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**John A. Thompson. *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role.*** Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4789-1 (hardcover, \$29.95).

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## Contents

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Introduction by Melvyn P. Leffler, University of Virginia .....	2
Review by Jerald A. Combs, San Francisco State University, Emeritus .....	5
Review by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University, Emeritus.....	10
Review by James H. Lebovic, George Washington University.....	17
Author's Response by John A. Thompson, University of Cambridge, Emeritus .....	20

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**Introduction by Melvyn P. Leffler, University of Virginia**

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John Thompson has been thinking deeply about American politics and foreign policy for almost fifty years. Previously, he has written luminously about the Progressive era and Woodrow Wilson. Now, he has integrated the conclusions of several important articles that he has written over the years and congealed his thinking about the motivations undergirding America's assumption of global responsibilities.

The three commentators agree that his book is stimulating and provocative. Thompson engages many of the most central questions in the history of American foreign relations: Why did the United States go to war in 1898? Why did it enter World War I? Why did the country jettison isolationism and become embroiled in World War II? Why did it decide to contain the power of the Soviet Union and pursue policies of containment for two generations?

Addressing these questions, he interrogates the conclusions of generations of realist and revisionist scholars, and finds them wanting. With clarity, wisdom, and cleverness, he argues that neither strategic nor economic factors have motivated the most crucial decisions of officials. Neither perceptions of threat nor fears of overproduction have impelled the United States to incur "the costs and risks of full-scale participation in world politics" (23). What has motivated American policy, Thompson argues, has been a sense of power, a sense of the country's immense capabilities to create a more benign world, and a feeling of responsibility "to promote 'public goods' beyond its own narrow interests" (281).

This sense of power and responsibility, claims Thompson, arose over many decades. He wants to explain a process, and he does so by examining critical moments of decision-making. In each of these moments, he explores the evolution of public opinion. "In the American system," Thompson stresses, "public debate matters because it shapes the context within which elected politicians . . . make their decisions" (23). Over time, Americans "at all levels were very conscious of their nation's great potential power . . . and this affected their views and attitudes in several ways." Power inspired confidence that the United States could achieve ambitious goals and power nurtured a "sense of responsibility." If the United States could act, yet failed to do so, its inaction "would be as consequential as action -- and, in some circumstances, morally culpable" (24).

The three reviewers tackle Thompson's themes with a critical eye. They know he has written a very important volume, but they are not convinced by his analysis. Jerald Combs thinks that Thompson is trying to say that ideals played a decisive role, not power. He also thinks that Thompson understates the role of national security. Nonetheless, Combs acknowledges that Thompson offers a "taxonomy of intervention" that is stimulating and important. Thompson wrestles with the relative importance of economic motives, strategic threats, ideals, and power. This taxonomy, Combs concludes, forces us to think deeply about critical interventions abroad when the costs were likely to be high. However, Combs also would have liked Thompson to reflect more about the course of U.S. expansion when the costs were low, for example, U.S. expansion into Latin America.

Lloyd Gardner is not convinced that power explains the course of U.S. foreign policy. Politicians and commentators, says Gardner, sometimes used idealistic rhetoric, but often that rhetoric was purposefully devised to conceal their real motives. Citing key figures like Alfred Thayer Mahan, Dean Acheson, and John J. McCloy, Gardner reiterates arguments he has made before about the centrality of property, the importance of interests, and the desire to control the trajectory of radical revolutions abroad. He notes that policymakers always want to garner support for their policies; that support is most forthcoming when they skillfully

combine interests and ideals in their rhetoric. But whatever their rhetoric, Gardner stresses that officials, especially in the late 1930s and 1940s, possessed real fears, well founded fears, that developments abroad might impel a garrison state at home. Gardner thinks that Thompson takes too much of a retrospective approach and trifles with these fears – fears that were real, in Gardner’s opinion – and fears that had consequences. “The American ‘empire,’ he concludes, “was not created in a fit of absent-mindedness.”

James Lebovic agrees that Thompson has given us much to think about. The book, Lebovic stresses, is both nuanced and detailed, rich in scope and ambition, infused with insightful and stimulating arguments. Yet Lebovic sees conceptual weaknesses and flawed thinking in Thompson’s approach. Lebovic does not feel that Thompson satisfactorily deals with the sources of “consciousness” of American power. He wants a deeper explanation of why Americans came to have a “sense of responsibility.” Lebovic believes that perceptions of threat actually undergird U.S. behavior. He also thinks that Thompson does not sufficiently illuminate how and why U.S. leaders catalyzed a sense of vulnerability among Americans.

The criticisms aside, all the reviewers believe that Thompson has written a provocative, thoughtful overview of U.S. foreign policy from the 1890s to the 1950s. In a non-polemical manner, Thompson vividly outlines many shortcomings in the realist and revisionist critiques of American foreign policy. He cogently and skillfully reviews the literature, raises the level of debate, and offers a wise and thoughtful analysis of his own. If we all agreed, it would stifle future research and constructive dialogue. So, let us celebrate our differences when they engender wise and probing reflection about our foreign policy past and future.

#### Participants:

**John A. Thompson** gained his B.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge where he is now Emeritus Reader in American History and an Emeritus Fellow of St Catharine’s College. His original research interest was progressivism but in recent decades he has switched his attention to the history of U.S. foreign policy and how it has been interpreted. His previous publications include *Progressivism* (Durham, UK, 1979), *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), *Woodrow Wilson* (London: Longman, 2002) and many articles in a variety of journals.

**Melvyn P. Leffler** is Edward Stettinius Professor of American History at The University of Virginia and a Faculty Fellow at UVA’s Miller Center. He is the author of several books on the Cold War and on U.S. relations with Europe, including *For the Soul of Mankind* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007) and *A Preponderance of Power* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993). In 2010, he and Odd Arne Westad co-edited the three volume *Cambridge History of the Cold War*. Most recently, he is the co-editor, along with Will Hitchcock and Jeff Legro, of *Shaper Nations: Strategies for a Changing World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016). He is now working on the policies of the George W. Bush administration.

**Jerald A. Combs** (Ph.D., UCLA, 1964) is Professor of History Emeritus at San Francisco State University and continuing to consult there as Officer of International Articulation. He is the author of *The Jay Treaty: Political Battleground of the Founding Fathers* (University of California Press, 1970); *American Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretations* (University of California Press, 1983), and *The History of American Foreign Policy* (4th ed., M.E. Sharpe, 2012).

**Lloyd Gardner** is Charles and Mary Beard Professor Emeritus of Rutgers University. The author of over fifteen books, including *The War on Leakers: National Security and Democracy from Eugene Debs to Edward Snowden*, he is a past president of SHAFR.

**James H. Lebovic** is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University. He has published widely on defense policy, deterrence strategy, military budgets and procurement, foreign aid, democracy and human rights, and international conflict. He is the author of five books including *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Johns Hopkins University, 2013), *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Johns Hopkins University, 2010), and *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11* (Routledge, 2007).

**Review by Jerald A. Combs, San Francisco State University, Emeritus**

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Although the title of John Thompson's erudite and provocative book emphasizes the role of power and America's sense of that power in creating the nation's global role from the 1890s to the present, that is not the most consequential of the arguments Thompson makes about the motivations for U.S. foreign policy. After all, who could argue against the idea that America's growing power to intervene overseas, along with the consciousness of that power among America's leaders and people, were crucial to the nation's role in the war with Spain, the acquisition of colonies, the interventions in World War I and World War II, and the ensuing Cold War. The real and more controversial thrust of Thompson's argument is that ideals played a more important role in America's foreign policy than allowed by those historians and political scientists who emphasize security or economic motives.

This is not immediately obvious in the introductory portion of the book. For there he insists that none of America's presumed motivations—power, security, economics, or missionary idealism—are adequate in themselves to explain America's adoption of a global role. Thompson's demonstration of the limitations of these motives, especially security and economics, is the most important contribution of this book.

Thompson argues that despite Realist assertions that strong nations will inevitably flow into vacuums of power, the growth of American power following the industrial revolution is not sufficient to explain American expansion. These arguments by scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Michael Mandelbaum, Kenneth Waltz, and John Mearsheimer underestimate the obstacles to expansion posed by the costs of wielding power.<sup>1</sup> While the growth of American power surely lessened the relative expense of the United States' major interventions, the costs of those interventions still have been substantial in terms of lives and treasure, and those resources could have been spent on improving the quality of domestic life. Therefore, Americans in those situations had to perceive that certain foreign policy goals outweighed the desire for domestic comfort.

Realists and many others would argue that if power itself is insufficient to explain America's major interventions, then national security interests have or should have been sufficient. But Thompson insists that the only national security goal for which Americans have been willing to sacrifice large-scale casualties and resources is defense against a serious threat to the homeland, and none of the crises the United States has faced in the modern era posed such a threat. "Completely outranking all other states in the basic sinews of power while at the same time enjoying a quite exceptional degree of security from the danger of serious external attack, the United States has been largely free from the systemic pressures emphasized in some versions of Realist theory" (xi). Thompson rejects the Realist argument that America's national security depended on intervening to prevent a hostile power from acquiring the resources of the entire European or Asian continent. He argues that an amphibious transoceanic invasion was simply not possible under modern conditions and it is unlikely that it would have been attempted. He also rejects the Realist argument that even if the United States were capable of deterring or defeating an attack from a European or Asian hegemon,

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); Michael Mandelbaum, *The Fate of Nations: The Search for National Security in the nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

the price would be exorbitant and require that the nation become a ‘garrison state.’ The price of deterrence, he says, would be no more than it already is for maintaining American power abroad.

While Thompson questions whether the nation’s security “*really* depended on its foreign policy commitments,” he admits that if American leaders and public opinion thought it did, security might indeed have been determinant in the nation’s major interventions. (23) Thus, this book is essentially about public opinion—the sense of national security as well as the sense of power—and Thompson concludes that the sense of national security on the part of the American public and its leaders is still insufficient to explain America’s major interventions. Some American leaders may have gone to war with Spain in order to expand U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere and Asia and to prevent rivals from acquiring bases there, but it was public anger at Spanish actions and sympathy for Cuba rather than threats to national security that brought public support for war, Admiral George Dewey’s unexpected victory in Manila that brought temporary support for keeping the Philippines as a colony, and the waning of that public enthusiasm that began the oscillation between activism and retreat that marked American foreign policy for most of the twentieth century.

At the time of American intervention in World War I, there was little fear that Germany would win the war and no fear at all that Germany could threaten the U.S. homeland even if it did win. The rejection of the League of Nations and the tide of opinion flowing against foreign involvements in the 1920s and 30s showed that while Americans remained confident of their power, they saw no clear and compelling security interest that would justify the costs of a major intervention. Even America’s entry into World War II “cannot be accounted for simply by fears for America’s own physical safety” (155). Public opinion was ready to build up America’s own military defenses, but President Franklin Roosevelt’s actions risking entry into a foreign war were much more controversial. Even when Germany seemed on the brink of conquering Great Britain and then attacked deep into the Soviet Union, neither Roosevelt nor public opinion were ready to declare war. By the time the United States actually did come into the war, according to Thompson, “it was evident that Hitler’s attempt to overcome Russia had not succeeded and thus that there was no longer any real possibility of his being able to bring the resources of a conquered continent to bear upon the United States” (153-154) I am not sure that in December 1941 it was quite so clear that Germany’s invasion of Russia would fail.

Even in the Cold War, Thompson argues that national security concerns were not adequate to explain the growing American commitment to intervention abroad. According to Thompson, American leaders knew that the Soviets posed no threat to the homeland. No cross oceanic invasion was possible in a nuclear era. America’s nuclear superiority throughout the 1950s and parity in later years deterred a nuclear strike on the homeland. Moreover, the Soviets had no intention of invading Western Europe: as Thompson argues, “the extent to which the defense of the nation’s territory and the preservation of its core values really depended on western Europe’s not falling under the domination of a hostile power was, then, neither self-evident nor uncontested. Moreover, the danger of this situation arising was agreed not to be imminent and was seen by many as very remote. In these circumstances, fear for America’s own security hardly seems to provide a sufficient explanation for the commitments made to promote the region’s recovery and to ensure its defense” (252).

If Realist contentions that national security motivated America’s major overseas interventions are inadequate, according to Thompson, so too are the Revisionist arguments that the United States was motivated by economic interests abroad. Whether those arguments came in the general form of an insistence that the nation’s prosperity had grown dependent on overseas economic interests, or the idea of Charles Beard that

influential elites were dependent on the international economic order, or the theory of William Appleman Williams that America's capitalistic political economy produced the ideology of an Open Door World regardless of its actual economic importance, all founded on the fact that overseas economic interests were not important to America's domestic prosperity. Moreover, it was difficult to establish a link between those economic interests and American diplomatic actions. Exports actually declined in importance between the nineteenth century, when they amounted to 6-7 percent of GNP, to the 1950s and 1960s when they were 4-5 percent of GNP and when 25 percent of those exports went to Canada and Mexico (16-17).

Thompson disdains the argument that a glut of U.S. products in the 1890s lay behind the Spanish-American War on the grounds that exports were such a small portion of the economy and most Americans were unwilling to give up anything in the home market to win overseas opportunities, as demonstrated by the U.S. high tariff policy. Neither did the nation's economic interests explain President Woodrow Wilson's confrontational approach to Germany prior to World War I, since trade would have continued in British ships even if Wilson had allowed German submarine warfare to drive American ships from trade with the allies. While he concedes that Revisionists are correct to argue that the United States was far from isolationist in the 1920s and 30s, Americans were still unwilling to pay any significant price to achieve foreign policy objectives. Exports were still only 5.3 percent of GNP, down from 6.8 percent in the fifty years before World War I. Europe was the primary market abroad, but the continent's share of U.S. exports declined from 75 percent to 50 percent between 1900 and 1920 and continued to fall. Capital outflows increased greatly, but were still only 3 percent of gross capital formation and 0.5 percent of GNP. America's primary overseas economic interests were in the imports of oil and rubber, but those occasioned little foreign policy activity (121-122). Instead, this period saw the imposition of extremely high tariffs to protect the home market at the cost of overseas markets; "indeed, contrary to the premise of the Open Door interpretation, a brutally materialist approach to understanding American foreign policy does more to explain its limited nature in this period than the extent to which the scope of its involvement, and even its commitments, broadened" (131).

Revisionists argue that World War II was fought to keep foreign markets open for surplus American commodities and thereby to preserve entrepreneurial freedom in the United States, and cite many contemporary statements to demonstrate this.<sup>2</sup> Thompson concedes that these economic issues were important, but points out that U.S. exports had declined to 3 percent of GNP during the Depression and that "the low aggregate level of dependence on overseas markets does make somewhat implausible that claim that an Axis victory would have compelled the United States to change the whole nature of its economic system" (178). More significant was the American fear of the loss of strategic imports, although this mostly supposed the remote chance of losing South America and ignored the possibility of synthetic substitutes. Therefore, Thompson concludes, there is no reason to elevate economic reasons over any other reasons for America's entry into World War II.

As for the Cold War up until 1952, the terminal date of Thompson's analysis, he again argues that economic interests were too meager to explain America's adoption of its global role. For instance, exports to Europe were only 2-4 percent of GNP in 1947 and there was plenty of home demand. Loans to Europe were only 3 percent of Wall Street banks total lending. Moreover, Wall Street was split over the mechanisms of U.S. economic influence abroad, favoring the World Bank but opposing the International Monetary Fund. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick J. Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler: America's Entry into World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1987).

he says, America's economic thrust in the Cold War was inspired by the New Deal rather than financier capitalism; diplomatic objectives of a multilateral trading system that would bring peace and prosperity along with less spending on armaments shaped economic objectives and not the other way around (220, 252).

If power, national security, and economics are insufficient explanations for American interventionism, so too is what Thompson terms "missionary idealism." He agrees that American nationalism is based not on ethnicity, language, or religion but rather on the nation's political system and the values it embodies, which Americans hoped would spread to the rest of the world. But, Thompson argues, democratic ideology has as often been invoked to reduce as to expand American intervention, even when U.S. power made intervention possible. Moreover, presidents and policymakers in pursuit of expansive goals abroad had to link the ideals of spreading freedom abroad with concrete security and economic objectives or suffer political defeat at the hands of an unconvinced public opinion, as happened to Woodrow Wilson and later to President Jimmy Carter. Thompson argues that "studies of public opinion indicate that democracy promotion, although widely approved of as a general goal of U.S. foreign policy, is regarded by the majority as less important than America's own security or economic interests and as not, in itself, justification for enterprises involving significant human or financial costs" (20-21).

Thus, one might imagine, Thompson would conclude that none of the factors—power, security, economic, or the missionary ideal of democracy promotion abroad—could alone account for America's adoption of a global role and that the answer would be some combination of those factors. But note Thompson's own conclusion: "The nation's preeminent economic strength and financial resources have endowed [the United States] with the means to play [a strenuous and wide-ranging global role], but possession of the capacity is not sufficient in itself to explain its exercise, especially given the costs involved. Nor is the undertaking of this global role easily explicable in terms of a need to safeguard the nation's core interests of safety from external attack and economic prosperity" (22). He makes no mention of missionary idealism or democracy promotion as one of the insufficient answers. Instead, he goes on to postulate that an additional factor helps explain America's adoption of a global role—the desire for a benign international order, one sympathetic to the United States and its values of democracy, liberty, and free enterprise. That desire, he argues, was especially aimed at the continent of Europe, for which Americans generally have had great sympathies as the continent of origin for much of the population and as a fellow advocate of the ideals of Western Civilization. At other times and to a lesser extent, he says, the United States sought to extend that benign international environment to the entire world, although Americans retreated from that faster and more easily than from their interventions in Europe. And so Thompson brings idealism back into the equation in defiance of the Realists and economic Revisionists whom he regards as disdaining them in favor of the more concrete interests.

Having added idealism back into the mix of factors necessary to bring Americans to overcome their historic reluctance to engage in foreign affairs and bear the major costs of seriously intervening abroad, Thompson creates a taxonomy of intervention. First, he argues that there had to be a crisis, a conflict abroad that posed a sense of threat to Americans and roused their moral and patriotic outrage. The atrocities in Cuba and the sinking of the *Maine* served that purpose in the 1890s, submarine warfare and the Zimmermann note in World War I, the viciousness of the Nazi regime and the apparently limitless expansionism of Germany and Japan in World War II, and the hatred of Communism in the Cold War. Second, since these crises did not rise to the level of threatening America's core interests in security and prosperity, America had to have a sense of power in order for it to believe that it could act on the basis of sentiments and values, win the war, and create a more benign international environment. Thus, American ideals (although Thompson admits that these American values included a less noble "imperial mentality" that desired to hold sway in the world)



played a significant part in America's interventionist phases. On the other hand, Thompson writes, the desire for a benign world order was never enough to produce the will to exercise American power in a substantial way in the absence of a crisis or direct attack. It was instead a "luxury good" that could be pursued if the cost were low enough. He concludes that "the future of America's world role is likely to depend less on how much America's potential power continues to exceed that of any rival than on how far the demands of playing that role can compete with its domestic priorities" (283).

I find Thompson's argument persuasive in his insistence that the goal of a benign international environment, with all of its idealistic overtones, was a significant motivating factor in America's major interventions, and also that a desire for world order was not by itself enough to bring about intervention. But for all of his sophisticated analysis of the shortcomings of national security and economic motivations, his analysis of the role those concrete interests actually did play in America's major interventions sometimes seems murky. He so often discredits the salience of power and economics in particular situations that it is unclear just what importance they did have.

To my mind, the order of motivational magnitude he implies in his treatment of these issues undervalues the role of national security. His definition of national security as avoiding an invasion of the homeland is rather narrow. He concentrates on rational assessments of the danger of invasion without much concern for the irrational fears of attack that must have lurked in the minds of ordinary people during overseas crises, although it must be admitted that his study of public opinion does not seem to find many of those fears. He also specifically rejects Arnold Wolfers' argument that national security required overseas interventions because core values such as democracy and free enterprise would be difficult to sustain if they were confined to North America.<sup>3</sup> Thompson is correct that this stretches the definition of national security rather far, and perhaps it should be treated under the category of idealism. In any case, this nod to idealism, like the concept of 'soft power,' has become an important part of the Realist argument.

Finally, while Thompson's argument is largely persuasive with regard to the American motives for major interventions, it says little about American expansionism at times and in areas when the costs were low. What was the relative importance in American minds of the motives of power, security, economics, and ideals in the nation's policy toward Latin America in the early twentieth century and the Third World in later years. Thompson makes one casual reference to U.S. expansion in Latin America as low-cost intervention and notes that the idealistic drive for a benevolent world environment was less profound toward the Third World than toward a Western European order. But it would be fascinating to read his order of motivational magnitude in those areas, because it is clear from this book that Thompson has thought profoundly about such issues.

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold Wolfers, "The Goals of Foreign Policy," *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1962).

**Review by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University, Emeritus**

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No academic debate has been more fraught than the argument over American foreign policy. John Thompson summarizes the points made by “realists” and “revisionists,” and concludes that both schools have missed the obvious explanation: America went abroad because it had the power to do so. He readily agrees that the major component of that power was America’s economic strength, yet asserts that the United States did not go abroad because of economic imperatives or fears about the future, or out of concern for protecting the homeland from attack, though both provided a plausible rationale that could be used when policymakers rallied support among themselves, and reached out to garner public support. Behind it all was the overwhelming advantage the United States enjoyed among the nations of the world from the late nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century.

By the late nineteenth century the United States had overtaken the European powers in industrial output, and was moving still farther ahead by leaps and bounds. Protected economically by a vast home market that despite ups and downs depended hardly at all on exports to keep capitalism afloat, and militarily by a two-ocean defense perimeter, policymakers could pick and choose the terms and occasions for involvement in world affairs. The most influential thinker about these issues, Admiral William Thayer Mahan, might have had some differences of opinion with Thompson here, because he believed that the two-ocean defense perimeter was no longer a viable foundation for policymakers to rely upon. Instead, the age of imperialism promised an age of conflict over trade routes among the powers—a contest the United States could not avoid if it wished to maintain what Mahan’s friend, Brooks Adams, called, America’s Economic Supremacy.

Thompson retells the story of the events leading to the War of 1898 and its aftermath, so that is where the questions above also take on importance. While it was true that fears of a “glut” resulting from over-production were much talked about during the depression years of the 1890s, Thompson avers, the reality of over-production actually centered in agricultural areas, also hotbeds of protest. If there were a lasting serious concern, moreover, the nation would have heeded the calls for a lower tariff as the best way to increase foreign trade. Having noted these points Thompson rests his case. Yet these connections between agricultural unrest including large numbers of Democrats and Populists and concerns about trade with a free Cuba—as an example of a general question concerning future prospects for political stability, go unexplored. Instead, the connection suggested by Thompson centers in humanitarian concerns, a re-visiting of the first interpretations of the war in 1940s and 1950s textbooks.

The build-up in pressure for action to free Cuba from monarchical control, and open it up to American exports and investment, was part of a so-called ‘large policy’ to make the Caribbean ‘Mare Nostrum.’ Republican Illinois Representative Robert Hitt proposed a resolution that envisioned a war, if necessary, for example, to protect American interests, establish a government that would be the choice of the Cuban people, and perforce become a close ally of the United States. His resolution easily passed in the House, but in the Senate wise old Republican John Sherman insisted the wording had to be changed: it placed too much emphasis on economic considerations. It had to be placed “upon some higher ground,” said Sherman. Hitt’s

analysis was “in substance” true, but “it is better not always to say the truth. It is better not always to speak of money and property and property interests.”<sup>1</sup>

A bit more on this point should be said. The stakes in Cuba alone were hardly insignificant, and were estimated at \$50 million dollars. But beyond that, the pressure to intervene came from trade journals from all parts of the country and the economy, not just agricultural sectors. And the agricultural sectors were completely integrated into the whole under a rubric that was often used later, agribusiness. By this time agribusiness fit the textile industry, the food processing industry, and many other producers, all of whom subscribed to the glut theory.

Thompson readily agrees that by 1898 the pressure from various groups to intervene in the Cuban situation had become intense—fueled by public outrage at the brutal policies of Spanish authorities—a familiar prelude to concern about human rights violations in later American interventions. But even that was not enough. It took external events, he writes, to breach the final walls holding back American indignation, the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana harbor. One should ask, then, why was the *Maine* there? The guerrilla war in Cuba had become a threat to American lives and property on the island, and Hitt rose once again to demand American intervention on the grounds that Spain was clearly unable to protect foreign interests. That same day, January 18, 1898, the Illinois representative met with President William McKinley. A week later the Secretary of the Navy ordered the armored cruiser *Maine* to the harbor as an attempt, writes historian Walter LaFeber, “to discourage future outbreaks on the island” and to point up the inadequacy of Spanish efforts to calm down the island.<sup>2</sup>

There was never any thought of Cuban rebels as ‘allies,’ and they were denied a place at the surrender ceremony. American Cuban policy was, in the resulting mechanics of pacification, as in the Philippines, a struggle to control revolution. Thus the Platt Amendment settled Cuban affairs for more than fifty years, with about the same terms as the British protectorate over Egypt that finally broke down a few years before Castro’s victory in the Cuban Revolution.

The Cuban and Egyptian protectorates, moreover, were both premised on the need to protect canals, Suez and Panama, to insure protection of trade routes for all time—if possible. The argument that serious material interests were not primary considerations because those most affected were only a segment of the national economy (at the moment) presupposes, first, that policymakers were myopic, and, second, that costs and benefits are shared equally across the population like a flat line across a graph. Those interested in a particular policy always understand their environment and the need to invoke the ideals of the nation as part of a successful campaign. But policymakers did talk about real interests, not just about sentiments. There are always competing interests, after all, seeking to dominate the public discourse, and the private policy sessions where determinations are made. The winning side must put its arguments in terms of both national interests and ideals. Persuasion is the ultimate art of politics.

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<sup>1</sup> William Appleman Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: 1969), 388-9.

<sup>2</sup> LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca, 1963), 344.

The advantages that Americans enjoyed allowed, and even defined, the luxury of defending the ‘American way’ as a suitable prescription for economies and political disorder around the world. During the years covered in Thompson’s survey, the nation could play the lead role abroad at very little cost, and with minimal disruption of national life. The cost of lives lost in World Wars I and II were not insignificant, but the results of both wars—fought on “foreign soil”—only increased the range of American choices. True, but certainly the choices involved inescapable responsibilities as well.

The world situation at the end of the Great Depression and the outbreak of what would become World War II posed challenges at home and abroad of an altogether different magnitude. But, contends Thompson, these actions did not have much to do with implausible “consequences for America’s political economy,” resulting from a Nazi-dominated Europe (177).

Whatever the rhetoric, again the reality was that a world divided into two spheres would not make much difference to American foreign trade let alone the national economic welfare. Thompson argues that “exports to countries outside North America constituted less than 3 percent of the gross national product in the 1930s.” But, indeed, that was (a big) part of the problem. World trade had narrowed in the Great Depression, with nations scrambling to hold on to what they could with tools like Imperial Preference, currency manipulations like the German aski mark, and, finally, military action like Japan in Manchuria. As in the pre-1898 years, certain sectors of the economy might be hard hit: “but the low aggregate level of dependence on overseas markets does make somewhat implausible the claim that an Axis victory would have compelled the United States to change the whole nature of its economic system” (178). And if that is not enough, it is also the case that America’s economic power would have permitted it to bargain successfully with a triumphant Germany and its allies for the trade it did need to sustain a capitalist economy.

Policymakers did not just see the world in those terms, however. For one example, the New Deal provided subsidies to Pan American Airways in an effort to oust German and Italian inroads into Latin American countries via state-owned airlines. Labor leader John L. Lewis approved all the actions taken to keep Latin America free of German dominance, telling the 1939 CIO convention that the Good Neighbor policy needed to be “bulwarked with definite arrangements and facilities . . . to see that America has an equal break in the foreign markets of the world.” It was a question, said Lewis, of putting idle men back to work.<sup>3</sup>

The lessons of the post-World War I era were plain: a Deist-type of involvement, simply setting things in motion with loans, was not enough. But policymakers decided the costs of intervention were worth it, not because of a desire to exercise their ability to do so—but because the alternative was too grim to contemplate. The Depression decade had brought capitalism’s defenders face to face with the possibility of a permanent garrison state that promised still more infringements on private property, and the accompanying social structure that would make the New Deal ‘reforms’ seem light taps on the wrist. Even before the outbreak of the war, the 1937 recession raised the question of where the country was headed. At a cabinet meeting, President Franklin D. Roosevelt demanded that his advisers give him some answers, objecting that “I am sick and tired of being told by the Cabinet and everybody else for the last two weeks what’s the matter with the country and nobody suggests what I should do.” What the people wanted to know, protested Treasury

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<sup>3</sup> Lloyd C. Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* (Madison, 1964), 62-63, 126-7.

Secretary Henry Morgenthau, was: “Are we headed toward state Socialism or are we going to continue on a capitalistic basis?”<sup>4</sup>

Outside the White House that debate merged with the question of a third term for Roosevelt and government reach beyond the New Deal. Former President Herbert Hoover foresaw the end of American political freedoms if Roosevelt cast aside the example of all his forebears: “every dictator in the world was first elected by the people,” he declared.<sup>5</sup> People in those unfortunate countries willingly accepted servitude as a relief from unemployment, financial chaos, and general insecurity. Anticipating Roosevelt’s decision for a third term as a decision for war, he warned that liberty would perish in the United States if the nation became involved in the European war. A virtual dictatorship would ensue, one that could never be exchanged for free government.

Few went quite so far as the embittered man who lost to Roosevelt in 1932, but the question of whether going to war would destroy the American form of government was a pressing one. There were plenty of conservatives who said it would, and their arguments had to be answered. One of those who crafted an answer was Dean Acheson, a conservative Democrat who had returned from exile to aid the President in his quest for ingenious ways to help the British without repeating the ‘mistakes’ of the World War I war-debts imbroglio.

If Thompson’s thesis is right, the debate within the American elite did not reflect real conditions, but rather a grave misunderstanding not only of material matters as well as an exaggerated fear of the ideological challenges. Dean Acheson would not have agreed. Like John L. Lewis, he feared the consequences of idle men on the stability of the Republic. In a speech at Yale in November 1939, Acheson addressed an audience of alumni who might fear going to war under a New Deal banner, and turned the argument around. What the world faced, Acheson began, was not simply a war between European rivals, but a great upheaval that would see either that “we have come to the end of the American experiment,” or its fulfillment globally. The economic and political system of the nineteenth century could not be reestablished in anything approaching its old form. Then he listed the salient factors in the new reality:

Credits which were once extended by the financial centers of London no longer provide the means for the production of wealth in other countries....the vast free trade areas, which once furnished both a market of vast importance and a commodities exchange, no longer exist..... British naval power no longer can guarantee security of life and investment in distant parts of the earth and a localization of conflict nearer home. We can see, too that immigration to the United States is no longer a solution for surplus populations elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

These conditions, he went on, had set the stage for the appearance of the totalitarian state: “I am not saying that morals are a matter of economics, but, rather, that there is high authority for the belief that if we are not

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<sup>4</sup> John Morton Blum, *From the Morgenthau Diaries, Years of Crisis, 1928-1938* (Boston, 1959), 391-2.

<sup>5</sup> “Hoover Says War Would End Liberty; Cautions on Effects of Our Involvement,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1939.

<sup>6</sup> The speech is reprinted in, *Morning and Noon: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 267-75.

led into temptation we may better be delivered from evil.” The argument he developed, therefore, was not around the peril of a military invasion, but instead the consequences of the growing appeal of totalitarian solutions to problems that extended even to ‘this country.’ “Indications of the possibility have not been lacking,” Acheson continued. “It is expecting too much to believe that an angry or frightened people would not take it. Once that has been done in a thoroughgoing way and without shame, we have come to the end of the American experiment.”

Acheson turned Hoover’s fears of a super New Deal around 180 degrees. A super New Deal developing into state socialism was the likely result if the U.S. stayed out of the war—with no chance of determining what kind of peace would come afterwards. Also in November 1939, Treasury Secretary Morgenthau’s adviser, Harry Dexter White, who was not from the Eastern Establishment, wrote to his boss that it was true that in the economic life of some countries the “international part” plays a greater role than in others: “In virtually all countries,” however, he wrote, “the character of national or domestic life is greatly influenced – and in some cases dominated by the international economic phases of the national economy.”<sup>7</sup>

As worried Americans looked out on the world at war the dominant ‘gut’ attitude opposed involvement—especially sending soldiers to Europe—with bad memories of the Great War arguing for caution. Roosevelt left little to chance as he moved the nation to war footing. “I am worried,” he wrote to Henry L. Stimson the man he would soon name secretary of war, “both by ‘fifth column’ activities over here and also by the larger number of college student groups who are not only isolationists but completely pacifist.”<sup>8</sup> With such concerns foremost in his thinking, Roosevelt made carefully worded promises throughout the 1940 presidential campaign, culminating in an October 11, 1940 speech in Boston that brought the biggest cheers of the presidential year. He declared, ‘I have said this before, but I shall say it again, and again and again. Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars. They are going into training to form a force so strong that, by its very existence, it will keep the threat of war far away from our shores. The purpose of our defense is defense.’

The key phrase—both Roosevelt’s defenders and critics insist—is “into any foreign wars.” His speechwriter, Samuel Rosenman had wanted him to add a stronger phrase, “except in case of attack.” FDR smiled and replied, “If we’re attacked, it’s no longer a foreign war.”<sup>9</sup> Over the next several months Congress passed a series of measures including, of course, the ‘entangling’ Lend-Lease act that made active participation likely if not inevitable. Acheson, Harry Dexter White, and the new Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, never believed it was a foreign war anyway, and thought that the absence of American casualties that far was only a temporary situation.

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<sup>7</sup> White to Morgenthau, November 13, 1939, *The Papers of Harry Dexter White*, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

<sup>8</sup> FDR to Stimson, May 21, 1940, *The Papers of Henry L. Stimson*, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency* (New York, 2016), 233.

Stimson's chief assistant, the formidable Wall Street lawyer, John J. McCloy, who would later occupy key positions in the Cold War hierarchy as well as at Chase Manhattan, supplied his boss with numerous speech drafts as the campaign outside Congress gathered steam. In August 1941, around the time of the Atlantic Conference where British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Roosevelt drew up their first plans for the postwar world, McCloy sent Stimson his latest suggestions. If the Axis won the war, it would mean foreign trade would be preserved only by meeting German terms, while, even more important, the nation would be required to spend billions and billions on defense yearly, "all of which would lead to restrictions and the economic and governmental controls which we abhor. In short, the fruits of the economic gains which we have made in the last century would be lost .... It is a ghastly deceit to contend that we could preserve the United States as an island of free enterprise in a totalitarian world economy."<sup>10</sup>

But at the end of World War II, which was brought to a close with a vision of the apocalypse by the triumph of American technology at Hiroshima, who could doubt the achievements of science and positive thinking? President Harry S. Truman all but claimed that the 'bomb' was only possible in the United States: "it is doubtful if such another combination could be got together in the world. What has been done is the greatest achievement of organized science in history. It was done under pressure and without failure." Truman did not deny that scientists born in other countries had aided the U.S. military in developing this first weapon of mass destruction, but believed that it could only have been accomplished under such pressures of wartime in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Thompson does not quote Truman's boast, but he does cite poet and dramatist Archibald MacLeish's 1945 prediction that the United States now had "the abundant means to bring our boldest dreams to pass—to create for ourselves whatever world we have the courage to desire." (236) The national frenzy that ensued when the Soviet Union exploded its first bomb in 1949 suggests the ironic transience of such Golden-Age thinking. But it also suggests something very relevant to an evaluation of Thompson's thesis. Despite the public statements of Truman, MacLeish, and Acheson, they were in fact very worried at different times about American prospects abroad and the complicated relationship of achieving Wilson's dream of 'a world made safe for democracy' and the survival of the liberal capitalist state. At issue, it would seem, is whether those fears were justified.

Thompson argues that all the supposed fears listed by those he labels realists and revisionists were shown, in retrospect, to have been groundless. They were little more than phantoms cast up to persuade the nation to undertake its grand mission to the world, a world which needed America (and the *idea* of America) more than America needed the world. But instead of settling the issue, that raises other questions: without American help could liberal capitalism have survived the turmoil of the Great Depression, two world wars, and the breakdown of the *Pax Britannica*?

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<sup>10</sup> Draft, dated August, 1941, *Stimson Papers*.

<sup>11</sup> "Statement by the President of the United States," August 6, 1945, Press Release, Aben Ayers Papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri. No one has better explained the impact of the bomb on American thinking and the emergence of the imperial presidency than Garry Wills, *Bomb Power: The Modern Presidency and the National Security State* (New York: 2010).

There is a lot of second-guessing here, along with a persistent tendency to use a retrospective lens on policymakers' contentions, with the result that one is left feeling that these leaders were incredibly uninformed about their country's real needs. The challenge to liberal capitalism's Lockean underpinnings from the alien ideologies of Communism, Fascism, and Nazism, portended much more than a world of closed economies, as dangerous as that was.<sup>12</sup>

Bearing much of the cost for rebuilding Germany and Japan after World War II was part of it, even though, at times, this meant short-term sacrifice of American economic interests. The United States wound up spending billions and billions of dollars on defense after the Korean War, despite having a lead in nuclear weapons, but military Keynesianism turned out not to require the hated New-Deal statist solutions that had been so much on the minds of policymakers in the pre-World War II era. As future president Ronald Reagan put the American advantage another way in his 1950s advertising spots for General Electric, 'Progress is Our Most Important Product.'

In 1947 when the Marshall Plan was being considered, the State Department's containment doctrine author, George F. Kennan, wrote to Dean Acheson that it would be important to find out if the British planned to support American plans to the fullest. Would the Labour Party's plans for dismantling the empire, which involved a "further restriction of living standards and [an] increase in labor discipline," demonstrate a cooperative attitude? Ambassador Lewis Douglas conveyed this concern in conversations with Foreign Office officials. The Truman administration could improve its support in Congress, he told them, if they "made clear there would be no further nationalization of great industries in this country. This is a hint from a friend, and was in no way intended as interference in [Britain's] internal affairs."<sup>13</sup>

On the eve of Pearl Harbor, one of Roosevelt's original Brains Trusters, Adolf Berle, declared, "There is no need to fear. Rather, we shall have an opportunity to create the most brilliant economic epoch the U.S. has yet seen. It is entirely feasible to make the country at once more prosperous and more free than it has ever been. And ... without sacrificing any of the essential freedoms."<sup>14</sup> It was altogether fitting that Berle wrote this surprisingly confident prediction in a Henry Luce publication, *Fortune*, a sister to Luce's *Life*, whose "The American Century" issue of February 17, 1941, contended that the New Deal had failed to make the economy work in a closed economy, and the pressing matter was to make sure the world became an open path to prosperity—that was the promise *and* the challenge ahead. It was certainly the case, as Thompson reminds us, that the achievements of American capitalism had allowed American leaders to make their own history, and certainly more so than for any other country in this era, but not without calculation. The American 'empire' was not created in a fit of absent-mindedness.

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<sup>12</sup> For a good discussion of the influence of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke on American foreign policy elites see Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge, 2014), especially 190-6.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Lloyd C. Gardner, "Economic Foreign Policy and the Quest for Security," in Norman A. Graebner, ed., *The National Security: Its Theory and Practice, 1945-1960* (New York, 1986), 86.

<sup>14</sup> Berle, "And What Shall We Do Then?," *Fortune*, XXIV (October, 1941), 102 ff.



**Review by James H. Lebovic, George Washington University**

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In his provocative and informative book, John A. Thompson probes the twentieth-century origins of the U.S. rise to global prominence. He attributes the expanse and extent of the U.S. position in the world to what he terms a ‘sense of power,’ challenging claims that U.S. preeminence owes simply to the growth and global share of the U.S. economy and material resources, foreign threats to U.S. security, or U.S. economic interests. Drawing from a full range of sources, Thompson subjects rival accounts to close historical scrutiny. The result is a well-researched, thorough, and insightful volume, written with nuance and detail, despite its scope and ambition. The book is less sturdy, however, when assessed against standards of conceptual development, theoretical rigor, and evidence testing.

Thompson acknowledges, of course, that immense resource and productivity positioned the United States for a pivotal global role, as evidenced by the U.S. contribution of military aircraft, naval vessels, and vehicles to the Allied effort in World War II and the robust U.S. post-war economy. The surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, meant to disable the U.S. fleet, was strategically shortsighted, then, because it discounted the rapidity and strength with which the United States would overcome its material setback in the Pacific (for example, producing fourteen aircraft carriers and almost nine thousand naval vessels in the 1941-45 period) and ultimately press Japan, from the land, air, and sea, to surrender. But, for Thompson, no less important to explaining America’s rise in the world has been a general “consciousness” of U.S. power that “has also shaped the state of mind with which Americans have approached the choices they had to make” (xii).

In Thompson’s analysis, physical prowess is seemingly a necessary but insufficient condition for the U.S. rise to global prominence. It can explain the capability but not the will of the United States to expand and intensify its involvement in the international system. But Thompson’s analysis leads one to ask “from what does the all-important ‘sense of power’ derive?” The answer will tell whether Thompson truly offers a clear and independent explanation for the U.S. global role.

By implication, the sense of power does not follow directly—or indirectly—from U.S. material attributes; nor does it follow from security threats, ideology, or economic interest, the foils in Thompson’s analysis. The clearest statement of attribution appears in the first chapter of the book. Thompson notes that “Americans at all levels were very conscious of their nation’s great potential power...” which “engendered confidence in the ability of the United States to achieve ambitious foreign policy objectives – provided it made the necessary effort.” From this emerged “a sense of responsibility” (24). Unfortunately, endogeneity renders the casual logic problematic. If we assume, from the text, that consciousness of U.S. power is inevitable, given its enormity, then material power is actually doing all the heavy lifting in the explanation: material power explains consciousness of power, which explains confidence in power, which explains a sense of responsibility. The caveat is that confidence is predicated in the explanation on the United States making “the necessary effort.” Either we assume that such an effort is forthcoming automatically by virtue of a consciousness of power (which appears unlikely given the conditionality of the statement), assume that a global role is still possible for a United States, short on confidence (which appears unlikely given the book’s claims about the far-reaching impact of a U.S. sense of responsibility, which follows from confidence), or else we are left with an explanatory hole. The resulting confusion impugns the independent standing of Thompson’s argument. Simply put, if everything follows from U.S. power, his argument is more conventional than he recognizes. Indeed, U.S. global engagement appears to increase, in his telling, with the scale of U.S. economic resources.

Concerns about the origins of a sense of power aside, Thompson too easily rejects rival explanations of the evidence, though the ‘security threat’ emerges nonetheless as a frequent, and worthy, challenger in his assessments. Three main problems beset his efforts to discount threat as a source of U.S. behavior.

First, Thompson sets up less-than-fair fights, at times, when pitting his preferred explanation—a sense of power—against threat. When arguing that the U.S. proclivity toward global engagement, before, during, and after successive world wars increased when the threat was low, not high, Thompson supports his claims, at key points, by alluding to an actual threat when a ‘sense of threat,’ not the actual danger, would seem to have been the appropriate competitor. For example, Thompson concludes that Adolf Hitler’s failure to attempt a cross-channel invasion, which he links to a reduction in threat, boosted U.S. public support for helping England (174). Later, he asserts that “there are good reasons for doubting that a concern with national security in the most basic sense of protecting the American homeland from external attack provides an adequate explanation for the U.S. commitment to western Europe in the late 1940s—or even a major part of the explanation” for “in the first place, the posited danger was very remote” (248). He goes on to recognize that Russia had neither the will nor the capability to conquer Western Europe. More generally, in discounting threat as a source of U.S. behavior, Thompson acknowledges that, over the last century, the geography and material resources neutralized any conventional threat that foreign powers might have presented to the United States. If we assume that the United States was consistently shielded from threat, rendering threat a constant in the analysis, a sense of power—a variable—must emerge as the superior explanation for the changing U.S. global position.

Second, the fact that Thompson’s evidence suggests that perceived threat influenced public opinion is not explicitly acknowledged. Insofar as President Franklin D. Roosevelt had to conjure up a direct Axis threat to the U.S. mainland in order to bring the American people along, threat helps explain the public’s willingness to prepare and then enter the Second World War. A reduction in perceived threat, not a (reduced) sense of power, then explains U.S. post-World War II demobilization. The United States dramatically demobilized at the end of the war (U.S. troop levels were down almost 90 percent from their wartime levels) and neither the U.S. public nor its congressional representatives embraced the principle of stationing U.S. troops abroad for potential military contingencies. The North Atlantic Treaty was briefed to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with the assurance that it would not require U.S. ground forces in Europe and lost public support in U.S. polls that were couched to suggest a U.S. obligation to engage in war if necessary (250). If Americans were responding from a sense of power, would not it follow that they would not have turned inward? A sense of threat also explains the return, thereafter, to U.S. global prominence. As Thompson puts it, “the unique effectiveness of the Cold War in mobilizing national support for foreign policy enterprises arose from its combination of stark ideological conflict with existential security concerns” which President Harry S. Truman successfully harnessed by framing it as a direct physical challenge to U.S. security, “positing a future situation in which Soviet Russia, intent on world domination, gained control over so much of the rest of the world that it could overpower the United States” (271, 272). If a sense of power was behind the U.S. effort, would not it follow that Truman would not have had to “scare the hell” out of the American public (to quote Senator Arthur Vandenberg) to acquire its support?<sup>1</sup> Thompson recognizes that Truman encountered severe challenges when trying to build support for a Soviet containment strategy and engage the United States with the world: “it could not be taken for granted at the end of World War II that the United States would be willing to undertake and sustain the costly foreign policy commitments that in peacetime it had always

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Mann, *Wartime Dissent in America: A History and Anthology*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010).

previously abjured” (228). Why not conclude, then, that the post-war U.S. global role was attributable in no small part to a fear that global instability would draw the United States into a major war, once more, and create opportunities worldwide for the Soviets to exploit in order to realize their reputedly nefarious ambitions?

Third, Thompson’s book begs the question as to which counts more, the perceptions of the public or its leaders. For that matter, it begs the question as to which counts more, perceptions or actual behavior. Thompson mainly tells a story of U.S. leaders deceptively prodding their reluctant citizens to accept global responsibilities. Thoughtful analysis (referencing a large, relevant literature on the subject) is required to determine who is influencing whom and when analysis should focus on what leaders do rather than what any one individual, or segment of the population, might think. These issues are given short shrift when Thompson writes, instead, of ‘American’ proclivities.

Ultimately, Thompson’s notion of a “sense of power” benefits in the explanatory competition from being the residual category. It is left standing with the falsification of rival explanations because it has not been similarly subject to rigorous assessment. By my reading, the U.S. public acted throughout the last century, not solely—or even mainly—from a sense of power but from a profound sense of isolation which U.S. leaders countered—for some complex mix of reasons—by creating an equally profound sense of vulnerability, and playing (post-Pearl Harbor) to a widespread desire for revenge.

**Author's Response by John A. Thompson, University of Cambridge, Emeritus**

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I should like to begin by thanking Tom Maddux for organizing this Roundtable on *A Sense of Power* and each of the reviewers for having read the book so carefully and engaged with its arguments so thoughtfully. All of them give an account of the book's contents, with that by Jerald Combs being particularly full and fair. But the three reviewers write from such different perspectives that I can best produce a coherent response by briefly stating what I was seeking to do, and how I set about doing it, addressing along the way the criticisms and objections – some of which arise from misunderstanding of my argument.

My book is an attempt to explain why the United States assumed the extraordinarily active and wide-ranging role in world politics it has played for the past six or seven decades, undertaking commitments that have made a heavy demand on the nation's resources.

I begin with an external perspective, in which I seek to provide an objective assessment of the position of the United States in the international system (within a broadly Realist framework of analysis). I emphasize the extraordinary economic pre-eminence among nation-states that the country had acquired by the early twentieth century. A significant measure of this is steel production, described by Winston Churchill as “a rather decisive index of military power.”<sup>1</sup> In 1910, the United States produced 44 per cent of the world's crude steel, as much as the combined output of Germany, Britain, Russia and France; it was already a potential superpower.<sup>2</sup> This productive capacity inevitably made the country an important player in world politics, as was shown in World War I when it became clear on both sides of the Atlantic that the outcome of the European conflict would be determined to a great extent by whether or not the Allies had access to American resources and credit. This degree of involvement in a foreign war was not the result of Americans' desire or choice; it was an inescapable consequence of the nation's economic and financial strength.

This did not, however, necessitate participation in the war as a full-scale belligerent. As James H. Lebovic says, I do not see the scale of America's relative power as a sufficient explanation in itself for its assumption of a global political role—primarily because the exercise of power inevitably involves costs. The most common and easily understood source of a willingness to bear such costs is a concern to protect a nation's physical security or its economic prosperity. In the case of the United States, I argue, neither of these core national interests seemed to require an extensive involvement in world politics. Given its geographical position and its own great military potential, the country could defeat or deter any external attack upon its homeland without the help of allies. In the period when the nation came to assume its global role, its overseas economic interests made only a marginal contribution to the GNP and in any case were not dependent upon support from the U.S. government. I conclude that America's position in the international system gave the nation a wide range of choice between viable foreign policy options; the scale of its potential power gave it the capacity to do much, but there was little that it *had* to do to preserve its vital interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter G. Boyle, ed., *The Churchill-Eisenhower Correspondence, 1953-1955* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina, 1990), 179.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan Burn, *The Steel Industry, 1939-1959: A Study in Competition and Planning* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), Table 105.

The body of the book attempts to explain the choices that *were* made. It takes the form of an analytical historical narrative of the evolution of U.S. foreign policy, and of the internal debate about it, from the late nineteenth century, when the United States first acquired the potential capacity to be a major actor in world politics, to the end of the Truman administration, by which time it had committed itself to a global role and developed the capabilities for playing it. My focus is on the willingness to incur significant costs to achieve foreign policy objectives, and so there are many overseas actions of the U.S. government that I pay scant attention to—notably, as Combs rightly points out, in Latin America. (I should perhaps make it clear that it is no part of my argument to deny or downplay the role of strategic considerations and/or economic interests in motivating these low-cost actions.)

Actions involving significant costs can be undertaken and sustained only if there is strong domestic political support for them, so explaining such actions requires attention to the shape and movements of public opinion as well as to the thinking of policymakers. Presidents and other officials can, of course, do much to influence wider opinion, but in an open, democratic system they cannot control it, and they are also influenced by it. It is an inter-active process, involving Congress and the media, so that when it comes to determining the nation's readiness to undertake costly commitments the perceptions of both "the public and its leaders" matter—and indeed are often not as distinguishable as Lebovic suggests. During the period I cover, there were profound differences of opinion at every level. As all the reviewers recognize, my book is principally a study of opinion, and an attempt to analyze the factors shaping it, as Americans responded to—and interpreted—the dramatic overseas events of the first half of the twentieth century.

Assessing the factors that really shaped people's attitudes and views is not a simple or easy matter. Whether they were policymakers or other participants in public debate, the evidence we have is of what they said or wrote and, as Lloyd Gardner observes, such statements are almost invariably efforts to persuade other people. As exercises in persuasion they may well not be a transparent revelation of their authors' own deepest concerns. Moreover, as Gardner also says, it has been standard in advocating a political course to make the case in terms of both the nation's interests and its ideals and principles. How can one judge which considerations or impulses were really most influential?

One way is to assume *a priori* that certain sorts of interest are primary and that therefore statements invoking these should be taken at face value and given greater weight. This seems to be Gardner's approach with regard to economic interests of various kinds—whether specific interests such as U.S. investments in Cuba in the 1890s or a more general interest in the flourishing of a capitalist system. Realist scholars seem to privilege invocations of security interests in a comparable way.

Rather than adopting such an approach, I use two other ways of trying to assess the truly determining sources of people's views, both of which can be illustrated by reference to probably the most momentous of the debates in the period – that over involvement in World War II. One method, which is quite standard, is to identify the characteristics that distinguished those who took one side from those who took the opposing one. Public opinion polls showed that the best predictor of support for Lend-Lease was regional, with over 75 per cent in the South favoring the measure and only 40 per cent in the old Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan). I deduced from this that the degree of sympathy with the Allied cause in the European war was an important determining factor.

My other way of assessing the real influence of particular considerations is a less commonly used one—testing the extent to which views were rational in the light of the available evidence at the time. To the extent that

they meet this test, views may be seen as self-explanatory. But to the extent that they do not, some further explanation is required for why people saw things that way. In 1940-41, the view that a victory for Hitler in Europe would open up the American homeland itself to the danger of direct attack involved scenarios that lacked credibility when subjected to informed appraisal. But after the fall of France the view that the future of Europe, and possibly the world, depended on what the United States did (or failed to do) was hard to challenge. This seems to me a good reason for attaching more causal weight to the second view than to the first.

To see security only in terms of the physical safety of the homeland is to take a narrow view of it, as the reviewers points out. But it was security in this narrow sense that was the focus of much of the debate in the period preceding Pearl Harbor—on both sides of the argument. This was because of its unique status as something that virtually all Americans agreed had to be protected at all costs. As N.J. Spykman observed (regretfully) in 1941, “the nation will offer the lives of its sons only for national defense” and “to the man in the street, national defense means defense against attack, and attack is identified with invasion.”<sup>3</sup> A few years earlier, President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself had declared that “nothing can persuade the peoples of the earth that any governing power has any right or need to inflict the consequences of war on its own or any other people save in the cause of self-evident home defense.”<sup>4</sup>

Many, of course, have had a more extensive view of the requirements of national security, seeing them as encompassing also the establishment and maintenance of a more benign external environment—a law-governed world order in which the United States did not face the danger of being dragged into foreign wars and in which liberal values could flourish, along with trade and peaceful intercourse. As Combs notes, the pursuit of such an international order has also been seen as a product of ‘idealism.’ But this rubric, like that of security, was coined in debates over the wisdom or necessity of such an objective. (‘Idealism’ as a pejorative description of Wilsonian internationalism; ‘national security’ as a justification for wider commitments assumed in the 1940s.) A more detached description would be that the concern with world order reflected a broad view of the nation’s interests rather than a narrow one—and in these general terms this difference can be seen as shaping much foreign policy debate from the days of Theodore Roosevelt to those of Donald Trump.

I argue that this more extensive and ambitious view of the national interest grew out of, and was sustained by, a recognition of America’s great potential power in world politics. This induced both a confidence that the United States *could* shape its external environment to a significant extent and also a belief, particularly among the WASP elite who were so influential in this era, that this great power had brought with it responsibilities that extended beyond protecting the nation’s own narrow interests. (Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s later comment that America was “the indispensable nation” reflected a similar outlook.<sup>5</sup>)

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<sup>3</sup> N.J. Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1942), 27. The book was written before Pearl Harbor, though published after it.

<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt to A. Hitler (and B. Mussolini), April 14, 1939. *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, vol. 8, 1939 ed. Samuel I. Rosenman (New York, 1941), 202-3.

<sup>5</sup> NBC’s Today Show, February 19, 1998.

I do not, as Lebovic's comment about endogeneity might be taken to imply, see this sense of power as automatically leading to the assumption of extensive political and military commitments; after all, it did not do so in the 1920s and 1930s. I differ from those who see America's actions as the product of an internally-generated expansionist drive. As I write, "it is highly unlikely that the American role in the second half of the twentieth century would have been as large had there not been the two world wars in the first half" (277), and much of my book is an analysis of the effects of these wars on American opinion and policy. In formal terms, I see the sense of power, like the possession of power itself, as a necessary but not sufficient condition of America's assumption of a global role. Its contribution was to broaden the scope of concern and increase the inclination to act. So I am not, as Lebovic thinks, seeking "to discount threat as a source of U.S. behavior" but, as I see it, the threats were to values and interests that went well beyond America's own physical security and economic interests.

Actions to secure these wider interests were always open to skeptical challenge, particularly when they involved heavy costs including the lives of American servicemen. In response, those advocating such actions have commonly argued that the safety of the American homeland itself was at stake. I recognize that, as Lebovic points out, insofar as these arguments succeeded in their persuasive purpose, they were themselves part of the explanation for the political support such actions enjoyed. I also acknowledge that such arguments benefitted from what Combs calls "the irrational fears of attack ... in the minds of ordinary people during overseas crises." (Indeed, I have written elsewhere about these.<sup>6</sup>) But such fears have generally not been enough to generate the public support necessary for an overseas war until there has been a direct attack (or perceived attack) on American territory or ships—as in 1898, 1917, 1941 and 2001. As Gardner observes with respect to 1898, however, these attacks have followed some degree of earlier American involvement in a foreign conflict.

This recurrent pattern can be seen as significant. For, as Lebovic suggests, the "actual behavior" of states provides some indication of their motivation. Following the fall of France, there was an evident prospect that Germany would soon force Britain, too, to come to terms. For the next eighteen months, in the Battle of Britain and the Battle of the Atlantic, Britain's ability to fight on hung by a thread. The United States responded by providing moral, material, and eventually naval support, risking involvement in the war. But it did not enter the war as a full-scale belligerent. The implication is that preventing Adolf Hitler's becoming the unchallenged master of Europe was important for the United States, but not a truly vital interest. In general, a foreign policy that owes more to a sense of power than to clearly imperative strategic or economic interests might be expected to be more subject to debate, hesitancy, and second thoughts.

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<sup>6</sup> John A. Thompson, "The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition." *Diplomatic History* 16:1 (Winter 1992), 42.