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Reply to Barry Blechman

The field of policy history has blossomed over the past few decades. The *Journal of Policy History* and the Policy History Conference have become exciting arenas for conversations, dialogue, and debates across disciplinary lines about the evolution of domestic and foreign policy. One of the most rewarding aspects of being part of this development has been to watch what started as a small cohort of mavericks in the profession turn into a vibrant community.

An important component to successful interdisciplinary scholarship, if the field is to work, is for scholars to take other disciplines on their own terms. Early in the development of the field, conversations too often revolved around historians dismissing social scientists for just presenting "abstract, timeless models" and flat, ahistorical theories, while social scientists dismissed historians for "just telling stories" and not providing theories and analysis.

Unfortunately, old habits die hard. That seems to be the case with Blechman's comments on *Arsenal of Democracy*. Mr. Blechman has had a very accomplished career as a policymaker. Blechman, who has a Ph.D. in international relations, was the founder and president of the DFI International, Inc., a research and consulting company in Washington. In addition to his writing and teaching, he has served on numerous boards, commissions, and advisory groups, such as the Project for a New American Century's Commission to Assess the Ballistic Threat to the United States (chaired by Donald Rumsfeld) and the Defense Policy Board (an advisory committee to the Department of Defense) under President George W. Bush from 2003 to 2007. He also founded and has led a nonpartisan think tank in Washington.

Let me begin with just a brief description of what my book is about. Based on research in twenty-three archival collections and a reading of the secondary literature on most of the major national security issues in this period, the book begins with an analysis of how President Franklin Roosevelt formed a powerful political coalition around the ideas and policies of liberal internationalism in the 1930s and 1940s.

While the coalition remained in place following the war and was responsible for the creation of the Cold War national security apparatus, the strength

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of the conservative opposition was much stronger in the 1940s and 1950s than much of the historiography suggested. Conservatives used national security as an issue around which to build their strength. An influential group of Republicans promoted the ideas of conservative internationalism to shed the image of isolationism and enable the party to challenge Democrats on national security. The emergence of conservative internationalism was an extremely significant development in the politics of national security and to the history of modern conservatism.

The cohort that emerged within the GOP after World War II pushed an agenda that helped the party challenge liberal internationalism—a pillar of the New Deal Order—and to fight off charges of isolationism. Within the consensus over anticommunism and containment, these Republicans found wedge issues through which to distinguish themselves from the Democrats. They placed more emphasis on fighting anticommunism in Asia over Europe; they called for military leaders to gain a bigger role in dictating national security strategy; they called for more aggressive investigations of alleged communist spies in the United States; and they claimed that the nation could be hawkish without requiring excessive sacrifice from citizens.

The ability of this faction to influence the Republican agenda opened up a partisan battle over national security that continues to this day. Conservatives effectively jettisoned any effort to really stand for antigovernment principles when they embraced an expansive national security state. The seeds of "Big Government Conservatism," as it was called during the presidency of George W. Bush, were planted.

The book moves through the 1950s and 1960s as national security became a fiercely contested political issue, with both parties competing to show who would be tougher against communism, culminating with President Johnson's decision to escalate America's involvement in Vietnam. After tracing the fragility and vulnerabilities of liberal internationalism during its heyday, the book then moves on to examine some of the challenges that conservatives faced after the 1970s. Rather than a portrait of conservatism that swept through American politics, I show how conservatives had to wrestle with the legacies of liberal internationalism as well as the conflicts of the 1960s. When conservatives were in power, they encountered substantial difficulty implementing their agenda and liberal internationalism proved to be far more resilient politically than they expected.

Blechman raises two criticisms about *Arsenal of Democracy.* The first is that the book provides too much historical narrative—too many stories—and not enough social science theory about the "underlying factors motivating

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the various actors." The second criticism is that I don't provide more of a policy prescription at the end (though, ironically, he faults one that he wrongly implies that I am making).

The work of the historian is to provide a complete narrative about the events, personalities, and turning points that define key issues. Historians put together the narrative based on extensive archival research and avoid attempting to impose monocausal theories on the past. As an undergraduate, one of my advisers, Morton Keller, liked to quote Henry James, who said the problem with theories is that they leak at every joint. While I like my history more analytical than many of my colleagues, I think Keller had an important point. What is most interesting is how different forces interact in specific moments, not how one is more important than another.

Until this time, there has been almost no synthetic history of the relationship between domestic politics and national security in the twentieth century. Any cursory review of the literature instantly makes this clear. As the distinguished historian Fredrik Logevall has pointed out, the two fields have separated since the 1970s with diplomatic historians focusing on the world of international elites attempting to respond to perceived threats and political historians focusing on issues such as welfare or civil rights. As Logevall wrote: "Particularly among those who study policy it would seem obvious that due consideration should be given to the role of domestic politics in the decision-making process and in what happened afterward. … What is striking, though, is how often studies altogether omit domestic politics, treating professional politicians involved in foreign relations as though they were not politicians at all. The 'intermestic' (international-domestic) dimension of U.S. foreign policy, in other words, which is generally much discussed as events are occurring, too often becomes a missing element in historical research."[1] Or as the noted diplomatic historian Robert McMahon wrote on the pages of this journal, "It is difficult to imagine two fields of scholarly inquiry with so much in common and yet so little interaction as diplomatic history and policy history. …Scholars of the domestic and foreign dimensions of policy, in sum, have far more in common than most of them recognize. They have been traveling along somewhat separate and distinct paths for some time now, to be sure."[2] While there have been some excellent monographs examining particular moments since World War II, the historical work has been limited.

To be sure, many scholars understand that politics never stopped at the water's edge. But we do not have much historical work that takes this into account. The point of *Arsenal of Democracy* is to provide an archivally-based history of what that meant and how it played out over time. My book takes

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the reader through many key periods in the history of national security, the partisan battles over Who Lost China?, the political context of the Cuban Missile Crisis and America's entry into Vietnam, the intraparty pressures Ronald Reagan faced when negotiating with the Soviet Union and more. The objective of the book was never to provide, or to knock down, a social science theory of which factors were most important in shaping these events—interest groups, ideas, parties, or more. Like many historians, the answer seems to be all of the above, and in the narrative I try to capture how these factors interact rather than making the case that one was more important than all the others.

My book is intended for both a general audience interested in history as well as the scholarly community. Despite Blechman's comments, it is fair to say that many people in the general public and even in parts of Washington still express a nostalgia that somehow things used to be different and politics did stop at the water's edge in earlier times. In an unusual move for a scholarly review, Blechman actually goes so far as to cite a letter from the publicist of Basic Books to make a main argument about the book. This is highly unusual since, as I am sure Blechman knows, the publicist's job is to raise points of interest with nonacademic audiences and to generate interest in books among booksellers and media officials. It is fair to say that most who have not spent their lives inside Washington sitting at the policy-making table or steeped in the academic literature are not really aware of this history.

In terms of the policy prescription, Blechman is right and I never attempted to provide one. That is not what the historian does. With this particular book, I wanted to write the history, not write the policy, a job that Blechman has much more experience with than I do.

Blechman goes on to say that I claim policymakers should focus primarily on politics and not on "the nation's objective interests." This is an interpretation of the book I just don't agree with. While the conclusion does say that policymakers must acknowledge that political pressures are always part of our discussions and can influence the formation of national security policy, I don't argue that this should be the only factor that policymakers consider, nor do I say this is the basis on which they should make their decisions. That is his argument about my book, not an argument that is actually in the book.

One only has to read through the manuscript to see that I devote extensive space to the multiple ways in which political considerations often led policymakers into dangerous directions. The story about how President Lyndon Johnson's fears of the Republican Right, which grew out of the fierce partisan battles of the 1950s, led him into the war in Vietnam says more than a few

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lines by a scholar ever could about the dangers that stem from politics. Just as important, I recount the history of politicians who were able to resist these pressures at key moments, like President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

At the same time, it is important to note that democratic political pressures sometimes can be healthy and we can see that as well. Indeed, Blechman blames the decision to go into Iraq on an elite group of neocons who he said led the Bush administration askew by selling a "totally bogus depiction of the political situation in Iraq." In that case, Blechman directly contradicts himself within his own essay. One might consider that had President Bush paid more attention to public opinion and congressional pressure—which was dubious about the war and became more so within a relatively short time period—it could have helped, not hindered, policymakers in deciding what was best for the country. The assumption that insulated policymakers can always make better decisions than politically sensitive politicians is equally misguided and dangerous.

Furthermore, *Arsenal of Democracy* provides a much broader argument than Blechman suggests. His review misconstrues the theme as being a book about how policymakers act according to political or policy concerns. This provides an inaccurate description of the history in the book. More relevant than what is the "most important" factor driving national security decisions are the ways in which national security policy decisions became integral parts of domestic political struggles and the ways in which domestic politics established the context within which policymakers had to formulate policy. The argument about how national security shapes domestic politics, ranging from party rhetoric to election strategies, is ignored by Blechman altogether.

On a few issues, Blechman and I have substantive differences that would have been interesting to explore. Blechman tends to see national security policy as being driven almost exclusively by the power of lobbyists and interest groups. Although I do discuss these factors, I give more weight to the role of midterm and presidential elections, political ambition, political ideas, partisan strategy, and feedback from previous decisions. Here I feel that a myopic focus on the "military-industrial complex" when discussing the politics of national security has downplayed these other crucial issues.

Yet Blechman is so concerned about scoring disciplinary points that this kind of debate is not the one we have. Rather, his style results in cherry-picking a handful of pages, misconstruing what I say, and making some notable mistakes in the process. For example, he argues that "the extraordinary role Henry Kissinger played and the power he accumulated on the National Security Council is barely mentioned" in the chapter on the 1970s, "and then, only in the context of Kissinger's ability to delay support for Israel

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during the 1973 war because of the president's 'incapacity' during the Watergate crisis." In fact, this is simply not true. This chapter and the one that examines the end of the draft and the one on detente both highlight Kissinger's central role and his power in a number of issues during this period. It is true that I could spend more time on Kissinger, but of course in a work of historical synthesis that covers over half a century, it is important to place individuals like Kissinger in a larger context of issues such as legislative-executive and partisan battles.

In the end, Blechman is looking for a very different kind of book than he will find from most historians. That is a legitimate desire, but it is also important, as policy historians have done, to realize that the way this field works best is not by demanding that one discipline adopts the format and style of the other but, rather, to understand how each can contribute to a richer understanding of the important subjects of the day.

The ambition of my book was to provide readers with specific accounts of the particular ways in which politics has mattered to national security. Beyond that, the history over this long period also teaches us specific lessons that hold true for the entire era. The first is the importance of multiple institutions in the arena of national security policy and politics. The president has not always been as imperial as standard accounts suggest. "Power?" Lyndon Johnson once vented, "the only power I've got is nuclear and I can't use that!" Congress provides politicians with numerous tools and institutional resources to challenge the conduct of national security policy, to support particular strategies, and to influence the political debates over an issue. Other institutions like the news media and interest groups also enter into the political battles.

But in the rush to appreciate the importance of American political institutions, we cannot skip over a second important lesson: the centrality of good old-fashioned electoral politics. When it comes to national security, all politicians, in the White House and on Capitol Hill, have had to consider how their arguments and decisions will play at the polls. This is a subject that has been too often downplayed in the field of American Political Development. Electoral considerations did not always dictate decisions, but more often than not they played an important role. Republicans have been as vulnerable as Democrats. Even as the parties have become more polarized and we have moved from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism, Republicans have found that militarism does not always play to their advantage. When in power, conservative politicians have very often redefined their objectives.

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Finally, what this story shows is the intermix of the defense establishment, institutional structures, partisan imperatives, and interest groups, along with public opinion. This is what history does best. Rather than making choices among variables, a narrative shows how they intermingle—sometimes clashing and sometimes complementing each other—across long stretches of time.

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NOTES

1. Fredrik Logevall, "Politics and Foreign Relations," *Journal of American History* 95 (2009).

2. Robert McMahon, "Diplomatic History and Policy History: Finding Common Ground," *Journal of Policy History* 17 (2005).

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