

# H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 575

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Mark Thomas Edwards. *Walter Lippmann: American Skeptic, American Pastor*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

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This stimulating and thought-provoking book appears in a series entitled “Spiritual Lives,” which offers “biographies of prominent men and women whose eminence is not primarily based on a specifically religious contribution.”<sup>1</sup> Walter Lippmann was the great interpreter, analyst, and critic of twentieth century America’s self-understanding. Verbally gifted, he either invented or popularized the key concepts that Americans used to understand the world they were shaping, including globalism, stereotypes, and the Cold War. Mark Thomas Edwards presents a fascinating interpretation of a man whose analyses were constantly changing, yet seemed founded on a moral certainty that Lippmann was always struggling, unsuccessfully in Edwards’ view, to explain.

This is not a comprehensive biography—Ronald Steel’s masterful work supplied that quite definitively<sup>2</sup>—but it is an attempt to make sense of an overly fecund and contradictory mind by bringing the discussion back to an analysis that is grounded in a post-religious world. Lippmann’s parents were agnostics from a German-Jewish background, who nevertheless attended synagogue. Lippmann was confirmed rather than bar mitzvah-ed. He rarely talked about his Jewish heritage. He started as a socialist, then became a Wilsonian, and for some time appeared to flirt with anti-modern Catholic natural law doctrines. But he could never completely commit, because, fundamentally, Harvard had left him with the powerful impression of the thought of William James and American pragmatism.<sup>3</sup> That provided a basis in which any kind of belief might be assimilated; even socialism, natural law, classic liberalism, New Deal liberalism, and the British universal historian Arnold Toynbee’s mystic prophesying.<sup>4</sup> Edwards argues that “Wedding James, Wallas, Nietzsche, and Keynes to Hamilton, Hayek, Toynbee, and Burke, Lippmann attacked the New Deal from the standpoint of a post-Christian humanism that prioritized decentralization of both the state and the economy” (162).<sup>5</sup> Thus it looked as if Lippmann was always trying to bring together opposites;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/s/spiritual-lives-spl/?cc=us&lang=en&>.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> See William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981 [1907]).

<sup>4</sup> See Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England: Public Addresses, Notes and Other Fragments, Together with a Short Memoir by B. Jowett* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004 [1884]).

<sup>5</sup> He is referring to the philosopher Henry James, the social reformer Graham Wallas, the sage Friedrich Nietzsche, the economist John Maynard Keynes, founding father Alexander Hamilton, economist and political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek, historian Arnold Toynbee, and political sage Edmund Burke.

and then failing. In the 1960s he was close to Washington power in the presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson but fell out with the latter and became persona non grata in the White House because of his criticism of Vietnam.

Edwards frames the vast Lippmann verbal legacy as reconciling “two seemingly incompatible post-Christian persuasions: The “Spiritual but Not Religious” (SBNR) and the “Religious but Not Spiritual” (RBNS)” (10). Ultimately this is then a story about a brilliant man who was always searching for meaning but could never find. As Edwards puts it, “Lippmann remained a post-Christian pundit to the end, finding religions useful for meeting personal and social needs while never himself encountering a God he could believe in” (212).

Like many recent biographies, such as Jennifer Burns’s powerful study of Milton Friedman,<sup>6</sup> *Walter Lippmann: American Skeptic, American Pastor* is also a book that brings out the extent to which the achievement of the male protagonist was based on the work of a large number of women, including in this case Lippmann’s second wife, the former Helen Bryne, and a bevy of female research assistants. Edwards reveals that “too few knew or cared at the time that one of the most revered Americans in all the world kept women locked in his attic” (181). The journalist’s household had, at least according to Edwards, a general “weirdness” (182). Sometimes Edwards offers political explanations, such as that Lippmann never forgave women for the presidency of Warren G. Harding,<sup>7</sup> but generally these seems too trite or superficial a view. Instead, this is a story of assimilation to the values of what Edwards calls a positionalist elite: “He became like the men he was most attracted to, inheriting their racism, sexism, classism, and nativism along with their more noble traits” (162).

Of interest to H-Diplo readers is the way the world view shaped by religious questioning translated into an interpretation of foreign policy. Edwards sees Lippmann as having applied pragmatism to a variety of subjects. This “sense of spiritual indeterminacy animated everything Lippmann wrote, including his landmark contributions to democratic theory and foreign policy” (9). Readers will see modern analogies to the way in which Lippmann struggled against the containment and rollback view of the world of President Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and wanted instead to reach an accommodation based not on ideology (another term which Lippmann liked to use repeatedly). Is Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, or China under the leadership of Xi Jinping, now the equivalent of the Soviet Union under Soviet premiers Josef Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev, and China under Chairman Mao Zedong in Lippmann’s analysis? Lippmann wanted a disentangling from Southeast Asia, longing for “a fortuitous defeat, even a ‘salvation,’ ” he wrote, as it would “force countrymen to abandon globalism.” (164). He argued that the world would be stable if it were not for the persistence and ubiquity of US interventionism: “America’s global policing was the main barrier keeping Europe and the world from

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Burns, *Milton Friedman: The Last Conservative* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> The 1920 election was the first in which women could vote, but it is more myth than reality that women were the decisive factor in the election of Harding. See Sara Alpern and Dale Baum, “Female Ballots: The Impact of the Nineteenth Amendment,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16:1 (Summer 1985): 43-67.

reconciliation” (164). That is a refrain that has been constantly reworked from Lippmann’s middle-aged castigations of the diplomat George Kennan to our own time.<sup>8</sup>

Edwards provides an interesting interpretation of how a clever but muddled man could shape Americans’ view of the world that—in the mid-twentieth century—they controlled and shaped. To the extent that the framing of a post-world religious world obsessed by the legacy of religion is still central to the political discourse of the Republic, this “spiritual” life of Lippmann also provides a guide for interpreting present-day partisanship in foreign affairs.

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<sup>8</sup> See Frank Costigliola, *George F. Kennan: A Life between Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).