The historical study of US foreign policy helps Americans understand how deeply they have been shaped by the values of the Founders—and how very far, for good reasons and bad, America has parted from those principles. In *Beyond the Water’s Edge: How Partisanship Corrupts US Foreign Policy*, Paul Pillar, a policy analyst and former intelligence official, notes that President George Washington’s warning that “party passions” must never be allowed to open “the door to foreign influence and corruption” has always restrained American politicians and statesmen—until now (181). Pillar argues that over the last generation, and increasingly since the advent of President Donald Trump, Republican Party leaders have been prepared to make common cause even with adversaries like Russian President Vladimir Putin in order to harm the other party. And it has worked. Pillar cites a poll taken soon after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine showing that far more Republicans held a “very unfavorable” view of President Joe Biden than of Putin (212).

It is possible, in short, to accept that American foreign policy has rarely been free of what Pillar calls “partisan corruption” and still recognize that it has never been as corrupt as it is today.

If Pillar’s narrative is guilty of “presentism”—exploring the past with the explicit goal of framing an argument about the present—there are good reasons to do so. The level of partisan hatred that has now been normalized has not simply hobbled Biden’s attempt to advance American interests abroad; it has obscured the very idea of a “national interest” to be pursued. The failure of one of the United States’ political parties now constitutes the other party’s idea of the national interest.

In the first half of *Beyond the Water’s Edge*, Pillar hunts down historical examples of partisan corruption: Federalists undermining the planning and execution of the War of 1812 in the hope of harming President  

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James Madison (41-45); Republicans imposing innumerable “reservations” on the treaty approving the League of Nations in order to weaken the Democrats in advance of the 1920 election (70-77). In some cases, one can question the bright-line distinction Pillar draws between principled and partisan disagreement. There is, for example, a much stronger case to be made that Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge killed the League out of personal animus to President Woodrow Wilson than that Lodge favored war with Spain and the subsequent annexation of the Philippines out of partisan rancor. The fact that today Lodge’s imperialism is antediluvian hardly discredits the sincerity of his convictions.

This blurred boundary poses a larger problem. “Partisan corruption” is plainly the right term to describe President Richard Nixon’s clandestine effort to tilt the scales of the 1968 election by persuading the government of South Vietnam to avoid peace talks, Director of Central Intelligence William Casey’s secret campaign to throw the 1980 election to Ronald Reagan by persuading Iran not to release the hostages, or President Donald Trump’s threat to withhold military aid to Ukraine in order to defame his rival, Joe Biden. These are, as Pillar notes, acts of treason (156). But does it apply, for example, to President George W. Bush’s decision to go to war with Iraq, as Pillar says that it does, at least in part (232-233)? The public was not clamoring for war. The Democrats were not violently opposed to war. Bush opted for war because he and his closest advisors suffered from a collective delusion that they could transform the Middle East through a catalytic act of aggression. In foreign policy, as in life generally, such delusions are far more common than outright cynicism.

Pillar writes as a “realist,” which is to say that he argues that nations act, or should act, to advance objective and more or less self-evident interests. Realists in general may be far more inclined to question the sincerity of people with rival views of the national interest than those who begin from the assumption that the conduct of foreign policy has a great deal to do with ideas in people’s heads—both statesmen and citizens. Some of those ideas are ruinous; but they are still ideas. From this latter perspective, what distinguishes the Trump era is that today’s partisan Republicans have no foreign-policy principles whatsoever, adopting whatever views have been mandated by The Leader, even if both they and The Leader espoused a very opinion the day before. That is partisan corruption in its purest state. (Pillar makes this point as well; 158-179).

Pillar is most confident about America’s objective interests, and most critical of those who hold contrary views, when it comes to Israel. The “Zionist project,” (233) as Pillar calls it at one point, haunts these pages. Unlike most historians of the period, Pillar endorses the view of President Harry Truman’s State Department, whose officials argued that the founding of Israel would damage American interests in the Middle East, and regards Truman’s decision to immediately recognize the new state as a matter of “domestic politics”—that is, as an appeal to the Jewish vote (99). This is Pillar’s definition of partisan corruption. He does not discuss whether a third factor was at work: the Jews’ moral claim to a homeland in

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4 Annette Freyberg-Inan, Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James, eds., Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

the aftermath of the Holocaust and the American (non-Jewish) public’s support for that cause. Since Pillar makes the pre-emptive claim that even fair-minded criticisms of Israel face denunciations of antisemitism, one should instead describe this almost shocking indifference to catastrophe as fervent anti-Zionism.

There is a strong case to be made that the unwillingness of any president or Congress over the last thirty years to break with Israel despite growing provocations to do so has less to do with strategic judgments than with politics. (Steven Walt and John Mearsheimer famously made this case in *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy.*⁶) Pillar argues that the Republican Party’s apparently unshakeable bond with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the most conspicuous example of party passions opening the door to foreign influence and corruption (189-195). One does not have to share his view of the State of Israel to agree.

But what should we say of Joe Biden’s lifelong embrace of the cause of Israel, and of his current, tortured efforts to support Israel’s war in Gaza while at the same time trying to limit the growing damage to America’s reputation in the region and beyond? Is that cynical support of “the Zionist project”? Or does it rather constitute an attempt to balance national security with the fundamental moral concerns that have always shaped American foreign policy, for good and ill? Would one wish it otherwise?


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