Book Reviews


Reviewed by Mitchell Lerner, Ohio State University

The back cover of David Ryan’s new book does him a disservice. *US Foreign Policy in World History,* it says, “explores whether consciousness and ‘spirit’ has been the main motivating force in U.S. foreign affairs or whether in reality it has been driven by materialism.” This claim is true enough. Ryan, principal lecturer in history at De Montfort University in Britain, has indeed chosen to reassess the relative importance of self-interest and ideals in the shaping of American foreign policy. And yet this book is much more than that, as Ryan not only presents a sophisticated argument about the wellsprings of American foreign policy but also attempts to explain how these two seemingly contradictory values have coexisted throughout the history of American foreign relations.

The back cover also claims that *US Foreign Policy in World History* is “a survey of US foreign relations.” It is a survey of an unusual sort, perhaps, as Ryan aspires to draw general conclusions about American foreign policy by examining a series of critical events and values; but the book really makes no attempt to be a traditional synthesis. Essentially, Ryan examines American foreign policy since the Revolution through a handful of case studies, such as the Monroe Doctrine, progressive-era diplomacy, the Cold War, and the American response to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. To Ryan’s credit as a writer, the use of such narrowly focused topics does not lead to the choppy and broken narrative that often mars such an approach. He does an excellent job of connecting the disparate events with one another and with his own theoretical foundation. A chapter, for example, may ostensibly revolve around the Spanish-American War, but it does so without isolating the war from other events of the time, and it emphasizes connections to larger issues of imperialism and American society. Accordingly, anyone looking for a general survey of American foreign relations would be best served by going elsewhere, as Ryan’s book is far too selective in its choices and skimpy in its details to provide a useful overview; the Korean War, for example, goes virtually unmentioned. But anyone looking for a challenging and insightful book about the nature of American foreign policy will find that *US Foreign Policy in World History* fits the bill nicely.

Ryan’s book is divided into two sections. The first part focuses on the roots of U.S. foreign policy by looking at the way that certain myths and symbols became integrated into American society and formed the basic principles for the country’s later
moves in international relations. Although Ryan identifies a number of such constructs, he sees a central theme emerging: the tendency of Americans to define themselves as superior to “the other” (no matter who that “other” might be at any given time) by publicly associating their country with personal liberty and self-determination. Thus, he suggests, the Declaration of Independence not only proclaimed American independence from the British empire, but also helped unite a disparate collection of people behind the notion that they represented the spirit of freedom and liberty that would always stand in stark contrast to old world colonialism. Such notions and self-definitions, Ryan suggests, formed the backbone of future American conduct in the international arena.

Although Ryan recognizes the centrality of selfless ideals in early American society, he argues that such claims merely masked the country’s attempts to advance its self-interest, primarily in the economic realm. The revolutionary generation, he contends, embraced the rhetoric of universal freedoms and individual liberties while at the same time taking actions abroad that denied those very principles to others. “In the name of the Monroe Doctrine,” he writes, “Latin American nations were often denied their self-determination through US intervention. . . . Democracy was often secondary to other US interests: order, stability, opportunity, the exercise of hegemony, access to resources, the denial of alternatives, whether nationalist or socialist” (p. 53). The United States might have wrapped such messages in principles that supposedly proved American moral superiority to the traditional European powers, but in reality, Ryan concludes, “the driving force of the new empire was economic” (p. 58).

In the second part of the book Ryan seeks to explain how these contradictory elements played out in American foreign policy in the twentieth century. His conclusions remain the same: The American people accepted an imperial and self-serving tradition as long as it was shrouded in rhetoric that emphasized American superiority and benevolence, thus adhering to and perpetuating these national constructs. In Ryan’s view, American policy makers in the Cold War portrayed the struggle (both consciously and unconsciously) as a world conflict between the forces of good and evil, a zero-sum game in which the United States would pay any price to protect its morally superior way of life. Doing so, Ryan suggests, not only justified American economic expansion but also kept a diverse population united and motivated against a perceived barbarian “other” and ensured the willingness of ordinary citizens to pay taxes to support defense budgets that largely benefited the elite. Compromise and pluralism, he concludes, could not be tolerated in a world that “had to be made safe for capitalism” (p. 139).

There are a few problems with US Foreign Policy in World History that deserve mention. The Sandinistas assume a central position in the narrative that far exceeds their importance in American foreign policy. Perhaps more problematic is the book’s excessive reliance on academic jargon and theory that is referred to but rarely explained. In the first five pages the reader encounters G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Francis Fukuyama, Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Said, Immanuel Wallerstein, and others, usually referred to or quoted but rarely explained or contextualized. The result is a book that is wholly unsuited for anyone except specialists in American foreign relations.
(and at $82.50 in hardcover, it is clear that Routledge is not expecting much of a popular audience). One notable exception to this rule is Ryan's excellent integration and discussion of world-systems theory, which heavily influences his analysis throughout. The book also suffers a bit from the author's polemical tone. Ryan, especially in the last chapter on George Bush (the elder) and Bill Clinton, sometimes strays toward harsh criticism more befitting a radical manifesto than a scholarly tome.

Still, these minor shortcomings are only distractions in an otherwise excellent work. Ryan has fit centuries of American history into a coherent framework that incorporates cutting-edge scholarship and methodologies. He offers an account of American foreign relations that moves beyond the simple “economics” versus “morality” debate and looks at the way the two seemingly contradictory aspects have evolved and reinforced each other. A book with as provocative a thesis as this will undoubtedly draw some criticism from those who disagree with its premise; nevertheless, Ryan's argument is of such quality that even his detractors will be forced to respect the book as a serious work of historical scholarship that makes a significant contribution to one of the great debates about American foreign policy.

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Reviewed by Akira Iriye, Harvard University

In this small book David F. Schmitz offers a fine biography of Henry L. Stimson, with a focus on Stimson's service as U.S. secretary of war (1909–1913, 1940–1945) and secretary of state (1929–1933). A lawyer whose public service spanned nearly half a century, Stimson may well be considered “the first wise man,” as Schmitz puts it.

Every U.S. secretary of state from the 1890s through the Second World War was a lawyer, and it is not surprising that their legal training and cast of mind gave U.S. foreign policy a special coloration. Among the lawyer-secretsaries of state, Stimson stands out not only because he believed in the rule of law at home and abroad, but also because he was convinced that the rule of law ultimately depended on force and the willingness of the society (domestic or international) to punish lawbreakers.

Rule of law, of course, implies the preservation of order, which in turn presupposes the existence of a community of like-minded, similarly oriented people (or states). It is not surprising that for Stimson the United States and, more broadly, Britain and some other European countries exemplified this type of community. He kept referring to “civilization,” which for him meant above all order, stability, and evolutionary (rather than radical) change.

This was a conservative ideology backed up by a view of the world's people that was unabashedly hierarchical. Stimson shared the racism of the age of imperialism, putting the white race at the top of the pyramid. Unlike some others who held these