

From Colony to Superpower

US Foreign Relations Since 1776. Book Review

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Today the United States is the essential nation, the unipower, the sole superpower, the country whose government, like God, worries if a sparrow falls to earth somewhere around the globe. The result of Washington's determination to meddle in every issue in every nation hasn't been pretty.

But it's worth remembering that the US wasn't always such a dominant international player. The 13 colonies along the Atlantic coast of North America barely emerged victorious in their revolt against Great Britain. The early existence of the newly independent country was tenuous at best. Even when the US was emerging as a global economic power, its international pretensions remained limited.

Washington more forcefully thrust itself on the international scene in the latter part of the 1800s, but its intervention was limited and episodic. Only after World War II did Americans assume that their government should effectively rule the globe.

Early Americans worried not about how to influence the world, but how to limit the world's influence on America. Indeed, President George Washington desired a time when the United States would "possess the strength of a Giant and there will be none who can make us afraid." That day has come – not that those who govern America will ever acknowledge the dearth of serious geopolitical threats. Even after Washington's Cold War adversaries disappeared policymakers retained Washington's Cold War military and engaged in even more promiscuous intervention abroad. They believe that the US, having attained its own security, now must micromanage the affairs of every other country – after all, why be the planet's dominant power if you don't dominate the planet?

George Herring, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Kentucky, has produced *From Colony to Superpower*, a mammoth volume that tracks the vagaries of American foreign policy over more than two centuries. It is encyclopedic in its reach, but remains a pleasurable read. Herring's goal is more to explain than judge, and he performs the former with admirable skill.

The story that Herring tells is familiar in outline but fascinating in detail. Always worth rereading, for instance, is the maneuvering to get French backing for the ongoing Revolution – critical for America's success, but which ended up bankrupting the monarchy and setting the stage for the French Revolution. It is a process that US policymakers should remember as foreigners – remember Ahmed Chalabi? – attempt to maneuver America into their fights.

Possessing only limited military power in a world filled with warring empires, the US could

rely on little other than diplomacy. Yet the imperious republic, full of moral certainty, often blundered away its opportunities. Indeed, representatives of the new nation, emphasizing their break with monarchy and empire, wouldn't take the title of ambassador or wear traditional court dress. Similar arrogance, though it takes very different forms, undercuts American influence today.

Despite Washington's pretensions that the US was the great representative of all that was good and just in the world, hypocrisy and inconsistency regularly marred American policy. Racism prevented recognition of the new nation of Haiti, born out of revolution against France. Lust for territory led to an unjust war against Mexico. The central government's determination to prevent southern secession led to violations of the very same neutral rights at sea defended by war in 1812.

Yet despite the brutal – especially towards Native Americans – conquest of the North American continent, US power nevertheless was contained. Washington's international meddling necessarily was limited. Americans could imperiously lecture the world. Their growing economic power could influence people and events. But the US could not impose its will on others.

That changed gradually as the 19th Century came to an end. There were presidents who resisted the temptations of power: Grover Cleveland refused to absorb the Hawaiian Islands after American planters conspired with US diplomats to overthrow the indigenous monarchy. But the Spanish-American War most dramatically launched America's "salt water empire" – under the rubric of promoting democracy and humanitarianism, of course. Sure of their own moral goodness, Americans launched an aggressive war of conquest against the Spanish Empire, which had neither attacked nor threatened the US, and crushed the Philippines' independence movement, killing some 200,000 Filipinos in the process.

This conflict truly was a harbinger of conflicts to come, from Vietnam to Kosovo to Iraq, where America initiated wars of choice for dubious purposes and sometimes killed promiscuously to achieve its ends. Although all of these conflicts generated opposition – Herring details the vibrant if ineffective anti-imperialist movement around the turn of the 19th Century – Washington policymakers harbored few doubts as to their right and ability to engage in global social engineering. Even grotesque failure was wished away, seen as no reason to inhibit ever more foolish humanitarian warmongering in the future.

The wealth of detail provided by Herring allows readers to rethink past policies. It is hard to see entry into World War I as anything but a tragic blunder, a testament to Woodrow Wilson's imperious certitude that he could remake the world. World War II, an outgrowth of Wilson's folly, poses a greater dilemma. Could America have accepted domination of Eurasia by either Nazi Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union? However one answers that question, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's manifold public deceptions and executive abuses deserve criticism (though Herring generally lauds his leadership).

From Colony to Superpower suggests that the Cold War might have been lessened if not avoided. Joseph Stalin was a moral monster, of course, but he appeared to be a paranoid more concerned about traditional Russian security concerns than interested in world conquest. The book also charts the end of the Cold War, giving credit to Ronald Reagan but concluding that the origins of the conflict's peaceful denouement were "much more complex than the triumphalists allow."

Herring takes readers up to the present, including the Iraq debacle. "Even if in decline, the United States will remain a crucial player in world affairs, and in coping with the challenges of a new and complex era the nation has a rich foreign policy tradition to draw on," he argues. Quite true.

But the overriding lesson of Herring's informative volume is that America should approach the world with renewed humility. The history of the US, a relatively new nation compared to so many states, is extraordinary. No other tribe, people, state, or empire has risen so quickly to global influence, let alone dominance. The result is enormous opportunity and responsibility.

Unfortunately, Washington often has misused its power, with horrendous results. Although more frequently the result of incompetence than malevolence, America's misbegotten interventions have resulted in casualties circling the globe. Despite the high hopes evoked by Barack Obama's election victory, he, and especially those he has selected as his national security "team," is unlikely to make the changes in US foreign policy that are so desperately needed. Those who advocate peace, prosperity, and liberty have no alternative but to continue the fight.

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