A Pact With The Devil:  
Washington’s Bid for World Supremacy  
and the Betrayal of the American Promise  
Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:  
Tony Smith. A Pact With The Devil: Washington’s Bid for World Supremacy  
and the Betrayal of the American Promise. New York: Routledge, March  
(electronic).

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Stable URL: http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/APactWithTheDevil-
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http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/  
7 November 2007
Tony Smith’s articulate and fluently written book has a clearly stated, though often repetitive thesis. The war in Iraq represents at least a disastrous mistake by United States policy makers, evidencing not just misjudgment but also an overweening sense of entitlement and a grotesque belief in the correctness of America’s path. Smith even suggests that the United States may be slipping into a “fundamentalist” “jihadist” position that has “fascistic” overtones in its zealotry and lack of prudence. *A Pact With the Devil* finally argues that while the well known conservative policy analysts associated with the Reagan and Bush White Houses have developed this constellation of obligations, these people have had crucial help from non-conservative intellectuals. The real firepower that has generated the commitments in Iraq has come from theorists of worldwide democracy situated on the left and generally supposed to be devoted to the Democratic Party. Neo Wilsonian purveyors of nation building, global law, and human rights have put forward ideas that conservatives literally highjacked for use in Iraq, and we see the ruinous results every day on the front pages of the *New York Times*.

Smith indeed is most eloquent, if sometimes over the top, in quoting to good effect well known liberal political theorists and political scientists in the 1980s and 1990s about what steps the United States had to take to achieve a responsible, humane foreign policy; *A Pact With the Devil* then juxtaposes these prescriptions with the way conservative ideologues have cashed out the ideas in Iraq. The intellectual history at the heart of the book interpretatively summarizes the work of social scientists who have thought of themselves as opposed to neo-conservatism. Smith’s commentary shows how this work coheres with the set of views he calls the Bush doctrine.

In trying in the above paragraphs to capture the vehemence, passion, and certainty of Smith’s writing, I have not just attempted to give the flavor of the book. I also want to intimate that in my own nightmares about contemporary American diplomacy, I share the author’s feelings of fury and betrayal of the “American promise.” But feelings don’t cut it in scholarship. While we should congratulate Smith on writing designed for a general audience, the book still seems to me to embody the defects of political scientists looking at the world of contemporary international politics.

First, history complexity gets slighted. Why on earth do we think that, as scholars, we can make such Technicolor and definitive verdicts about the war before it is even over? As citizens we surely can work ourselves into a rage about the deficiencies of the Bush regime, certainly if we are Democrats. But as academics searching for understanding, we must surely know that when events recede into the past, their valence changes. We cannot clearly see what the outcome of this conflict will be, or how historians will parse it.

The flattened uncritical version of the history of American foreign policy that Smith advances makes me even more suspicious of the moralistic rush to judgment. As a good internationalist liberal, Smith has defended and still defends the main diplomatic initiatives
that the United States has undertaken in its rise to world power. He wants to position himself as a supporter of the "American promise," while simultaneously distancing himself from recent policy in the Middle East. Now Smith does not mean *A Pact With the Devil* as a tome for the erudite. It only lightly engages with the heavy literature on foreign policy, and rightly focuses on the outpouring of liberal theorists over the past fifteen years, their observations on current matters in journals of contemporary affairs. At the same time Smith’s text delineates a history of American foreign policy. In fact, he adumbrates the same one in two earlier and more substantive volumes with weightier historical components, *The Pattern of Imperialism* (1981) and *America’s Mission* (1994).

The spread of democracy from the 18th century has been an unalloyed good for Smith. In the United States in the last century the commitments of Woodrow Wilson, the struggle against the Nazis, and the long battle with the Soviet Union in the Cold War have forwarded Enlightenment goals. Smith’s vision does not have much room for irony or ambivalence. Even in his more professional publications, lack of nuance goes together with an absence of the examination of primary sources and only moderate mastery of the secondary historical literature. The resulting history parades before the reader a series of triumphs. Smith, however, also acknowledges that the formulators of Iraq policy have an ideological heritage that joins up with the earlier successes of American diplomacy. Thus, it is crucial for him to maintain that we can still disconnect the beneficial peacekeeping that has gone before from the belligerent interventionism of the present.

Smith’s gestures toward such a disconnect fail. He says that the most recent makers of policy have overstepped the bounds of realism, that they suffer from a unique hubris, that they lack a fundamental ethical balance. But only a selective reading of the intellectual formulations of American policy in the past and, dare I say it, a cartoon version of the diplomatic history, can sustain this perspective.

For the formative period of the Cold War read carefully the Truman Doctrine Speech by then President Harry Truman; George Kennan’s "The Sources of Soviet Conduct"; and the rhetoric of NSC-68 in 1950, authored in part by Paul Nitze. They propound claims for American exceptionalism every bit as outrageous as the many ex cathedra statements of George Bush on Iraq and on the U.S. role in the world that get quoted in *A Pact With the Devil*. Moreover, Smith has no discussion of the adventurism that accompanied some of this rhetoric. He avoids the case of Vietnam, which -- he seems to concede -- falls “within the logic” of American foreign policy (p. 57). An earlier case does just as much harm to Smith’s formulations -- the second part of the Korean War, which does not even get a mention in the book. In the fall of 1950, after achieving the initial purpose of turning back North Korea, the Americans marched to the north of Korea. Ignoring multiple warning of Chinese intervention, the United States dreamt of a rollback of communism, part of the promise of NSC-68. The incursion resulted in an ugly and unnecessary expansion of Asian conflict. It would help Smith in comprehending Iraq to grasp the reckless policy of Secretary of State Dean Acheson.
In short, the history of American “Wilsonian” diplomacy demonstrates more ambiguity than Smith makes out, and I am afraid the Bush Doctrine fits right in with it. Or put it another way: if you don’t like the Bush Doctrine, you should have a hard time swallowing many of the acts of American assertiveness around the world in the last 100 years, and the justifications for these acts.

So, for Smith, history is a batch of examples whose lessons are clear and easily available. They show how good we were then, and how bad we are now. In addition to finding this history teaching dubious, I finally have problems with Smith’s sense of the policy making process. He tells us that a “transition belt” or a “transmission belt” unites academic thinking on policy to the later policy position adopted in Washington. A “conceptual food chain” links intellectuals and diplomats. First formulated and debated in scholarly journals, ideas then get “synthesized for public policy in the United States.” In more popular magazines such as Foreign Affairs or Foreign Policy the most salient thought gets an executive summary before the policy elite consumes the thought in the halls of power (pp. 94, 114). A Pact With the Devil even hints that conservatives on their own could not have provided this elite with the Bush doctrine; they had to have the help of the brainier liberals.

Now I have an inordinate distrust of declarations of influence by intellectuals. Today’s foreign policy may also rely extraordinarily on the authority of professorial experts, though we would not know this for more than a generation when we will be able to subject policy making in Iraq to scrutiny of the extant sources. But no one who has seriously studied original material in grasping the origins and implementation of any foreign policy believes in such a food chain. The belief is foolish, silly. It elevates the role of ideas and academics in foreign policy far beyond what the record will bear. In concentrating on the lucubrations of many of his coworkers Smith may have given us a portrait that many of his colleagues will not like, but he has not shown that their collective output caused policy in Washington.

In A Pact With the Devil Smith laments that some of his liberal scholarly peers have somehow not been able to keep his faith; they have fallen away from his specific brand of Wilsonianism. I believe the book more expresses an unfortunate aspect of the disciplinary standpoint of political science. It is a science that yet revels in making immediate black and white moral judgments -- either those of Smith or of his opponents. And it has a communal arrogance about its relevance to the real world.