germans and the French and the Brits. This is a garden variety war, basically, for money and greed. We're staying out of it.

**Charles Kupchan:** [35:40](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=ufy3oA0dsfOjbRZ3LiaGWUY2PIRhhwQ9ik0T-cuQioHEoFH0jl98hLeZluZO6tcH77F9semkG0yJiTHdrgZwYbKBMl8&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2140.64) And so all the isolationist tropes that guided American statecraft in the 19th century, they were alive and well in the Wilson administration until 1917. And then, Imperial Germany starts sinking boats, American ships that are crossing the Atlantic to do business. Because the United States believed that neutrality meant the ability to continue to trade with belligerents. But Germany said, nope, we're not going to let that happen. And that's when Wilson says, we're going to go to war. But he does so very much as an idealist. I would urge your listeners to get on the internet and go read his request to Congress for a declaration of war in April, 1917. It's remarkable.

**Charles Kupchan:** [36:33](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=CA1rUMvynA8S63a1xvzeWQU_uWGWFEW4R3bSZ2AiqPzMrJzI3NSrzyDHffpSjNNIwO0jZpta3wDKElWAhNOQxK6Rt_E&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2193.35) It is all about principles and rights and saving the world for democracy. There's not a word about the national interest. And in part, that's what got him into trouble. He was too idealist. He said this is a fight for American values. And ultimately, when your sons are dying in the trenches, you want to know that it's more than a fight for American values. And the same would go for World War II, Demetri. Especially when I began to dig into the 1930s, I was quite surprised by the public image of Roosevelt that exists today, in the sense that yes, he was a great wartime hero, he pulled off the New Deal. But over the course of the 1930s, he was right in the midst of the isolationist mainstream, guiding one piece of neutrality law after another. And this was real tight neutrality.

**Charles Kupchan:** [37:35](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=WY-3dW0HHCxrmtN82THG-XoWoujR7zylcx4-JrXz8wal47KDORuUezxL3_dimxM2ZuGWxWGL1SasMf1K5wH-nGyDMCo&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2255.35) This basically said that the United States could do no business with any belligerent, because we don't want to run the risk that what took us into World War I would happen again. He then changes his mind in 1939 after the fall of most of Western Europe, and he does so because he thinks that if the Nazis succeed in taking Britain, they will be powerful enough to come to the Western Hemisphere. And that's when he convinces Congress to go ahead with what's called cash and carry, which is that belligerents could bring their own ships and pay in cash and buy goods from the United States. And then he goes ahead with the Lend-Lease program in 1941, where the United States starts giving ships and aircraft and other material to the victims of both Japanese and German aggression.

**Charles Kupchan:** [38:31](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=U0Io-0etuDh03RUhY1Da4u49ZyO8OgOgPVAn-7PhyFT6ZqDFsTg5zwPOWfNV17LqTKZGjiR4pf4xYTl9FtcKOVJV-dk&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2311.02) But, and this is important, when he sold cash and carry and when he sold Lend-Lease to the Congress and to the American people. He said, "I am doing this to keep us out of the war. I am doing this so that we don't have to go fight, but we will empower those people who are fighting for themselves." And even though that was his position, the America First Committee fought him doggedly because they believe that if we were supplying those that were fighting on the allied side, we would eventually find ourselves at war. And that is, in fact, what happened. Had it not been for Pearl Harbor, it's really quite questionable whether the United States would have entered World War II.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [39:21](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=1KD1Sj7jUdbSYlLLZxWF5uYq_1IlqYC3DDuOtgH4407tq_nlJ0mOCb7PZQ2p-8gw4nYgR7PzoaC_9FGlbbN0D-A3prw&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2361.38) Well, I want to move the second part of our conversation to the overtime, Professor. And I'd like to actually spend most of that time applying the lessons of America's isolationist past to today. And whether or not we are ... I mean, you write in the book that you make a case for what you call strategic retrenchment, which is, I guess is a more thoughtful approach to isolationism. It's one way to maybe, put it. But I've been thinking, I mentioned to you before we turned on the microphone, that I spent the morning rereading parts of Barbara Tuchman's book, The Guns of August.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [39:58](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=6gtea1Vg2lpYNv-Y3fPV-hXWT5rCHTWziZ0gx0QzJCZ36SQXrYOWRVZxBllig0lgs3p-80SjtY7SgndBO0m1UDYtAOw&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2398.79) I've been thinking a lot, more and more in the last few months about comparisons between the present time and both the pre-World War I era as well as the interwar period. And I think there are commonalities and there are differences. And some of those came up for me when I was reading your book. Because, well, I mean, it speaks directly to the issue of internationalism or isolationism. So, I'd like to delve into that dimension as well. And also given how close we are to the November election, I think a discussion about the candidates, their platforms and the implications of either a Biden or a Trump presidency would also be worth discussing.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [40:42](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Uk4IVBeODP1UPls8db6hBWZFAy35OT8cnFt2QxpTPWJHJNZt6Z723vOlFbXVlyDYahUbSaCkigaDZVBe6vyXVO9M680&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2442.32) For regular listeners, you know the drill. If you're new to the program, Hidden Forces is listener supported. If you want access to the second part of my conversation with Professor Kupchan, as well as to the transcripts and rundowns to this episode, and every other episode we've ever done, head over to patreon.com/hiddenforces. There's also a link in the summary page to this episode with instructions on how to connect the overtime feed to your phone, so you can listen to these extra conversations just like you listen to the regular podcast. Professor, stick around, we're going to move the second part of our conversation into the overtime.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [41:21](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=HzNyxZKG51fjECUmQdx3kP3uHvHrvE5tYwKcSgsa6YhFA283mQ-l4rfWRRpSBaqjbrp73fVcOnSjbww3cuHVXUgMDz0&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2481.47) Today's episode of Hidden Forces was recorded in New York City. For more information about this week's episode, or if you want easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you want access to overtime segments, episode transcripts, and show rundowns full of links and detailed information related to each and every episode, check out our premium subscription available through the Hidden Forces website, or through our Patreon page at patreon.com/hiddenforces.

**Demetri Kofinas:** [41:58](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=5QqKzclSCjJ7E4pG-x-2m9YB9HcyFv5CVFMfZbgcGgqhuT1UMbCHLfCWll1SQwfbxJZapzlT88k-_ByhhHUqJrjhjw4&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=2518.71) Today's episode was produced by me and edited by Stylianos Nicolaou . For more episodes, you can check out our website at hiddenforces.io. Join the conversation at Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @HiddenForcesPod or send me an email. As always, thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.