

19th Berlin Colloquium on Contemporary History

**The Second Founding of the United States, 1937-1947**

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**Interview**

*Berlin Colloquium: Calling the “long decade” between 1935 and 1947 the period of the United States’ “second founding” is, at first glance, quite startling. What’s the reasoning behind it?*

It’s basically questioning the common belief that substantial changes in society and politics were caused only by the Cold War. There’s no reason to diminish the Cold War’s continuing significance. But for the sake of greater historical clarity, the New Deal and the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt should be looked at more closely. It was during this time that initiatives were launched whose importance would rise greatly in subsequent years. It wasn’t an inevitable process. But the groundwork was laid for a change in direction that would place the country as a whole on a new foundation.

*What exactly distinguishes the “starting point” in 1937 from the “end point” in 1947?*

These dates weren’t chosen arbitrarily, but limiting them to an actual decade has a certain pragmatism. One could just as easily have used the years 1933 and 1948, or 1938 and 1951. Why those years? In 1937, labor unions in the US seemed to have finally arrived in the modern age. The Wagner Act, which had been passed shortly before, enshrined rights that workers in Europe had enjoyed since the late 19th century, such as the right of free organization and collective bargaining, including for unqualified workers. Ten years later, new laws had already ring-fenced these concessions. Another example: in 1938 an initiative narrowly failed in Congress that would have required that declarations of war be subject to a public referendum among all eligible voters. The National Security Act, passed in 1947, showed that nothing was left of this direct democratic impulse. The new law even substantially curtailed the role of Congress in matters of war and peace.

*But one could just as easily say that the curtailment of organized labor was a restoration of normal conditions in the US and in no way a second founding. Seen this way, the New Deal laws would be the exception to the rule.*

There you touch upon a point that can and should be discussed in depth. In our context, however, another consideration seems even more important to me; namely, the manner in which the restrictions on the Wagner Act were justified. First and foremost came references to problems of “national security,” with an argument that can be summarized like this: Conflicts in the world of labor harm the country’s “social security” and therefore its “national security,” because in the global struggle between democracies and totalitarian dictatorships there is no difference anymore between foreign and domestic policy. That brings us to a core theme of our colloquium: Not only why the topic of “national security” became more important in the discourse between politics and society, but how “security considerations” came to dominate thinking about society and the choice among political options as a consequence. In a nutshell, why “security” became an obsession – and why this obsession took hold at precisely the time when the United States was at its zenith and all its partners and rivals still struggled with the effects of World War II.

*How were these issues discussed in the colloquium? What aspects did it focus on?*

Two ideas were mentioned, surprisingly, only in passing: That the American master narrative, the self-image of a “chosen nation,” is especially liable to sense real or imagined vulnerabilities. Also, that President Roosevelt inadvertently raised people’s sense of insecurity by introducing the prospect of “total security.” Instead, Roosevelt’s restricted scope of action was discussed in detail – that it was Roosevelt’s conservative rivals and not he and his backers who controlled the political agenda.

*... a bold argument.*

Perhaps. On the other hand one can also take Jean Paul’s attitude: Why bother with old and tired interpretations? Why not throw the windows wide open? In this case it concerned an observation that, astonishingly, has been overlooked for so long – or at least hasn’t been grasped in full. I’m talking about Roosevelt’s dependence on a “veto power” in Congress, a negative coalition of conservative southern Democrats or “Dixiecrats” and Republicans. This coalition was held together by fear – that the apartheid regime in the southern states would be

destabilized, and of Communists at home and abroad. This side provided some essential impulses for the creation of a defensive security state. Scenarios of threats and fears were constructed that had little to do with reality but plenty with fantasies of weakness and impotence – not to mention with a “worst case” view of the world.

*So why could this negative coalition so durably influence the political agenda? What explanations were offered?*

The willingness of the New Deal Democrats to be blackmailed was repeatedly stressed. It was basically a mixture of opportunism, lack of confidence and a scope for action that was indeed circumscribed. In any case, even before the war's end a clearly contoured agenda for the future was already taking shape, of minimalist social security at home and military superiority abroad.

*Still, matters could have taken a different turn. Roosevelt had clear ideas for the postwar period and his Vice-President Henry Wallace even more so. They envisioned a “one world” policy in which the USSR and China were partners rather than rivals. A “national security state” and the Cold War had no part in their plans.*

That's true. Some participants also gave great significance to the assertion that the Roosevelt-Wallace team also would have managed to push through their ideas. But this argument rests on counterfactual assumptions, of course. We can safely say, however, that even if Wallace had been nominated once again as Vice-President in 1944 and then succeeded Roosevelt following the president's death in April 1945, he would still have been hard pressed to resist the epochal changes of 1945.

*What kind of epochal change? Until now it sounded as if events since 1945 stand for a self-reinforcing process that, at least, has been very difficult to change.*

Let's recall that security fantasies had sprouted long before 1945 and concepts for establishing “total security” were also on the rise. But that in no way means that there could not have been corrections or fractures in that time. The path toward the “national security state” was not inevitable. One more ingredient was needed; namely, the atomic bomb. The mere idea that the Soviet Union or other states could gain possession of this weapon was political doping for advocates of a “policy of strength” and a state armed to the teeth. Domestically, meanwhile, the idea of real or imagined atom spies whipped up a collective hysteria. A loyalty and intimidation campaign was launched because of them – two whole years before

Joseph McCarthy and his political bloodhounds took the stage. This fear poisoned debates; it silenced everyone who still believed in alternatives. Or, it simply hid the obvious from view. One participant pointed out that a 1952 special issue of the liberal magazine *Partisan Review* on the state of US politics failed to even mention the Korean War.

*The public debate shared this interpretation of a new nuclear epoch?*

Essentially, yes, and not least because within an astonishingly short time, the Roosevelt liberals morphed into “Cold War liberals” who not only accepted the maxims of building up arms, containment and rivaling blocs, but held these as the very heights of wisdom. It’s no coincidence that their ranks gave rise to many defense intellectuals who would set the stage for decades of military-focused thinking.

*Did the role and function of these defense intellectuals play a detailed part in the discussion?*

Unfortunately, no. But at least it became clear that historians should wake up out of their hibernation on this subject. The last in-depth study was published in the early 1980s, *Wizards of Armageddon* by Fred Kaplan. Political scientists and sociologists would also be well advised to look into this field. Ideas of society and politics have been influenced more profoundly by defense intellectuals and their academic bases than by many other putatively outstanding thinkers who are constantly being cited as references.

*Back to the idea of “second founding.” Isn’t this term a bit excessive, even if one sees a turning point in the rise of the “national security state”?*

That would likewise be an excellent topic for discussion. On the other hand we shouldn’t forget about all the traditions that were cut. Although intellectuals and journalists from the “mainstream” warned against the undermining of democratic foundations by the growing security complex in the first half of the 20th century, their arguments have been banished to the margins ever since. America is essentially still paying the price for its inflationary fears. We are dealing with a society that has lost the measures that used to distinguish risks, threats and dangers – for nearly 80 years now. From that perspective, a bold term like “second founding” is quite appropriate.