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American Political History

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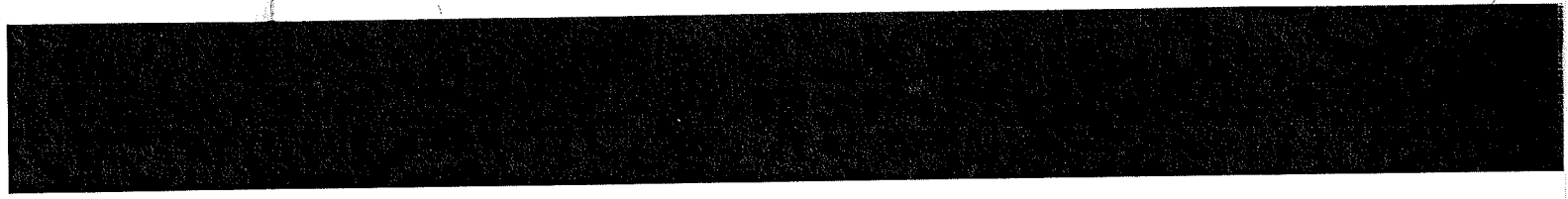*Vassar College*

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research for the same reasons one supports political advocacy: because both contribute to the larger causes of shifting the terms of debate in American policy making and to amplifying the power of conservative ideas. Conservative think tanks have thus advanced a plan to privatize Social Security in the 1970s and promoted it relentlessly for 25 years, until it appeared on the "mainstream" policy agenda of President George W. Bush in 2004.

Until 2007 conservative think tanks outnumbered liberal think tanks by two to one. Research-based think tanks of no identifiable ideology—many of them the older institutions like Brookings—still reflected the greatest number of think tanks, but the ranks of ideological think tanks were growing the fastest. The aggressive advocacy of the new organizations has affected think tanks of all stripes. Most think tanks—old and new, ideological and not—have increased their investments in communications and public affairs over the past two decades. Many have switched from producing books and longer studies to producing more short policy briefs, the types of products that are easily and quickly digested by decision makers and journalists.

The race between conservative and liberal think tanks has tightened. In the wake of the 2004 election, foundations and individual donors demonstrated a fresh interest in supporting new liberal think tanks. Since then, the Center for American Progress has become a sizable presence in Washington, and other, smaller think tanks have emerged on the liberal left. In the years ahead, observers should track both the competition among ideological think tanks and the struggle between those organizations and their seemingly nonideological brethren.

See also conservatism.

FURTHER READING. Lee Edwards, *The Power of Ideas*, 1997; John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd ed., 1995; Harold D. Lasswell, "The Policy Orientation," in *The Policy Sciences*, edited by Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell, 3–15, 1951; Charles E. Merriam, *New Aspects of Politics*, 1970; Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*, 2005; James Allen Smith, "Think Tanks and the Politics of Ideas," in *The Spread of Economic Ideas*, edited by David C. Colander and A.W. Coats, 1989.

ANDREW RICH

third parties
See populism.

transnational influences on American politics
After more than 50 years in elected office and 10 years as speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Thomas "Tip" O'Neill encapsulated his wisdom about government in a single phrase: "All politics is local." In the words of his biographer, John A. Farrell, O'Neill's commitment to the needs of his Boston-area constituents made him one of the paragons for the twentieth-century transformation in American society: "As a young man with a passion for politics, O'Neill had watched and learned as Franklin D. Roosevelt employed the modern science of government to blunt the devastating effects of the Depression. . . . O'Neill fought Rooseveltian battles in Massachusetts, pushing for higher state payments to the elderly, new hospitals for the sick and mentally ill, a fair employment practices act for the state's African Americans, and the grand, ambitious public works and highway projects that transformed the face of the commonwealth in the postwar years. He believed that government was the means by which a people came together to address their community's ills, to right wrongs and craft a just society." This was traditional local "boss" politics, dominated by ethnic identity, personal favors, and appeals to the "common man." This was American democracy in action.

This was also transnational politics in practice. For all the appeals to a special local set of interests, every major policy issue that O'Neill and his counterparts addressed had an international dimension. From state payments to the elderly to public works projects, U.S. government legislation reflected the influence of events, personalities, and ideas in foreign societies. The same could be said about basic policies, even at the most local level, during the prior two centuries. American politics have never existed in a national vacuum; they have always been part of a wider space that crosses the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as the Rio Grande and the northern border with Canada.

The nature and weight of transnational influences have, of course, varied over time. Particular moments in the nation's history—the 1780s, the 1840s, the 1920s, and the 1960s—witnessed a remarkable density in personal connections between prominent political actors at home and their counterparts abroad. Other moments of more inward focus in the United States—the 1830s, the 1870s, and the 1930s—saw less explicit discussion of foreign political relationships. Nonetheless, even the latter decades were transnational, as Americans continued to import products, ideas, and people in large numbers. Many politicians have contested the appropriate degree of American involvement with the wider world, but no one of any prominence has ever really advocated for complete U.S. separation. American politics have always been transnational politics.

"Isolationism," in this sense, was more a polemical label than an accurate description for a particular point of view. Politicians who at one time called themselves "isolationists"—Robert La Follette, Arthur Vandenberg, and Gerald Nye, among others—were themselves the products of transnational influences on the United States. La Follette, for example,

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had traveled extensively in Russia and Europe. His progressive politics reflected his observations of state welfare programs overseas. Even the "isolationists" were also transnational political actors.

We can best understand the diverse transnational influences on American politics from the eighteenth century to the present by dividing these influences into roughly two areas: *war* and *public activism*. Although these topics often overlap in practice, it is helpful to examine how each reflects a series of particular and recurring transnational connections across numerous decades. These topics neglect many other areas of foreign influence that have received extensive attention from historians—commerce, popular culture, immigration, and technology, among others. Focusing on war and public activism, however, highlights some of the most significant ways in which the sources and practices of American politics changed in connection with developments abroad. The experiences of Americans in foreign societies, and American perceptions of those societies, had an enormous influence on the definition of the nation and the formulation of its policies. The U.S. experience in both war and public activism was deeply conditioned by transnational personal and institutional relations.

War

In one way or another, the United States has been at war for most of its history. These wars have included battles with foreign powers on or near American-claimed territory, continental conflicts over land control and political authority, and military interventions against adversaries overseas. In each of these contexts, war has exposed American politics to transnational experiences and ideas.

The American Revolution was typical of this process. During the late 1770s and early 1780s, the rebelling colonists aligned with France and Spain to fight against continued British control of North America. The alliance converted a group of domestic revolutionaries—provincials, in the eyes of the British—into international ambassadors for American nationalism. Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and John Adams (as well as his precocious son, John Quincy Adams) spent most of the conflict in Europe, negotiating for foreign support. Despite their explicit rejection of traditional European aristocratic politics, these men became diplomats at the courts of monarchs. They were succeeded, after the Treaty of Ghent in 1783, by another generation of American diplomats—particularly Thomas Jefferson, who served at the court of the Bourbon monarch on the eve of the French Revolution.

These diplomatic experiences made the American revolutionaries into worldly politicians. Although they rejected traditional Old World politics, they learned to practice them for radical purposes. Franklin and Adams, in particular, made numerous deals to procure military aid and trade from European states. They also made and broke alliances to serve the needs of an emerging independent government. Their definition of an American republic was self-conscious of the place the new nation would occupy as a small and weak state in a world filled with much more powerful, aggressive empires. Their support for a strong central government, under the Constitution, was a political calculation about the foreign threats the new United States would face, and the need to prepare for international competition. Key constitutional innovations, especially the creation of the presidency, reflected the influence of monarchy and its unifying institutions on the republican revolutionaries in Philadelphia.

George Washington's famous Farewell Address in 1796 was a testament to the formative influence of European diplomacy and institutions on American politics. At a moment of intensive conflict between the United States and France and Great Britain (both of whom were at war), Washington advised citizens that "nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated." This was a classic call for American adherence to a political balance of power—avoiding moral crusading and carefully steering clear of permanent bonds that could implicate the nation in unwanted conflicts. Following from Niccolò Machiavelli more than Jefferson or Madison, Washington defined the United States as a practitioner of raison d'état, the pursuit of the "national interest" through secular and flexible maneuver between different coalitions of power. Washington and his successors in the White House spoke of "temporary alliances" with republican and nonrepublican states, not isolation or ideological consistency in policy making. They were European-influenced realists who practiced power politics for the defense and promotion of American ideals.

This realism kept the United States out of foreign revolutions, despite rhetorical urges to the contrary. The French, Haitian, and Latin American revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries received no significant support from the American government. In Haiti, the administration of Thomas Jefferson was overtly hostile to the creation of a regime that challenged European authority under African leadership. The United States was a revolutionary nation, but its definition of acceptable revolution included attachment to European-inspired notions of good government and realist traditions of the balance of power in foreign policy.

Every subsequent war, especially those outside of North America, reinforced these principles and increased other foreign influences on American politics. In the Civil War, both the Union and Confederate armies—the largest military institutions built within the United States to that date—studied and implemented European fighting methods. Confederate general Robert E. Lee adopted Napoleonic

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tactics for maneuver and surprise in battle. Union general Ulysses S. Grant used centralized methods of resource and manpower mobilization to build a fighting force that could take grave casualties but still annihilate its enemies. Neither Lee nor Grant fought like any of their American predecessors; both fought a modern European war on American soil. Many European observers in Germany, France, and Great Britain studied the Civil War as a testing ground for their ideas of war in an age of more powerful Machiavellian states. The "American way of war," like the American approach to international relations, was also European in origins, and soon global in scope.

Beyond military strategy, President Abraham Lincoln also adopted a strongly European-influenced argument against slavery in the cause of the Union. British politicians of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries pursued the global abolition of slavery for the purpose of empowering free labor markets. This position received reinforcement from the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man. Ending slavery—or at least eliminating any foreign support for the institution of slavery—became a widely embraced political duty outside North America on the eve of the Civil War.

Lincoln shared many antislavery views, but he avoided taking a categorical position on the issue as long as possible. Once it became clear in course of the Civil War that he could not find a political compromise between North and South to preserve the Union, Lincoln invoked British and French antislavery positions to justify the use of violence against the slaveholding Confederacy. The Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Lincoln on January 1, 1863, freed the slaves in the Confederate states and pledged that "the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons."

Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation to enlist the freed slaves against the Confederacy. He also used this document to attract antislavery opinion in Europe to the Union side. The latter consideration was crucial. The British government, in particular, had strong economic interests connected to the cotton trade from the Confederate states. It also had geopolitical interests in North America that would be served by a weak and divided American nation. Lincoln and his secretary of state, William Henry Seward, feared that British recognition and support for the Confederacy would undermine, and perhaps defeat, Union aims. The Emancipation Proclamation countered this possibility by appealing directly to British and other foreign audiences to embrace the Union as the force against slavery. Lincoln alienated moderates in the United States with this document, but he appealed to foreign constituencies that he needed on his side. The Emancipation Proclamation and the "second American Revolution" that it came to represent were strongly connected to European

politics. Although the battles occurred on American soil, the Civil War was a transnational conflict.

American politics in both world wars fit the same pattern. The two defining political moments of the conflicts for the United States—President Woodrow Wilson's announcement of his Fourteen Points on January 8, 1918, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's signature on the Atlantic Charter of August 14, 1941—reflected important connections between domestic aims and foreign influences. Both documents had a deep and simultaneous impact on citizens at home and abroad. They contributed to a "liberal" and "modernizing" set of politics that crossed national boundaries.

Wilson's Fourteen Points, articulated in his speech to a joint session of Congress, began by explaining that the United States had sent its soldiers to fight on European soil for the first time "because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secure once and for all against their recurrence. . . . All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us."

To combat threats from abroad and assure that the world was "made safe for democracy," Wilson espoused long-standing European ideas about international law and organization. Drawing on the experiences of the European states that had formed transnational cooperative institutions—including the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (founded in 1815), the Superior Council for Health (founded in 1838), and the First Geneva Convention on the treatment of war wounded (founded in 1864)—Wilson proposed a new international organization for peace. During the negotiations outside of Paris at the end of World War I, this idea became the basis for the League of Nations—the most important effort at global governance and war prevention in the early twentieth century.

The U.S. Senate vetoed American membership in the League of Nations for fear that it would restrict American independence, but the League remained influential in American politics. Under Wilson's successors, especially President Herbert Hoover, the United States continued to support the creation of a "civilized" system of international law to regulate aggression among states. In addition, the United States participated in the growing range of international exchanges of people, ideas, and technology operating in parallel with the League of Nations. The power of the U.S. federal government grew with the creation of a Department of Commerce in 1913 that managed and promoted these activities. Through federal grants of aid, legal encouragement, and foreign negotiations the U.S. government became what one historian calls a "promotional state," much more akin to its European counterparts than to its pre-twentieth-century American predecessors. The end

of World War I contributed to a stronger federal role in American society and deeper transnational ties to local businesses and communities.

These developments underpinned the New Deal—a domestic and international "war" on poverty and economic dislocation during the Great Depression. President Franklin D. Roosevelt solidified the transnational strains of American politics when, in the summer of 1941 (months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), he hinged the future of American freedom and prosperity on the defeat of fascism. Meeting with British prime minister Winston Churchill off the coast of Newfoundland, Roosevelt signed the Atlantic Charter that committed both Great Britain and the United States to "common principles" for a "better future for the world." These common principles included the "final destruction of Nazi tyranny," and the creation of a new international peace "which will afford to all nations the means of dwelling in safety within their own boundaries, and which will afford assurance that all the men in all lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want." Domestic and international liberty, according to this formulation, were interdependent.

Roosevelt defined America's national purpose in the Great Depression and World War II as an extension of the Wilsonian goal of making the world safe for democracy. He reorganized American society along these lines, under the direction of a now dominant federal government. Similarly, Roosevelt defined foreign threats—political extremism, economic autarchy, and interstate violence—as core challenges to America's national purpose. Citizens of the United States were mobilized to fight for their freedom *as a single nation* on an unprecedented scale. American society never looked back. Historian Michael Sherry identifies the Great Depression and World War II as the formative moment for a militarized, outward-looking political culture in the United States. The European-inspired realism of Benjamin Franklin and John Adams had, over the course of 150 years, evolved into a form of federal dominance in American society unanticipated by any of the nation's founders. This new role for Washington reflected influences and threats from abroad, as much as those at home.

American politics during the cold war deepened this phenomenon. From the last days of World War II through the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, U.S. leaders consistently emphasized the need to keep the nation mobilized for conflict with Moscow and other communist challengers. New institutions, including the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency, emerged to manage domestic resources, monitor threats, and control dissent. The National Security Act of 1947 concentrated power more centrally in the White House with the creation of the National Security Council and the reduction of congressional oversight for security

matters. As a consequence, the United States prepared for and fought numerous conflicts after 1947, but the president never again sought a formal declaration of war.

The perceived threat of foreign communism was ever-present in American society. It motivated a change in the size and scope of the American military as it became a permanent global force with bases on every continent and nuclear weapons ready for immediate use. It transformed universities as the U.S. government used its financial and legal leverage to make the academy more helpful in addressing pressing policy challenges. Most significant, perceptions of communism transformed the terms of political debate. To win election to office—Republican or Democrat—one had to appear "tough" on communism and committed to a broad global agenda for the United States. Domestic cold war politics were international anti-Communist politics.

The figures who came to dominate the American political scene in this context were not the usual suspects from elite families and white Anglo-Saxon pedigrees. Men of this background remained powerful, but not as exclusively as before. The international dimensions of the cold war placed a new premium on anti-Communist cosmopolitanism—a knowledge of foreign societies, a personal biography rooted in struggle against foreign extremism, and a hypernationalism born of immigration to America as a "savior" nation. Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski are prime examples of this phenomenon. European immigrants who came to the United States fleeing Nazi terror, they emerged as powerful, unelected policy makers promising to help the United States manage a world of dangerous threats and difficult balance of power decisions. Kissinger and Brzezinski espoused American ideals, but they consistently counseled the country to curtail its cherished hopes and act more like a "normal" state, accepting "lesser evils" in its friends and combating "greater evils" in its enemies.

The same political rhetoric, and many of the same personalities, carried on into the post–cold war era in American politics. Iraq and Islamic fanaticism replaced the Soviet Union and communism as the overriding threats in American debates. Mobilizing the nation for combat at home and abroad became the guiding principle, yet again, for the government after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. As the Truman administration created the National Security Council during the onset of the cold war, the administration of President George W. Bush founded the Department of Homeland Security as a response to terrorism in the new century. Pervasive perceptions of foreign threats, in a time of perpetual war, set the terms of American political debate. Transnational influences were now central to the most local discussions of authority, economy, and survival. The war at home and abroad continued.

Public Activism

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Public Activism

The intersection between the foreign and the do-
mestic in war had a close analogue among public
activists—including social reformers, local organi-
zation leaders, prominent intellectuals, and public
demonstrators. Especially during the twentieth cen-
tury, public activists in the United States drew on
ideas, strategies, and tactics from abroad. They fre-
quently thought of themselves as part of larger global
transformations in society. Most significant, activists
often had personal connections to foreign countries,
derived from birth, family, study, and travel. Ameri-
can activists were transnational translators, synthesiz-
ers, and innovators at the same time.

The transnational scope of public activists was also
somewhat broader than that of the politicians more
deeply involved in war and daily policy making. Fig-
ures like Franklin, Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt, and
Kissinger focused their energies on Europe above all
other non-American areas of the world. For them,
the transnational was largely trans-European. Activ-
ists in the twentieth century, however, had a more
transglobal perspective. They came from and inter-
acted with a broader geography in their daily politics.
They often looked self-consciously beyond Europe to
other societies for alternative reform inspirations.
Europe mattered to American activists, but over the
course of the twentieth century it became less central
to them than it was to their counterparts in policy-
making institutions.

Advocates of substantial reforms in American race
relations were most explicit about their desire to look
beyond Europe. Founded in 1816 by a mix of north-
ern abolitionists and Southerners fearful of slave vio-
lence, the American Colonization Society helped to
transport more than 10,000 freed slaves to the West
African territory of Liberia. With the end of the Civil
War and the promise of African American suffrage
during Reconstruction, support for the emigration of
freed slaves largely evaporated. Nonetheless, the con-
troversial work of the American Colonization Society
was the beginning of a "return to Africa" movement
that would animate public discussions of the "race
problem" in the United States for the next century,
especially among those who believed that blacks and
whites could live in peace only if they were separated.
According to this logic, African Americans would
live freer and happier lives if they were back on a
continent populated by people who looked like them
and presumably shared similar traditions. This was
often a well-intentioned effort, but its separatist logic
was adopted by a range of political activists, for a va-
riety of purposes, in later decades.

Marcus Garvey was perhaps the most influential
and transnational figure in the early twentieth cen-
tury to espouse a separatist African American agenda.
Born in Jamaica and widely traveled throughout
Central America and Western Europe, Garvey came
to the United States as a penniless immigrant in 1916.
Within a few years he organized and led the largest

transnational black organization of the twentieth
century: the United Negro Improvement Association
(UNIA), which would open chapters in more than
a dozen countries, including many parts of Latin
America and Africa. The organization emphasized
self-reliance, racial autonomy, and black nationhood.
According to Garvey, descendants of Africa should
take pride in their past and work together for the
common advancement of their race. He called for a
transnational organization of blacks to create a single
nation under his leadership and the UNIA.

Garvey's aims became most explicit in August
1920 when he organized the monthlong Interna-
tional Convention of the Negro Peoples of the
World at Madison Square Garden in New York City.
Elected "provisional president of Africa" by the as-
sembly, Garvey oversaw the writing and approval of
the "Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of
the World," which demanded that "the governments
of the world recognize our leader and his represen-
tatives chosen by the race to look after the welfare
of our people under such governments." As a trans-
national sovereign, the UNIA called on "the various
governments of the world to accept and acknowledge
Negro representatives who shall be sent to the said
governments to represent the general welfare of the
Negro peoples of the world." Africa should be pro-
tected for Africans, according to the declaration, and
the UNIA asserted that, on other continents blacks
would "demand complete control of our social in-
stitutions without interference by any alien race or
races." Announced in New York amid signs of grow-
ing American intolerance to dissent, this was a bold
and transnational vision of African American power
as part of a global racial movement.

Garvey and the UNIA never achieved their goals,
but they contributed to a remarkable transnational
outpouring of reform ideas and initiatives among
activists with diverse interests. The most prominent
African American intellectual of the period, W.E.B.
DuBois, strongly disagreed with Garvey on many
points, but he shared the UNIA's commitment to a
global movement for racial reform. Speaking at the
first Pan-African Convention in London on July
25, 1900, DuBois famously proclaimed, "The prob-
lem of the twentieth century is the problem of the
color line, the question as to how far differences of
race—which show themselves chiefly in the color of
the skin and the texture of the hair—will hereafter
be made the basis of denying to over half the world
the right of sharing to utmost ability the opportuni-
ties and privileges of modern civilization." DuBois
did not call for a common black nation with a single
leader, but he did link the local with the interna-
tional when he asked in his London speech, "may
the conscience of a great nation rise and rebuke all
dishonesty and unrighteous oppression toward the
American Negro, and grant to him the right of fran-
chise, security of person and property, and generous
recognition of the great work he has accomplished in

a generation toward raising nine millions of human beings from slavery to manhood. . . . Let the nations of the world respect the integrity and independence of the free Negro states of Abyssinia, Liberia, Haiti, and the rest, and let the inhabitants of these states, the independent tribes of Africa, the Negroes of the West Indies and America, and the black subjects of all nations take courage, strive ceaselessly, and fight bravely, that they may prove to the world their incontestable right to be counted among the great brotherhood of mankind."

DuBois's "brotherhood of mankind" was a clarion call for many activists focused on issues other than race—including poverty, urban blight, health, and children's welfare. A generation of reformers, generally labeled "progressives" by historians, conceptualized the problems of the United States in transnational terms that resonated with the arguments voiced by both Garvey and DuBois. These progressives self-consciously drew on what they envisioned as an international dialogue among activists about how to improve society through rational, determined, and cooperative action. Like Garvey and DuBois, they formed countless organizations that crossed borders for this purpose, they participated in a widening web of "exchanges," and, most important, they embraced the experimental application of foreign ideas to local problems. In Wisconsin, for example, a group of intellectuals and politicians came together to author what they called the "Wisconsin Idea"—a mix of remarkably creative and cosmopolitan reform initiatives inspired by local problems in an agrarian and industrializing community. Borrowing from the British, Germans, French, and others, Wisconsin activists pioneered worker's compensation insurance, unemployment benefits, public education, and social security. They did not assert a sense of common racial consciousness across boundaries, but they did nurture an enduring commitment to transnational reform rooted in local needs.

This dream did not die with the Great Depression and World War II but attracted the attention of a new generation of young activists in the 1960s. Unlike their predecessors, the New Left did not endorse rational planning or state-building efforts. Instead, it focused on the transnational participatory spirit that had animated Garvey and DuBois, as well as their progressive counterparts. Activists in the 1960s emphasized a common experience of youth across societies confronting paternalistic, militaristic, and unjust institutions of power that needed rapid change from below. Inspired by "liberationist" movements in the third world, the euphoria of mass demonstrations, and a new feeling of relevance, young people on every continent demanded far-reaching change. They pushed for an end to foreign wars, attention to hidden suffering within modern societies, and more egalitarian politics. They argued that this was a truly worldwide agenda that must begin within each state.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the most prominent New Left organization in the United States during the 1960s, put this argument in apocalyptic terms. Its "Agenda for a Generation" (also known as the "Port Huron Statement") announced: "Although mankind desperately needs revolutionary leadership, America rests in national stalemate, its goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear, its democratic system apathetic and manipulated rather than 'of, by, and for the people.' . . . Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living. But we are a minority—the vast majority of our people regard the temporary equilibriums of our society and world as eternally functional parts. In this is perhaps the outstanding paradox: we ourselves are imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present."

SDS and the many other activist groups that emerged in the 1960s did not achieve their desired changes in policy, and they did not create a cohesive generation of reformers. They did, however, transform local and international attitudes. American society and many of its counterparts abroad became more sensitive and accepting of racial, gender, and various ethnic differences. Concern for human rights also grew in public attitudes, if not always in policy practice. Most significant, transnational borrowings of ideas and programs became more common and more accepted. To think locally after the 1960s meant to think about localities across societies. This basic attitude transferred from the New Left demonstrators of the 1960s to the environmental, feminist, and antiglobalization activists of the late twentieth century. The 1960s endure in the contemporary imagination as the moment of transnational political activism that all subsequent movements seek to capture in one way or another.

Looking Outward

Tip O'Neill was correct; all politics is local. The local, however, has always included deep and diverse connections to practices, ideas, and influences that are not American in origin. From the American Revolution to the demonstrations of the 1960s, American politics have been transnational politics. The experiences of war and public activism have reflected this phenomenon; they have also increased its intensity. During nearly every military conflict and nearly every burst of reform the United States became more, not less, connected to its counterparts near and far. The nation globalized long before people used the term.

If there is a general direction to American history, it is outward, not inward. If there is a general lesson from American history, it is that political change requires familiarity with a landscape far beyond the borders of the 50 states. These were O'Neill's politics, as they were the politics of his heroic predecessors

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in Boston and his modern successors from the Sun Belt South. In order to do more for one's constituents, one must do more for their transnational hopes and interests.

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transportation and politics

A remarkable number of new transportation technologies emerged in the United States and other industrialized nations during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including long-distance stagecoach lines, river steamboats and oceangoing steamships, steam and electric railways, automobiles and all-weather highways, and commercial aviation. Each new mode of transportation invariably elicited a variety of political responses.

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the intimate relationship between transportation and American politics than the oddly shaped and geographically roundabout route chosen for transcontinental stagecoach service inaugurated in the late 1850s; for the first time it became possible to cross the United States from coast to coast by land using only commercial transportation. The Butterfield Overland Stage linked the cities of San Francisco and St. Louis, Missouri, by way of such frontier outposts as El Paso, Texas; Tucson, Arizona; and Los Angeles, the most populous of which could claim only a few thousand residents. From Fort Smith, in far western Arkansas, Butterfield ran a branch line east

to Memphis, Tennessee, to serve the home state of Postmaster General Aaron Brown, who oversaw the federal mail contracts that funded much of the expense of operating a stage line across so much unpopulated space.

Mail Contracts

It would be impossible to overestimate the importance of income from federal mail contracts in underwriting the cost of new modes of transportation across vast sections of the United States in the nineteenth century. Mail subsidies were the lifeblood of most long-distance stage lines serving the West, so much so that in the early 1860s, the western "stagecoach king" Ben Holladay maintained one of his several homes near Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., to cultivate a cordial relationship with members of the U.S. Congress who periodically voted on mail contracts.

Mail contracts also subsidized the operation of many a steamboat plying the navigable waters of the United States, most notably along 3,000 sparsely settled miles of the Missouri River as it meandered between St. Louis and the frontier outpost of Fort Benton, Montana—a transportation hub aptly named for Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton, one of the strongest supporters in Congress of transportation links across the West. During his 30-year career in the Senate, Benton promoted federally subsidized transportation links not merely between Missouri and the West Coast but extending all the way to China and India.

Much of what Benton (1782–1858) proposed on the floor of the Senate (between 1821 and 1851) and in other public forums was too visionary to be realized in his lifetime, but mail contracts did subsidize the first steamship service between the East and West coasts, by means of a 48-mile portage across the Isthmus of Panama, that commenced just *before* word of gold precipitated a mad rush of travelers to California in 1849.

Long after stagecoach and steamboat transportation had been relegated to the remotest corners of the United States in the early twentieth century, the railroad passenger trains that superseded them depended on federal mail contracts, and increasingly so in the late 1940s and 1950s as the number of rail passengers declined steadily. Many of the trains carried dedicated Rail Post Office cars in which highly trained clerks sorted the mail en route, the schedules of mail-carrying trains being determined largely by the needs of the U.S. Post Office Department. Thus, when the Post Office cancelled all "mail by rail" contracts in late 1967, passenger train service effectively collapsed in all but the most scenic portions of the United States. Had it not been for federal dollars to support Amtrak, implemented in May 1971, long-distance rail passenger service across the United States would very likely have disappeared.