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**Melvyn P. Leffler.** *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War.* New York: Hill and Wang, September 2007. 608 pp. ISBN: 0-8090-9717-6 (hardcover, \$35). ISBN: 0-374-53142-0 (paperback, \$17).

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### Review by Jeremi Suri, Professor of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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The Cold War, Melvyn Leffler writes in his superb new book, “is about men and their ideas and their fears and their hopes.” “[O]fficials in Washington and Moscow,” Leffler argues, “intermittently grasped the consequences of the Cold War, glimpsed the possibilities of détente, and yearned for peace, but they could not escape their fears or relinquish their dreams. Around the globe peoples were struggling to define their future and disputing the benefits of alternative ways of life, so the Cold War was indeed a struggle for the soul of mankind” (p. 8).

Leffler’s prior work—especially his prize-winning book, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*—set the standard for analyzing the intersection of threat perception, political economy, and military power in the postwar world. He famously described the combination of prudence and foolishness that led American leaders to seek global preponderance after the Second World War: “It meant creating a world environment hospitable to U.S. interests and values; it meant developing the capabilities to overcome threats and challenges; it meant mobilizing the strength to reduce Soviet influence on its periphery; it meant undermining the appeal of communism; it meant fashioning the institutional techniques and mechanisms to manage the free world; and it meant establishing a configuration of power and a military posture so that if war erupted, the United States would prevail. If adversaries saw the handwriting on the wall, they would defer to American wishes.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 19. See also, on page 498: “Initially content with the role of

From a coherent strategy of “preponderance” to a “struggle for the soul of mankind,” Leffler traces a number of cogent themes. First, he points to the profound insecurities that dominated American and Soviet thinking. American leaders, especially President Harry Truman, feared the growth of communist power in Eurasia. Seared by the experience of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism, they were acutely conscious of the fragility of democratic capitalism, and the threat posed by an authoritarian regime with an ideology promising to redistribute power and wealth to the masses. Soviet dictator Josef Stalin feared exactly the reverse—the relative weakness of his communist regime, Russia’s vulnerability to attack and encirclement (proven twice in his own lifetime), and the rise of a revitalized postwar Germany. In his new book, Leffler quotes Stalin expressing sentiments that he and most of his successors in the Kremlin until Mikhail Gorbachev shared: “I HATE THE GERMANS...It’s impossible to destroy the Germans for good, they will still be around...That is why we, the Slavs, must be ready in case the Germans can get back on their feet and launch another attack against the Slavs” (p. 30-31).

Second, both of Leffler’s Cold War books show how American and Soviet leaders addressed their fears by preparing for the worst-case threats and seizing apparent opportunities for preventive action—strategic defense through political and economic expansion. Leffler is particularly good at documenting the Soviet side of this dynamic in his new book, drawing on a wealth of newly available materials. Time and again—from Berlin to Cuba to Vietnam to Afghanistan—he argues that leaders in Washington and Moscow took what appeared to be safe gambles in an international system filled with mistrust and grave danger. They deployed more weapons, intervened in more places, and relied on greater public bombast to show strength rather than weakness, courage rather than cowardice. Leffler is clearest on this point in *For the Soul of Mankind*, where he devotes an excellent chapter to President Dwight Eisenhower’s actions after Stalin’s death. Leffler shows that Eisenhower, like British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, wanted to pursue peace with Stalin’s successors. Despite what Leffler describes as promising signals from the Kremlin, Eisenhower remained acutely conscious of Western vulnerabilities. The president sought peace, but only by building strength as a hedge against the treachery and aggression of the adversary. Leffler explains the thinking of Eisenhower and his closest advisors: “The United States should not ignore the prospect of negotiating agreements with the Kremlin...but those agreements had to comport with U.S. security interests. Otherwise, Eisenhower and [Secretary of State John Foster] Dulles preferred to use America’s superior power to win the Cold War rather than settle on terms that might prove dangerous” (p. 134).

Here we have the classic “security dilemma.” Eisenhower and his successors perceived their actions as defensive, but they appeared offensive to their counterparts in the Kremlin.

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financial hegemon, U.S. officials came to believe that they had to offer economic assistance in amounts they had not anticipated; they had to establish linkages with foreign elites in ways they had not envisioned; and they had to incur strategic commitments and assume political-military responsibilities in places they had not contemplated. These new tactics were deemed essential to establish a configuration of power that safeguarded U.S. security and that institutionalized Washington’s preponderant influence in the international system.”

The same was true in reverse, Leffler shows, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and his successors sought to increase their security in Berlin and Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

A third theme in both of Leffler's Cold War books is that policy is about difficult human choices. He focuses in great depth on the pressures leaders faced at home and abroad after 1945, but Leffler ultimately argues that these pressures did not determine outcomes. Leaders still had options that they weighed and chose among. Truman decided to overstate the postwar threat to American interests, and he "became a prisoner of his own rhetoric." (*For the Soul of Mankind*, page 71.) As described above, Eisenhower chose not to take risks for a new opening to the Soviet Union in 1953, according to Leffler. *For the Soul of Mankind* further chronicles Khrushchev's erratic aggression and retreat in the early 1960s, Kennedy's hesitance to pursue détente after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Johnson decision to escalate in Vietnam, and Brezhnev and Carter's mutual efforts to show strength before negotiation in the late 1970s. None of these leaders saw their choices as ideal or optimal. They reflected calculations of costs and benefits, toleration of lesser evils, and assessments of probable consequences. The choices were difficult—"agonizing" Leffler shows (8).

Taken together, *A Preponderance of Power* and *For the Soul of Mankind* should dissuade readers from common criticisms of policy-makers for being naïve, thoughtless, or particularly self-serving. Although he condemns inhumane actions—including a description of Stalin as "the cruelest dictator the world had ever witnessed" (*For the Soul of Mankind*, 58)<sup>3</sup>—Leffler gives readers an appreciation for how difficult it was to make effective policy in the Cold War; how hard it was to escape the choices that contributed to superpower hostility, domestic intolerance, and Third World intervention. For all their contrary intentions, leaders were "beleaguered by the dangers and opportunities that lurked in the international system," according to Leffler (*For the Soul of Mankind*, 452.) Leffler goes so far—perhaps too far—to argue that Stalin and Truman "could not do otherwise in an international order that engendered so much fear and so much opportunity" (*For the Soul of Mankind*, 83.) Similarly, he contends that Khrushchev, Kennedy, and Johnson had "nowhere to go once they escaped from Armageddon but back to Cold War" (*For the Soul of Mankind*, 233.)

Cold War policy decisions were very difficult, and perhaps they were even somewhat predictable in Leffler's account. Reading from chapter-to-chapter in *For the Soul of Mankind*, one begins to feel the Shakespearian proportions of the narrative. Every major Soviet and American postwar leader before the 1980s sought to build a new basis for peace, but each of them ultimately chose security through military strength and foreign intervention. Leaders consistently deemed military cuts and foreign withdrawals too risky to put into practice. Leaders consistently chose to consider far reaching arms control and

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<sup>2</sup> For two classic accounts of the "security dilemma," see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (January 1978), 167-215; John Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2 (January 1950), 157-80.

<sup>3</sup> Leffler's detailed account of Stalin's cruelty is persuasive and very well-supported. Calling him "the cruelest dictator the world had ever witnessed" is probably a bit excessive, and certainly unnecessary.

geopolitical negotiations only in the future, not in the present. This was predictable, not inevitable. In the *For the Soul of Mankind*, Leffler chronicles many of these choices (in 1945-48, 1953-54, 1962-65, and 1975-1980) as understandable, but still tragic “lost opportunities” (9).

This is the most significant methodological difference between Leffler’s two books. *A Preponderance of Power* explained and evaluated difficult policy choices; *For the Soul of Mankind* posits an alternative. The book was conceptualized and written with knowledge of how the Cold War ended, peacefully and rapidly after the mid-1980s. The final detailed chapter of the book on Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev (and George H.W. Bush) is the most original and ground-breaking part of Leffler’s recent writing. It is a chapter about the end of the Cold War that reframes the entire post-1945 narrative. Drawing on the remarkably rich collection of letters, diaries, speeches, and memoranda available from Reagan and Gorbachev, Leffler argues that these two men transcended the limits of their predecessors. Both echoed common desires for peace, but both also showed extraordinary courage and determination in its pursuit. Time and again, Leffler persuasively chronicles their individual actions, often opposed by their closest advisers, to replace conflict with cooperation.

From his first years in office, long before Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to the top position in the Kremlin, Reagan wrote personal letters to Soviet leaders—Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko—trying to get serious negotiations started for the elimination of nuclear weapons and the opening of frozen Cold War boundaries in Europe. “What was unique about Reagan,” Leffler writes, “was his willingness to reach out to a leadership he abhorred, men whose values he detested; to appreciate the concerns of the adversary; and to learn from experience” (341). Repeating himself for emphasis, Leffler hammers home the point that Reagan showed a sincere “willingness to talk” with his adversaries (347). “Reagan’s greatest contribution to ending the Cold War,” according to Leffler, “was not the fear he engendered but the trust he inspired” (448). How congenial and effective Reagan appears in retrospect.

Gorbachev also shines—brightest of all the leaders—in Leffler’s account. He “ended the Cold War” (448). Despite his private overtures, in the mid-1980s Reagan continued to speak of an “evil empire” and a controversial Strategic Defense Initiative, and he flaunted increased American support to the forces fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Unlike his predecessors, Gorbachev chose not to respond tit-for-tat. Instead, he endeavored to eliminate the sources of Cold War conflict that undermined Soviet domestic development. Gorbachev was a “devoted communist” (370), but not a dogmatic communist. He believed that the Soviet Union could live with its capitalist adversaries and through the pursuit of peace better the lives of citizens around the world. Gorbachev wanted to reallocate military spending for building a more humane communist society, and he wanted to reduce the risks of war and other costly conflict. Gorbachev worked to reconfigure the “zero-sum game of the Cold War,” according to Leffler. That was “his greatest achievement” (460).

For the first time in the Cold War, by the end of 1985 both the United States and the Soviet Union had bold, even radical, leaders willing to take the kinds of risks for peace that were,

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Leffler shows in earlier chapters, intolerable for Stalin, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, or Brezhnev. Reagan and Gorbachev were confident, visionary, and even foolhardy men. They were also pragmatists willing to adapt and change, eager to work with friends they could find among their enemies.

Negotiation and compromise on nuclear weapons, conventional forces, and eventually the future of Germany and Eastern Europe brought the Cold War to an end. Gorbachev made “most of the concessions” (450), according to Leffler, but Reagan consistently encouraged this process by meeting him part of the way. Gorbachev needed, Leffler explains, “sympathetic listeners in Washington,” and Reagan played that role with gusto (462). The risks were less for Reagan, but they were still real. He and Gorbachev invested their relationship with trust and even a commitment to long-term partnership. This was a truly extraordinary moment, but it could have happened earlier. Leffler shows that we must respect the careful choices that kept the Cold War in place for more than four decades, but we must also recognize that it might have ended earlier—or at least taken a less dangerous turn—if leaders had acted more like Reagan and Gorbachev. Reagan and Gorbachev’s achievements make one contemplate how things might have been different if Eisenhower had been more bold, if Khrushchev had been more controlled, if Kennedy and Johnson had given détente greater priority, if Carter and Brezhnev had not become subsumed in crises throughout the Third World.

*For the Soul of Mankind* is a tribute to Leffler’s energy and insight as a scholar. He has expanded the chronology from *A Preponderance of Power*, scoured American archival sources for five different decades, and incorporated some of the most important archival findings from the former Soviet bloc. Leffler has also seriously studied the work of very diverse scholars, incorporating their analyses into his account. *For the Soul of Mankind* is the best book published to date on the dynamics of the Soviet-American diplomatic relationship during the Cold War.

The main shortcoming in Leffler’s distinguished work is conceptual. Although he is a master at analyzing the dilemmas and difficulties of foreign policy decision-making by political leaders, his definition of decision-making remains somewhat narrow. Powerful leaders – a very small group – receive information, assess conditions, define aims, and then act in Leffler’s narrative. The main action for Leffler centers on how leaders interact with one another. He leaves little room for other influences. In *For the Soul of Mankind*, this is a problem compounded by the “moments” he chooses to analyze, and those he neglects. Chapters on 1956, 1968, and the lead-up to the Helsinki Accords of 1975 would surely focus on the crucial role played by protesters, dissidents, intellectuals, non-state actors, and international organizations in the formulation of policy. In each of those periods, it would seem that leaders reacted at least as much to the kinds of groups largely absent from Leffler’s narrative. One would also suspect that these “outsider” groups played a more significant role in some of the periods that Leffler does cover, especially the late 1970s. Robert English, Matthew Evangelista, and James Mann have documented some of this story,

and it makes Brezhnev, Carter, Gorbachev, and Reagan less dominant as actors in explaining the end of détente, the rise of “new thinking,” and what has followed.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to influence, one must ask about implementation. Leffler documents in terrific detail what leaders intended to do, and what they thought they were doing. Is that a fair representation for how nations act in the international system? Leffler’s chapter on 1953-1954 is a prime example. Even if Eisenhower had been a little bolder in approaching the post-Stalin leadership, was it possible for him and Georgi Malenkov to pull off a shift in superpower relations? Didn’t they face too much resistance and stagnation within their own governments? If Eisenhower could not implement the military budget cuts he wanted, how could he get the foreign policy bureaucracy to turn so quickly after the searing experience of the Stalin years? Malenkov could not even keep himself in power. How could he reciprocate any overture from Washington effectively? These objections are not designed to diminish the capabilities of strong leaders, but to show that the difficulties of decision-making go beyond the intentions and actions of presidents and general secretaries. Opportunities were lost and gained in the Cold War because of policy implementation in places far from the White House and the Kremlin. Looking at policy implementation also provides a much more complicated picture of Reagan and Gorbachev—both of whom allowed Cold War-style violence to continue in Latin America and the Baltic States well past when they appeared intent on ending the Cold War.

*For the Soul of Mankind* refers to ideology, memories, and the international system on numerous occasions. Leffler clearly recognizes that these are crucial elements of decision-making. The reader, however, only gets a very vague sense of what they are and how they really affected policy. Leffler effectively documents mutual distrust between capitalist and communist leaders, but ideology is about much more than that. It is a continually evolving set of beliefs, in constant negotiation among broad groups of adherents. How did Cold War ideologies evolve? How did evolving ideologies—and the controversies surrounding them—push leaders in new directions? How did leaders contribute to broader ideological change? Leffler only really addresses the latter question for Reagan and Gorbachev, in part.

Leffler persuasively describes how memories of the Second World War affected Soviet views of Germany and threats from the West. He is also masterful in assessing how the memories of the Great Depression colored American perceptions of international political economy. What about memories of Cold War events, including the Korean and Vietnam Wars? What about the manipulation, distortion, and rewriting of memories through propaganda and public culture? These are not only questions about public mobilization. Leaders are susceptible to the manipulation and distortion of memory. They are also consumers of propaganda, as Leffler admits when he describes the presence of Marxist-

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Trans-National Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004). Leffler cites English and Evangelista in the *For the Soul of Mankind*, and I know that he is deeply familiar with all three books. I think, however, he could take their arguments about broader intellectual and policy influence more seriously.

Leninist discourse in secret Soviet documents. Beyond the Depression and the Second World War, how did evolving memories of conflict transform Cold War decision-making?

Then there is the international system. In *For the Soul of Mankind* this comprises the fears and opportunities engendered by postwar reconstruction, decolonization, and revolutionary nationalism. How did that system of transformations, and many others, operate? How did it really affect decision-making? What was the “structure of the international system?” These are complex questions. Leffler’s emphasis on the existence of an international system that is more than the sum of the biggest states is insightful, but still incomplete. What was the Cold War international system and how did it perpetuate itself?

Leffler concludes his monumental book with this powerful verdict: “The Cold War lasted as long as it did because of the ways in which American and Soviet ideas intersected with evolving conditions of the international system. U.S. and Soviet leaders thought they represented superior ways of organizing human existence...The international environment posed danger and opportunity to leaders in Moscow and Washington” (452, 454). This is the best analysis we have to date, but it continues to hinge on a very small and self-contained set of actors. Leffler’s book will surely inspire other historians (including this one) to stretch his insights into a broader framework for understanding policy and decision-making.

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