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James Kurth: The Protestant Deformation and American Foreign Policy: Study Guide

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JAMES KURTH: THE PROTESTANT DEFORMATION AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: STUDY GUIDE, 2009

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Study Questions

This talk was given at the Philadelphia Society meeting five months before 9/11. What is revealing is how much of this analysis was underscored by the events that followed and, more recently, intensified with yet another return to the modern American foreign policy default position (the “republic of choice”) following the Bush 43 administration’s emphasis on the War on Terror.

1. What does Kurth mean by **Protestant declension**? The purpose of this essay is to show why “its pervasive sway is generating intense resistance and international conflict.”
2. **The Protestant Religion and International Politics in European History** What were the **four major movements** that initiated the modern era in the early 16C “within the medieval structure of the Holy Roman Empire?” What were the Wars of Religion? What was the provenance (origin) of the **modern states-system**? The **Habsburg** [from “hawk castle”] family ruled the Empire from the late 13C to the first decade of the 19C when the French emperor Napoleon dissolved it. Charles V, who was also king of Spain, brought it to the apex of its power in the mid-16C. The family continued to rule Austria until the end of WWI. The patriarch of the family remains (2009) Otto von Habsburg, who would have become emperor when his father died in 1922. What did “Europe” become under the **Treaty of Westphalia**? What have been this multipolar system’s successor systems?
3. What were the two great Protestant naval powers and was their distinctive character? What accounts for the superiority of these small countries? What was **Max Weber**’s thesis about the Protestant ethic? What was distinctive about the two leading Protestant land powers? How did the classical **balance of power** system work? What were the goals and objectives of all of the powers? How did Protestantism effect the colonization of Africa and the creation of the German Empire? How did the alliance of Germany and Austria in 1879 have fateful consequences? Did the United States follow much the same path after it was admitted into the states-system in the late 18C?
4. **The Protestant Reformation versus Hierarchy and Community** What was the character of the Protestant protest? What were the features of the “double reformation” the reformers sought? Why did the Protestants emphasize personal “reading of the Holy Scriptures?” What makes Protestantism more unique than other religions? What was the intended (and restricted) effect of the removal of **hierarchy and community**, traditions, and customs?
5. **Protestant Churches and Church Governance** With respect to hierarchy and community, Protestant church polities varied in structure from Episcopalian (rule by bishops), Presbyterian (rule by bodies of elders), and Congregational. These correspond in the American constitutional system to the president, senate, and house. The electoral college (similar to that of the Holy Roman Empire and the college of cardinals that elects the popes) may be added. What do all Protestant churches deny both doctrinally and theologically?

6. **The Protestant Slide into Secular Life** What is the economic and political significance of the spread of the Protestant rejection of hierarchy and community into secular life? What took the place of hierarchy and community in the free markets and the political arena? What are the fundamental elements of the **American Creed**? The key question: How was the outward spread of the Protestant rejections of hierarchy and community from the arena of salvation into these other arenas “driven by a particular inner dynamic, or rather decline, within the Protestant faith itself?” Thought Question: Given that precedents for free markets, constitutionalism, or the rule of law already existed, what might their further development have looked like apart from a Protestant decline?
7. What are the **Six Stages of the Protestant Declension**? Kurth refers to Locke’s idea of the mind as a *tabula rasa* [blank slate]. He also alludes to J. Willard Hurst’s “**release of energy**” thesis about the advent of legal innovations and free-market reforms in mid-19C America. What churches in Europe and America remained hierarchical and even somewhat communal? How did the focus on grace shift to a focus on works? With the Presbyterian and Congregational churches Kurth does not mention any solutions, but one that was attempted in New England by the late 1660s is known as the “Halfway Covenant,” whereby the grandchildren of church members could receive baptism, even though the parents have not been admitted to full membership. How did **Max Weber** believe the Protestant ethic become the capitalist spirit? What took place could be ascribed a release of energy into worldly work.
8. The third stage is crucial to understand the cultural backsliding that followed. What happened with the growth of the number of Protestants who had experienced the culture but not the grace? As the focus on grace faded, what happened next? Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn published a short story, “Whiff from the Empty Bottle,” in *Catholic World* (1945) that takes a similar look at four generations of decline in the family of a very stern Calvinistic pastor. There are many sources on the **unitarian** (humanitarian, religious humanist) movement in early 19C New England, which coincides with the fourth stage. A turning point was the Unitarian takeover of Harvard in 1805. A good synthesis of both the movement and its consequences in the early 19C is Samuel L. Blumenfeld’s *Is Public Education Necessary?* The secular humanist **American Creed** that developed out of these trends is often referred to as a “civil religion,” about which a great deal has been written. Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart* is a particularly influential study. Learned Hand’s “Spirit of the Law” is an early expression. David Gress’s *From Plato to NATO* is a historiography of the development of the grand narrative approach to history: what M. Stanton Evans, in his book *The Theme Is Freedom*, calls “the liberal history lesson.” What has replaced the American Creed since the Second World War and, particularly, the 1960s? Its “cosmic humanism” aspires, in some circles, to the homogenization of humanity and generally adopts multiculturalism as a strategy for breaking down competing loyalties rather than as a final outcome.
9. **Protestant Pluralism and Public Rhetoric** What was the effect of the condition of **Protestant pluralism** on the public rhetoric of the early American republic? How would you characterize the logic of public rhetoric, even in the midst of periodic revivals and growing Catholic immigration? What was the resulting ideology and who wrote the classic description of it?
10. **The Protestant Declension and American Foreign Policy** The Spanish-American War marks the great sea change in American foreign policy represented by the “seven league boots” of Uncle Sam and, soon afterwards, gunboat diplomacy. One of Kurth’s colleagues at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Walter McDougall, dealt with this watershed change in *Promised Land, Crusader State*. Francis Lieber’s successor at Columbia, John W. Burgess, dealt with its constitutional ramifications in *Recent Changes in American Constitutional Theory* (1923). A few years later the Great White Fleet was sent on a trans-global voyage late in the second Theodore Roosevelt Administration. Congress had to appropriate additional funds to bring it back to the United States.

11. **The Fourth Stage of the Protestant Declension: Woodrow Wilson** Wilson saw himself called to implement the reforms instituted by Christ. Richard Gamble's *War for Righteousness* is a critique of Wilson's Progressive approach to international politics and "the war to end all wars." Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn singled out the clergyman George Davis Herron as one of the gravediggers of the Old Europe (*Leftism*, p. 241). What were Wilson's chief political and economic notions?
12. **The Fifth Stage of the Protestant Declension: The American Creed** Although the League of Nations was a failure, most of Wilson's "Protestant-like notions became permanent features of American foreign policy." How did the United States continue and expand its presence in many regions of the world? How was the American Creed promoted overseas? Why did the United States withdraw from European affairs after 1920? What became the characteristic pattern of American foreign policy in peacetime? How does Kurth account for the outbreak of war with Japan? In particular, it was the embargo of petroleum and scrap metal after Japan occupied China in the 1930s, but Japan had already been preparing for war against the United States by the early 1920s. How was this characteristic bifurcated mix of realism and idealism in foreign policy developed further after the Second World War? What other characteristic of American foreign policy also reach its fullest development during the Cold War?
13. **International Relations and Protestant Conceptions** Is great power **hegemony** over an international association a normal expression of great power behavior? Why does the United States have a unique place in the history of international associations? How is this pattern consistent with Protestant norms? How are these organizations being transformed since the Cold War?
14. **The Sixth Stage of the Protestant Declension: Universal Human Rights and the Protestant Deformation** What three factors caused American elites to embrace universal human rights in the 1970s? How has the United States become what Lawrence Friedman terms a "**republic of choice**" based on an idolatry of self? What is the ideology of **expressive individualism** (a term that Friedman also uses)? What kind of totalitarianism or general will does it represent? By the way, possessive individualism bears some resemblance to the "**inner-directed**" character type of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) while expressive individualism bears some resemblance to the "**other-directed**" character type. The inner-directed type has the inner resources to say with Martin Luther: "Here I stand, I can do no other." The other-directed type, like Vaclav Havel's greengrocer, takes his signals from the expectations of his peers or the reigning norms and tends to go along to get along. What is the **Protestant Deformation**? How would you describe the foreign policy of the republic of choice? What were some of the Cold War constraints that prevented a full pursuit of this project? How has this "grand project" fared since the collapse of the Soviet Union? As discussed by **Samuel P. Huntington** and others, where has there been greater resistance to this project? Pope John Paul II and, more recently, Pope Benedict XVI have criticized elements of the American project in a series of papal encyclicals. What are some signs that the resistance is breaking down?
15. **The Protestant Reformation and the Protestant Deformation** How do these two movements compare? What is undermining the American empire?

Review

stages of Protestant declension	Habsburg empire	Treaty of Westphalia
Max Weber	balance of power	hierarchy and community
American Creed	humanitarianism (unitarianism)	Protestant pluralism
hegemony	expressive individualism	republic of choice
Protestant deformation	Samuel P. Huntington	