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The Rusty and Rancid Origins of the Fulbright Program

Every year some 8000 students and scholars, foreign and American, receive Fulbright grants to study or teach in a foreign country.¹ Most likely none of them know that the program owes its origins in part to a giant ball of partially melted chocolate, studded with rancid nuts, left behind in China after V-J Day. But as Sam Lebovic shows in this fascinating article, it was the sale of such surplus materials after World War II that provided the initial funds for Fulbright's program of foreign exchange.

Not all of this 'war junk' was so useless as the spoiled candy. The roughly four million types of surplus material included everything from airplanes and artillery to uniforms and food. But most of it was worthless to the United States. Postwar peace made the cost of shipping surplus materials home prohibitive. The U.S. government preferred to sell it to the countries where it lay. But a shortage of dollars overseas complicated things. Why not trade it for favors? This is the context in which Senator J. William Fulbright introduced Senate Bill 1636 in 1946, giving the State Department jurisdiction over the disposal of surplus property, and authorizing the creation of a system of educational exchange. In lieu of buying surplus material with cash, foreign governments would fund the travel and lodging of Americans in their country, and the travel of their nationals to America. Thus the program would be free to the United States.²

¹ Fulbright Program, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, "Facts and Common Questions," <http://eca.state.gov/fulbright/facts-and-common-questions> (Accessed 2 June 2013).

² In fact, as Lebovic points out, the bill gave great flexibility to the State Department in how to spend the funds. Less than 5% of the proceeds from surplus sales actually went to educational exchange programs

Lebovic's "From War Junk to Educational Exchange: the World War II Origins of the Fulbright Program and the Foundations of American Cultural Globalism, 1945-1950," is divided roughly into three parts. The first section focuses on the details of the emerging system. Since the Fulbright program has acquired an image of pure altruism, it is useful to see the actual context of its origins. Mining congressional debates, Senator Fulbright's papers, and press accounts, Lebovic shows that the Fulbright Act was initially perceived primarily in its relation to the surplus. Indeed, its supporters seemed almost apologetic. The *Washington Post* argued that the exchange program was "preferable to watching our property rust away" (291) while a Congressional supporter claimed it "enables us to salvage something out of surplus property abroad which otherwise would be a total loss" (287). The program's origins in surplus disposal also shaped its early implementation. Areas without surplus property (most of Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East) could not participate.

Second, Lebovic explores the ideological origins of the exchange program. Why did policymakers decide to direct the funds to this program, rather than to others? Lebovic argues that the Fulbright Act emerged from the "rubble of global war" (312). Senator Fulbright and his supporters saw educational exchange as an antidote to fascism. Adolf Hitler had "demonstrated the great power of education... [to create] an army of savage and fanatical monsters" (294). By making "all knowledge fully and freely accessible," educational exchange would teach citizens to think for themselves and immunize them against future demagogues (294).

Educational exchange also drew on a deeper strain of American thought that the war had invigorated. Borrowing from John Fousek, Lebovic calls this "nationalist globalism" (283): an ideology that combined a sense of divine mission with a belief that the entire world was now a proper concern for American foreign policy.³ Consistent with this ideology, Fulbright saw no difference between global interests and American interests. Educational exchange would benefit the United States, but also the world. Nationalist globalism, as Lebovic tells it, was simultaneously liberal and self-interested.

The third part of the article reveals the effects of this ideology in practice. Despite the internationalist rhetoric, U.S. officials retained control. Foreign governments paid for the program, but it was directed by a Board of Foreign Scholarships (BFS) appointed by the American president. In each country, a supposedly bi-national board would supervise exchanges, and pair scholars and institutions. Building on work by Frank Ninkovich, combined with State Department records, Lebovic shows that Americans dominated these

(290). Still, the vast majority of the bill's actual text relates to educational programs. Senate Bill 1636, 79th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1946.

³ John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: 2000).

boards.⁴ Members of U.S. diplomatic missions studded their rosters and every chairman was an American. Moreover, the boards' actions remained subject to review by the State Department. Complaints by foreign partners made little difference. Despite Chinese opposition, for instance, Americans occupied every one of the five seats on that nation's board. Chinese officials served merely as "advisors" (299). With firm U.S. control of nominally "bi-national" foreign institution, the Fulbright program, as Lebovic argues, "began to increasingly resemble a program for Americanization" (296).

But of what did this Americanization consist? Since Lebovic is focused on the American institutional and ideological side of things, he can't tell us much about what happened on the ground in Europe and Asia. He refers often to "asymmetries of power" (283) that shaped the initial phases of the program. But it is not clear from his account precisely how U.S. power was exerted. Why did the various colonies in America's 'Empire by Invitation' agree to pay for exchange programs controlled by the U.S. in return for "war junk" they may not have wanted in the first place? Were threats and/or promises needed? Did foreign officials come to an 'understanding' that agreeing to take part in the program would help them achieve other goals vis-à-vis the United States? Lebovic's U.S.-centered approach leaves these questions unanswered.

However, there is still much we can learn from a study of ideology. It is striking, for instance, that officials at the time did not seem to have a well worked-out idea of exactly how the Fulbright program would function to advance American goals. From its inception, the BFS agreed that the program should "certainly implement the general aims of U.S. foreign policy" (297). But this seemed to rely as much on wishful thinking and "a faith in the ability of American culture" (308) as on clear strategy. Officials assumed that foreign visitors to the United States would be converted to American democratic ideals, which they would then carry with them as they returned home. "[M]y original idea," Senator Fulbright later explained, was "...a program designed to influence political matters through the intelligent leadership of the important countries" (306). But U.S. officials also assumed that the reverse would not happen to Americans overseas. Rather than fretting that American travelers would bring dangerous foreign ideas home to America, U.S. officials saw the influence running in only one direction. Whether importing or exporting scholars and students, the net result would always be a spread of American values. Such was the confidence in the power and appeal of American ideals, Lebovic notes, that Fulbright program officials pushed to expand the program to the Soviet Union (311). As Fulbright confidently exclaimed, "how often I have thought what a fine thing it would be if Mr Stalin or Mr Molotov could have gone to Robert College, or Columbia, in their youth" (310).

⁴ Frank Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas: U.S. Foreign Policy and Cultural Relations, 1938-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Lebovic's account is not the first to note the surplus origins of the Fulbright Act; indeed the program's official website mentions this.⁵ But this article is certainly the most complete account we have. What does it reveal about the program and its relation to mid-century American foreign relations?

Historiographically, Lebovic aims for a middle position. The Fulbright Act was not the "idealist creation of benevolent internationalism" that some have made it out to be. But neither was it "structured wholly by binary Cold War imperatives" (283). Rather it was "a product of a fleeting liberal internationalism" (283). While not blind to American interests, it assumed that serving these interests would also serve the interests of mankind. The argument carries a whiff of a pre-Cold War 'lost opportunity' narrative, though Lebovic convincingly deflates any wistful utopianism. American policymakers may have been naïve, but not so naïve as to give something away without furthering their own national interest.

The difficulty lies in making the Fulbright Act work simultaneously as the product of contingent opportunity and as representation of broad trends in American foreign relations. Without the former—that is, without the 'problem' of war surplus—would there have been a Fulbright program at all? It is not difficult to imagine so, though the form would have differed. Or perhaps not: if supporters of the Act felt the need to present it as a way for "the taxpayers of this nation...to receive some return, at any rate, on their lend-lease equipment" then one wonders how popular educational exchange was after all (290). At the least one questions the size of the constituency for *government* support of such exchange. Lebovic convincingly demonstrates that some elites sincerely believed in the program; to what extent was the wider public convinced?

This leads to a consideration of where precisely the Fulbright Act fits in the longer arc of the history of the United States in the world. Here I think Lebovic could have pushed further. He interprets the Cold War primarily as a bipolar strategic contest: Fulbright did not understand educational exchange (in 1945 at least) as a way to gain an advantage vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, ergo this was not a Cold War program. An alternative conceptualization of 'Cold War' could suggest a different argument. For instance, if the Cold War is understood primarily as a U.S. production steeped in messianic assumptions about the shape of American power in the world, then the Fulbright program might be seen as representative of a broader constellation of ideas and institutions that helped to create the Cold War in the first place.⁶ This review is not the place to debate whether or not this interpretation of the Cold War is the correct one (or whether there is any single 'correct' explanation), but I raise it merely to suggest that the idea that American interests are universal, that what is good for the United States is also good for the World, is not

⁵ Fulbright Program history, <http://eca.state.gov/fulbright/about-fulbright/history> (Accessed 2 June 2013).

⁶ See, e.g., Anders Stephanson, "Liberty or Death: The Cold War as US Ideology," in *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (New York: Frank Cass, 2000), 81-100.

necessarily a pre-Cold War mindset but was present in important ways throughout the Cold War itself. The story of ‘war junk’ would then be less about the contingent origins of the Fulbright program and more about the expanded geography of American power in the wake of World War II. Indeed, this seems to be what Lebovic is nodding toward with his emphasis on ‘nationalist globalism.’

We might also head in the other direction: backwards rather than forwards in time. To what degree was the Fulbright Act a distinctly *postwar* phenomenon? Fulbright was not the first to imagine the exchange of scholars across borders as a means to world peace. Nicholas Murray Butler initiated a similar program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the 1910s.⁷ The federal government also sponsored exchange, as Lebovic notes, in 1908 via the return of the Boxer Indemnity to China, in 1920 through the liquidation of the Belgian Relief Commission, and in Latin America during World War II (284). Given these precedents, the Fulbright Act—and the broader internationalism to which it belonged—seem more like the inexorable flowering of an informal imperial urge and less like the accidental byproduct of war junk.

Still, Lebovic is right to insist that “there was nothing obvious or natural about the emergence of America’s postwar cultural expansion” (312). In presenting a convincing ideological portrait of Senator Fulbright and revealing the surprising origins of his famous program, this article will help readers to ponder the fit between ideas, power, and chance in the creation of the American Century.

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⁷ Ninkovich, *Diplomacy of Ideas*, chap. 1.