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Review by **William Michael Schmidli, Bucknell University**

The fraught seven months between President Jimmy Carter's signing of the Panama Canal and Neutrality treaties in September 1977 and their ratification by the Senate the following April, Natasha Zaretsky argues, marked more than a milestone in the rise of the New Right. Based upon her analysis of the arguments for and against ratification, Zaretsky concludes that treaty fight over whether to cede jurisdiction of the canal to Panama and establish the waterway's permanent neutrality "crystallized a debate in the mid to late 1970s about the future of U.S. foreign policy after Vietnam." (537) With Carter in the lead, supporters championed the treaties as not only advancing the President's effort to inject a much-needed dose of morality into U.S. foreign policy, but embodying a "mature" approach to resource management and the U.S. role in an increasingly globalized world economy. By contrast, opponents visualized the treaties as a "giveaway"—a boon to America's enemies reflecting the Vietnam War's lasting imprint of defeatism and weakness on much of Washington's elite political establishment. At the heart of this struggle, in other words, were competing visions of U.S. nationalism in the post-Vietnam era: "one nationalism that linked moderation, restraint, and moral revitalization to the restoration of U.S. power; and a competing nationalism that was fueled by the theme of American retreat, animated by the fear that the United States had emerged from the Vietnam War deeply wounded, and premised on the belief that the Soviet threat was growing rather than diminishing in importance." (537)

"Restraint of Retreat?" contributes to the rising focus among U.S. foreign relations historians on the "intermestic": the interplay between international and domestic considerations in shaping U.S. policy.¹ Having interrogated the relationship between

¹ On the intermestic dimension, see for example, Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America's Cold War: the Politics of Insecurity* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 10.

mutual anxieties over the family and the future of the United States in the post-Vietnam era in her recently published book *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980*, Zaretsky mixes a similar blend of political and cultural history in her analysis of the Panama Canal treaty debate.² Adding to a growing body of scholarship emphasizing the significance of the 1970s for U.S. politics and society, Zaretsky's piece effectively uses the treaty fight to illuminate competing visions of U.S. power at the end of the decade.³

On one side of the debate, the Carter administration, Zaretsky argues, "seized on the canal issue as one cornerstone of a distinctly post-Vietnam foreign policy." (539) As part of Carter's broader emphasis on inserting morality into U.S. foreign policy, the canal treaties promised to enhance the U.S. image in Latin America—strengthening Carter's nascent human rights policy, playing to the nationalist sympathies of the region's dictatorships (potentially mollifying their complaints of being targeted by the Human Rights Bureau), and institutionalizing a newfound respect for Panama's sovereignty. More broadly, Zaretsky contends that the Carter team understood the canal issue within the paradigm of "resource management" that emerged in the aftermath of the 1973 OPEC oil embargo (544). With access to natural resources taking on greater urgency, new powers emerging in the Third World, and the global capitalist economy becoming increasingly interdependent, the Administration focused on deploying soft-power to meet U.S. foreign policy objectives. Accordingly, for the Carter team, continued access to the Panama Canal and U.S. future prosperity in Latin America during an era of economic globalization would be best achieved "not through coercion or force, but rather through the sober assessment of needs, coupled with a willingness to negotiate with those actors in possession of the desired resource." (546) The Carter Administration's support for the canal treaties, Zaretsky concludes, reflected the President's effort to exhibit a new "maturity" in the international arena(548).

On the other side of the debate, opponents of the canal treaties "perceived the paralysis, confusion, and weakness that in their view had gripped policymakers in the wake of the Vietnam War." (548) Rather than maturity, prominent conservative leaders and grassroots New Right activists viewed the canal treaties as defeatism. Similarly, Carter's emphasis on management threatened to turn the United States, in the words of commentator Patrick Buchanan, into an "international shrinking violet." (554) Falling back on anticommunist rhetoric, opponents criticized Carter for playing into Soviet plans to turn the Gulf of Mexico into a "Red Lake" and lashed out at East Coast establishment bankers with financial interests in Panama "who put profit above patriotism and prioritized their financial interests over those of the nation." (556)

² Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³ See for example, Niall Ferguson et al., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

It is here that Zaretsky's essay really shines. Unlike her discussion of Carter's emphasis on maturity and resource management, Zaretsky's examination of the opponents of the treaties incorporates a range of analytical lenses that add depth and flavor to her argument. Opposition to the treaties, she argues, was frequently framed in gendered and racial terms. Taking cues from Theodore Roosevelt's emphasis on manliness, critics linked ratification of the treaties to U.S. emasculation and weakness. More broadly, opponents linked the canal "giveaway" treaties to the perceived failures of domestic social welfare programs, "simultaneously construct[ing] the U.S. state as a white benefactor and Panama as an implicitly nonwhite, feminized, needy dependent." (552) Such arguments, combined with an emphasis on Panama as an uncivilized tropical backwater prior to U.S. construction of the canal, elided the long history of U.S. imperialism in Panama—and the region as a whole—and instead created a narrative of "third world actors wielding power over the United States in ways that struck them as a form of blackmail." (555)

With her blend of cultural and political history, Zaretsky convincingly captures the red flags the treaties raised for many opponents. Her adept unraveling of the gender and racial tropes deployed by many opponents raises an interesting question: did the Carter Administration also engage in this kind of loaded discourse? While the theme of "maturity" figured prominently on both sides of the debate, in Zaretsky's telling, the Carter team seems far more sensible than treaty opponents—rather bland technocrats in comparison to the masculinity-fixated conservative leaders like Pat Buchanan or the subtly racist and empire-denying New Right spokesperson Phyllis Schlafly, let alone those who voiced more conspiratorial views percolating up from the grassroots, such as one Pennsylvanian who linked the debate to "big bankers" attempting to create "one world government where a few chosen people will control the whole world." (557) Does Zaretsky pass up an opportunity, in other words, to fully unpack gendered and racialized thinking animating the Carter Administration and instead zero-in on the nuttiness of treaty opponents?

In her conclusion, Zaretsky concurs with historians who view the Senate ratification of the canal treaties as a "Pyrrhic victory" for the Carter Administration, citing the political capital expended by the White House, on the one hand, and the significant political gains made by the New Right during the antitreaty campaign, on the other. Zaretsky further adds that the treaty provision granting the U.S. a permanent right to intervene in Panama if the canal's neutrality was threatened resulted in a lost opportunity to "reexamine the history of U.S. foreign policy" since "earlier discussions of historical injustice gave way to the near unrelenting reiteration of American intervention rights." (561) In sum, the opponents of the canal treaties, she concludes, were able to "dismiss the call for resource management, reassert the primacy of the Cold War, and prioritize territorial nationalism over the globalization of American capital." (562)

In light of the Ronald Reagan administration's strong support for neoliberal economic policies, the latter statement raises an intriguing question. Given the wariness of many treaty opponents to the forces of globalization, how do we explain the deep structural reforms in the Third World induced by the Reagan-led Washington Consensus during the 1980s? Or subsequent conservative support for free trade agreements? In this sense, should we understand the treaty debate as crystallizing the New Right's vision of U.S.

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nationalism, or as revealing impending fissures (particularly in regard to economic policy) among the diverse constituencies of U.S. conservatism?

Taken as a whole, “Restraint of Retreat?” has much to offer scholars of both the Carter Administration’s foreign policy approach and the rise of the New Right. By illuminating the competing visions of U.S. nationalism animating the Panama Canal treaty debate, Zaretsky makes a compelling addition to our understanding of U.S. political and social development in the post-Vietnam era.

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