
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Robert Dean, Kurk Dorsey, Jeffrey A. Engel, Bruce Kuklick


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The field of interpretive overviews of U.S. diplomacy has flourished since 1960 with many leading scholars reaching back into the colonial origins and revolutionary period for the foundations of America's attitudes on foreign affairs and diplomatic record. Richard W. Van Alstyne's *The Rising American Empire* (1960) and William A. Williams' *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959) initiated new approaches in this field with Van Alstyne focusing on the emergence of a conception of American empire out of the 18th century European imperial struggle for dominance and its development through continental expansion into insular imperialism in the Caribbean and Pacific. Williams shifted attention further to internal sources shaping American expansion and the quest for overseas market opportunities culminating in a powerful 20th century drive for an open door for American trade and investment at the expense of American ideals of self determination and representative government. More recently, Walter LaFeber has reinforced the Williams perspective on the transforming impact of economic considerations in *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750*. Robert Kagan joined the field with the first of a projected two-volume study, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century* (2006), which was featured in an H-Diplo roundtable in April 2007. Like Williams and LaFeber, Kagan focuses on the 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 evolving conflict among American leaders on the appropriate foreign policies.

Walter Hixson has taken up the challenge of rethinking the nature of American foreign policy with critical enthusiasm. He agrees with many of his predecessors’ emphasis on the domestic sources of American policy and that the United States is a dangerous nation but not in Kagan’s sense of the United States as a threatening model of modernity with its revolutionary ideology and liberal, commercial society. Instead, Hixson proposes a cultural reinterpretation, which relies on concepts from the “linguistic turn” that Hixson introduces in appendices, most notably postmodernist theory, Gramscian cultural hegemony, and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. As Hixson emphasizes in his response to the reviews, his intent is “to get a place at the table, especially at the diplomatic history table, for postmodernist analysis.”

Hixson advances a thesis that stresses continuity in American policy from a “culturally constructed and hegemonic” national identity that emerged from the Puritans in the colonial period and gained affirmation as “the Myth of America” through the revolution and Constitution and beyond to the present. By relying on the categories of race, gender, and religion, Hixson explores how Americans created a myth of progress, peacefulness in international relations, superiority in all areas, and belief in self-determination. Hixson challenges this patriotic self-image and, instead, suggests that the United States is

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exceptionally aggressive and frequently resorts to war in response to internal psychic crises. “Foreign policy flows from cultural hegemony affirming ‘America’ as a manly, racially superior, and providentially destined ‘beacon of liberty,’” Hixson suggests, “a country which possesses a special right to exert power in the world. Hegemonic national identity drives a continuous militant foreign policy, including the regular resort to war.” (1-2)

Although several reviewers don’t agree with Hixson’s thesis in different respects, they also don’t reject the importance of considering cultural influences on U.S. foreign policies. As Jeffery Engel notes, Hixson brings together a “synthesis of cultural critiques of American society and its foreign policy” that will help to challenge excessive triumphalism about America’s past policies.

1.) Robert Dean is sympathetic to Hixson’s cultural orientation and critique of U.S. policy: “Hixson’s reframing of the standard narrative has a bracing effect, and could prove illuminating to students unfamiliar with such approaches to our national history,” Dean suggests. (2) However, Dean questions whether the “Myth of America,” Hixson’s trope to summarize a collection of patriotic views on America, is used too frequently as a substitute for analysis of specific situations and change over time. Dean points to more divisions among Americans based on “race, class, gender, religion, region, and other factors” that contribute to “perpetual recurrence of struggles over ideology and the mythic underpinnings that legitimate claims to power.”

2.) Bruce Kuklick is not sympathetic to Hixson’s approach, particularly his reliance on cultural theories at the expenses of traditional empiricism. “Scholarship is not a great tool, but it is the best thing we have to overcome our personal passions,” Kuklick warns, so historians can engage “... with shared access to the data that support different interpretations.” (3) Hixson, for example, moves rapidly through the 19th and 20th centuries until he slows down to address the Cold War and engage in more discussion of specific policies.

3.) Continuity in the “Myth of America” and ensuing continuity in U.S. policy is a central characteristic of Hixson’s study. Dean and Jeffrey Engel, however, question this perspective in several ways. Dean, for example, suggests that the mythic discourse is more contested, most recently in the anti-Vietnam War movement and in the protests against aspects of President George W. Bush’s war on terror and the Iraq war. Engel comments that Hixson at times ignores the international context that has an important impact on U.S. attitudes and policy. An international environment in the 1930s characterized increasingly by German and Japanese expansion clearly prompted changes in U.S. policy under Franklin D. Roosevelt and changes in American public views. Hixson, however, points to the Myth as leading the U.S. to challenge Japan. “The point is not that U.S. entry into World War II was necessarily wrong or mistaken but rather to unpack the hegemonic interpretation in order to broaden inquiry into the coming of the war, the war itself, and its profound consequences,” observes Hixson, who concludes that the “United States went to war
in an identity-driven quest to see its way of life prevail in Europe and Asia.” (161-162)

4.) Kurt Dorsey questions two central manifestations of Hixson’s thesis, most notably that the U.S. aggressively resorted to the use of military force throughout its history and that an internally based psychic crisis always contributed to the reliance on force. Dorsey notes a number of situations where, if the United States eagerly sought war, it could have acted sooner rather than later from the gradual origins of the War of 1812 to the impact of the Cuban independence movement and war with Spain in 1898 to the impact of the Lusitania crisis in 1915, and the step-by-step gradualism of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1965. Dorsey also challenges the value of Hixson’s psychic crisis theory in which he makes use of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory: Hixson writes “I am arguing that foreign policy, and especially the choosing of war, reflects a virulent form, an overdetermination, of identity-affirming representation. Ultimately, violence against external enemy-others flows from the psychic crisis of representation, the alienation stemming from the inability to achieve the Real.” (318) Hixson refers to a psychic crisis template every time that the U.S. goes to war (13, 28, 50-51, 67, 98-100, 121, 159, 251, 289), but Dorsey suggests that “any moment in any country’s history can be made into a point of psychic crisis pretty conveniently, and that convenience weakens Hixson’s overarching argument.”

5.) A central question is how well Hixson’s thesis holds up with respect to major policy makers and decisions for war. Woodrow Wilson, for example, would appear to fit Hixson’s “Myth of America” considering his racialism, his patriarchal gender views, his religious perspective, and his intense commitment to American democracy and capitalism. Did these beliefs along with a psychic crisis prompt Wilson to move aggressively for war in 1914-1917? Robert W. Tucker’s Woodrow Wilson and the Great War: Reconsidering America’s Neutrality, 1914-1917 (2007), the subject of a recent H-Diplo roundtable,† offers a close analysis of Wilson as he tried to defend America’s neutral rights and stay out of the war. Tucker is critical of Wilson’s failure to maintain a neutral stance on British policies in contrast with his insistence on the right of Americans to travel on neutral and belligerent passenger liners and merchant vessels. Once Wilson recognized that the circumstances of the war and his policy positions put him on the course for war with Germany, Tucker depicts Wilson as engaging in a variety of maneuvers and mediations to avoid entry into the war. All of Hixson’s Myth concepts exert pressure on Wilson but he seems to resist them until Germany launches unrestricted submarine warfare.

6.) Hixson devotes three chapters to the Cold War and in a general sense agrees with the recent emphasis of Melvyn Leffler and Vlad Zubok on the conflict as competition between two modernist societies to defend and advance their systems and visions on a global basis. Hixson suggests that the “Myth of America” imposed a constructed narrative on the conflict that “reflected continuity within national identity and foreign policy rather than a postwar phenomenon brought on by Soviet expansionism.” Hixson notes that many real things happened in the Cold War, such as the “Neocolonial Nightmares” in chapter eight in Latin America, Africa, and Vietnam, and he does give significant influence to the military industrial complex as a shaping factor on U.S. policy. Yet the Cold War “is nonetheless a cultural construction devoid of ontological status. Simply put, the Cold War always was and still is a narrative discourse, not a reality.” (166) As Hixson explains this further in his response, “one must distinguish between events of the period, such as the Berlin Blockade, and the framing of these events, such as the trope ‘Cold War,’ with all the meaning that was attached to it within American culture.” (3)

7.) In his concluding chapters on the end of the Cold War, September 11th and the “Global Crusade” against terror and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Hixson identifies Ronald Reagan as the first postmodern President who “embodied the providential destiny inherent in Myth of America identity” and pursued the “Evil Empire” from Central America to Afghanistan and into space with the Strategic Defense Initiative (255-256, 264-268) as the Soviet Union abandoned the Cold War and hegemony in Eastern Europe. However, Hixson emphasizes that the myth requires an evil enemy-other to replace the Soviet Union and the Bush Presidents found it in Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the current Iraq War. September 11th is viewed by Hixson as “blow back” from the conflict with Iran since 1979, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with excessive U.S. backing of Israel, and the U.S. involvement in the Soviet-Afghan conflict with the mujahideen.

Participants:

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Like many historians, I have been watching for years in horror and bemusement while the Bush administration commits an endless series of egregious imperial blunders and brutalities. What could they have been thinking as they launched their ill-fated campaigns of neo-colonial conquest and domination in the Middle East? For anyone who has paid even cursory attention to events of the twentieth century, most especially to the fate of the United States in Vietnam and to that of the Soviets in Afghanistan, it should be evident that the day when great powers could simply impose their will by force upon troublesome “natives” is long past. Nonetheless, the policy of the Bush administration has been to cling desperately to failure, just as their predecessors in the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations did when faced with a nation they could not “build” with aerial bombardment and counterinsurgency campaigns. One assumes that President Bush and his functionaries expect to be long out of office for the final disastrous dénouement of the tragedy they set in motion.

With *The Myth of American Diplomacy* Walter Hixson has constructed a comprehensive, synthetic argument that, among other things, attempts to explain the otherwise irrational choices that led the Bush administration to choose war in this latest iteration of U.S. imperial ambition. A hegemonic American national “identity” constructed and perpetually reconstructed throughout the course of history since the onset of Anglo-American colonial settlement provides the (seemingly deterministic) core of his explanation. “Violent aggression inheres in national identity,” ergo, a “continuous pattern of warfare and intervention . . . flows from an identity rooted in nationalist modernity conjoined with psychic crisis.” (305) Implicit in Hixson’s argument is the proposition that Bush and his minions (or minders?) as adherents of this hegemonic identity had no choice but to lash out in calculated fury. “The September 11 assaults . . . ignited a renewal of warfare that functioned to assuage psychic crisis, reaffirm national identity, and reassert cultural hegemony.” (304)

Thus for Hixson, the Bush era “global war on terror” is a manifestation of the continuity of a culturally constructed foundational mythic identity stretching back to Jamestown and the Puritan migration. His is an assertively “cultural” interpretation of American foreign relations and American history in general. Cultural meanings provide the central agent of causation in his narrative. His analysis rests on a “postmodern” concern with the construction of discursive regimes and how that process is intertwined with the deployment of social power. That concern, however, manifests itself in his narrative not so much as an exploration of the construction of the mythic discourse itself, but as a set of...
assumptions used as a template against which the history of American empire is reframed. That method, to my mind, generates both the strength and the weakness of the narrative.

Hixson's argument is based on a very extensive reading of secondary sources, seen through the lens of his theoretical presuppositions. Relentlessly dispensing with the nationalist chauvinism that frames the current political discourse about America's “role” in the world, he retells the story as one of four hundred years of racial, religious, and gendered expansionist violence, wrapped in the patriotic platitudes of the “myth of America.” For those of us who have long been immersed in the literature that Hixson draws upon, the narrative is largely familiar. This is perhaps simply a pitfall of the genre—by its very nature, the grand synthesis of the whole span of U.S. history is going to cover much of the same ground that others of its kind have done. Nonetheless, Hixson's reframing of the standard narrative has a bracing effect, and could prove illuminating to students unfamiliar with such approaches to our national history. It may well prove irritating or even infuriating to historians invested in more traditional narratives.

I'm not sure though, that the notion of the “Myth of America” serves the argument very well. I sometimes thought that it functioned as a kind of shorthand that displaced analysis, rather than performing it. Hixson is aware of the pitfalls of reductionism and labels “the myth of America” as an “essentialist trope” used to frame his argument about national identity and its effect on foreign policy. (15) My question, I suppose, is whether or not the opacity of the phrase obscures as much as it reveals. While I find his reading of the politics of U.S. imperial expansion entirely plausible as a description of the largest patterns in their “hegemonic” form, a long history of various and sundry “resistances” to the dominant forms of expansionist discourse and practice gets short shrift. The implication that there has been only one “essential” mythic discourse shaping national identity is also questionable. That sort of argumentative strategy is perhaps understandable with the author's self-consciously reflexive narrative intentions to construct a short, readable revisionist synthesis that upends traditional nationalist historiography. Americans, however, have always been divided over questions of the proper ordering of social, economic, and political relations. Divided by race, class, gender, religion, region, and other factors, the U.S. and its history is characterized by the perpetual recurrence of struggles over ideology and the mythic underpinnings that legitimate claims to power.

Hixson is assiduous in his efforts to account for race and gender in his postmodern exploration of American foreign policy. Class, however, seems to get less attention as an element of discourses of national identity. I rather miss it. I wonder if the relative lack of attention to class is a function of the powerfully idealist thrust of the argument. The New Left revisionists come in for criticism of their overemphasis on the Open Door and material motivations for American policy. I agree that the notion of the domination of American foreign policy by corporate interests is too simple. But let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Some of my own work has striven to understand the intersection of personal and “national” identity-narratives among certain U.S. establishment elites. Class seems to me inseparable from gender and race in understanding how power-holders act in the discursive world they inhabit (or for understanding how that discursive world is constructed). Here lies perhaps another of the formal problems of the synthetic survey.
Hixson has written. Individual political actors, or even other organized political subsets, tend to drop out of sight, with any assessment of the specific “interests” that may situate them within a discursive field left largely to the imagination. Given the structure of his explanatory thesis, I would like to know if, or how, material interests are a part of the “psychic crisis” that is “conjoined” to nationalist modernity to propel the imperial project. Instead of such an analysis, if I may be permitted a little good-natured reductionism myself, at various places in the narrative the “Myth of America” leaps into the breach to “revivify” the white, Anglo-Saxon male dominated project of imperial war. In that usage, the trope of the “myth” doesn’t nourish my sense of the contingency and strangeness of the past, or of the human complexity of historical actors. My own aesthetic and intellectual preferences in the construction of this sort of historical narrative lean toward a close accounting of the intersections of discourses of national identity with the individual “identity-narratives” arising out of social experience that historical actors bring to their role. If “psychic crisis” is to be called upon to explain the actions of the state, I would like to know more about how, when, and why particular state actors experience such distress as they manipulate the levers of power.

Since the shadows of the current lunatic imperial misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan hover over the narrative, lending considerable weight and persuasiveness to the argument, I ask a perhaps unanswerable counterfactual question. Would Al Gore’s administration, had a bare majority of the Supreme Court not “selected” George W. Bush in the disastrous 2000 election, have responded to the terrorist attacks of September 2001 with an invasion of Iraq? I ask because the Gore team would have been subject to the play of signification and representation, and situated in a discursive “structure” of mythic national identity just as the Bush White House was. Somehow I suspect that Iraq would not have been on the short list for a campaign of “shock and awe” followed by the construction of “enduring bases.” This may, of course, be wishful thinking, as counterfactual speculation so often is. But if the history of the preceding decade offers useful clues, we can speculate that the invasion and destruction of the Iraqi state would likely not have happened. The Clinton administration certainly had its own style of empire, often employing one or another variant of cruise missile diplomacy, or as a last resort, intervention with an “exit strategy.” They exhibited, however, a marked aversion to outright conquest and occupation, preferring whenever possible an “open door” neoliberalism. If this counterfactual scenario is plausible, it makes a distinction with a difference that is meaningful to us as citizens and as historians. Discourses of national identity certainly help shape political practice, and our huge empire carries a lot of momentum in the direction that Walter Hixson has indicated. Nonetheless, the course of history is shaped by many other, sometimes mundane, contingencies. I can’t see how the operation of a mythic “national identity” provides an especially persuasive explanation of Bush v. Gore. Yet it may be that what could become the biggest disaster of U.S. foreign policy hinged upon that court decision at one point in a long and extraordinarily complex chain of causation.

So, I’ll conclude my commentary with kudos to Walter Hixson for constructing a narrative that eschews the obfuscating cant of nationalist pieties, and calls a spade a spade, and an expansionist empire an expansionist empire. At the same time I still harbor certain
epistemological reservations about the persuasiveness of “national identity” as the determinate causative agent in this narrative of imperial practice.
It would be informative and entertaining if, in the U.S. presidential election this fall, some network would arrange to have Walter Hixson ask the questions of the major candidates in a debate on foreign policy. Given his caustic assessment of the history of that policy, Hixson would certainly have a series of sharp exchanges with Republican John McCain to provide the entertainment value. But what might be truly informative would be watching Democrat Barack Obama (if I may risk a “Dewey-Defeats-Truman” moment) acknowledge many of Hixson’s specific points while disagreeing with his overall indictment of U.S. policy.

In The Myth of American Diplomacy, Walter Hixson puts forth probably the most damning assessment of U.S. foreign policy ever offered by a prominent historian. A blurb on the dust jacket from historian Michael Sherry of Northwestern University urges readers to see this book as following the tradition of William Appleman Williams's similarly titled The Tragedy of American Diplomacy, perhaps in that it attempts to challenge the dominant way of thinking about the broad sweep of U.S. diplomacy in relatively few pages, while synthesizing research on a new approach to understanding the United States’ view of the world. Whereas Williams focused on the power of economics, Hixson seeks to explain how American culture shapes U.S. foreign policy. Rather than being driven largely by economic influences, much less legitimate security concerns or a realistic understanding of the nation’s options, Hixson argues, U.S. foreign policy arises from a culture that leads American citizens to think far too highly of themselves and far too little of their serial opponents. The other key difference is that Williams seemed to think that there was an admirable core to the United States—hence the tragedy of failing to live up to its promise—while Hixson is relentlessly critical of American culture.

The four words or phrases that dominate his argument are “elide,” “enemy-other,” “psychic crisis,” and “pathological.” In their search for a usable past, those whom Hixson calls nationalist historians have, in his judgment, elided the truth repeatedly, playing down, for instance, the racism inherent in U.S. culture and the related aggressiveness of U.S. foreign policy. Rather, those historians have feted the United States as a land of equality that usually tries to export the best of its mythical qualities and chooses war only rarely. In short, they have created a powerful myth of American moral excellence that few U.S. citizens question, in part because it is hazardous to be seen as outside of the mythical sphere. Hixson, then, sees a nation that has convinced itself that it is superior, so that anyone who does not acknowledge that condition is easily dispatched to the ranks of enemy-other, from allegedly savage Indians to godless Communists (foreign or domestic). Once a group or nation has been confined to enemy-other status, it is just a matter of time before some psychic crisis comes along that makes it easy for the United States to turn to...

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warfare. Hixson portrays the United States as a heavily militarized country, both in terms of armaments in hand and attitudes in mind, so when things go poorly bitter Americans can readily turn to military adventure to right perceived wrongs brought on the nation by those enemy-others who never bought into the myths of American goodness. What all of this adds up to, in Hixson’s conclusion, is a pathological militancy toward enemy-others, based not on anything of importance that those others have done, but rather on problems inherent in U.S. culture.

Therefore, one of the core arguments that Hixson makes early on is that there is great continuity over time in American culture and foreign policy. Broad changes in technology, the economy, and society have not dented the stable loyalty to imperial nationalism reaching back to the days of the Puritans and only reinforced after U.S. independence. When dissenters from time to time challenge the myth of American greatness, they are vigorously swatted down, unless they dissent in the name of preserving that greatness in the face of disastrous policies, in which case they might have marginal influence. Political leaders and scholars have both contributed to the creation and reinforcement of the American myth, which has insinuated itself throughout society, even to the singing of the national anthem before sporting events.

Most of the material that Hixson brings to bear to make his case, such as President James Polk’s aggressiveness toward Mexico or President Harry Truman’s unwillingness to sympathize with Soviet concerns, will probably not be new to moderately well-read students of U.S. history. Because the purpose of the book is to show the continuity in American culture and foreign policy, Hixson is thorough, if necessarily brief, in his coverage of events. Still, the vehemence with which he makes his case is striking, and the focus on broad continuity and negative consequences is unlike any other scholarly book. Even those enemies of the United States of whom Hixson is critical are usually the aggrieved party in their disputes with the United States. As an example, while the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hixson reminds us that they were provoked by U.S. officials who really did not want peace and had no respect for those of another race.

Methodologically, what sets this book apart is Hixson’s unusual use of theory. The four appendices explicitly lay out his faith in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and others whom most diplomatic historians have not dealt with since that (painful?) graduate school methodology course. Together, they provide an underpinning for Hixson’s dismissal of the empirical historians who have provided much of the structure of the Myth of America that Hixson seeks to destroy. Their fetishization of archival documents, he charges, “crowds out critical thinking (p. 4),” and their faith in objectivity is misguided.

The upshot of his examination is a policy prescription: the United States needs to reject its unilateral hegemonic policy in favor of a new postmodern, international hegemony. Instead of defying the world, the United States should reject nationalist impulses and work with other countries to solve a whole host of problems, such as environmental degradation and terrorism, which resist nationalist solutions. Hixson does not spell out how such a radical shift might actually happen, although I suspect that he would see Senator Obama as
the closest thing to a plausible post-modern leader—a person who transcends what Hixson calls racial modernity and has a complex international background—who might be able to eschew the old ideas.

The problem with the policy prescription is that it is based on the core idea that the American people either have been fooled by leaders and historians into following a hyper-nationalistic foreign policy or have willingly bought into it despite its egregious flaws, or both. Because the United States has been either isolated or powerful for most of its history, Hixson suggests, it never faced any real external threats that required the nation to sacrifice for a greater cause. It seems unlikely that many U.S. citizens will want to be told that they have been chumps, at best, and pathological killers at worst. More prosaically, the book has only a few pages on that prescription with no sense of how such deeply-engrained attitudes might be dug out and recast, especially because most Americans seem to like what they have. It is easy to imagine Obama, without his American flag lapel pin, squirming under intense questioning, feeling basically sympathetic to many of Hixson’s points while not wishing to suffer the same fate as fellow presidential aspirants Dennis Kucinich or Ron Paul, both of whom ran on platforms that proposed major contractions in U.S. military commitments around the world. Hixson, correctly, would point to the flap about lapel pins as a small symbol of the power of the Myth of America hegemony, demonstrating the unelectability of anyone who challenges the myth in a serious way. Indeed, Hixson’s points about culture are often valuable in helping us understand both history and current events. And yet his steady drumbeat of criticism does not match the complex record of good and bad motivations and outcomes that mark the foreign policy of the United States—or almost any country.

In particular, the idea that the United States has been pathologically quick to use military force does not seem to mesh with the historical record. Given the Chesapeake affair, the War of 1812 could just as easily have been the War of 1807. The Cuban revolution that led to war with Spain had been going on for three years by the time the United States chose to use force against Spain in 1898. The First World War could have become an American war in May, 1915 with the sinking of the Lusitania. And even the massive intervention in Vietnam might plausibly have happened in 1954 rather than a decade later. One can legitimately critique the timing of the use of force and even the reason for using force in each case, but it is hard to see how these decisions fit a pathological pattern. Even the continued existence of Canada and Mexico as independent states would seem to defy the notion of the United States as pathologially militarized—surely someone could have cooked up a psychic crisis to erase those two nations. Hixson suggests that the United States did not annex all of Mexico because Americans did not wish to deal with those allegedly culturally inferior Mexicans, but then the United States was less aggressive with Canada because the Canadians were so culturally similar. The cultural explanation is thus so malleable that it can explain anything, even policies with contradictory outcomes, which makes it too good to be true.

In a similar vein, the definition of psychic crisis seems so broad as to be nearly meaningless. In Hixson’s rendition, the United States comes across as a perpetual teenager, stuck in crisis mode. The psychic crisis idea probably does help to explain the decision to intervene in
Korea in 1950 or more obviously to invade Iraq in 2003, but at other times it is less convincing. Surely two of the greatest crises in American history came in the early 1890s and 1930s. The former had passed before the decision for war with Spain, and the latter if anything caused the United States to shy away from military entanglements overseas. Conversely, the psychic crises that Hixson sees at the root of U.S. involvement in World War I, such as the rise of the suffrage movement, hardly seem to have peaked in 1917. In short, any moment in any country’s history can be made into a point of psychic crisis pretty conveniently, and that convenience weakens Hixson’s overarching argument.

It is also difficult to see how the proposed international hegemony would work in reality. Hixson lists increased cooperation on environmental affairs as one plausible benefit of the dismissal of the myth of America. In fact, over the 20\textsuperscript{th} century no country did more than the United States to promote international environmental protection. That record has been eroded over the last eight years with the stubborn refusal of the Bush Administration to join the growing consensus on human-induced climate change. Whether the next administration is John McCain’s, Hillary Clinton’s, or Barack Obama’s, the United States is likely to go back to its old role of being more of a leader than a follower, and it is also likely that the United States and China, for reasons of economics and culture, will not only disagree on climate change but also have nearly insurmountable differences that would preclude any functioning international hegemony.

*The Myth of American Diplomacy* is likely to be the subject of vigorous debate in graduate seminars (if not, unfortunately, the subject of a presidential debate), just as *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* has been for fifty years. Like Williams before him, Walter Hixson should be applauded for bringing together an enormous amount of material, including theory new to his fellow diplomatic historians, and forcing us to ponder the role of culture, not just as an occasional influence, but instead as the driving force in making U.S. foreign policy. In the end, I believe that he stakes too much on cultural influences and describes U.S. culture incorrectly. But then, having been friendly with Walter for twenty years, I am fairly certain that he regards me as too much of a nationalist historian with an unwarranted faith in archival sources and objectivity.
Walter Hixson has written a sweeping new study of American foreign policy. By embracing the cultural turn in the academy that has been the source of so much discussion, revision, and anger over the past generation (if not longer), Hixson puts American conceptions of a unique American identity at the fore of his story, arguing that self-generated conceptions of superiority have, since well before the Revolutionary War, placed Americans on a violent course against their neighbors and the wider world. Because, as he notes, “identity can only be constituted in relation to difference [5],” American notions of their own divinely-mandated excellence led to conflict with others deemed different and inferior by extension. Hixson suggests American national policymakers have felt little compunction in dismissing other peoples deemed racially, religiously, or culturally inferior, because their own self-interest appeared self-evidently paramount. Expansion and war usually followed whenever interest and identity coincided in this fashion, just as the American sense of superiority grew with every successfully-orchestrated conflict with others. Because a fused national identity brooks little dissent, he further argues, the American public has over time reflexively consented to whatever policies its leaders argue are in their best interest, even if such policies appear hypocritical or even dangerous when viewed by contemporaries and by historians aided by hindsight and by the evolution of social norms. Notions of superiority beget war, in other words, which reinforce celebration of American group-identity, thus fueling further conflicts with others. The cycle is both never-ending and self-sustaining, meaning the United States remains the warrior state of its inception by virtue of its faith in itself.

Hixson’s study is sure to be read by serious students of American foreign policy over the next generation. As a synthesis of cultural critiques of American society and its foreign policy, this single volume offers a singular example of how historians of the past two generations have frequently come not to celebrate American accomplishments but rather
to complicate our understanding of the subterranean pain and suffering that so frequently accompanied grand achievements celebrated by national consensus. For teachers seeking an antidote for students stricken by a pre-collegiate education that consciously celebrates American virtue and achievement above all others, Hixson's book will offer at first blush an appealing choice. By bringing together a plethora of secondary works and monographs into a cohesive whole, he has surely generated the basis for many a vibrant classroom discussion.

Perhaps, however, he has provided more explosive fuel than healthy fodder. *The Myth of American Diplomacy* is an angry and breathless book, not only a synthesis but a litany of woe. Hixson's American state never misses an opportunity to be racist, sexist, oppressive, derisive of foreigners and dismissive of domestic dissent. Its leaders speak of liberty and claim to act in its name, yet they consistently assault critics (at home and abroad) who reject the chains of the American system. Because it compiles a myriad of similar critiques drawn from the whole of American history into a single volume, and because it does so with such an furious tone, it is quite possible that Hixson's book will in time be read more as an example of the early 21st century anger over the long-standing belligerency of American foreign policy, a proclivity for violence abroad and uniformity of thought veiled as political consensus at home, than it will be employed as a definitive history of American foreign policy. We read the Nye Commission's work (or at least, we know of the work) as a way of explaining the widespread frustration with the American experience in World War I, just as we teach our students to read from the *Annales* of the same period in order to understand the psychic trauma of post-war French society. Samuel Huntington or Francis Fukuyama's post-Cold War treatises are typically assigned less because their arguments appear valid than because they highlight the zeitgeist of their period. Such is oftentimes the fate of synthetic arguments: they tell us much about the author and his times as they reveal much about the past. Arguably they simultaneously demand additional study and more varied perspectives if readers are to gain a full picture of that complicated past. The best syntheses—those by William Appleman Williams, Paul Kennedy, or Charles Beard leap to mind—prompt such further study. They are catalysts in the search for knowledge more than full answers themselves.

For experts in American diplomatic history, especially those trained in the culturally sensitive environment he embraces and who are thus themselves used to many of his central arguments, there is little new in this book save Hixson's own synthesis. Put simply: if you went to graduate school in the last thirty years, you will not be shocked by what Hixson puts forth. Moreover, to be well versed in the field’s literature and ever-expansive list of studies on race, gender, language and even identity is to recognize at once the validity of Hixson's examples. To be an expert, however, is to simultaneously realize his exclusion of other noteworthy topics and perspectives that did not aid his overall argument, including economic motivations for American policy most of all, as well as security fears of past generations of American leaders that appear difficult for later historians to justify. This should not surprise readers, nor is it a critique of Hixson's effort. Syntheses rarely surprise well-trained readers. Their goal is to bring together the thoughts of a field, not to force a radical change of direction.
I will return to what the book tells us after first giving due attention to what Hixson argues. Beginning with the influx of European immigrants following the Columbian voyages, and continuing his tale through to the present day, Hixson posits that American notions of superiority and exceptionally, that which he terms a "Myth of America"—a term capitalized throughout the book—have through every generation provided not only justification for American policies of expansion, genocide, and war, but more importantly have fostered a fused notion of acceptable American identity so powerful and pervasive as to make dissent virtually impossible for the bulk of Americans. The mass of American citizens do not recoil with horror at the actions of their nation against "inferior" peoples, in other words, because the underlying logic of American superiority appears so patently obvious. “I argue that national identity is both culturally constructed and hegemonic,” he writes on page one. “I argue, moreover, that national identity drives U.S. foreign policy and reinforces domestic hierarchies. Foreign policy flows from cultural hegemony affirming ‘America’ as a manly, racially superior, and providentially destined ‘beacon of liberty,’ a country which possesses a special right to exert power in the world [1].” His words are truth in advertising, as the sentiment pervades the book. Successive chapters drive this central argument home. Every generation of Americans believed themselves superior to other peoples, other races, other religions, and ultimately to other ways of viewing the world, he argues. American leaders moreover believed they possessed the right as well as the ability to judge the needs of others, all of which led to policies that endorsed violent expansion as a means of enlarging the sphere of American largesse while simultaneously employing conflict with others to solidify domestic consensus at home.

We have, of course, Europe to blame for all of this. Hixson reports that American notions of superiority grew directly from the cultures of its original European settlers, who considered the indigenous peoples of the Americas inferior along every conceivable matrix. To dominate such peoples was an American birthright, one, Hixson argues, that was extended in time to Africans, Asians, and even women at home and abroad. Might makes right, in other words, or rather when powerful peoples require a justification for their own exertions of power, notions of superiority are readily at hand. As most citizens find it better to jump on this bandwagon of superiority than to admit exclusion from a master race and culture, few are willing to object too strenuously to the physical exertions of American identity at the cost of others.

Hixson provides a litany of tragic examples in support of his thesis. European settlers eradicated indigenous peoples; they enslaved Africans; and they rebuffed and ultimately oppressed strange religions. Successive generations of Americans proved every bit the equals of their predecessors. “The passing of the Indians confirmed for many the continental destiny of the superior white race, broadening cultural space for the subsequent invasion of Mexico [65],” Hixson intones. “The same drives that underlay slavery and Indian conquest fueled the Mexican War, as U.S. history texts benignly reference the 1846 invasion.” He further adds, “the violent hegemony that prevailed in Texas created a militarized culture of war in which the White Texans seized land from the Tejanos as well as the Comanches, Wichitas, Caddos, and other Indians.” The result was nothing short of “unrelenting ethnic cleansing [65],” though he thoughtfully adds that the “militant culture of Texas” alone did not justify such oppressive American expansionism.
“Convictions of Anglo-Saxon superiority, providential destiny, and modernist progress underlay westward expansion as traders, investors, land-hungry settlers, missionaries, farmers, cattle ranchers, and visionaries of an eventual U.S. ‘empire on the pacific’ flocked to the west and Southwest [65].” Racism and violence underlay the entire American experience in Hixson’s view. “Nothing was more American than ethnic cleansing of Indians [89].”

Such oppressive behavior continued well past the nineteenth century. In later chapters, Hixson applies the same logic and the same language to decry American action against Spain in 1898, American economic and cultural expansion throughout the Western Hemisphere during the same period and after, the nation’s entry into both World Wars and throughout the Cold War, and ultimately in the post-Cold War period when the dissolution of communism served as final confirmation of American superiority for pundits and policymakers alike. Success reinforced further notions of superiority, Hixson suggests. Every victory in war proved the divinely inspired manifest wisdom of American expansion; so too did every decision for war spur a spasmodic celebration of American ideals at home, as confirmation of the Myth of America led to conformity of thought at home. By the Cold War, in fact, Hixson argues that American leaders actively chose war as a way of shoring up domestic consent, seeking conflict with others as a way of reaffirming the unity and the unified purpose of American identity. Even defeat in Vietnam in time became a rallying cry for further military exploits. In Hixson’s view, that war was “the ultimate neocolonial nightmare,” fought in a nation that “functioned as little more than a site for the United States to act out the pathological drives of its militant national identity [244].” Under President Ronald Reagan, “Cultural remasculinization in the wake of defeat in Indochina and the Iran hostage crisis drove the male-dominated national security state to seek out opportunities to directly employ military power and to win such conflicts [263].” By his chapters on the Cold War Hixson has wisely incorporated the desire of the military industrial complex to seek war and unified national identity as the surest roads to guaranteed profits, though he employs this device less as an acceptance of the importance of the economic motivations of policymakers than as merely another layer of sin at the root of American evil. Greed thus mixed with racial, religious, liberal, and gender notions of superiority in a heady brew few if any Americans could withstand, or would want to.

Hixson makes a compelling case for the importance of cultural hegemony as both a unifying factor at home and a driver of policies abroad. Few would quibble with his argument that notions of racial superiority fueled westward expansion, the development of a nascent colonial empire after 1898, or even the reflexive military response to opposition in Asia or the Middle East. Whether discussing the Japanese, Somalis, or Arabs, Hixson helps explain why opponents to American rule seem unwilling to merely accept the home-grown logic of American superiority.

Hixson sometimes goes too far, especially when his prosecution of the American past ignores the broader international context. Yes, Americans were largely convinced of their own superiority, but less so than say the Nazis or those same Japanese imperialists whose worldview contributed at least in part to the violence of World War II. Americans are not alone in thinking their system and their society best; they are not alone in privileging their
own identity and their own perceived needs. Hixson acknowledges this potential for comparisons in his introduction, but then concedes that American society will prove his sole concern. It is no great sin to focus a book of American history on the American past, as surely there is enough fuel for his fire within that story. However, even cursory nods towards other societies would have helped readers understand the context and the depth of American policies. The Americans in his story did not engage a world as devoid of life and opposition as those mythic textbooks he cites would have their readers perceive of the virginal American West. Other states played their role in conflict as well. Yet Hixson’s focus on American identity alone creates for the reader a picture American sin distinct from context. And sometimes, context matters. “In 1941 polls showed that Britain was the European country the U.S. public liked best,” Hixson argues during a lengthy and provocative critique of World War II as a “good” war. Yet given the alternatives of Hitler’s Germany or Stalin’s Soviet state, this is a case where most Americans in fact got it right even after factoring in their own cultural affinity for the nation (Great Britain) considered most like themselves. “During the Blitz, Hitler’s bombing assault on London,” Hixson writes, “Edward R. Murrow and other broadcasters vividly reported on the besieged island outpost of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Many Americans came to see the war as a great moral cause for all of Western civilization. [145]” Even if we grant Hixson’s suggestion that the real heroes of World War II should be those who opposed the insane destructiveness of war to their very marrow, I for one am capable of simultaneously seeing virtue in opposition to a system as hideously evil as Nazism. It is a shame, as Hixson points out, that subsequent American leaders have employed the image of Hitler as a means of rallying their people to war against lesser despots, but even if we accept Hixson’s portrait of an imperfect American society we should not forget that other societies might in fact be worse. Washington was wrong to jail Japanese-Americans during World War II. Berlin built Auschwitz. The difference matters.

Even more importantly, with its ceaseless condemnation of the American past the book obscures the complexity of the choices faced by Americans in the past, no matter how flawed their ultimate decisions. Hixson applies a 2008 sense of morality to individuals from the 17th century (it would be more shocking to discover that Cotton Mather was not a racist than to understand that he lived in a world in which racial differences mattered). This, along with the tone of the book, is its greatest flaw.

The book thus serves as a synthesis and as a primary source for future historians seeking to understand a growing critique of American foreign policy at the close of the second Bush Administration. It also inadvertently raises for readers of H-Diplo an important though rarely discussed question of the importance of tone. I consider Hixson’s tone unfortunate if it turns off potential converts, because nuggets of insight pervade this book. To be really influential, we should therefore ponder, must writers exercise rhetorical restraint? I submit that to persuade one must speak in language acceptable to the listener. The content of one’s argument need not change, but perhaps the politeness quotient should be proportioned to the likely approval or disapproval of the audience. Hixson’s book is a fascinating read. It will prove less influential than it might otherwise have been not because of what he writes, but the manner in which it was written.
Gabriel Kolko, the director of my dissertation, was a positivist. Over and over he would tell me to drown myself in the facts, and from them the truth of American imperialism would appear. The data will direct you to the truth. In his best book, *The Triumph of Conservatism* (1963), Kolko presented his own view of the Progressive Movement. His explanation of what was going on, which used the concept of “political capitalism,” came in the context of a theoretical appendix discussing with the reader the failings of the theories of Marx, Weber, and Veblen to explain the evidence—just as Hixson provides us with several theoretical appendices.

Gar Alperovitz, whose *Atomic Diplomacy* (1965) was the model for my own early work, was less clearly a positivist, but in his own mind he believed that the assemblage of information would force the historian to come to the same conclusions about the end of World War Two and the beginning of the Cold War as Alperovitz himself had. My hero, then and today, was William Appleman Williams, and in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1962) he had a larger vision of American diplomatic history than either Kolko or Alperovitz. He was not at all a theoretician but an historian who saw his discipline as subject to wide interpretative differences. Williams, I believe, thought that there was more wiggle-room in what historians might take as essential about the American experience, and his book more or less called on his peers to shift their angle of vision. Indeed, his looser sense of the scientific nature of history was probably what energized his critics to attack him so ferociously: they seemed to be saying that Williams's broad vision was a product of his personal deficiencies and would not hold up to impartial scrutiny.

I have always thought Williams had the better of this argument, in part because his ideas corroborated for me the pragmatist philosophy I also studied during the 1960s. I bring up these personal matters because Hixson’s *The Myth of American Diplomacy* revives many of the themes of the revisionism of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet Hixson employs an array of anti-positivist theoretical devices that, I suspect, would make Kolko cringe and that would even make Williams back off a bit. I must say that they have made me reappraise my openness to Williams’s relativism.
The theoretical orientation of *The Myth of American Diplomacy* certainly makes the book unappealing for a student audience. But unless one has a fairly deep understanding of American foreign policy and its connection to domestic issues, this book will be rough going in any case. It jumps around chronologically, does not take up many matters, and often gives us an evaluation of events without much of a detailed discussion. Instead of historical analysis of a problem, Hixson frequently quotes the appraisals of the problem by authors of whom he approves. The book is best read as a commentary on the history of American international politics that might be read alongside some heavily descriptive account.

So the book is a theoretical interpretation. That makes it hard to read. What makes it less than profitable to read is that the theorizing in the book is not clear. Hixson's introduction and four Appendices (which we are advised to consider right at the start) strike me as attempts to tutor his fellow diplomatic historians in the new ways of postmodernism, but Hixson is quickly led into the contradictions and evasions of postmodernism.

Let's look at the central issues. Hixson argues that we must interpret the sweep of foreign policy as being determined by what he calls “The Myth of American Diplomacy.” This set of presumptions is a fundamental way of seeing things that prompts Americans and their leaders to presume that they stand for sacred notions of liberty and justice. These values are always depicted by U.S. leaders as being threatened by adversaries who, in their hostility to freedom and right, inevitably are out to destroy America. Thus, its citizens are constantly called upon to defend themselves and a form of life that is ultimately desirable for all peoples.

This is my gloss of Hixson's more abstract language, which employs talk of a monolithic discursive regime, a metanarrative, a cultural construct, an imaginary, and the “representations” Americans have about their history, their past behavior, and their present actions. In the use of these conceptual mechanisms, Hixson goes beyond my rendering of these ideas as equivalent to a constellation of enduring American beliefs. The author repeatedly writes that there is nothing beyond this imaginary construct. There is for example no such thing as the Cold War, in which the democratic and peace-loving United States battled a malevolent Soviet empire. The Cold War has no “ontological status” – it is not real, but only a way of talking and doing (166). Historians in particular are mistakenly chained to an outmoded empiricism, whereby they think they can find out if certain aspects of the Cold War happened or did not happen the way they are thought to have happened.

Instead, aided by these heavyweight notions, Hixson outlines what The Myth is and the continuities that it exhibits. And this task involves him in telling us how The Myth has led American to behave. For example, we see Americans defending “their” lands and attacking Indians, the British Empire, the Spanish in Cuba, the Germans in the first half of the twentieth century, and the Russians in the second-half. The United States needs enemies of the good to define itself and can always find them. The Myth leads the United States to make perpetual war for perpetual peace. Hixson often talks about this as “the binary” of America.
Here is the first problem: why should we accept this examination of The Myth as an adequate account of the American outlook unless we resort to some sort of empiricism? Why shouldn’t we conclude that a different sort of myth best represents American doings and undergoings? Why should we pay any attention to Hixson’s Myth as a persuasive depiction of the American discursive regime unless he can convince us with evidence? He rather tells us that history is like fiction and has a lot in common with literature (310).

Here is a second and related problem. Hixson goes beyond laying out how Americans and their leaders have thought about their foreign policy. He also says their belief is a myth. That is, it is something that is not true. And, Hixson does know what is true. Some sorts of psychoanalytic theory, he repeatedly asserts, demonstrate that psychic crisis inheres in the attempt to establish people’s social identity. This is central to the human condition in all societies, but in the United States the response to unacknowledged internal anxieties always leads to external aggression. The peculiar narrative that Americans have of their national history is actually a working out of a fearful hyper-masculine and racist hostility and belligerence. The Myth, says Hixson, is pathological (e.g., 15). Moreover, some Americans have seen that The Myth does not square with “social actualities” (246), and the United States has worked against “economic and social progress” (219). The second problem is: why does Hixson think all this is true if all we know about are discursive regimes, and if history is like fiction?

Here is a third problem, to me the most significant. Hixson does not just describe what in truth has occurred, in contrast to The Myth. The truth has a moral dimension. The Myth is bad; the United States is “evil” (16); it has a “will to destroy” (290), commits “crimes against humanity” (42), and has “an affinity for fascism and militarism” (143). On the other side, all the domestic but unavailing enemies of The Myth – peace progressives, feminists, pacifists, and cooperative internationalists – are good. Hixson, like America, has his own binary. The deep problem for me is that Hixson again and again dismisses the claims of old-fashioned historical scholarship to establish truth. Yet at the same time he gives absolute credence to his own perspective and assessment.

Put aside the inconsistent theories, and we have in this book an attempt to unmask the pieties of American foreign affairs that one finds in the public, in policy makers, and in some historians. Underneath the mask, for Hixson, is a series of grotesque truths that may indeed tell us about the practice of international affairs in the United States. But in addition the way that the unmasking takes place tells us about Hixson’s own moral outlook, and his certainty that any person of good will must share his views.

Scholarship is not a great tool, but it is the best thing we have to overcome our personal passions; our private moral stance is crucial, but central to historical work is the attempt to put aside our individual proclivities. We need to look at the book’s denigration of history and Hixson’s elevation of his own morality. The repeated disdain for empiricism avoids our engagement with shared access to the data that support different interpretations. Hixson’s recurring statements that we are all caught up in our representations neglect to justify his own moral superiority.
In a not very deep way the book does sense that its theory is self-contradictory. No one, Hixson says, grasps the potential weaknesses of his volume more than he does. He tells us while the book is just a further move in a conversation, it is “a work of scholarship, not pure invention.” He knows that other nations have also distorted their pasts, and engaged in violent aggression (15-16). Nonetheless, Hixson implies these difficulties are resolved simply by admitting to them, and then asking us to move on.

Well, these are not just potential weaknesses, and I think careful readers with any sense of consistency will grasp them. You can’t have it both ways. If Hixson is only participating in a conversation, this book is pure invention. If nations can distort their past, then some histories will be empirically better than others. If other countries have engaged in violent aggression, then we had better ask if opposition to them was warranted. Although Hixson’s conclusions are hyperbolic and unnuanced, there is an element of truth in them. I wish The Myth of American Diplomacy had more respect for more standard way of showing that the conclusions were true, for it is not in control of the non-standard ways.
I would like to thank the organizers and participants in the H-Diplo Roundtable on *The Myth of American Diplomacy*. Although I found some of these reviews narrowly conceived, I appreciate the opportunity they provide to clarify some points and open discussion on these critical issues.

As the readers solicited by Yale University Press and other reviewers have noted, the book is a synthetic work covering the entire sweep of U.S. diplomacy. It emphasizes the continuity of U.S. foreign policy as rooted in a hegemonic national identity, which I have conceptualized (borrowing from Sacvan Bercovitch) as the “Myth of America.” Like all nations, the United States is an “imagined community”—its identity is not “real” but rather is rooted in discourse and representation. There is no such thing as the United States other than what we say (discourse) and show (representation, e.g. the American Flag) it to be. I have emphasized that a remarkably continuous foreign policy characterized by violence, militarism, and the regular resort to war flows from that hegemonic national identity; that an aggressive foreign policy is part of the glue that holds the imagined community together; that war has often been the nation’s response to psychic crisis. I think these ideas are important and worth discussing. Theory and non-traditional approaches to history—postmodernism, if you like—help to explain this argument. That’s why I use them, not because I like big words or have contempt for traditional historical practice. As I noted in the book, “None of this implies devolution of the discipline into anarchistic relativism, or the sudden irrelevance of documentary evidence, or contempt for extant historiography (upon which this study has been wholly dependent).” (306) This latter point seems lost on Bruce Kuklick, but more on his review later.

I’ll begin with Robert Dean, the only cultural historian among the five white men who organized and executed the reviews, not because (or only because) his was the most “favorable” review but because he also offered the most thoughtful criticism. Dean questions the usefulness of the “Myth of America,” the self-avowed “essentialist trope” that I employed to structure the narrative, and has his doubts about the frame of national identity as well. These concerns are legitimate and I won’t argue with them here; I don’t claim the book has all the answers. I use theory because it seemed to help in rethinking the history of American diplomacy. I would be most pleased if other scholars suggested alternative conceptualizations, but what I do believe is that certain core ideas, which are
cultural in nature, foster a hegemonic worldview that enables the regular resort to war and at the same time marginalizes peace progressives and advocates of domestic social justice. I understand that I have just said a mouthful; the book offers more than 300 pages of narrative explanation.

Dean also makes a telling point when he calls into question my relative de-emphasis of class. Certainly economic aspects of diplomacy have been well explored—by Charles Beard, William A. Williams, and a host of revisionist, corporatist, and cultural historians in their wake. But Dean’s critique points to something different, the need for more class-based analysis, not only of the sort that Dean himself has done, linking class with gender in the world of upper crust elites, but also more analysis of middle and working class worldviews on American diplomacy. I could and should have done more of this in the book, as it would strengthen my argument. I do argue that patriotic national identity in a sense trumps class consciousness; that the consensus behind mythical national identity obscures for millions of citizens the class and social inequalities of American society, often leading them to support militarism, to rally behind the flag. That same militarism, however, impedes social reform and marginalizes its advocates within society. I don’t think the United States typically goes to war, or achieves the consensus required to go to war, for economic reasons. My argument is that the nation’s militant chauvinism typically is culturally driven.

I appreciate Kurk Dorsey's close reading of the book and his willingness to grapple with the arguments. It’s fair comment to argue that my “steady drumbeat of criticism does not match the complex record of good and bad motivations and outcomes that mark the foreign policy of the United States.” The “good” and the “bad,” as well as the nation’s regular resort to war must be discussed on a case by case basis, as I have done throughout the book, before they can be assessed as a whole. Dorsey would have to offer a lot more than the few examples of what he perceives as restraint. Indeed, in all the examples he cites the fact remains that the United States ultimately chose war, as it has done throughout its history and pre-history and is doing even as we speak. Finally, I see a bit of a contradiction in Dorsey’s skepticism as to the prospects of a new post-nationalist hegemony. While casting a dubious eye on that prospect, Dorsey nevertheless asserts that no country has done more than the United States to promote international environmental protection. I don’t dispute the claim—he knows far more about the subject than I ever will—but it does seem to me that this success suggests that the nation could do far more to exert a positive influence on world affairs should it find a way (as other nations have) to transcend its penchant for unilateralism and violent aggression.

While other scholars have described my book as “important,” “spirited,” “provocative,” and even “deeply enthralling,” Jeffrey Engel and Bruce Kuklick find it angry and offensive. The book does indeed challenge head on the deeply ingrained cultural notion that the United States is a “beacon of liberty” and is “bound to lead” the “free world.” Both Engel and Kuklick seem outraged by my intimation that the United States is not morally superior to other nations. They trot out the Nazi standard of all evil and imply that I argue the United States is no different. I make no such statement or implication (nor do I point out, though I could have, that Hitler, as German historians are now starting to explore more fully,
modeled Lebensraum to some extent on U.S Manifest Destiny). As I point out in the introduction, I could not do a synthesis of the entire history of U.S. foreign policy and make it a comparative history at the same time. That said I do analyze U.S. foreign policy within comparative contexts of modernity, imperialism, and post-colonialism. But ultimately I agree we need more comparative analysis, including more of what historians from other countries think about the history of U.S. foreign policy—and not just historians from Europe. I doubt, for example, that most historians from Latin America would characterize my tone and rendition of the history of U.S. hemispheric behavior as angry and unreasoned.

Engel wishes I had offered “even cursory nods toward other societies” to lighten the burden of U.S. history, but in fact I did do some of this. The introduction references German, Chinese, French, British, Soviet, Turkish, and Israeli national aggression. I point out that Indians, while clearly the victims of massive Euro-American ethnic cleansing, did not live in an Edenic state of nature until corrupted by the white man and that “a history of inter-tribal conflict, tribes’ willingness to ally with other Europeans against other Indians and whites, and various cultural practices within Indian communities all belie the stereotype.” (23) I pointed out in my counter-hegemonic assessment of the onset of the Pacific War that “[t]his discussion should not minimize Japan’s murderous aggression, its crude and cynical pan-Asianism, its political instability marked by a spate of assassinations, and its own violent xenophobic insecurities. Moreover, Japan, in the final analysis, did start the war through its ultimately suicidal assault on Pearl Harbor.”(160) There are more such examples that these reviewers overlook.

Bruce Kuklick accuses me of advancing my own morality as Truth and seeks in every way to discredit the book. For example, he quotes me as labeling the United States as “evil” on page 16, whereas I wrote, “I do not consider the United States uniquely evil.” . Leaving aside his gratuitous comments about the book’s craftsmanship (in which I take considerable pride), Kuklick reveals not only an ignorance of theory but also a determination to reject it out of hand. That is, he is unwilling, like many historians, to consider that there might be anything at all worthwhile in theoretical or post-modernist approaches. I used to feel the same way until I made the effort to read a good bit of it and to my own surprise found that some of it was indeed worthwhile. Like so many historians, Kuklick summarily rejects “the contradictions and evasions of post-modernism,” even derisively placing the term “representations” in quotations even though an interdisciplinary journal by that name has been published for a quarter of a century.

Kuklick writes disdainfully that I argue, “There is no such thing as the Cold War,” as the conflict had no “ontological status.” This is indeed what I write and he perceives it as heresy. I quote the historian Alan Nadel, who neatly defines the Cold War as a period marked by “general acceptance . . . of a relatively small set of narratives by a relatively large portion of the population.”(166) One must distinguish between events of the period, such as the Berlin Blockade, and the framing of these events, such as the trope “Cold War,” with all the meaning that was attached to it within American culture. The events are real—the tanks rolled in Berlin—but the frame is not real. The Cold War is pure discourse, imagined if you wish, a term entirely dependent on discourse and representation. The Cold War,
which Kuklick asserts as the real, thus can only be fully interrogated through analysis of language and theory, but this is the analysis that he disdains as moralistic heresy.

And that brings us to the most critical point. Much of the criticism essentializes *The Myth of American Diplomacy* as a “denigration of history” and a book that shows “disdain for empiricism,” as Kuklick puts it. The point is not to denigrate other scholarship—I reiterate, the entire book is built upon that very foundation—but rather to get a place at the table, especially at the diplomatic history table, for post-modernist analysis. And for all my own alleged “moral superiority,” it is the angry determination of others to keep the gate closed that structures their own critiques. What they fail to understand, in my view, is that the unwillingness to unpack discourse and representation serves only to perpetuate the hegemonic national mythology that enables our militant and increasingly untenable foreign policy. Simply put, it will stay constructed until it is broadly deconstructed.

In conclusion, I am not going to deny that my book is a sharply worded narrative that proves highly critical of the history of U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps, as Engel charges, it is too sharply worded. Perhaps I am more of patriotic nationalist than I would care to admit. I hate to see this country, and this world, preoccupied with violent aggression when so much else needs and must be done.