Whence American Internationalism
Jeffrey W. Legro

One of the most interesting and important puzzles in international relations involves the shift in the dominant ideas held by Americans regarding foreign policy during World War II. Before that conflict, the dominant American conception of effective strategy was unilateralism, which favored flexibility and eschewed standing institutional affiliations or ties to other great powers entailing a precommitment of military force. Yet in that war, Americans accepted as their new orthodoxy the previously chastised internationalism, which embraced an active role in international institutions and shattered the taboo against standing involvement in Europe’s great power politics. This shift is puzzling, not because it occurred but because it did not occur earlier, especially after World War I or during the Great Depression. The lag is important because analysts widely believe that the United States’ refusal to provide international leadership in the 1920s and 1930s significantly worsened the Great Depression, helped produce conditions that fostered totalitarian/fascist regimes, encouraged Germany’s and Japan’s aggression, and contributed to the scale and violence of World War II. Why, then, in contrast to its position during World War II, did the United States not embrace international security commitments vis-à-vis the European powers after World War I?

This question carries more than historical interest. Many of the pressing contemporary issues of world politics hinge on the likelihood of change in national ideas about international security. Scholars today argue over whether Japan will adhere to its pacificist postwar thinking or adopt an autonomous, militarist view of security, whether

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1. The list here includes scholars, such as Costigliola 1984; Kindleberger 1973; and Gaddis 1972, 2, 18–20, 23–24; and policy officials, such as Henry Stimson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dean Acheson, Walt Rostow, and Lyndon Johnson. See Kuklick 1970, 614–15.

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China is heading toward a Russian-style liberalization or a medieval siege mentality. Likewise, scholars disagree about whether Germany will one day overthrow its multilateral mindset and return to an autarkic approach to world politics. Perhaps most important for the future of world politics, some wonder whether Americans will once again refuse international security commitments.

But to even begin to address these possibilities, we need some general understanding of why states fundamentally change their long-held ideas toward international affairs. Although a surge of recent work has demonstrated the usefulness of analyzing collective ideas as a structural force, relatively little attention has been paid to why ideas themselves sometimes change quite rapidly in a discontinuous fashion. Constructivist scholars who have most systematically studied the collective nature of ideas have begun to address change from two directions. One group highlights process, be it through structure-agent mutual constitution, communicative actions, or new socialization. A second group stresses the importance of agents in remaking ideas. Although each of these general approaches to change has been fruitful, both struggle with a fundamental issue: how is it that individuals who hold differing or even similar ideas accomplish change in collective ideas in some circumstances but not others? The answer to this question, I argue, depends on the dynamic role of ideational structure itself.

Understanding this influence requires a reconceptualization of ideational change. Such change, instead of being viewed as a single phenomena, is more usefully thought of as having two ideal stages (which, in practice, are often difficult to disentangle). First, social actors must somehow concur, explicitly or tacitly, that the old ideational structure is inadequate, thus causing its collapse. Second, actors must consolidate some new replacement set of ideas, lest they return to the old orthodoxy simply as a default mechanism. Efforts for change in both stages are challenged by collective ideation problems that make coordination difficult and/or give individuals incentives to shirk efforts to challenge dominant beliefs.

Whether societies effectively transcend collapse and consolidation barriers depends in part on the role of the ideational structure in its own transformation—specifically the interaction of ideationally shaped social expectations and the consequences of experienced events. Change in collective ideas is much more likely to occur under three conditions: (1) when events generate consequences that deviate from social expectations, (2) when the consequences are starkly undesirable, and (3) when a socially viable replacement idea exists. By shaping expectations and alternatives, ideational structure has an irreducible role in change. Thus comparable societies with different dominant ideas will evolve differently in reaction to similar environmental pressures.

2. See, for example, Van Evera 1984; Rohrlich 1987; Goldstein 1993; Dobbins 1994; Johnston 1995; Legro 1995; Katzenstein 1996a,b; Kier 1997; and Berger 1998. My aim is to explain relatively rapid transformations of ideational structure, not gradual steps that over time can produce full-blown alterations.
This framework is useful in explaining the enigmatic evolution of U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth century. I argue that American ideational continuity after World War I was a result of the reinforcing effect of that conflict on the preexisting American belief that entanglement in Europe’s political/security affairs would be harmful. Hence the United States did not address its international problems in the 1920s and 1930s by internationalist initiatives; instead it further withdrew from such commitments. This continuity was not simply a reflection of the power, threat, or technology conditions of the times, nor did it directly reflect the distribution of interests or social purpose in society. By 1940–41, however, American expectations of what should occur in international relations were sharply and disappointingly confounded by the events leading up to and culminating in World War II. The result was the dramatic shift toward internationalism in American conceptions of security that preceded—and hence was not caused by—the Cold War. That the same orientation exists today further reinforces its autonomy from the long bipolar U.S.–Soviet confrontation.

This argument provides leverage in explaining foreign policy because it highlights the autonomous role of ideational structure in change, clearly distinguishing it from arguments that view social beliefs as simply windsocks of environmental pressures or political tools wielded by powerful domestic elites. Empirically, such arguments do not satisfactorily explain the rise of American internationalism because they suggest that change was equally likely after World War I or the Great Depression. Conceptually, they neglect an epistemic effect: the necessary endogenous role of ideas in their own transformation. My point is not that ideational change is reducible to the same preexisting collective ideas. Instead, I highlight a general logic that explicates the way that ideational structure mediates which environmental conditions are most likely to produce change, indicates which ideational structures are most open to change, and accounts for why some actors are able to sell new ideas while many others fail. The overall framework seems applicable to ideational continuity and discontinuous change in a number of issue areas, as I discuss in the conclusion.

The argument takes shape in five parts. I first specify and measure continuity and change in U.S. foreign policy ideas. I then present the logic of an epistemic approach (which is different from the “epistemic community” perspective). I apply that approach to explain American ideational continuity and change and then consider its usefulness in relation to competing explanations. Finally, I discuss the implications of the argument.

**Ideas of Internationalism, 1908–50**

My explanatory focus is the dominant “episteme” (a collectively held belief characterizing a particular group about appropriate or effective corporate behavior) in U.S. foreign policy.\(^5\) In most societies one can find competing sets of ideas, but for the

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\(^5\) My use of *episteme* and *epistemic* differs from both the deep constitutive connotations of social episteme, such as in Ruggie 1993; and the expert interest group focus of epistemic community, such as in Haas 1992.
sake of effective action one orthodoxy tends to dominate in the hierarchy of such sets. A number of recent works have demonstrated the effects dominant ideas have in such issue areas as macroeconomic policy, economic development, national security, foreign economic policy, human rights, trade, monetary policy, and internal security.\footnote{6}

The most important part of an episteme is its collective nature: it is not simply the sum of all the views of individuals or groups; instead it has a degree of autonomy. Collective ideas are intersubjective and distinct from individual beliefs. They are typically embodied in symbols, discourse, and institutions. Individuals and their interactions naturally influence collective ideas, but they also must confront these ideas as “fact.”\footnote{7} Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro have noted this quality in their study of collective public opinion. Analysts of organizations have shown how beliefs by which groups orient themselves take on unique symbolic importance and become an autonomous force in their own right.\footnote{8} Scholars of international relations have documented how powerful elites manipulate images and then become captured by such notions at a later time.\footnote{9} What is less well understood is why such conceptual orientations sometimes radically shift.

The initial task, then, is to document variation in the dominant American episteme on how best to provide for security in major power relations along one key dimension: the American belief in pursuing international relations through unilateral means instead of internationalist policies.\footnote{10} Unilateralism implies a belief that going it alone, that is, avoiding institutional commitments to other nations, particularly military commitments, best serves the national interest. Carried to its extreme, unilateralism can lead to isolation from international activities. Internationalism, in contrast, implies a belief that social well being is best served by supporting international institutions and committing national military power to maintain relationships with the major powers in Europe. What is notable is that American views toward unilateralism and internationalism have not fluctuated randomly through time. Before World War II, the dominant orthodoxy was unilateralist; during the war, a shift to an internationalist outlook occurred. The transformation is apparent in several measures.

One common way to assess collective ideas is through symbols and discourse. One such indicator in the United States is the ritualized State of the Union address, given annually by the president, that discusses foreign policy.\footnote{11} This speech tends to be highly symbolic and is rightly seen as an effort to capture the character, thought, and direction of the nation.\footnote{12} Presidents want to present their ideas in ways that sell,
and they tend to rally support and legitimacy by reflecting and saluting social traditions and norms. It is clear empirically that these annual speeches are much more than simply the views of the individual leaders, since personal opinions and public discourse do diverge. \textsuperscript{13} Because the address is annual, it provides only a rough measure of the content and timing of change, but the uniform context and format makes it a useful point of comparison.

Figure 1 presents the results of a content analysis of these speeches (see appendix for methodology). The solid line in Figure 1 indicates the level of internationalism portrayed as desirable in the State of the Union address for that year. A score of zero reflects the position that the United States should avoid becoming institutionally involved in major power international relations at all. From this perspective, the United States should live and let live, separate from Europe. A score of 5 reflects the view that U.S. security is best served by the United States being actively integrated in political military affairs, joining international institutions, and making precommitments of political and military power to other major powers.

To further probe whether the views expressed by the president represent collective or idiosyncratic sentiment, I have surveyed the editorial responses of four newspapers that reflect different regions and partisan leanings (see Figure 1). \textsuperscript{14} These responses are coded in terms of their support for or criticism of the degree of unilateralism and internationalist themes in the State of the Union speeches. If an editorial

\textsuperscript{13} See, for example, the internationalist Franklin Roosevelt's favorable pronouncements on isolationism in the 1930s.

\textsuperscript{14} The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and Los Angeles Times.
called for more internationalism than proposed by the president in the address that year, the symbol appears above the solid line (by one-half point); if the editorial and the president were at about the same level, the symbol appears on the line; and if the editorial favored more unilateralism, the symbol appears below the line (by one-half point). Collectively these tell us whether the address roughly reflected broader sentiment. For example, if two or three newspapers disagreed with the internationalist sentiment in a speech with no offsetting sentiment in the opposite direction, this would suggest that the president’s views did not resonate with those of the broader society.\textsuperscript{15} Although not a perfect gauge because of the limited nature of the editorial responses on foreign policy, the speeches, along with editorial reactions to them, offer a reasonable, easily reproducible representation of the dominant collective ideas on security policy before and after the two world wars.

As shown in Figure 1, World War I produced very little change in Americans’ commitment to political-military unilateralism, whereas World War II led to a dramatic transformation. Before and after World War I the debate favored more unilateralist ideas. During World War II, however, this measure took a qualitative leap toward high levels of support for internationalism and remained there after the war.

This presidential measure is confirmed by the editorial responses, which tended to agree with or collectively swarm around the State of the Union address—that is, some agreed, some disagreed. In only one year did three or more editorials disagree with the sentiment expressed in the State of the Union address.\textsuperscript{16} In only five years were there two editorial responses disagreeing with the sentiment expressed in the address without any others disagreeing in an opposite direction (the others either agreed with the speech or did not comment at all).\textsuperscript{17} These results suggest the reliability of the State of the Union address as an indicator of collective sentiment—presidents rarely voiced a foreign policy position completely out of line with society, especially in the high-profile speeches surveyed.

Finally, the results in Figure 1 are supported by an analysis of the vast secondary literature that characterizes dominant ideas by drawing on memoirs, personal papers, speeches, archival records, surveys of journals and newspapers, and public opinion data. Based on my reading of the State of the Union addresses, inaugural speeches, and the secondary literature, the following brief elaboration of the evolution of the collective American mindset on security provides substantive depth.

\textit{The Legacy}

The origins of twentieth-century American thought can be traced to the country’s “founders.” Those leaders did not favor noninvolvement in the world. Indeed, com-
merce was seen as very desirable. What they stigmatized was political-military ties with major powers (that is, Europe) that would entrap the country. Every year since 1796, George Washington’s “Farewell Address to Congress” has been read aloud in Congress on his birthday. In it he advises, “The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible. . . . Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalship, interest, humor, or caprice? It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.”

Thomas Jefferson, in his first inaugural address on 4 March 1801, echoed the same theme, declaring “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.” Finally, James Monroe, the originator of the doctrine that declared the Americas a haven from European colonization, stated that “separated as we are from Europe . . . we can have no concern in the wars of the European Governments nor in the causes which produce them.”

The imprint of these ideas, more than tired phrases, is evident even as the United States emerged as a great power at the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, the United States did become more active in the international arena, indicating a gradual evolution away from an isolationist form of unilateralism. But American ideas remained largely limited in terms of international commitments. Theodore Roosevelt was the most aggressive internationalist of his era, but his modest policy of engagement met relatively strong resistance. In sharp contrast to later Cold War beliefs, none of Roosevelt’s immediate successors publicly agreed with him that the United States should uphold the balance of power in Europe.

**Continuity After World War I**

In the pre–World War I period, the speeches of William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson show continuity across political parties. Both leaders recognized that the United States’ place in the world was changing, but both strongly reflected traditional views. These leaders saw the need for the United States to interact with other nations, particularly major powers, despite the relative geographic isolation enjoyed heretofore. But their main emphasis involved commercial activity—just as Washington had advocated. Taft and Wilson continued to view Europe as a source of danger, the instigator of militarism (both presidents decried the need for a standing army), and the cause of the much-despised imperialism. Thus, despite an increased willingness to engage commercially, Americans were hesitant to interact in continental power politics. This reluctance became clear as World War I erupted and the United States tried to keep its distance. Wilson argued in 1914 that the United States meant “to live and let live.” He chided those that would change “a nation that staked its very life to

free itself from the very entanglement that had darkened the fortunes of older nations and set up a new standard here." 20

Once the United States intervened in the war, Wilson began to prepare the country for a new peacetime direction. He argued in December 1919 that the United States’ place in the world had fundamentally changed: “no policy of isolation will satisfy the growing needs and opportunities of America.” 21 But what he was referring to specifically were not political and military affairs, but commerce: The United States had changed in the sense that it was no longer a debtor, but a creditor and should engage in the expanding economic market. His speeches, judging by editorial reactions, were received with either approval or a somewhat mixed reaction (often reflecting partisan leanings). But it is notable that nowhere in his State of the Union addresses did Wilson directly defend the controversial Article 10 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which would commit U.S. forces to preserving the peace in Europe and, as discussed later, was exactly what Congress (and the country) had rejected.

In the aftermath of World War I, Wilson’s successors retreated to the safety of ideational continuity. Warren Harding declared in his inaugural address that “the recorded progress of our Republic, materially and spiritually, in itself proves the wisdom of the inherited policy of non-involvement in Old World affairs.” The key, as Harding elaborated, was not involvement per se, but commitments that might impinge on the United States’ ability to decide its own course in each instance (hence precluding such commitments). “This is not aloofness,” Harding succinctly declared, “it is security.” 22 The United States would engage the world in finance and trade, it would offer advice, and join in efforts to reduce armaments. But U.S. security was seen as best served by self-help, and Harding recommended the same to others. 23 Calvin Coolidge largely echoed these themes, arguing for the avoidance of permanent alliances and Old World controversies, the efficacy of nonintervention, and the dangers of balances of power, militaries, and alliances. 24

In sum, despite a militarily successful effort at European intervention in World War I and the president’s own entrepreneurial efforts, American aversion to commitments on security apparently changed little after the war was over. 25 The United States did continue its commercial expansion—largely along the trend seen earlier in Taft’s and Wilson’s policies before the war. 26 But Americans’ basic unilateral conception of strategy was mostly an extension of the prewar orthodoxy. Even many so-

20. 1915 State of the Union address in Israel 1966.
22. 1921 inaugural address in Inaugural Addresses 1961.
23. 1921 and 1922 State of the Union addresses in Israel 1966.
24. 1923 State of the Union address in Israel 1966; 1925 inaugural address in Inaugural Addresses 1961. Coolidge’s internationalist causes were advocated within the traditional consensus. For example, he argued that U.S. involvement with the World Court was strictly voluntary (1924 State of the Union address) and that the Kellogg-Briand Treaty did not limit unilateral action in any way (1928 State of the Union address). For State of the Union addresses, see Israel 1966.
called internationalists were opposed to strategic commitments. A 1921 Literary Digest poll showed U.S. newspaper editors favoring helping France if it were attacked, but opposing any formal guarantees. This survey captured the American belief that any precommitment of forces to Europe was harmful to U.S. security.27

Transformation in World War II

American ideas about security in the early years of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s (FDR) presidency showed strong continuity with the ideas that emerged after World War I and were promoted by Wilson’s Republican predecessors. As was true earlier, the United States was open to cooperating on the reduction of armaments viewed as fostering militarism, threatening democracy, and encouraging war. Furthermore, the United States (although with less enthusiasm in the early stages of the Great Depression) had an interest in furthering international commerce. But on issues of military-political commitments in major power politics, the traditional orthodoxy ruled.

The development of American thinking on security from 1933 and after reflects a transition from the old to the new. The balance of discourse in support of traditional versus nontraditional ideas shifted in three phases. During the first phase, from 1933–1938, discourse was one-sided in favor of U.S. unilateralism. For example, the nationalist-minded FDR declared in 1934 that the “United States cannot take part in political arrangements in Europe,” and that “self-help and self-control” were America’s tradition. Despite the incidents on the continent, the United States could play only one familiar role: stay out of it, defend the homeland, act as an example, and offer council.28

From 1938 to 1941 the balance became more equal. FDR began to stress how other nations’ acts affected the United States and the American way of life. On the one hand, FDR heeded tradition in warning against entangling alliances; on the other, he derided those who “wishfully believe the United States can live in isolation” (while rejecting that this meant the United States had to join the war).29 By 1941–42, the balance had shifted to the need to engage the turmoil in Europe—the threat to the democratic way of life was so immense that the country’s safety now depended on events abroad—especially the challenge of dictators controlling the resources of Eurasia. FDR belittled isolationists as “selfish men who would clip the wings of the American people in order to feather their own nest.”30

The third phase in American views on security, from 1942 on, clearly and consistently stressed one side of the ledger. The collective orthodoxy embraced the necessity of international cooperation and multilateralism. Table 1 shows this distinct change through a comparison of the old and new thinking. Compared with concepts before

28. 1934 State of the Union address in Israel 1966.
29. 1940 State of the Union address in Israel 1966.
30. 1941 State of the Union address in Israel 1966.
TABLE 1. Transformation of the American foreign policy episteme

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<th>Old orthodoxy</th>
<th>New orthodoxy</th>
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<td>International involvement</td>
<td>“Our manifest destiny has been to stand apart studiously neutral.” (Wilson, 1915)</td>
<td>“We cannot make America an island in either a military or economic sense.” (FDR, 1943)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military engagement</td>
<td>“Our America can be no party to a permanent military alliance.” (Harding, 1921)</td>
<td>“Our national safety and the security of the world will require substantial armed services, particularly in overseas service.” (Truman, 1946)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship to major powers</td>
<td>“The United States cannot take part in political arrangements in Europe.” (FDR, 1934)</td>
<td>“Our own well being is dependent on the well being of other nations far away.” (FDR, 1945)</td>
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<tr>
<td>International cooperation</td>
<td>“Ultimately, nations, like individuals, cannot depend upon each other but must depend upon themselves.” (Coolidge, 1924)</td>
<td>“Our guiding star is the principle of international cooperation. To this concept we have made a commitment as profound as anything in history.” (Truman, 1949)</td>
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Sources: State of the Union addresses in Israel 1966; and Inaugural Addresses 1961.

1940, the collective American understanding of security transformed after 1942. The dominant view no longer asserted that security was best served by standing apart as an unsullied example to, and/or good office for, others; instead, the balance shifted toward international engagement, cooperation, and most notably commitments of force to other major powers.

An Epistemic Approach: Ideas and Events

How then can we explain the shift from one stable set of collective views about managing major power relations to another? In addressing this question, I highlight the influence of the ideational structure within which deliberation takes place. The point is not that such a structure is the whole story but that the structure is a critical piece in understanding how enduring social ideas can radically transform. In what follows, I describe how epistemic change occurs (or not) and use this logic to explain the evolution of American thinking on foreign policy.

The Logic of Epistemic Change

Although scholars have done substantial work on why individuals change their personal beliefs, continuity and transformation in collective ideas necessarily involves
social mechanisms as well. Change requires collective action, or perhaps more accurately, “collective ideation”: the formation of social ideas implies the potential for coordination, even collective action, problems. These problems are apparent in the two stages that together constitute ideational change.

The first stage involves the collapse of the reigning consensus. Social actors must agree, even if tacitly, on the inadequacy of the old orthodoxy and the need to replace it. Because there is no physical group mind, aggregate conceptual change must necessarily relate to the thinking and/or actions of individuals or subgroups. But change cannot be reduced to individuals. Even when the majority may believe otherwise (suggesting the need for change), the extant collective orthodoxy may endure for a variety of reasons, including individual ignorance of others’ private reassessment of what is proper and desirable, the costs to individuals (given the benefits) of altering collective and institutionally embedded symbols, or even a fear of social ostracism for challenging group beliefs. For individuals to consider fighting the accepted collective wisdom, strong intersubjective evidence for doing so has to be present. The second phase requires consolidation, involving coordination or collaboration among domestic actors on a new ideational structure. Subgroups may prefer incompatible replacement ideas and find it difficult to agree. Hence, individual beliefs and incentives to act on them (to bring about change) may not effectively aggregate, leaving the extant collective idea intact. What, then, allows actors to overcome these barriers?

Although not offering an explanation per se, scholars from a variety of traditions rely on the same solution to this two-part collective ideation problem. Essentially they distinguish between normal times and critical junctures, shocks, or crises. In the study of politics, three types of events—wars, depressions, and revolutions—are most frequently cited as decisive. These crises are depicted as a type of collective electroshock therapy that jolts societies out of their extant modes of thought and gives them new ways of dealing with the world. Although useful, these types of analyses shed little light on why similar events produce change in some instances but not others, how exactly shocks cause change, and why a new creed takes one form and not another. This shortcoming suggests the need to do more than invoke shock as the cause. In particular we must understand what it is about a “shock” or event that is likely to undermine an existing ideational orthodoxy (collapse) and enable a society to reach a new orthodoxy (consolidation).

The first stage, collapse, seems to be shaped by the synergism of two factors: (1) the fit between social expectations (generated by collective ideas) and events, and (2) whether subsequent experience is socially desirable. Social epistememes generate ex-

31. For more on the distinction between individual and collective ideas and the overall approach, see Legro forthcoming.
pectations about what consequences should result if societies follow or deviate from their prescriptions. Whether collapse and consolidation occur (leading to change) depends on the preexisting ideational structure and the logic of its relationship to events. For various (advertent and inadvertent) reasons societies can either act in accordance with ideational prescriptions or not. Ideational rules are usually respected, but this need not always be the case—other factors besides ideas also can affect behavior and these may do so in particular situations. When adhering to ideational prescriptions, the collective expectation is that events will match, that prescribed action will bring desirable consequences and proscribed action undesirable consequences. When the consequences of experienced events do not match expectations of what should happen, there is pressure for collective reflection and reassessment.\footnote{Levy summarizes some of the research that speaks to this point. Levy 1994, 305.}

One might expect cognitive biases (for example, dissonance reduction, selective attention to evidence, attributional pathologies) to mitigate the effects of such discrepant information.\footnote{See Jervis 1976, esp. 143–45, 288–315; Eagly and Chaiken 1993, 559–625; and Tetlock 1998b.} But such inertial human mental habits are partly contained by the public nature of significant gaps between expectations and results in collective ideas. One can more easily rationalize personal, contradiction-prone excuses. Rationalization becomes difficult to do, however, in social situations, especially when at least some other motivated actors have different (and critical) views. Thus unfulfilled expectations can potentially have more significant implications in a social context than for individual beliefs.\footnote{Whether countries are autocratic or democratic can influence these tendencies. But even autocracies are not immune from underlying issues of credibility and legitimacy based on ideas.}

Unfulfilled expectations, however, are only part of the picture. Also crucial are the actual consequences societies experience. There is a difference between unexpected failure and unexpected success. Both outcomes involve unfulfilled expectations, but only in the former case is conceptual innovation probable. People are more sensitive to losing something they expect than to gaining something they did not expect.\footnote{See Kahneman and Tversky 1979; and Levy 1994, 304. Rose highlights dissatisfaction as central in the search for new ideas in public policy. Rose 1991.} This tendency has social implications in that unexpected successes do not draw critical attention for reasons captured in the folk saying, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” In such circumstances it is difficult to generate the types of collective reflection and action needed for transformation. Likewise, when failure is accurately anticipated by ideational beliefs, the transformation of those beliefs is unlikely. Protectors of the dominant orthodoxy simply use such events to reinforce their position. Unexpected failure, however, allows individuals to confidently overcome “do you see what I see” concerns resulting from the pressures of social conformity and gives critics of the extant orthodoxy intersubjective evidence to press the case for change.\footnote{See Perrow 1984; Arnold 1990; Kates and Clark 1996; and Sperber 1996.}

This reasoning is both similar to and different from a Bayesian updating approach. It appears similar in that actors seem to update their beliefs based on information. Yet
the framework here anticipates a basic asymmetry in such "learning" that is inexplicable from a Bayesian perspective. Here not all unfulfilled expectations lead to updating—only those resulting in undesired consequences, not those involving desired consequences. These two situations are largely symmetrical in terms of their contradiction with expectations and the need to update beliefs. But they have asymmetrical social effects; that is, societies will treat equivalent losses and gains differently: losses are much more likely than comparable gains to trigger aggregation processes that lead to change.41

The epistemic framework also appears different from a Bayesian approach by placing more emphasis on single events in causing change as opposed to the weighting of a series of events spread over time. This phenomena may be particularly relevant in any issue area where strong uncertainty, problem complexity, and the lack of opportunities for repeated testing mean that learning takes place according to small and biased samples. In such circumstances, a Bayesian view is problematic.42 This seems to be the case in world politics where single events with big consequences often play a disproportionate role.43 Of course even "single" events—such as the wars, depressions, and revolutions usually highlighted—typically consist of a series of subevents linked in time and context, and the cumulative effect of these is relevant to change. In accordance with the logic here (and Bayesian updating), the more a society encounters events connected in substance and time that defy expectations with some negative results, the more likely will collapse occur. Similarly, the more significant the undesirable results of any single event, the more likely will collapse occur.

The second stage, consolidation of a new dominant episteme, can also encounter similar, often tacit, cooperation problems. Although a collapse may occur in the current orthodoxy, failure to reach a consensus on a replacement could still inhibit transformation. Even when the majority of individuals privately recognize the need for change, the collectivity may nonetheless stick to the extant orthodoxy for a variety of reasons, including a stalemate conflict over a replacement belief structure and individual ignorance of others’ reassessment of what is proper and desirable.44

Again, the resolution of this aspect seems importantly affected by the structure of ideas in relation to the event. Ideational structures are rarely monolithic but instead reveal a binary axis in their architecture.45 Usually they contain a hierarchy of ideational elements with one dominant idea and at least one main challenger. This structure is important because the oppositional idea and its fit with the given event can significantly influence the likelihood of change. Since there are always ideas avail-

41. Here I am emphasizing the social effects of this cognitive phenomenon captured by prospect theory.
42. On the problems of Bayesian analysis in (common) conditions of strong uncertainty, see Denzau and North 1994. In general, the Bayesian perspective finds varying support at the individual level (see, for example, Grether 1980), and even sympathetic international relations scholars note a lack of evidence in some areas of state decision making (see, for example, Fearon 1995, 409).
43. On the importance of single events in learning in international relations, see Boulding 1967, 2–3, 9; Jervis 1976, 235; and Tetlock 1998a, 870–72.
45. For a variety of examples, see Kane 1990, 56.
able, the key issue is their social plausibility: is there a primary oppositional idea that has a social base—a cohort of advocates—prior to an event that confirms the expectations of the oppositional idea but not the dominant idea?\(^46\) This gives advocates of the alternative idea persuasion power: they not only criticize but also offer a socially salient solution that will serve as a new focal point for collective beliefs. Any initial success that correlates with the ascendance of the alternative strengthens its relative credibility and the likelihood that it will become socially embedded. It is this dynamic at the ideational level that can give voice and power to previously marginalized concepts and their supporters.

In sum, ideational change is usefully examined as a product of collapse and consolidation. Situations involving the combination of unmet expectations and undesired consequences are likely to facilitate collapse, whereas those where expectations are fulfilled and/or desired consequences occur favor ideational reproduction. Consolidation of a new structure is enhanced by the existence of a prominent viable oppositional idea, the prescriptions of which seem to correlate with socially desired results. Although collapse and consolidation are usefully separated for analytical reasons, in practice they will be related. The more significant the collapse—because the consequences are so broadly experienced and negative or because expectations are dramatically confounded—the more likely societies will attempt to overcome consolidation. Likewise, traits related to consolidation affect collapse. The absence of a single, socially viable alternative episteme makes collapse less likely, whereas the presence of one that strongly challenges the dominant orthodoxy means that societies may need less in the way of unmet expectations or consequences to overthrow the old for the new. Overall, then, the epistemic account of change offered here is one of constrained contingency. It captures tendencies, not wholly determined outcomes, by highlighting the ways ideational structure, depending on events, can allow or encourage idea entrepreneurs to succeed in some circumstances but not in others.

**Method and Measurement**

In what follows I apply this framework to the important and puzzling development of American security thinking in the twentieth century through the two world wars. This history provides two comparable episodes (one involving a crisis that produces ideational continuity, the other a crisis that causes transformation) in one longitudinal case. This history is useful for analysis because a variety of factors are relatively stable (for example, regime type, deep history, geography, broader political culture, and major power war as shock) across the episodes, whereas other factors related to the model and prominent alternative explanations (such as leadership skill, interest group pressures, and systemic incentives) vary across the two episodes. I establish the validity of my argument by demonstrating (1) how continuity and transformation

\(^46\) Wildavsky notes that a problem will only be recognized as such if a solution is available. Wildavsky 1979, 42.
in American ideas about foreign policy were shaped by the epistemic logic involving ideas and events, (2) that what leaders did and how they fared was affected by ideational structure, and (3) that existing explanations are indeterminate without the explanation offered here.

I contend that change and continuity varied (in terms of correlation and causation) with the mix of expectations, consequences, and oppositional epistemes. This argument, of course, raises the central methodological issue of how one measures such inherently elusive variables. The major potential pitfall is a lapse into tautology by defining/measuring causes based on the outcome of the case. Hence the meaning and measurement of expectations, consequences, and oppositional epistemes deserve clarification.

*Expectations* refers to what societies anticipate based on the norms of the dominant episteme and the justifications for the chosen course of action. For example, if the dominant episteme prescribes a certain action and action is taken on that basis, societies will anticipate socially desirable results. If a proscribed action is undertaken, leaders will justify such deviance from the dominant idea by a particular set of outcomes that can be achieved by doing so. I measure these expectations according to the dominant ideas and discourse that surround the decisions taken. *Consequences* are assessed according to social interpretations of events. One cannot objectively impose a generic standard for what is seen as a negative or positive consequence for a particular society because such a judgment inherently depends on the lens and aims of the society itself. One society’s “loss” is another society’s “victory.” Assessments of expectations and consequences can be separated from outcomes (change in collective beliefs) in chronological terms and in causal terms. My interpretation of particular social expectations and perceived consequences depends on data that generally precede periods of change or continuity. Moreover, the coding is not tautological in a direct analytical sense, since expectations and consequences alone do not automatically produce change: such an outcome depends on the interaction of the two factors.

Finally, the number and social viability of *oppositional epistemes* is evident in the public debates over the particular issue—in this case international involvement and institutional commitments in the two different episodes. These debates indicate what prominent alternative ideas, if any, exist in public discourse and debates. Prominence and social viability are linked to whether oppositional ideas have high-level promoters and/or broad-based public backing before events.

I assess each of these factors based on the generally clear consensus in the massive (mainly secondary) historical literature that covers elite and popular attitudes, media positions, and opinion surveys. The most important analytical constraint on this analysis is a “null” alternative—is there another interpretation for these variables in these cases that is more plausible in light of the historical evidence? This constraint, along with the earlier mentioned efforts at independent coding, minimizes (but does not eliminate) the inherent danger of measuring “causes” by effects in historical analysis.

In what follows, I first address ideational continuity in World War I and then transformation in World War II. In each case I summarize my argument for that era,
discuss the collapse phase in terms of expectations and consequences, and address the consolidation phase in terms of dominant and oppositional idea dynamics.

**Explaining Ideational Continuity: World War I**

Continuity in collective ideas resulted from World War I largely because the interplay of expectations and events generated barriers inhibiting both collapse and consolidation. Collapse did not occur because U.S. intervention had undesirable consequences that defied expectations and reinforced preexisting popular unilateralist ideas. Those who believed a change was still necessary could not agree on a viable replacement episteme to coordinate their varying ideas on internationalism.

**Contra Collapse**

The United States intervened in World War I in the spring of 1917, despite its tradition of aloofness from European conflicts. Although Americans were generally averse to involvement, German submarine attacks on U.S. merchant shipping and civilian travelers, German hostility (as revealed by the Zimmermann Telegram), and American hopes to shape the peace (and avoid future entanglements) finally provoked the United States into action. Most Americans understood that the decision to intervene was exceptional because it involved a choice (no one declared war on the United States). Americans had been debating such a choice since the beginning of the war. After all, the United States could have followed the path that FDR would later offer in 1936 when war again looked imminent, “through adequate defense to save ourselves from embroilment and attack.”47 Not doing so was an extraordinary step. When the United States declared war, the journalist Frank Cobb wrote, “The old isolationism is finished. We are no longer aloof from the world.”48 Those opposed to the intervention consistently pointed out that it was contrary to American tradition and that negative consequences would result. Even Wilson worried both before and after intervening that doing so could have significant costs—that it could in fact change the very nature of the United States and its potential as an example to other countries. The vocal minority consistently stressed this point, and it was not easily forgotten.49

Most important in terms of expectations, Wilson justified U.S. intervention with a campaign for an internationalist view of security during the war. He argued that the world had to be made “safe for democracy.” Without U.S. intervention, democracy might suffer, and if democracy suffered, the United States itself might be vulnerable. The goal, the promise, that was held out to convince key segments of the population that intervention was needed was that the United States would fight to build a new

47. 1936 State of the Union address in Israel 1966.
49. See Link 1965, 264–69; Cooper 1969, 167–73; and Rochester 1977, 44–47.
international order in its own image (demanding active commitments). To be sure, there were those who wanted to intervene simply for reasons of great power interest or status, but these individuals and groups had always favored involvement. The ones who provided the critical leverage in favor of engagement were those previously opposed because they feared it would sully American virtue and halt progressive reforms. These progressives, however, were sold by the Wilsonian argument that virtue and reform would be furthered by internationalism. Wilson rallied the key progressive supporters to exactly this theme in the 1916 election. What was central for the postwar period was that the expectations generated by this justification for intervention in European affairs and the standards it set for judging the efficacy of this decision were not matched by the consequences of ensuing events.  

Against these expectations, the social interpretation of the World War I experience was strongly negative. Rather than victory euphoria, "disillusionment" is generally the term used to describe how Americans judged their intervention—a view that confirmed the wisdom of the no-entanglement logic and the authority of its supporters. Many Americans returned from the war drained and disgusted by their encounter with modern industrial warfare. More importantly, discontent spread among elites and the rest of the polity during the process of concluding and ratifying the peace treaty and the Covenant of the League of Nations. Promises of a democratic surge (which helped inspire the intervention) went unfulfilled as many governments never attempted such a transition and those that did struggled for survival. Also damaging to public support was the failure of the Allies to forsake the imperialism so despised by some Americans, wanting instead to retain their colonies. Americans were further repulsed by revelations of "secret treaties" among the European powers to divvy up the spoils of the war, especially against the background of a vengeful peace treaty. Imperialism, secret treaties, and nondemocratic governments were key elements of what to Americans made European ties undesirable and hence what was wrong with great power interaction. Disappointment was widespread, and Americans generally felt that U.S. involvement had been a mistake.

This feeling was particularly prominent among those who formed the lynchpin of Wilson's political support—the progressives. As Robert Osgood concludes, "disenchantment was heightened by the paucity of the crusade's material and spiritual rewards in proportion to the magnificence of the idealistic hopes it had raised and the seeming enormity of its sacrifices, both tangible and intangible." This dynamic reinforced the extant orthodoxy, and the League of Nations and French security treaty became "casualties of the general American reluctance to shoulder any further international commitments."

50. See Knock 1992, 95ff; Rochester 1977, 26, 38–47; and Kennedy 1980, 42, 50.
52. Knock 1992, 211, 239, 252.
53. Levering 1978, 42.
Consolidation Thwarted

The lack of change in American attitudes toward unilateralism is ironic because there appears to have been support among important elites for something different than the prewar unilateralism.\(^{57}\) At least two alternative frameworks for dealing with international relations were prominent at the time: Theodore Roosevelt’s balance-of-power approach and Wilson’s nascent multilateralism. But consolidation of any new dominant episteme proved difficult. Neither fared well vis-à-vis the World War I experience. U.S. leadership and unfettered internationalism (of either an institutionalist or geopolitical stripe) did not resolve what most viewed as the cause of the war and American troubles: the European buildup of men and arms, the arms-conflict spiral that followed, and the United States’ failure to remain neutral.\(^{58}\) In contrast to this validation of the old orthodoxy, the war and its aftermath offered little support for the claims of those who would overthrow it. Deterring potential aggressors and managing the power void in Europe were not the major concern.

This standoff is epitomized in the fight over the Versailles Treaty and the U.S. rejection of the League of Nations. The central symbolic issue in the struggle was Article 10 of the League’s covenant, which obligated member states to protect each other from external aggression. Opponents of the League, led by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, wanted to alter this (and other) provisions of the treaty, in effect gutting any precommitment to use force. Proponents, especially President Wilson, opposed such reservations, believing they undermined the whole internationalist intent.\(^{59}\) Especially given the results of intervention, internationalists were divided and had difficulty agreeing: “There was no clearly identifiable strategy for such men to follow in the foreign policy debates over the peace settlement and the League of Nations.”\(^{60}\) In a close fight, the treaty was rejected, and as described earlier the United States’ prewar unilateralist mindset was affirmed. In the interwar period, the United States selectively engaged in measures that fit its outlook, such as supporting disarmament, but it rejected the League of Nations or other arrangements that precommitted U.S. forces or threatened U.S. neutrality.

This interpretation of World War I necessarily highlights the role of ideational structure over the influence of agents, none less important than Woodrow Wilson. Yet some historians have underscored Wilson’s role in the ideational continuity of the United States in the interwar period. Wilson is commonly portrayed as having personally bungled the League of Nations issue, especially in relation to the U.S. Senate, and in doing so, launched the United States on a stay-at-home trajectory for the next

\(^{57}\) Knock’s discussion of the votes indicates that forty-two to forty-three senators were in favor of the League without reservations, another thirty-eight favored it with reservations, and thirteen were irreconcilably opposed. Knock 1992, 263–64.
\(^{59}\) Lodge favored a more narrow commitment to French security, but this was not the choice of others, such as Wilson and probably the general public, as indicated by the 1921 Literary Digest poll of editors. See Knock 1992, 265–68; and Ninkovich 1994, 65.
\(^{60}\) Roberts 1997, 351.
two decades. It does appear that if Wilson had compromised and accepted reservations demanded by critics, the U.S. Senate would have ratified membership in the League of Nations. But as Wilson and others believed, doing so would have eviscerated the United States’ commitment and role. Thus, even if the United States had joined the League with reservations, there is little reason to believe it would have dramatically changed the American attitudes that dominated the next two decades. Arguing the opposite seems a leap of faith. It is implausible to maintain that if the United States had made a watered-down commitment to the League, its attitudes and actions in international relations would have been dramatically different across issue areas (such as deterring aggression and monetary collaboration) in the years that followed. What seems more relevant in explaining Wilson’s difficulties in selling his case here (since he was generally considered a skilled shaper of opinion) is the broader ideational structure that emerged from the war. Wilson’s ability to persuade on this issue was confounded not only by his failing health, but also by the “basic intractability of the very public opinion that he claimed to read and shape into a common consciousness.”

In this instance, the combination of behavior (intervention) that deviated from the prescriptions offered by the dominant episteme and ended in negative consequences (disillusionment) helped to weaken any movement toward collapse of the old way of thinking. Supporters of the old orthodoxy, in contrast, received political ammunition with which to fight their case. This combination of events also impeded the consolidation of a single, viable replacement episteme from the small set that existed. The result was that unilateralism emerged as an even more dominant guiding concept of interwar U.S. foreign policy.

Explaining Ideational Transformation: World War II

The events that led to and became known as World War II, in contrast to those leading to World War I, resulted in the transformation of the dominant American ideas about effective foreign policy. Ideational dynamics played a critical role in this transformation. As World War II took shape in the late 1930s, Americans clung to their unilateralist approach in the face of a series of events with negative consequences that strongly contradicted the traditional collective ideas and confirmed an alternative set. This context enabled those groups and individuals seeking change to coalesce effectively. The result was the transformation of American ideas about appropriate foreign policy in the midst of World War II.

Collapse of Unilateralism

American thought in the early 1930s was dominated by the domestic economic difficulties of the Great Depression, not matters abroad. But to the extent the country

61. Many are critical of Wilson, for example, Knock 1992; and Ambrosius 1987.
63. See Leffler 1979, 39; Leigh 1976, 109; and Dallek 1979.
64. Ninkovich 1994, 96.
looked outward, the dominant episteme on international relations was the unilateralist orthodoxy bequeathed by the experience of World War I. As Charles Smith's study of public opinion asserted in the late 1930s, "As long as the memory of that war [World War I] remains, the people will insist that their government go to great lengths to avoid any future conflict." Although within this unilateralism sentiment Americans emphasized a variety of different viewpoints, all agreed that involvement in the increasingly rough political waters of Europe was a bad idea. The expectation was that such involvement could do little good in Europe and only bring harm to the United States. During the 1930s Americans clung tightly to beliefs that nonentanglement furthered security, that arms buildup fostered war, and that U.S. interests were best served by neutrality.

These beliefs generated expectations that the United States could retain its security if it just stayed out of European and world conflict. In 1937, when FDR tried to ameliorate this sentiment by promoting U.S. internationalism, the result was ill-received. FDR allegedly commented, "it's a terrible thing to look over your shoulder when you are trying to lead—and find no one there." A 1937 opinion poll concluded that 70 percent of Americans felt that entering World War I had been a mistake for the United States. In another poll in 1937, when asked if the country would stay out of another world war, 56 percent replied in the affirmative. Accordingly, the United States in those years remained largely outside such efforts; and when trouble did arise abroad, the United States tried to seal itself off by imposing strict neutrality laws.

The events of the late 1930s and the ensuing war raised significant contradictions for such expectations. In a relatively short time period, a series of events—Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War, Japanese expansion in China, Germany's absorption of Austria and the Sudetenland, and the fall of France—provided a significant challenge to the dominant notions of aloofness as security. Not only was the world going to pieces around the United States—preceded by an economic depression fueled by a lack of international cooperation and engagement—but eventually America itself was attacked at Pearl Harbor.

The shift in collective sentiment as a result of these events is apparent both in the opinion polls collected at the time and in the accounts of elites. Although Americans consistently rejected declaring war, their willingness to become involved had changed dramatically from the fervid isolationism represented by the Neutrality Acts of 1935–37. Collective opinion on a variety of proxy questions addressed international involvement. For example, 95 percent of those polled in 1936 felt that in the event of war, the United States should not get involved again. By the end of 1940, 60 percent favored

67. Ibid., 118–120.
68. Dallek 1979, 147ff.
70. Gallup 1972, 54, 65.
72. Among others, see Osgood 1953, 112–113; and Jonas 1990, 204–13.
helping England to win, even at the risk of war, rather than not getting involved. Pollsters repeatedly asked the public whether they thought intervening in World War I was a mistake. In January 1937, 70 percent said “yes” and 30 percent said “no.” By December 1940, 39 percent thought it had been a mistake, 42 percent thought it had not, and 19 percent had no opinion. After Pearl Harbor, only some 20 percent felt the war had been a mistake. In place of the anti-intervention, anti-entanglement sentiment, Americans (albeit never pro-war) accepted the risk of involvement, and after Pearl Harbor turned rapidly to favoring no peace short of full surrender.

The views of many elites similarly shifted with these events. FDR, whose public views often flowed with the tide of public opinion, gained resolve from the 1938 Munich crisis; he consistently advocated both the importance of U.S. engagement in the mounting conflagration and U.S. internationalism in general. The outbreak of war in 1939 changed congressional sentiment toward the arms embargo on aid to France and Britain even in the face of energetic efforts by some to prevent such slippage. Leading journals, such as The New Republic, Common Sense, and The Progressive, similarly shifted their editorial stance toward the need for U.S. engagement in the European crisis. With the fall of France, the nation’s leading columnist on foreign affairs, Walter Lippmann, joined those leaning toward intervention. Many Americans saw the fall of France as a turning point, especially in terms of the likelihood the United States would become involved in the war. Finally, with the acceptance of the “Lend-Lease” aid policy to Great Britain in the spring of 1941, the New York Times declared the end to “the great retreat which began with the Senate rejection of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. . . . Isolation has failed.” For most remaining doubters, the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany followed by the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan resolved the issue. As Senator Vandenberg, a prominent Republican spokesman on foreign policy, concluded, the Japanese attack “ended isolationism for any realist.” An ardent minority remained faithful to their belief in isolationism, but such a view as a dominant orthodoxy was through.

FDR did not have to promise great results from intervention as Wilson had. Instead he simply made the case to America in economic, political, and military terms based on the threat posed by Axis control of other continents. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German-Italian declaration of war completed the work for him. As FDR, the frustrated internationalist, tried to hammer home to the nation in his fireside chat on 9 December 1941, “In these past few years—and, most violently, in the past three days—we have learned a terrible lesson.” Isolationism, the president

73. See Page and Shapiro 1992, 183; and Gallup 1972, 259.
74. See Gallup 1972, 54, 253; and Bruner 1944, 15–16.
76. Dallek 1979, 200–201.
78. Bruner 1944, 22.
80. Vandenberg 1952, 1.
continued, had been a mistake. The hard-core isolationists who had tried to argue that the United States was not vulnerable or that its security was not at risk by the world crisis unconvincingly explained the Pearl Harbor attack as a plot concocted by FDR to draw the United States into the war.

Consolidation of Internationalism

As much as the defenders of tradition tried, the need for U.S. engagement could not be dismissed by the notion that the nation had not been detached enough, since with each new challenge it had tried harder and harder to distance itself. Nor could it be explained through an "arms equals war" thesis, popular in the interwar period, that held that arms producers, arms races, and arms buildups caused war and could be harmful to U.S. interests. By the onset of World War II, Americans had begun to understand fascist aggression not as a product of an unintended arms spiral, but as a tool for territorial expansion for countries such as Germany and Japan.

In contrast to the refutation of the dominant orthodoxy, two oppositional ideas received affirmation and gained legitimacy. First, there was the revival of Wilsonian internationalism. Most Americans believed that bilateral and autarchic responses to the instability of the 1920s and 1930s contributed significantly to the economic distress that became a wellspring of the later aggression. Leaders also thought that more effective international institutions and mechanisms might have prevented or ameliorated the rise of autarchic policies. Not joining the League of Nations, many felt, was a mistake. Sentiment toward joining a postwar League of Nations shifted dramatically during the war, with 37 percent in favor of joining in May 1941, 55 percent in favor in November 1942, and 72 percent in favor in June 1944. In the summer of 1943, 61 percent favored a "permanent military alliance" with Britain (25 percent were opposed)—a preference contradicting the traditional warning against such relationships. In March 1945, 81 percent favored U.S. participation in a world organization with policing power to maintain international peace. Americans now saw international stability as depending on both aid and open markets, and on both economic and military commitments abroad. The United States adopted a new recipe for security: active engagement in major power political-military affairs, especially through multilateral procedures and institutions.

Accompanying Wilsonianism was the rise of a "geopolitical theory" that saw Europe as the world's strategic pivot. This development was fostered by a growing American consciousness of international interdependence—that U.S. security was necessarily affected by conditions abroad. According to this view, the United States

82. Gaddis 1972, 1.
83. Dallek 1979, 313.
86. Gallup 1972, 405, 497.
had to be concerned with Europe’s affairs and the distribution of power. In the 1930s, amidst the failure of the League to adjudicate aggression and the ascendency of totalitarian governments, such a worldview gained increasing currency. Not to counter such buildups would allow totalitarian governments to expand and harness large amounts of power, which might threaten even a fortress America; if one of these totalitarian powers were to control Eurasia, even without a direct challenge to U.S. territory, there was a fear that the United States would have to alter its way of life (in other words, the threat of a “garrison state”) to deal with the possible opponent.  

In the beginning phases of World War II, geopolitics and Wilsonian internationalism fused in an ideational union to form a new dominant internationalist episteme on how to manage great power relations. Those interested in maximizing power and those interested in promoting international peace agreed that engaging in institutions and alliances, including economic and military commitments, made sense. This agreement (in contrast to the lack thereof after World War I) was paved by epistemic dynamics that preceded (not followed) the Cold War competition that would soon emerge. Activists, from international bankers to pacifists, worked through organizations—such as the League of Nations Association, the Foreign Policy Association, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—to encourage the United States to expand its international engagement and cooperation. This effort was in effect a social movement that helped to develop and spread internationalism as a plausible policy idea. The collapse of the old orthodoxy in the early 1940s further induced a meeting of the minds of opposing views of internationalism in a way the orthodoxy-confirming experience of World War I did not. Those who remained committed to noninvolvement struggled to make their case, but given the evolution of collective ideas and events, they simply lacked the leverage to sway the broader society.

It would be tempting here to credit this transformation to FDR’s political skill. In contrast to the image of the ill Wilson bungling the League of Nations, FDR is depicted as an able politician who successfully used the levers of government and society to install internationalism as the new orthodoxy in foreign policy thinking. And although FDR’s skills and the lessons he learned from Wilson’s experience did play a role, the different results of these two leaders in instilling internationalism also depended on the ideational structures within which they operated. This is clear in FDR’s inability (indeed, limited effort) in formulating a proactive internationalist policy in response to the Depression and Hitler’s aggression in the 1930s. When running for president in 1932, he was attacked as an internationalist; he responded by renouncing his earlier support of the League of Nations, war debt leniency, and sweeping tariff reductions. Although FDR’s beliefs on the desirability of internationalism were constant, his skillful efforts only emerged and succeeded in conjunction

89. Fox 1985, 28.
90. See Jonas 1990; and Divine 1967.
91. See, for example, Divine 1967; and Cole 1983, 12–13.
92. Dallek 1979, 18–20
with the broad structural change in collective beliefs about security that took place in the 1940s.

In summary, the combination of a monastic adherence to noninvolvement and the shattering consequences that ensued undermined the dominant consensus. Two oppositional yet socially plausible views existed that pushed the country in the same direction of engagement and active commitments to international institutions, even those involving military forces in Europe. FDR and his "wise men" were at the forefront of that shift, but the story of the transformation in American thinking about foreign policy is not simply that of the great leaders of history. Instead their successful efforts can only be understood in the context of encouraging circumstances created by the interaction of ideational structure and events that took place in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Alternative Arguments

All of the preceding would be for naught if it could be shown that the ideas claimed to have causal autonomy are actually epiphenomenal to other factors. In what follows, I briefly address prominent alternative arguments that might explain the same variation in American ideas simply as a product of external adaptation, more narrow interest groups, and/or domestic social purpose. Although each argument offers important insights, all are indeterminate. A plausible counterfactual case can be made that, according to external conditions and internal interests/social purpose, change might have as easily occurred during World War I—or at least during the Great Depression—but, of course, the shift did not occur until later. The point is not that environmental forces, interest groups, or domestic social purpose are irrelevant, but that they are incomplete without attention to epistemic dynamics.

Environmental Adaptation

The most prominent alternative represents a collage of explanations that view the development of U.S. foreign policy behavior as a product of the strategic circumstances of the two postwar periods. According to this logic, the United States maintained its unilateralist stance after World War I because of (1) the distribution of power, and/or (2) the threats it faced, and/or (3) the inexpensive and safe nature of unilateralism given the extant technology. After World War II, the United States had more reason to build institutions and accept commitments because it faced a more significant threat from the Soviet Union, had better control over its allies owing to disparities in power, and was more vulnerable from a distance as the result of developments in military technology.

93. See, for example, Isaacson and Thomas 1986.
94. See, for example, Costigliola 1984, 9–10; Leffler 1979, 368; and Lake 1999.
Undoubtedly, the situation after each war was different. But the major qualitative break in the three systemic factors is as apparent in the first conflict as it is in the second. In the key areas where World War II supposedly differs from World War I, the difference between what came before and after World War I is at least as significant as the differences between the two postwar eras. Yet continuity occurred after World War I, suggesting the incompleteness of the adaptation explanation. A closer look at the three key factors—balance of power, threat, and technology—is illustrative.

A focus on the geopolitical balance of power shows that World War I signaled a turning point demanding U.S. involvement, not withdrawal. The war left a vacuum of power on the European continent. Germany was disarmed and France was critically weakened by the harsh conflict, much of it fought on French soil. This situation raised the possibility that some quickly recovering country within Europe or some outside power could dominate the continent, an outcome considered anathema from a geopolitical view. Walter Lippmann wrote at the time, "we find ourselves in a world where four of the eight or nine centers of decisive authority have collapsed." He argued that the United States could not just return home "to gaze in rapt admiration at the Monroe Doctrine."95 In particular, Americans were not blind to the possibility of Germany reemerging as a predator. During World War I, Wilson portrayed Germany, especially its militarized nature, as a threat to the world. At the peace conference he wondered whether German aggression had been given sufficient attention and at another point predicted that there would be another war within a generation if countries did not unite to do something about it. As a vice-presidential candidate in 1920 FDR similarly argued that the main function of the League of Nations was to prevent another war crisis—possibly ten years down the road by a revived Germany intent on revenge—from escalating into war.96 Many "Atlanticists" favored at least a commitment to France as a hedge against a resurgent Germany but were unable to make headway against those opposed.97

In the past, Britain had always counterbalanced countries aspiring to dominate the continent, but after World War I its capacity to do so was significantly diminished. Weakened by the war and consumed with difficulties and challenges in its empire, Britain could no longer be an effective counterweight. Moreover, the United States had the power (manufacturing more in the 1920s than the other six great powers combined) and should have had the interest to take on that role after World War I.98 To be sure, the relative disparity in power and likely control the United States had over Europe after World War I was not as great as after World War II, but the situation was dramatically different than at the beginning of the century. Yet there was a puzzling absence of any type of nascent Atlantic Alliance or Anglo-American coopera-

96. Ninkovich 1994, 66–67, 102. Ninkovich argues that Wilson generally did not use geopolitical logic to sell the League because it would have conflicted with his idealistic justification for entering the war. He doubts that such logic would have carried the day anyway because of deep-seated foreign policy habits.
tion to deal with the post–World War I power vacuum. In fact, European countries invited the United States to do just that by instituting some form of alliance or military commitment. What Americans viewed as common sense after World War II should have been viewed the same after World War I had the country considered how to provide for security in a similar fashion. The point is, it did not.

Closely related to an explanation based on power is one based on threat. From this perspective, the United States did not commit to European security after World War I because no country posed a clear threat. After World War II, in contrast, the intentions and power of the Soviet Union demanded U.S. engagement. The key problem with this view is that American thinking did not develop in response to threats. The United States failed to respond to Hitler’s aggression in the mid-1930s, and only after Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war did the United States take direct action. Second, the fundamental shift in American attitudes toward internationalism occurred before the rise of the Cold War. Even during World War II—when the Soviet Union was considered a future ally, not a threat—the United States prepared to engage itself directly in exactly the type of long-term commitments, such as the United Nations and Bretton Woods, that it had shunned for most of its history. Clearly, the Soviet threat consolidated support more easily and led to a much more significant U.S. military presence in Europe than would have been the case otherwise. Nonetheless, the basic American conceptual shift that accepted the desirability of committing forces prior to actual conflicts occurred before the Soviet threat emerged.

A final form of the environmental adaptation argument hinges on the expanding reach of technology and the corresponding vulnerability of the United States after World War II. Although the evidence in this area is mixed, it is as plausible to argue that the decisive qualitative break in technology vis-à-vis U.S. vulnerability occurred in World War I as it is to argue that it occurred in World War II, even given the rise of strategic air power. Several events in World War I shocked Americans and should have conveyed the message that the United States was no longer immune from enemies abroad. German submarine attacks damaged Americans’ sense of immunity. And more important, the Zimmermann Telegram signaled the potential ability of European powers—that is, Germany—to directly threaten the United States, especially with the assistance of a country such as Mexico.

100. See Walt 1987; and Wagner 1993.
101. See Kennan 1967, 225–30; Divine 1967; and Pollard 1985, 4, 244.
102. Thompson discusses the perceptions of this vulnerability and the opposite view that strategic air power provided for a more robust defense against invasion, suggesting the continuing feasibility of nonengagement. Thompson 1992, 30–40.
103. One journalist noted that the effect of the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 was so great that ten years after the event, people remembered where they were and what they were doing when it occurred. Knock 1992, 60.
104. The telegram had a profound effect on both President Wilson and the public, dominating headlines for days. See Knock 1992, 116–17; and Link 1965, 354.
Technological capabilities at the time did allow the United States to project power to Europe relatively efficiently. One proxy for this cost is maritime freight rates between Europe and the United States. Metal ships and steam propulsion had reduced significantly (by 60 percent) the costs of shipping people and material across the Atlantic in the two to three decades before World War I and a bit more by the late 1920s—a "revolution" in transport. Costs remained relatively stable until after 1950, when another reduction began.105 Using this indicator, World War I, not World War II, more closely marked the most significant break in technology costs, inviting a similar shift in American ideas on engagement in Europe. But that shift came only later in a period of relatively stable maritime costs. As Senator Lodge argued, the ocean barrier that separated the United States from Europe in 1776 and 1812 no longer existed in 1914—steam and electricity had erased it.106 This fact was made clear by the massive convoying and U.S. intervention that decided the outcome of World War I. That outcome did not, of course, reveal to the leaders of the time that intercontinental power projection was less than it would be in the age of jet power and nuclear weapons (developments that came largely after the shift in American ideas). And World War I (specifically, Gallipoli) did demonstrate that projecting force without a friendly port in an amphibious invasion against opposing forces was a difficult business.107 But the effects of U.S. intervention clearly demonstrated that a transatlantic security-threatening force was more potent and successful than ever before in history.

In sum, good arguments exist that environmental incentives for an American commitment to Europe were different after World War II than after World War I. But there is also good evidence suggesting that a decisive qualitative break along the dimensions of power, threat, and technology occurred in World War I. The relevance of an epistemic dynamic to American ideational continuity in this period is apparent in a simple counterfactual: had Americans after World War I thought about their security in the same way they did after World War II, they would have responded very differently to the power, threat, and technology conditions present at that time. Hence those conditions alone do not explain Americans' ideational stasis and change.

**Interest Groups and Social Purpose**

Another view of national conceptual development disaggregates the collective state to examine the interest groups within. In this view, collective ideas are simply those notions put forward by the most powerful groups or some simple aggregation of the views of many groups. The composition of interest groups behind U.S. foreign policy for this period has been described in a variety of ways, including partisan (Republicans versus Democrats), political ideology (progressives versus conservatives),

107. Lake 1999, 99–100. Unopposed amphibious operations were not problematic. Millett 1996, 52. The difficulty of opposed landings might also have been used in favor of engagement in Europe to avoid such a need.
socioeconomic sectors (those with overseas economic interests versus those without), ethnic groups (pro-German versus pro-British), and regional interests (isolationist Midwest versus internationalist coast). From this perspective, changes in state orientation are a matter of understanding how the relative power and/or interests of smaller groups within the state shift, allowing one or another to seize control of the national reins.

Interest groups certainly pushed and pulled on the extant ideational constraints, leading some analysts to argue that U.S. policy was somewhat unstable and chaotic in the 1920s and 1930s. But deviations in an internationalist direction were bulges in, not the popping of, the unilateralist balloon. Such exceptions tended to be primarily in the economic realm, in specific sectors, limited in duration, and largely involving private parties (such as the Dawes and Young Plans). There is no large shift in the direction of American thinking on foreign policy consistent with shifts in internal interest groups and their ideas. For example, the Great Depression allegedly altered the relative power of different economic sectors. Yet the thinking on U.S. foreign policy did not change until a decade later and only after the epistemic effects discussed earlier.

A third argument about the American shift emphasizes not interest groups, but domestic social purpose. John G. Ruggie has argued that the United States’ adoption of multilateralism reflected its founding principles as a community open to all. Anne-Marie Burley contends the shift was a product of U.S. policymakers projecting the “philosophy, substance, and form of the New Deal regulatory state onto the world.” These explanations tell us much about the form of American internationalism when it occurred, but they are more ambiguous on the issue of timing. If the shift in the social purpose of the American state occurred during the Great Depression, why was there no shift in ideas about external intervention in security until the 1940s? Moreover, during World War I an explicit link was made between support for a progressive interventionist program at home and intervention in the war abroad. Why in this instance did the tie between interventionism at home and abroad not stick? In this case external experience (the disillusionment from World War I) contributed to the end of domestic progressive social intervention, reversing the causal arrow in the social purpose argument.

In sum, the transformation of American beliefs during World War II, but not World War I, suggests the relevance of paying attention to collective ideas about appropriate action even in explanations of ideational transformation. The point is not that collective ideas by themselves determine the likelihood and direction of change and that power, threat, technology, interest groups, and social purpose are unimportant.

108. For a survey of such arguments, see Doenecke 1987.
109. See Wilson 1971, x; and Frieden 1988, 60.
110. See Leffler 1979; and Roberts 1997, 360.
112. On the sectoral shifts that occurred as a result of the depression, see Frieden 1988, 68, 83.
Rather, I have offered the more limited case that ideational structure matters even in its own transformation, often in conjunction with other factors.

Implications

In this analysis I have attempted to make conceptual and empirical headway in specifying the way that ideas, events, and agents interrelate to allow ideational transformation in some circumstances but not others. In this concluding section I explicate the range and limits of the approach, how it relates to other prominent research programs, and its relevance to contemporary international relations.

An epistemic logic sheds light on the history of U.S. internationalism, but it also seems to have broader applicability than simply a *sui generis* explanation of that case. The framework applies to—and brings together—work that has examined both ideational change and continuity in a variety of issue areas in different countries. Examples include Judith Goldstein’s study of U.S. trade policy; Peter Hall’s analysis of British macroeconomic policy; Scott Sagan’s account of nuclear weapons safety in the U.S. military; Frank Dobbins’ study of industrial policy in France, Britain, and the United States; Robert W. Kates and William C. Clark’s study on environmental policy; and Hans W. Maull’s and William Wohlforth’s studies on German and Soviet foreign policy, respectively. The framework adds to the insights of these studies in three ways. First, it disaggregates change into two stages that clearly elucidate the microfoundational collective ideation issues at stake. Second, it provides a varying logic of expectations and consequences (failure and success) that in some instances reinforces continuity, in others change. Third, it addresses the role of ideational structure in the emergence (or not) of new dominant ideas.

There are limits to the explanatory domain of the approach as well. It will not encompass every case of change in ideas, since many varieties of such alterations exist. This is an argument about a particular type of change and a particular type of ideas. Relatively rapid discontinuous ideational transformation is only one type. Shifts in collective ideas can also take place in a slower series of steps over time. So, too, can alterations emerge within the general logic of a dominant episteme. And, of course, the changes that do occur need not always mean the triumph of the new or the complete dismissal of the old: layering can also result. My focus here, however, has been on rapid change and specifically the link (or not) between crises and such transformations. In addition, I have only examined ideas that are generally “more fluid, pragmatic, amenable to the proof of success or failure, and leave a certain latitude to language, experience, and even the critical faculties of individuals”; these ideas might be contrasted with a second type, which “are generally more homogeneous, affective, impermeable to experience or contradiction, and leave little scope

115. See, for example, Goldstein 1993; Hall 1993; Sagan 1993; Wohlforth 1993; Dobbins 1994; Maull 1995; Kates and Clark 1996; and McNamara 1998. For a more extended discussion of some of these, see Legro forthcoming.

for individual variations” such as many religious beliefs.117 This latter category may require a different logic of change, if one exists at all.

In international relations, my argument has direct implications for a number of different analytical traditions. The first is the prominent grand-strategy approach that depicts states as rational actors correctly perceiving the environment and responding appropriately to maximize security.118 One need know little about the collective perceptions, beliefs, and modes of calculation of states, since these are generic and likely to reflect systemic forces. The thrust of this useful and parsimonious form of explanation, as in market analysis, rests in environmental constraints and incentives. But the problem is that grand-strategy predictions and actual state thinking and behavior often seem to diverge. Although the strategic focus certainly captures the adaptive dimension of foreign policy, it overemphasizes the calculating at the expense of the ideational. Groups interpret their circumstances and make decisions based on a preexisting ideational framework about what is desirable and what should happen. There is an adaptive learning aspect to this argument. But it is learning from a collective belief baseline: one that has a certain irrational asymmetry in the lack of learning that can result from situations where expectations are unmet but the results are positive. And sometimes collective ideas can even help create—in a type of self-fulfilling/negating prophecy—the very circumstances confronted. This appears to be the case in the interwar period, when American views on how to cause security directly contributed to the international circumstances that produced insecurity in the form of economic hardship and military conflict.

Second, the analysis illustrates the importance of focusing on the collective nature of ideas, thus pointing to a missing element in studies that highlight the cognitive traits of individuals or the instrumental agency of social actors. These perspectives lack an aggregation mechanism to account for collective mentality. Hence, psychological approaches that lack a social component are often stumped in explaining why a particular schema (of the many available to different individuals) emerges to guide action. The nature of collective ideas gives them properties distinct from the individuals who adhere to those understandings. Even powerful agents, such as presidents and their advisors, operate in a broader national setting characterized by ideas and symbols that often constrain and structure their individual preferences and attitudes. Likewise, game theorists have had relatively little to say (except to invoke collective ideas) about why one focal point among many is reached, or why no equilibrium emerges at all.119 Thus the epistemic logic I suggest helps to account for why social actors are able to negotiate collective ideation problems in some instances but not others.

Third, the approach attempts to address a gap in the ongoing work of constructivist scholars who seek to understand the influence of collective ideas, beliefs, norms, and identity in world politics. Although much of this work has usefully shown the impact

118. For a review and critique of this literature, see Stein and Rosecrance 1993.
119. See, for example, Schelling 1960, 70; Kreps 1990; and Weingast 1996.
of ideational structure, relatively little of it has explored the sources of transformation in such ideas. Structural explanations tend to emphasize continuity, not change. To the extent constructivists have tried to explain change, they have pursued one of two paths, each insightful, each with gaps. The main solution (in response to structural reification) has been to turn to enterprising social agents who are able to persuade others.\textsuperscript{120} Although there is much to these studies, ultimately they hinge on defining what is persuasive independent of the outcomes (that is, change in collective, not just in some or even many individual, ideas). To date this has been an elusive task.\textsuperscript{121}

I am certainly not saying that social movements and agency do not matter. Typically, nondominant social agents work to make their own views as accessible and plausible to as many members of society as possible. In the epistemic framework, agency is critical in establishing an oppositional set of ideas that can serve as a replacement in situations favorable to collapse and consolidation and in reacting to the opportunities presented. In the U.S. case, for example, nonstate actors aided by FDR’s leadership succeeded in establishing a viable oppositional idea of internationalism that enabled the transformation during World War II.\textsuperscript{122}

Another general constructivist approach to change has focused on process, be it through structurationist logic or a Habermasian communicative action analysis. In the structurationist account, structure and agency are “mutually constituted or co-determined entities”: interaction among agents and structures both produces and reproduces those entities.\textsuperscript{123} The key issue, however, is whether reproduction (stasis) or new production (change) in ideational structure will occur. The answer for structurationists seems to be historical contingency. Likewise, the communicative-action notion that arguing, deliberating, and persuading can change minds is indeterminate on when this is likely to happen outside the seemingly open-ended presupposition that “audiences are prepared to listen.”\textsuperscript{124} The framework here attempts to reduce the indeterminacy in these perspectives by delineating the circumstances under which agentic arguments will be persuasive and when collective ideas are likely to be malleable to change versus when they are likely to be resilient in the ongoing processes of mutual constitution and public argumentation. Mating collective ideational properties and events with the microprocesses of collapse and consolidation helps to determine this trade-off.

Finally, in contemporary international relations, the argument directs our attention to the likelihood of ideational collapse and consolidation in ongoing cases of poten-

\textsuperscript{120} See Finnemore 1996; Price 1998; and Keck and Sikkink 1998. Johnston examines how individual belief change occurs within institutions, but he does not examine the link from individuals to collective change. Johnston 1999.

\textsuperscript{121} This is evident also in the social movement literature that highlights the influence of cultural frames. See McAdam et al. 1996.

\textsuperscript{122} Divine 1967.

\textsuperscript{123} See Wendt 1987 and 1999; and Checkel 1998, 326.

\textsuperscript{124} Risse 2000, x. Risse’s analysis and examples also seem to work through individuals (for example, Gorbachev and Hassan), again raising the issue of how individual belief change connects to collective idea change.
tial transformation—especially in Germany, China, Russia, Japan, and the United States. The ability of individuals to overturn the dominant episteme—individuals with this in mind do exist in each country—will depend not just on their skills or the groups to which they belong or even the strategic situation their country faces but also on each nation’s collective expectations and the types of events and consequences experienced. Although most of the time such events will not shake the extant belief set, when situations involve both unmet expectations and negative consequences, and when a single prominent alternative idea exists, societies are much more likely to experience a turnover in the dominant episteme. It is these circumstances that could signal the onset of the next revolution in American ideas about foreign policy and the transformation of the internationalist position that has guided the United States in world politics for over fifty years.

Appendix: Analysis of Presidential Foreign Policy Discourse

Figure 1 is based on a content analysis of all the State of the Union addresses delivered between 1908 and 1950. I assessed the passages relating to foreign policy in terms of positive and negative statements about different types of actions for enhancing U.S. security and welfare. I used the following six-point numerical continuum measuring unilateralism versus internationalism (in half-point increments) to assess the text in terms of its language and causal arguments related to foreign policy:

0  The United States should avoid getting involved in international relations with major powers. To the extent possible the United States should live and let live. The country can best lead as an example. (This end of the spectrum is stronger to the degree rhetoric also denigrates the opposite end.)

1  The United States should necessarily engage the world, but it should do so without binding itself in institutional arrangements.

2  The United States must play a large role in world affairs. This might involve some limited institutional commitments such as arms control and the mutual lowering of tariffs. But traditional political military alliances or general commitments to collective security institutions would be proscribed, especially with Europe.

3  The United States must play a large role in the world, especially in economic affairs. Positive attitude toward the benefits of international institutions, but not involving military precommitments.

4  U.S. security would be well served by more substantial international commitments and agreements, even those involving military precommitments.

5  U.S. security depends on actively constructing international institutions and relationships that tie us to other major powers and to which we give political military backing. (This end of the spectrum is stronger to the degree rhetoric also denigrates the opposite end.)

The line shown in Figure 1 reflects my assessment and coding of the speeches; a second coder (blind to the purposes and content of the study and my coding) also assessed the passages according to the six-point scale. We assigned the same value in 39 percent of the total
observations (forty-one speeches). In 37 percent of the observations our assigned values differed by one-half point; in 15 percent, by one point; in 10 percent, by one-and-a-half points; and in one observation by two points.

I surveyed the editorial responses of four different newspapers (reflecting different regions and partisan leanings)—New York Times, Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and Los Angeles Times. These editorials present a much less comprehensive picture of foreign affairs than the speeches themselves. Sometimes they offer only passing comments on foreign affairs; sometimes they only address the domestic portions of the speeches. Editorials that made no mention of foreign affairs or did not contain enough information to code were not included—hence each newspaper may not be represented every year. I coded each editorial based on a three-tiered scale based on whether it voiced more, roughly equal, or less support for internationalism than the sentiment found in the president’s State of the Union address.

The content of “more” and “less” is defined by the preceding six-point scale. Again, a second coder also assessed the editorials. In 71 percent of the editorials \( n = 92 \) we assigned the same rank; in 25 percent of the cases we differed by one rank; and in 4 percent we assigned an opposite rank.

References


125. The 1916 and 1933 State of the Union addresses either had too little information to code or did not discuss foreign affairs. In Figure 1, these addresses have simply been assigned a value representing an average of the preceding and following years.


McAdam, Doug, John McCarthy, and Mayer Zald, eds. 1996. Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


