

The American Conservative

[Getting Realist with Robert Merry](#)

A veteran of Washington journalism takes on The National Interest

By Lewis McCrary | October 27, 2011

Every politico knows K Street, the avenue that is the symbolic center of the Washington lobbying industry. But how many have heard of a small patch north of that broad avenue, the center of the capital's think tanks and intellectual life? To the northeast of Farragut Square, in a triangle roughly defined by L Street, Massachusetts Avenue, and 17th St.—Washington's idea alleys—sit a majority of the engines of public policy.

The old guard resides on stately Massachusetts Avenue, a showcase of the postwar optimism for elite central planning: Brookings, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Johns Hopkins' Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, at various times home to foreign-policy heavyweights like Francis Fukuyama, Paul Wolfowitz, and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Turn south and you encounter the fruit of a neoconservative reaction against the postwar establishment that began in the 1960s, flowered in the Reagan years, and continues to provide the blueprint for Republican administrations: the American Enterprise Institute and *The Weekly Standard* both occupy one nondescript building at the corner of 17th and M, directly across from that home of benign imperialism via photojournalism, *National Geographic*.

L Street, one block further south, is home to the relative newcomers to DC's idea alleys—the centrist New America Foundation, the libertarian Cato Institute, and the Pew Research Center. A few floors above Pew are the offices of The Center for the National Interest, formerly known as the Nixon Center. The center may not have the impressive edifice of Brookings or the sumptuous lunches of AEI, but it is here that realists—international relations experts who reject the dominant discourse of liberal interventionism—have some skin in the game. And they've just signed a new heavyweight to lead their flagship journal, *The National Interest (TNI)*.

Robert Merry, who became editor of *TNI* in September, is not widely known outside the Beltway. But he is a veteran of Washington journalism, having covered Congress and the Reagan White House for the *Wall Street Journal* before leaving day-to-day reporting for *Congressional Quarterly (CQ)*, which he later led as CEO for a dozen years. Along the

way he found time to write three books in fields as varied as 20th-century journalism, antebellum presidential history, and foreign policy.

Merry had long considered moving closer to policy advocacy. “I always contemplated perhaps getting into polemical journalism,” he admits. “I was recruited twice by Bob Bartley to join the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page.” He wasn’t ready to leave reporting then—he had also “become beguiled by the entrepreneurial spirit of the early Reagan years”—and the rigorously non-partisan *CQ* precluded any editorializing. Yet it was the need to publicly critique the principles behind the second Bush administration’s interventionism that motivated his 2005 book, *Sands of Empire: Missionary Zeal, American Foreign Policy, and the Hazards of Global Ambition*.

“Does America want to become a Crusader State promoting a universal culture and extolling presumed universal values that must be spread throughout the world in the righteous cause of peace?” Merry asked. “Or will any such missionary zeal inevitably collide with other world cultures and thus spread conflict and turmoil?”

The book caught the eye of realists, including Center for the National Interest president Dimitri Simes. When the editorship of *TNI* became vacant, Simes called Merry and a new era at *The National Interest* began.

Merry’s appointment marks a significant moment for the journal that began as a project of Irving Kristol, father of neoconservatism—a school today known for advocating a thoroughgoing interventionist foreign policy. *TNI* first came to prominence in 1989 after publishing a provocative essay by a 37-year-old political scientist named Francis Fukuyama. In “The End of History?” Fukuyama posited that “we may be witnessing ... not just the end of the Cold War ... but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

“I consider that to be one of the really truly dubious theses that has never been appropriately killed off,” says Merry. He points out in *Sands of Empire* that even Kristol eventually dismissed Fukuyama’s narrative of progress, saying, “I don’t believe a word of it.”

In the pacific 1990s, *The National Interest* was a forum for both realists and neoconservatives, the latter seeing the “end of history” as a call to Wilsonian idealism and democracy promotion. The two camps had been allies in the Cold War, but with that era over, they became uneasy bedfellows. The fissures began in 2001, when the Nixon Center took ownership of *TNI* from Irving Kristol and James Schlesinger became publisher. Even after that reorganization, divides were still apparent. Adam Garfinkle, then *TNI*’s editor, wrote that in an “age of New-Economy Wilsonianism” America should pursue a strategy “that expands the deep peace, preserves American primacy, and spreads Wilsonian institutions worldwide.” Then came 9/11 and Iraq, and the tension between the two camps rose to a head. In 2005, Fukuyama left to form *The American Interest*, and

Garfinkle became editor of the new spinoff. After 20 years, realists had taken full control of the *TNI* masthead.

Merry makes no bones about the journal's philosophical commitments, questioning "whether its identity in the realm of foreign policy realism is as coherent and consistent as it could be." He wants to make clear that *TNI*'s editors "stand for realism in foreign policy," not only through big theory pieces on the scale of "The End of History?—though Merry admits that they "are important" and "can get you attention if they're provocative and if they say something really serious that people can't ignore"—but also by finding a balance with coverage of unfolding events, both from academics and journalists.

"We need to give our readers a thorough understanding of what's really happening in some of these regions and potential hotspots around the world. If you believe that Wilsonian dreamy idealism is not really the prism to look at these events, then we have something to offer." Merry is also confident that *TNI*'s website can find a niche as the place to turn for serious analysis to supplement breaking international stories. "The mainstream media is usually about a week behind" in producing these kinds of backgrounders, he observes.

TNI remains committed to serious debate, Merry insists, an approach that may evoke the spirit of Irving Kristol, who in the 1980s left the academy and New York for what he saw as Washington's more lively and tolerant intellectual culture. The realist identity of *TNI*, says Merry, "has to balance off our interest in stirring debate and discussion—sometimes heated discussion. And you can't have that unless you have multiple sides of an argument presented."

He agrees with Kristol that the 1980s marked a flowering of intellectual life in the idea alleys of Washington, but he laments the result, with interventionists dominating both parties. His long view of history—which, following Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, sees civilizations as caught up in great cycles of rise and decline—lends hope to his realist colleagues. America may indeed be in decline, he says, and someone has to speak to that reality. In the 1950s, he points out, William F. Buckley and *National Review* were a "voice in the wilderness," out of which emerged a movement of then unimaginable scale.

But the intellectuals in the alleys can't achieve much without political support, particularly presidential leadership—the subject of his forthcoming book—and that leadership has to acknowledge the crossroads at which America stands. "We're still living in the world created by FDR," he says. And when the right "political manifestation" of a paradigm shift comes along, realists need to be ready.

Merry has the measured demeanor of a man used to observing things from the press box—not throwing food fights on cable TV. But the idea alleys shouldn't underestimate his determination to lead the realist camp to a new prominence. Under his leadership, *The National Interest* is sure to cause anxiety among interventionists of all stripes, reminding them that their current cycle of dominance may be coming to an end. Merry is fond of

saying that while there are no certain ends, history still moves with a “crushing force”—and no one can escape it, not even the advocates of progress.