



***The Global Cold War:  
Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times***  
**Roundtable Review**

Reviewed Works:

**Odd Arne Westad.** *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times.* New York: Cambridge University Press, October 2005. ISBN-13: 978-0-52185-364-4. \$35.00 (hardback). ISBN-13: 978-0-52170-314-7. \$19.99 (paperback, published March 2007).

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Review by Jerald A. Combs, Emeritus Professor of History, San Francisco State University

First let it be said that Odd Arne Westad has offered a magisterial survey of the Cold War in the Third World that fully deserves its Bancroft Prize. Remarkably for a work of this breadth, Westad has combined the use of a wide array of secondary works with significant research in recently available primary documents. He has written clearly and vividly in a way that is accessible to the wider public yet sufficiently detailed, documented, and balanced to be convincing to a professional audience. While he does not offer any startlingly new information, his book will inspire some rethinking by many Cold War historians regardless of their politics.

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Westad's thesis is that the most important aspects of the Cold War were not the European, strategic, or military issues around which most histories of the period have centered but instead involved the attempts of the United States and the Soviet Union to impose their own versions of "high modernism" on the Third World. These Third World interventions by the superpowers, aided by local elites who invited such interventions to modernize their nations and reform or abolish their own peasantry, brought little but disaster according to Westad. He sympathizes fully with those who resisted modernism to protect the religious and peasant values that the superpowers and local elites sought to eliminate and he regards modernism, whether of the American liberal-capitalist or Soviet communist version, as simply colonialism and foreign control by another name.

While Westad blames both the United States and the Soviet Union for their Third World interventions, he is harsher on the United States. The Soviets were constrained during the Stalin and early Khrushchev years because they lacked the ability of the United States to project their influence globally through superior economic, naval, and air power. Thus, it was American interventionism in the 1950s and 60s that "created the Third World" because those interventions inspired a common resistance among anti-colonial leaders premised on the principle of national sovereignty without sufficient concern for the issue of internal liberty. Not only did the United States create the Third World by its interventions, according to Westad, but it destroyed those societies by imposing brutal dictatorial governments and a version of development (modernization) that was one-sided in favoring developed over developing economies. A few nations with an industrial capital base, access

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to international markets, and export-oriented policies ultimately did well, especially in Southeast Asia, but most did very poorly. By demolishing Third World societies, American interventions left those societies vulnerable to further disasters of their own making.

Westad overreaches in casting so much blame on the United States for the shape of the Third World, especially when he does not analyze just how things would or should have worked if Americans had not intervened. Nevertheless, Westad's account of the line-up of American interventions in the Third World during the early Cold War, especially when that line-up is unleavened with the discussions of the brutal conduct of Stalin and the Soviets in Europe that mix with the narrations of Third World interventions in most general histories of the Cold War, makes for devastating reading. There is no denying Westad's descriptions of the atrocious and dictatorial governments that the United States helped to install in Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, and the Congo and the vicious and unjustified means it used in combating what it feared might be revolutionary and Soviet-leaning regimes. There is also no denying the way in which American interventionism was discredited in the eyes of almost all of the Third World by its actions in Vietnam, Cuba, and the Middle East, where the United States supported Israel in its conflict with rising Arab nationalism. I hope that some specialists in the particular interventions Westad describes will comment in this roundtable on the accuracy of Westad's abbreviated histories of those incidents, but to this generalist they seemed quite balanced and in accord with best recent secondary works on those topics. The one exception is his description of the Six Day War of 1967, in which he blames the United States for failing to restrain Israel without any mention of the Soviet role in falsely warning Egypt that Israel was mobilizing for an invasion.

In the most original part of Westad's book, the author uses primary sources from recently opened archives in the former communist world to describe the Soviet Union's own Third World interventions, which accelerated especially in the 1970s. In that decade, many Third World leaders responded to the discrediting of America's interventionism in Vietnam, Cuba, Angola, and the Middle East and the failures of the U.S. model of modernization by turning to the Soviet model of modernism along with Soviet military, economic, technological, and political aid. In Westad's view, these Soviet interventions were as misguided and ruinous as America's. Like the United States, the Soviet Union also was founded on universalist European and Enlightenment ideas rather than identity, and Soviet interventions based on these principles, like American interventions, inspired nativist reactions. Westad offers excellent and well-documented accounts of the Soviet Union's relatively unsuccessful attempts to control Cuba, its support of the vicious regime of Mengistu in Ethiopia, its contributions to the chaos of Angola, and its doomed and violent intervention in Afghanistan. He also points out that the Soviet model of development—heavy industry, collective agriculture, avoiding the world market, and state mobilization and nationalization of major economic resources—failed disastrously and left the former colonial states that tried it in great poverty.

Meanwhile, of course, the United States under Nixon and Kissinger was continuing to intervene with mixed success to install or support dictatorial and atrocious regimes that

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could serve as American proxies in their areas. This included Brazil, Argentina, and Pinochet's Chile in Latin America, Iran in the Persian Gulf, South Africa in Angola and elsewhere in Africa, and Suharto's Indonesia in Asia. American Cold War interventionism then culminated with Ronald Reagan's aggressive support of rebels against leftist regimes in Central America and support for the Islamic fundamentalist rebels against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

This book, I believe, will have a significant impact on the historiography of American foreign relations. It is a powerful indictment of American foreign policy in the Third World, one that all but the most determined and ideological nationalists will find persuasive, and one therefore that will contribute greatly to the revisionist view of the Cold War. Westad provides a very sophisticated view of American motives. He has shifted away from the economic interpretation of American (and to some extent of Soviet) foreign policy that appeared in revisionist histories in its strictest form in the works of historians like Gabriel Kolko and in less rigid form in the Open Door interpretations of William Appleman Williams and the Wisconsin school. He has offered a more cultural/ideological interpretation in which economics play an important but only partial role. Westad asserts that strictly economic motives for American foreign policy are inadequate to explain American policy and points to the inconsistencies of U.S. tariff policy and the lack of clout that business exercised with various presidents as evidence for that. He emphasizes instead the cultural and ideological influences on American interventionist policies that include racism, beliefs in technology and modernization, entrepreneurial aggressiveness, and individualistic anti-collective interpretations of liberty. Thus, he incorporates many of the insights from the cultural turn in the history of American foreign relations. One could perhaps interpret the cultural and ideological factors and the motives they created for American policies more favorably than Westad does, but it seems to me that he has been essentially fair in assessing them.

He also incorporates the recently available documents from the Communist side of the Cold War in ways that earlier revisionism could not. The fact that these documents condemn much of Soviet policy undercuts the sort of revisionism that blamed the United States almost entirely for the Cold War but does not lessen the criticisms that can still be made of U.S. policy, for clearly American interventionism in the Third World preceded Soviet interventions.

Another factor that makes Westad's book so persuasive is the contemporary atmosphere in which it is being read. With the end of significant threats to the United States emanating from Russia and the First World, it is natural that people will concentrate on the history of American policies toward the Third World areas that constitute present catastrophes and dangers. After reading this book, it is impossible to believe that a repudiation of the unpopular policies of George W. Bush by the United States will make much difference to the attitudes toward America in the Third World however much it might improve attitudes in the First World.

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But however persuasive Westad may be in his portrayal of U.S. policy toward the Third World, by omitting the concurrent Cold War in the First World, he removes a historical context that is important to proper historical judgment of the Cold War and American policy overall. For revisionists who regard the United States as the aggressor in the First and Second Worlds as well as the Third World and who see Soviet policy as essentially defensive, that context will not make much difference and they will see American policy in the First and Third Worlds as all of a piece. But if the Soviet Union really did pose a security threat to the United States, or even if American leaders mistakenly believed that the Soviets posed a threat, it casts U.S. policy in the Third World in a somewhat different light.

One does not need to go to the lengths of John Gaddis in his *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* to argue that fears for national security underlay the entire history of American foreign policy or even as far as his Cold War security arguments in *We Now Know* and *The Cold War: A New History* to believe that the Soviets did indeed present a threat and that American policy was at least partially a response to that threat.<sup>1</sup> Historians with access to the recently opened documents of the communist world do seem to have reached a consensus that Stalin wanted to cooperate with the West at least temporarily after World War II, but there certainly is no consensus on whether the kind of concessions the West would have had to make to continue that cooperation were desirable given the nature of Stalin's regime and suspicions about his long-term plans. Certainly the new documents leave little doubt of the enmity that the Soviet leaders and Mao's China felt for the United States. Clearly both Khrushchev and Brezhnev regarded détente as a mere tactic and saw it as no restraint whatever in their expansive policy toward the Third World.

Revisionists can argue that the United States nevertheless had little to fear from its communist adversaries. After all, America was militarily and economically far more powerful than they were. But once the Soviets acquired nuclear weapons it was not at all clear that U.S. nuclear supremacy was useful except to deter the Soviet employment of such weapons. And while the United States certainly had greater naval and air power to project into the world at large, the Soviets had conventional supremacy in the European theater that seemed so vital to the world balance of power.

While there is thus a continuing debate about the communist threat in the First World and American policy toward it, there does seem to be a consensus among historians that the United States exaggerated the threat of Soviet activities in the Third World in that Third World nationalism was likely to make Soviet interventions as self-defeating as American ones. Moreover, the consensus of historians also seems to be that American interventions had most of the grievous consequences that Westad has so well described. But if American leaders truly believed that communist activities in the Third World posed a security threat

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<sup>1</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005).

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to the United States because they would shift the balance toward the Communist great powers, then again it places U.S. interventions in a somewhat different context. The mitigation for American policy might be slight, but that mitigation ought at least to be part of the overall judgment.

Further mitigating the regrettable American policies toward the Third World is the fact that devising a proper policy toward developing nations is difficult even under the best of circumstances and with the best of motives. That difficulty can be seen in the rather anemic prescription for such a policy Westad offers at the end of his book. "If there is one big lesson of the Cold War," he says, "it is that unilateral military intervention does not work to anyone's advantage, while open borders, cultural interaction, and fair economic exchange benefit all." He argues that nations need to "stimulate interaction while recognizing diversity, and, when needed, acting multilaterally to forestall disastrous events." Westad believes that there is little hope that the United States will accept such a policy because it has been interventionist throughout its history, not just during the Cold War, and that the only chance to change that policy would be if American dissenters came to power. He opines that "there is also another America, symbolized by the resistance to the war in Vietnam, the protests against intervention in Central America, and the opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq."

Well, amen to all of that, but the devil is in the details. Just how does his call for "open borders [and] cultural interaction" differ from modernism and fit with the peasant and religious values he implicitly defends. Beyond the call for "fair economic exchange," what sorts of economic arrangements need to be fostered by and with the Third World? And since the United States will inevitably influence these arrangements even if it avoids unilateral military intervention, what sort of policies should the United States follow to accommodate its own interests while confronting the issues of poverty in the developing world and terrorist threats to the West? There is certainly no consensus on specific foreign policies in the "other America," whatever that "other America" might be when at some point the opposition to the Vietnam and Iraq wars encompassed a majority of the people.

It would have been helpful if Westad had made clearer the preferable alternative to U.S. intervention in the Cold War. Was it essentially abstention, as realists critical of intervention argued, or a different kind of engagement in favor of revolutionary movements, as revisionists maintained? But even without offering a clear alternative, Westad has performed a great service by describing the history and consequences of U.S. and Soviet interventions.

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