

H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

Review Essay 94

Michael Mandelbaum. *The Four Ages of American Foreign Policy: Weak Power, Great Power, Superpower, Hyperpower*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780197621790.

Reviewed by **William L. d'Ambruoso, Independent Scholar**

5 March 2024 | PDF: <http://issforum.org/to/RE94> | Website: rjissf.org | Twitter: @HDiplo

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Daniel R. Hart | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

How has the United States' foreign policy changed over time? After all, the country itself has changed dramatically in its more than two-and-a-half centuries of existence, especially in terms of its power vis-à-vis other countries. Living through the past several decades of mostly uncontested American hegemony, one can forget just how weak the United States was following its improbable victory over Britain in the late eighteenth century.¹ In fact, European and especially British developments in the first hundred-plus years after the American Revolution continued to have enormous implications for the United States.

As the United States grew, the challenges and opportunities it faced changed as well, as Michael Mandelbaum describes in his new volume, *The Four Ages of American Foreign Policy: Weak Power, Great Power, Superpower, Hyperpower*. The first age (up until 1865) was about both surviving challenges, especially from Great Britain and the threat of secession, and capitalizing on opportunities to expand its domain on the cheap, as with the Louisiana Purchase. Subsequent ages were defined by the increasing projection of power from the relative safety of its fortuitous geography: the chief rivals of the US have usually been an ocean away. It became an “offshore balancer” in its great-power phase in the first half of the twentieth century, assisting “blocking coalitions” to make sure no one great power dominated any other region, especially in Europe (118). It then grew into a global power, with commensurate ambitions, following World War II, fighting the Cold War against a rival superpower, the Soviet Union. Finally, the United States emerged from the Cold War as an uncontested “hyperpower,” with unprecedented strength that, perhaps ironically, seems to have come up against the hard limits of ideological influence abroad.

Despite these changes, Mandelbaum highlights three consistencies of US foreign policy through the ages. First, the United States has shown a desire to spread ideas like liberty and a “belief in the possibilities of social and political improvement” beyond its borders (3). This inclination was rooted in America’s religious traditions, found full expression in the ideas of President Woodrow Wilson, and endured in the post-Cold War Era, in which the foreign policies of all presidents “included a Wilsonian strain” (440). Second, the United States has turned frequently to economic instruments, from President Thomas Jefferson’s embargo prohibiting American exports in 1807 to punish the British (65), to the United States’ frequent use of economic sanctions today. Third, the US public has played an outsized and sometimes decisive role in changing its country’s foreign policy. The effect is most dramatic when the public decides that the world is a

¹ Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

more dangerous place than they had surmised, such as in response to the sinking of the USS *Maine* ahead of the Spanish-American War (139), the bombing of Pearl Harbor (206), or the 2001 terrorist attacks (422-423). America's foreign policy, he summarizes, has been "unusually ideological, unusually economic, and unusually democratic" (3).

In explaining US foreign policy, Mandelbaum convincingly balances competing factors. In particular, he shows what economist Jacob Viner calls the "long-run harmony" between the accumulation of power and wealth.² Mandelbaum moves adeptly between economic and security concerns, and lucidly describes the economic foundations of the United States' meteoric growth in power. He also insists that power does not explain every subsequent foreign policy choice; many of the consistencies that he brings forth, like the importance of public pressure, are of an ideational character. The result is a book that gives a fair hearing to both sides of a long-running debate between realists and idealists in studies of international affairs,³ even if it leans toward realism in its normative implications.

The downside of this fair-mindedness, which is also a danger for books that cover as much ground as this one does, is that the narrative ends up taking few chances. The book sometimes hops from one landmark event or important development to another saying predictable things, like a fount of conventional wisdom. Native Americans lost to the English settlers because they did not have sufficient military power to prevail (88). The September 11 attacks had a "galvanizing effect" on the public (423). These sentiments do need saying in a book that aims for comprehensiveness, even if they do not make for the most compelling reading, and it is one reason why the book may make more sense as reference on the shelf rather than a cover-to-cover page-turner.

Sweeping tomes also inevitably commit some sins of omission. Among the more notable is the failure of the book to answer Cynthia Enloe's now decades-old question in reference to writings on international affairs: "Where are the women?"⁴ Women, both collectively and as individuals, go mostly unmentioned. I see only three women's names in the book: Anarchist Emma Goldman goes to prison for antiwar activism in one sentence on page 165, Madeline Albright comes up a few times about 240 pages later, and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel gets a mention in the last chapter.

Since one of the results of gender discrimination has been a lack of women in the presidency, the office most closely connected to foreign policy, the conspicuous absence of women may be partly excusable. Still, the book misses opportunities. Mandelbaum refers to the Constitutional amendments that followed World War I, including the nineteenth, which gave women the right to vote. Given that public pressure is a major theme of the book, one wonders how this extremely important development impacted foreign policy. If it changed the content and intensity of public pressure, that would be interesting; if it did not, that would be of interest, too. Unfortunately, these points go unaddressed. The paragraph closes by following up on its two lines about women's suffrage with a sentence about daylight savings time and then moves on (164).

The lack of universal suffrage, along with the institution of slavery, the treatment of Native Americans, and other ugly elements of US history, hurts the "persistence of cause of liberty" argument that Mandelbaum asserts. The reader must keep asking, liberty for whom? The book's inconsistent answers to this question are on display in the discussion of the key laws that preceded the Civil War. "The Kansas-Nebraska Act of

² Jacob Viner, "Power Versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *World Politics* 1:1 (1948): 1-29. See also, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall Of The Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500-2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); Robert Gilpin, *US Power and the Multinational Corporation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1975).

³ For a recent recap of this old debate, see Gideon Rose, "Foreign Policy for Pragmatists," *Foreign Affairs* 100:2 (April 2021): 48-57.

⁴ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

1854...allowed *the people* of those two prospective states to decide for themselves whether to allow slavery” (100; emphasis added). It is not clear which “people” this involves. The book does better on the next page: “The Confederacy,” Mandelbaum writes in his explanation of the Civil War, “sought to preserve the liberty of its communities and states to live their lives as they—that is, the nonslaves [*sic*]—preferred and as they always had” (101-102). The “nonslaves” clarifier is both more morally defensible and historically accurate. It is easy, but dangerous, to refer to “the public” or “the people” collectively when only a minority held most of the political power.

With its emphasis on liberty, *The Four Ages of American Foreign Policy* at times gives off more than a whiff of American triumphalism. To the author’s credit, however, the book rightly assigns quite a bit of responsibility for the end of the Cold War to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and to the economic problems of Communism when other observers credit 1980s US foreign policy or President Ronald Reagan’s leadership.⁵ Triumphalism is not completely absent even here, though, since the consistency of US containment policies and the United States’ comparatively shining economic example are mentioned as well (371-374).

Mandelbaum’s narrative is also too hesitant to criticize the nuclear policies of the United States, and by extension, the Soviet Union, during the Cold War. He writes that their development of “large numbers of [nuclear] weapons” was not irrational, but in fact “promoted the survivability of their retaliatory forces and so reinforced the nuclear truce between the two superpowers” (286). But how much is enough for survivability? Did each side need to build tens of thousands of weapons to deter each other? The “criticism” that Mandelbaum dismisses (286) on this subject actually has it right: if the two superpowers had kept to significantly lower limits that still could have inflicted enormous amounts of mutual damage, they would have reached a nuclear stalemate in a safer manner and at a much lower cost.⁶

Mandelbaum writes more critically of the post-Cold War period of US foreign policy, and especially the Iran nuclear deal of 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He argues that it marked “a turning point in the history of American foreign policy,” because it showed that the United States was “unwilling to exert itself” to meet one of the less formidable challenges it faced (453-454). This argument is unpersuasive. It does not discuss why the United States should have “exerted itself” if Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons were not one of its biggest challenges. Furthermore, it does not make clear how years of painstaking negotiations were not “exertion.”

Mandelbaum states that preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons could stop a “proliferation cascade” because the United States does not have a long history of deterring unfriendly regimes in the Middle East (452). Yet he previously described how the United States sent hundreds of thousands of soldiers to Saudi Arabia, expected by some to be the next nuclear weapons country in the region after Iran,⁷ in order to deter Iraq ahead of the 1990–1991 Gulf War (386). Turkey, another proliferation danger, joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952. The claim that the region has not seen US deterrence is not convincing, and there is little reason to believe that the proliferation cascade, an oft predicted but still unrealized fear,⁸ would come to pass.

⁵ See, for example, Lee Edwards, “How Ronald Reagan Won the Cold War,” *The Hill*, December 26, 2019, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/474669-how-ronald-reagan-won-the-cold-war/>.

⁶ David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960,” *International Security* 7, no. 4 (1983): 71.

⁷ See, for instance, Gen. Kevin Chilton (ret.) and Harry Hoshovsky, “Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East,” *Defense News*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/02/13/avoiding-a-nuclear-arms-race-in-the-middle-east/>.

⁸ For a classic argument that fears of a rapidly-expanding nuclear club are overblown, see Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate*, Third Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2013), 37-39. For a more recent treatment that reviews several works on the dangers of a proliferation cascade before

Mandelbaum does not offer feasible alternatives to the JCPOA in this book. He has recommended elsewhere that Iran be deterred from obtaining the bomb, and if necessary, that the United States should use preventive strikes with the aim “of extend[ing] [Iran’s] lead-time to the bomb from weeks, which is where it stands now, to years.”⁹ Yet that is exactly what the JCPOA did, with inspections, and without war.¹⁰ Recent US foreign policy has had its share of mistakes; the signing of the JCPOA was not one of them.

In general, Mandelbaum’s book is clearly written and skillfully covers the most well-known events. It is best treated as a reference work, perhaps in parallel with other, narrower books that take more risks and offer less conventional accounts.¹¹

William d’Ambruoso has taught courses on international relations theory, security, and US foreign policy at Bates College and Bowdoin College. He also served as a fellow with the International Security Program and the Project on Managing the Atom at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs in the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and he is the author of *American Torture from the Philippines to Iraq: A Recurring Nightmare* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

contending that the risks are more manageable than they seem, see Robert Einhorn, “Will Russia’s War on Ukraine Spur Nuclear Proliferation?,” Arms Control Association, October 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-10/features/russias-war-ukraine-spur-nuclear-proliferation>.

⁹ Michael Mandelbaum, “The United States, Iran, and the Lessons of the Last War,” *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, 30 July 2023, <https://jstribune.com/mandelbaum-the-us-iran-and-the-lessons-of-the-last-war/>.

¹⁰ Kali Robinson, “What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?,” Council on Foreign Relations, 21 June 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-iran-nuclear-deal>; Arms Control Association, “More Than 80 Nuclear Nonproliferation Experts Reaffirm Support for the Iran Nuclear Deal,” 13 September 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/2017-09/more-80-nuclear-nonproliferation-experts-reaffirm-support-iran-nuclear-deal>

¹¹ For a slightly narrower (libertarian) angle on US foreign policy, see: Christopher A. Preble, *Peace, War, and Liberty: Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2019). For an example of a history of US foreign policy that is fairly conventional but covers a distinct period, see: John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). An example of an unconventional account covering topics that Mandelbaum does not is: Susan Williams, *White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2021).