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**Review by Geir Lundestad, Norwegian Nobel Institute**

Melvyn P. Leffler is one of the very leading historians in the world on the Cold War. His *Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (1992) established his reputation as an extremely competent, left-of-center, but fair-minded historian on the origins of the Cold War. Scholars have been referring to the book ever since, although we may not have read all of its 689 pages as thoroughly as perhaps we should have.

Since 1992 Leffler has published a couple of smaller books, with others or by himself, and written at least two groundbreaking articles, also largely on the origins of the Cold War. These have served to strengthen his reputation further. So, we have indeed been waiting for his next big book. Now the book is here, fifteen years after his previous major work.

*For the Soul of Mankind* has many of the qualities one expects to find in a book by Melvyn Leffler. He has looked at a vast number of sources; he has read practically all there is to read on his topic; he has digested it all and has given his book its own special form. The bibliography comes to 25 densely packed pages. Since he, like several other Western Cold War historians, does not speak Russian he is in debt to those institutions that have made the Russian-language sources available in English. In addition, friends, other researchers, and students have helped him translate documents from several different languages. They

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1 I thank Olav Njølstad for useful comments on an early version of this review.
are all properly thanked in the acknowledgments. In fact, it should be mentioned that the Norwegian Nobel Institute and I are also thanked for having hosted Leffler for a month at the Institute, a great pleasure indeed.

Such thoroughness is what one expects from an academic of Mel Leffler’s stature. It comes as a welcome surprise, however, to discover that he has become a more lively writer than he used to be. Many historians are or have become excellent writers. Leffler has also moved up considerably in that category. His readers will appreciate this. I must say that it was more fun to read the 586 pages of the present work than the 689 of his previous book. He brings the story alive by quoting copiously from the memoirs, letters, and documents of the protagonists in Washington and Moscow. It is another matter that occasionally the quotes become too long and too many and the analysis perhaps briefer than it could have been.

In his history of the Cold War Leffler achieves many things. We have been waiting for his updated analysis of the many points of contention in the huge Cold War historical debate. Leffler is fascinated by ideology, as are so many others, occasionally going quite far in stressing this point: “Ideology shaped perceptions – this is one of the great lessons of the Cold War–accentuating fears, highlighting opportunities, and warping rational assessments of interests in Washington and Moscow.” (458) Yet, he is also open to other factors: geopolitics, great leaders, historical memory, domestic opinion, interest groups, the role of allies and clients, etc. At one point he even argues about Stalin that “he was acting like a Russian tsar, seeking every opportunity to enhance the security and power of his country.”(31) Then you begin to wonder about his over-all emphasis on ideology. On the whole, however, “[his] desire was to follow the trail of the evidence, keeping in mind the many persuasive interpretations of great-power behaviour during the Cold War.” (6) Yes, this “is a naïve statement”, as Leffler himself admits, but still eminently sensible, at least for a historian. Social scientists may have more to say about such a statement.

As one expects, Leffler is exceedingly well-informed about virtually all aspects of the Cold War. He has useful comments on crises in many different parts of the world. The Cold War was global, or, better, from its origins in Europe, in the 1960s and particularly in the 1970s it became more and more global. In the new debate on the geographical origins of the Cold War, Leffler will have nothing of the new Third World focus: “For decision makers in Moscow and Washington, as in all European capitals, no question was more important than the future of Germany.” (8) I definitely support his interpretation on this point.

In dealing with the American presidents involved in the Cold War, Leffler draws convincing and well-informed portraits. His analysis of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan is the most interesting. Carter has often been given rather short shrift by historians, who see him (at least initially) as not being very knowledgeable about foreign affairs, and then trying to navigate as best he could in the growing split between national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and secretary of state Cyrus Vance. Leffler sees Carter as more of his own man, eager to protect détente, optimistic about the position of the United States, remaining “steadfast”, a man of “equanimity.” (for instance 324-25, 328)
In the discussion about Regan’s role, Leffler adopts a middle position. He categorically states that “It was Gorbachev who ended the Cold War.” (448). He thus rejects the many American triumphalist interpretations that give Reagan most of the credit. At the same time, however, he is generous in describing Reagan’s contributions. “What was unique about Reagan was his willingness to reach out to a leadership he abhorred, men whose values he detested; to appreciate the concerns of his adversary; and to learn from experience.” (341) He was also crucial in making the American right support the necessary understandings with the Soviet Union. “Reagan could lead the American people to accept the end of the Cold War—on American terms, of course.” (464) In fact, he went so far that even his own Vice-President wondered whether Reagan had gone too far. This, too, sounds quite reasonable and sensible to me.

A crucial point is what has been Leffler’s purpose in writing this book. Most of us would have been pleased simply to write yet another book on the Cold War. Leffler, however, insists that “This book is not ... a narrative history of the Cold War.” (7) Rather he has chosen five “moments” during the Cold War “when officials in Moscow and Washington thought about avoiding or modulating the extreme tension and hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union.” Again and again he insists that the leaders on the two sides “believed they had choices to make.” (7) Supplementing his repeated references to human agency and contingency in history, Leffler states that “Their often agonizing decisions were far less predetermined than one might think.” (8) In fact, “This is a history of lost opportunities.” (9)

This is a problematical point since what in fact happened did happen for a reason. The Cold War ended under Reagan, Bush and Gorbachev while relatively little happened, in the way of ending the Cold War, under Truman and Stalin, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Khrushchev, Carter and Brezhnev. It is also somewhat curious, to put it mildly, that the Nixon-Kissinger years, when détente clearly went the farthest before Reagan and Gorbachev, is studied only as a subsection in the chapter on Carter and Brezhnev. Even in his introductory generalizations Leffler states about the leaders mentioned that “Yet in their quest for salvation and vindication, they made decisions that even by their own calculations perpetuated an often self-defeating conflict.” (9) Even in the very same sentence where he refers to “the history of lost opportunities”, he continues by stating that “it shows that opportunities are lost when leaders who wield great power are engulfed by circumstance and entrapped by ideology and memory.” (9)

Yes, the leaders were indeed engulfed by circumstance and entrapped by ideology and memory. And Leffler demonstrates how this was the case, in chapter after chapter. So, in what sense were these then really lost opportunities? True, there were examples of serious misperceptions. As Leffler shows, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was certainly not a push for the oil resources of the Persian Gulf. (457-58) Soviet leaders sometimes seriously misread US intentions, as for instance in 1983 with the Able Archer exercise. (356, 358) Yet, there were not really that many examples of such obvious misreading of the other side’s intentions. And, again, the examples that exist happened for a reason. On the whole the perception of the other side was so deeply entrenched that one would be tempted to conclude that the Cold War was an over-determined phenomenon.
This is actually borne out in chapter after chapter of Leffler’s analysis. In the chapter on Truman and Stalin he insists again and again that “Stalin did not want a rift with the Western powers” (53) and that “Truman did not seek a showdown.” (56) In fact, “Neither Truman nor Stalin wanted a cold war.” (57) Occasionally Leffler makes the two protagonists much more similar than they were, as when he writes about Stalin and Truman that “They were not inclined to tolerate opposition.” (48) That may have been true, but the consequences suffered by their opponents were rather different.

So why, then, did the Cold War develop? Leffler’s answer is clear: “The Cold War came because conditions in the international system created the risks that Truman and Stalin could not accept and opportunities they could not resist. Neither the president of the most powerful country the world had ever known nor the cruelest dictator the world had ever witnessed was in control of events.” (57-58) Leffler’s final words in the chapter on Stalin, Truman, and the origins of the Cold War are the following: “They could not do otherwise in an international order that engendered so much fear and so much opportunity.” (83) So, where exactly is the lost opportunity here?

The procedure is very much the same in the ensuing chapters. In the chapter about the years after Stalin’s death, we read much about various plans on the Soviet side to bring a solution to the German problem. Malenkov and Eisenhower agreed that “Compromise and conciliation were essential. President Eisenhower said there was a chance for peace. There was a chance, Malenkov emphasized, but it demanded deeds from the United States as well as the Soviet Union.” (122) In the end, however, on this point too Leffler’s conclusion about the United States and the Soviet Union is that “neither of their leaders could liberate himself from his fears or transcend his ideological makeup.” About Kennedy, Johnson, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev the concluding words are “They had nowhere to go once they escaped from Armageddon but back to the Cold War.” (233) About Carter and Brezhnev we read much about their initial hopes for détente, but, again, the conclusion is that détente “foundered when forces of inexorable change in a dynamic world accentuated their sense of vulnerability and vindicated domestic opponents, who from the outset had never believed that détente was a suitable framework to compete for the soul of mankind.” (337)

In summing up the years from 1945 to 1985 Leffler emphasizes that “The Cold War emerged and persisted for four decades because these leaders were trapped by their ideas and ideals and beleaguered by the dangers and opportunities that lurked in the international system.” (452) This is not particularly new; in fact it is pretty much what all of us who have written about the Cold War have argued. Or, worse, the conclusion is so abstract that it is difficult to determine exactly what it really means: “The Cold War lasted as long as it did because of the way in which American and Soviet ideas intersected with evolving conditions of the international system.” (452)

Three additional points should be mentioned. First, there might be a problem with the definition of détente. In the book détente appears to be virtually anything from minor efforts to reduce tension, for instance through limited arms control agreements, to more
full-fledged efforts to end the confrontation itself. There is a big difference between “modulating” and “avoiding” or eliminating tension. The discussion would sometimes have benefited from a clearer statement about where on this continuum the effort in question was located. One way of rephrasing this is to say that all the efforts before Gorbachev were efforts entirely or at least largely within the Cold War system. Only Gorbachev, with support from Reagan, did away with the system as such.

Second, the Cold War was a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, but the two did of course have allies around the world. On the whole Leffler tries to include the allies where they fit into his concentration on the two protagonists. The obvious points are there. We do learn about the European influence on the origins of NATO, about Churchill’s efforts for a tripartite summit after Stalin’s death, about the international diplomacy on Germany, about the European roots of the Helsinki process, about the role of the Eastern European peoples in that *annus mirabilis* 1989. Yet, it has to be said that Leffler’s focus remains that of the two superpowers. For instance, Eisenhower’s interest in détente looks rather less impressive in the considerable European literature on Churchill’s summit efforts than it does from inside the Eisenhower administration, where John Foster Dulles quickly becomes the standard of comparison. Again, Leffler has of course consulted this literature; he just does not think it is particularly relevant for him.

Finally, any book of this size is bound to have a certain number of mistakes. Even as meticulous a researcher as Leffler has his share. Munich and the relinquished slices of Czechoslovakia took place in 1938, not in 1939 (18); Jaruzelski proclaimed martial law in Poland in December 1981, not 1982 (341); Gorbachev of course came to power in 1985, not 1986 (449); the Communists and their allies indeed triumphed in the May 1946 elections in Czechoslovakia (454).