

Reviewed Work:

Klaus Schwabe. *Weltmacht und Weltordnung: Amerikanische Außenpolitik von 1898 bis zur Gegenwart. Eine Jahrhundertgeschichte.* (World Power and World Order, from 1898 to the present. A history of the Twentieth Century). Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005. ISBN: 978-3-506-74783-9.

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Review by Christian Hacke, Institute für Politische Wissenschaft und Soziologie, Bonn, Germany

In any given bookstore today, books about current U.S. foreign policy fill whole tables. Judging from these titles, it is an undoubted “achievement” of the Bush administration that interest in and criticism of the United States have almost become interchangeable. The scholar of history, however, will ask: Does President Bush’s foreign policy signify a radical break with American tradition or are there continuities that help to illuminate America’s role in the world and its behavior on the international scene today? This is one of the key questions Klaus Schwabe addresses in his satisfactorily voluminous history of American foreign policy in the last one hundred years. In doing so, he also points out that the world before the accession of George W. Bush and before 9/11 might not have been peaceful and stable, but that at least the U.S. did a good job as guarantor of world order – *tempi passati*.

Another key question about America’s role in the world is whether the U.S. sees itself merely as a passive example of a prosperous, free, and democratic society or whether it rather engages actively – even employing military power – in the world to spread American ideals and secure American interests. Depending on how Americans at different times interpreted their mission, world politics evolved accordingly. Until 1898 this question remained on the backburner, but when the Spanish-American War led to the – almost accidental – occupation of Cuba and the Philippines by the U.S., the anti-colonial and anti-imperial self-image of the Americans was dealt a first blow.

Klaus Schwabe, one of Germany’s most distinguished scholars of American history, thus chose the right moment in time to let his “Jahrhundertgeschichte” (story of a century) unfold – it is the story of the rise of the United States in international affairs. In contrast to George F. Kennan, who understands the events of 1898 as the American fall from grace, Schwabe regards them as the point of origin of the conflict between American imperialism

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(mostly among the elites) and American self-sufficiency or even isolationism (mostly among the common people): “America began its way to an imperial power with force and energy, but the goal was pursued only half-heartedly. ... The imperialists did not manage to convince the public for good.” (p. 40). This conflict would continue to shape American foreign policy for the next century.

Accordingly, Schwabe identifies President Woodrow Wilson as the personification of America’s missionary imperialism – Wilson’s idealist rhetoric, in this interpretation, mainly serves as camouflage. And although Woodrow Wilson’s vision of a League of Nations failed and caused tremendous international instability in the interwar years, his missionary drive remained a pillar of American foreign policy. Wilson’s legacy – or rather: its idealist interpretation – has been guiding American presidents ever since. They all subscribe to the ideology of American exceptionalism and Wilson’s sense of mission while the majority of Americans are all too willing to take such idealist rhetoric at face value. Thomas Jefferson tips his hat!

Appropriately, Klaus Schwabe puts emphasis not only on the idealist strain of American foreign policy in the first half of the 20th century, but also on America’s sheer economic power – and the interests of economic expansionism that come with it. Regarding the development of the century, the phase of American economic weakness because of the Great Depression and the rise of national-socialist Germany in the 1930s was only an interlude. The President who unified his country to defeat both these challenges, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, is the second major figure in Schwabe’s narrative. He gives due respect to Roosevelt’s crucial achievements, the New Deal and the anti-Hitler alliance from 1941 to 1945, but Schwabe also explains how Roosevelt underestimated Stalin’s cruel resolve. To this day the origin of the Cold War is a matter of debate, but in terms of realpolitik, the division of Europe and the world was a product of the clash between America’s missionary claim and the Kremlin’s policy of conquest and subjugation. In Schwabe’s study, this complicated process is particularly well developed and subtly analyzed, based on a masterful historical knowledge.

Potsdam and Hiroshima set the course in 1945 for the role of the atomic power America in the second half of the century, in the Cold War. Schwabe is right to stress the necessity of a militarization of foreign policy that was inherent to the international constellation. From this vantage point, the major crises in Berlin, Cuba, and Vietnam are logical outflows of a predetermined course of affairs. Their resolution, however, was far from predetermined, and Schwabe excels at illuminating the achievements and failures of each President, the role of the U.S. Congress in international affairs, and the increasing importance of public opinion.

It is worthy of further discussion whether the formative years of the Cold War, especially the aspect of militarization and ideological cold-war liberalism under the administrations of Democratic Presidents Truman and Kennedy, should receive even more thorough treatment than Schwabe grants them. This seems entirely plausible since he portrays

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Ronald Reagan as the third major President after Wilson and FDR. Schwabe presents Reagan as the Great Communicator, the mesmerizing mixture of an aggressive ideologue and a shrewd power politician. There is some justice to this almost revisionist interpretation of the often misunderstood and ridiculed leader, but it leads directly to the question of common traits from Wilson to Truman to Kennedy to Reagan. Certainly the development and ambiguity of American cold-war liberalism and, dreadful word, neoconservatism, remains a field of research to be done.

Anyway, Reagan's confrontational – but measured – style paid off in the end. His massive arms build-up and the Strategic Defense Initiative pushed America into economical and social sickness, but this excessive military spending also pushed the Soviet Union over the brink. The selection of Gorbachev as the new General Secretary and Gorbachev's implementation of glasnost and perestroika proved that Reagan's steadfastness was worthwhile: Gorbachev gave in to the pressure and tried to reform the Soviet system of socialism. Over time he had to accept what Reagan understood all along, that the Soviet system was too decrepit to be reformed – any attempt to tinker with it would only precipitate its demise.

Reagan's unswerving belief in the power and ultimate success of freedom and democracy laid the foundation for the triumphal victory in the Cold War that was epitomized in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany in 1989/90. Schwabe notes that this triumph was accompanied by the prudent forgoing of all symbolic triumphalism on the part of then-President Bush and his Secretary of State, James Baker. Laudably, the author also does not refrain from recounting the darker side of Reagan's strategy and its high costs. Reagan's self-confident unilateralism and use of religiously motivated speech did not only disturb the Soviets but also America's allies, particularly in Europe. It also foreshadows some of the conflicts George W. Bush's foreign policy would bring – the analysis of the parallels and differences between Reagan and Bush Jr. is another field of research that deserves more attention. The complex connections between the Reagan and Bush administrations can also be seen in the Iran-Contra Affair, which very nearly destroyed Ronald Reagan's presidency. It was a grumbling from the repressed underbelly of Reagan's confrontational policy: his readiness, spelled out in the Reagan Doctrine, to support anticommunist "freedom fighters" all over the world often trumped a careful analysis of the consequences. The support of the mujaheddin's fight against the Soviet invaders in Afghanistan would return as a terrible boomerang on September 11, 2001. On the other hand, Reagan's secret, non-military support (in cooperation with Pope John Paul II) of the Polish Solidarnosc movement exhibits the bright and visionary side of the Reagan Doctrine that helped to bring about the implosion of tyrannical Soviet rule. All considered, there seems to be no President whose foreign policy legacy is harder to assess than Reagan's. There are no easy or definite judgments, and Schwabe subtly squirms on the issue as well.

The effective and influential diplomacy of the Bush/Baker administration that led to German reunification – against the considerable concerns of the French and the British –

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and the building of the broadest of international coalitions to oust Saddam Hussein's Iraq from Kuwait in 1990/91 figure as a high point of American foreign policy achievements – and also as a somewhat premature end point of Schwabe's analysis. Regarding the strategic possibilities, the range of scholarly, political, and public debate, and the impact on world affairs, the early 1990s were the most interesting time in American foreign policy in forty years. The age of bipolarity had given way to a – lasting? fickle? – unipolarity; America had emerged from the terrible 20th century victorious over totalitarianism of every stripe, national-socialism, fascism, and communism. But now, bereft of a unifying enemy, what was the United States, blessed with historically unparalleled power and riches, to do?

Ultimately a debate about American grand strategy and the most basic nature of the United States as an international actor, this national and international exchange of ideas and interpretations accompanied all of the 1990s and received another major boost after 9/11. Schwabe, the excellent historian, pays too little mind to these rather recent and strategic developments. And yet, his cursory assessment of the current administration rings true: "At home and abroad, Bush's pathos of freedom suffers from a lack of credibility, it is hollow. ... America's triumph in the Cold War was also a triumph of higher political and moral credibility. ... [The downfall of the Soviet Union] therefore is a writing on the wall for the United States. To avoid such a fate, the U.S. needs to turn back and re-emphasize the best traditions of American foreign policy. One of those convictions is, since Woodrow Wilson, the necessity to contain international anarchy through international institutions that establish world order by maintaining liberal values." (p. 496)

Klaus Schwabe delivers an opulent, elegantly written tome, the sum of his deep and refined knowledge about the history of American foreign policy. His analysis is consistent, informative, and rock-solid. Embedded in a thoughtful context of intellectual history, the author explains that the United States' rise to power did not occur without backlashes and contradictions and was made possible by domestic as well as international factors. As argued throughout this comment, the only thing left to be desired is a stronger and more reflective exposition of the common elements and motivations of American foreign policy across the decades. America's liberal internationalism from Wilson to Truman to, well, even Bush Jr. is a multi-faceted school of thought whose subtle changes and modifications warrant a more intimate treatment.