Review of International Studies (1998), 24, 251–259 *Copyright © British International Studies Association*

America after the Cold War: competing visions?

LINDA B. MILLER

Michael Elliott, *The Day before Yesterday*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996

John Gerard Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996

Monteagle Stearns, *Talking to Strangers*, Princeton University Press, 1996

Warren Zimmermann, *The Origins of a Catastrophe*, New York, Random House, 1996

For observers of US foreign policy, the first post-Cold War decade has been liberating, in some cases even exhilarating. Freed from the conceptual shackles of bipolarity or nuclear deterrence, scholars and journalists are rummaging in the grab-bag of American history in order to deduce old principles to guide policy-makers through the thicket of new challenges. Political leaders also find historical analogies irresistible. Over the course of his two-term presidency, Bill Clinton has compared himself variously to Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt. Less charitable critics have found echoes of Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge. Party affiliations are of little import in such ransacking of the past.

For American diplomats, these same years have been frustrating at best. Charged with the day-to-day conduct of US relations with other governments, plus a plethora of international organizations and non-governmental agencies, American ambassadors have coped with reduced budgets, an executive branch ill at ease with foreign policy or preoccupied with scandals or opinion polls, and a legislative branch determined to shape the global agenda according to domestic politics. The volumes under review document the competing visions of analysts who would join historical studies and questions of identity to chart the future of American foreign policy and practitioners who would implement American objectives in the world more effectively if they could be articulated more intelligently and supported more consistently at home. The gap between theory and practice persists, albeit in altered form, as the American century concludes.

The past as prologue?

Is America still exceptional? Was the Cold War an aberration? Should the United States behave like a 'benevolent hegemon' or 'the sole remaining superpower'? Does domestic support for either of these roles exist or matter? Such are the questions

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press

both Michael Elliott and John Ruggie pose. Both believe the American past is more than prologue, but differ in their views of what part of that past is most salient. For Elliott, the decades prior to 1914 deserve scrutiny, perhaps emulation. Then American energy and ingenuity helped ease the transition from agriculture to industry. For Ruggie, the interwar period and the Cold War era need reconsideration. Then the American penchant for institution-building flourished. For Elliott, Americans must 'get over' nostalgia for the 'Golden Age' that followed World War II, because America's prosperity was built on others' misery and loss. The almost five decades of the Cold War and American hegemony were the exception. The rediscovery of the nineteenth century reveals that then, as now, America was a nation of immigrants; then, as now, American domestic society was turbulent. Yet this comparison is vastly oversimplified, in part because it neglects the increasingly vital question of American identity (or multiple identities), not only of policy-making elites but also of the broader, increasingly heterogeneous society of which they are a part.

For Ruggie, 1945–90 must be seen as part of a continuum during which US presidents, Congressional leaders and the public repeatedly dealt with two possible foreign policy orientations, one based on 'policy preferences for an international order in which the US seeks to institute and live by mildly communitarian organizing principles, and one in which it avoids entanglement in any serious institutionalized commitments'.[1] As long as the Cold War waxed and waned, American leaders could act as if they had chosen the first orientation, while reserving the second if domestic audiences seemed to balk at accepting longer-term obligations. Since 1989, this juggling act has been increasingly difficult to sustain, even though the need for clarity of goals and means has been more pressing.

While it is reasonable to assert that America's past contains important lessons for the present, rapidly changing technology and demography circumscribe its utility. Nevertheless, retelling the American narrative is instructive for policy-makers overly impressed with the novelty of the late twentieth century. Elliott's elegiac rendering of 'America's wild ride' before 1945 and Ruggie's nuanced assessment of America's performance after World War II underscore the dangers of Washington's rejection of engagement with the world. But has that danger ever constituted a real choice after 1941? If not, theorists and practitioners should be examining how political leaders have sought to manage the competition between domestic and foreign imperatives and to garner the requisite domestic support for their choices, for their visions.

When they do so, it becomes evident why stability and coherence in US foreign policy has resulted as much from accident as from calculation since American choices have never existed in isolation from the world's turmoil. Ironically, received ideas of America's exceptionalism, whether based on its superior material resources or the intangibles of political leadership, have had a deleterious effect. Exceptionalism based on 'deliverance' from the evils of Europe's power politics has promised attractive but false choices for the United States before and after the Cold War.

The real value of historical re-creation, as both Elliott and Ruggie demonstrate, lies in the capacity of writers to transcend momentary fads that prevent an understanding of America's choices over time. Fortunately, the recent enthusiasm over

[1] Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*, p. 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'decline' has itself declined as an explanation of America's erratic foreign policy record. So too will the notion of 'civilizational clash',[2] as it becomes clearer that this fevered discourse essentially replays the sterile realist–idealist debate that has proved so tenacious and misleading. By stressing the compelling nature of both geopolitics and democratic politics in the formulation and execution of US foreign policy, Ruggie demonstrates conclusively that America's alleged isolationist streak is frequently a poorly concealed preference for unilateralism. Elliott assists by wondering whether US institutions are adequate to the task of coping with the return of fragmentation to the arena of global politics and economics.

Their appraisals suggest that US foreign policy since the founding of the republic should not be viewed as a Manichean struggle of callous underinvolvement versus pernicious overengagement. Both Elliott and Ruggie lament the slow pace of accommodation to newer realities in Washington and in the country as a whole. Both understand that the consequences of 'uneven' globalization in the world economy are felt in the society at large before they are well understood in academe or in the many and wondrous parts of the federal government. Unfortunately, neither author does more than hint at the importance of subnational groups or hybrid identities in foreign policy formation. Nor do they assess the implications when individual states like Massachusetts or California or even cities like New York develop their own foreign policy approaches, say in trade matters, to the point of threatening to deploy economic sanctions on their own, well ahead of what the federal government might be contemplating, as in the case of Burma (Myanmar).

Attention to such decentralizing trends, together with more discovery of the varieties of loyalty available to citizens of the American polity, would help elucidate what choices of orientation, objectives and instruments are feasible in the present and future. Presumably, US foreign policy will continue to project American values, as in the past. But whose values will they be when the contest for American identity is more fluid than it has been in the past, certainly more fluid than during the Cold War? The tendency to assume that the United States will continue to be exempt from broader historical trends needs an overhaul. If, in fact, *all* states are 'undergoing a metamorphosis brought on by structural change in the world society and economy'[3] as Susan Strange argues, will America need to refine itself and its foreign policy in ways that the past did not comprehend? This question needs closer inspection than either Elliott or Ruggie offers in their otherwise commendable texts.

The view from the ground

While theorists speculate about the past and future direction of American foreign policy, envoys living in the present must cope with the inevitable confusion and improvization that accompanies major historical change. The end of the Cold War has found the US diplomatic capacity seriously underfunded at the very time that

[2] For an extended discussion of this concept see *Foreign Affairs Agenda: Contending Paradigms in International Relations* (New York, 1997), esp. essays by Samuel P. Huntington and Edward Luttwak; and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York, 1996).

[3] Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 73.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enterprise is the major instrument for the attainment of foreign policy goals. While military force and economic instruments are always vital resources, so too is the calibre of the personnel who evaluate the flood of information from other countries. Accurate reporting remains the foundation of successful negotiation and bargaining. Representing the US is still a primary function of ambassadors and their staffs, a task made far more difficult when lack of direction at home or debilitating squabbles between the White House and Congress send conflicting signals to foreign audiences, as was the case during the Yugoslav wars or later during the run-up to ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention. When it all comes together, as it did during the intricate stages of German unification, a high standard is set which is rarely evident.

Monteagle Stearns, a veteran ambassador, clearly understands that the content of US foreign policy reflects the perennial contest for an acceptable balance between duties at home and duties abroad. He is well aware that, despite spreading affluence, many Americans see the glass as half-empty, as Elliott complains. Why? After decades of hearing that the Cold War demanded deferred domestic renovation, the 1989 'victory' seems hollow, in large part, because US presidents and legislators habitually oversold the threats. They convinced themselves that only exaggeration of dangers would secure steady domestic support for the long struggle with Communism and the Soviet empire. A decade later, these Cold War habits and rationales linger on. The expected redefinition of US goals and means has proceeded slowly. What began in 1947 in an *ad hoc* fashion, namely, a form of 'containment' that by definition would elevate foreign policy requirements over domestic priorities, became institutionalized in Washington's agencies and bureaucracies, including the State Department, and is proving difficult to dislodge.

As a result, the traditional diplomacy associated with the exchange of ambassadors continues to compete with other forms of representation, especially the use of back channels or summit meetings that play to television audiences and temporarily enhance the personal prestige of heads of state or government. Stearns is firm in his rejection of these alternatives: 'Professional diplomats can anticipate problems before they require the attention of senior officials at home or at the summit; they can make certain that American positions are understood by policy-makers abroad and they can accomplish quietly what special emissaries can do only with a blare of trumpets'.[4] Moreover, the better use of trained diplomats could help correct one of the most glaring defects of US foreign policy, the persistent reliance on personal relations with foreign leaders that robs American presidents of flexibility when circumstances change, as they did in Iran and the Philippines, for example.

Because Stearns is so realistic about the volatility of public opinion that shapes Washington's agenda, his suggestions for better management carry much weight. Especially valuable is his insistence that no matter how technical the new diplomatic tasks may be, in terrorism or narcotics, in the environment or population control, the importance of diplomacy as communication means that Foreign Service officers who master the intricacies of specific cultures and languages should be posted and rewarded appropriately. Similarly, the US loses influence if it fails to second more trained personnel to non-governmental organizations or to share ideas with other governments whose diplomatic resources are also stretched after the Cold War. If for no other reason, such approaches will serve to put covertly acquired information in

[4] Stearns, *Talking to Strangers*, p. 89.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the proper perspective and will downgrade any tendency for actual negotiations with other governments to founder when concessions are misunderstood as weakness at home.

Stearns is most persuasive when he argues that trade negotiations pose the most difficult problems of coordination. Orchestrating the activities of the Office of the US Trade Representative with the State Department, against the background of Congressional oversight and participation at every point of negotiation and implementation, is time-consuming. Worse, such a cumbersome system often sends conflicting messages to foreign governments with whom the US has security and other relationships, as has happened so often with Japan. With consummate tact, of the kind that made Stearns so valuable an interlocutor as a career diplomat, he writes: 'The foreign policy expertise of members of Congress and their staffs, so valuable when constructively used, can also turn obstructive when deployed to serve ideological or excessively short-term and partisan ends'.[5]

It is precisely this latter problem that has confounded much of the Clinton administration's foreign policy. Exquisitely sensitive to domestic politics, the President and his entourage have wanted to augment the conventional agenda by adding environmental issues and highlighting human rights concerns in ways that would differentiate the 'new' Democrats from their Republican predecessors. Nevertheless, despite re-election, the White House has remained mired in turf battles with Senator Jesse Helms, the conservative chair of the Foreign Relations Committee. He has held up ambassadorial appointments in an effort to impose conditions on treaties or insisted on State Department reorganization. Key posts in Canada, Mexico, Germany, Russia, Argentina and Korea remained vacant, as the President himself has tried to micromanage the appointment process. In addition, the spreading financial mess of the 1996 election campaign means that even the older, somewhat dubious, practice of rewarding political contributors with important ambassadorships is under attack.

One result of this disarray is the growing number of unnecessary conflicts with allies like the members of the European Union (EU). To give just one example, by failing to head off or deal effectively with the clearly bizarre aspects of the Helms–Burton legislation, the administration found itself trying to enforce penalties on other countries and foreign companies that do not accept the US trade embargo against Cuba, which persists chiefly to placate the Cuban *émigré* community in Miami that helped to re-elect the president. Only last-minute, professional diplomatic manoeuvring headed off a needless confrontation when the EU threatened to take the dispute to the World Trade Organization, a move that would jeopardize one of the most cherished goals of recent US foreign policy.

For all its alleged novelty, then, post-Cold War US foreign policy runs the risk of being imprisoned as well as informed by domestic politics. Important initiatives like NATO expansion are announced before domestic groups, without proper exploration of the international ramifications. Bilateral relations with China are subject to corporate pressures that reverse the linkage of human rights and trade, previously advertised as inseparable. Little wonder that foreign policy professionals in US embassies are adrift when asked to explain the pulling and hauling in Washington that leads to rapid reversals of existing policies. As seen from abroad,

[5] Ibid., p. 143.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the same voices that insist on the relevance of sole superpower status for America are those whose fetish for cost-cutting means that the US will lack the diplomatic presence that might achieve such exalted claims.

If American diplomacy is allowed to deteriorate further, Stearns warns, US embassies will remain 'diplomatic fast-food outlets for traveling officials from Washington'.[6] Rather than a permanent conversation, American diplomacy will become a dialogue of the deaf, as 'the Washington-dominated diplomacy of the United States' becomes sunk in trivia, unable to distinguish between real and imagined threats, unable to prepare for 'the impending collapse of a nation-state or of an ecosystem'.[7]

The Yugoslav wars: a special case?

The impending collapse of a nation-state (or actually, a state, rather than a nation-state) was precisely what Warren Zimmermann, the last US Ambassador to Yugoslavia, attempted to get the Bush administration to prepare for in 1990. A distinguished career diplomat with long experience in the Balkans, Zimmermann was one of the first to see that ignoring the steady rise of extreme nationalist rhetoric in Yugoslavia would cost many lives and jeopardize virtually all of America's post-Cold War foreign policy goals in Europe and beyond. He states firmly and convincingly that the 'Yugoslav catastrophe was not mainly the result of ancient ethnic or religious hostilities, nor of the collapse of communism at the end of the Cold War, nor even the the failures of the Western countries'. No, he insists, responsibility lies squarely at the feet of 'nationalist leaders who coopted, intimidated, circumvented, or eliminated opposition to their demagogic designs. Yugoslavia was destroyed from the top down.'[8]

This interpretation means that the American and European efforts to contain the violence within the international borders of Yugoslavia, to offer humanitarian assistance through the UN, to mediate through the EU, were doomed as long as Western leaders lacked the political will to coordinate force and diplomacy. Zimmermann's chilling portraits of Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman are unmatched in the burgeoning literature seeking to explain what went wrong. How could the worst genocide in Europe since 1945 proceed in the face of televised images of carnage? Zimmermann's account of the ways in which he urged US policy-makers to make room on their crowded agenda for the consequences of a violent break-up of Yugoslavia is a textbook case of what Stearns reports as one of the resident ambassadors' chief difficulties: getting Washington's attention and retaining it long enough to have action plans developed for responding to predictable disasters.

As early as 1989, Zimmermann had his staff prepare 'worst-case scenarios' for Yugoslavia's descent into chaos. In understated prose, he confirms that at a meeting of US ambassadors with Secretary of State James A. Baker, his counterparts, most of whom were political appointees, did not regard the prospect of Yugoslavia's

[6] Ibid., p. 149.
[7] Ibid., p. 178.
[8] Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe*, p. 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dissolution as particularly worrisome. Baker himself was largely preoccupied with the intricacies of German unification and later the Gulf War, as was President Bush. Thus, the repeated US calls for Yugoslavia to stay together had much to do with trying to prevent the issue from intruding into other game plans, especially the poorly conceived focus on keeping the larger multiethnic Soviet Union together.

Against these odds, Zimmermann's vocal efforts to depict Milosevic's duplicity and mendacity and Tudjman's fanaticism and authoritarianism in their true colours were downgraded. When the opportunity to exercise intense US diplomatic pressure arose, the cycle of violence had already begun and took on a life of its own. While the resort to sanctions satisfied critics temporarily, this instrument lacked staying power unless and until it could be used with force properly and systematically applied toward sensible goals.

Zimmermann's nuanced reaction to Congressional activity on Bosnia may surprise those who assume that most career ambassadors chafe at the messiness of US democratic processes, as did the illustrious George Kennan. To be sure, he regrets the 'passionate but sporadic' behaviour of elected representatives playing to their ethnic constituents. He is properly distressed at the posturing and meddling that confused words with deeds, that allowed Congressional leaders to look at Yugoslavia through the prism of what was possible in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. This congenital US impatience with details and complexities permitted local tyrants to take full advantage of the many openings to play off key senators against the White House.

Stearns would sympathize with Zimmermann who, in desperation, finally resorted to telephoning individual legislators to explain why their amendments and resolutions were 'counterproductive'. Later he learned that Senator Dole inquired, 'Why doesn't that ambassador stop calling senators and do what he's being paid for?'[9] No wonder Zimmermann concludes that the 'episodic interventions reflecting selective allegiances' of Congress made matters much worse. Quite correctly, he reserves his harshest criticism for the executive branch, whose procrastination allowed thuggish politicians in Yugoslavia to manipulate both the Americans and the Europeans when it became obvious, first in Croatia and later in Bosnia, that the Western powers had no stomach for the precise application of force against the Serbs which might have shortened the horror, if not prevented it altogether.

Zimmermann is hardly naive in his analysis of the local Balkan factors that brought about the demise of the Yugoslavian state, again, an entity that was never a nation. Indeed, his description of the multiple identities of some of the local parties is exemplary and does much to dispel the fog that often surrounds discussion of ethnicity. The value of his memoir lies in his willingness to confront the repeated lapses of judgment, especially the adherence to Colin Powell's military doctrine that argued for only overwhelming use of US force, if force were to be used at all. Of course, this belief robbed American policy-makers of choice, even if it was supposed to guarantee no more Vietnams, no more Somalias, no more Lebanons.

Zimmermann authoritatively exposes the superficiality of such views. He declares that such limitations would keep the US on the sidelines of every post-Cold War crisis, no doubt precisely what the proponents of benign hegemony would prefer anyway. From long experience, he argues convincingly that 'Bosnia was a clear case

[9] Ibid., p. 131.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of aggression; we had a moral, perhaps even a legal obligation to deal with it.'[10] By the time the Clinton administration came to this conclusion, thousands more were either dead or displaced.

Not only were there geopolitical or moral arguments to support more forceful US responses; there was also the question whether America's identity as the leading successful multiethnic state required a strong commitment to maintaining such status for Bosnia in the heart of Europe as part of an overall strategy. Zimmermann's resignation, in protest over Washington's vacillations and obfuscations as the Bosnian War worsened, allowed him to speak frankly on another troublesome issue. In words that Stearns would endorse, Zimmermann explained to Secretary of State Warren Christopher that the demoralization of the Foreign Service would reduce US diplomacy to irrelevance. In Bosnia, at the end of 1993, American diplomacy 'without force had became an unloaded weapon, impotent and ridiculous'.[11]

Some observers and policy-makers insist the events of 1994–5 that finally mobilized the Clinton administration to sponsor the Dayton Accords redeemed the ghastly mistakes of 1990–3. Not Zimmermann. He is understandably alarmed at the vagueness of these agreements. Their major flaw is that the leaders who had fanned the flames of hypernationalism originally are supposed to be the peacemakers and enforcers of an inconsistent set of agreements that promised more than they or the US were prepared to deliver. Coupled with the refusal of IFOR and the initial reluctance of SFOR commanders to arrest indicted war criminals, this deliberate and short-sighted divorce of justice from peace has set the stage for a renewal of hostilities when the troops are eventually withdrawn.

The Yugoslav wars appeared to be a special case as they unfolded, although, seen in the broader perspective of post-Cold War conflicts, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, such episodes of state collapse fuelled by ethnic tensions and demagogic leadership will recur. With luck and skill, few will exact as heavy a toll on America's self-image.

Brave new world?

What a difference a decade makes. Writing in these pages in 1990, Robert Garson asserted that: 'A new international order is being created not through shock and violence, but through incremental developments.'[12] While this view accorded the United States considerable margin for error, far more so than in the tense era of nuclear stand-offs and stalemates, the post-imperial era has dramatized the extent to which shock and violence, along with incremental change, has marked the return of history rather than its demise. It has also encouraged analysts to revisit older US foreign policy doctrines, including containment and 'global meliorism',[13] should

[10] Ibid., p. 216.
[11] Ibid., p. 231.
[12] Robert Garson, 'The Rise and Rise of American Exceptionalism', *Review of International Studies*, 16 (1990), p. 179.
[13] See Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1976* (Boston, MA, 1997), chs. 7 and 8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press

policy-makers choose to legitimate their choices in a vocabulary well understood at home, if not abroad.

If containment rests on negative goals, and global meliorism on more ambitious, positive goals, appropriate instruments will be required and suitable targets will be demanded as well. What these two doctrines permit is the pursuit of a multifaceted strategy toward friends and foes (if there are any), allies and clients (if there are any), and other countries or players who do not fit easily into such categories. Thus regional bullies like Iraq become 'rogue states', managed by sanctions rather than just diplomacy or uses of forces that entail unacceptable casualties. More important actors like Russia and China are offered 'commercial diplomacy' and 'constructive engagement' so long as they do not compete too vigorously with the US for market shares or political influence in the wider world. This schematic approach falters when others find their assigned roles too confining and regard such American visions as pompous or patronizing. In the short term, since there is little that either Beijing or Moscow can do about it if they want access to US technology or assistance, American political leaders have considerable scope to pursue such stratagems.[14]

In the longer term, American policy-makers should be explaining to their counterparts that the end of the Cold War has renewed the constant negotiation and bargaining with domestic players in the perennial contest for resources and priorities. As a consequence, foreign policy initiatives will be held hostage to domestic politics unless and until sophisticated trade-offs can be arranged and completed. The links between ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention, NATO expansion, ambassadorial appointments and balanced budget deals are a harbinger of things to come internationally, as seasoned diplomats already appreciate.

To comprehend this new-old universe of American foreign policy, scholars will need to spend less time worrying about the parsimony of their structural theories and more time investigating the neglected domestic setting within which US foreign policy is actually operating. In addition, they will have to place less emphasis on America's uniqueness or the inevitability of US hegemony and more stress on the diminishing capacity of the state to prevail in the global economy where other actors play by different rules. The significant tests of American exceptionalism lie in a future for which the past and present offer guidance but not certainty.

[14] See Michael Cox, *U.S. Foreign Policy after the Cold War: Superpower without a Mission?* (London, 1995), chs. 5 and 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210598002514 Published online by Cambridge University Press