Dangerous Nation Roundtable Review
Roundtable Editor’s Introduction by Thomas Maddux

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

If you went into U.S. Diplomatic History in the 1960s, you probably received thorough training from the origins of American diplomacy in the revolution to the Cold War. Early on you encountered Samuel Flagg Bemis and learned the meaning of archival research and the study of the exchange of official notes, demarches, and policy making in the offices of new U.S. officials and British leaders. You learned to skim your way through monographs on *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, *Jay's Treaty*, *Pinckney's Treaty*, which received the Pulitzer Prize, *The Latin American Policy of the United States*, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy*, which earned a second Pulitzer Prize, and *The Latin American Policy of the United States*. Bemis also edited *The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy* (18 vols., 1963-72). You may have taught your first course in U.S. diplomacy with Bemis' *A Diplomatic History of the United States*

Despite the quality of Bemis’ scholarship, students probably welcomed a shift to Thomas Bailey’s *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (1940-1980, 10th edition). Amazon still has copies of various editions ranging in price from $9 to $180. Bailey turned out a number of monographs and several, like his classic text, shifted away from the Bemis emphasis on the diplomatic exchanges between governments to focus on the role of public opinion in the formation and implementation of foreign policy.

Bailey’s text achieved dominance in the field although a number of scholars offered both diplomatic textbooks, such as Richard Leopold’s *The Growth of American Foreign Policy* (1964) and Robert Ferrell’s *American Diplomacy: A History* (1969), and interpretive studies such as Richard W. Van Alstyne’s *The Rising American Empire* (1960) which discussed the emergence of a conception of American empire out of the 18th century European imperial struggle for dominance. Van Alstyne explored its development through continental expansion and into insular imperialism in the Caribbean and Pacific. After retiring from Harvard in 1957, Frederick Merk also contributed a series of books on expansion in the in the 1830s and 1840s as well as an influential thematic study of *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (1963).

The arrival of revisionists led by William A. Williams redirected the focus of diplomatic history even further to internal sources shaping continental expansion and them overseas market aspirations, and the Open Door perspective. Two major interpretative challenges from Williams and his students appeared in 1972-1973; Williams’ edited *From Colony to Empire: Essays in the History of American Foreign Relations*, and Lloyd C. Gardner, Walter F. LaFeber, and Thomas J. McCormick produced *Creation of the American Empire: U.S. Diplomatic History*. Expansion as a central objective in U.S. diplomacy had been explored previously, but the emphasis on domestic sources shaping U.S. policy went far beyond Bailey's emphasis on public opinion and placed economic considerations from land to markets as dominant factors.
Several recent interpretive studies in *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* have continued the traditions established by Bemis, Bailey and Williams. In *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865*, Bradford Perkins broadens his familiar focus on Anglo-American relations to explore major themes of territorial expansionism, crusading republicanism, and commercial trade desires. Perkins' applies a Bemis-like approach to present what American diplomats and their foreign counterparts are doing, and to offer praise and blame on these leaders and their policies. By contrast in the second volume, *The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913*, and in *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750*, Walter LaFeber emphasizes the Williams' perspective on the transforming impact of economic considerations, most notably the industrial process of the last 19th century and its demand for markets for goods and outlets for investments as a dominant consideration with American policymakers over other external and internal forces.

So what is Robert Kagan thinking when he moves into this territory with the first of a projected two-volume study of American foreign policy? Kagan started his study ten years ago and completed a Ph.D. at American University in 2005 with a dissertation entitled “The Sources of American Conduct in International Affairs.” Robert Beisner, author of *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865-1900* (2nd ed., 1986) among other works, directed the dissertation so Kagan had very good training.


Some of the issues raised by Kagan’s study and the commentators include

1. What is the relationship of Kagan’s approach to earlier studies mentioned above? This is not a Bemis or a Perkins’ diplomatic history. Many of the classic confrontations, negotiations, and treaties receive only passing attention. For example, the War of 1812 is discussed most directly on pp. 144-152, but Kagan’s emphasis is more on the domestic sources and consequences of the conflict rather than the issues and negotiations leading up to the conflict or the negotiations at Ghent to end the war.

2. Kagan focuses on internal sources shaping American attitudes and policies, most notably the “insatiable desire for territory and dominant influence,” the revolution’s unleashing of an ideology and liberal, commercial society, and the evolving conflict among American leaders and their parties over appropriate foreign policies from the Federalist-Jeffersonian response to the French Revolution and ensuing European wars, to the challenge of the Cuban independence movement at the end of the 19th century. Thus, Kagan shares a domestic orientation with the revisionists and emphasis on territorial expansion but gives considerably less weight to Williams’ open door thesis and the search for markets.
3. Kagan clearly rejects the classic view of George Washington’s Farewell Address of 1796 as a statement of isolationism. In reviewing the issue, Kagan does not directly engage the historiography from Bemis’ view of the address as a statement of independence aimed at British and French meddling, to Alexander DeConde’s stress on the domestic political conflict between the Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans, to Felix Gilbert’s emphasis on the influence of European ideas about foreign policy mixed with Washington’s and Alexander Hamilton’s experiences and interests, to Burton Kaufman’s and the revisionist emphasis on the address as a strategy for expansion and empire. Instead, Kagan emphasizes the importance of the domestic context and the ideological differences between Thomas Jefferson and Hamilton on the meaning of republicanism which shaped their different views on foreign policy.

4. This is also the case with the Monroe Doctrine. Kagan devotes considerable attention to the origins of the doctrine and the interaction among Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, President James Monroe, and Henry Clay over the formulation and application of the doctrine on specific issues such as the revolution in Greece against the Turkish sultan. Kagan suggests that JQA was keeping expansionist options open whereas Monroe emphasized ideological distinctions and considered the doctrine a “statement of international republican solidarity.”

5. So is the United States a dangerous nation, as Kagan’s title suggests? Kagan emphasizes the alarming impact of American territorial expansion on Indian tribes and the European powers as well as the troubling impact of American revolutionary ideology and liberal society. The American self-image, however, Kagan views as lacking self-awareness on this threat and, instead, he views Americans as “by nature inward-looking and aloof, only sporadically and spasmodically venturing forth into the world, usually in response to external attack or perceived threats.” (5). The United States is clearly an ideological threat to the European monarchial powers and a territorial threat to Spain. The bluster of the Holy Alliance and the Monroe Doctrine, however, seem to dissipate fairly quickly after 1823 and the revival of European concerns in the late 19th century seem limited as the British move to a rapprochement with the United States which leaves only Tsarist Russia and Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany as leading critics of the United States. Kagan’s brief discussions on China and Japan in the late 19th century suggest that neither perceived the U.S. as a danger.

6. Kagan’s analysis of the relationship of slavery and foreign policy in Chapters 7-9 certainly integrates a number of issues that are treated separately and not linked together very much in the literature. Kagan emphasizes two increasingly distinct economic and social systems between North and South with different world views despite some areas of agreement. This perspective shapes Kagan’s analysis of differing views of Jacksonian Democrats and Whigs, different perspectives on...
expansion and the Texas issue, on the application of the Monroe Doctrine, and on the meaning of Manifest Destiny. He depicts two distinct foreign policies aimed at each other. The North by the 1840s had turned to containment of the South and slavery—which Kapan compares with the U.S. in the Cold War—and the South pushed for the expansion of slavery to reduce the areas of freedom around the South.

7. Kagan engages the revisionists most directly on their home turf in the late 19th century build-up to overseas expansion. Walter LaFeber’s *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (1963) leads the way joined by Edward Crapol’s *America for Americans: Economic Nationalism and Anglophobia in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1973), Howard B. Schonberger’s *Transportation to Seaboard: The Communication Revolution and American Foreign Policy, 1860-1900* (1971); Thomas J. McCormick’s *China Market; America’s Quest for Informal Empire, 1893-1901* (1967); and William A. Williams’ *The Roots of the Modern American Empire; A Study in the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (1969)  Kagan does not devote much attention to the economic transformation of the period, gives little weight to economic calculations being decisive on foreign policy decisions from the 1870s on, and notes considerable inconsistency in U.S. policies, both expansion and reaction, confidence and insecurity, and, above all, considerable political maneuvering by Democrats and Republicans in the 1880s. Kagan notes a growing U.S. desire to be a great power and follows this most closely through a discussion of the campaign to build a new navy.

8. Kagan concludes with the Cuban crisis in the 1890s and an evaluation of the handling of this crisis by Presidents Grover Cleveland and William McKinley. Into the cross-fire of historical interpretations, Kagan emphasizes the American public and McKinley’s sense of outrage over Spanish policy in Cuba and a growing belief that the U.S. had the power and responsibility to do something about Cuba: “It was not that McKinley wanted war, or the fruits of war, as part of some expansionist or imperialist design. He was not seeking to unite the country or strengthen its character through war. He was not trying to distract attention from economic difficulties at home by fighting a war abroad. He was not trying to fulfill some late-nineteenth-century ideal of masculinity or to save a decaying civilization by instilling ‘barbarian virtues’ through martial glory. He was not ‘taking up the white man’s burden’ by intervening in Cuba; nor was he intervening in order to gain access to markets in East Asia. McKinley did not want war at all. But he was prepared to go to war if that was what was necessary to achieve what he regarded as a moral and humanitarian imperative.” So McKinley actually meant what he said publicly.
Kagan’s sequel will have to follow this line further in the second volume as Teddy Roosevelt rushes to get the Rough Riders into Cuba, with or without their horses, and as Admiral Dewey steams with the Asian fleet for Manila in the Philippines.

—Tom Maddux