



**H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews**  
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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).

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux  
 Reviewers: John L. Harper, Geir Lundestad, Elizabeth Spalding, Jeremi Suri

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**Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge**

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For decades historians of the Cold War have fought and debated Cold War issues and in some respects continued their own “Cold War” long after the end of this conflict. The disagreements have flowed with charges of triumphalism over the results and disputes over which side, the Soviet Union or the United States, was responsible for the start of the conflict, which side escalated the disagreements coming out of the results of WWII into the Cold War, which side intensified the conflict as opposed to seeking accommodation to lessen the discord, and which side held the most responsibility in extending the conflict from Europe to the rest of the globe and into space.

Melvyn Leffler has again shifted the focus of debate with *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*. In his prize-winning *Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War*, Leffler prompted historians to shift away from intense debates on what consideration—open door for American capitalism, security, domestic politics, an imperial quest for dominance—had the most important impact on American Cold War politics. In evaluating the interacting impact of these considerations, Leffler significantly elevated the historiography on U.S. policies. By making extensive use of primary source publications, translations, and recently scholarly assessments on Soviet policy, such as Vlad Zubok’s *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (2007) [the subject of a forthcoming H-Diplo roundtable], and Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (2005), Leffler has reinforced the literature that explores equally the perspectives, policy formulation, and implementation results for both sides.

The title of Leffler’s study also points to his support of recent scholarly efforts to incorporate ideology in assessments of both Cold War camps. The battle for “the soul of mankind” is about the importance that policy makers placed on advancing and defending their respective systems and visions on a global basis. As Leffler suggests, his book “is about ideology and memory. It is about structure and agency. It argues that officials in Washington and Moscow intermittently grasped the consequences of the Cold War,

glimpsed the possibilities of détente, and yearned for peace, but they could not escape their fears or relinquish their dreams.” (8)

The reviewers do have some reservations about Leffler’s selection of case studies, about whether there really were “lost opportunities” for accommodation, and on specific interpretations as well as on decision-making, implementation, the relationship of his study to Cold War historiography and to international relations theory. However, they recommend that you read it, challenge it, and profit from it.

(1) Leffler begins with the question of why Soviet and American leaders did not stop the Cold War sooner and examines five case studies: the origins of the Cold War in 1945-48; the 1953-54 manoeuvres of Dwight Eisenhower and the post-Stalin leadership; Nikita Khrushchev and American leaders in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis; the erosion of détente under Brezhnev and Carter, 1975-1980; and the end of the Cold War, 1985-1990. Geir Lundestad questions whether there really were “lost opportunities” before the 1980s to end the conflict, or does Leffler’s analysis suggest a Shakespearian dynamic, according to Jeremi Suri, in which leaders desire accommodation but pursue policies that work against their desires? They reach conclusions similar to many of the authors in Klaus Larres and Kenneth Osgood, eds., *The Cold War after Stalin’s Death: A Missed Opportunity for Peace?* (2006) who note far more competition than opportunities for ending the conflict.

(2) The reviewers question a number of Leffler’s interpretations, assumptions, and selections. John Harper, for example, wonders if Stalin, who “despised signs of foreign communist autonomy, really felt that the communization of Western Europe was desirable, let alone possible?” Does Stalin really fit with Leffler’s paradigm of the struggle for the “soul of mankind”? Lundestad suggests that Leffler could have identified more precisely where the various efforts at détente stood on a continuum from avoiding conflict to ending conflict. Harper also wonders about the omission of Franklin Roosevelt, who started the ball rolling on the American side, and Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, who launched détente. The latter are covered as a backdrop to Leonid Brezhnev, but Leffler’s main focus is on Jimmy Carter. The reviewers consider Leffler’s assessment of Carter as one of the most interesting in the book, but questions persist about the viability of détente by 1976 on the U.S. side and the degree of Brezhnev’s and the Soviet Politburo’s commitment to it.

(3) Jeremi Suri, with some support from the other reviewers, raises questions concerning Leffler’s definition of decision-making, implementation, and the role of evolving ideology, memory, and the international system. “Powerful leaders—a very small group—receive information, assess conditions, define aims, and then act in Leffler’s narrative,” according to Suri, who suggests there should be more consideration of the impact of outsiders, non-state actors, and international organizations. Harper and Lundestad make similar points with their respective wish for more context, such as the political groundswell in the U.S. against détente, and a discussion of the impact of allies on both sides. Policy implementation, Suri notes, should include more consideration of the significant impact of bureaucracies and interest groups on both

sides. Suri also suggests more attention to the role of evolving ideologies—Leffler considers this most significantly with Reagan and Gorbachev—the impact of Cold War memories on the conflict, and more analysis on the nature and impact of the Cold War international system.

(4) In focusing on Leffler's relationship to Cold War historiography, Elizabeth Spalding raises a number of questions concerning Leffler's relationship to and use of international relations concepts and his central emphasis on ideology. Spalding suggests that Leffler combines George Kennan's realism with structural realism "in which the (in)security structure of the international environment supersedes human agency and national interests." (2) Leffler then mixes up an incompatible stew, according to Spalding, by dropping ideology right in the middle of the pot, but Leffler's "interior case studies generally contradict his assertion of ideology's importance to the Cold War." (3) Leffler's emphasis on ideology does coincide with the increased emphasis on this since the end of the Cold War in interpretations of both U.S. and Soviet policies.

(5) The reviewers point to Leffler's chapter on the end of the Cold War and his analysis on the contributions of Gorbachev and Reagan as well worth the price of the book. Leffler notes the critical importance of Reagan's desire for negotiation with the Soviet Union from 1981 on despite his belief that communism would fail, that the Soviet Union was an "evil empire", and that the U.S. needed to increase its defense spending significantly, aggressively contain the spread of communism, and contest it where it existed in Third World countries with the Reagan Doctrine. Spalding suggests that Leffler excessively minimizes the impact of Reagan's revitalized containment policies in forcing Gorbachev to change basic Cold War beliefs and policies. Leffler, however, suggests that Reagan contributed the most by his willingness to negotiate with Gorbachev and the reassurance he gave the Soviet leader that the U.S. did not threaten Soviet security. Reagan's contribution is even more significant considering the resistance he faced from conservatives, from many of his significant advisers, and from attentive foreign policy circles and Congress. On the other hand, Leffler emphasizes that Gorbachev changed the most with respect to his ideological preconceptions, his view of international relations, and his insistence that Moscow's allies stand on their own and address the demands of their own people rather than relying on Soviet intervention to bail them out. Furthermore, Gorbachev did not let Reagan's rhetoric, his stubbornness on the Strategic Defence Initiative, and his unwillingness to back off on contested issues such as Afghanistan, Angola, and Central America prevent him from pursuing the accommodation he believed was critical to allow for a reorientation of Soviet spending priorities and a hoped-for revitalization of a reformed Soviet system.

### Participants:

**Melvyn P. Leffler**, co-chair of the America in the World Program, is Edward R. Stettinius Professor in the Department of History at the University of Virginia. He served as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at UVA from 1997-2001. In 1993, he won the Bancroft Prize for *Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the*

*Cold War* (1992). His other books include *The Specter of Communism: the United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1953* (1994); and *The Elusive Quest: America's Pursuit of European and French Security, 1919-1933* (1979).

**John L. Harper** is Resident Professor of American Foreign Policy and European Studies at the Bologna Center of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). He received an A.B. in History from Haverford College and a Ph.D. in European Studies from SAIS. He is the author of *America and the Reconstruction of Italy, 1945-1948* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), winner of the Helen and Howard Marraro Prize from the Society for Italian Historical Studies (in Italian translation as *America e la ricostruzione dell'Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987); *American Visions of Europe: Franklin D. Roosevelt, George F. Kennan, and Dean G. Acheson* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), winner of the Robert H. Ferrell Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations; and *American Machiavelli: Alexander Hamilton and the Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). Among his recent articles is "Anatomy of a Habit: America's Unnecessary Wars," in *Survival* Summer 2005. He is working on a book called *The Cold War* for Oxford University Press.

**Geir Lundestad** was born in 1945. Since 1990 he has been the Director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute and the Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee (the committee awards the Nobel Peace Prize.) After having been a professor of history and American Civilization at the University of Tromsø from 1974 to 1990, since 1991 he has been an adjunct professor of international history at the University of Oslo. He has published a number of books on the origins of the Cold War and on American-European relations after 1945. His most recent book is *The United States and Western Europe Since 1945. From "Empire" by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift* (Oxford University Press, 2003, paperback, 2005).

**Elizabeth Spalding** is Associate Professor of Government at Claremont McKenna College, where she teaches U.S. foreign policy and American government and directs CMC's Washington Program. The author of *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism*, she has contributed to several volumes on the presidency and U.S. foreign policy and written for the *Wilson Quarterly*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, and the *Claremont Review of Books*. Her current research interests include the war on terrorism, the beginnings and endings of the Cold War, religion and U.S. foreign policy, and the Wilsonian influence on modern American foreign policy. Her Ph.D. in government and foreign affairs is from the University of Virginia.

**Jeremi Suri** is Professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a senior fellow at the University of Wisconsin's Center for World Affairs and the Global Economy. He is the author of *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); *The Global Revolutions of 1968* (W.W. Norton, 2006); and *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Harvard University Press, 2003). Professor Suri was recently honored as one of America's "Top Young Innovators" by the

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Smithsonian Institution. Professor Suri received his Ph.D. from Yale University, his M.A. from Ohio University, and his B.A. from Stanford University.

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