



Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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At last an Assistant Professor, who is willing to think in bold, broad terms about core issues of international politics and the internal affairs of nation-states. One casualty of the still mounting pressure on young scholars to rush into print is that it discourages wide-canvas books and original speculation.

Jeremy Suri has broken this mold and written an original, challenging work of synthesis that brings together topics that are often treated in isolation. *Power and Protest* is a genuine work of international history. The accessibility of foreign archives, particularly those from the former Soviet bloc, has generated repeated calls for a new international history. In practice, however, few historians have been able to avoid an American-centered or Soviet-centered history. Suri has managed an overview that enables the reader to view international politics from multiple perspectives and to provide a broader context for understanding national decisions.

The author also links the study of high politics within nation-states to their social and intellectual history. Diplomatic historians have long recognized the importance of this sort of inquiry, but have had difficulty implementing it. With the same facility that he displays, moving back and forth between the capitals of the great powers, Suri examines the social movements inside these states and their impact on foreign policy.

It is difficult to do justice to the many disparate insights and interpretations found in the book. However, Suri advances a clear albeit controversial line of argument, which holds the work together. Central to his analysis is his contention that by the late 1950's the Cold War had reached a stalemate. This was because both Superpowers were effectively handcuffed by the existence of nuclear weapons, which "were so powerful that they were useless" (3). For each side the cost of attacking the other had become prohibitive.

This "stalemate" was unsatisfactory to restless publics in the United States and the Soviet Union. Partly for this reason, President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev launched fresh initiatives designed improve their country's international position. Yet a series of close calls, notably in Berlin and during the Cuban Missile Crisis, induced greater caution. "Fearful of

conflict,” Kennedy and Khrushchev “curtailed their ambitions for international change,” and by so doing “accepted the political status quo, they had criticized years earlier” (43).

Yet rather than calming the waters, this shift created new instabilities. Other heads of state—Mao Tse-Tung in China, Konrad Adenauer and later Willy Brandt in West Germany, Charles DeGaulle in France—resented the dominance of the Superpowers and sought ways of escaping a bipolar configuration that constrained their national interests. Furthermore, citizens in both the eastern and western blocs became even more discontented with the rigidities of a permanent Cold War.

In all major nations, the key actors were the students of the post-1945 baby boom generation. In an effort “to nurture more productive and loyal citizens,” industrial countries had greatly expanded institutions of higher education. This created a critical mass of young people, residing close together with both the time and opportunity to challenge existing authority. As their movements developed, they were able to draw upon “an international language of dissent.” Writers such as Michael Harrington, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Wu Han and Herbert Marcuse “offered biting critiques of political elites for failing to fulfill domestic promises and accomplish national goals,”(130) and provided an intellectual stimulus to insurgency.

While the breakdown of the Cold War “domestic consensus” thus preceded the Vietnam War, Suri maintains that in the west, the American escalation of the war triggered an outpouring of rage and disruptive protest that threatened the very foundation of the state. Moreover, there was a multiplier effect as militant student actions in one country inspired even more incendiary acts in others.

In a lengthy chapter entitled “The Illiberal Consequences of Liberal Empire,” Suri re-examines the American role in Vietnam. Though sharply critical of its results, he sees the American efforts there to be an expression of liberal ideology. The mission was indeed imperial, but “the difference between the American liberal empire and its predecessors is the *degree* to which Americans thought they were really improving the rest of the world . . . Liberal faith in individual rights and market relations was at the core of American expansion overseas. Even critics who have pointed to the self-interest and hypocrisy of U.S. imperial activity have also noted the powerful influence of liberal ideology” (131-132).

Viewing the Vietnam War from an international perspective, Suri emphasizes the role of the Soviet Union and China, as well as the United States. For all three powers, Vietnam was not a vital national interest, but simply an opportunity to assert ‘ideological leadership.’ Each wanted to show that “they had the best ideas to fill in the open spaces” (133). The particular attraction of Vietnam was that it seemed safe terrain for conducting this competition “because of its apparent isolation from the most dangerous areas of superpower confrontation” (133).

As it turned out, Vietnam became a trap for all three. The Soviets and Chinese found themselves competing for influence with a junior partner in Hanoi that demanded their aid, while ignoring their advice. For the United States, there was a fearful loss of life and international prestige, as its plan for uplifting the Vietnamese was translated into devastation and failure on the ground.

Why did Kennedy and Johnson persist in a project that was so obviously foundering? Sooner or later every writer on the Vietnam War confronts this well-worn but haunting question. For Suri, part of the answer is the genuine threat of communist expansion in Southeast Asia. However, his larger argument is that the same ideological passion, which led the United States into the war continued to drive the policy. In this rendering, it is the idealism of American leaders that produced disaster.

For Lyndon Johnson in particular, Vietnam was the arena in which the U.S. could escape the Cold War “stalemate” and put its principles into action. As he instituted an ambitious reform program at home, the President was hoping to produce an expanded New Deal for Southeast Asia. To retreat from Vietnam “would call the entire idea of an international New Deal into question” (150). If the United States “failed to improve the lives of Vietnamese citizens,” how could it “expect to succeed in other parts of the world?” Yet whatever the intention, Suri acknowledges that the United States was behaving in Vietnam like “a classically imperialist state” (154). The resulting damage profoundly effected students in the west, who were already alienated and angry about the shape of the Cold War world.

This leads Suri into the most original and important part of his book – the global protests of 1968. While it has been widely recognized that the popular upheavals of the period had an international dimension, there have been few efforts by historians to attempt an overarching analysis of this phenomenon. Suri maintains that it was “nuclear stalemate between the great powers, unresolved alliance disputes, and the increasingly impersonal nature of domestic institutions,” which “alienated citizens from their governments.”

As an aspect of the Cold War competition, leaders of both blocs had made grandiose commitments to their domestic constituencies. The consequence was heightened expectations and a perception of “false promises,” especially by young people. The world remained dangerous and polarized, while social change at home seemed glacial.

Suri provides a fascinating review of upheavals in the United States, Germany, France, Czechoslovakia, and China. He is alert to their particularities, notably the situation in China where it was Mao himself, who generated revolt from below as a way of smashing a stagnant communist party and government bureaucracy. While describing “local grievances” that inspired the initial protest Suri contends that “dissatisfaction with Cold War politics broadened the range of public criticism beyond provincial concerns” (211). Although there was little coordination between national movements, “protestors operated in parallel, reflecting the similar—though certainly not identical—discontents and strains that transcended national boundaries” (211).

This produced a crisis of authority in every nation, as governments responded with the use of force to quell discontent. As seen most vividly in the case of France, a policy of violent repression only fanned the flames of discontent and undermined even further the legitimacy of the state. Leaders in all the affected societies “became aware of their precarious hold on power.”

One curious development was that “Cold War antagonists now ... recognized their interdependence” (213). Already linked by their common fear of nuclear annihilation, “they also

shared difficulties in maintaining basic order within their boundaries.” From this matrix was born the politics of “détente.” Conventionally regarded as an effort to reduce international tensions, Suri argues instead that “détente” was primarily a means of enhancing domestic social control. Government elites “used agreement with foreign adversaries to contain increasingly virulent internal pressures” and to “free their resources for repressive measures” (213).

Casting away some old “ideological baggage,” leaders jettisoned “longstanding policies—such as ‘nonrecognition’ between the two Germanys and between the United States and China” and “now affirmed one another’s legitimacy as sovereign states” (214). Paradoxically, the point of this exercise, however was not to end the Cold War or to dismantle its architecture but to re-stabilize the existing order. While personal relationships between top officials became more amicable, military arsenals continued to grow.

These “profoundly conservative” developments were accompanied by even greater secrecy, lies, and manipulation on the part of governments and their increased isolation from public opinion. Just as Mao Tse Tung used “contact with external powers to restrain the Red Guard groups that had grown too disruptive,” (231) so Richard Nixon was able to use apparent diplomatic victories to handicap a rebellious peace movement.

The author’s own attitude towards the politics of “détente” is decidedly negative. As a strategy for preserving stability, he admits its success. However, “détente’s fatal weakness grew from its inability to address the claims of citizens and small states that refused to accept the status quo because of its perceived injustice” (258). Absent from the calculus of elites was any attention to issues of “national self—determination, human rights, economic fairness, and racial and gender equality” (258).

The response of concerned citizens across the globe was to retreat from politics. Daunted by the apparent immunity of elites and the absence of moral content from any national agenda, it became more rewarding to focus on jobs, community and family life. Thus was nurtured a cynicism towards governance that has persisted to the present day, and which impedes democratic decision-making into the post 9-11 era of the Bush “war on terrorism.”

In many ways the passionate conclusion of Suri’s book is curiously at odds with its complacent narrative. His presentation of the Cold War is deeply influenced by the ideas of John Gaddis to whom he acknowledges a great intellectual debt. Like Gaddis, Suri embraces the notion of “the long peace” as a way of conceptualizing the closing decades of the 20th Century. His emphasis on the Cold War stalemate reflects that perspective as does the implication (in the first part of his book) that efforts by governments and citizens to transform the international order were grandiose and flawed.

But was there ever a Cold War stalemate? Perhaps in Europe where both the Soviet Union and the United States seemed resigned to the division of the continent. However, it is a mistake to extrapolate from the European situation to developments elsewhere. Suri acknowledges that the nuclear arms race continued, yet fails to appreciate its significance. Soviet and American leaders recognized the perils of a “first-strike,” but continued to regard nuclear advantage as a key to

their geopolitical influence. For that reason, each side persisted in developing weapons that increased the danger to the other.

Moreover, the apparent stability in Europe merely fueled violent confrontations in other locations. The notion of “a long peace” has no application to events in Latin America, Africa, and most obviously Southeast Asia.

In Suri’s description the Cold War lingers in the period after the Cuban missile crisis as an atavistic formation, kept artificially alive by the grip of ideology. In Vietnam, there are no important interests at stake, merely the gratuitous efforts by Superpower leaders to impose their ideas in an unimportant place. He overlooks the reality that two social and economic systems were in deadly rivalry with each other. The stakes were not always symmetrical. For the United States, Vietnam became a vital arena of contestation because its military “credibility” was under challenge and because throughout the Third World it was facing indigenous resistance to a global capitalist order.

It is one of the peculiarities of this book that while Suri does a creditable job of incorporating intellectual, cultural, and political developments into his analysis, he pays no attention to the economic interests that underpinned US policy and that of its rivals. That omission leaves the unintended impression that the Cold War competition was devoid of content, and was nothing more than a cynical ploy of governing elites, who used international politics to maintain domestic power.

Suri is surely right to suggest that Cold War circumstances shaped domestic protest across the globe. However, the relevant stimulus was not a stalemate but a reckless, expensive, violent impulse to victory—exemplified on the American side by a willingness to devastate the people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in order to impose their national agenda.

In an otherwise thoughtful discussion of the American protest movement, Suri places far too much emphasis on the excessive expectations of the young. The extremism that he describes did not originate with a youthful intolerance of immobility or stagnation. It derived from the continuing reality of death and destruction, which an ostensibly democratic polity was powerless to stop. From that perspective, the claims of Lyndon Johnson and others to be propagating reformist ideals in Southeast Asia was justifiably perceived as nonsense.

Power and Protest is an important new book, which illustrates some of the promise as well as the pitfalls that can result from the new international history. It is a major work, which all serious scholars of the Cold War will wish to consult.

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