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**Thomas Alan Schwartz.** “‘Henry, . . . Winning an Election Is Terribly Important’: Partisan Politics in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations.” SHAFR 2009 Presidential Address. *Diplomatic History* 33:2 (April 2009): 173-190. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00759.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00759.x> .

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Review by **Melvin Small, Wayne State University**

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**T**homas Schwartz’s SHAFR presidential address reprinted in the April issue of *Diplomatic History* makes a strong case for the importance of domestic political considerations, especially elections, in explaining at least some of the motivations of the makers of American foreign policy. And he does so without even mentioning that easiest of targets, Karl Rove.

Schwartz begins with two recently released tapes, one from Richard Nixon and the other from Lyndon Johnson, demonstrating the significance of their reelection campaigns in helping to shape the contours of a specific foreign policy. Schwartz cites my own work where I contend that while we suspect that most important U.S. foreign policies have been influenced by domestic politics and elections, we generally lack the smoking gun since it would seem indecorous for a president to talk about domestic politics, for the record, when he or she is considering matters of national security. With new tape releases, we have at least two rock-solid examples of the practice. Alas, it is unlikely that we will ever again be privy to such conversations, except when memoirists tell us about off-the-cuff comments like those of John F. Kennedy suggesting that he could not change Vietnam policy until after the 1964 election.

Those who would like to see and hear even more Nixonian smoking guns should punch up the documentary series “Fatal Politics,” on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Hughes, who works at the Miller Center where Schwartz located his juicy transcripts, has recently put together a brilliant selection of clips and videos not only proving the link between the 1972 election

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<sup>1</sup> YouTube Fatal Politics Channel, <http://www.youtube.com/user/fatalpolitics> . Accessed 29 April 2009.

and Vietnam policy but also making it virtually impossible for anyone to gainsay the “decent interval” thesis—including Henry Kissinger.

Schwartz mentions his dismay to discover that my own article on public opinion was one of the few left out of the second edition of *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (2004), presumably to make room for new “discourse” on trendier subjects. It is not very sophisticated these days to study such straightforward variables as reelection campaigns and partisan concerns, but Schwartz presents the case for them as he highlights their role from the 1790’s, where the party system itself owes a good deal to the foreign crises confronted by the Federalists, through the interesting debate about the origins of the Monroe Doctrine, and the run-ups to the Mexican-American and Spanish-American Wars and to both World Wars. And it is difficult to ignore the role of ethnic groups in explaining U.S. policy towards Great Britain in the nineteenth century and Israel and Cuba after World War II.

In looking at the nineteenth century, with which many SHAFR members have only a passing familiarity or at least interest, Schwartz reminds us that secretaries of state were often chosen because they were the leaders of their parties and not because of any special talent in that realm. And many of those who learned on the job ultimately became president.

The general issue of elections and foreign policy also involves the view from foreign capitals. Nikita Khrushchev used to boast that he helped elect John F. Kennedy instead of the anti-communist Richard Nixon by not releasing captured American flyers until after the election. Nixon was presumably given a boost by Mao when the Chinese leader purposefully planned the president’s epochal visit during a time when it would help him in the 1972 election.

Schwartz introduces several social-scientific models that one can apply to the issue, including James Lee Ray’s “rational political ambition theory,” which begins from the simple premise that all leaders desire to maintain their power and Alex Mintz’s attractive two-step approach whose first step involves an analysis of the political impact of different options in the national- security sphere. Another political scientist worth looking at is Nigel Bowles who in *Nixon’s Business* (2005) mined our archives to test Richard Neustadt’s framework for studying presidential power and authority. His chapter on Nixon’s decision to dissolve the Bretton Woods agreements reinforces the argument that the election of 1972 was foremost in the president’s mind when he shocked the international system by ending the gold regime. Bowles supports Luke Nichter’s argument, presented by Schwartz.

Many presidents who know they are permitting the upcoming elections to determine their foreign policies defend such maneuvering by contending that they are thinking of the nation’s security first since their opponents’ victories would leave the United States in a precarious position in the world. Certainly that was the case with FDR who was less

than honest with the public in 1940 because he was convinced that the Republicans would retreat from the nation's international responsibilities. Indeed, it is highly likely that FDR made the difficult third-term decision because he was convinced that only he could keep the nation safe, an argument highlighted in David DeSilvio's recent Wayne State University dissertation on FDR and the election of 1940. Similarly, Nixon was convinced that the election of George McGovern, whose nomination he helped to engineer and who was the perceived candidate of appeasement and unrealistic idealism, would threaten America's national security. And as Schwartz notes, Henry Kissinger was absolutely convinced that the election of another idealist, Jimmy Carter, could destroy the safer world he had helped to create and thus advised Gerald Ford to adopt policies that would keep the soft and inexperienced peanut farmer out of the White House.

With so many examples of foreign-policy decision-making turning on reelections especially those decisions made within two years of the next campaign, I am surprised that Schwartz did not try to make a case for a one-term, perhaps six-year presidency. That would make the president an instant lame duck but it might lead to more rational national-security policies. Of course, Schwartz does conclude on an optimistic note. Just because the president is concerned about winning the next election by testing the public-opinion winds before he or she acts, does not necessarily mean that the foreign-policy decision based upon that concern would be a disastrous one. In many cases, public preferences, often for non-intervention, in hindsight were rational and in the nation's best national-security interests. On the other hand, as we have recently seen, it is sometimes easy to alter the national mood or proclivities for international escapades when the president and his minions, who may have credibility at the beginning of their tenure, present intelligence estimates outlining a dire threat to the nation.

Whether there is the cause for hope in a system where domestic political issues often wag the international dog, as Schwartz concludes, he offers a convincing argument for always taking a look at election cycles and partisanship when trying to understand how presidents made their decisions, even if smoking-guns like those found in the Nixon tapes are rarely available. Finally, any scholar who can buttress a serious presentation with references to Paul Giamatti, *The Simpsons*, and *Casablanca's* Captain Renault in one brief article deserves attention.

**Melvin Small** is a Distinguished Professor of History at Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan after receiving his BA from Dartmouth College. Over the past two decades he has concentrated his research and writing on the postwar era, with an emphasis on the Vietnam War, the antiwar movement, and presidents Johnson and Nixon. A historian of U.S. diplomacy, his special interest has always been in the relationships between public opinion, domestic politics, and foreign policy, a subject reflected in his recent monographs as well as several theoretical articles. A former president of the Peace History Society, and a co-investigator on the quantitative IR project, the Correlates of War, he has written the award-winning *Johnson, Nixon and the Doves* (1988),

*Democracy and Diplomacy* (1996), *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (1999), *Antiwarriors* (2002), and *At the Water's Edge* (2005), among other books.

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