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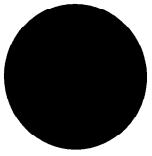

Lucid Stars

The American Foreign Policy Tradition

Walter Russell Mead

One of the most remarkable features of American foreign policy at the end of the Cold War is the ignorance of and contempt for the national foreign policy tradition on the part of so many prominent statesmen. Most countries are guided in large part by traditional foreign policies that change only slowly. The British have sought a balance of power in Europe since the Reformation. The French have been concerned with German power on land and British and, later, American economic and commercial power for almost as long. Under both the tsars and the commissars, Russia sought to expand to the south and the west. Today, Boris Yeltsin's government is quarreling with the Turks over the use of the Bosphorus; it is a quarrel that began when the Russians were ruled by the Romanovs and the Turks by the Ottoman sultans.

Only in the United States can we find a wholesale and casual dismissal of the continuities that have shaped our foreign policy in the past. "America's journey through international politics has been a triumph of faith over experience," observes Henry Kissinger. "Torn between nostalgia for a pristine past and yearning for a perfect future, American thought has oscillated between isolationism and commitment."[1]

At columnist Joe Alsop's suggestion, George Shultz made a collection of books about American diplomacy when he became secretary of state, but nowhere in the 1,138-page record of his eight years of service does he mention anything he learned from them. For Richard Nixon, American history appeared to begin and end with the Cold War. American history before 1945 remained a fuzzy blank to him; in his final book, he called the United States "the only great power without a history of imperialistic claims on neighboring countries"[2]—a characterization that would surprise such neighboring countries as Mexico, Canada, and Cuba (and such former neighbors as France and Spain) as much as it would surprise such expansionist American presidents as Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, James Knox Polk, Ulysses S. Grant, and Theodore Roosevelt. Other than sounding warnings about the dangers of isolationism or offering panegyrics with respect to American virtues, Nixon is otherwise largely contemptuous of or silent about traditional American foreign policy—although he frequently and respectfully refers to the foreign policy traditions of other countries with which he had to deal.

The tendency to reduce the American foreign policy tradition to a legacy of moralism and isolationism can also be found among the Democratic statesmen who have attempted to guide American foreign policy in the last 20 years. Some, like Jimmy Carter, embraced the moralism while rejecting the isolationism; others share the Republican contempt for both. The copious and learned books of the former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski show few signs of close familiarity with the history of American foreign policy or with the achievements of his predecessors, much less a sense of the traditional strategies and goals that guided their work.

For these men, as for many American diplomats and politicians during the Cold War, American history contained little of value for those charged with shaping American policy during the struggle with the Soviet Union. Their common judgment on traditional American foreign policy was like Samuel Johnson's pronouncement on a manuscript submitted for his approbation—that it is both original and good. Unfortunately, where it is good it is not original, and where it is original, it is not good. This is simply not so.

It is also a somewhat surprising attitude, at least on the face of things. The United States, whatever the conceptual failings of its foreign policy framework, has had a remarkably successful history in international relations. After a rocky start, the young American Republic quickly established itself as a force to be reckoned with. The revolutionaries shrewdly exploited the tensions in European politics to build a coalition against Great Britain. Artful diplomatic pressure and the judicious application of incentives and threats enabled the United States to emerge from the Napoleonic Wars with the richest spoils of any nation—the Louisiana Purchase built on the ruins of Napoleon's hopes for a New World empire. During the subsequent decades, American diplomacy managed to outmaneuver Great Britain on a number of occasions, as the United States annexed Florida, extended its boundary to the Pacific, thwarted British efforts to consolidate the independence of Texas, and won the Southwest from Mexico despite the reservations of the European powers.

During the Civil War, deft diplomacy on the part of the U.S. ambassador to Britain, Charles Francis Adams, defeated repeated efforts by powerful elements in both France and Britain to intervene on behalf of the Confederacy. The United States possessed a sure diplomatic touch during the conflict—gracefully giving in over the seizure of Confederate commissioners from a British ship in the *Trent* Affair and forcing a reluctant Britain to observe the principles of neutrality and pay compensation for the violation of these principles in the controversies over Confederate ships built by British firms.

Following the Civil War, the United States became a recognized world power within a generation, establishing an unchallenged hegemony in the Western Hemisphere even as it successfully asserted a veto over great-power actions in China, arbitrated the Russo-Japanese War, and played a growing role in European power politics.

As for American intervention in the First World War, it was only a failure compared to Woodrow Wilson's lofty goals. The United States did not end war forever, nor did it establish a universal democratic system, but otherwise it did very well. Although it suffered fewer casualties than any other great power and had fewer forces on the ground in Europe, the United States had a disproportionately influential role in shaping the peace. Monarchical government in Europe disappeared as a result of the war; since 1918, Europe has been a continent of republics.

Fashionable though it is to mock the Treaty of Versailles, and as imperfect as that treaty was in many respects, its principles—self-determination, republican government, collective security, and adherence to international law—survived the eclipse of the Versailles system and still guide European politics. Woodrow Wilson may not have gotten everything he wanted at Versailles, and his treaty was never ratified by the U.S. Senate, but Wilson's vision and his diplomacy, for better or worse, set the tone for the twentieth century. France, Germany, Italy, and Britain may have sneered at Woodrow Wilson, but every one of these powers today conducts its European policy on Wilsonian lines. What was once dismissed as visionary is now accepted as fundamental. This was no mean achievement, and no European statesman of the twentieth cen-

tury has had as lasting or widespread an influence.

Even in the short term the statesmen who sneered at Wilson did not do better than he did. Neither Clemenceau nor Lloyd George nor Orlando did very well at Versailles; the United States was the only winner of the First World War, as it had been the real winner of the Napoleonic conflicts of the previous century. The First World War made the United States the world's greatest financial power, crushed Germany—economically, America's most dangerous rival—and reduced both Britain and France to such a degree that neither country could mount an effective opposition to American designs anywhere in the world. In the aftermath of the war, Britain conceded to the United States something it had withheld from all of its rivals over the previous two centuries: it accepted the United States as co-monarch of the seas, formally recognizing the right of the United States to maintain a navy equal to its own. Woodrow Wilson and Warren Harding succeeded where Philip II, Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Wilhelm II had failed—and they did it without going to war with Britain. An American diplomacy that asserted American interests while stressing the community of values between the two English-speaking nations induced Britain to accept peacefully what no previous rival had ever extracted by force.

The result of the Second World War was more of the same. The United States entered the war later than any other great power, lost less blood in the fighting, and made greater gains from the settlement than anybody else. Winston Churchill defended the British Empire from Hitler and Hirohito, but he was no match for Franklin Roosevelt and the U.S. Treasury's Harry Dexter White. Stalin gained hegemony over the wasted landscapes of Europe's impoverished east, but the United States secured an unchallenged position of leadership in a bloc of countries that included the richest, most dynamic, and most intellectually advanced societies in the world.

The United States not only won the Cold War; it diffused its language, culture, and products worldwide. The American dollar became the international medium of finance; the American language became the language of world business; American culture and American consumer products dominate world media and world markets. The United States is not only the only global power: its values and its culture inform a global consensus, and it dominates to an unprecedented degree the formation of the first global culture and civilization our planet has ever known.

Yet, foreign policy commentators and practitioners alike only too often hold that the United States, in order to succeed in foreign policy, must abandon its naive oscillation between idealism and isolationism and embrace the mature, sophisticated, worldly foreign policy ideas of European statesmen. Somehow, they have succeeded at foreign policy, and we have repeatedly failed.

Nobody seems to ask a basic question: which European country has had a more "sophisticated" and successful foreign policy than the United States?

Henry Kissinger points to Metternich, but the great Austrian prince outlived the conservative order he had helped to create in 1815 and saw it collapse into ruins in 1848. Great Britain? It marched into the twentieth century like a lion and is limping out like a palsied lamb, retaining only the energy to bleat that the brash and clumsy Americans ought to defer to its superior wisdom, experience, and realism in foreign affairs. But, as Dean Acheson noted 30 years ago, Britain, in losing its empire, had also lost its role; far from solving this problem, British leaders, from Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson to Margaret Thatcher and John Major, have contributed to a pattern of failure, decline, and incoherence, and Britain continues to sink into the second rank of European powers.

What has France achieved in the twentieth century—or indeed since the death of Talleyrand—that the United States ought to emulate? Since Napoleon III brought the disaster of the Franco-Prussian War on himself in 1870, French foreign policy has known many defeats and Pyrrhic victories but few real successes. It did recover Alsace and Lorraine from Germany in 1919, but only at the cost of a war that bled it white and destroyed forever France's standing as a military power of the first rank. France's interwar policy was never coherent or feasible: the Little Entente in east-central Europe was a fiasco, and France's collapse in 1940 still casts a shadow over the country's standing in Europe and the world. The greatest French foreign policy leader of the twentieth century, Charles de Gaulle, is chiefly celebrated for his courage in ending France's participation in disastrous colonial wars. Over the other failures, betrayals, brutalities, futilities, and disasters of French statesmen in Indochina and in north and west Africa after the Second World War, let friendship and our gratitude for the legacy of Lafayette cast their veils of discretion. France's European policy under François Mitterrand ended with reluctant acquiescence in German unification and a growing recognition that the century-long effort to defend France's historic role as the leading political power in Europe had failed. Is this a record for American statesmen to emulate?

Further east, the record is darker. Should the United States imitate the "realism" of the Soviet Union, thereby borrowing the policy of the loser in the Cold War? Should we look to the policies of the Romanovs that brought the Russian Empire crashing down into chaos and ruin?

If we turn to Germany, we see that the delicate structures of Bismarck collapsed, that the aggressiveness of Kaiser Wilhelm II led to disaster, and that Hitler's foreign policy led to national catastrophe. Japan's efforts to model its foreign policy on the European states led to the same outcome. It was only when Germany and Japan began to take lessons from the fecklessly idealistic United States—by placing an emphasis on commerce rather than militarism, becoming disinclined to spend unnecessary money on their armed forces, and dedicating themselves to the construction of international systems of security and law—that these two countries began to flourish.

Compared to the dismal achievements of the other great powers in the twentieth century, American foreign policy, with a handful of exceptions—most notably with respect to Vietnam—looks reasonably good. Cast morality aside. From a purely practical standpoint, no European power, with the possible exceptions of Switzerland, Sweden, and the Vatican, has done better than the United States in the twentieth century. Most have done much, much worse. It may be that we have lessons to learn, but it is not certain that Europe is where we must look for our teachers.

An Active Foreign Policy

The American foreign policy tradition is so neglected and unexamined because it is an unusually complex and slippery one. Compared to other great powers, the United States, with its global interests, short history, multicultural composition, and rapid rise to world power, is an unusual, even a unique, phenomenon. Its interests and values are quite different from those of other great powers, and its foreign policy is unique in form as well as content. Foreigners are confused, baffled, and irritated by the twists and turns, the moralistic posturings, the impulsive acts, and the cacophonous debates of the American foreign policy process, but those who watch us closely have often admired our success even more than they have despaired of our methods. "God," as the saying goes, "has a special providence for drunks, fools, and the United States of America."

But there is another reason why the American foreign policy tradition is so little

valued or known. At the end of the Second World War, American statesmen confronted an intractable problem. The nation's interests as they understood them required the United States to maintain an active and global foreign policy. This in itself was not new. The United States had pursued an active, even a global foreign policy from its earliest days. But as the confrontation with the Soviet Union deepened, it became clear that the United States would have to send large quantities of money and numbers of troops overseas. A handful of naval squadrons would no longer suffice; garrisons would have to be maintained on foreign soil, their troops exposed to the risks of combat for years, and possibly decades, to come.

This is a painful duty to impose on the voters in any democracy; it raised particular problems in the United States. Not only were American taxpayers profoundly hostile to the idea of sending their money overseas, the prospect of formal long-term alliances with European countries breached the most sacred traditions of American foreign policy. The United States of course had never been isolated from European politics or European economics, but it had managed to conduct its foreign policy without entering formal alliances with European nations since the abrogation of the French alliance in 1798, and without maintaining the ability to conduct offensive and defensive warfare on the European mainland.

The generations without formal alliances had been happy and prosperous ones for the United States. A weak and divided nation had grown into the richest and strongest power in the history of the world. During these years, the American people had settled a continent, built great railroads, and developed an industrial system whose dynamism was second to none. To many Americans alive in 1945, this was the natural order of things. It is what Warren Harding meant when he spoke of "normalcy" after the First World War, and its restoration is what many Americans believed they had sacrificed and fought for in the Second. Wartime propaganda had reinforced this belief. Fascism and Japanese militarism had been the cause of the war; now those evil ideologies had been crushed. The world's free peoples—the brave Russians, the rapidly developing Chinese, the plucky British, and the disappointing but well-meaning French—were now in control, and, many Americans expected, the necessity of American intervention would now fade away.

It was the sad duty of the American foreign policy elite of the 1940s to persuade the nation that this was not so. It did not have much time for this task; the winter of 1947 brought the United States face to face with one of the most perilous situations in modern European history. Europe's economies had not only failed to recover from the devastation of war; much of the Continent appeared to be sinking deeper into a depression whose end could not be foreseen. "Europe is steadily deteriorating," wrote Under Secretary for Economic Affairs Will Clayton in May of that year. "Millions of people in the cities are slowly starving.... Without further and substantial aid from the United States, economic, social, and political disintegration will overwhelm [it]."

Well-organized Communist parties in Italy and France appeared to be gaining strength at the expense of the fragile democratic forces. Meanwhile, Britain's sagging economic and military power was beginning to crumble; the United States would have to face the new postwar world without a single powerful ally. President Harry S. Truman, already performing poorly in the polls, faced an uphill battle for reelection; the congressional elections of 1946 saw a stunning collapse of the once-secure Democratic majorities in both houses.

These were the unpromising circumstances in which the Great Debate on postwar American foreign policy had to be launched 50 years ago. The American foreign policy establishment responded by creating what, without prejudice, we can call

the Cold War Myth. As historian Michael Kammen reminds us in *Mystic Chords of Memory*, myths are not bad. Condensations of historical traditions and received ideas that form a useful shorthand for debate, they are even necessary. Like most myths, the Cold War Myth was a mixture of fact, interpretation, and fiction; it was intended to meet the needs of the nation at a specific point in its history.

There were two main elements in what became the Cold War Myth. One part was about Them; the other part was about Us. The part about Them—that communism was a united global force engaged in a determined, aggressive crusade to impose its vicious ideology in every corner of the globe—was never very accurate and hampered thoughtful American foreign policymakers throughout the Cold War. It was politically useful in that it mobilized American public opinion for the struggle. Secretary of State Dean Acheson conjured up the image of a communist tide flowing throughout the Middle East to persuade leading congressmen to support aid to Greece and Turkey, but he knew at the time that he was being, as he would later say, "clearer than truth." The image of monolithic communism was politically mischievous because it effectively prevented American public opinion from understanding the Cold War in any coherent or sensible way. Fortunately, the collapse of communism has now largely robbed this myth of its power to harm; it can safely be relegated to the museum of historical oddities and popular delusions, like the anti-Masonic fervor of the mid-nineteenth century.

The Necessity for Myths

The part of the Cold War Myth about Us was less obviously inaccurate than the myth about communism; unfortunately it still helps shape American foreign policy discussions, and, unless its influence is countered, it will wreak a great deal of mischief in the post–Cold War era. Essentially, the Cold War Myth about the United States was born of desperation. The difference between the apparent content of traditional American policy—isolationism and protectionism—and the demands in the postwar era for an interventionist and free-trade policy was so great that little effort was wasted in attempting to look for links between the old and new foreign policies.

In the heat of political debate, there was no time and little inclination for subtle hair-splitting about the nature of American foreign policy in past generations. It was idle to say that the Monroe Doctrine and the special relationship with Great Britain constituted a sophisticated and successful American participation in the global balance of power. Too much political oratory, too many history books had been dedicated to propagating the myth of Virtuous Isolationism; the Cold Warriors instinctively felt they were better off stressing the discontinuities between the old and the new American policies.

In effect, the Cold Warriors ended by arguing that the diplomatic history of the nineteenth century was a blank—that, except for westward expansion, the United States essentially had no foreign policy from the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 until McKinley's war with Spain in 1898. America's traditional isolation, they maintained, was the result of the weakness of the United States, the power and presence of the British navy, and the undeveloped state of technology in the nineteenth century. During this period, the American people knew little and cared less about foreign affairs. Isolated from the rest of the world, Americans developed strange and unrealistic ideas about how foreign policy worked.

The United States was like a rich and beautiful girl educated in a strict convent, said the Cold Warriors; once it stepped out into the world, its past experience was of very little use in dealing with its new surroundings and situation. The American people, in Henry Kissinger's words, had been

"brought up in the belief that peace is the normal condition among nations, that there is no difference between personal and public morality, and that America was safely insulated from the upheavals affecting the rest of the world."[3] This "conventual" school went on to say that it was because of its inexperience that the United States adopted idealistic foreign policy goals during the First World War and afterward took refuge in isolationism after the repudiation of the Treaty of Versailles. Never having had a foreign policy before, the United States was simply unprepared to face the world into which it emerged in the twentieth century.

In what the Cold Warriors never tired of calling the "complex" and "sophisticated" world of the twentieth century, the old verities had to be discarded. The world had shrunk, and American power had grown. The United States could no longer sit peaceably disarmed, shielded from foreign conflicts by the mighty oceans on its shores. By the time the United States itself might be physically attacked, it would be too late to win another war. It was therefore necessary to build and maintain peacetime alliances of precisely the sort George Washington had so trenchantly warned us against. Nor could the United States safely indulge its moralistic illusions. The dreams of sanctity proper to a young girl in the convent had to be discarded in the hurly-burly of the real world. If the United States wanted omelets, it would have to break eggs. Because the United States is so uniquely virtuous and virginal, this lesson came hard—says the Myth of the Cold War.

The mythmakers of the Cold War were extremely successful. They buried the myth of Virtuous Isolation and replaced it with the new myth of America's Coming of Age. This was, in a simplified form, the respectable history of American foreign policy that many of us dimly remember from our high school and college days. It is a smell that has hung so long in the air that nobody knows it is there. It is the intellectual background to much of the punditry that one hears and reads in the contemporary media. It is the basis for the thinking of much of the American foreign policy establishment. It is also, unfortunately, a very poor foundation for the choices that the nation must make in the coming years.

Like most historical myths, the Cold War Myth is a mixture of helpful and harmful ideas. Much of what it said is lucid analysis that remains essential to any reasoned approach to American foreign policy today. After 1945, the United States clearly did need to take a more active role in international politics than it ever had before. Historically, the United States had been a free rider in the British world system; now it would assume the privileges and shoulder the costs of global hegemony on its own. Some of the most hallowed concepts in the American foreign policy tradition had to be discarded or revised. Permanent neutrality was no longer an option. It would indeed be too late to start planning national security policy when an enemy nation had already upset the European balance of power. In the postwar era, the United States would have to open its markets to the goods of other nations if it sought market access in return.

On these and many other points, the Cold War Myth was a useful basis for national discussion and policy. But, as with every historical myth, there are limits to its usefulness. Now, at the end of the Cold War, it has become a positive obstacle to reasoned discussion about the future foreign policy of the United States. We need to reconnect with the national foreign policy tradition that the Cold Warriors relegated to the background.

Prosperity and Foreign Policy

It is important to understand that at one level, the Cold War Myth was a historical travesty. The United States was not a hermit kingdom before the Cold War. It was not, as the Cold War Myth seems to imply, Emperor Hirohito who "opened up" a reluc-

tant America by bombing Pearl Harbor; it was President Millard Fillmore, who, in 1852, sent Commodore Matthew Perry 10,000 miles to open up Japan. Furthermore, foreign policy played a much more central role throughout American history than the Cold War Myth would have it. The leading statesmen of the United States devoted, if anything, more of their attention to foreign policy questions before and during the Civil War than they did during the Cold War itself. Indeed, of the first nine presidents of the United States, six had previously served as secretary of state, and seven as ministers abroad. George Washington, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, and Zachary Taylor had won fame for commanding American troops in the field. Six of the 15 American presidents who served before Abraham Lincoln had been *both* secretary of state and minister to Great Britain; a seventh, Thomas Jefferson, had been secretary of state and minister to France; and an eighth, John Adams, had been minister to France and Britain.

The greatest minds and the most powerful politicians in the United States were eager to serve as secretary of state in the nineteenth century. Only the presidency itself stood higher in precedence, power, and political visibility. Success in foreign policy was considered one of the strongest possible qualifications for an aspiring president, and such political leaders as Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster distinguished themselves in this office. Throughout the nineteenth century, the American diplomatic and consular service included some of the greatest names in politics and letters. Writers such as Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne represented their country abroad; formidable political figures such as William Henry Seward, Charles Francis Adams, James G. Blaine, and John Hay regarded their diplomatic service as the peak of their careers.

It was no accident that so many American political leaders devoted so much attention to foreign policy in the so-called isolationist period. The prosperity and happiness of the average American family was visibly tied to the successful conduct of American foreign policy, and the connection was lost neither on the voters nor on those who hoped to win their support for office. Economically, the United States was more dependent on the rest of the world in the nineteenth century than it was during the Cold War. From 1869 to 1893, foreign trade accounted for 13.4 percent of GNP, compared to 7.3 percent for the period from 1948 to 1957.[4]

This trade was not simply a concern of seaboard towns. Access to foreign markets was absolutely essential for American farmers in the remote settlements on the frontier—so much so, that most prominent American political leaders believed that control of New Orleans was essential, not merely to national happiness, but to unity. While Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone roamed the trans-Appalachian wilds, informed opinion in the United States and abroad held that the Middle West would not remain in a federal union that could not provide it with safe access to international markets. The volunteer backwoodsmen who followed Andrew Jackson to New Orleans knew why the port was important to the United States and grasped the importance of the battle they fought there against the British in 1815.

Their children and grandchildren never forgot their dependence on foreign customers and on the means of transporting their produce to market. American farmers were utterly dependent on export markets for their wheat, corn, tobacco, and cotton. The cash income of a family on the plains of Illinois depended on the conditions of the European wheat market. The interest rates the farmers paid on their loans and the freight rates they paid to the railroads were also determined to a large extent by conditions in London. Once a farming community had passed the initial pioneering stage of subsis-

tence agriculture and began to sell its surplus produce, it entered the world market. And once that community developed banks and sought to borrow money for public or private improvements, it encountered an international system of credit and trade that in some ways was more closely integrated in the nineteenth century than it is today.

The nineteenth century was no time of Arcadian isolation from the rigors of the world market. Time after time, American domestic prosperity was threatened or ruined by financial storms that originated overseas. The depression that followed the Napoleonic Wars in Europe spread to the United States. The panic of 1837 had its origin in London; the panic of 1857 began when upheavals in China and India caused disarray in the London money markets, which spread to New York. For the rest of the century, the American economy remained vulnerable to shocks caused by the periodic collapses of international financial markets. The panic of 1893, for example, was caused by the collapse of the Argentine loan market and its effects on British banks.

Foreign investment also played a greater role in American prosperity during the nineteenth century than it does now. The United States had to borrow the money for the Louisiana Purchase from the Dutch, and during Thomas Jefferson's presidency, foreigners are believed to have owned more than half of the national debt. Foreign money dug the canals, built the railroads, and settled much of the West. One third of the capital for the American canal system came from overseas, foreigners poured between $2.5 billion and $3 billion into American railroads, and by the early 1880s foreign cattle barons owned more than 20 million acres of the American West.[3] Foreign investors had political power in the United States, and Americans resented this but could do little about it. The great banks of the Anglo-American establishment, such as the House of Morgan, controlled the nation's money supply and had the power of life or death over most businesses. Populist agitators lambasted the "Money Trust," and presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan denounced the British and their hirelings who would "crucify mankind upon a cross of gold"—but such protests were in vain. Like Third World politicians who complain today about the International Monetary Fund, American politicians could get nowhere against the entrenched power of foreign investors in the American economy.

Financial disasters that began overseas were not limited in their effects to the major metropolitan centers. Unemployment, bankruptcies, disruptions of trade, collapses in prices, and closures of banks resonated throughout the United States. The average American in 1845 or 1895 was at least as aware of the links between domestic prosperity and the international economy as is his counterpart in 1995—perhaps more so.

Interventionist America

Although the United States was not a member of any European alliance system during this period, the nineteenth century was not a quiet time in American foreign relations. Virtually every presidential administration from Washington's to Wilson's sent American forces abroad or faced the possibility of war with a great European power. During the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15), for example, the United States fought an undeclared naval war with France and both declared and undeclared wars with Great Britain. These wars and their consequences—including Jefferson's Embargo Act, which banned all foreign trade—had immense repercussions domestically. The embargo was perhaps the most painful economic shock the United States ever experienced. The Union was in danger of breaking up over the declaration of war against Britain in 1812, and British troops sacked Washington and attacked Baltimore. Nor were the consequences of these wars limited to the battlefield; U.S. foreign trade fell by 90 percent

between 1807 and 1814, as the British navy blockaded the American coast. The resulting collapse in the prices of tobacco, cotton, and other agricultural products drove thousands of Americans to the brink of bankruptcy.

The crises did not stop with Napoleon's exile to St. Helena. Until well after the Civil War, the United States was in a permanent war atmosphere, in which either it or its European negotiating partners were continually threatening war, levying sanctions, and issuing threatening orders to their armed forces. Almost every American president between the War of 1812 and the First World War threatened or used force against a foreign country. The objects of these threats were not limited to the Western Hemisphere; American fighting forces were found in every ocean and on every continent during this time of supposed isolation and innocence.

Great Britain, as the only global power of the day, was the country with which the United States most often came closest to war. From the end of the War of 1812 to the Venezuela boundary crisis of 1895, there was scarcely an administration, and never a decade, in which the United States and Great Britain did not have a war scare. A series of questions agitated the relations between the two Atlantic powers during this period, keeping relations continually at or near the boiling point. American support of Fenian and Canadian rebels against British rule brought the two countries within a hairsbreadth of war during Martin Van Buren's administration. The boundary between the United States and Canada was another fertile source of quarrels. A dispute over the boundary between Maine and New Brunswick was a major issue in the presidential election of 1840 and led to the "Aroostook War," in which both the United States and Britain rushed troops to the remote area under dispute.

At the same time, the British government was actively intriguing to bring the newly independent Republic of Texas within its sphere of influence. American fears of British designs played a large part in the U.S. decision to annex the Lone Star Republic and helped launch the Mexican War in 1846. Besides Texas, the major issue in the election of 1844 was the Oregon boundary issue, with "Fifty-four forty or fight!" the slogan of Democratic expansionists who wished to fight Great Britain over conflicting claims to the Oregon country.

The 1850s saw another rash of crises between the two countries, brought about by the South's desire to establish new slave states in Cuba and Nicaragua. The British, meanwhile, were bent on extending their control along the coasts of Central America in the hopes of controlling communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific. British efforts to search ships under the American flag in the effort to suppress the Atlantic slave trade also caused crises; closer to home, so did the British refusal to return slaves on American ships driven into British-controlled harbors.

The Civil War, of course, saw the United States and Britain approach the brink of war when an American warship stopped the British steamer *Trent* and removed two Confederate commissioners who were on their way to London, in violation of the doctrine of freedom of the seas. War was only narrowly averted over British negligence in allowing Confederate commerce raiders to fit out in British ports. For years after the war, U.S. and British diplomats would rattle their sabers in negotiations over compensation for the damages that had been inflicted by the *Alabama* and other Confederate ships.

Relations between the United States and Great Britain did not decisively improve until the final decade of the nineteenth century, when Britain's fear of Germany led it to adopt a more conciliatory, even cringing, tone in its dealings with the United States. By giving in to Grover Cleveland on the Venezuela boundary issue, by backing away

from its claims to an equal share in any future canal in the Panamanian isthmus (the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty), and by accepting the decision of an arbitration tribunal regarding the Alaskan-Canadian boundary dispute that favored American claims, Great Britain brought an end to what had once been the most prominent fault line in international politics.

The United States also had a troubled relationship with Spain. A long and not particularly edifying diplomatic campaign of threats, baseless claims, bribery, and intimidation resulted in Spain's cession of Florida to the United States in 1819. Washington made known its hostility to any Spanish attempt to reestablish its rule over its rebellious colonies, and the instability in Cuba brought the United States and Spain to swords' points several times before leading to the Spanish-American War in 1898. Between attacks by American filibusterers on Spanish colonial possessions, violations of U.S. neutrality laws in support of Cuban rebels, and such diplomatic maneuvers as the Ostend Manifesto urging the outright seizure of Cuba, American policy toward Spain was marked by aggressive designs and disregard for international law until William McKinley finally put an end to four centuries of Spanish power in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific.

Although France and the United States had fewer points of contact, their relations were also rocky at times in the nineteenth century. They came to the brink of war when Andrew Jackson sent a naval expedition to back up his threat of war if France failed to honor agreements relating to compensation for American shipping losses during the Napoleonic Wars. Both during and after the Civil War the United States and France were regularly engaged in harassing and threatening one another. Napoleon III openly sought the breakup of the United States; his attempt to establish a puppet emperor in Mexico while the United States was distracted by the Civil War was the grossest and most dangerous challenge to the Monroe Doctrine.

The United States was also heavily involved in Latin America. As early as 1832, Washington sent a punitive fleet to the Falkland Islands to reduce an Argentine garrison that had harassed American shipping. The Mexican War (1846–48) was the most egregious example of American wars of aggressive conquest, but by the Civil War American forces had seen action in Haiti, what is now the Dominican Republic, Curaçao, the Galápagos Islands, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and Peru. Between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, Marines were sent to Cuba, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Haiti.

During the recurring great-power crises of the nineteenth century, serious statesmen believed that war was possible, probable, or even inevitable. Public opinion agreed, and international crises were accompanied by violent waves of popular agitation. Americans in the nineteenth century were no strangers to newspapers with war-scare headlines. Foreign policy issues loomed large in electoral politics. Succeeding administrations were well aware that the American people would not tolerate their government looking weak or appeasing foreign governments. Reading the diplomatic correspondence of the era, one senses that statesmen were always conscious of an excitable public looking over their shoulders.

Interest in foreign affairs was by no means limited to an intellectual or diplomatic elite. Often—indeed, usually—the American government was more pacifist and isolationist than public opinion. At several points in the nineteenth century, the popular pressure for war against Britain or France was almost overwhelming. Furthermore, popular opinion pressed the American government to involve itself more directly in European affairs. The Greek War for Independence, the Hungarian Revolution, and the Fenian uprising in Canada engendered particularly strong agitation,

but they were far from the only occasions in which significant parts of the American population wanted to see American arms used to vindicate American principles or interests in far-flung corners of the world.

In addition to these diplomatic and military contretemps with the great European powers and its hemispheric neighbors, the American government in the nineteenth century took an active role in opening up Asia and Africa to trade. As American whalers and merchants spread out across the world in search of profits and whale oil, diplomats and naval forces followed. Sometimes these visits were peaceful. By the Civil War, the U.S. government had sent official missions to Vietnam, Thailand, the Ottoman Empire, China, Sumatra, Burma, and Japan.

But sometimes American presidents dispatched more than diplomats. The U.S. Marines had already ventured "from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli" by mid-century. Thomas Jefferson's dispatch of a punitive mission against the Barbary pirates was the first, but by no means the last, such expedition sent out by American presidents. The village of Quallah Battoo was shelled and burned by an American force sent by Andrew Jackson to the coast of Sumatra; in 1843, U.S. Marines fought with villagers in coastal Liberia after Commodore Perry was attacked by an African; the Marines returned to Liberia in 1860 to protect American lives and property.

In 1844, U.S. Marines landed in Guangzhou to protect Americans from Chinese mobs. They returned 12 years later and defeated 4,000 Chinese troops in a pitched battle. A permanent Marine presence would guard American traders and diplomats in China and participate with European forces in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900.

China and Sumatra were not the only places in Asia in which American forces were engaged in conflict during the "virginal isolation" of the nineteenth century. In 1871, U.S. Marines retaliated for a Korean attack on an American ship and a diplomat by seizing two forts in a punitive expedition. Commodore Perry's orders directed him to shell Japan if the mikado refused his request for trade and diplomatic relations. By 1900, U.S. forces were established throughout the South Pacific, and the United States had weathered a serious international crisis with Germany over the control of Samoa.

Slipping Out of the Convent

The U.S. navy has maintained a global presence much longer than most Americans realize. The permanent Mediterranean squadron was established in 1815 to keep the Barbary pirates in check; in 1822, the United States established its West Indian and Pacific squadrons—the latter charged with protecting American whalers and commercial interests in South America and the South Sea islands. In 1826, this was followed by a Brazil or South Atlantic squadron, with the East India squadron following in 1835 and the African squadron established off the west coast of Africa in 1843. In other words, during the period of American innocence and isolation, the United States had forces stationed on or near every major continent in the world, its navy was active in virtually every ocean, its troops saw combat on virtually every continent, and its foreign relations were in a perpetual state of crisis and turmoil.

The importance of foreign policy in American politics was even greater than this list would indicate. Foreign policy and domestic politics were inextricably mixed throughout American history. There were four great issues in nineteenth-century American politics: slavery, westward expansion, the tariff, and monetary policy. Of these, only slavery was a purely domestic issue, but foreign policy issues were absolutely critical to the course of the Civil War in which the slavery controversy climaxed. Secretary of State William Seward schemed to cut the Civil War short by provoking a

war with the European powers that would rally the North and South to a joint effort. European intervention was the strategic goal of the Confederacy throughout, and the battle for foreign public opinion was one, if not the decisive, consideration that ultimately led a reluctant Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

Of the remaining great issues, westward expansion was obviously a foreign policy issue; the tariff question then as now had both domestic and foreign policy implications; and monetary policy was fundamentally a question about the relation of the American economy to the British-dominated international system. As William Jennings Bryan said in the concluding peroration of his Cross of Gold speech, "It is the issue of 1776 over again.... Instead of having a gold standard because England has, we will restore bimetallism, and then let England have bimetallism because the United States has it."[6]

From all this, it should be clear that the United States pursued an enormously active and generally successful foreign policy throughout its history. If the United States was educated in a strict convent, it regularly slipped out to carouse in the streets. In every administration since George Washington took the oath of office, foreign policy issues have played a major political role. America's greatest and deepest statesmen have devoted an enormous proportion of their time and efforts to understanding foreign policy issues, and from this engagement over the centuries has emerged a national foreign policy tradition. It is different from the foreign policy traditions of other countries, but we ignore it at our peril.

American Interests, American Values

The traditional foreign policy of the United States has, like the foreign policy of other countries, been based on a combination of interests and values as interpreted by generations of foreign policymakers, opinion leaders, and ordinary citizens. While each generation of Americans has struggled to define the national interest and the national values, and to relate the two concepts in an overall foreign policy strategy, they have done so within a certain broad consensus about the nature of those interests and values.

The first of these traditional concerns may be called "freedom of the seas." From the days of the Barbary pirates to the present time, the United States has considered the right of its citizens, goods, and ships to travel freely in international waterways in times of peace and war to be a vital national interest. The undeclared naval wars with Britain and France, the War of 1812, and the First World War all turned on this issue; it seems clear that if Japan had not bombed Pearl Harbor, the undeclared naval war in the North Atlantic would have ultimately led to American entry into the Second World War as well. When President Ronald Reagan defied Muammar Qaddafi's "line of death" in the Mediterranean, or when he extended the protection of the U.S. navy to neutral Persian Gulf shipping during the Iran-Iraq War, he was following a consistent line of conduct and thinking that traces back to the Washington administration—and even to Colonial resistance to the British Navigation Acts.

The second traditional concern was the "open door." It has not been enough that American goods and ships be free to pass unimpeded through international waters; they must be able to find markets in foreign ports. Furthermore, because its trade is global, the United States has always sought to replace trade relations based on bilateral concessions with an open international system based on the principle of "most favored nation." The effect of such a system is to base international economic relations increasingly on universal legal norms, a significant advantage to the United States, whose commercial interests involve it with many countries everywhere.

A third constant in American foreign policy has been its global orientation. The importance of the Pacific as a theater for American commerce has been a theme of American diplomacy since the eighteenth century, and the importance of the West Indies and Latin America for American trade has been an acknowledged factor in American policy since the peace negotiations that concluded the Revolutionary War. "There is no better advice to be given to the merchants of the United States," wrote John Adams in 1785, "than to push their commerce to the East Indies as far and as fast as it will go." There is no ocean from which American commerce is willing to be excluded, no port into which its goods do not seek entrance, no market to which it does not seek access.

These core interests are commercial, and American foreign policy has historically put commerce first. Like Great Britain, only more so, the United States has historically seen itself as a maritime trading nation; its favorable geographic position gave it the ability to worry less about its military security and concentrate on the more rewarding prospects of enhanced prosperity through trade.

The primacy of commercial objectives does not mean that the United States has operated without a military and political strategy, however. The conditions that have allowed the United States to operate as a maritime trading nation—a balance of power on the continent of Europe and a secure naval shield against the activities of European powers in the rest of the world—were goals of both British and American policymakers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This community of interest is what underlay the original proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine, and the failure of Great Britain to maintain the balance of power in Europe drew the United States into both World Wars and the Cold War.

In Asia, the United States has also believed that its ability to trade depended on the maintenance of a balance of power. Originally, this meant that the United States sought to strengthen the independence of the indigenous Asian regimes against British and other European encroachment. This policy grew into the Open Door and led eventually to a policy of support for China against Japan. From the 1840s onward, the United States pursued the objective of preventing any single power from dominating East Asia. Its Cold War policies, both before and after the Vietnam War, arose from the same interests and considerations that led Commodore Perry to Japan in 1853, and induced Secretary of State John M. Hay to proclaim the Open Door at the turn of the century.

In using the term "balance of power" to describe American foreign policy, one must be careful to distinguish between the American and European senses of that term. This difference is related to the most crucial difference between American and Continental "realism"—or between what one could call the Anglo-American and the Austro-Hungarian schools of diplomacy. The Austro-Hungarian school, with its roots in the military great-power competition of modern European history, instinctively views foreign policy as a zero-sum game. If Austria becomes more secure, then France must be less so. In this view, the world tends to be divided between revisionist and conservative states, and international conflict is a necessary and permanent condition of international relations.

The Anglo-American view is somewhat sunnier. Although such Anglo-American realists as Alexander Hamilton and Dean Acheson have been no more optimistic about human nature than the darkest and most pessimistic Austro-Hungarians, the priority of commercial relations in Anglo-American diplomacy gave rise to an alternative view about foreign relations. Commercial relations are not zero sum. If Austria

becomes richer, it can buy more goods from France. This makes France richer in turn.

In theory, Anglo-American diplomacy offers the opportunity for a stable status quo in which all major powers prefer the continuation of the status quo to the costs of revisionism. As the costs of war rise, the prospects for an equilibrium actually improve; Germany and France are far less willing to risk war with one another today than either country was one hundred years ago.

The possibility of a stable equilibrium does not depend on moral reform. Both individuals and nations continue to act on their interests, but these interests lead them to enclose their competition for wealth and power within a framework of cooperative institutions and agreements to prevent war and to advance the common goal of increasing prosperity. The creation of a stable international equilibrium based on mutual economic interests has been a consistent goal of American foreign policy in the twentieth century. The Atlantic Alliance, for example, was seen not only as an exercise in righting a European balance of power dangerously challenged by Soviet preponderance after the Second World War, but as the instrument of a broader agenda of international cooperation. In American eyes, the purpose of NATO was not only to deter the Soviet Union from aggression; it was also to help make war between the NATO states impossible and unthinkable. To a very great degree, this strategy succeeded; centuries of warfare between Germany, Britain, and France appear to have come to an end.

One ought not romanticize the tradition of American realism. While its approach to great-power politics has been sunnier and more successful than the Austro-Hungarian school, American realism has never limited itself to the short list of policies recommended in Sunday School. The history of U.S. foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere is one of expansion, hegemony, and interference in the affairs of others. No international organization and no principle of international law has ever deterred the American government from pursuing its hemispheric interests by whatever means appear most likely to secure them. The desire to see a balance of power in Europe and Asia has never been matched by a corresponding desire to see a balance of power in the Americas; to achieve hemispheric supremacy was the goal of the United States from 1787 to 1898; to defend that supremacy has been its goal ever since. The exercise of an international police power in the Caribbean and Central America and a general supervisory interest in the affairs of the nations further south are elements of traditional American foreign policy that are unlikely to change soon.

Beyond these commercial and military interests, the United States has a set of political interests that have also helped shape American foreign policy since the Revolution. The American Republic was, and felt itself to be, a revolutionary state in a world order dominated by monarchies and despotisms. The United States has never been willing to wage international war for purely political reasons, but within this limit it has often and assiduously pressed its republican principles in international relations. When it has had the opportunity, it has generally encouraged and at times compelled other states to replace monarchies and overt despotisms with regimes with at least a veneer of democratic principles and institutions. The Monroe Doctrine announced Washington's intention to resist by force the restoration of monarchical rule in Latin America; after both World Wars, and again after the Cold War, Washington used its leverage to encourage its former foes to reform their governments, as well as to change their foreign policies.

This political agenda of the United States is not unique in history. Crusader states who use their military power to fur-

ther their religious or social ideals are found throughout the history of the European and Islamic cultures. Nor has the United States been an exception to the rule that crusader states are often hypocritical and self-serving. Obedient dependencies may oppress their citizens in peace; we tolerate among our allies—and at home—what we condemn in our adversaries. Cardinal Richelieu sided with the Protestants; President Nixon made his peace with the Gang of Four. Thomas Jefferson owned slaves; Ronald Reagan aided death squads in El Salvador; Louis XIV did not always observe the religion in whose name he claimed to rule.

Pursuing an American Agenda

Without making light of such inconsistencies in American history, one must acknowledge that the United States has pursued its political agenda for more than two centuries and that the cause of spreading democratic government has been unusually successful. It is not only that many countries around the world have embraced democracy; it is also that the attraction of democratic values has created a pro-American public opinion in many countries. The international popularity of the United States, though far from universal, has been an immense asset for American foreign policy throughout the twentieth century and remains so today. The enduring worldwide identification of the United States with the cause of human liberty and of responsible democratic government may rest on imperfect historical foundations—yet it is a real force in world affairs and an asset that other countries have sought and failed to acquire.

It is, of course, not possible in these few paragraphs to do full justice to the American foreign policy tradition. But it is important to understand that this tradition is broader and deeper than the Cold War consensus. The biggest intellectual challenge at the end of the Cold War is for us to escape from the cramped and narrow Cold War constructs and return to the mainstream of the American foreign policy tradition. The United States did not emerge from isolation in 1945, and the Cold War was not the first instance of sophisticated American foreign policy in support of global interests. Whatever its usefulness in the past, the Cold War Myth today impoverishes discussion. Cold War categories reduce foreign policy debates to abstract, simple, and, above all, loaded terms: isolation versus intervention, protection versus free trade, realism versus idealism. Ironically, for a myth whose central concept is an appeal to realism and sophistication, there is only one right answer for all the questions that these discussions ever pose. No matter what the subject, isolationism, protectionism, and idealism are never right; interventionism, free trade, and realism are never wrong. The Cold War categories transform foreign policy questions from tests of political judgment to tests of moral fiber. They assume that we know what the right policy is and ask if we are morally strong enough to do what we already know we should. This is not an approach calculated to enrich debates over foreign policy but rather to cut them off, to confine the range of acceptable options to a small and homogenous set.

The simplistic moralism and the naïveté of these Cold War categories are not their only flaws. They reduce complex historical problems into abstractions and first principles. Some degree of simplification is inevitable; all historical myths must simplify, if only to permit educated lay opinion to play a reasonable part in foreign policy debates. But the Cold War categories simplify in ways that are particularly unhelpful in the post–Cold War world. They are categories suitable, perhaps, for a nation girding itself up for a long struggle with a single-minded enemy; they are score sheets for marches, not waltzes.

With the end of the Cold War, we have an enormous need to place the Cold War itself in historical perspective. We can no longer simply use the concepts and strate-

gies of the Cold War world. In a world without Hitlers and Stalins we cannot be perpetually on guard against Munich. The thing we most need to know about today is the thing that the Cold War Myth most comprehensively repressed. Unless we are to proclaim a new Year Zero and tear up all the history books again, we will have to go back and find the underlying similarities between American foreign policy during the Cold War and American foreign policy in the previous decades and centuries. We need to recover the American foreign policy tradition and use it to help us shape our choices in the difficult times ahead.●

Notes

1. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 18.

2. Richard Nixon, *Beyond Peace* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 30.

3. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pp. 39–40.

4. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1975), p. 542.

5. Sidney Ratner, James M. Soltow, and Richard Sylla, *The Evolution of the American Economy: Growth, Welfare, and Decision Making* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), pp. 115, 261, and 329.

6. Richard Hofstadter, *Great Issues in American History: A Documentary Record* (New York: Vintage, 1958), p. 165.