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William Voegeli:
Is Inequality Our Fault?

Colin Dueck:
Tom Cotton's Only the Strong

Douglas A. Jeffrey:
Merle Haggard

Jeffrey H. Anderson:
"Our Democracy"

Myron Magnet
Bradley C.S. Watson:
Clarence Thomas

Barry Strauss:
Julius Caesar

Charles Murray:
Is Diversity Our Strength?

Peter Berkowitz:
Walter Russell Mead on Israel

Christopher Caldwell:
The Death of Rock'n'Roll



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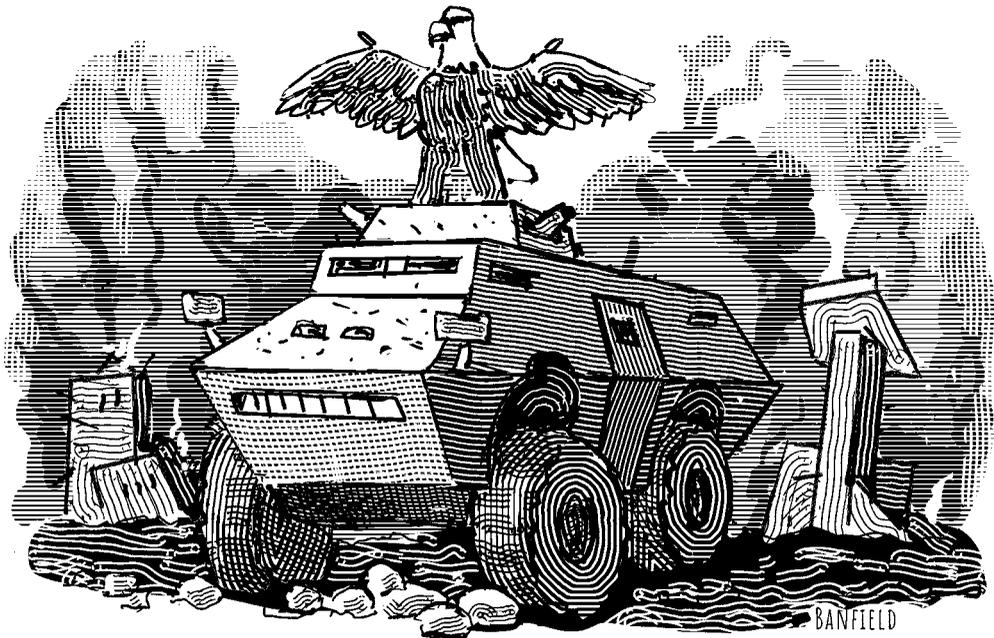
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Book Review by Colin Dueck

PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH

Only the Strong: Reversing the Left's Plot to Sabotage American Power, by Tom Cotton.
Twelve, 288 pages, \$30



WHEN NOT ACCUSING THEIR FELLOW citizens of being fascists, American progressives enjoy cooking up impractical schemes for what they call global governance. The Left-liberal vision of U.S. foreign policy cherished by progressives is more impatient with, and even openly disdainful of, the national interest than it used to be, but no major conservative political figure has refuted the Left's vision at book length since the Cold War. Until now, when Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton takes up the case in his impressive new book, *Only the Strong*.

As Cotton notes, the problem began with President Woodrow Wilson, who rejected not only the soundness of the American Founders' constitutional order but their foreign policy framework as well. George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Federalists were sensible enough to understand that while the nascent United States might act as a kind of international exemplar of republican government, it would necessarily consult and safeguard its own interests when devising its foreign policy. Of course, by the early 20th century, the rise of American power raised questions as to how to do this under changing circumstances. Unfortunately, Wilson bungled that opportunity by insisting that the United States could lead only by committing itself to an unrealistic agenda of universal or multilateral progress. Snatching defeat from

the jaws of victory following World War I, he overreached, and unintentionally set the United States on a course that would return to strategic disengagement in the postwar years.

Wilson believed and repeatedly said with great fervor that U.S. foreign policy could be admirable only if it did *not* pursue American national interests. Instead, he insisted, it had to pursue global ones. Moreover, the United States had to deliberately bind itself through multilateral institutions, reducing its own freedom of action, to encourage similar self-binding processes on the part of other countries. As Cotton points out, these have been recurring themes in progressive American foreign policy recommendations ever since.

An important force on the left wing of the Democratic Party during the mid-20th century, progressives finally grabbed their big opportunity to take over that party more completely in the wake of the Vietnam war. Mistakenly arguing that America's frustrations in Vietnam demonstrated the bankruptcy of the anti-Communist cause, progressives in the late 1960s and early '70s pressed for a new U.S. foreign policy agenda based on environmentalist shibboleths, cuts in American defense spending, assaults on our intelligence capacities, and a soft spot for third-world dictators so long as they were fashionably left-wing. This was a revised liberal internationalist vision, making full allowance for the anti-

American flatulence of the New Left. Cotton is appropriately damning.

THE FOREIGN POLICY APPROACH OF THE Democratic Party has never entirely recovered from that ignominy. Instead, its leading champions—including Presidents Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden—split the difference between objective national security requirements and Left-liberal silliness. Cotton unsparingly details their many failings. President Obama, for example, looked to hover above all international differences, including those involving his own country—the classic Wilsonian conceit. Attempting to kick-start processes of accommodation with key dictatorships based in Tehran and Havana, Obama scaled back U.S. defenses while mocking the notion of any threat from Vladimir Putin's Russia. By the end of his tenure, having decided that Putin liked the GOP, prominent Democrats would reverse themselves entirely on the Russia issue without batting an eye.

Still, the Wilsonian vision persists. The important thing for Democratic Party progressives is not any hard-nosed defense of American interests. That would be wrong. Rather, the important thing is the promotion of global interests through multilateral institutions. And when they say "global interests," they are sure to let you know this includes worldwide homage to their cherished priorities of gender



fluidity, abortion on demand, and insanely stringent climate change regulations. The rules-based liberal international order is in constant need of being updated, and progressives are always happy to “Left-splain” their latest demands.

SENATOR COTTON, FOR HIS PART, HAS little use for the Biden Administration’s foreign policy. As Cotton suggests, the president reads from the script he is given, and in today’s Democratic Party, that script is written by postgraduate urban bicoastal progressives. So, Biden pivots in their direction. The median policy preference of the Democratic Party base—including on U.S. foreign relations—is an excellent guide to whatever Biden happens to believe on any given day.

For Cotton, a decorated Army veteran who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as with the Old Brigade at Arlington National Cemetery—whose history he lovingly recounted in his first book, *Sacred Duty* (2019)—the failings of the current White House are personal. As he reminds us, during the summer of 2021 Joe Biden presided over a willfully ill-managed U.S. withdrawal from the Afghan conflict. The Taliban immediately triumphed. Not one of Biden’s presidential appointees was held accountable. That sent a signal to every would-be predator in the global arena that Joe Biden was a soft touch. Vladimir Putin, looking to take advantage, followed with a full-blown invasion of Ukraine. Biden failed to deter that assault. The White House then realized that serial weakness on national security policy might be a problem in more ways than one.

Getting tough with Russia is currently in fashion with progressives. A decade ago, it was not, and someday that will change again when it suits their needs. Meanwhile, Biden talks tough on China—sometimes—while failing to ramp up a coordinated American effort suited to the scale of the threat. More sober-minded Democrats are forced to admit that the administration’s proposed levels of defense spending have been inadequate. The overriding progressive concern, after all, is the woke transformation of American life at home. If U.S. armed forces face some violent crisis in the Taiwan Strait, they may not have the weaponry they need to deter or defeat China. But they’ll have all the online diversity training they could possibly want.

Recognizing the absurdity of the situation, Cotton proposes a shift in conception. Americans, he argues, should reject the progressive internationalist “vision” with its related dysfunction. A better foreign policy approach would return to the good sense of the American Founders, emphasizing, in Washington’s words, “our interest, guided by justice.” In practical terms, U.S. diplomacy should start

with a recognition of vital interests. These include, first, the security of the American homeland. Which means border security is a legitimate issue, and Cotton offers suggestions on how to improve it. Increased federal spending on a nationwide missile defense system to better defend the mainland against attack also falls under the heading of homeland security. Next, a willingness to think geographically, rather than in terms of liberal abstractions, promises that relations with Latin America should be a high priority to the United States. Beyond this, the U.S. has a fundamental interest in preventing overwhelming, hostile conglomerations of power in Eurasia. For this very reason, Cotton says, U.S. forces should maintain a forward presence in key bases overseas, while avoiding peripheral interventions. The strength of America’s alliance system bolsters American security. For Cotton, the United States should have the seriousness to distinguish between friends and enemies. This, and not lip service to left-wing platitudes or to right-wing wishful thinking, is the way to restore the country’s reputation.

CORRECTLY DESCRIBING THE EXPANSION of Chinese power as the single biggest challenge to the U.S. on the world stage, the senator recommends further strategic decoupling from China’s massive economy. As he puts it, “Wall Street shouldn’t be funding our main enemy.” China’s greatest assets are economic, and Cotton views the economic arena as the most important one in the ongoing competition with Beijing. He also believes, however, that a military buildup is urgently needed to bolster America’s Pacific defenses and help deter any Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Lousy arms control treaties, of the type so admired by progressives, should be avoided while the U.S. rebuilds its strength across multiple dimensions.

Cotton is perhaps too hard on the mid-20th-century Democratic presidents stretching from FDR to JFK. To be sure, they each made grave mistakes. Franklin Roosevelt badly misjudged Josef Stalin. Harry Truman failed to deter a North Korean attack in 1950. And John F. Kennedy stumbled terribly at the Bay of Pigs. Nonetheless, each of these presidents also did considerable good on national security issues. FDR led the country to victory over the Axis powers. The feisty Truman assembled a much-needed international alliance to counteract Soviet expansion. And Kennedy faced down Nikita Khrushchev over the Cuban missile crisis.

Perhaps one reason for the relatively robust qualities of mid-century Democrats, compared to later iterations, was their grounding in working-class voter support from all regions of the country. These are the voters

who now cast their ballots for tough-minded conservatives like Cotton. For mid-century Democrats, that grounding provided a worthwhile check on policies best described as overly intellectual. It’s no coincidence that when Democrats pivoted from their working-class base toward a new coalition defined by postgraduate, politically correct sensibilities, their international policy approach also became increasingly obnoxious. If Harry Truman could see today’s so-called progressives, including on national security, he might understand why Cotton gives them hell, or, as Truman himself put it, tells the truth about them and they think it’s hell!

COTTON’S CENTRAL, EYE-OPENING INSIGHT in this book is that progressives deliberately hamper U.S. freedom of action in world affairs because they do not trust it. Nor do they really trust the American people, including on foreign policy, whenever the outcomes diverge from left-wing preferences. Instead, progressives trust transnational networks of administrative, legal, and academic experts to promote and implement desirable policies over the heads of elected officials. We know this because they say so. The resulting challenges to American sovereignty are real.

Progressives say they want world peace. Unfortunately for them, the U.S. armed forces have done more for world peace than all of the Left-liberal transnational networks combined. It is American military power that ultimately guarantees not only our interests, but other worthy objectives, including the freedom of numerous allied peoples. A certain exhaustion with this role does seem to characterize American opinion of late, and given the sorry record of the post-Cold War era, that fatigue is understandable. But as Cotton points out, walking away from it altogether will not serve American interests. Progressives undermine U.S. military power even as they undermine American sovereignty. The pressing need is to abandon Left-liberal fantasies regarding transnational governance and regroup behind a more hard-nosed foreign policy approach emphasizing the unapologetic defense of vital interests. As Tom Cotton explains in this bracing book, the way to gain respect in the international arena is not to bleat daily about the need for rules-based liberal world order. Rather, the way to gain respect in that anarchic arena is for the United States to act according to the Marine Corps mantra: “No better friend, no worse enemy.”

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