

2008

h-diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables

Volume IX, No. 4 (2008)

22 February 2008

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

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/SoulofMankind-Roundtable.pdf>

Review by Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, Claremont McKenna College

John Lewis Gaddis of Yale University—where, more fittingly now than when he left Ohio University for Yale, he holds the Robert A. Lovett chair in history—may be dean of the Cold War historians, but Melvyn Leffler, the Edward Stettinius professor of history at the University of Virginia, is in a position to compete with Gaddis. Both scholars have written landmark books—*Strategies of Containment* and *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* by Gaddis and *A Preponderance of Power* by Leffler—and their work has informed much of the American academic debate about U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with the debate, here is a quick overview of the four main schools of Cold War thought (with occasional blending thereof). Realism, the oldest approach, holds that the Cold War arose out of the power vacuum at the end of World War II and that American and Soviet

leaders pursued their respective national interests because of power politics. Rising to ascendancy in the 1960s and 1970s, revisionism counters that American presidents' policy choices, along with the market structure of capitalism, caused the East-West conflict, while the Soviet Union was a revolutionary power seeking political and economic equality. Starting in the 1970s with newly available materials from the Truman Presidential Library and other U.S. sources, post-revisionism aims to make realism more nuanced and presents the Cold War as a series of mutual misunderstandings between the United States and the Soviet Union. Finally, from the late 1980s to the present, corporatism merges the power

*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.*

politics of realism with the core economic arguments of revisionism, portraying the United States, the USSR, and their respective leaders as rational actors who constantly sought security through their strategic and economic policy choices. Although historians have dominated the debate between and among the four schools of thought, political scientists have weighed in heavily over the years. Indeed, none of these approaches would be possible without political science, since realism and neo-Marxist revisionism originated in that discipline. And it should be noted that the roots for these schools are found in practical politics rather than scholarly writing: witness the work of diplomat-scholar George F. Kennan, diplomat Charles Bohlen, and journalist Walter Lippmann for the realists and progressive politician Henry A. Wallace and, to an extent, Lippmann (again) for the revisionists.

Gaddis typically receives credit for helping found post-revisionism, although his recent work, especially his popular *The Cold War: A New History*, is closer to a traditional or orthodox understanding of the Cold War. (Traditionalism or orthodoxy—concluding that the United States had no choice but to fight the Cold War because a totalitarian, communist regime was engaged in the conflict—has long been out of favor as a legitimate school of Cold War thought.) While downplaying the connection in the past, Leffler has been associated with corporatism, and recurring themes of corporatism run through *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*. But Leffler's current scholarship seems most at home with realism. In fact, *For the Soul of Mankind* develops a new, post-open-archives, post-corporatist, realist interpretation of the Cold War. As Gaddis continues work on the authorized biography of the late George Kennan, Leffler offers a book that is strikingly Kennanesque, especially in its focus on diplomatic leaders and their strategic intentions. At the same time, reflecting an updated post-Cold War perspective, Leffler blends classic Kennanesque realism with modern-day structural realism.

Leffler taps, absorbs, and comments on a wide range of archival and secondary materials from the United States and the former Soviet Union, and he plainly intends *For the Soul of Mankind* to straddle the scholarly and popular markets. Leffler posits five key periods in the East-West conflict in which, he says, the outcome could have gone another way; throughout the book, he grapples with the proposition that nothing about the Cold War was predetermined. The five moments—Truman and Stalin at the postwar dawn of the Cold War, Eisenhower and Malenkov after Stalin's death, Kennedy and Johnson with Khrushchev during and after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Carter and Brezhnev amid the crumbling of détente, and Reagan and Bush with Gorbachev in the final years of the Cold War—are revealing picks. Notably, Leffler does not select a Nixon-Brezhnev moment, although he briefly covers Nixon and Kissinger's diplomatic efforts. By realist standards, however, the Nixon era was the high point in Cold War diplomacy, when both sides agreed that the superpowers had stabilized the international system through mutual recognition of each other's status, influence, and political sophistication and through nuclear parity. It is not until the advent of Gorbachev that diplomacy again becomes so interesting to realists and to Leffler.

While still firmly a historian, Leffler aims to apply political science, mostly international relations (IR), concepts to the political leaders and political moments he has chosen. But he

has chosen impoverished aspects of IR theory with which to frame his detailed historical research. The problem is most evident in Leffler's central thesis, which is clearly stated in the introduction and conclusion but becomes muddled in the interior case studies. Leffler stresses that he wants to account for human agency as a factor in starting, prolonging, and ending the Cold War (6-8). At first, this focus seemingly steers him toward realism, in which political leaders, representing their nation-states, direct international relations. For realists, as for Leffler, political leaders act according to their own national interests and what is best for the security of their respective countries. But Leffler also suggests the Cold War was, ultimately, subordinated to the system or environment in which the conflict took place (8-9, 57-58). This inference moves him toward structural realism, in which the (in)security structure of the international environment supersedes human agency and discrete national interests. To support his thesis, he probably would have done better to hew more closely to Kennan and remain centered on the individual leaders and their political intentions; or he needed to clarify if he thinks structure trumps all other factors or if the two points of view can be reconciled with each other. Instead, the unresolved tension between Kennanesque realism and structural realism leads to confusion.

Leffler also wants to account for ideology and admits that this factor has often been left out of methodological analyses of the Cold War; he talks about ideology in his introduction and his conclusion. But neither Kennanesque nor structural realism permits for a meaningful exploration of the role of ideology in international politics, and Leffler is done a disservice by the IR theories he has turned to. His interior case studies generally contradict his assertion of ideology's importance to the Cold War. In Leffler's breakdown, Truman was practical, liked things in black and white (47), did not know how to deal with the twists and turns in Soviet policy (55), and unfortunately used ideological language that resonated with the American people rather than rhetoric that was focused on economic interests (65, 71); although steeped in an ideological mind-set, Stalin was pragmatic and opportunistic (14), acted like a Russian tsar seeking to enhance the security and power of his country (31), and wanted to collaborate with Truman but had to respond to the United States in order to defend Soviet security and national interests (52-54, 69); everybody between Truman-Stalin and Reagan-Gorbachev got caught in a structural, international status quo; Reagan saw nuclear war as the paramount global threat, changed the purpose of U.S. strength into the basis for talking with the Soviets (358-59), and learned to inspire trust rather than engender fear (448); and Gorbachev de-ideologized international politics, allowed the overthrow of communist governments in Eastern Europe, and ended the Cold War (448).

The longest examination of ideology in *For the Soul of Mankind* is Leffler's curious treatment of Gorbachev's point of view. Leffler presents Gorbachev as both an earnest reformer and enlightened socialist, who was security-driven rather than ideological. When Gorbachev acted in an ideological manner, submits Leffler, it was because he had trouble with his Politburo; but there is no evidence given that Gorbachev lost control of his Politburo. Leffler seems influenced by the pluralist model of Soviet comparative studies, which has largely been discredited by materials from archives opened in the last fifteen years. He also confuses short-term tactics with long-run grand strategy. With hindsight, he recasts Gorbachev's agenda as driven by the supreme goal of ending the Cold War. Gorbachev emerges in this depiction as a global humanitarian (412), rather than the Soviet

premier who was trying to hold together the USSR. A Soviet tactic may have been to say that Moscow had no intentions to expand its power or influence in the future; but Gorbachev's grand strategy—as he himself explained it—was to revitalize communism at home so that it would also succeed abroad. For Leffler, Gorbachev defensively wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan, and the United States dragged things out through their offensive actions (409-13). There is no consideration that strategic and economic pressure from all—especially American—sides forced Gorbachev to see that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was weakening the Soviet empire. Indeed, Leffler maintains that the United States' application of strength had nothing to do with changes in Soviet behavior (414-15).

In the end, it is difficult to determine Leffler's precise definition of ideology. As with Kennan's realism, any ideology—including that held by those who live in free, open regimes—distorts reality (52). Ideology seems to be more about fear and insecurity than anything else. It is alternately described as or equated with passions, fears, vulnerabilities, instincts, memories, and aspirations (72, 79-80, as examples). Again, Leffler is similar to Kennan in these regards, including intimating that ideology embodies a flawed belief system that often hindered rational diplomatic professionals from following rational strategic and economic national interests.

Another area in which Leffler is Kennanesque is in how he portrays the nuclear question. One of the reasons for the split between Secretary of State Dean Acheson and George Kennan in the late 1940s is that Kennan began to regard the atomic, then nuclear, factor as overriding the Cold War. But Truman's strategy of containment always presented the nuclear aspect as derivative of the Cold War, rather than the other way around. Eisenhower's MAD and Kennedy/Johnson's flexible response doctrines placed the nuclear challenge in the same framework. It was Nixon and Kissinger, the realists, who equated the arms race with the Cold War and conducted diplomatic talks in a political as well as nuclear setting of parity between the superpowers. It was Carter, the anti-realist, who wanted to escape the East-West conflict and redesign world politics and, instead, did his part to destroy détente. And it was Reagan who returned to Truman's containment of peace through strength and freedom and pursued the strategic defense initiative (SDI) in order to make it immaterial which aggressive power had nuclear weapons. Like Kennan, Leffler also fails to see that the Soviets situated nuclear weapons in the Cold War context. Soviet premiers consistently viewed gaining nuclear strength as a powerful weapon in and of itself and for negotiations on their terms. To avoid financial disaster and because he knew Reagan was serious about SDI, Gorbachev conceded to strategic arms reductions talks on American terms; but it was not something he wanted to do.

By using a blend of Kennan's realism and structural realism, Leffler does not account for regime distinctions. On the American side, he overlooks the importance of self-government, liberal democracy, or liberal internationalism. Except for Carter, all of the presidents Leffler considers were compatible liberal internationalists. Further, despite some deviations along the way, Eisenhower, Kennedy/Johnson, and Reagan/Bush followed Truman's lead. Reagan was unique in that he started with Truman's approach and then took containment to its logical conclusion in the circumstances he faced and forged in the 1980s. (Leffler dismisses NSC 68, so he denies the comprehensiveness of Truman's

containment.) And on the Soviet side, Leffler does not explain communist totalitarianism, even though he calls Stalin evil in his conclusion and describes some of the atrocities under his rule. The rest of the book reads as if liberal democracy and communist totalitarianism were two equally viable systems, facing similar economic challenges and just trying to guarantee the security of their respective citizens. By the time Leffler gets to Gorbachev, he uncritically presents a wealth of quotes from the former Soviet premier and misses that acceleration (*uskorenienie*) of socialism was as essential to Gorbachev's project as openness (*glasnost*) and restructuring (*perestroika*).

In agreement with both classical realism and structural realism, Leffler contends that the Cold War was about external behavior. Again, he sets aside regime distinctions, which are grounded in the notion that the foundational concepts at the heart of the nation-state define its ideology. Leffler does not base his examination of Soviet intentions and actions on the nature of that regime, and so is left with a superficial consideration of ideology. This is perhaps Leffler's most Kennanesque theme. The moral equivalence so long associated with realism is converted into a cultural relativism that comes to the fore in Leffler's analysis: Both sides in the East-West conflict were the same not only because they were great powers in the conventional realist sense but also because they each had ideologies, fears, aspirations, and insecurities.

Leffler 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) In the end, ideology becomes merely an irrational expression of dreams and fears and an impediment to *détente*. But the Cold War was an ideological and strategic battle for, as Leffler puts it, the soul of mankind. If one does not understand the importance of ideology to the exploration of the political, moral, military, and economic elements of the Cold War, one is left with only a realist's insecurities and a revisionist's reductionism. Without understanding the opposing ideologies and regime differences at the center of the Cold War, the defining essence of the Cold War is misconstrued. Because of this chain of misinterpretations, one cannot accurately define the strategy or the end goal of the statesman, the diplomat, or the tyrant.

Melvyn Leffler rightly says both American and Soviet leaders yearned for peace. But as they espoused opposing ideologies, they also held and pursued opposite meanings of the term. Using the same vocabulary did not mean the Americans and the Soviets understood the words in the same way. For all the flaws of liberal democracy in practice and for all the challenges that the United States has faced as leader of the "free world," it is a good thing that the Soviet definition of peace never prevailed.

Copyright © 2008 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.