The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times
Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:

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I am grateful to Professors Combs, Yegorova, Painter, and Hitchcock for taking time to write such comprehensive, fair, and stimulating reviews of my book, and to the H-Diplo editors for organizing the roundtable. A focused discussion is an excellent way of debating the key aspects of a book and I am very glad that The Global Cold War, and the issues which it attempts to bring to the forefront, have been selected for such an exchange of ideas. I am, of course, very happy that the reviewers all like the book and have kind things to say about it, but for the sake of argument I want to concentrate on those points where there are disagreements or at least a difference in emphasis.

Just as in the general debate about the book, there are three main questions that are up for discussion here.¹ Many of my friends and colleagues ask why I focus exclusively on the Third World and disregard Europe. Others query my emphasis on the role of ideologies. And quite a few disagree with my views on why interventions almost never deliver their intended results. The latter discussion is of course entangled in the current debates over Iraq and Afghanistan; more so now, probably, than when the book was first published more than two years ago.

Before going on to deal with the main historical issues one by one, I need to dwell a bit on the question of the book’s contemporary relevance. I knew, of course, when finishing up the manuscript, that the book would be read and commented on with an eye to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is unavoidable and – to some extent – welcome; I made the final revisions of the book very much with Bush’s wars in mind. While I am no great believer in generic “lessons from history”, I do believe (or at least hope) that there is something that can be learnt from historians.

The relevance here, for me, is as follows: The interventionism that the United States practices today came out of policies pursued during the Cold War and out of a mindset that allows policymakers to argue successfully that Americans will only be safe when the world

¹ There are a number of excellent reviews of The Global Cold War. Mark Lawrence’s “The Other Cold War”, Reviews in American History, 34:3 (September 2006): 385-392 is an outstanding (though not uncritical) discussion. Others, by Sir Lawrence Freedman (in Foreign Affairs), Anatol Lieven (in London Review of Books), and Ian Roxborough (featured review in the American Historical Review) are worth having a look at, as is the roundtable in Cold War History, with contributions by Jeremi Suri, William Wohlforth and myself.
has become more like America. My argument is that U.S. interventions during the Cold War were not, on the whole, reasons for exultation in the United States or abroad, and that any suggestion, at any time, that the world needs to be remade in order to make one country secure is usually a product of misapprehension or megalomania, or sometimes both.² I will comment further on the historical debates about interventions below, but, as for the contemporary relevance, not only do I see conceptual links in terms of execution between Cold War interventions and the disasters of the 2000s; I also find that a lot of bad history lessons are being spread by those who argue in favor of the United States presence in Iraq now and who may argue in similar terms with regard to other crises in the future.

Natalia Yegorova, who with her path-breaking work on the Soviet Union and the Iran crises in 1945-46 has done so much to open up the documents-based study of Moscow’s Third World policy, disagrees with my emphasis on non-European matters in the Cold War. William Hitchcock – who is the author of one of the best histories of Cold War Europe (the other is Tony Judt’s) – also reminds us of the centrality of that continent. Hitchcock is entirely right, of course, when he warns against seeing the European cold war as old news because we understand it fairly well (as we now do to some extent, through the work of Marc Trachtenberg, for instance). “Familiarity,” Hitchcock cautions, “should not breed contempt”.

But what I have tried to do in The Global Cold War is the opposite of disregarding Europe; it is rather (pace Castlereagh, the old reactionary) to bring the Third World into play to rectify the balance in the Second, or at least in the historiography regarding it. For far too long Europe has been seen as not just the only cause of the Cold War but also as its key engine throughout. The existence of an overview of the conflict in the Third World will help, I hope, those who work primarily on Europe not only to see influences and parallels they have not been aware of before, but also to rethink the Cold War as a global system (in which Europe, surely, played its important part). My account should therefore be seen as a somewhat overdue piece of historiographical “affirmative action”, which focuses on the Third World in order to overcome the explicit Eurocentricity of earlier accounts. It is a bit curious, though, that rather few reviewers criticised two generations of geographical oversimplification of the Cold War in general overviews – be it from the Right or the Left – as long as they centered on the two Superpowers and on Europe.

For the record, and before moving on, everyone who has read it will of course know that this book is not an attempt at a general overview of the Cold War. It is a history (very simplified) of the Cold War as it played out in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As I noted in an earlier debate on the book (with William Wohlforth), it is slightly unfair to take me to task for not having written a general history of the Cold War, since that was never my aim. It is very clear to me, therefore, that if I were to undertake such a project, then Europe (and

²J.M. Roberts, The New Penguin History of the World (fifth ed., revised and updated by O.A. Westad; London: Penguin, 2007) has helped me appreciate the historical parallels on the latter point; they are many, from Sargon’s Akkad to Napoleonic France.
indeed the United States and the Soviet Union in domestic terms) would loom much larger in it.

There is also a need to note what I am claiming as the relevance of the book. When I write that one of its claims is that the most important aspects of the Cold War were “connected to political and social development in the Third World”, I am not first and foremost thinking about the Third World’s role in the Cold War but about the Cold War’s role in the Third World. My friends are right in noting that if I want to establish the former, I will have to write a general overview to lay things out in terms of balance between the different arenas on which the conflict was conducted. But the latter point is the most important to me: In the sense of global or transnational history, incorporating the many definitive trends of the late 20th century that were not determined by the Cold War, it is the way the conflict exacerbated, skewed, or stymied developments in the South that matters most to what our world looks like today.

David Painter, who has written so insightfully on the Cold War and the quest for energy resources, and Natalia Yegorova are both skeptical of my emphasis on ideology over other factors in shaping the course of the Cold War in the Third World. Yegorova does underline, as does Painter, that I do take other causes – such as security, military strategy, economic gain, and access to resources – seriously in my attempt to present an overall picture. But they are both right, of course, that I stress ideologies as far more important on a larger number of issues than any of the other causes that are generally debated in the literature. I have no trouble in owning up to it: I am – unabashedly – a Cold War essentialist, someone who finds – after studying the historical record – that leaders mostly meant what they said about why they engaged in interventions abroad. We may disagree with their motives (we should!). We may even question whether they were honest to themselves (though that line of argument does not take us very far). But the picture that the available materials leave is that policies on both sides were dependent on fairly comprehensive and often stated views of how the world works and of one’s own place in it.

I wrote the three first chapters of The Global Cold War very much because I wanted to comment on the confusion that exists with regard to the uses of the concept ‘ideology’ in international history. To me, as you will see from the book, the concept needs to be liberated from two camps that have taken turns in keeping it hostage for much of the time this historiography has been in existence. The first camp claims that ideology equals political theory, very often in a formal sense; in other words: Soviet ideology was Marxism-Leninism in its Stalinist form. US leaders did not have an ideology because they did not (all) subscribe to a political theory. This use of the concept restricts it ad absurdum. The second camp sees ideology as a community of faith, as the ties that bind, as a mutual solidarity society in which policies are determined by the need to assist brethren abroad. If Stalin made agreements with Chiang Kai-shek rather than Mao Zedong in 1945, ideology was therefore not important to him. If Carter preferred the Shah against Iranian democrats in 1977, then ideology was therefore of limited interest in the White House.

The problem with this definition is that it sets ideologies as communities rather than extensive world-views; it emphasizes schools over ideas. It was quite possible to be a
Marxist in 1945 and believe that China was not ripe for revolution (in fact, it was difficult to be a Marxist and believe in any of Mao’s gobbledygook). It was overwhelmingly possible to be a believer in liberal capitalism (and a Democrat; a Southern one to boot) in 1977 and see the Shah as a better alternative for Iran’s development than the Iranian left-wing or the clerics.

Natalia Yegorova in her review refers to Karen N. Brutents – the very influential Deputy Head of the CPSU CC’s International Department – as someone who stresses power and prestige instead of ideology as the driving force in Soviet Third World policy. Having read Brutents’s recent books – by far the best and most honest memoirs to come out of the former Soviet foreign policy elite – I would disagree with Natalia on this point. ³ (I must also confess that I base my view on many hours of interviews with Karen Nersessovich himself.) His sense is that, to the very end, power considerations influenced Soviet foreign policy, while ideology determined it. (I still remember my first meeting with him, during which he launched a strong attack against John Lewis Gaddis [the pre-We Now Know Gaddis, that is] for disregarding the role of ideology in Soviet foreign policy!)

It is very unfortunate, though, that much New Cold War History sees ideology as first and foremost a Soviet phenomenon. To me it has become more and more obvious that it, using the definition above, was even more important on the U.S. side on the conflict. I have laid out the reasons why in the book – there is no need to repeat them here. But if there is one point that I would like to see discussed further in terms of broad interpretations, this is it: That ideology, as a comprehensive world-view, was more important to U.S. policymakers than to their Soviet counterparts during most of the Cold War.

I am very grateful to Jerald A. Combs, who through his books taught me and my cohort the historiography of the Cold War, for his positive review.⁴ Professor Combs asks what would have happened had the United States not intervened as often as it did during the Cold War. Though counterfactuals always make me a bit uneasy, my sense is that many places would have seen considerably less bloodshed as a result. South Africa would have had majority rule earlier if not for U.S. policies. Namibia would have been independent. Angola would have been spared a devastating civil war. Vietnam would have reunified earlier. In development terms the results would have been mixed, I think. The ANC and SWAPO would probably have moved fast towards reasonably competent governments. The MPLA in Angola would most likely have descended into the same corrupt quagmire as it is in today. The Vietnamese Communists would have been even more doctrinaire if they had taken over in 1965 than they were ten years later. But a lot of lives would have been saved in the process.

³ Tridtsat let na Staroi Ploshchadi [Thirty Years at the Old Square] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnaia otnoshenii, 1998) and Nesbyvsheesia: neravnodushnye zametki o perestroike [What Was Not to Be: Engaged Notes on Perestroika] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnaia otnoshenii, 2005).

⁴ Especially his American Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretations (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983; I still use it with my graduate students).
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Let me add just a couple of comments on ‘development’. Combs (and Ian Roxborough, in his excellent review in the AHR) both see me as a bit of a ‘peasant romantic’. Let me assure them that I am too close in terms of background to the peasant world to feel any form of romantic attraction to it – it is, often, a harsh life. But I do still believe that the many forms of violence perpetrated against peasant communities in the name of progress are indefensible. It is morally wrong, as well as counterproductive, to treat whole population groups as statistics. The arrogance with which outsiders often approach Third World communities is a recipe for disaster, because it breeds resistance through ignoring local knowledge. I am not against vaccinations, or alphabetization, or clean water. But I am for more humility and respect for the choices of others when involving oneself with cultures abroad.

The same goes, to some extent at least, for the overall anti-interventionist argument that the book presents. As shown in The Global Cold War, I have very little patience with Cold War socialist utopias. All of them were dysfunctional. Some were horror-shows, like the Soviet-backed Mengistu regime in Ethiopia or Pol Pot's Cambodia, which China supported. The reason why I focus in on the United States and its actions is simply that it was, by far, the most powerful nation during the Cold War, and the one that could set the parameters that others would operate by. During the époque I am looking at, the United States, in terms of its foreign interventions, got it wrong more often than it got it right, and a lot of human suffering resulted. In policy terms, if there was an alternative, I think it was the same as it is for the United States today: democracies do not intervene abroad unless they are attacked or they are prevailed upon to do so by a world organization. This is an attitude that might seem ‘lame’, as some American reviewers have pointed out. But if so, that is an affliction that post-Iraq policymakers should be praying for.

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