Reviewed Work:


Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux


Your use of this H-Diplo roundtable review indicates your acceptance of the H-Diplo and H-Net copyright policies, and terms of condition and use.

The following is a plain language summary of these policies:

**You may** redistribute and reprint this work **under the following conditions:**

- **Attribution:** You must include full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.
- **Nonprofit and education purposes only.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- **For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.**
- Any of these conditions may be waived if you obtain permission from the copyright holder. For such queries, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

H-Diplo is an international discussion network dedicated to the study of diplomatic and international history (including the history of foreign relations). For more information regarding H-Diplo, please visit [http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/).


---

**Copyright © 2007 by H-Diplo**, a part of H-Net. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
European observers are often amazed by the sudden and radical changes in American foreign policy after the inauguration of a new president. When Bill Clinton came into power after the end of the Cold War, it appeared that he would usher in a new period of American isolationism. Clinton believed that the country’s main problems were economic in nature (“it's the economy, stupid”) and that foreign entanglements in the Balkans and in Africa were not in the interests of the United States. For a while, America wasn’t a team player in the international diplomatic arena, because America didn’t appear to be interested in playing at all.

The arrival of George W. Bush in the White House in early 2001 and the events of 11 September changed the basic foundation of American foreign policy. Defending the country from external threats became the prime task of the government. Again, however, America wasn’t a team player because it relished in the thought of being the world’s only superpower.

Klaus Schwabe’s magisterial study Weltmacht und Weltordnung—world power and global order—was written at a time when the debate about America’s future foreign policy was in full swing after September 11, 2001. The author does not place political or ideological grand designs at the center of his analysis. Instead, the theoretical framework of U.S. foreign policy that he lays out at the beginning of the book serves merely as an illustration of the bandwidth of American political debates during the last 110 years. Foreign political ideals such as isolationism or expansionism interact in a rapidly changing world with friends and foes and force the United States to constantly adjust its foreign policy. The lens through which Schwabe interprets 20th century American foreign policy is the country’s search for an international order that would provide the greatest possible security.

Schwabe commences his study with an analysis of the War of 1898. The symbolism of that conflict was quite striking. Less than a decade after Americans had settled their part of the North American continent (the closing of the frontier), the United States looked abroad for new territories to settle. America challenged the old colonial power Spain that was clinging on to its last colony in the New World. Expansionists like Theodore Roosevelt, Alfred T. Mahan, and Josiah Strong dominated the American foreign policy debate at the turn to the 20th century. They believed that America’s security depended on overseas territories. The

Georg Schild is Professor of North American History at the University of Tübingen, Germany. He earned his MA in 1989 at the Free University Berlin, his Ph.D. in 1993 at the University of Maryland at College Park, and his Habilitation in 2001 at the University of Bonn. His books include Bretton Woods and Dumbarton Oaks: American Economic and Political Postwar Planning in the Summer of 1944 (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995), Die bedrohte Supermacht: Sie Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik der USA nach dem Ende des Kalten Krieges (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2002), and Zwischen Freiheit des Einzelnen und Wohlfahrtsstaat: Amerikanische Sozialpolitik im 20. Jahrhundert (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004). Professor Schild’s current research interest is in the history of war in America.
focus of the national debate at the time was limited in scope, emphasized expansionist military arguments and thereby masked the fact that America fought the War of 1898 without a clear understanding of the costs of extending its sphere of responsibility beyond the home continent to include tens of thousands of Spanish speaking Catholics. In 1899, the Philippine uprising under Emilio Aguinaldo shocked the Administration of William McKinley and forced America into fighting a brutal war of attrition against an indigenous national movement. Mark Twain at the time wondered whether there were two different Americas, “one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive’s new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on, then kills him to get his land.” For the United States, the experience of that war appeared so unappealing that America refrained from further imperialist adventures.

America resumed its search for order and for the country’s role in the international political arena during the First World War. Initially, President Woodrow Wilson opposed entering into the conflict. He changed his mind, however, when he began to view the war as an opportunity to influence the prevailing system of international politics. Wilson sought to use America’s military might (and moral superiority!) to replace the old system of military rivalries with a new order based on the rule of law. The president made it clear in April 1917 that the United States would not enter the Great War for territorial and economic gains. Instead, Wilson sought to conduct a crusade to “make the world safe for democracy” and envisioned a democratic peace based on his Fourteen Points Address. On the one hand, America would be one country among many, on the other hand it would be the undisputed moral leader of the world.

Wilson’s attempt to lead by moral example was frustrated, however, by the Allies and by American senators. England and France did not want to conclude a democratic peace after the sufferings of the war. American lawmakers criticized the participation in the League of Nations because membership appeared to indicate a loss of U.S. sovereignty. Twice the Senate voted down the Treaty of Versailles. In the battle between American leadership and isolationism, the latter won. Without American participation the League failed to provide forceful support for weak nations during the 1930s.

During the Second World War, America joined forces with England to save the world from a deadly combination of vicious tyrants or—even more menacingly—from one tyrant dominating the entire Eurasian landmass. The close cooperation of American and British troops fighting side by side between 1941 and 1945 was the climax of America’s willingness to join forces with other nations in a team effort.

At the same time, isolationism appeared discredited. After the U.S. was drawn into the second worldwide conflict within one generation, it became clear that the international community had to develop new security structures that would put checks on aggressive nations. In order to achieve that goal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt believed that Japan and Germany had to be weakened permanently and that the U.S.A. had to cooperate closely with the U.S.S.R., Great Britain, and China. Those four states would be charged with
maintaining peace and security as “co-operative imperialists”, as Schwabe puts it. Just as Wilson’s idealist concept of a global legal order died in the harsh climate of domestic postwar politics in 1919 and 1920, Roosevelt’s realist approach also came to naught. Soon after the end of the war it became clear that the basic American political beliefs were incompatible with those of the Soviets.

Schwabe begins the chapter on the history of the Cold War with a reminder that while in retrospect the United States appears as the most powerful nation in 1945, Americans at the time felt insecure. The Soviet Union with its powerful Red Army and propaganda machine appeared to threaten the freedom in Europe and Asia. Schwabe concludes that the Truman Doctrine—America’s promise to aid all free peoples in their struggle against suppression—was not offensive in nature, but a protective measure to prevent a communist takeover of Europe.

America’s Cold War strategy was most successful where it sought to promote democracy in close cooperation with its overseas partners. Despite America’s leading role in NATO, politicians from allied countries such as West Germany’s first chancellor Konrad Adenauer were quite successful in influencing American foreign and security policy. U.S. administrations believed they had to take German and European public opinion into consideration.

In other parts of the world such as Asia, the Cold War became a hot conflict. Schwabe leaves no doubt that this was to a large extent a mistake of America’s Cold War strategy. America did not counter the communist threat in Asia with democratic alternatives, but allied itself with authoritarian regimes.

President George W. Bush’s current policy in the Middle East reminds Schwabe of Wilson’s early 20th century vision of security. Like Wilson, Bush believes that American security depends on an expansion of democracy. Schwabe is skeptical, however, as to whether Bush will succeed in creating an international order of democratic states by deploying military forces.

The 20th century was a period of America’s rise to power. This ascent was accompanied by Washington’s constant search for a coherent foreign policy, for a global political and economic order, and (for Schwabe’s purposes most importantly) for America’s own role within that order. Throughout the 20th century, Americans debated whether the country should abstain from foreign entanglements (isolationism), whether it should dominate the international political system (because America was morally or militarily superior to other nations) or whether the United States should join forces with other states in order to create democratic international institutions. At various times, different approaches gained the upper hand. To Schwabe, the irony of America’s diplomatic history is that policy options one (isolationism) and two (domination) appear most attractive from many Americans’ point of view. Schwabe, however, leaves no doubt that America was most successful when it worked closely with those countries that share its liberal democratic ideals. Isolationism
paved the way for the Second World War, unilateralism was responsible for short sighted military conflicts such as the Vietnam War. Cooperating with other nations in creating a global order to fight terrorism and hegemonic aspirations and to promote liberal values would mean drawing the right conclusions from the experiences of American 20th century foreign policy.