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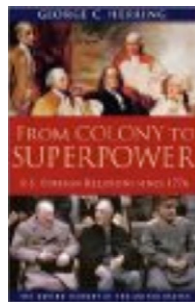
# Review Essays

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## **Authoritative History for *Which* Generation? by Walter A. McDougall**

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*From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*, by George C. Herring. Oxford University Press, 1,035 pages, \$35.00 (cloth).



David Kennedy has salvaged the dreams of C. Vann Woodward and Richard Hofstadter, who first conceived of the Oxford History of the United States back in the 1970s. To be sure, its early volumes were splendid. In *The Glorious Cause* (1982), Robert S. Middlekauff reminded a demoralized post-Vietnam audience of the heroic idealism attending the nation's founding. In *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), James McPherson plumbed the tragedy of a civil war fought over competing notions of liberty and garnished a Pulitzer Prize. In *Grand Expectations* (1996), James T. Patterson survived the minefields of Cold War American history. But the fact that only three titles appeared over two decades speaks volumes. Several authors dropped out of the roster while others, most notably Charles Sellers, published separately when they failed to do what the editors wanted.

Kennedy rode to the rescue, first by winning the series a second Pulitzer Prize with *Freedom from Fear* (1999) on the Depression and World War II, then by assuming the mantle of general editor upon Woodward's death at age 91 just a few weeks short of Y2K. On Kennedy's watch Middlekauff has published an updated edition, Patterson carried his story through the 2000 election in *Restless*

*Giant* (2005), and Daniel Walker Howe won the series a third Pulitzer Prize with his grand mural of the Jacksonian era, *What Hath God Wrought* (2007). Gordon Wood's volume on the early national period is due soon.

George C. Herring, the author of *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*, is a veteran and historian of the Vietnam War, which rendered him sensitive to the potential arrogance of those who wield power. He has also been a devoted teacher, which rendered him sensitive to the potential bias of those who write about wielders of power. Such serviceable but unremarkable traits, plus Herring's reputation as a specialist, would seem not to have made him a candidate for a grand synthesis. Indeed the first name penciled in for this survey of U.S. foreign relations was his University of Virginia mentor, Norman Graebner.

But Herring proved a good choice after all because national epic—in addition to knowledge, perspective, and *Sitzfleisch*—demands an equable temperament. Some reviewers have been annoyed by Herring's frequent “on the one hand, on the other” equivocation, or lack of an overarching theory about the roots of American foreign policy, or attention to backwaters (e.g., Latin America) at the expense of the main geopolitical channel. My own complaints include occasional lacunae (what became of the Potsdam Conference?), the short shrift given technological factors in world politics, and the narrative's abrupt start in 1776. From the last, readers may get the false impression that the Continental Congress achieved Tom Paine's *novus ordo seclorum* just by declaring independence, whereas, in fact, the Founders drew heavily on earlier British diplomatic traditions and took decades to establish their own. Still, Herring did well what the task required, which was blanket coverage and interpretive balance without idiosyncrasy. To quote Emily Rosenberg's book jacket blurb, “Herring's well-paced, readable, and up-to-date history of U.S. foreign relations will be the authoritative account for this generation.” But thereon hang the questions of *which* generation we are talking about and *which* lessons (if any) are learned from America's parabolic ascent.

Grand synthesis needs architecture, and Herring's is sturdy. The book consists of twenty chapters, each of which runs between 34 and 58 pages. The 117 years from 1776 to America's coming of age around 1893 receive 299 pages, whereas the 114 years from then until 2007 get 665 pages. To put it another way, the midpoint of the pagination, a chapter beginning on page 484, falls at the year 1931. The chapters, moreover, are thoroughly narrative because Herring puts his thematic cards on the table in the introduction.

What has distinguished U.S. foreign policy over time? Several tendencies, none of which is given priority or confined to certain eras. They include an anxious yearning (first expressed by George Washington) for “the strength of a Giant,” so that no other power could make Americans afraid; lust for “the riches of the world,” to be had through policies serving their economic

self-interest; faith in “God’s American Israel” endowed by Providence with a manifest destiny and moral mission; racial bias either blatant or masquerading as condescension; “practical idealism” that can facilitate the compromise diplomacy demands; a preference for unilateralism (mistakenly called isolationism); and democratic populism that invites demagoguery, inconstancy, and special pleading “from the Irish in the late nineteenth century to the modern-day Cuba and Israel lobbies.” Those tendencies lured U.S. statesmen into some spectacular blunders, but the innate strength of the nation and people are such that U.S. foreign relations must be deemed a spectacular triumph. “Ironically,” Herring quickly adds, “as the nation grew more powerful, the limits to its power became more palpable, a harsh reality for which Americans were not prepared by history.”

Still more tendencies emerge from the telling. Thus, Washington’s neutrality and John Jay’s treaty with Britain during the wars of the French Revolution made perfect sense, but had almost to be forced on an hysterical, ideologically charged Jeffersonian populace. As president himself, no one personified better than Jefferson “the essential elements of a distinctively American approach to foreign policy,” including territorial expansion by “devious and even duplicitous means” even as he contrasted America’s high moral purpose with others’ low self-interest, and a stubborn, self-defeating self-righteousness. Exhibit A in the case against Jefferson is his calamitous 1808 embargo on foreign trade. One consequence of his failure to defend U.S. sovereignty during the Napoleonic wars was the rise of the 1812 War Hawks, the first American war party insisting that grandiose goals could be had on the cheap. Indeed, it is not absurd to suggest that John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay were proto-neoconservatives insofar as they cried for a war to re-moralize American society and expand American ideals abroad while harboring an ulterior motive (conquest of Canada). Their cheap-hawkery, to employ Harvey Sicherman’s term, just gave the British an excuse to burn Washington, D.C.

Fast-forward to Secretary of State John Quincy Adams’ Fourth of July, 1821, address to the effect that America goes not abroad “in search of monsters to destroy.” Donald Kagan has recently tortured that text to argue that Adams really meant the opposite. But Herring interprets the speech and subsequent Monroe Doctrine as prudential insofar as Adams cautioned against risking specific national interests on behalf of vague universal causes. Likewise, he rightly describes Andrew Jackson’s diplomatic departures as “more of style and method than substance” and constrained by his “frontier practicality.” Old Hickory never overreached.

James K. “Young Hickory” Polk nearly did overreach as leader of the next American war party. His Mexican War from 1846 to 1848 taught Americans that starting wars is simpler than ending them, not to mention bestowing “the blessings of republicanism” on large, fractious foreign races. Even the annexations from Texas to California were no boon in the short run because the prospect of new slave states stoked the crisis that tore the nation apart.

In 1860–1861 war parties and cheap hawks in the North and South alike contrived to put America’s manifest destiny in mortal peril.

After the Civil War and Reconstruction (their first failed experiment in nation-building) the American people returned to work knitting the industrial sinews for world power. The tipping point came in the 1898 Spanish-American War that began when another war party preached a crusade against imperialism that made the United States an imperial power. If, as Cuban patriot José Martí sarcastically said, “To change masters is not to be free,” how much more true was that so for Filipinos. President William McKinley’s motives might have been holy, but his decision to annex the Philippine archipelago landed the U.S. Army in a counterinsurgency that cost 4,000 Yankee lives, 200,000 Filipinos, and 600 million Gold Standard dollars. It prompted pragmatic philosopher William James to intone: “God damn the U.S. for its vile conduct in the Philippines,” and Theodore Roosevelt to damn the Philippines for an Achilles heel. As president, “TR” eschewed idealistic nation-building, as when he quipped that to occupy the Dominican Republic would be like swallowing a porcupine wrong end-to. But in another way TR did prove a model for future imperial presidencies. Enticed by sociologist Edward Ross’s Progressive elitism, Roosevelt “saw his role as managing and manipulating a presumably ignorant or indifferent public and Congress to do what he deemed right and necessary.”

TR, a balance-of-power man, understood limits. Woodrow Wilson did not. Once convinced the United States must help to win the Great War in order to win the peace, he smeared as isolationism the neutralism on which he had just won re-election. Then he asked Congress to declare war in a speech Robert Zieger has called “at once breathtaking in the audacity of its vision of a new world order and curiously detached from the bitter realities of Europe’s battlefields.” Herring’s own judgment is that Wilson set impossible goals and, thereby, set up all parties for profound disillusionment even as his war effort verged on fanaticism. His Committee on Public Information led by zealous journalist George Creel mounted the nation’s first overseas propaganda campaign, while his Justice Department deprived war critics, pacifists, socialists, suffragettes, Negroes, and German-Americans of civil liberties.

At the Paris Peace Conference, Allied leaders obliged Wilson to abandon his Fourteen Points with one exception: the League of Nations. Just as Bill Clinton’s Washington Consensus later held that globalization must sooner or later oblige all recalcitrant holdouts and rogue regimes to fall into step with liberal norms, so Wilson trusted the League to adjudicate all disputes and repair all the injustices of the 1919 treaties of peace. But his own stubborn refusal to entertain the Senate Republicans’ reservations about the constitutionality of some clauses in the League Covenant doomed the League of Nations in Wilson’s own country.

Herring goes on a roll in the two interwar chapters that burst one myth and oversimplification after another. That will gratify those of us who have

long argued, for instance, that the allegedly “isolationist” Republicans in the 1920s, in fact, took “unprecedented measures and managed significant accomplishments” in world affairs; that real isolationism arrived in the Great Depression and was patronized by Franklin D. Roosevelt; that isolationists were by no means all reactionary, Midwestern yahoos; and that the League of Nations would likely have been ineffective against fascist aggression even (or especially) if the United States had joined. FDR, after all, congratulated Neville Chamberlain on the Munich Conference.

Echoing his editor David Kennedy, Herring describes World War II, as a “massively transformative event.” The conflict endowed the United States with unprecedented economic, military, and ideological power, plus the global mission many Americans suspected was their ultimate calling. But rather than focusing exclusively on the familiar diplomacy of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin, Herring also describes U.S. policy toward Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East. That enables him to foreshadow many postwar, Cold War, and even post-Cold War crises that would drag Americans into costly commitments in such previously unimaginable spots as Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf.

Such was American hegemony in 1945 (a unipolar moment if ever there were one) that Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish gushed, “We have . . . the abundant means to bring our boldest dreams to pass—to create for ourselves whatever world we have the courage to desire.” In other words, Americans could play God. The Creation at which they were present, however, was the Cold War, which Herring correctly dates from March 1946. But Americans typically cheap-hawked the 1947 Truman Doctrine’s universal commitment until North Korea’s 1950 aggression.

What follows is a series of chapters written in a somewhat agonized tone. It is as if the author is wringing his hands and weighing, along with his historical subjects, the merits of America’s shifting, drifting Cold War strategies of containment. Dwight Eisenhower hoped to cap defense spending through blunt nuclear deterrence while negotiating an end to the arms race. But those contradictory goals became moot after Sputnik heralded an era of mutual assured destruction. John Kennedy vowed Americans would pay any price and bear any burden in defense of liberty. But his “ambiguous and uncertain legacy” included the Berlin Wall, the reckless Cuban missile crisis, escalation of the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, and Middle East policies that ran afoul of “Nasser’s regional ambitions, competing U.S. interests in the conservative Arab oil states, the power of the Israel lobby, and, of course, the Cold War.”

Herring also asserts—on the authority of Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy’s Middle East Policy* (2002), and Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: the United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (2004)—that Kennedy promised a “special relationship” with Israel in return for misleading assurances to the effect that Israel’s Dimona nuclear reactor would not be

turned to military purposes. Herring calls Israel's *bona fides* into question again regarding the "unprovoked and brutal" Israeli attack on the *U.S.S. Liberty* during the 1967 Six-Day War. Citing documents published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, volume 19, he considers the Israeli claim of mistaken identity as "inconceivable" and "incomprehensible," just as Clark Clifford and Dean Rusk did. But at least the Six-Day War was a stunning victory for American arms and interests over those of the Soviets. Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War, by contrast, was a disaster that caused the Democrats' own "Wise Men," including Dean Acheson, Charles Bohlen, W. Averell Harriman, George F. Kennan, Robert A. Lovett, and John J. McCloy, to bail out on Southeast Asia after the Viet Cong's 1968 Tet Offensive. Herring neatly concludes that if the Kennedy years had been the acme of American hegemony, then "The crisis of hegemony was 'resolved' in a manner both inconclusive and anticlimactic. Governments rarely deal with complex issues head-on, democratic governments especially so."

Herring's equivocation leads him to make somewhat sympathetic judgments with regard to the practitioners of detente. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger might have made huge mistakes, but "deserve full credit for their important achievements" because "detente initiated processes that made possible the end of the Cold War." How so? The answers range from encirclement of the Soviet Union through the Sino-American rapprochement, to encouragement of eastern bloc dissidents through the Helsinki Accords, to engagement with Moscow on a wide range of issues, and even a restored moral self-confidence in U.S. foreign policy if only as a reaction against Nixon and Kissinger's Realpolitik. It took a few years for the effects to materialize. "Ford tried to perpetuate detente and ended up presiding over its demise. Carter sought to escape the Cold War and became its captive." But the effects would seem to have melded and manifested themselves in the triumphs of the Reagan years.

Wrong, says Herring, in no uncertain terms. Indeed, his useful if sometimes annoying equivocation mutates into tendentiousness when he arrives at the Reagan administration. Herring regards its first six years as feckless and risky, citing the disaster in Lebanon, proxy wars against exaggerated enemies that killed some 110,000 Central Americans, and a wasteful arms race that only exacerbated tensions with the USSR. Nor does Herring credit "triumphalists," who claim that Reagan's rhetorical flights, confrontational policies, and muscular defense budgets brought down the Evil Empire. Rather, he attributes the end of the Cold War primarily to "the basic weakness of the Soviet system and the dramatic steps taken by the remarkable Gorbachev."

That is not the story I remember or have since read about. Whatever else one thinks of Ronald Reagan or his legacy, the reality—as attested to by former Soviet officials and dissidents themselves—was that U.S. policies and pronouncements in the 1980s forced the Kremlin to make painful strategic

choices, exposed that “basic weakness of the Soviet system” (which Reagan understood better than most), de-legitimized the Soviet bloc, challenged the nuclear arsenal that underlay Moscow’s status as a superpower, and not least (Herring grants this) boldly decided to trust Gorbachev and encourage the *perestroika* and *glasnost* that eroded the communist system from within.

Herring’s critique of post-Cold War American statecraft is sadly on solid ground. The era began with boasts soon revealed as hubris. It was Charles Krauthammer’s “unipolar moment” at Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history,” when the United States could exert William Kristol’s “benevolent hegemony” thanks to Scooter Libby’s “absolute military supremacy.” Instead, the nation and world heard an uncertain trumpet in the Clinton years, as evidenced by tardy, cheap-hawkish responses to the Yugoslav horrors and rise of al Qaeda, and a too certain trumpet in the George W. Bush years, as evidenced by the contrast between utopian rhetoric and the reality of quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq. Herring blames the latter on “a sort of ‘cabal’” led by Dick Cheney, Don Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, and John Bolton. He finds it hard not to conclude that Iraq “was the wrong war in the wrong place fought in the wrong way.”

The leitmotif of Herring’s epic is trajectory. Having risen from colony to superpower, the United States can only descend from its apogee, not least because its national debt increased over the G. W. Bush years “by more than \$3 billion” (p. 961). Yes, it reads billion, an outrageous typo that just goes to show how hard it is to get used to talking in *trillions*. “Talk of unipolarity ended; pundits once more spoke of a nation in decline.” What remains of the book, at that point, is just two and a half pages, rather an abrupt coda to so long a composition. That risks leaving the reader with the impression that 230 years of American history was just prologue to our present woes, which, in any case, are a tale still in progress. But Herring does not mean to leave us in despair. Indeed, he concludes with a long list of American statesmen whose wisdom, prudence, shrewdness, and vision he believes worthy of emulation. He also believes American power can remain supreme among nations so long as we cease to squander it. He just asks, with Abraham Lincoln, that Americans dis-enthrall themselves of the conceit that they are God’s chosen people, live up to their own ideals, and lead others by example rather than force.

Now it is time to return to Emily Rosenberg’s blurb naming Herring’s Oxford history of U.S. foreign relations the authoritative one for a generation. But which one? If it turns out to be the *last* word for the baby-boom generation, then it may impart some humility to graying hawks and doves alike, but have little effect on the future. If, however, it turns out to be the *first* word for the younger generations in our leadership queue, then it may indicate that the neoconservatives have some serious “agitprop work” to do all over again.

