PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Internationalizing U.S. Diplomatic History: A Practical Agenda

MICHAEL H. HUNT

International history has been much with us of late. Indeed, it has become over the last decade increasingly difficult to open a journal or hear a luncheon address without being treated to the academic equivalent of a ritual rain dance summoning the spirit of a more international approach. You are by now familiar with the essential message. More work along the well-established lines of multiarchival research is imperative if we are to establish an adequate understanding of American relations with the other great powers as well as the lesser ones. Nonstate actors also deserve more attention for their influence on U.S. policy. We should extend our work into economic and social realms where the state may be marginal to the understanding of international interaction. Finally, the comparative dimension should figure more prominently in our work. Because any case becomes clearer when set alongside other comparable cases, the resulting insights can be rich, especially for Americans studying their own country's policy and hence in need of distance from it.

Although advocates of international history have dealt in detail with our research program, they have had strikingly little to say about the broad implications of a more global approach for other facets of our scholarly life. It is time to propose a practical, if preliminary, agenda that considers the ramifications of a more international diplomatic history—for the definition of its scope and the way in which we engage with it.

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1 *Diplomatic History* has over the last few years reverberated with discussions on international history, and provides a good point of entry for the uninitiated.
and coherence of our field, for our theoretical and methodological orientation, for the nature of our instruction, and finally, for the themes and lessons our work conveys to the public. The observations that follow seek to respond to an important challenge that must be met if international insights are to become genuinely integrated into the full range of our work.

What defines our field and holds it together as our concerns move in a more internationalist direction? Already the inroads of international history have blurred the boundaries of diplomatic history, leaving its general contours and our individual places within it less clear. Look at the list of major works setting American policy in a global context. Few titles there carry the names of U.S. diplomatic historians; rather, most are works by international historians trained abroad or by area studies specialists who think of themselves as historians of U.S. foreign relations peripherally if at all. Some authors are, horror of horrors, not even historians. This body of work fits awkwardly on the margins of U.S. foreign relations as most specialists once thought of it.

This problem of field definition perhaps needs restatement. The difficulty is not so much that the field is now less clear than it once was but that it is a good deal broader as new, more international works and questions have come to coexist alongside the approaches that have long defined the field, especially the statist concern with policy and the policy process. And a broader field is one that diplomatic historians will have to work harder to control. But who wants—or is able—to double the hours in the work week or to go back time and again for fresh training in order to keep up with new developments?

This very breadth makes more important than ever a division of labor and a fruitful interaction among those with different specialties whether international or not. We need help from our own diplomatic history colleagues and from colleagues in allied fields who can serve as bridges to new methodologies or bodies of scholarship pertinent to our own work. Perhaps even more urgent is collaborative work, now virtually nonexistent within the field. The astonishing complexity of the world and the perils of misinformation and superficial, even ethnocentric, understanding make collaboration not just desirable but, it would seem in many contexts, imperative. To be successful, collaborative projects will require careful planning of research and writing strategies and a willingness on the part of foundations to support such projects through both exploratory meetings and

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2 To take some important examples from the Cold War in Asia see John Dower, Empire and Aftermath: Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1878–1954 (Cambridge, MA, 1979); Jeffrey Race, War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province (Berkeley, 1972); and Steven I. Levine, Anvil of Victory: The Communist Revolution in Manchuria, 1945–1948 (New York, 1987).

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lump-sum or coordinated research grants. As we seek to extend our collective range, we should devote more thought to devising effective strategies of collaboration and more time to discussing them.

These points about field bridging and collaboration seem particularly germane to the current interest in developing an overall assessment of the history of the Cold War now that it appears to be over. We need a history of it that breaks out of an exclusively or even heavily American frame of reference. Historians of the United States would gain by working together with specialists on a wide variety of other countries and regions. The contribution of those specialists is indispensable, for they can supply what is arguably most needed now for a genuinely international appraisal of the Cold War—a fuller sense of the cultural pattern from region to region across the Cold War globe and a sharper sense of the ways cultural patterns informed the Cold War experience of particular governments and peoples. With the help of specialists on and scholars from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, Cuba, and India we can begin to explore those patterns so that we can make better sense of the official archives and other Cold War records as they become more widely available. This enhanced cultural sensitivity will help us understand how attitudes toward the role of the state, how the past as a guide to present conduct and long-term goals, how responses to foreign penetration, how sacrifice in the name of some collective good, and how schisms along class and ethnic lines—to note but a few key themes—may vary from place to place and people to people.

As we acquire the greater breadth of interest mandated by a more international diplomatic history, many of us will face awkward adjustments in our place within our departments and especially in our relationship with Americanist colleagues. There is an inherent tension in taking a nationally defined field of study—U.S. diplomatic history—and seeking to set it in its international context. To the degree that we deal with broad global issues relevant to U.S. policy, then to that degree we weaken our ties to the American history field, which has for most of us been departmental base, and we strengthen our involvement in other groupings within our departments. This reorientation may meet some resistance from colleagues in American history who will regret, perhaps even resent, the diminution of field loyalties in departmental politics and of field coverage in the classroom resulting from a shift to a more global and less American-centered perspective. But there are compelling arguments for this shift, with its attendant cultivation of hybrid historical concerns and interdisciplinary interests, and those arguments will have to be made. Not least is the opportunity open to us to break down the lines of narrow specialization that many see as a current bane of the historical profession.

How might internationalization affect our theoretical and methodological orientation? U.S. diplomatic historians have developed what amounts to a special relationship with political science and the theoretically driven field of international relations. Historians have been drawn to the relationship by the allure of “science” and by an interest in methods that might help control and interpret the American archives, while the other side
has sought guidance on historical sources and a short cut to mastering case studies.

The relationship promises to change. Already doubts about the theory-building enterprise have become pronounced. Political scientists have themselves noted problems. Over a decade ago Stanley Hoffmann, wrapping his doubts in paradox, called for thinking of international relations as "the science of uncertainty," and more recent evaluations of the field identified a formidable set of impediments to progress, notably inadequate historical perspective, difficulty controlling "data-rich" cases, pervasive ethnocentrism, neglect of regional and area studies insights, and inattention to social forces and economic processes. Some favorably disposed diplomatic historians such as Paul Gordon Lauren, John Lewis Gaddis, and Richard H. Immerman have mildly seconded these concerns without admitting any loss of faith, while others have sharply attacked efforts to develop "general theories" as (in the words of Christopher Thorne) "divorced from the complexities provided by historical evidence; riding high into a quasi-theological stratosphere; delivered in an unlovely tongue; in some cases accompanied by seemingly super-rational exercises in mathematics whose complexity, it transpired, formed the basis for conclusions regarding political processes that were remarkable only for their banality."4

The emerging internationalist consensus is likely to deepen these doubts among diplomatic historians and alter the intellectual terms of trade between diplomatic historians and political scientists. Confronted by interstate and intercultural relations raised to a new level of complexity, theoretical formulations and covering laws will seem more than ever to suffer from conceptual formalism, evidentiary muddled, and a general ethnocentrism noted by even the gentlest critics. As a result, diplomatic historians may well find themselves establishing liaisons with a wider range of sources of inspiration and guidance.

One of these sources is area studies. It offers a substantive knowledge that is indispensable to international history, and its insistence on the absolute and fundamental importance of language skills is one we cannot ignore. Anthropology is another. It highlights the centrality of culture and cultural differences and provides tools and terminology to help explore those themes. Sociology is a third. It offers an entrée to the study of social groups and social movements, essential if international relations is to be seen

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as something more than the interaction of autonomous political entities. Finally, poststructuralists deserve to be heard as well, for their reflections on language can help us toward a more subtle and profound analysis of texts.

If we turn to consider studies of crisis, we have a good illustration of the inadequacies of international relations theory and of the advisability of looking elsewhere for interpretive frameworks. The crisis literature raises some basic historical problems about how and what we know that its more sophisticated exponents, both historically inclined theorists and theoretically oriented historians, sometimes concede but do not dwell on. That literature proceeds on the assumption that a historical case carries a fixed meaning. But, as any college history major soon learns, major events cannot be fixed unambiguously in the light of history. Even with a full body of evidence available, the meaning does not stabilize; rather, interpretations evolve and interpretive differences, sometimes quite marked, continue to plague us. History with its quicksilver qualities seems a poor foundation for theory.

On top of this questionable assumption about the fixed and unambiguous nature of the past rests the belief that participants in crises have clear points of view and that historians and others with sufficient objectivity can capture them. This belief is no less questionable. Indeed, a contrary case could be made. Far from being clear, the thinking of policymakers, particularly under the crosscutting pressures that attend crises, is marked by pronounced ambiguities and shifts that are bound to frustrate the efforts of historians and theorists bent on exacting clearly defined intentions from the record. Scholars may differ over what the principals in a past crisis wanted precisely because the principals themselves were not certain either as individuals or as a group about the dangers they faced or the outcomes they desired. Far from having a simple or settled point of view, policymakers caught in a complex and tension-filled situation in which the outcome carries potentially great personal and national consequences themselves often display a fuzzy, inchoate, or even shifting definition of their interests and goals.

An international history that asks us to interpret a crisis in terms of its multiple participants compounds the problem both of extracting a stable meaning out of a highly dynamic, interactive process and of marshaling the skills to follow the complex lines of perception and action specific to each of the participants in a crisis. Only when all of the parties involved are combined to achieve a rounded picture are these difficulties most fully apparent. It is then that we are forcefully reminded of how uneven and

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5 This is a conclusion to which I have been drawn by recent scholarly accounts of the Korean War by Burton I. Kaufman, The Korean War: Challenges in Crisis, Credibility, and Command (Philadelphia, 1986); Callum A. MacDonald, Korea: The War before Vietnam (New York, 1986); and Rosemary Foot, The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict (Ithaca, 1985), and by my own work on "Beijing and the Korean Crisis, June 1950–June 1951" (unpublished m.s.). This conclusion is also developed in a somewhat different context by Leon V. Sigal, Fighting to a Finish: The Politics of War Termination in the United States and Japan, 1945 (Ithaca, 1988); and by Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," World Politics 31 (October 1978): 61–72.
discrepant is the evidence from which we work, how thick the fog of uncertainty was as each side tried to impose an artificial clarity on the outlook of the other, and how deep confusion and misperception could become as the information on which estimates were made lagged behind the evolving thinking and changing stances of the other side.

In the main, historically grounded crisis studies by political scientists proceed at the price of ignoring differences of interpretation over U.S. policy and by excluding the international dimensions as if they were only incidental rather than essential to understanding and evaluating policymakers in crisis. This point is strikingly evident in Cold War crises such as Korea (1950), Vietnam (1954), and Cuba (1962). Not only is there a marked ambiguity even in the fairly full American record, an ambiguity that gives rise to significantly different historical interpretations, but there is also the even more daunting problem of confronting limited evidence about Washington's antagonists that in any case must be read across a substantial cultural divide. But even crises of an earlier era for which evidence is full and where the chief actors and their present-day interpreters operate within roughly the same cultural framework pose sobering difficulties. For example, the commendable effort by political scientists to draw theoretical and policy implications from the outbreak of World War I has precipitated a debate over interpretation of the sort all too familiar to historians. Any effort to build theory on these cases and others like them requires an enormous leap of faith.

Although it might be more convenient to think of a crisis in terms of a game of chess or a fencing match, other analogies might be more appropriate, particularly analogies that allow for less transparency and rule-bound behavior than international relations theorists would like. For example, participants in a crisis might be thought of as creators of narratives. In the context of crisis each party constructs narratives that account for the behavior of the other side, and these narratives carry "truths" that provide the basis for action, however distant those truths may be from the confusion, mixed motives, and changing calculations that in reality characterize the behavior of the other side as it writes, revises, and acts on its own narrative. Viewed internationally, a crisis is made up of narratives that seldom overlap, or for that matter even converge, in a way that puts all parties in the same narrative framework. Rather, the distinct narratives intertwine, and as they do, each narrator appropriates narrative fragments from the others, prompting in turn the revision or extension of the original narrative.

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7 These reflections were stimulated by the discussions at the March 1990 Quail Roost conference, sponsored by the Triangle Universities Security Seminar, that included treatment of Korea by myself, Vietnam by George Herring, and Cuba by Ole Holsti.

Thinking of policymakers as narrators may help us see more clearly the many unpredictable twists a crisis (like a piece of fiction) may take. And thinking of a crisis as the interweaving of evolving narratives spun out by each of the major participants in the crisis underlines the complexity of the phenomenon that we struggle to pin down.

How might international history influence the way we teach and what we teach? This concern is most pressing at the graduate level, where we recruit, train, and place the next generation of diplomatic historians. At this level the need for internationalization collides with long-established practices within the historical profession and with the insularity of American education and culture. Those of an international persuasion must work to break down or circumvent these formidable barriers to a more expansive conception of the field.

Initially, there is the difficulty in recruiting graduate students able to do international history. Incoming students, particularly in American history, have ill-developed language skills and limited sensitivity to foreign cultures. For those with limited background and preparation, the immersion in American history even if leavened by a second field requirement does little to change the initial cultural parochialism. Similarly, language skills do not come easily, especially for someone already in his or her twenties and already under the normal pressures of professional training. Departmental committees examining graduate applications need to understand the importance of language skills in building an internationally oriented program and to give language skills and foreign residence more weight than might normally be the case for applicants in U.S. history.

Language skills are especially critical, for they open the door to cultural understanding, not to mention historical evidence. We should do more recruiting with those skills in mind. If graduate students in American history currently constitute a less-than-promising pool of recruits, there are other groups to which we can turn. We ought to make clear to able undergraduates interested in international affairs the importance of language training (ideally some of it in-country) and to steer some of the best into graduate education. Within our own graduate programs we ought to keep our eyes open for students outside American history who already have established language competence and whose research interests link their basic field to U.S. foreign relations. Much can be gained by working with a colleague sympathetic to the international approach in order to assure well-rounded training and good thesis direction for these students. We must also look abroad to attract to our programs well-trained students who command not only English but in addition their own mother tongues (and often one or two others to boot). Having an international network of colleagues who know our graduate departments and upon whose judgment we can rely does much to facilitate this process. Some recruits may eventually return home, adding further to the international network, while others may stay, attracted by the better opportunities and working conditions that prevail in American higher education.

Further obstacles to appropriately international training often crop up along the way. Faculty who strongly identify with the history of a particular
country may find transnational training and research unsettling. Faculty mentors may resist having their students stray into international topics out of fear that their regional identity or country specialization will be blurred and their career prospects diminished, while departmental regulations often reflect and perpetuate the balkanization of departments (mirroring the profession as a whole) into national or regional kingdoms that do not invite crossovers. International training and research is also exceedingly costly for the institution, not to mention time consuming for the students. Aside from the costs of language programs and course work on campus, exploratory research abroad takes money. The dissertation, once formulated, requires good library resources in the relevant languages and extensive traveling to archives foreign as well as domestic.

A final obstacle appears in the form of a placement process still largely organized along national lines. The doubts of mentors noted above often boil down to a justifiable concern over how or whether their charges will be able to accommodate to the requirements of this kind of job market. Thus, our exceptionally talented and bold student, having struggled successfully to gain competence as an international historian, may have to reconvert into an American historian, whose claims to professional standing will depend substantially not on the mastery of affairs beyond the water's edge but on the command of policy formulated in Washington. There are signs, however, that this field bias, which puts a premium on the study of American perceptions, institutions, and official actions and devalues the foreign perspective and reaction, may be eroding. One of the most encouraging is the decision by search committees to use with increasing frequency the phrase "the history of the United States and the world" or even "international history." This terminological shift may reflect an openness to change in some departments that gives the lie to some of my more pessimistic characterizations above. Obtaining a position does not, however, mark the end of the struggle for our young international historian. There remains the career-long task, particularly acute during the pretenure years, to maintain language fluency, keep up to date in several distinct historical literatures, and stay in touch with the changing interests of often quite distinct scholarly audiences.

It is important not to forget our undergraduate charges as we seek to incorporate international insights into the curriculum. They confront us with daunting pedagogical challenges, the dimensions of which have become clearer for me as I have taught two different kinds of international courses over the last few years.

One course has dealt with the post-1945 world. It raises difficult questions about what my American students should know about their world and how prominently the American experience in it—as opposed to the experience of other peoples—should be featured. Once some defensible balance is struck, there remains the formidable task of selecting from an astonishing range of global topics those worthy of more detailed treatment. And beyond that, the literature on those topics—a literature embracing such diverse issues as peasant mobilization and capital investment—takes time to master and considerable pains to convey to students, especially when this
course may be their first as well as their last systematic classroom exposure to the contemporary world.9

My other international course, a more conventional treatment of the history of U.S. foreign policy, has proven daunting in another way: To find the space and the means to introduce a global dimension without slighting the essential focus on the United States. In an effort to internationalize this upper-level course, I have been experimenting with different ways of exploring international crises with the hope of breaking down often thin and stereotypical views of foreign powers and simple, unilateralist conceptions of U.S. foreign policy. The device on which I have come increasingly to rely is the use of foreign documents placed alongside American policy documents combined in a course pack of my own devising. Students are exposed to contemporary German and British commentary on the U.S. policy of neutrality between 1914 and 1917 along with a sampling of the standard Wilsoniana. When we reach the eve of Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt and Cordell Hull must share the spotlight with Japanese policymakers locked in debate in Tokyo. Vietnam provides an opportunity to add the voices of Vietnamese peasants and Ho Chi Minh to those of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and their advisers. The Iran crisis of 1979 sets Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini articulating his world view against President Jimmy Carter struggling within his. In general this documentary exposure is far more effective than any secondary account or lecture alone can be in driving home the point that the world is not transparent, uniform, or simple, and that as a result perceiving international "realities" and making moral judgments are both more difficult than previously imagined.

To help us toward a more international perspective in the classroom, a wide variety of experiments is needed, keyed to the diversity of the institutions in which we teach and to our own interests as instructors. We also need appropriately international teaching resources, not least the basic texts. Here in the classroom as in our research, diplomatic historians can profit from collaborative efforts and from the sharing on panels, at conferences, and in journal essays of our classroom successes, failures, and perplexities.

How might the move toward a more international diplomatic history reshape the themes and lessons conveyed to the broader public and to policy-oriented scholars who turn to us for historical perspective? Of all of the big issues that the new, more international diplomatic history raises, none bears as much potential political dynamite as the problem of evaluating the perceptiveness, immediate impact, long-range consequences, and overall efficacy of U.S. policy. To judge from work in international history that has had an especially catalytic effect on the field, one dominant theme may well turn out to be that of unrealized goals and unintended consequences. In developing the gap between the desired or intended goal of policy and the actual results, the new diplomatic history may corrode the faith in

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9 See the rationale and syllabus for such a course in Post World War II International Relations As a Component of General Education in American Colleges and Universities (Washington, 1989), a pamphlet prepared by the Atlantic Council of the United States.
instrumental rationality that informs much of the literature, not least works aspiring to the status of policy science. A more internationalist diplomatic history may prove less a source of lessons for activist policymakers than a repository of cautionary tales.

On the most obvious level the new diplomatic history will highlight the fundamental perceptual problem plaguing policymakers. Perceptions, which serve as the basis for policy, are profoundly conditioned by cultural values. In the case of relations between markedly different countries and peoples, those perceptions will do more to obscure than to illuminate the beliefs and behavior of the other. Hard-won understanding of other cultures has repeatedly underlined the gap between what policymakers thought they saw and the reality at least as scholars can today reconstruct it. Although we may think we live in a global village, its inhabitants still hold sharply divergent and surprisingly tenacious world views. Studies done under the influence of the international approach are likely to make us more sensitive to the pitfalls lying in the way of those seeking to make clear and accurate policy assessments. Policymakers, themselves culturally conditioned and carriers of unexamined ideological biases, struggle against long odds to understand a diverse, indeed bewilderingly complex world. That realization should give added weight to the voices of caution in policy discussions.

The new, more international diplomatic history is likely to strengthen the theme of limits in a second related way. Policymakers not only suffer from serious misperceptions; they are surrounded and buffeted by social and economic forces that they do not easily control. As the new diplomatic history makes room for the economic and social actors, the limits on the leaders of states will become clearer. Their world is no more simple than it is transparent. Current policy toward Latin America, for example, seeks control of immigration, drugs, and political unrest, and in doing so it flies in the face of earlier experiences in which the American state has struggled with only limited success to master the pushes and pulls that move migrants, to control “illegal substances,” and to “pacify” revolutionary discontents. Seen in this light, policymaking appears the sometimes tragic attempt to alter or deny forces beyond the policymaker’s command.

International history has had much to make of the foreign policy muddle both here and abroad—of the misguided programs of cultural transformation and the recurrent patterns of cultural misperception. Those themes were an especially notable feature of the American approach to the developing world where our containment policy suffered the worst setbacks (as, for example, in China, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Cuba, and Iran). Those themes remain germane even as the Cold War gives way to the drug war in such countries as Panama, Peru, and Colombia, to the hopes for the rise of “free” economic and political systems in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, to the enthusiasm for “democracy” and “human rights” in China, and to the battle against a “fanatic” aggressor in the Middle East threatening “tolerably-priced” oil.

This increased sensitivity to cultural differences and to nonstate actors provides a natural entrée to a more comparative perspective on U.S. foreign relations. This perspective reveals how policymaking differs fundamentally
from country to country and how social and economic actors challenge state control of transnational activities in a variety of different settings. This comparative impulse is likely to serve as an antidote to the tendency to see the United States as a special case, thus reducing the temptation to picture American dealings with the world as either unusually blundering and shamefully depraved or as a heroic story of good intentions and sometimes magnificent achievements. Because comparative work should make it clearer that the burdens, dilemmas, and constraints under which the United States has labored are weights that other countries have also felt, such work may thus help us argue for a less chauvinistic and more sophisticated appraisal of our nation's conduct.

But if our more international orientation may convey these various themes, only a Pollyanna or a Pangloss would be confident that policymakers and the public will listen to, not to mention accept, them. Jeffrey Race's tale of his frustrated and frustrating effort in 1971 to brief Pentagon officials on Long An province bears reading and remembering. Race offered insights on the war in the Vietnamese countryside that in retrospect seem essential, yet the officials refused to listen to a line of argument that undercut the culture-bound premises of policy. Scholars may speak truth to power, but power may not want to hear. As bearers of an unsettling message, we will need to be explicit and compelling about why an international perspective is an important one for Americans to cultivate. And more than ever we will need to pay attention to good clear writing that synthesizes some of the global issues important to an understanding of the American place in the world and to the lives of real people here as well as abroad. Narrow monographs written for a small group of fellow specialists are essential building blocks for public education but not sufficient if we are to help internationalist sensibilities take hold outside the academy.

As diplomatic historians come increasingly to agree on the importance of an international dimension within the field and to cultivate a more international approach in all facets of our scholarly lives, we may well find ourselves moving beyond field renewal to an enhanced influence within the profession. By expanding our perspective and adding to our intellectual range, we will be raising the prestige of diplomatic history in a historical discipline now fragmented into narrow specialties. It would be a pleasant irony indeed if it were to turn out that diplomatic history, once derided as the most narrow and insular of the historical fields, were to emerge in its new guise as one of the broadest and most interpretive, as an arena in which systemic change could be discussed, broad syntheses attempted, and comparative issues pursued—all with important implications for policymakers and the public at large.