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Bringing It All Back Home or Another Side of Bob Dylan: Midwestern Isolationist

TOR EGIL FØRLAND

The subject of this article is the foreign policy views of singer and songwriter Bob Dylan: a personality whose footprints during the 1960s were so impressive that a whole generation followed his lead. Today, after thirty years of recording, the number of devoted Dylan disciples is reduced but he is still very much present on the rock scene. His political influence having been considerable, his policy views deserve scrutiny. My thesis is that Dylan's foreign policy views are best characterized as "isolationist." More specifically: Dylan's foreign policy message is what so-called progressive isolationists from the Midwest would have advocated, had they been transferred into the United States of the 1960s or later. I shall argue that Bob Dylan is just that kind of personified anachronism, seeing the contemporary world through a set of cognitive lenses made in the Midwest before the Second World War— to a large extent even before the First (or, indeed, before the American Civil War).

This article is divided into three parts. In the first part I analyze the songs of Bob Dylan, trying to extract Dylan's views on foreign relations. In the second part I compare my results with the foreign policy advocated by Midwestern isolationists. Having identified similarities I attempt to explain them by a closer look at Dylan's background and life, and by probing deeper into the origins of Midwestern progressivism. In the third and final part I venture even further into the field of speculation, asking whether there may be parallels between isolationism and not only Dylan but also Vietnam War protesters of the "New Left" movement, who felt that Dylan was singing for them.

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II

Bob Dylan is not, and never was, a politician. Those few times he cast himself in the role of public speaker (or was cajoled into it) have produced notorious scandals.\(^1\) His attitude towards politics has moved from curiosity through rejection as irrelevant to outright hostility.\(^2\) But although lacking political ambitions, Dylan is not void of political opinions. They can be found in his songs. I have no ambition to contribute to the research on Dylan as a poet.\(^3\) My method in this part is to read his songs and try to find their message — disregarding the literary means by which this message is brought across. In the second part, armed with biography, I shall seek the roots of that message.

It is not easy to (re)construct Bob Dylan’s foreign policy views: because he is so mute about foreign policy. We are left with what can be gleaned from less than ten songs among a production of several hundred. On the other hand, analysis is made easier by the fact that Dylan’s foreign policy views have been remarkably stable over those thirty years which his career

\(^1\) The outstanding example is Dylan’s incoherent December 1963 speech to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, which had just awarded him its Tom Paine award. Only a few weeks past the murder of President Kennedy, the folk singer gave the unexpecting liberals another shock. First he invited them to retire from the civil rights movement because they were too old: “It is not an old people’s world. It has nothing to do with old people. Old people when their hair grows out, they should go out.” Then he confessed that he “saw some of [him]self” in Lee Oswald, Kennedy’s alleged murderer. Quotes from Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (London: New English Library, 1986), 200–205; see also Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan* (London: Abacus, 1972 [first published in 1971]), 161–64. No wonder that Dylan would write, in an open letter to the Committee: “I am no speaker nor any politician.” Quoted from Clinton Heylin, *Dylan: Behind the Shades* (New York: Viking, 1991), 86.

\(^2\) In May 1964 Dylan told protest singer Phil Ochs, “The stuff you’re writing is bullshit, because politics is bullshit. It’s all unreal. The only thing that’s real is inside you. Your feelings. Just look at the world you’re writing about and you’ll see you’re wasting your time. The world is, well... it’s just absurd.” Scaduto, 176, see also 177–86. Compare Dylan’s “there are no politics” poem on the jacket of his 1964 album *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, printed in Bob Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962–1985* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 154–55. (Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from Dylan songs are from this book.) After being “born again” in 1979, Dylan went one step further. In an interview with the *Rolling Stone* 21 June 1984 (p. 15) he condemned politics as “an instrument of the Devil. Just that clear. I think politics is what kills; it does not bring anything alive. Politics is corrupt; I mean, anybody knows that.” Cf. also “Political World” from the 1989 album *Oh Mercy*.

\(^3\) To say that the literature on Dylan’s poetry is growing rapidly would be an understatement. Shelton, 513–15, gives an update through 1986. My favorite is still Jesper Tang, *Bob Dylan smiler* [The Smiling Bob Dylan] (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1972), though it is of course somewhat dated.
spans. There is a paucity of "foreign policy songs" — indeed, of social commentary in general — during what we might call Dylan's introvert period, from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies. The foreign policy message of Bob Dylan, 1983, however, corresponds well to that of 1963. It contains two central elements. One — aversion to war — leads to protests against its effects on individuals caught in the war machine, and to finger-pointing at munitions makers and defense authorities. The other element consists of a rejection of foreign trade because of its effects on US producers, and leads Dylan to blame Eastern or foreign capitalists.4

Dylan's aversion to war erupts in the most famous song from his "protest period" or indeed ever: "Blowin' in the Wind." It is evident as well in songs that were not recorded at the time, among them "John Brown": a soldier returns from war, mutilated, shocked by the realization that up close, his enemy's face "looked just like mine." In the 1980s, after Dylan's "born-again period," the nuclear apocalypse has loud religious overtones. In "I and I" "the world could come to an end tonight." The thoroughly depressing "Dark Eyes" observes that "time is short." The unhappy soldier returned, matured, in 1984, cast by Dylan as the "Clean-Cut Kid" whom "they made a killer out of" by sending him "to a napalm health spa to shape up," giving him "dope to smoke, drinks and pills/A jeep to drive, blood to spill."5

The consistency between Dylan of the 1960s and Dylan of the 1980s came out most clearly in the fall of 1988, when Dylan added a verse about the Vietnam War to "With God on Our Side," written 25 years earlier. The original version had been bitterly ironic about a system which taught that God is on America's side in war no matter how many deaths or who the enemy might be — red Indians or red Russians. It had raised the specter of nuclear annihilation: "now we got weapons/Of the chemical dust/If fire them we're forced to/Then fire them we must." But thanks to Dylan's 1964 farewell to finger-pointing songs, the Vietnam War had to await the

4 Those conversant with Dylan's later songs may have trouble finding room in this dichotomy for "Neighborhood Bully": that Infidels (1983) song widely considered as a Zionist statement. In my opinion, there are two conclusions to be drawn from this song. First, Dylan is a Jew — born again or not. Second, he is no pacifist. Neither deduction is very surprising. My reason for not analyzing "Neighborhood Bully" further is simply that I do not consider that it provides much of a clue to Dylan's general foreign policy message.

5 "John Brown" appears on the bootleg album Gaslight Tapes featuring songs from Dylan's performances in Greenwich Village in 1961. Other early and little known antiwar songs are "Let Me Die in My Footsteps," which finally was included on Dylan's 1991 album of miscellaneous, the Bootleg Series, Vols. 1–3, and "Playboys and Playgirls."
1980s before he would sing out explicitly against it: “In the 1960s/Came the Vietnam War/Can somebody tell me/What we’re fighting for/So many young men died/So many mothers cried/Now I ask the question/Was God on our side?”

There is a further aspect to Dylan’s antiwar songs. He not only laments the thought of a nuclear Armageddon; he also points his finger at those who (Dylan thinks) are responsible. John Brown, “his face...all shot up and his hand...all blown off” finally realized that he “was just a puppet in a play.” In 1963, in maybe his most bluntly finger-pointing song ever (excepting newborn again songs), Dylan named those pulling the strings on John Brown. They are the “Masters of War” who “build all the guns,” “the death planes,” and “the big bombs,” who “never done nothin’/But build to destroy” – who, in short, are making money out of war. (Although “all the money you made/Will never buy back your soul.”)

Dylan the war-protester is well known. The other foreign policy side of Bob Dylan – his hostility towards international trade and his concomitant wish for US self-sufficiency – has received less attention, partly because it came to the fore in the late 1970s and early 1980s, after Dylan’s political influence had waned. Dylan the international trade-protester comes out most forcefully in “Union Sundown” from the 1983 album *Infidels*. His “shoes, they come from Singapore,” his “flashlight’s from Taiwan,” and so on. Not even the Chevrolet he drives is US made: “They don’t make nothin’ here no more.” The result is unemployment: “the job that you used to have,/They gave it to somebody down in El Salvador.” It is all because of “capitalism,” which “is above the law./It say, ‘It don’t count ’less it sells.’/When it cost too much to build it at home/You just build it cheaper someplace else.” Dylan has no love for this logic: “It’s sundown on the union/And what’s made in the U.S.A./Sure was a good idea/’Til greed got in the way,” goes the refrain.

“Union Sundown” is not an aberration. In the 1979 song “Slow Train” Dylan bemoaned “All that foreign oil controlling American soil,/Look around you, it’s just bound to make you embarrassed./Sheiks walkin’ around like kings, wearing fancy jewels and nose rings,/Deciding America’s future from Amsterdam and to Paris.” While such blunt

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6 These lyrics are taken from a tape recording of one of Dylan’s concerts. I am thankful to Johnny Borgan for making available to me this tape as well as the studio outtake of “Union Sundown” referred to in footnote 12.

nationalism cannot be found in the songs from the 1960s—and would have been rather misplaced, since in those years it was the United States that decided the sheiks' future—the economics (or the lack of it) of "Union Sundown" has a spiritual brother in the 1963 song "North Country Blues." This song depicts the decline of a northern mining town. At one time "the iron ore poured" and "the drag lines an' the shovels they was a-humming"—until one day the mine was directed to close down: "They complained in the East,/They are paying too high./They say that your ore ain't worth digging./That it's much cheaper down/In the South American towns/Where the miners work almost for nothing." ("Union Sundown" was more specific: in that song the Brazilians and Argentines made thirty cents a day.)

What happened—to the north country miners as well as to the factory workers of "Union Sundown"—was that they came up against the economic logic of comparative advantages. When not constrained by political means, capital will flow across boundaries and labor intensive industries will locate in countries where labor is relatively cheaper. As the US work force claims higher wages than for example South American miners or auto workers, the goods they are producing will sell at a higher price. Unless protected politically against this economic logic—the bright side of which is cheaper products—US business in order to survive will have to switch to sectors where the United States has a comparative advantage, for example computers. After a successful transition, the United States, including its work force, may benefit from lower-priced products coming from South America. But the transition process will put some people out of work; some factories will have to close. In some mono-industrial towns there will be nothing left to keep the young from leaving.

Bob Dylan, by his own admission in "Slow Train," "don't care about economy." Speaking to biographer Anthony Scaduto in 1971, Dylan explained: "My thing has to do with feeling." Yet, still by Dylan's account in "Slow Train," "it sure do bother [him] to see [his] loved ones turning into puppets." The puppets may be a clean-cut kid like John Brown, or the storyteller of "North Country Blues," having lost husband and hope after the mining gates locked. Those pulling the strings may be those in command of corporate capitalism. Or it may be those in command of the US defense establishment and international relations. (There may even be considerable overlap.) Dylan makes no attempt to

8 Scaduto, 286. See also Dylan's lecturing of Phil Ochs, quoted in footnote 2.
comprehend the workings of these systems. But he sees people being hurt, and lashes out against "the masters" that "make the rules." Explained one of Dylan's close Greenwich Village friends from 1961 to Scaduto: Dylan "was beginning to think and talk about people who were being trod upon. Not in any class way, but just that he hated people who were taking people. He had a full conception of people who were being taken, and he did read the newspapers."

A profound empathy with the puppets and a correspondingly profound lack of understanding of the mechanism by which the strings are pulled: these factors form the basis of Bob Dylan's foreign policy message. He ends up blaming masters of war, i.e. the munitions industry, and masters of international trade, i.e. corporate capitalism. He has no faith in organized labor: "The unions are big business, friend,/And they're goin' out like a dinosaur," goes a line in "Union Sundown." The verse ends with another, curious lamentation: "They used to grow food in Kansas/Now they want to grow it on the moon and eat it raw./I can see the day coming when even your home garden/Is gonna be against the law." Dylan's worry about his home garden becomes comprehensible only after a venture into prewar US history: to an America which Dylan, born 1941, never saw, but which may have shaped his policy views more than he or anyone else has realized.

III

Bob Dylan is not the first American to point his finger in anger at the munitions industry and corporate capitalism. Between the two World Wars – and earlier as well – there was a strong strand in US politics called "isolationism." Heeding the warnings of the founding fathers against being drawn into the affairs of the Old World, "isolationists" wanted the

9 One caveat: Several of the concerts during his 1979 so-called gospel tour featured the recently born-again Dylan giving his audience an international-relations sermon. Recapitulating what he had recently been taught by fundamentalist preacher Hal Lindsey, Dylan explained that Russia [identified as Magog in the Book of Revelation] and Iran [Gog] would soon spark off Armageddon in the Middle East. At a show in San Francisco he also threw in China for good measure, reminding fans – hecklers, rather – that it had an army of two million people. With this exception, however, Dylan has stuck with his "feeling thing." Heylin, 333–35 and 353–54.

10 Quotes from "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)." Scaduto, 81.

11 The point about eating the food raw is probably not a major one. A studio outtake of an earlier version of the song goes like this: "Now they want to grow it on the moon./They gonna take you home garden away from you./I can see it coming pretty soon." The same version has Dylan adding "...under corporate command" after naming the system "capitalism."
United States to mind its own business—literally. Not that the New World should reject contacts with Europe altogether. But diplomatic and commercial involvement that might entangle the United States in the affairs—and wars—of the world outside the Western Hemisphere ought to be avoided.

As the financial, commercial, and ideological interests of the United States in the outside world grew during the 19th century, political leaders found isolationism a straitjacket. The trend towards interventionism climaxed in 1917, when the country entered the First World War. In the interwar years the pendulum swung back. Many Americans considered that the war had only saddled them with huge loans to Europe—loans which might never be paid back (and indeed never were). The US war effort had failed to achieve that restructuring of world affairs which had been President Woodrow Wilson's rationale for taking the country into the European war in the first place. Nudged by President Franklin Roosevelt, however, during the latter half of the 1930s the United States once again edged closer to involvement in European affairs—until Japan struck at Pearl Harbor and wiped out not only a significant part of the US Pacific Fleet but also whatever hope remaining isolationists may have had of keeping America out of the Second World War. Isolationism as such was wiped out as well: a weak "neo-isolationism" reappeared after the war but was never able to prevent Presidents Truman and Eisenhower from entangling the United States ever closer in the affairs of Europe.

My argument, however, is that one species survived of that brand of isolationists which has been labeled "agrarian progressives." In the 1960s it reappeared—in the person of Bob Dylan.

The "isolationists" were a mixed band. Isolationism in the interwar years was strongest in the Midwest. It was predominantly a rural phenomenon. And in many but far from all areas isolationism drew its strength from its appeal to Americans of German or Irish descent. A major element of Midwestern isolationism was constituted by so-called agrarian progressives (or radicals, as some analysts prefer). These were farmers or lived in areas where farming was important. Leading isolationist historian Wayne Cole has written of the general attitude of agrarian progressives in Congress, that they


favored programs beneficial to farmers, small businessmen, debtors, workers, and the little guy. They were hostile to monopoly and critical of big business and big finance. In the crises of the Great Depression, western progressive isolationists urged federal action. But they tended to fear bigness of almost any sort—including big business, big government, big military, and eventually (for many of them) big unions.15

Agrarian progressives were not socialists; nor were they pacifists.16 Midwestern isolationists abhorred war, of course, but their isolationism was also economically motivated. Midwestern farmers produced for a domestic market, not for Europe. They did not consider that they had much to lose by following a policy which would insulate the United States from the quarrels of the Old World. If the United States involved itself in war, Midwesterners risked losing not only sons: higher taxes and higher interest rates would probably follow, and bigger government as well. The big businessmen out East, on the other hand, would have to cope with shrinking profits if trade with Europe were lost as a result of US isolationism. In their role as munitions makers and financiers, however, they could earn big money on an armaments race—indeed on war itself.

Midwestern progressive isolationists reacted to increased international tension by trying to restrict the munitions industry. The most important attempt to check the influence of “the makers of war” was Senator Gerald P. Nye’s Senate investigation into US munitions industry in 1934–36.17 Nye’s Munitions Investigation Committee was in no way an isolated instance; it fitted perfectly with Midwestern isolationists’ permanent campaign against Eastern big business. For example when Harold Knutson was elected congressman from Minnesota’s 6th District in 1916, “the first plank in his personal platform was elimination of profit in war by nationalizing the manufacture of all war materials.” In 1937 he claimed that Wilson had been manipulated into the war by diplomats, munitions makers, and international bankers.18

Bob Dylan tapped into a solid vein of Midwestern isolationism, then, when condemning the masters of war. His denunciation of Eastern

15 Cole, 129, see also 37–38.
16 Ibid., 255. For a comparison of progressive isolationist Gerald P. Nye with pacifist socialist Norman Thomas, see ibid., 229.
capitalists and his refusal to accept the results of international free trade were also solidly planted in isolationist tradition. Agrarian progressives were scathing in their criticism of Eastern big business and bankers. As remedy for the plight of small farmers, isolationists would often propose a protective tariff wall. This had been the second plank in Knutson’s 1916 platform. In 1930 Knutson proudly voted for the protectionist Smoot-Hawley Act, arguing that farmers and workers would benefit and that without it “we must reconcile ourselves to descending to the levels that are to be found in foreign and competing lands.” Three years later he suggested to the House of Representatives that the United States follow the same policy of self-sufficiency that the US pioneers had followed: “We can produce nearly everything we consume,... and everything which is consumed in the United States ought to be produced here.”

Agrarian progressivism had a history reaching back far beyond the World Wars: through the so-called populism of the late 19th century and all the way back to Thomas Jefferson. Populists and agrarian progressives looked with nostalgia to the time of the independent, self-sufficient yeoman farmer: to a time before railroads, industrialization, and Eastern bankers gained control of the US economy and “machine politics” came to dominate and corrupt US politics. Deploiring the progress of “Hamiltonian” ideas in the United States – a strong central government relying on mercantile interests and the modernizing forces of industry and finance – populists and agrarian progressives clung to the “Jeffersonian” yeoman ideal. With Jefferson they asserted that “the small land holders are the most precious part of a state” and therefore had a special claim to protection. This glorified portrait of the self-sufficient yeoman farmer as the backbone of the United States is what Richard Hofstadter has called “the agrarian myth.” It constituted a formidable weapon in the arsenal of populists and agrarian progressives, despite the fact that the self-sufficient yeoman farmer had almost disappeared by the time of the Civil War,

19 Ibid., 61-62.
20 “Progressivism” was of course more than just agrarian progressivism. Carl H. Chrislock, in The Progressive Era in Minnesota 1899-1918 (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1971), points at (pp. 1-2) “a fundamental difference of outlook” between “old progressives” who “wanted, as far as possible, to restore the individualistic, small-town and rural society of the pre-urban period,” and another wing that “accepted the permanence of large-scale industrial and financial enterprises, proclaimed that the nation’s future lay in the cities, [and] affirmed that old-fashioned individualism was dead.” See also Russel B. Nye, Midwestern Progressive Politics (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1959), 15, 31, and 184-90; and Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 4-5.
21 Stuhler, 7-8.
giving way to commercial agriculture based on cash-crops produced for urban markets and land speculation on borrowed money. When crops or land speculation failed – leaving farmers unable to pay mortgages – railroads, trusts, or bankers were blamed: and the agrarian myth lived on. It spilled over into politics and foreign policy as well. In politics the agrarian myth built nostalgia for the independent voter undented by party politics and discipline; the other side of this coin was a hatred of urban “machine politics” whereby votes could be bought and sold. In foreign policy the agrarian myth fueled isolationism.22

Re-enter Bob Dylan. Or, more precisely: enter Robert Allen Zimmerman, born 1941, of Hibbing, Minnesota, where he lived from 194723 until he left for the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in the fall of 1959, later changing his name to Dylan. Hibbing is a mining town of the Iron Range, not far from the Canadian border: its major tourist attraction is not Bob Dylan’s childhood home but the world’s biggest open-pit mine.24 Hibbing is a small town – some 5,000 inhabitants – among other small mining towns in a still rural part of Minnesota. It is a (the?) “North Country Blues” town, its fortune going up and down with the cycles of iron markets and international competition.25

Minnesota was one of the strongholds of US populism and agrarian progressivism. Outside of the metropolitan twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul – an example of those “urban islands in a sea of wheat” which Russel Nye describes in his study of Midwestern progressive politics26 – Minnesota is a grain and dairy state including also a fair share of miners and factory workers. From the early years of the 20th century and until Senator Henrik Shipstead was defeated in the election of 1946, isolationism was “a dominant strain in Minnesota foreign policy thought.”27 In no other state was the Non Partisan League, opposing intervention in the

23 Dylan was born in 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota, where the Zimmerman family lived until 1947, when they moved to nearby Hibbing, the hometown of Dylan’s mother.
24 I had no easy time finding the Zimmerman house when making a pilgrimage to Hibbing in 1988: it occupied a weak third place among the town’s tourist attractions, trailing the open-pit mine and Hibbing High School – famous not for Dylan’s attendance but for its award-winning architecture.
25 Shelton, No Direction Home, 25-29, provides a historical geography of Hibbing as well as a Zimmerman family history from the time when Dylan’s ancestors left the Russian Empire in the 19th century until Bobby arrived on 24 May 1941.
26 Nye, 6.
27 Stuhler, 6.
First World War, as successful as in Minnesota. In the interwar years Minnesota upheld its tradition of sending isolationists to Congress, whether Republicans or representatives of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party. When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, Minnesota was represented in the Senate by two isolationists. Although Minnesota’s 8th Congressional District, which includes Hibbing, was not the most isolationist district in the state, it certainly fitted the isolationist mantle. In 1931 its congressman for 14 years between 1929 and 1947, William Pittenger, tried to convince his colleagues in the House of Representatives that “we had better begin to look at world affairs from the standpoint of what is good or what is bad for America and not from the standpoint of the international financiers.” Henrik Shipstead, representing Minnesota in the Senate from 1923 to 1947, was a devoted Jeffersonian and agrarian progressive; whereas his radicalism vanished over the years and he ended up rather conservative, he never flinched from his isolationism.

Shipstead may have been a true believer. But by 1947, Minnesota voters had turned their backs on the veteran senator as well as on interwar-style isolationism. Postwar Minnesota, the Minnesota of Harold Stassen (governor from 1938) and Hubert Humphrey (senator from 1948), joined other Midwest states in accepting, even supporting, an activist role for the United States in world affairs. Wayne Cole ends his account of how Roosevelt defeated the isolationists by pointing to the eroding socio-economic bases of isolationism, concluding that “a way of life and a mode of thinking were fading from the American scene.”

As Hofstadter has pointed out, however, the yeoman farmer had been fading from the US scene for more than one hundred years; and yet the agrarian myth was still a political symbol to reckon with. The crux of my argument is that Bob Dylan, although he left Hibbing in 1959 and Minnesota in December 1960, is deeply influenced by that myth. The specific, political position of interwar isolationism was knocked dead by the attack on Pearl Harbor. When little Bobby started school, old Shipstead left the Senate, defeated. By the time Robert Zimmerman, now in Minneapolis, was busy being reborn as Bob Dylan, Shipstead was dying. But basic attitudes of the kind that helped shape Midwestern isolationism do not disappear overnight. We may safely presume that the Zimmerman son got his full dose of these attitudes, although we know

nothing about the voting pattern of father Abraham Zimmerman, small-town businessman. Before leaving Hibbing, Bob Dylan had been exposed to rural Minnesota: still grain and dairy farm country outside the mining Range. The picture that fastened in his brain, developed by rural propaganda, was the agrarian myth. Leaving the university after only one year (and very little studying) for Greenwich Village and, later, the goldfish bowl life of a superstar, hardly equipped Dylan with the tools for contrasting the myth with reality. His seclusion in the Catskill mountains after his 1966 motorcycle accident probably only reinforced his conviction that the good life is a country life. It was a most logical step when, in 1974, Dylan bought a farm — in Minnesota.  

And it should come as scant surprise that at the giant “Live Aid” TV concert in 1985, after playing “Ballad of Hollis Brown,” a 1963 song about a starving South Dakota farmer who in desperation shoots his family and himself — Mick Jagger and Tina Turner had just done “It’s Only Rock and Roll but I Like It” — Dylan would air his hope that “some of the money that’s raised for the people in Africa, maybe they could take just a little bit of it — maybe one or two million maybe — and use it, say, to pay the, er, pay the mortgages on some of the [American] farms, that the farmers owe to the banks.” As mentioned at the outset, not a terrific speaker — nor one to tell his audience what they want to hear. But sensible enough (if still ill-fitted to the occasion) for a true believer in the agrarian myth. In this context the complaint in “Union Sundown” that they want to grow food on the moon instead of in Kansas makes sense; as does the fear of your home garden being outlawed. The agrarian myth taken to its limits — and added a fair share of paranoia.

Although it may not be all that simple to deduce a foreign policy from the agrarian myth, its emphasis on self-sufficiency is pointing in isolationist directions. In “Slow Train,” the verse following Dylan’s bemoaning of foreign oil controlling American soil has “Jefferson turnin’ over in his grave.” It is no coincidence that Hamilton’s subterranean activities go unmentioned.

Besides internalizing the agrarian myth, Dylan when he left Hibbing had learned what international trade can do to a mining town. He shared his experience with his audience in “North Country Blues,” and in a 1984 interview: “ninety percent of the iron ore for the Second World War

35 Quoted from Wilshin, “Charity,” in Gray and Bauldie, *Telegraph*, 228. The importunate/unfortunate remark led, by the way, to “Farm Aid,” featuring a Dylan in top shape and spirits. Heylin, 401–03.
came out of those mines, up where I'm from. And eventually they said, 'Listen, this is costing too much money to get this out. We must be able to get it someplace else.' Now the same thing is happening, I guess, with other products.” The same interview has Dylan deploring the tendency towards globalism, providing, as it were, a prose version of “Union Sundown”: “there's a big push on to make a big global country — one big country — where you can get all the materials from one place and assemble them someplace else and sell 'em in another place, and the whole world is just all one, controlled by the same people, you know?” Dylan wants a different kind of United States: “it will have to be a country that's self-sufficient, that can make it by itself without that many imports.”

You take the agrarian myth, add a first-hand experience of the workings of free trade – and you have a trade isolationist deploring the machinations of Eastern capitalists: who locked the Minnesota mining gates, moved the Chevrolet assembly line from Detroit to Argentina, and now want to grow food on the moon instead of in Kansas. They may even come after your home garden. But do “With God on Our Side” and “Clean-Cut Kid” grow out of Midwestern isolationism as well? Did Dylan write “Masters of War” after reading old Shipstead speeches or getting hold of the correspondence course called “War or Peace,” produced by the Minnesota Education Department in 1936, which taught that the prime reason for war was economic? Most likely he did not. There is no need for any elaborate explanation of Dylan’s aversion to war and fear of the Bomb – just as there is no problem understanding why Dylan, with his instinctive empathy with the downtrodden and with his exposure to the emerging radical student environment in the early 1960s, got involved in the civil rights movement.

It may still be worth pondering, however, how Dylan came to point his anti-war finger at the masters of war, who “fasten the triggers/For the others to fire” and then “set back and watch/When the death count gets higher” and bank accounts grow. Was it all a result of the influence of Dave van Ronk, early Greenwich Village buddy and “New Leftist” who, like other Village friends of Dylan, tried to pull the newcomer from Minnesota out of the 1930s and into something more contemporary than cloning himself into Woody Guthrie II? An alternative would be once

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36 Rolling Stone, 21 June 1984, 18.  
37 Stuhler, 65.  
38 Dylan biographers have suggested that Dylan was strongly influenced by Suze Rotelo, the girl he was living with in the early Greenwich Village days. Suze, apparently a “red-diaper baby,” was working for the Congress of Racial Equality. See Scaduto, Dylan, 111-13; and Heylin, 51.  
39 Scaduto, 82-83.
more to pay another visit to the populists of the 19th century. Richard Hofstadter has drawn attention to the populist proclivity for conspiracy theory. Populists interpreted US history since the Civil War as a struggle between on the one hand the little man: “farmers, laborers, merchants, and all other people who produce wealth and bear the burdens of taxation” – and on the other hand the corporate interests: “the allied hosts of monopolies, the money power, great trusts and railroad corporations, who seek the enactment of laws to benefit them and impoverish the people.” Or, even simpler, “a struggle between the robbers and the robbed.” According to Hofstadter, “The notion of an innocent and victimized populace colors the whole history of agrarian controversy, and indeed the whole history of the populist mind.”

The conspiracy notion did not follow populism into oblivion but resurrected, transformed, in the 20th century. Hofstadter observes the conspiracy trait in progressivism. Progressives, however, as opposed to populists, were willing to mount the beast of federal power in their fight against the corporate interests. The New Deal represented a high-water mark for this strategy, until the expansion of federal government during the Second World War saw the beast grow to unprecedented strength. Midwestern progressive isolationists joined FDR’s ride for some time, becoming ever more fearful of where it might end. In the latter half of the 1930s, particularly after Roosevelt’s so-called court packing proposal in 1937, most isolationists decided to get off. But it was too late to make any difference: Roosevelt rode on, trampling the isolationists under foot.

In this context one can regard Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy’s campaign against Communist influence in the federal government as a revival of the populist conspiracy theory, this time directed against the federal beast run wild. It ought to surprise nobody that leading Midwestern isolationists Gerald Nye and Robert Wood, chairman of the America First organization, supported McCarthy. McCarthy and neo-isolationists like Senators Kenneth Wherry and James Kem fought big government on behalf of the little Midwesterner.

In this respect, Bob Dylan is a spiritual brother of Joe McCarthy. They share a tradition: that of representing the little man against the vast, apparently impersonal system hurting ordinary people. But when it comes to naming the people pulling the strings behind the scenes and the desks,

40 Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, 16–17, 35 (last quote), 64–65 (first quotes), and 70–93.
41 Ibid., 226–36.
Bob Dylan: Midwestern Isolationist

McCarthy and Dylan part ways. McCarthy is the more specific, pointing his finger at Communists — real or, more probably, imagined. Dylan is vaguer. His culprits are the somewhat less helpful "they."

Dylan’s "they" represent a monster with at least two heads: corporate management and the bureaucratic establishment, sometimes merged into the Establishment in general. "They" are those capitalists in the East who order the North Country mines to close down. The poor white man who killed civil rights activist Medgar Evers is only a pawn in their game. "They" are the multiple authorities of "Subterranean Homesick Blues," who are keeping it all hid. They run Maggie's Farm. "They" shift assembly lines from the USA to South America or indeed wherever on the globe; they have even touched the moon. "They" made a killer out of a clean-cut kid, that's what they did. "They" said America was the land of milk and honey and now "they" say it's the land of money: "who ever thought they could ever make that stick?" "They" are devious, conspiring people. "They" are not us.

IV

Bob Dylan told his audience not to follow leaders — himself included. Had he been heeded, there would have been little point in writing this article. But as Todd Gitlin, leader of the New-Left vanguard Students for a Democratic Society, later would write, “Whether he liked it or not, Dylan sang for us.... We followed his career as if he were singing our song.”

"Blowin' in the Wind" became a generational anthem. Joan Baez and Judy Collins would sing "The Times They Are A-Changin'" for, respectively, President Johnson and the 17 April 1965 march protesting the Vietnam war: what may be considered the official starting point of the antiwar movement. Songs like "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm," "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," "Highway 61 Revisited," and "Desolation Row," while less finger-pointing, took his

44 Quote from "It's Unbelievable," from the 1990 album Under the Red Sky (emphasis added). The songs referred to earlier in the paragraph are “North Country Blues,” “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” “Maggie's Farm,” “Union Sundown,” “License to Kill,” and “Clean-Cut Kid,” all in Dylan, Lyrics.
protest to new artistic levels and a new and wider audience. The monthly *Current Biography* recently updated its piece on Dylan: “the epitome of hipness.” Says the journal of his political influence: “The countercultural tribes awaited his gnomic yet oracular pronouncements as though they were the Hebrews preparing for the descent of Moses from Mount Sinai.” That this New Left Moses shocked his followers by first turning to country ballads instead of anti-Establishment rock and then, finally returning from the mountain, carried with him the real Commandments insisting that they were from God, may have diminished his group of disciples but is less relevant to his place in the historiography of the 1960s. Having described Dylan as a representative of Midwestern isolationism in 1960s’ clothing, the question of whether the same label also fits the New Left hardly needs additional begging.

Let it first be noted that the idea that the opposition to the Vietnam War represented some kind of “new isolationism” is nothing novel. Barbara Stuhler has discussed this notion – and dismissed it on the ground that those opposing US involvement in Vietnam would not oppose US involvement overseas in general. And of course history never repeats itself. The socio-economic bases of isolationism and Vietnam War opposition were completely different: by 1960 the number of students in the United States passed that of farmers; nine years later the farmers were outnumbered by three to one. The bipolar, nuclear world of the 1960s was in some respects fundamentally different from the world before Yalta and Hiroshima. And although the ageing Gerald Nye in 1971 criticized the US involvement in Vietnam, most interwar isolationists were long dead and those remaining played no significant role in the new movement. Charles DeBenedetti in his account of the anti-Vietnam War movement found that it consisted of two main elements: liberal internationalists and radical pacifists. Isolationism, if it played any part at all in the antiwar movement of the 1960s, must have been cleverly disguised. I shall end by suggesting that maybe it was in there in disguise – masquerading as the New Left.

Before proceeding, allow me to hedge my bets. As just mentioned, the

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47 *Current Biography*, October 1991, 26–30, quotes from p. 28.
world had changed since the heyday of isolationism. Moreover, the New Left focussed on issues which for various reasons had received little attention by progressives: the Bomb, campus democracy, civil rights, and increasingly the Vietnam War. And New Left leaders were very well read: they knew that the agrarian myth was just that. We might nevertheless dwell for a moment with an intriguing socio-geographic parallel, namely that both isolationism and New Leftism seemed to find its most fertile land in the Midwest. The Quaker-inspired Student Peace Union, which spread out from Chicago and came to represent something of an avant-garde linking peace organizations and the student movement before it folded up in 1964 in the aftermath of the US-Soviet test ban treaty, had its stronghold in the Midwest.\textsuperscript{52} Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), however, the organization which from 1962 emerged as the focal point of the New Left, points to the limitations on this line of speculation. SDS historian Kirkpatrick Sale states that early SDSers were “overwhelmingly from the East and generally from the cities.”\textsuperscript{53} Only with the advent of the “prairie power” cohorts in 1965 did the center of SDS recruitment shift: away from Eastern intellectuals to students from rural areas of the Midwest and Southwest.\textsuperscript{54} Although Sale in estimating geographical strength probably does less than justice to the influential Michigan group of early SDS leaders – which included such “founding fathers” as Al Haber, Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, and Paul Potter – the geographical background factor seems incapable of carrying our analysis very far.\textsuperscript{55}

More promising ground for further speculation is provided by ideology. A first observation would be that – somewhat surprisingly, given the position which opposition to US involvement in the Vietnam War would assume by 1965 – the New Left was not at first primarily interested in foreign policy.\textsuperscript{56} Nor was its analysis of international relations ever very sophisticated or constructive. Being in favor of “peace” is deceptively simple; it is much harder to come up with a credible strategy for coping with a competing superpower with an anti-

\textsuperscript{52} DeBenedetti, 41, 64, 95; Gitlin, 86–87; Matusow, 310.

\textsuperscript{53} Kirkpatrick Sale, \textit{SDS} (New York: Random House, 1973), 89. Sale adds, however, that there was “a sizeable majority from the Midwest.”

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 204–09, 278–82; Gitlin, 186.

\textsuperscript{55} Midwesterners among the SDS elite also included Clark Kissinger, national secretary from 1964, and “prairie power” president Carl Oglesby, elected in the summer of 1965. On the background of the SDS leaders mentioned here, see Sale, 24, 35, 108, 126, and 187. It may also be worth noticing that William Appleman Williams, dean of the Wisconsin School of New Left revisionist historians, was from southwestern Iowa.

\textsuperscript{56} Gitlin notes that when he was elected SDS president in 1963, he was “the first top officer whose main work had been for peace, not civil rights.” Gitlin, 131.
liberal ideology and a steadily increasing stock of nuclear weapons. For this reason, and because of the other factors mentioned above which separates the New Left from the old isolationists, it is probably prudent to do no more than point at the obvious similarity between the two movements, namely that both argued for a less active US role in world affairs – albeit for different reasons.

We are not forced to leave the issue at that, however. Foreign policy was but one side of the New Left as well as of older progressivism. Turning to domestic politics we find considerable similarities in another area of great interest to both radical movements. The New Left took over from progressivism a perception of the United States as run by the money interests – although it invented the name “corporate liberalism” for it, thereby including much of the federal bureaucracy as well. Moreover, the New Left and progressivism were of one spirit not only in bemoaning the dysfunctioning of the US political system but also in coming up with a similar panacea: direct democracy.

Around the turn of the century, progressives saw their democratic ideals perverted by urban machine politics. Votes were bought and sold by political “bosses.” Believing the problem to be not the citizen who accepted that his vote had a price but the system which let bosses buy and sell votes, progressive reformers called for direct popular democracy, including such devices as direct primaries, referendums and recall. No subject-matter was seen as above the capacity of the ordinary citizen to debate and decide in an enlightened way.

These ideas resurfaced in the Port Huron Statement: the SDS policy statement which, as “the manifesto not only of SDS, but of an entire generation of radicals,” provided the New Left with an ideology. Adopted at the 1962 summer convention, over the next four years the 64-page pamphlet was spread in some 60,000 copies, making it probably “the most widely distributed document of the American left in the sixties” – and probably the most important as well. It criticized the United States for not living up to the Union’s democratic ideals; instead, the document claimed, the United States “frustrates democracy by confusing the individual citizen, paralyzing policy discussion, and consolidating the irresponsible power of military and business interests.” Declaring that

57 Ibid., 188–89; see also DeBenedetti, 97–102.
58 Hofstadter, Era of Reform, 254–69.
"men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity," arguing that "the goal of men and society should be human independence," the Statement went on to prescribe the remedy of "participatory democracy" as the cure for America's disease. The Port Huron Statement was drafted by Tom Hayden: of Irish middle-class background and a leading member of the early New Left's Michigan stronghold. A speech prepared by Hayden in March 1962 had been even more succinct:

We must have a try at bringing society under human control. We must wrest control somehow from the endless machines that grind up men's jobs, the few hundred corporations that exercise greater power over the economy and the country than in feudal societies, the vast military profession that came into existence with universal military training during our brief lifetime, the irresponsible politicians secured by the ideological overlap, the seniority system [in Congress] and the gerrymandered base of our political structure, and the pervasive bureaucracy that perpetuates and multiplies itself everywhere.

Referring to Hayden's articles in 1960, when Hayden worked as a journalist for the university paper, DeBenedetti remarks that "by this time his writing had a Midwestern populist ring." Todd Gitlin calls the values of the Port Huron Statement "all-American in their attempt to fuse individualism with participatory democracy." It may be time to proceed one step further, and suggest that this element of New Left ideology in fact was a leftover from progressivism and not at all new. Maybe after all the times are not that much a-changin'.

60 Quoted from Sale, 51-52. 61 Quoted from ibid., 43. 62 DeBenedetti, 67-68 and 111, quote from 68. 63 Gitlin, 114. With reference to the Port Huron Statement and the debate between the SDS and the leaders of its parent organization the League for Industrial Democracy, who castigated the students for not condemning Communism, Gitlin stresses (p. 107) that "the movement's élan and language were utterly American. It did not speak in Marxist dialects.... The SDS Old Guard were steeped in a most traditional American individualism."