

# 2009



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**George C. Herring.** *From Colony to Superpower: U. S. Foreign Relations since 1776.* Oxford University Press: New York, 2008. 1,056 pp. ISBN: 978-0195078220 (hardback, \$35.00).

Roundtable Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Roundtable Web Editor: George Fujii

Introduction by: Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

Reviewers: Jerald A. Combs, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, Howard Jones, and Douglas Little.

Author's Response by George C. Herring, University of Kentucky (Emeritus)

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

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George Herring's first book, *Aid to Russia, 1941-1946: Strategy, Diplomacy, the Origins of the Cold War*, appeared in 1973 in the Contemporary American History Series edited by William E. Leuchtenburg for Columbia University Press. Yes, the origins of the Cold War was contemporary history in the distant past. A year earlier John Lewis Gaddis published *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* in the same series. Both authors made a significant contribution to the emerging post-revisionist perspective on the origins of the Cold War. They moved away from the preoccupation with the issue of who was more responsible for the start of the conflict, Joseph Stalin in the Kremlin who hoped to spread communism according to the traditionalist viewpoint, or the United States in its search for markets and hegemony as depicted by revisionists. Herring, Gaddis, and other post-revisionists searched for an illusive middle ground and to examine the origins of the conflict as a historical process driven by conflicting perspectives, interests, and misperceptions.

Neither Gaddis nor Herring completely discarded their original perspectives even as they moved into different areas of specialization. Gaddis continued his studies on Soviet-U.S. relations and strategy whereas Herring moved on to Vietnam with *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, the first edition arriving in 1979 and currently in a fourth edition (2002). Herring's text arrived as historians began to teach courses on the Vietnam conflict. He placed the conflict in the context of the expanding global Cold War. For historians looking for a balanced introduction to the conflict that integrated diplomacy and military history, Herring's approach, which combined overall criticism of U.S. policy with a dispassionate tone, was a welcome change from the intensity of the contemporary debates. Subsequently Herring added several additional influential works on Vietnam, most notably *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The "Negotiating Volumes" of the Pentagon Papers* (1983) and *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (1994).

With *From Colony to Superpower: U. S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, Herring has successfully taken up the challenge of addressing the entire history of American diplomacy in one volume of almost 1,000 pages.<sup>1</sup> The reviewers are in agreement that Herring has met the challenge with, in Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman's words, a "sure-footed narrative ... rich in detail that is sometimes telling and sometimes just plain fun." Cobbs Hoffman welcomes Herring's avoidance of presentism in his narrative and his "deft handling of human foible." (1-2) Howard Jones agrees that Herring keeps the story moving in an account that is "balanced and fair in interpretation." (1) Jerald Combs and Douglas Little applaud Herring's attention to the human dimension of foreign policy and as Combs notes, topics that are frequently left out such as U.S. relations with Native Americans and the influence of religion and missionaries on U.S. policy.

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<sup>1</sup> A more common approach among texts on U.S. diplomacy is to focus on the 20<sup>th</sup> century or offer two volumes with examples such as Howard Jones, *Crucible of Power: A History of American Foreign Relations from 1897* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2008); Robert D. Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy since 1900+* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.; 2008); Jerald A. Combs, *A History of American Foreign Policy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; 2 vols., 2008); and Thomas G. Paterson, *et.al., American Foreign Relations; A History* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.; 2 vols., 2004).

The reviewers also raise some questions about Herring's approach and interpretations as well as his perspective within the various schools of interpretation:

- 1) What does Herring consider as the most important factors shaping U.S. policies? Little suggests that Herring highlights the role of race, technology, and exceptionalism in shaping American attitudes and policies; (2) Cobbs Hoffman suggests that "issues of race, class, and gender make only fleeting appearances" in Herring's analysis, but she concludes that these concepts could not have carried the narrative throughout at the expense of "physical force, economic interests, international custom, and patterns of diplomatic interaction." (2) Jones points to expansion as a key preoccupation of American leaders, which is emphasized by Herring from the Founding Fathers to 20<sup>th</sup> century, noting that "the role of expansion in bringing security and empire" under the guidance of skillful American leaders is a major theme. (1) Combs gives Herring considerable credit for including both the "domestic context within which American leaders conducted their foreign relations" as well as the international environment and role of international actors in influencing U.S. policy. (1)
- 2) Is a central thesis possible in a comprehensive text covering over 200 years? Cobbs Hoffman notes that Herring covers the familiar themes of exceptionalism, racialism, enthusiasm for spreading democracy, the pursuit of markets and territory but she would like "a sharper assessment of some sort" to help Americans today to "better understand [the United States'] path and America's cumulative impact upon the world." (3) Other reviewers point to Herring's title and discuss how the U.S. transformed itself from colony to superpower with respect to the contributions of its leaders and the consequences, both positive and negative. In reviewing Herring's assessment of American leaders, Little points to the author's emphasis on the example of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams: "America's most successful policy makers took their cue from Adams and tempered their imperial ambitions with a healthy dose of realism... [but] the costs of impulsive and reckless leadership fed by visions of empire, Herring reminds us, have been exceeding high." (3) Rejecting the American self-image as peaceful, isolationist, and non-interventionist, Herring critically notes the costs of U.S. policy toward Native Americans, James K. Polk's Mexican War, William McKinley and the imperialism of the 1890s, and Woodrow Wilson's idealistic crusade to make the world safe for democracy.
- 3) What is Herring's relationship to the main interpretations on American diplomacy? Combs devotes considerable attention to this issue, noting that despite Herring's extensive criticism of U.S. leaders and policies, the author "does not go so far in his criticism of America's foreign policy record as the revisionists. For the revisionists, expansionism and the selfish motives behind it provide the central theme." (2) Herring endorses ideals of democracy and freedom but is critical when the U.S. moves beyond standing as practitioner of these ideals to spreading them to other nations in the style of Woodrow Wilson or George W. Bush. Combs places Herring in a "softer realism" camp of "balancing goals with the power available while avoiding the excessive pursuit of American ideals abroad." Power and national interests

provide a pragmatic foundation for policy “but it must also be balanced with America’s ideals.” (2-3) In discussing a number of leaders and advisers, Little and Combs identify Herring’s preference for those who come close to this maxim and tried to balance ends and means such as Secretary of State William Henry Seward and containment advocates like George Kennan and George C. Marshall. Combs notes that Herring prefers Franklin D. Roosevelt over Theodore Roosevelt who combined pragmatism in dealing with Asia with a lack of restraint and disdain for the people of Central America and the Caribbean. Combs suggests that Herring’s “pragmatic or soft realist view” does have some problems in evaluating specific interventions by expanding the considerations beyond the “simple hard realist test of whether that intervention would be in America’s strategic or economic interest and whether it is achievable given the power available.” (2-6) In his response, Herring emphasizes his divergence from “pure realist principles”, noting the consideration he gives to economic influences, ideology and domestic politics. (4)

- 4) The reviewers not unexpectedly question some of Herring’s interpretations on specific leaders. Jones, for example, joins the traditional debate over “who had the more effective approach to foreign policy—Roosevelt the realist, or Wilson the idealist?”, and Jones votes for Roosevelt over Wilson, suggesting that Herring exaggerates Wilson’s importance since his interventions led to considerable damage to those who experienced them and contributed to significant 20<sup>th</sup> century problems for the U.S.(2-4) Jones also advocates different assessments on John F. Kennedy’s presumed interest in an accommodation with Fidel Castro in 1963 and Kennedy’s interest in reducing U.S. involvement in Vietnam in 1962. (4-6) Cobbs Hoffman notes that Herring sometimes fails to “fully contextualize American practice” with respect to issues such as American experience with war compared with Europeans or how real differences were between American and European diplomatic statecraft. (3) Combs also finds a few contradictions in Herring’s advocacy of restraint, most notably when he criticizes Bill Clinton for failing to “intervene either early or vigorously enough in the humanitarians crises in Haiti, Rwanda, and the Balkans.” (6)

### Participants:

**George C. Herring** is Alumni Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Kentucky. He is a former editor of *Diplomatic History* and a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. He is the author of *Aid to Russia, 1941-1946: Strategy, Diplomacy, the Origins of the Cold War* (1973); *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.; 2002); *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The “Negotiating Volumes” of the Pentagon Papers* (1983); and *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (1994).

**Jerald A. Combs** (PhD UCLA 1964) is Professor of History Emeritus at San Francisco State University where he retired after serving nine years as chair of the History Department and two years as Dean of Undergraduate Studies. He is the author of *The Jay Treaty: Political Battleground of the Founding Fathers* (University of California Press, 1970); *American*

*Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretations* (University of California Press, 1983); and *The History of American Foreign Policy+* (3d ed., M.E. Sharpe, 2008). His latest publication is "A Missed Chance for Peace? Opportunities for Détente in Europe," in *The Cold War after Stalin's Death: A Missed Opportunity for Peace?*, edited by Klaus Larres and Kenneth Osgood (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

**Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman**, Ph.D., is the Dwight E. Stanford Professor of American Foreign Relations at San Diego State University. She is the author of *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Harvard 2000) and *The Rich Neighbor Policy: Rockefeller and Kaiser in Brazil* (Yale 1992). She is co-editor of *Major Problems in American History* (Houghton-Mifflin 2008) and is currently writing a world history textbook.

**Howard Jones** received his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1973 and is University Research Professor at the University of Alabama. He is the author or editor of more than a dozen books, including *To the Webster-Ashburton Treaty: A Study in Anglo-American Relations, 1783-1843* (1977); *Mutiny on the Amistad* (1987); "A New Kind of War": *America's Global Strategy and the Truman Doctrine in Greece* (1989); *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (1992); *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War* (1999); *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (2003); *The Bay of Pigs* (2008); and *Crucible of Power: A History of American Foreign Relations from 1897* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; 2008). He has a book in press entitled *Blue and Gray Diplomacy* and is beginning work on a study tentatively entitled *Into the Heart of Darkness: My Lai*.

**Douglas Little** received a B.A. from the University of Wisconsin in 1972, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in 1975 and 1978, respectively, from Cornell University. As a historian at Clark University, he teaches American diplomatic history as well as courses on 20th century America and United States relations with the Middle East. He has published a number of articles as well as *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008, Third Edition), and *Malevolent Neutrality: The United States, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Cornell University Press, 1985). His current research focuses on the U.S. response to radical Islam between the 1967 Six Day War and the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

George Herring, accorded the honor of authoring the only topical volume in the prestigious Oxford *History of the United States* series, has lived up to his opportunity. He has incorporated the information and insights from the past couple of decades of monographs and interpretive essays in our field into an outstanding narrative history of American foreign relations. Novices can consult this summary with confidence. Experts will profit from fresh and well-written discussions of things they already know, authoritative summaries and some surprises in those areas in which they do not specialize, and the stimulation of informed and carefully considered but inevitably controversial interpretations. All will know that they have consulted the best and most up-to-date summary of the state of the field.

Herring begins each chapter with an account of the domestic context within which American leaders conducted their foreign relations and uses this opportunity to incorporate the insights of the social histories that have appeared as a result of the linguistic and social turn in our profession. He uses the social history literature masterfully to demonstrate the importance of American attitudes toward race, ethnicity, and gender in U.S. foreign affairs. He is especially strong in describing the influence of religion and missionaries on American policy.

Herring also includes at the beginning of most chapters a survey of the international atmosphere and structure of power, which gives him the chance to integrate the work of scholars in International Relations and Political Science as well as international history. Such concerns for international history extend even further into his chapters, as he pays careful attention to the other side of America's diplomatic disputes. His accounts of American policy and wars always include substantial analysis of the diplomatic, social, economic, and political factors influencing the policies of other nations and people toward the United States. His book is specifically multi-archival in those areas of Herring's own expertise, Vietnam and World War II, and in other areas it makes full use of the multi-archival work of other diplomatic historians and of historians who specialize in other nations and cultures.

Reflecting the changes in the field over the past few decades, Herring includes in his account of the other side of U.S. diplomatic history extensive summaries of U.S. relations with Native Americans. Nothing is so quick to dispose of old myths about American innocence and virtue in foreign relations as the inclusion of this topic, and Herring's is the best treatment of U.S.-Native American relations of any general U.S. diplomatic narrative I have seen.

The footnotes and bibliographical essay provide an excellent guide to the most recent and important secondary works upon which Herring has based his narrative. The one major shortcoming of the book is a dearth of historiographical analysis. That is not to say that the book is short on interpretation; Herring offers strong overt judgments throughout his book. In a few instances, such as the debate over America's use of the atomic bomb against Japan,

he will give a brief account of the historiographical controversy. Occasionally he also will refer in a footnote to books that offer a different interpretation of a specific event, although in those cases he rarely says just how his interpretation differs from the other works. That is probably insufficient for those who are not expert in our field to understand how his overall viewpoint compares with other interpretations of American foreign policy as a whole. Perhaps that is where this review can be of some assistance.

Herring is scathingly critical of much of America's record on foreign affairs. He dismisses with contempt America's self-image as an innocent, isolationist, and peace-loving nation. The United States has been unilateralist rather than isolationist, he avers, and has had as much experience with war as almost any other nation. His accounts of U.S. policy toward Native Americans, westward expansion, the imperial surge of the 1890s, and multiple interventions in weaker, less developed nations are caustic in their treatment of American tactics if not always of their results. Moreover, he gives full attention to the economic self interest and racist sense of superiority that lay behind U.S. expansionism.

But Herring does not go so far in his criticism of America's foreign policy record as the revisionists. For the revisionists, expansionism and the selfish motives behind it provide the central theme of the entire history of American foreign relations. For Herring, this expansionism is only one of several aspects of U.S. foreign policy. He speaks favorably of America's ideals of democracy and liberty and praises those instances in which Americans sought to live up to those ideals within their own society, showing, as Jefferson put it, "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." (5) But he disparages the arrogance of the sense of mission with which the United States has sought to spread its ideals to other nations. He argues that the United States has been most successful in its foreign policy when it demonstrated a strong sense of pragmatism rather than idealism, and he concludes that, "popular notions to the contrary, the United States has been spectacularly successful in its foreign policy. To be sure, like all countries, it has made huge mistakes and suffered major failures, sometimes with tragic consequences for Americans – and other peoples as well. At the same time, it has sustained an overall record of achievement with little precedent in history." (9)

Although Herring speaks critically of "amoral realism" as espoused and practiced by people like Henry Kissinger, his description and praise of pragmatism places him clearly in the realist camp. His pragmatism is essentially the same as the realist creed of balancing goals with the power available while avoiding the excessive pursuit of American ideals abroad. But his realism is a softer realism than the hard realism of Kissinger or many International Relations scholars who believe that one can predict the conduct of nations by assessing strictly their power and their material and strategic interests. Most realists in today's historical profession seem to agree with Joseph Nye that the soft power of ideals, ideology, and culture count strongly in both national motivation and foreign policy effectiveness. As Herring puts it, the amoral realism of Nixon and Kissinger demonstrated that "Policies can not survive indefinitely without some foundation in the nation's most cherished principles." Herring further quotes one of the fathers of historical realism, Walter Lippmann, as saying that "The American conscience is a reality. It will make hesitant and ineffectual, even if it does not prevent, an un-American policy." (6) Thus Herring and most

other realists in the historical profession are soft realists in the sense that they believe U.S. foreign policy must be pragmatically grounded in the realities of power and national interest, but it must also be balanced with America's ideals. While the United States should not seek to spread those ideals abroad by force, neither should American policy run directly contrary to its values.

Herring is a soft realist in another sense. Conservative nationalist historians of American foreign relations argue that the United States has succeeded in combining its ideals and interests in its rise to super power status. Hard realist historians do not worry so much about balancing ideals with interests but instead seek to balance American interests with the power available and generally argue that the United State was right when it increased and used its power to achieve those interests. Soft realist historians like Herring also seek to balance American interests with the power available. But not only do they broaden the definition of interests to include some attention to ideals, they also praise those decision-makers who advocated limiting American goals to accommodate existing power rather than those who sought to increase power to achieve greater goals. Thus, again in reference to the Vietnam policies of Nixon and Kissinger, Herring opines that "The height of realism is recognizing when to cut one's losses." (808) His advocacy of restraint in U.S. foreign policy permeates his entire narrative.

In Herring's treatment of early American foreign relations, he favors the subtle diplomacy of Benjamin Franklin during the American War of Independence over the more blunt and confrontational diplomacy of John Jay and John Adams that conservative nationalists like Samuel Flagg Bemis praised. He commends the restraint of the Federalists toward Great Britain and condemns their belligerence toward France. He is very critical of the overly principled diplomacy of Jefferson and Madison that led to the War of 1812 with Great Britain and equally critical of their totally unprincipled approach to expansion into Louisiana, Florida, and lands belonging to the Indians. He admires John Quincy Adams as an outstanding Secretary of State who sought and achieved many of America's goals while avoiding confrontations that the United States could not handle. At the same time he condemns Adams for his utter lack of principle in defending Andrew Jackson's actions that led to the acquisition of Florida. Herring denounces the callousness and aggressiveness of American leaders toward Native Americans, Spaniards, Mexicans, and others whom the United States pushed aside in its march westward, but concedes that this expansion laid "the foundation for its future status as the world's greatest power." (222)

Meanwhile, Herring points out that the rationales the United States used to justify the defeat and displacement of those in the way of its continental expansion would serve to sanction claims to American superiority and dominion in its surge into overseas territories in the late 1800s. That imperial surge was no aberration from past U.S. foreign policy but a continuation and fulfillment of it. McKinley may have been ambiguous in moving toward war with Spain, but he was very purposeful in seeing to it that the United States would control the Philippines and Cuba rather than the rebels who sought independence from the United States as well as Spain.

Herring continues his soft realist approach as he analyses U.S. foreign relations in the twentieth century. He asserts that Theodore Roosevelt embodied the best and the worst in America's traditions – he was the consummate pragmatist in limiting U.S. commitments in Asia to those it could uphold, but toward Central America and the Caribbean he displayed the “narrowness of vision and disdain for other people that had afflicted U.S. foreign policy from the birth of the republic.” (176-7) While somewhat skeptical of Wilson's refusal to challenge the British blockade of Germany, Herring is quite sympathetic to Wilson's diplomacy leading up to U.S. intervention in World War I. He thinks that German policy left the United States with little choice but to enter the war, and he believes that Wilson achieved about as much as he could in the Treaty of Versailles, although he bemoans Wilson rigidity in refusing to compromise with the U.S. Senate to gain its consent to that treaty. He regrets Wilson's intervention in the Russian Revolution, which he says stemmed from mixed and murky motives and was totally ineffective but just enough “to feed the myth among Soviet propagandists and some revisionist historians that Wilson had sought to overthrow the Bolshevik government.” (415) Herring is even more approving of the diplomacy of Franklin Roosevelt. He agrees with Roosevelt's cautious escorting of the American people to the brink of World War II, and he supports Roosevelt's attempts to cooperate with the Soviet Union during the war, arguing contrary to Alonzo Hamby and John Lewis Gaddis that Roosevelt did not move toward a harder line against the Soviets just before he died. (587)

Up to this point, I think Herring's narrative and interpretations, critical as they are of U.S. policies, would find rather few dissenters from the right among professional historians in our field. The nationalist view represented by historians like Samuel Flagg Bemis is totally passé in the profession, although it probably commands a majority in the general public. Even hard realists, who would consider as excessive the hand-wringing over the nation's tactics by historians who cannot bring themselves to disown the extraordinary results of past U.S. foreign policy, concede that the tactics did indeed bring great calamities to many who stood in America's way.<sup>1</sup> The primary dissenters from Herring's book to this point will probably be revisionists who would see Herring as underplaying the economic selfishness, cultural pathology, and horrendous atrocities involved in America's expansion. They would also see Herring as praising too much the accomplishments of American leaders because they achieved the goals they sought, however wrong those goals might have been.<sup>2</sup> Herring may receive more dissent from nationalists and hard realists when he deals with U.S. policies in the Cold War and afterward because there is considerably more recent literature from those points of view than there is on earlier American diplomacy. But Herring's approach is still measured and balanced in a way that will impress if not persuade all of his readers.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Walter Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). Revisionists may also criticize Herring for hedging on some issues critical to their interpretation. For instance, Herring passes no judgment on whether the Cuban rebels were winning in 1898, thereby making McKinley's decision for intervention strictly a means of thwarting revolution, or whether the rebels and Spanish were at a stalemate, which makes more credible the idea that McKinley was intervening to prevent interminable chaos and destruction. (313)

Regarding the origins of the Cold War, Herring agrees with what is probably now the consensus of experts—that Stalin was ruthless but cautious and wanted to keep his alliance with the West at least temporarily. Herring agrees with the realists as opposed to the revisionists in arguing that the Yalta arrangements probably did not provide “a solid foundation for stable U.S.-Soviet postwar relations.” (587) He also argues that Truman did not immediately reverse Roosevelt’s cooperative policy with the Soviets and that he used the atomic bomb on Japan primarily to end the war quickly rather than to intimidate the Soviets, although he was happy to accept the collateral benefit of strengthening the U.S. negotiating hand against Stalin. But Herring finds the move toward containment, even when it was the political and economic rather than military containment of the Marshall Plan, too confrontational. He argues that the United States should have relied more on negotiations with Stalin, although he does not make clear what negotiated settlement would have allowed the United States to rebuild the political and economic infrastructure of Western Europe, including Western Germany, without the Soviets draining off the aid to Western Germany for their own purposes or regarding the rebuilding of Western Europe as a threat to themselves and their control of Eastern Europe. He clearly regrets the escalation of containment from political to militarized containment and scathingly criticizes Paul Nitze’s NSC 68. Thus, he concludes, “United States officials often misread and sometimes misrepresented Stalin’s intentions. They exaggerated the Soviet threat. They unwisely rejected negotiations, leaving unanswered the question of whether the Cold War might have been ended earlier, its worldwide effects somehow mitigated. Still, their firm but measured responses to the challenges of postwar Europe produced creative initiatives such as the Marshall Plan and NATO. United States policies helped to ensure the economic and political recovery of Western Europe, purge it of self-destructive internecine hatreds, and produce firm ties to its trans-Atlantic partners.” (650)

Herring’s primary criticism of American foreign policy from this point on is its overreaching in an attempt to achieve global containment. He does note that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea and Acheson’s speech leaving Korea out of the U.S. defensive perimeter may have been a factor in Stalin consenting to North Korea’s invasion, but that criticism of excessive restraint is far milder than his criticism of America’s occupation policies in Korea and of the decision to go north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. He praises Eisenhower for his restraint in keeping the peace, remaining calm in the face of the Berlin and Sputnik crises, taking a few steps toward nuclear disarmament, and keeping the military budget somewhat under control. But he harshly criticizes Eisenhower’s buildup of nuclear weapons under his New Look policy and his interventions in the Third World as a result of his failure to understand nationalism in developing countries. As might be expected, he has an outstanding and quite critical account of U.S. policy toward Vietnam, although he distinguishes his critique of Lyndon Johnson from that of revisionists like Lloyd Gardner. (990)

Herring contends that 1968 marked the end of America’s policy of global containment, as Nixon and Kissinger rightly understood that it was beyond the nation’s capabilities. He says that Nixon and Kissinger deserve full credit for taking major strides toward the détente with the Soviet Union that Kennedy and Johnson had begun and which, despite the criticisms leveled at it by both conservatives and liberals, helped slow the arms race and

end the Cold War. He is also approving of Nixon's opening to China and Kissinger's attempts to make peace in the Middle East. But Herring says the accomplishments of Nixon and Kissinger must be weighed against "huge and glaring failures." These failures included imposing a Cold War mindset on essentially local and regional problems in Asia and Latin America, needlessly prolonging the Vietnam War, trampling on Constitutional rights of dissenters at home, and ruthless and bizarre behavior that disillusioned the American people with global involvement. (808)

Herring credits Gorbachev more than Reagan for the end of the Cold War, and praises Reagan more for his willingness to negotiate with the Soviets toward the end of his administration than for what Herring considers his ineffective and needlessly provocative hard-line policy earlier in his tenure. Herring also denounces the "darker side" of Reagan's policy – his absurd glorification of the Nicaraguan Contras and grossly exaggerated sense of Soviet threat to Central America, his inept intrusions into the Middle East capped by the Iran-Contra scandal, and the massive deficit he accumulated with his defense spending and tax cuts.

In one of his few criticisms of American restraint, Herring disparages Clinton's "minimalism," as he failed to intervene either early or vigorously enough in the humanitarian crises in Haiti, Rwanda, and the Balkans. But, as might be expected, he is far more critical of George W. Bush's doctrine of preventive war, his invasion of Iraq, his ignoring of America's traditional allies, and his defiance of both international and Constitutional law. Herring sees this as the very opposite of the pragmatic and restrained realist foreign policy that should have guided the United States throughout its history.

I find Herring's interpretations as satisfactory a summary of the state of the field as the rest of his narrative. The pragmatic or soft realist view that he espouses does, however, have its problems. In assessing whether or not U.S. intervention was necessary or justified, it no longer has the simple hard realist test of whether that intervention would be in America's strategic or economic interest and whether it is achievable given the power available. Since the soft realist view includes more than just U.S. strategic and economic interest and defines the power available so broadly, the judgment becomes much more complex and amorphous. Thus it is not clear why Herring insists that intervention in the Balkans and Rwanda were so necessary when he thinks restraint was desirable in other instances. Moreover, the pragmatic or soft realist view has the rather irritating quality of Monday morning quarterbacking, in that if one can look back and see that a policy succeeded in achieving its goals, then it was by definition a realistic and pragmatic balancing of goals and power, while if it failed it was clearly unrealistic.

Nevertheless, the restrained realist outlook does provide a framework for a balanced view of the past and does accord with my own reading of the historical evidence. I am sure there will be some vigorous dissent from Herring's interpretations, but I would be surprised if that is not coupled with universal respect for what he has accomplished.

Review by Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, San Diego State University

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In the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, “The Snow Queen,” the young hero is held captive until he can successfully piece together a puzzle made of ice shards. A spell prevents him from seeing how they fit together to form a word. With his true love’s help, the boy eventually shapes the mysterious word “eternity,” though the reader is left to puzzle over its significance.

George Herring has artfully fitted together the myriad, jagged pieces of American foreign relations from 1776 to the present. He combines famous anecdotes with lesser known but important stories that help explain how the nation kept disaster at bay during its infancy, courted ruin in the Civil War as a result of greedy expansionism, and made use of opportunity in the twentieth century to achieve international preeminence. World events shine through at every turn in the tale, such as the Yucatán Caste War of 1847 and the 1848 uprisings in Europe, revealing the setting for American choices. In 1000 pages Herring creates the best map of U.S. foreign relations to date. What he does not do is tell us its significance.

The daunting nature of the task may be one reason. From *Colony to Superpower* is part of the seven-volume (and counting) *Oxford History of the United States*. It is the only book in the eleven planned which, as series editor David M. Kennedy observes, is topical and attempts to address a single subject across “more than two hundred years of American nationhood” (xiii). Implicitly, it must explain two centuries of international history as well.

Herring accomplishes the assignment with panache. Like others in this prize-winning series, his sure-footed narrative is rich in detail that is sometimes telling and sometimes just plain fun. (Did you know that the young Fidel Castro was a “good enough pitcher” that the New York Giants offered him a \$5000 bonus to sign up? (687)). Herring’s comprehensive masterpiece is so beautifully written that it may be read for pleasure or assigned to students in lieu of a textbook. Ideologues of all stripes will bridle at the author’s attempt to create a fair-minded portrait that balances outcomes and intentions up through George W. Bush. But most readers will appreciate his critical, yet uncynical outlook. In this encyclopedic account, historicism triumphs over presentism (without even a nod to post-modernism). Herring excavates the past on its own terms, rather than to demonstrate how saintly or sinful, innocent or iniquitous the American government has been. This is atypical at a time when most similar accounts are a footnote to William Appleman Williams, whose *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* marks its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, in 2009. See, for example, the recent works of Robert Kagan, Chalmers Johnson, Niall Ferguson, Andrew Bacevich, and Walter Nugent.

One of the book’s greatest strengths is its deft handling of human foible. Hardly any politician gets away without some observation that reveals either the humor in his pretension or the frailties that made him real. Gimlet-eyed observations from abroad assist. John Jay and John Adams were “the greatest quibblers I’ve ever seen,” noted one British diplomat after the duo’s paranoid pedantry cost the new nation some precious

bargaining room (32). Americans themselves are also lampooned. “Hardly a people to go tiger shooting with,” Neville Chamberlain’s sister observed when the U.S. quailed at upbraiding the Japanese government in the 1930s for violating the treaties it had signed (512).

At the same time, Herring sometimes reminds us of forgotten heroism, like that shown by General Winfield Scott before he got too old and fat to mount a horse gracefully in the Civil War. Here we see Scott in his prime, dashing by sled along the frozen border with Canada, brandishing his personal authority in lieu of back-up from the cavalry and warning hotheads who thought to invade their northern neighbor, “except it be over my body, you shall *not* pass this line” (185). Other minor, but important characters are also rescued from obscurity, including brave Townshend Harris, who kept his composure and civility when foreign diplomats were slain around him and laid the basis for a mutually-respectful relationship between the U.S. and Japan. Doughty Nicholas Trist is remembered for besting dour, racist James K. Polk. Humane Dwight Morrow, “shrewd as a pocketful of mice,” is applauded for standing up to U.S. oil companies and easing Mexico’s sorrows in the 1930s rather than deepening them—as American diplomats tended to do (476).

Herring also does a good job of giving credit where it is due at the global level. He shows how other countries sometimes took the lead in implementing liberal goals that the U.S. did much less to advance despite its high-flown rhetoric of liberty and justice for all. The British Royal Navy constrained Spain and France from abridging the independence of the Latin American republics, for example. And in its principled opposition to the international slave trade, it was Britain that showed real “moral leadership” in the Western hemisphere. The U.S. government refused “even to use the word *Haiti*” until Abraham Lincoln (110).

Herring’s work does not shift onto virgin territory from a historiographical point of view. Although he candidly exposes the racism that drove some American leaders, issues of race, class, and gender make only fleeting appearances in his account. That said, it is doubtful Herring could have sustained an analysis that credibly gave pride of place to these concepts over the full 200-plus years. Physical force, economic interests, international custom, and patterns of diplomatic interaction were established well before the United States had much more to do with the outcome of events on an international scale than gendered language or free-floating prejudices – as signal as these might have been.

A more important lack in the book is its failure to fully contextualize American practice, something few authors do, unfortunately. Considering how *much* Herring does take on, this is perhaps understandable. But it would be interesting to know the author’s opinion on how far outside (or inside) the scope of “normal” diplomatic practice the U.S. operated. He says at the outset, for example, “few nations have had as much experience at war as the United States” (1). Really? What about Germany, Russia, China, France, Britain, Rome, the Ottomans, Aztecs and any number of others over the long course of world history? Is the U.S. really the one country about which it makes sense uniquely to say, “every generation has had its war” (2)? Dates with which the U.S. had relatively little to do come quickly to mind, like 1793, 1803, 1848, 1870, 1905, 1914, and 1939. Herring’s deprecating comments sound more like the instinctive breast-beating of academics who would rather be accused

of cheating on an exam than going easy on the world's most powerful country. The author notes with wry amusement that American diplomats sought to demonstrate their moral superiority to European nobility by dressing in common black during the nineteenth century. Was this superficial play-acting the only real distinction between them and the "best tradition of European statecraft," based upon bribery, extortion, violence, and unapologetic realpolitik (21)? Perhaps it was, but Herring doesn't make the argument one way or another.

In fact, there is little argument in the book at the metaphysical level. As noted previously, this is one of its strengths. *From Colony to Superpower* is not dogmatic or thesis-ridden. It patiently chronicles the well-known themes of American history: the sense of providential destiny, the penchant for unilateralism, the shadow of racism, the pursuit of riches, and the pride in being "the center of world democratic revolution" (216). But one longs for a sharper assessment of some sort. The closest Herring comes to a thesis is on the penultimate page of this otherwise very fine narrative, where he concludes that "the nation has a rich foreign policy tradition to draw on" (963). This bland observation is cold comfort at a time when Americans are unsure of their nation's place in the world—when accusations of bullying from its best friends and threats of unending jihad from its worst enemies leap off the front page. The election of Barack Obama created a sense of new possibilities at the end of 2008, but the happy glow of a polite interregnum is always transitory. No one president can fundamentally alter the national trajectory, so it would be helpful to better understand its path and America's cumulative impact upon the world.

George Herring has elegantly fit together the shards of American history. His seamless account will be a standard reference for coming generations. But at the end of the story the reader is still left to wonder what exactly it all means.

This volume is the seventh to appear in the distinguished series, *The Oxford History of the United States*, which has already garnered a number of awards, including three Pulitzer Prizes—James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988), David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (1999), and Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (2007)—and a Bancroft Prize—James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (1996). George C. Herring, Alumni Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Kentucky and author of many books, including his highly acclaimed work on the Vietnam War, thus took on the awesome task of meeting the high standards set by his predecessors. Did he succeed? Yes, in several respects—including writing the first topical volume in the series that has already earned a National Book Award nomination. This is a comprehensive, nicely written work, balanced and fair in interpretation, anecdotal and analytical, not overly laden with footnotes, an almost encyclopedic coverage of America's foreign relations from the Revolution to the present. Its greatest strength is a narrative and largely chronological approach that keeps the story moving in an interesting and often eloquent fashion. Especially gratifying is to see about a third of book devoted to pre-twentieth-century diplomacy.

A major theme is the role of expansion in bringing security and empire, with American foreign relations often in the hands of sometimes gifted and visionary policymakers who recognized the necessity of compromise. For the most part, American diplomatists were able and pragmatic leaders who from the early days of the republic rejected isolationism while focusing on national security and vied with Europe's veteran stable of Machiavellian diplomats by skillfully exploiting their problems in securing a place for America in the community of nations. American policymakers mixed Enlightenment ideals with realistic interests of security, manifest destiny with commercial and defensive aspirations, free trade with empire, and, ultimately, a new world order of self-determination with respect for international law. They also, however, fostered a dark side—a racial superiority and arrogance that condoned slavery, an aggressive expansionist war with Mexico, a series of Indian wars, a crusading war against Spain that led to the establishment of protectorates—all in the name of spreading liberty, and often through forceful, unilateral actions. The “practical idealism” of Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt; the idealism of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Woodrow Wilson; the “amoral” realism of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger—all created a complex approach to foreign relations that appeared unique but in reality was not much different than that of their European counterparts. (5) The United States has more often than not acted as a “traditional great power” despite its longtime claims to exceptionalism and “moral superiority” over the militarist and undemocratic features of the Old World. (8)

Like all books of this broad scope, this one leaves out some items that readers will find disconcerting. Yet the omissions are precious few in number. Herring missed a wonderful opportunity to show the relationship between domestic and foreign policy that arose from the *Amistad* mutiny led by Joseph Cinqué in 1839—when internal political, executive, and

judicial controversies became intertwined with American diplomacy involving Spain, Cuba, and England over the complex interworking of the African slave trade, racism, slavery, and international law.<sup>1</sup> In bringing much needed focus to the international dimensions of the Civil War, Herring might have highlighted one of the most pivotal moments in the intervention controversy—when the Confederacy’s opportunity for British mediation rose dramatically after General Robert E. Lee’s victory at Second Bull Run in August 1862. This moment quickly passed, however, when he invaded the North and, while the Palmerston ministry waited for news of further victories, withdrew from the battlefield at Antietam and allowed the Union to claim a narrow victory that did not kill the interventionist idea but again put the mediation effort on hold. Herring declares that in acquiring the rights to build the Panama Canal, Theodore Roosevelt won “complete sovereignty,” when in reality the United States won the *rights* of sovereignty and not the *right* of sovereignty. (368) A technicality one may say, but the distinction permitted the president to deny the charges of imperialism, however unconvincing he might have been.

Herring provides good coverage of Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policy but is perhaps too generous in saying that “only Wilson stands alone in importance in twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy.” (492) It is unquestionable, as Herring claims, that “the Great War and Woodrow Wilson transformed U.S. foreign policy dramatically ... [and] the United States became a major player in world politics and economics.” (434) Many Americans remained reluctant to make commitments to anything beyond their ocean shores, but Wilson made them realize that the world was changing and that they must change with it. “In trying to establish for his nation a leadership role, Wilson articulated a set of principles that in various forms would guide U.S. foreign policy for years to come.” (434-35) But were these principles all positive in impact?

It would be the “irony of fate,” Wilson declared, if he focused on foreign affairs. Yet as Herring shows, the Wilson administration intervened in Mexico, the Caribbean, Russia, and Europe. As an all but avowed pacifist, the president more than once took the United States to the brink of war with Mexico, sent thousands of American military forces into Russia during a civil war that could have led to violence and perhaps war, and entered the Great War in 1917 as a crusade “to make the world safe for democracy” by fighting a “war to end all wars.”

Intervention, as Herring suggests, seems justified in certain instances—when American security is at stake, or where great inhumanities exist—yet policymakers must weigh the high risk of an entangling foreign involvement against the reasonable assurance of success. Unilateral intervention, of course, is more dangerous than a multilateral effort, both in amassing a decisive force in going into the targeted country and in making a graceful exit. Most important (as in going to war), policymakers must ask whether they have exhausted all other corrective options and thus left intervention as the last resort.

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<sup>1</sup>See Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; rev. ed., 1997).

Regarding Wilson's diplomacy, can one reasonably argue that he explored all choices of action before intervening in Mexico? Cuba? Dominican Republic? Haiti? Panama? Honduras? Russia? Europe? Space prohibits an analysis of each of the above foreign ventures, so let one example suffice. Mexico provides the most flagrant instance of intervention, primarily because the action occurred more than once and rested on a moral impulse that took the United States to the edge of war at least three times. The interventions were unilateral, the products of Wilson's acting without advisers or congressional support (or even knowledge at first); the missions' objectives were neither clear nor in harmony with strategy and tactics—except to install a moral government after removing an unsavory leader; and there was no exit strategy for the two outright military interventions.

In perhaps the most jumbled instance of diplomacy during the early twentieth century, Wilson bounced from one side to the other in the Mexican Revolution, at one point supporting Venustiano Carranza (even to considering a war on Mexico to bring down dictator Victoriano Huerta); at another time Pancho Villa (and risking conflict with Carranza); at still another by pronouncing neutrality before going back to Carranza; and capped by the dispatch of 12,000 American soldiers under General John J. Pershing in a futile search for Villa in the Mexican desert—all guided at the outset by a moral compass prohibiting approval of Huerta's "government of butchers." In the long and arduous diplomatic process, Wilson applied the provocative principle of *de jure* recognition in judging the legitimacy of a foreign regime, thereby breaking a tradition of more than a hundred years of *de facto* recognition. The new precedent led him to change loyalties several times during the Mexican civil war, taking the nations to the cusp of war at least three times and leaving America's Mexican policy in shambles.<sup>2</sup> What is more, his example of missionary diplomacy provided a model for later presidents to emulate. One wonders if Wilson ever asked himself whether he had exhausted all options to the point that the only option left was war.

Who has the more effective approach to foreign policy—Roosevelt the realist, or Wilson the idealist? Both presidents laid the basis for a changing national attitude toward foreign affairs, but Roosevelt opposed a direct involvement in another country's domestic problems unless a refusal to do so endangered America's security. Wilson far surpassed his predecessor in active intervention by sending troops to Mexico (twice), Europe, Russia, Cuba, Haiti, Panama (twice), and Honduras (five times), and by establishing a protectorate over Nicaragua with the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty. Although Wilson had the best intentions, his efforts rested on a moral strain that led to considerable direct and collateral damage to those involved and raised questions about whether national security was at stake in all instances.

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<sup>2</sup>Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Struggle for Neutrality, 1914-1915* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960), chaps. 8, 18; Robert E. Quirk, *An Affair of Honor: Woodrow Wilson and the Occupation of Veracruz* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1962); Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises, 1915-1916* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), chaps. 7, 10; Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), chaps. 11, 12.

On the Kennedy years, Herring makes the questionable assertion that President John F. Kennedy quietly explored chances for an “accommodation” with Cuba after his June 1963 speech at American University. (723) Yet in the spring of that year the United States revived the CIA-Mafia plan to assassinate Fidel Castro that the agency had initiated as part of the Bay of Pigs invasion, combined it with the CIA’s executive action program instituted at White House urgings, and shepherded a rendezvous in a Paris hotel between a CIA operative and a potential Cuban assassin, who, contrary to Herring’s assertion, *refused* a ballpoint pen with poisonous needle as impractical but soon returned to his homeland to work toward a military coup. These realities hardly suggest a sincere White House interest in an accommodation.

Not surprisingly, Herring is especially strong on the Vietnam War, yet one can question whether he too easily dismisses as “conjecture” with no “evidence” the claim that President Kennedy might have withdrawn from Vietnam. (728) At risk of being typecast as a Kennedy “apologist” (which I am not, as my recent work on the Bay of Pigs should attest), I respectfully disagree. Defense Department documentation, National Security Council papers, private papers in the John F. Kennedy Library and the National Defense University, White House tapes, and several monographs, including a recent book on McGeorge Bundy (the last appearing too late for Herring to use), show that President Kennedy had moved toward a sharply *reduced* American involvement in Vietnam. No one can say, of course, what he would have done had he lived, but a pattern of behavior shows that he was leaning toward a gradual withdrawal aimed at returning to the advisory and assistance role that existed on his taking office.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1962 Kennedy instructed his secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, to draft a plan of phased withdrawal of American forces that would take place in coordination with the South Vietnamese army’s ability to defend the nation. The result was the “Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam,” which sought to turn the clock back to January 1961. Indeed, the plan had cleared CINCPAC, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and its chair, General Maxwell Taylor, by the spring of 1963, when the Buddhist crisis erupted and placed everything on hold.<sup>4</sup>

In late September, however, the move revived when the president told McNamara that events since the Buddhist uprising had raised “serious questions” about the chances for

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<sup>3</sup>Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For the recent study dealing with the withdrawal idea, see Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 2008). For earlier examples, see John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 402, 409; Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 54-55; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 261-62; Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 238, chap. 16, 441-42, 452-53. Logevall argues, however, that “the incipient-withdrawal thesis” is not persuasive and that the initial withdrawal of a thousand troops in December 1963 was “a device to put pressure on Diem.” Logevall, 69.

<sup>4</sup>See George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.), 113; Jones, 234, 244-45, 248.

success in Vietnam. On 2 October the McNamara-Taylor mission returned from South Vietnam with a recommendation to reduce the American commitment. “We need a way to get out of Vietnam,” McNamara told the president in a conversation recorded in the White House. Herring does not refer to the McNamara-Taylor report in his present work under review, but he deals with it in his monograph on the Vietnam War. In it, he focuses on the “selective pressures” advocated in the report but does not mention the recommended force reduction.<sup>5</sup>

That same day of 2 October, the president made the decision to withdraw the first contingent. Two days later, Taylor circulated a memorandum among his joint chiefs colleagues, declaring the president’s withdrawal directive one of his “Approved Actions for South Vietnam.” According to the partial disengagement idea, “All planning will be directed towards preparing RVN [Republic of Vietnam] forces for the withdrawal of all U.S. special assistance units and personnel by the end of calendar year 1965. The U.S. Comprehensive Plan, Vietnam will be revised to bring it into consonance with these objectives, and to reduce planned residual (post 1965) MAAG [Military Assistance and Advisory Group] strengths to approximately pre-insurgency levels.” The first 1,000 American troops would withdraw in December (which they did), and the remainder of the nearly 16,000 forces would pull out over the course of 1964, leaving about 1,500 MAAG advisers behind and the mission intact when combined with the Vietnamese trained to take the Americans’ places.<sup>6</sup>

But several events undercut the reduction effort. First came the internal turmoil caused by the assassination of South Vietnamese Premier Ngo Dinh Diem on 1 November, followed by Kennedy’s own assassination three weeks afterward. These two shocks led to a weak and divided Saigon government that ultimately emboldened the Vietcong, and removed the main proponent of a phased reduction of American forces. Much later came another pivotal event—Oliver Stone’s Hollywood movie *JFK*, which deserves praise for raising the public call for declassifying documents on the president’s assassination, but warrants criticism for its irresponsible charges of conspiracy that have subjected anyone who argues for a possible withdrawal into a suspected Kennedy apologist—even if the claim rests on documentation and is on White House tapes.

The important point is that the president did not seek a total withdrawal (emphasized by Stone and others) but a *reduction* of American military forces to the level of January 1961. Kennedy wanted to maintain the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, but one primarily

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<sup>5</sup>JFK quoted in memo from JFK to McNamara, Sept. 21, 1963, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 4, *Vietnam, August-December 1963*, 279; Tape recording of meeting in Oval Office, Oct. 2, 1963, President’s Office File, Presidential Recordings Collection, Tape no. 144/A49 (cassette 2 of 3), JFKL; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 81-82. See Herring, 122-24. For the report’s recommended reduction of forces, see *The Pentagon Papers: The Department of Defense History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam* [Senator Mike Gravel Edition], 4 vols. (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1971), 2: 163-64, 169; memo for JFK from McNamara and Taylor, 2 Oct. 1963, NSF, Countries—Vietnam, boxes 200-201, JFKL; memo from Taylor and McNamara to JFK, 2 Oct. 1963, *FRUS*, 4: *Vietnam August-December 1963*, 337-39; Record of Action No. 2472, Taken at the 519<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, 2 Oct. 1963, *ibid.*, 353.

<sup>6</sup>Taylor memo (“South Vietnam Actions”) for Adm. David McDonald and Gens. Curtis LeMay, Earle Wheeler, and David Shoup, Oct. 4, 1963, JCS CM-935-63, Taylor Papers, box 1, National Defense University, Wash., D.C. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 82.

advisory and assistance driven. In this manner he remained consistent in his declarations that he would not send American combat troops and that the South Vietnamese must win (or lose) the war on their own.

Yet even this argument does not exonerate the Kennedy administration of blame for a deepened and more dangerous involvement in Vietnam. The president approved counter-insurgency warfare, supported the notoriously ineffective and unpopular Diem regime along with Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife Madame Nhu, escalated the American force level in Vietnam (although not technically combat) from under a thousand to nearly 17,000, and condoned the generals' coup that led to Diem's assassination.

None of the above criticisms noticeably detracts from the great value of Herring's work. He has demonstrated the central importance of America's foreign policy in the making of America and in showing to an often skeptical readership that the subject is not only part of mainstream history but can be interesting when related in the elegant and witty manner found in this study. There is much to praise in Herring's analyses, including Franklin's role in American Revolutionary diplomacy, Jefferson's willingness to change his constitutional course in approving the Louisiana Purchase, John Quincy Adams's astute diplomacy in securing the United States's southern and western borders, Lincoln's dealing with the many foreign as well as domestic complexities of the Civil War, the expansionist drive of the 1890s that led to America's first taste of overseas empire, Franklin D. Roosevelt's establishing the nation as world leader, the hard decisions made by Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower during the Cold War 1940s and 1950s, the tragedy of Vietnam, the formulation of new strategy in the Nixon-Kissinger years, the indecisiveness of the Jimmy Carter presidency toward the Iranian revolution, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and the end of the Cold War, and the myriad questions about the war in Iraq.

Most unsettling is Herring's dire analysis of the state of American foreign policy in the wake of the Iraqi War. Admittedly cautious about making an assessment so soon (indeed, while the war still goes on), he darkly notes that "even if Iraq should emerge from its present chaos unified and stable, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it was the wrong war in the wrong place fought in the wrong way. It diverted attention and resources from the war in Afghanistan, what should have been the preeminent concern." Although Saddam Hussein's collapse meant the end of a brutally vicious ruler, it also resulted in more hardships for the Iraqi people, continued instability throughout the region, and a vast new recruiting ground for terrorists. Furthermore, the Bush administration's flaunting of the law, inept pursuit of the war, disregard for allies, use of torture in interrogations, and dismissal of the Geneva Conventions in dealing with POWs have undermined the nation's stature as world leader. "It is one of the supreme ironies of recent history that leaders bent on perpetuating U.S. primacy squandered it through reckless use of the nation's power." (960-961) Increasing numbers of Americans saw "a nation in decline," particularly in "its soft power, the sway of its ideals," which has emerged from "the huge gap between the principles its leaders proclaimed and the actions they took, especially in the much publicized mistreatment of captives." (961-962)

What to do? The United States, Herring asserted, must drop its claims to being “God’s chosen people” and rebuild relations with other countries through multilateral efforts to resolve problems becoming increasingly global in nature. (963) American power has limits; more influential than force of will is a good example.

One does not have to agree with Herring’s conclusions to admire this work; it is comforting to know that if the United States time and again strayed from those principles so essential to its greatness, it just as often returned to that wise track of balancing idealistic pronouncements with pragmatic, realistic actions that succeeded in transforming a colony into a superpower.

*Why We Need Diplomatic History*

When Gallup Pollsters asked the American public in January 2000 to list the most important issues facing their country in the new millennium, the respondents relegated federal spending on the military to 20th place; the U.S. role in world affairs tied for 21st. That was hardly surprising: After the fall of the Berlin Wall, enrollments in diplomatic-history courses plummeted, and freshly minted Ph.D.'s with dissertations on foreign relations had a difficult time finding tenure-track positions. By this autumn, however, student interest in topics like the cold war was rising, while a *Newsweek* poll showed that foreign policy had once again cracked the public's "top five" list, thanks to the stunning attacks on September 11, 2001, a controversial war in Iraq, and Russia's recent invasion of nearby Georgia.

Yet popular attitudes toward international affairs remain volatile. Frustrated by military stalemates in Baghdad and Kabul, impatient with complex issues like global climate change and nuclear proliferation, and frightened by the financial meltdown on Wall Street, Americans may be tempted to turn their backs on the world and to recite instead the dictum popularized by Will Rogers, the Jon Stewart of his day, during the Great Depression, another era of extraordinary crisis: "Diplomacy is the art of saying 'nice doggie' until you can find a rock." That dismissal has been echoed by some social historians, who have insisted that because the study of foreign relations is too state centered, elite oriented, and tradition bound, it and its practitioners neglect important work on race, gender, and popular culture.

In his splendid new book, *From Colony to Superpower: U S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*, however, George C. Herring, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Kentucky, reveals that diplomatic history is alive and well. In so doing, he also warns that Americans ignore diplomatic history at their own peril and insists that only by understanding the past can they ensure that the United States will play a positive role in international affairs in the future.

Herring's book is the seventh to appear in the Oxford *History of the United States* series, whose previous volumes have garnered not only wide scholarly acclaim but also three Pulitzer Prizes. Written by academic experts with a gift for blending grand narrative and high-powered analysis, the Oxford series is designed to bring the latest historical scholarship to the widest possible audience and to reconnect university researchers with general readers less interested in disciplinary wars on campus than in what Cornell University's late Carl Becker long ago called "the usable past." To that end, earlier contributors like Daniel Walker Howe, David M. Kennedy, and James M. McPherson have striven to break down the intellectual barriers separating social, political, and cultural history in order to highlight the connections between state and society.

The only volume in the series that spans the entirety of the American past, *From Colony to Superpower* could not be more timely, more colorful, or more compelling for Americans seeking to understand the causes and the consequences of the quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq. Herring is well equipped to provide that analysis. In *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Wiley, 1979), a classic account of Uncle Sam's disastrous policies in Southeast Asia, he showed how a rigid sense of racial hierarchy, a love affair with military technology, and an abiding faith in "American exceptionalism" led Washington to underestimate the staying power of Vietnamese guerrillas clad in black pajamas, who emerged victorious a quarter-century after the shooting started.

Because race, technology, and exceptionalism were key ingredients in American's remarkable transition from colony to superpower, Herring has made them central features in the complex story he tells in his new book. On almost every page, he refutes the old canard that diplomatic history is "more or less what one clerk said to another." In reminding readers about the role of American Indians in the French and Indian War, the cultural clash between America and Islam spawned by Thomas Jefferson's confrontation with the Barbary Pirates, or the destruction that Confederate raiders wrought on Yankee whaling operations in the North Pacific during the Civil War, Herring never loses sight of the human dimension of foreign policy.

America's success in "opening" Japan to the outside world during the second half of the 19th century, for example, was the result not only of Commodore Matthew C. Perry's gunboat diplomacy but also of Japanese fascination with baseball, land-grant colleges, and the McIntosh apple. Nor does Herring forget that the central figures in "the American century" stretching from the final battles of the First World War to the first volleys of the global war on terror included not merely Woodrow Wilson and Henry Kissinger but also Charles A. Lindbergh and Michael Jordan. In a 1996 poll, Chinese high-school students ranked the NBA star along with the late Zhou Enlai as the two men they admired most, with implications for world relations.

Herring's larger purpose, of course, is not merely to entertain readers but to encourage them to reflect more broadly about America's role in the world during the past 250 years. Although George Washington cautioned Americans to avoid entangling alliances in the farewell address he delivered in 1796, Herring notes that from its very inception, the United States was intimately involved in global politics. Surrounded by predatory European empires, the new nation that Washington and his comrades established at the end of the 18th century depended for very survival on the ability of statesmen like Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to play Britain, France, Spain, and Russia off against one another. The incorporation of vast tracts of land into America's transcontinental empire—Louisiana in 1803, Florida in 1819, Oregon in 1848—did not result from God's will or the absent-mindedness of Europe's rulers but from shrewd moves launched by visionary leaders with diplomatic savvy.

Although two-thirds of his book covers events since 1900, an era familiar to many readers as "the American century," Herring emphasizes that the course of U.S. foreign relations was shaped in profound ways during the early 1800s, by policy makers like John Quincy Adams

who provided both vision and leadership to put America on the path to great-power status early in the 19th century. While serving as James Monroe's secretary of state in 1823, for example, Adams secured grudging European acceptance of a U.S. sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere, despite America's lack of military resources necessary to enforce what soon came to be known as the Monroe Doctrine. Firmly convinced that his country was destined for greatness, Adams was nonetheless a realist whose abiding faith in the power of ideas was balanced by a deep appreciation of the limits of power. When some legislators in Congress called for the United States to export democracy to Latin America, where wars of independence had recently unleashed radical social forces, Adams balked.

"America, with the same voice which spoke herself into existence as a nation, proclaimed to mankind the inextinguishable rights of human nature," he explained in his 1821 Independence Day address, "but she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy." Were America to do otherwise, Adams warned, "she might become the dictatress of the world," but "she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit."

During the following century and a half, America's most successful policy makers took their cue from Adams and tempered their imperial ambitions with a healthy dose of realism. William Henry Seward, Abraham Lincoln's secretary of state, steered the nation through some dangerous diplomatic waters during the Civil War and presented his successors with a blueprint for a Pacific empire that stretched from Alaska and Hawaii to Midway and Samoa. Elihu Root, an international lawyer and diplomatic troubleshooter often credited with founding "the American Establishment," spent the early years of the 20th century restraining Theodore Roosevelt's tendency to shoot first and ask questions later. And policy makers like George F. Kennan and George C. Marshall, who developed the doctrine of containment during the late 1940s, always recognized the importance of balancing ends and means and never permitted their anticommunist ideology to obscure the significance of economic solvency.

The costs of impulsive or reckless leadership fed by visions of empire, Herring reminds us, have been exceedingly high. In 1846, a pugnacious James K. Polk started a war of choice against Mexico that, in the short run, resolved a smoldering boundary dispute over Texas and wrested control of some prime Southwestern real estate, including California, from General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. When Polk pressed Congress to permit the expansion of slavery into most of the land seized during the Mexican War, however, critics predicted that the new territory would prove a dose of arsenic for the country, poisoning relations between North and South.

Likewise, William McKinley's "splendid little war" that freed Cuba from Spanish rule in 1898 may have confirmed America's emergence as a great power, but it also drew the country into a bloody struggle in the Philippines, where insurgents fought a losing battle for independence—first from Madrid and then from Washington—that left an estimated 4,200 American soldiers and perhaps more than 200,000 Filipinos dead. Not long afterward, Woodrow Wilson, the only university professor ever to sit in the Oval Office, brought the United States into World War I on an idealistic crusade to make the world safe for democracy that seemed less reckless than arrogant. Wilson's misguided and abortive

attempt to remake the postwar world in America's image ushered in two decades of economic turmoil and military conflict that culminated in World War II.

Rejecting claims that the 1920s represent "an isolationist backwater," Herring shows that the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations actually embraced unilateralism and pursued "involvement without commitment" to promote America's economic interests while preserving its freedom of action, an approach not unlike the one that President George W. Bush would later adopt (436). In the aftermath of World War I, the United States steered clear of military alliances and collective-security pacts, but Wall Street led efforts to jump-start the war-torn German economy, as the Commerce Department pushed open the door for Ford, General Electric, and other multinational companies seeking to invest abroad and Hollywood films entertained audiences throughout Europe. Although the Republicans earned high marks in the short run by "scrupulously avoiding binding political commitments," Herring concludes, their unilateral approach "concealed major long-term failures" that became apparent only after the collapse of the international financial system and the disintegration of the League of Nations during the 1930s (482).

Franklin D. Roosevelt inherited an unprecedented set of political and economic challenges both at home and abroad. As unemployment soared and incomes shriveled, the American public paid little attention to the fallout from the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the Italian assault on Ethiopia, or Nazi Germany's strong-arm tactics in Central Europe. The Roosevelt administration was slow to recognize that Adolf Hitler's fascist ideology, his alliance with Japan and Italy, and his development of a state-of-the-art war machine presented a clear and present danger. Only after France fell and Britain was bombed did Roosevelt and the American public undergo what Herring calls "a great transformation" (484), as they acknowledged that the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans no longer provided what one historian called "free security."

In the aftermath of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Roosevelt not only mobilized the United States for global war but also alerted the American public to the central role Uncle Sam would have to play in world affairs after the shooting stopped. More pragmatic and realistic than Wilson, Roosevelt had few illusions about the challenges, yet he did have a vision of a stable balance of power sustained by America's military superiority and economic vitality. Inspired by Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower transformed the United States into a nuclear-armed superpower whose chief responsibility was to make the world safe from communism.

When John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson failed to understand that even superpowers must accept limits, America stumbled into a quagmire in Vietnam and received another dose of arsenic not unlike the one Polk's actions had earlier forced us to swallow. Although the poison temporarily immobilized policy during the 1970s, Ronald Reagan concocted the perfect antidote—a huge military buildup linked to a born-again American exceptionalism—that put the Kremlin on the defensive and led to the end of the cold war. A series of international crises during the early 1990s—Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda, and political chaos in countries like Haiti and Somalia—suggested that the collapse of the Soviet Union had made the world safe

merely for regional warfare and genocide. Although there was no “peace dividend,” by the end of the decade a technology-driven wave of globalization did bring peace and prosperity to Bill Clinton’s America.

Nevertheless, America’s emergence as what one French critic has called the world’s first “hyperpower” early in the new millennium has come at a considerable price. The export of American popular culture, typified by such varied symbols as McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, Paris Hilton, and Howie Mandel, has helped make the United States a convenient target for traditionalists in every corner of the globe who equate consumerism with decadence. The cost of maintaining a military arsenal larger than those of all other nations combined has helped transform the United States from the world’s largest creditor to the world’s largest debtor in just one decade.

Perhaps most important, after more than 60 years of cold-war and post-cold-war crises, key foreign-policy decisions have been—at least until now—less likely to be made by pragmatic leaders in the mold of John Quincy Adams or Franklin Roosevelt than by ambitious national-security managers who have little respect for America’s constitutional system of checks and balances or for protecting civil liberties.

At the dawn of the Cold War, the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a book titled *The Irony of American History* (1952). Niebuhr began by acknowledging the well-intended efforts of men and women from Main Street to Capitol Hill to combat a communist threat that seemed every bit as dangerous as fascism, but he also offered some words of caution. Would it not be truly ironic if, in an attempt to defeat Soviet totalitarianism, America adopted the repressive tactics at home that it opposed abroad? If American democracy should perish during the cold war, Niebuhr prophesied, “the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle.”

Like many of his generation, Niebuhr worried that the vicious “red baiting” of the 1950s would silence critics of U.S. foreign policy and produce disaster overseas, as it eventually did in Southeast Asia during the 1960s. In June 1972, a year after Niebuhr’s death, burglars linked to the White House broke into the Democratic National Committee’s offices at the Watergate Hotel to determine, among other things, whether Richard Nixon’s Democratic rivals possessed information about the Vietnam War that might have derailed his bid for re-election. Herring reminds us that the ensuing scandal led not only to Nixon’s impeachment and resignation but also to a series of shocking revelations about warrantless FBI wiretaps and CIA assassination plots dating from the Eisenhower years. With strong public support, during the late 1970s Congress rejected the principle that the ends justify the means, curbed presidential power, and reined in America’s intelligence agencies.

Although Niebuhr was probably not a fan of the New York Yankees, one look at the recent foreign policies of President Bush would probably have led him to utter one of Yogi Berra’s best known aphorisms: “It’s deja vu all over again.” Herring points out that in the aftermath of Al Qaeda’s attacks on New York and Washington, at a time when people from

almost every corner of the globe were heard to say, “We are Americans,” the Bush administration “took a decidedly unilateralist turn” reminiscent of the 1920s (939). It also embraced an alarmist national-security doctrine predicated on preventative war that harked back to the darkest days of the cold war and enhanced presidential power in ways that would have brought a smile to Nixon’s face.

“It is one of the supreme ironies of recent history that leaders bent on perpetuating U.S. primacy squandered it through reckless use of the nation’s power,” Herring concludes (960-61). For the United States to find its way out of Iraq and back to political and financial stability, the American public will need to pay much closer attention to how the world works. Looking at Russia from a back porch in Alaska or attending grammar school in Indonesia may be a good start, but it’s not nearly enough. For as George Herring has pointed out, America’s transformation from colony to superpower required not only wise and realistic leaders willing to take calculated risks but also attentive and intelligent citizens willing to accept the consequences.

Author's Response by George C. Herring, Emeritus, University of Kentucky

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**M**y thanks to editor Thomas Maddux for organizing this roundtable and to the contributors for the time they put into reading my book—no small task in itself—and the care with which they critiqued it. Nothing means more to authors than to have their work taken seriously.

When the legendary Oxford University Press editor Sheldon Meyer (more years ago than I care to remember) invited me to write a volume on U.S. foreign relations in Oxford's *History of the United States* series I was delighted. I was pleased that a sub-field of U.S. history some claimed had been marginalized within the larger profession seemed thereby validated. I was flattered by the honor and excited at the prospect of doing the book. It was only when I actually sat down to begin writing that I came to realize the magnitude of what I had agreed to do. The other volumes in the series published or under contract dealt with discreet chronological periods, the American Revolution, the Civil War, for example. Mine would cover the entirety of U.S. history and deal with a subject that required at least some attention to events in other countries and to the international context in which United States foreign policy was conceived and implemented. The task proved daunting indeed, taking around twelve years to complete. It was also great fun after close to forty years in the field to have the opportunity to pull it all together in some meaningful way, and, on a day-to-day basis, to continue to learn new things and to see old things in new ways.

The purpose of the Oxford series, as set forth by its founders Richard Hofstadter and C. Vann Woodward was to bring the best of historical scholarship to the widest possible audience by producing readable books accessible to the educated general public. Hofstadter and Woodward also hoped to revive narrative history, which seemed to them to have fallen on hard times and which Woodward considered “essential to an understanding of American history by the modern citizen, who would otherwise confront the present and the future with outdated misconceptions of the past.”<sup>1</sup> My task then was to synthesize the vast literature of the history of U.S. foreign relations into a compelling narrative appealing to the general reader, to make “diplomatic history” both entertaining and instructive.

My plan for the book incorporated a number of different features. I sought to give ample attention to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, truly the formative years of U.S. foreign policy and often neglected in broad accounts of the subject. In fact, those chapters proved to be among the most enjoyable in large part because of the colorful personalities and the free-wheeling environment in which they operated. I sought to provide context for U.S. foreign relations by including in most chapters discussions of the domestic and international circumstances in which the events took place. While discussing the broad forces that shaped U.S. foreign relations, I also wanted to put people front-and-center in my

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's introduction to Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York, 2005), xiv.

narrative, not only policy makers but also individuals such as entrepreneurs, merchants, missionaries, and educators, often the advance guard of American expansionism—even a Voice of America disk jockey. While dealing with familiar topics, I hoped also to bring in the sort of material that would make clear the breadth of the term “foreign relations” and the remarkable diversification of the field in recent years, such things, for example, as the role of baseball in early U.S.-Japanese relations, the part played by Disney cartoons in World War II propaganda, and the importance of jazz in penetrating the Iron Curtain. As well as possible within space limits, I sought to explicate the motives of and the positions assumed by other nations in diplomatic disputes and to show the impact of U.S. intervention on other peoples. Above all, I wanted to provide on key topics the most up-to-date information and interpretations and to put the material within a comprehensible interpretive framework.

I am very pleased that the reviewers agree that I succeeded in producing the sort of narrative history I set out to write. Jerald Combs calls *From Colony to Superpower* the “best and most up-to-date summary of the state of the field;” Howard Jones describes it as “elegant and witty,” “balanced and fair” (not, thankfully, “fair and balanced”). Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman speaks of a “sure-footed narrative,” “beautifully written.” I was especially pleased with Douglas Little’s observations that the book demonstrates that our field is “alive and well” and that, “on almost every page,” by its attention to a broad range of topics, it “refutes that old canard that diplomatic history is ‘more or less what one [damned] clerk said to another.’”

I must also, of course, address the criticisms of my work offered by the reviewers. In response to Combs’s lament of the “dearth of historiographical analysis,” I should note that this omission was deliberate and indeed mandatory, perhaps because the series’ editors figured that nothing might deaden the pages for general readers as much as excursions into the sometimes arcane world of historians writing about what other historians have said about this topic or that. Those places in early drafts where I actually injected some historiography invariably came back with instructions to cut. I had no real problems with this approach. I came into the field forty-four years ago steeped in historiography, and for years served up heavy doses of it in my classes. For graduate students, of course, it remained essential. But in my final years of undergraduate teaching, I began to question whether lengthy discussions of historiography helped accomplish what I wanted to do. Thus I sought to write a book that took historiography into account without getting bogged down in it or sidetracked by it.

While writing the book, I had to make daily decisions about what to include and what to leave out, and I fully expected to be criticized on this score. Indeed, that was the first criticism I encountered. A colleague of mine here at the University of Kentucky, a former diplomat who had served in Iran and has written extensively about that country, lavishly praised those parts of the book he read. But he also complained that I did not do enough with Iran. Jones’s review, similarly, notes that I did not discuss the *Amistad* affair, an episode he has written an excellent book about. I have read Jones’s study and seen the Steven Spielberg film, and I even recall debating whether to include the topic or not. For reasons that I cannot recall, I decided not to do so, perhaps a mistake, since, as Jones points

out, the *Amistad* affair offers a “wonderful opportunity to show the relationship between domestic and foreign policy....” Similarly, Jones observes, I might have given more attention to the fleeting opportunity for foreign intervention in the American Civil War provided by Gen. Robert E. Lee’s victory at Second Bull Run. I don’t disagree.

Turning to substantive issues, Jones finds me “too generous” toward Woodrow Wilson, a comment that rather surprised me. I must confess that I have always been more than a bit ambivalent about Wilson, sympathetic with his dreams for a better world, admiring of his rhetorical skills, but turned off by his personal hauteur and his way of dealing with people, especially toward the end of his career. By affirming the enduring influence of the principles that he set forth, I did not intend to condone—as Jones seems to think I did—his actions, especially his frequent interventions in Mexico and the Caribbean. In the case of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, I question his reasons for intervening and especially what the United States did there. On Mexico, I conclude that Wilson has been “harshly and rightly criticized” and emphasize his blindness to the fact that even “those Mexicans who shared his goals would consider unacceptable even modest U.S. efforts to influence their revolution.”<sup>2</sup> Nor do I condone U.S. interventionism in general. On the contrary, from Canada in 1775 to Iraq in 2003 I am sharply critical of the pretensions that drove repeated U.S. military interventions and in most cases of their results. My conclusion indeed is that as a rule the major impact was to stimulate powerful currents of nationalism in the areas being invaded by the United States.

Jones also questions my ranking of the relative importance of Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt as makers of American foreign policy. I did say (and here Jones misquotes me) that “only Wilson stands above him [FDR] in importance in twentieth century U.S. foreign policy.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps I should have stated more explicitly that this judgment was based on Wilson’s articulation of the seminal ideas that would guide U.S. policymakers throughout the American century and beyond. I certainly did not mean to suggest that Wilson was a more effective diplomatist or to demean Roosevelt’s importance. Indeed, my paean to FDR should make very clear my high regard for him.<sup>4</sup>

I hesitate even to approach that well-worn issue of what JFK might have done with regard to Vietnam, but Jones raises the matter and I will therefore respond. For years, I stubbornly resisted any notion that at the time of his assassination Kennedy was committed to withdrawal from Vietnam. Like Jones, I was appalled by arguments to that effect in Oliver Stone’s movie, *JFK*. I have been persuaded in recent years that, given his experiences in the White House and what he knew about Vietnam, Kennedy might well have acted differently than Lyndon Johnson did in 1964-1965, and I incorporated this view

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<sup>2</sup> George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York, 2008), 397.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 492.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 587-588.

into the fourth edition of *America's Longest War*.<sup>5</sup> Jones notes in his review, as earlier in his book *Death of a Generation*, some interesting new evidence showing Kennedy's interest in a partial withdrawal that would have taken U.S. troop numbers back to their 1961 level. I remain unconvinced that he was firmly committed even to a partial withdrawal. What is essential to understand about the planning for a withdrawal, I believe, is that it was designed at least in part to pressure the Saigon government. It was also based on the premise of increased stability in South Vietnam, and the Buddhist crisis of summer/fall 1963 completely undercut that contingency. There is no doubt that Kennedy was deeply troubled by Vietnam, and very little question that he wanted to get out. But his private interest in withdrawal contrasts sharply with his public affirmations that the United States must stay the course and, as John Prados points out, his consideration of possible escalation in Laos.<sup>6</sup> In the final analysis, the most important point, and here Jones and I fully agree, is that Kennedy was responsible for what Jones calls a "deepened and more dangerous involvement in Vietnam" culminating in the overthrow and death of Ngo Dinh Diem which left the United States with much greater responsibility for the fate of the Saigon government.

The reviewers' comments on my interpretive perspective merit some attention. It should come as no surprise to those who know my work that, as Cobbs Hoffman points out, race, class, and gender merit "only fleeting references" in *From Colony to Superpower*. I could not have written a book built around these concepts. Had I done so, it likely would have not been published in this series. Indeed, Cobbs Hoffman acknowledges that "it is doubtful Herring could have sustained an analysis that credibly gave pride of place to these concepts over the full 200-plus years." I should note, however, that I do give considerable attention to race, which, as Michael Hunt pointed out years ago, is an omnipresent force in U.S. foreign policy from the beginning. I must also take exception to Combs's labeling of me as a "soft realist," someone who, as he observes elsewhere, emphasizes the limits of power and the necessity of restraint and limited goals in foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, as a graduate student, I cut my scholarly teeth on George Kennan's *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* and Hans Morgenthau's numerous writings. I have always been troubled by the messianic tendencies in U.S. foreign policy. The limits of power is a major theme in my writings. But the emphasis on economic influences in *From Colony to Superpower* reflects the work of William Appleman Williams and his disciples. I devote a good deal of attention to ideology and domestic politics, and in many other ways depart from pure realist principles. In fact, as Thomas Zeiler has pointed out in his recent state-of-the-field essay, the old frames of

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<sup>5</sup> George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., New York, 2001), 127-128.

<sup>6</sup> John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* (Lawrence, KS, 2009), 77-81.

<sup>7</sup> Jerald A. Combs, *The History of American Foreign Policy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Armonk, NY, 2008), xiv-xv.

reference of nationalist, realist, and revisionist have become blurred and in any event no longer apply very well to writing in the field.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of broad themes, I wish now that I had brought into the mix Reinhold Niebuhr, who is mentioned by Douglas Little in his review. He, perhaps better than anyone else, articulated the dangers of harnessing American ideals to American power. The foreign policy “model” that I find most appealing is what I identify as the peculiarly American brand of practical idealism best exemplified in the diplomacy of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. Both men vigorously defended their nation’s interests, but in general they did so in ways consistent with its principles, FDR’s handling of the isolationists from 1939-1941, of course, a glaring exception. They proclaimed with singular eloquence lofty ideals, Lincoln’s “last best hope,” “new birth of freedom” and “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” and FDR’s Four Freedoms. In doing so, they won widespread support among peoples across the world. Yet they were also, as FDR put it, “intensely practical” men who operated with keen awareness of the means available to them and the limits to their own and the nation’s power and indeed to the limits of diplomacy itself. Perhaps this is part of the “sharper assessment” Cobbs Hoffman looks for in her review. It is too early to tell at this point, but this may also be the course that the Obama administration will follow in these dangerous and difficult times.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas W. Zeiler, “The Diplomatic History Bandwagon: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History*, 95 (March 2009), 1056.