Weltmacht und Weltordnung Roundtable Review

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Weltmacht und Weltordnung Roundtable

11 May 2007

Review by Donal O’Sullivan, California State University, Northridge

From Co-Imperialism to Unilateralism:

More than 200 times, U.S. troops have been deployed abroad, yet Congress has declared war only five times: at the start of the War of 1812, the War against Mexico in 1846, the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the two World Wars. As Harvard historian David M. Kennedy points out, Congress has acted like ‘a sheet anchor, restraining or even extinguishing the martial urge’.1 While the unique American system of checks and balances has created a dynamic tension between Congress and the President, the White House has generally dominated foreign policy decisions, forcing the legislature to follow suit or face charges of lack of patriotism.

In his seminal study, Klaus Schwabe underscores the difficulties of conducting foreign policy in an open society, an environment which cultivates ambiguity and contradiction as patterns of power. With a discerning yet sympathetic eye, he outlines the path of the United States from reluctant imperialism to superpower status. Schwabe, one of the leading Central European scholars of 20th century U.S. foreign policy, is professor emeritus of Modern History at the Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule (RWTH) Aachen and has written extensively on the foreign policies of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The impressive and extensive synthesis concentrates on the interaction between world leaders and more or less ignores social and cultural factors as well as gender, race and ethnicity.

Characterizing the United States as a world power *sui generis*, the author carefully avoids ideological slant and cheap shots, preferring skillful observation and meticulous study of the archival documentation. In describing the rise of the U.S. from 1898 to today, he strives to portray the historical context free of contemporary bias. In 544 pages (including

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endnotes), the study explains U.S. foreign policy as less driven by individuals than as a result of the complex decision-making process of American politics. Specifically, Schwabe is interested in the well-known problem of principles vs. practices – or, if you prefer, morality vs. realism. The key question he asks is: Was Washington, in its missionary zeal to expand its values around the globe, willing to subject itself to the same principles it advocated?

In the introduction, the author identifies four main challenges for a German historian describing U.S. foreign policy: overemphasizing German-American relations, reverting to a simple survey of world politics, measuring U.S. policy against the benchmark of traditional European diplomacy and judging the past from today's perspective. Weltmacht und Weltordnung demonstrates his remarkable success in overcoming these obstacles, resulting in a much-needed synthesis based on hundreds of scholarly monographs.²

From the outset, Schwabe notes the fundamental difference between American foreign relations and 19th century European cabinet policy. He insists that claims of continuity must be weighed against the natural tendency of democracies to vacillate and change course based on the vagaries of public opinion. Sensibly, he reminds his European readers of the specific American idiosyncrasies, based on ‘five traditions’ guiding U.S. relations with the outside world: Isolationism, the revolutionary anti-colonial reflex, the humanitarian impulse, the sense of democratic mission, and expansionism.

As Schwabe describes it, isolationism harks back to the attempt to break free from the ‘rotten’ absolutist tendencies of the 1700s, and he quotes George Washington’s last speech as the foundation of this trend. Yet while steering clear of foreign entanglements, the U.S. also sided with countries shaking off their colonial yoke. The Monroe Doctrine expressed this stance against European powers establishing themselves in the Western Hemisphere. Thirdly, foreign relations have been conducted to better the world by using American influence abroad. Schwabe identifies U.S. support for the creation of Liberia and support for human rights activists around the globe as symbolizing this trend. Specifically, he cites Presidents Carter and Clinton as placing humanitarian aspects high on their foreign policy agendas. Like many later nationalist politicians, American leaders beginning with Thomas Jefferson embraced the notion of being part of a ‘chosen people’, calling upon their fellow countrymen to spread freedom abroad. Clearly, as Schwabe mentions, this sense of democratic mission was easily exploited for the fifth tendency of U.S. foreign policy: expansionism.

Within this framework of contradictory tensions, Schwabe characterizes U.S. foreign policy as more dynamic and therefore more difficult to understand than traditional nation-state diplomacy. For the most part of its history, blessed with geographical safety, the United States could afford the luxury of basing its policy on values (p. 4). Faced with the need to explain foreign conflicts to an electorate mostly ignorant of foreign affairs, policy-makers often resorted to simplifying the issues and invoking morality to garner domestic support, thus exposing themselves to charges of hypocrisy abroad.

Yet, while the ‘five traditions’ convincingly reflect the underlying tensions at work within the foreign policy establishment, Schwabe’s narrative avoids translating these categories effectively – which is one of the downsides of composing a synthesis. The author’s convincing yet cautious outline reflects what the German academic tradition calls ein abgewogenes Urteil, a thoughtful, generally sympathetic position, spiced with mild criticism (i.e. President McKinley’s ‘dirty war’ in the Philippines). Schwabe clearly prefers staying close to the archival documentation while avoiding flamboyant statements.

To emphasize the influence of public opinion, he begins his account with the vital debate between Imperialists and Anti-Imperialists regarding the 1898 Spanish-American war. The decline of Spain’s power offered opportunities to take up ‘the white man’s burden’. But even Teddy Roosevelt (characterized by Schwabe as ‘paternalistic’ and ‘racist’) remained a reluctant expansionist. For Schwabe, the Panama Canal turned the U.S. into the hegemonic power in the Caribbean, and the Roosevelt Corollary gave Washington a ‘blank check’ for intervention in Latin America. However, Americans harbored deep reservations about following in the footsteps of the European empires.

Before World War I, Schwabe concludes, U.S. foreign policy pursued its opportunities for world power only half-heartedly. He maintains that America remained a non-colonial power. At the same time, he reminds us that for Washington, nation-building has a long tradition, and policy-makers in general had few reservations with cooperating with dubious characters, especially in Central and Latin America.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, with hundreds of thousands of American soldiers setting foot on the Old Continent, the balance of power began to shift. According to Schwabe, President Woodrow Wilson intended to use economic and military power to shape the world along U.S. ideals. However, this attempt was largely foiled by Congress’ decision not to join the League of Nations. While favorably inclined towards Wilson’s idealism, Schwabe criticizes Wilson’s inability to accept a compromise solution on the issue of Congress’ unwillingness to join the League of Nations. He asserts that even a limited membership would have been better for world peace than staying out of the organization altogether.

Retreating into ‘splendid isolation’, the 1920s saw a succession of weak Presidents who limited their foreign policy goals to ‘dollar diplomacy’, used financial and economic tools to provide stability and, in Schwabe’s eyes, neglected security policy altogether. Marking the
defeat of this policy not with the rise of Nazi Germany, but, interestingly, with the decision by France and other European nations to stop paying off the wartime debt in December 1932, Schwabe views the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as a vital step forward. FDR was charismatic, a tactical genius, perfectly willing to produce a populist smokescreen to hide his true intentions and imbued with enough foresight to view Hitler as America’s most dangerous enemy.

For his European readers, Schwabe makes an effort to explain Roosevelt’s adversaries in the isolationist camp. He portrays the 1930s movement ‘America First’ as a mixture of traditionalism, nationalism, Christian pacifism and sometimes anti-British and anti-Semitic feelings. While he acknowledges the somewhat devious manner in which Roosevelt moved the country towards war, he stops far short of falling prey to conspiracy theories. Indeed, he calls Roosevelt’s decision to issue the Atlantic Charter together with Churchill a ‘remarkable event’: although formally neutral, the administration formulated common war aims with Great Britain (p. 117).

During the wartime Grand Alliance, Schwabe notes how Roosevelt was put on the defensive by Stalin by a couple of unnecessary blunders and some more significant illusions about the character of the Soviet regime, reserving harsher words for Churchill’s imperial ambitions. But apart from some smaller points, Schwabe lauds Roosevelt’s United Nations model as the most important U.S. contribution to world security in the 20th century. The Four Policemen constituted a form of a ‘co-operative imperialism’, a difficult concept to stomach for those on the fringes of the police station, especially those with a long history of imperialism themselves (like France and Britain). Schwabe defends Yalta, and justifies the whitewashing of Stalin in American public opinion with Roosevelt’s conviction that only the alliance with Moscow could successfully defeat the Nazis and the Japanese. There was no real alternative, he asserts.

A small remark might be of value here. The outline mostly steers clear of intelligence affairs, which is perhaps a wise choice in a book attempting to outline 100 years of foreign policy. Yet, there are some pitfalls. For example, while Schwabe mentions the significant influence of Harry Dexter White in reforming international financial institutions (p. 139), he does not identify him as a Soviet agent. And while he devotes several pages to the CIA’s Bay of Pigs disaster and the assassination of Salvador Allende, it would have been interesting to hear Schwabe’s assessment of Soviet intelligence and the penetration of American society during the 1940s.

It should be obvious by this point that Schwabe devotes little time or space to revisionist arguments. For Schwabe, Roosevelt’s successor Harry Truman did not pursue a clear-cut global Cold War strategy, and he sees no reason to assess an active expansionist U.S. policy. More important in explaining the course of events are ‘Truman’s personality and the new balance of power as well as the demise of the traditional German and Japanese powers, which forced the President into a more antagonistic role towards the Soviet Union.
It is in the final chapter that Schwabe’s account, an historian’s foray into the contemporary world, becomes passionate. Not surprisingly, he faults the administration of George W. Bush with a serious departure from multilateralism. While the war in Afghanistan had been conducted with the assistance of a broad international coalition (Schwabe underscores the efforts of Secretary of State Colin Powell), the Iraq war marked the triumph of unilateralism. But, as Schwabe notes, the failure to locate WMDs and to find evidence of ties between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda significantly damaged U.S. credibility. As a key concept of President Bush’s foreign policy, the notion of ‘preemption’ remains fuzzy.

Concurring with internal critics like Joseph S. Nye, Robert Tucker and G. John Ikenberry, Schwabe defines the Bush doctrine as a clear break with past U.S. foreign policy. Instead of being the last resort, preemption became the lode star for Washington’s relations with the outside world. He contrasts America’s isolation under George W. Bush with the political and moral credibility during the fifty years of the Cold War. Schwabe does not doubt that future administrations will return to the multilateral approach which he calls among ‘the best traditions’ of U.S. foreign policy. Ending his book with a look at the gap between rhetoric and reality, Schwabe is optimistic about the eventual path of U.S. foreign policy: international anarchy has to be contained with peaceful means and through international institutions, which has been a fundamental tenet of U.S. foreign policy since the days of Woodrow Wilson, and only the U.S. is able to secure a world order based on liberal values and the rule of law. *Weltmacht und Weltordnung* has already become a fundamental textbook in the German-speaking academic world, contributing to an informed debate over U.S. foreign policy, which is vital in an age when slogans abound and crude Anti-Americanism has become fashionable. Schwabe’s comprehensive and ambitious book serves this purpose exceptionally well.