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Melvyn P. Leffler. *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War.* New York: Hill and Wang, September 2007. 608 pp. ISBN: 0-8090-9717-6 (hardcover, \$35). ISBN: 0-374-53142-0 (paperback, \$17).

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Review by John L. Harper, the Johns Hopkins SAIS Bologna Center

At the heart of the study of the Cold War for those living through it were a series of questions: what were the factors driving the East-West conflict, what was the basic nature and trajectory of the international system, and would statesmen have the wit and the freedom from fate necessary to avoid Armageddon and secure a lasting peace? Writing in 1957, Raymond Aron believed that “The unity of the planet is manifestly tending to disintegrate. New centers of force, outside the boundaries of the Western and Soviet civilizations, are due to arise.” Aron saw no possibility that either Washington or Moscow could reverse polycentrism and achieve a position of clear dominance, nor of an agreement between them to put an end to the Cold War. “Political wisdom can offer no more hopeful prospect than survival through moderation.” Writing a year later, Aron’s fellow sociologist C. Wright Mills saw a somewhat different picture: “The old international balance of several or of many relatively equal nation-states has been replaced by a polarized world. . . Then the mechanics of international affairs were often the mechanics of fate. But now the decisive interplay is between two superstates. In the international realm, events have become less subject to fate, more subject to human decision. Given the scope and the centralization of the means of power now organized in

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these two superstates, the role of explicit decision is enlarged.” For Mills, the concentration of power in the hands of the United States and the Soviet Union--and within them in the hands of small elites—was a reason for optimism about the possibility of mastering fate and avoiding World War Three.¹

Melvyn Leffler’s new book is an attempt to come to grips, using the benefit of hindsight, with some of the same questions, for example, the nature of the post-war international realm, and the possibility of autonomous human decision within it. It is not, he makes clear, a general narrative but rather an examination of the relation between human agency and impinging reality during a series of watershed moments, or potential turning points, in the Cold War. The focus is on five sets of leaders during five important episodes: Josef Stalin and Harry Truman, 1945-1948; Georgi Malenkov and Dwight Eisenhower, 1953-1954; Nikita Khrushchev, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, 1962-1965; Leonid Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter, 1975-1980; Mikhail Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, 1985-1990. Fundamentally, what Leffler wants to explain is why, until 1985-1990, U.S. and Soviet leaders were unable and/or unwilling to bring an end to the Cold War.

To do so, he invokes four constant features, or “givens,” making up the context of Cold War decision-maker and weighing upon individual leaders. First is the “configuration of power in the international system.” (5) Typically, it presented a picture of impending threats to one’s (or one’s allies’) security as well as tempting opportunities to extend one’s influence, while not being susceptible to quick alteration. Next are domestic pressures and parameters, including “interest groups, public opinion, and powerful bureaucracies” with which U.S. and Soviet leaders had constantly to reckon. (5) Third are “constituents abroad, formal allies and sometimes informal clients, governments with their own interests that they pursue vigorously, sometimes with cunning and guile and sometimes with a dazzling candor. These clients are never as weak as they seem, and great powers aiming for hegemony cannot disregard them.” (6) Finally, there are the historical experiences (for Soviet leaders the catastrophe of the war) and the political convictions that help to determine threat-perceptions and define ultimate objectives. In short, there are memory and ideology. (Let us define ideology as a secular religion: a set of beliefs purporting to explain reality, including the dynamics and direction of History, and indicating a path to temporal salvation. By its very nature, an ideology represents a limited perspective, reflecting the experience and interests of a particular group or nation, rather than, as its adepts claim, universal truth.²) If one of Leffler’s factors is most important in explaining why the Cold War continued despite recurrent longings for peace and apparent opportunities to end it, it is this. As the book’s title indicates, Leffler wants to emphasize that leaders on both sides saw the Cold War as a struggle “for the soul of mankind,” and to

¹ Raymond Aron, *On War* (New York: Norton, 1968, first published in 1957), 120; C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), 37.

² This is my definition, but I don’t think Leffler would object.

establish the truth of their respective versions of History. It could not end until one (or both) of the antagonists had changed its view of the world.

The strengths of this book are at least three-fold. The first is that it helps to correct an old flaw in Cold War historiography by providing a scrupulously balanced picture of the selected episodes. It is practically unique among major studies in devoting virtually equal attention to Soviet and U.S. policy-making and deliberations. A second strength is the remarkable richness of the documentation. The author seems to have mined every available archival source and is familiar as well with an array of very recent secondary literature. One can only admire the energy and diligence that went into the preparation of this book. A third strength is the way in which the author handles his protagonists. There is a thumbnail biography of each, conveying with economy and skill their complexity as human beings, and how and why each had come to see the world as he did before arriving at the summit. These are followed by well-crafted accounts of the same figures exercising power. More often than not, the author convincingly shows, they were reacting to events and struggling with the above-mentioned circumstances, the creatures, more than the masters, of pressing fears and hopes. Leffler writes of his characters, even those whose hands were covered with blood, with empathy and insight. His aim is not to moralize, but to reveal their motives and explain their actions in their own terms. In this he brilliantly succeeds.

Naturally, one can quibble over specifics and wish he had gone further on certain questions. Here are a few examples: Following Eduard Mark and others, he writes that Stalin pursued a cautious, “national front” strategy in the attempt to reconcile continued co-operation with the United States and Britain with his longer-term aim to dominate Western Europe. But did someone who (as Leffler points out, 77) despised signs of foreign communist autonomy, really feel that the communization of Western Europe was desirable, let alone possible? George Kennan argued that Stalin did not welcome the prospect of successful revolutions abroad that might lead to communist leaderships and movements independent of his will, and that might inspire and ally with opposition to his rule within the USSR. According to Milovan Djilas, Stalin “felt instinctively that the creation of revolutionary centers outside of Moscow could endanger its supremacy in world Communism . . . That is why he helped revolutions only up to a certain point—up to where he could control them—but he was always ready to leave them in the lurch whenever they slipped out of his grasp.”³

This reviewer found Leffler’s interpretation of Khrushchev’s motives during the Cuba crisis to be a little frustrating. “He had conceived his gamble to put missiles in Cuba not only to protect Castro’s revolution but to redress the strategic imbalance and allow for continued reductions in theater forces and military manpower. If Americans were faced with threats as grave as those facing his own country, he had thought, they would negotiate more

³ George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin* (London: Hutchinson, 1961), 250-51. Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 132. Curiously, neither of these classics appears in Leffler’s bibliography.

seriously about disarmament and Germany.” (166) Does this mean that Khrushchev aimed to use the missiles to try to settle the Berlin question on his terms (as some American historians have suggested, but as Khrushchev and his adviser Oleg Troyanovsky later denied)? Something similar can be said concerning the installation of SS-20 intermediate-range missiles in the 1970s. Leffler does not explain the reasoning behind a decision fraught with important (and presumably unintended) consequences for several of his protagonists. Nor does he deal adequately with the heated controversy in the United States concerning Soviet heavy inter-continental ballistic missiles. (If I am not mistaken, the phrase “window of vulnerability,” a staple of the tendentious domestic critique of détente, does not appear.)

This last point suggests a couple of weaknesses arising from the structure of the book. The first is simply that in choosing to focus on five well-defined moments, the author has excluded (except for passing references) personalities and events that are germane to the outcomes that he wants to explain. Take for example the chapter on 1975-1980, “The Erosion of Détente.” Leffler is excellent on Brezhnev and Carter (as well as on Zbigniew Brzezinski’s hyperactivity and schematic outlook). But it is misleading to say that “Brezhnev killed détente” by invading Afghanistan in December 1979. (334) A good case can be made that détente had been mortally wounded when Carter took office in January 1977.⁴ This had to do, *inter alia*, with the inherent contradictions in Nixon’s and Kissinger’s conception, the political fall-out from the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and the relentless campaign waged against it by Republican conservatives and Cold War Democrats. Take as well the chapter on Stalin, Truman, and the origins of the Cold War. Like Richard Nixon, Franklin Roosevelt is but a shadowy presence. Yet a good case can be made that the grand alliance was fatally compromised by the time Truman took office in April 1945. This had to do, *inter alia*, with the inherent contradictions in FDR’s policies, the political fall-out from Soviet behavior in Eastern Europe, and a growing conservative trend in the United States.

A second problem is that Leffler’s dense, detailed narrative, while giving a vivid picture of how leaders saw the world day-to-day, tends at times to lose sight of the contextual factors that conditioned their policy choices. His highly-favorable, and by-and-large persuasive, portraits of Reagan and Gorbachev show that the former was capable of learning about (even if from a starting point of appalling ignorance) and of inspiring trust on the part of the adversary, whereas the latter was dogged and courageous in pursuit of a new perspective on international relations (even if as a means to a futile end: the renewal of socialism in the Soviet Union). But only in the book’s conclusion does the reader hear in any detail about the “political groundswell” in the United States of the 1970s that was a fundamental factor in the overthrow of détente.⁵ By the same token, only in the conclusion

⁴ Despite Kissinger’s suggestion otherwise, its future would not necessarily have been brighter if Gerald Ford had won re-election. By 1976, the anti-détente forces in his administration were well-ensconced.

⁵ “Disaffected liberals—soon to become the intellectual forerunners of neoconservatism—joined with traditional conservative groups, ethnic blue-collar workers in the Northeast, defense industrialists and business entrepreneurs in the South and Southwest, and evangelical Christians. These business, ethnic, and religious groups had little in common but their fear of Soviet power, their antipathy to atheistic communism,

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does the author discuss in a sustained way the structural decline of the Soviet economy and the implications for it of major innovations in information and communications technology. (460, 463) Finally, only in the conclusion does he say much about the contemporaneous political and budgetary pressures in the United States itself (Western European pressures are not mentioned) pushing Reagan, whether he liked it or not, in the direction of détente. The reader puts the book down with the sensation that these important developments were tacked on at the end. It must also be said that any choice of structure entails its trade-offs, and this is not to suggest that the author should have written a book different from the one he wanted to write. It is a fine one as it is.

To return briefly to the sociologists, Leffler's book demonstrates that Aron was right in his analysis--the international system was (and is) tending to become ever more difficult for any single power to dominate—but also that Wright's optimism was not unfounded. Although embedded in domestic and international configurations of power and under the influence of messianic ideologies impelling their superstates toward deadly conflict, when it counted most, U.S. and Soviet leaders were able to act with restraint. A couple of final questions for the author: does he mean to say that when the Soviet Union gave up the "struggle for the soul of mankind" at the end of the 1980s, that the contest was over and had been won by the United States? And what have been the consequences of assuming, as many did, that this was the case?

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and a desire to redirect what they regarded as a wrong-headed liberal tendency in American politics. They believed strongly that the United States had to rebuild its military strength." (456)