"The cause of all our troubles"

The American invention of isolationism in World War II

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The paper

Historians have long structured narratives of America's rise to world power around the dichotomy between internationalism and isolationism. But this dichotomy was invented in World War II in order to naturalize, not explain, the birth of American global supremacy. Rather than assume that internationalism and isolationism are stable and neutral analytics, this paper provides a conceptual history of their formulation and propagation in the political discourse. It begins by arguing that for most of their history, Americans imagined their place in the world within the conceptual frame of internationalism: they could either avoid or transcend the system of power politics, but not join (much less dominate) it. But in the 1930s, such internationalism began to collapse. A new term, isolationism, expressed a fear that power politics was ineradicable. It conjured a world closed to intercourse unless kept open by force. It was in order to avoid "isolationism" that, in 1940 and 1941, American officials and intellectuals first decided that the United States should attain political-military supremacy across the globe. Worried, however, that global supremacy sounded imperialistic, they then turned it into the epitome of internationalism, now defined primarily against isolationism. By 1945 internationalism had traveled full circle. Harnessing the resonance of prior efforts to transcend power politics, it morphed into a will to dominate power politics.