The illusion of omnipotence

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From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776
By George C. Herring
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The sheer size of the new republic worked against its survival, Britain's Lord Sheffield concluded, soon after the American Revolution ended. The "authority of Congress can never be maintained over those distant and boundless regions."

Two hundred years later, the United States had proved him wrong, more than justifying George Washington's hope that his nation would "possess the strength of a giant and there will be none who can make us afraid."

In From Colony to Superpower, George Herring, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Kentucky, provides a comprehensive, competent and rather conventional narrative history of US foreign policy from the origins of the "empire of liberty" in the 18th century to its "unipolar moment" following the fall of the Soviet Union and the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.

Despite some major failures, Herring argues, American foreign policy has been "spectacularly successful." Behaving, for the most part, like a traditional great power, the US has balanced its zeal to carry out a providential mission to spread Christianity and democracy with the pragmatic pursuit of its national interests. Unilateralist, but almost never isolationist, America conquered a continent, dominated its hemisphere and the Pacific Ocean, prevailed in two world wars, won the Cold War and "extended its economic influence, military might, popular culture and 'soft power' through much of the world."

Success, however, generated "the illusion of omnipotence." And so, the limitations on American power, evident in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, were difficult for Americans to swallow.

To enhance its status in the new world order, Herring concludes, the US must "act anew and think anew," by shedding any notion of itself as God's chosen nation, acknowledging that "it has often violated its own principles and inflicted harm on other peoples," and by acting in concert with other countries.

Almost without exception, From Colony to Superpower echoes the assessments of the US academic foreign policy establishment. America's conflict with Mexico between 1846 and 1848, Herring writes, was a war of lust and aggrandizement, provoked by president James Polk, who coveted Texas,
California and New Mexico. The Spanish-American War at the end of the century, advertised at the time as the inadvertent emergence of the US as a world power, was actually a war of design, "with imperialist results."

In the 20th century, Theodore Roosevelt exemplified the "best and worst" of the nation's foreign policy traditions, ending a war in East Asia while displaying "disdain for other peoples" in Central America and the Caribbean. His cousin, Franklin Roosevelt, articulated a new security policy based on human freedoms and international cooperation - but also laid the foundations for an "imperial presidency" that stretched the truth, infringed on civil liberties and threatened constitutional checks and balances.

On Vietnam, Herring asserts, as he did in *The Longest War* (1979), that the policies of three presidents rested on "badly flawed" Cold War assumptions and a failure to deploy means adequate to the ends they sought. Finding no "persuasive evidence" that John Kennedy had opted for withdrawal before his assassination, Herring claims that the president remained committed to the proposition that a non-communist South Vietnam was vital to US global interests.

Fearing that Republicans might "push Vietnam up my ass," putting his domestic agenda in jeopardy, Lyndon Johnson escalated, allowing the "domino theory" to creep into official justifications for intervention, even though it was "no longer taken as gospel by most regional experts." And Richard Nixon prolonged the war for four more years, at the cost of 20,000 American and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese lives, even though he knew North Vietnam would prevail. Opposition to global engagement, not an era of peace, was his principal legacy.

Herring does not adequately examine the strategic priorities that have shaped American foreign policy in the Middle East. He implies, however, that the US tilts too much toward Israel. In 1967, he writes, the Johnson administration "appears to have given Israel the freedom to respond as it saw fit" to Egypt’s deployment of troops near the border. Six years later, a massive supply of American military hardware by the Nixon administration helped Israel reoccupy the Golan Heights and advance into Egypt and Syria.

Vague on a Palestinian homeland, Herring asserts, Jimmy Carter's Camp David Accords achieved less than many commentators have claimed. And after the sale of AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia strained the "special relationship" between the US and Israel, Ronald Reagan did not push a plan for Palestinian "self administration" in the occupied territories or pressure the Israelis to freeze (or dismantle) settlements.

According to Herring, George H.W. Bush "kept Middle East peace hopes alive" by courageously taking on the Israel lobby with a threat to veto loan guarantees unless Yitzhak Shamir "stopped the settlements." But Bush the younger "usually sided with Israel," especially after September 11, as Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert justified attacks on Hamas and Hizbullah and a war in Lebanon as essential steps in "the war on terror."

In the fall of 2008, the plan of the Bush administration to rewrite the map of the Middle East is in tatters. The war in Iraq has strengthened the hand of Iran. Bush has thrown Rice - and not much else - at the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. And the US has lost credibility in the region and almost everywhere else.

America's decline, Herring concludes, "may represent a longer term trend." To remain a crucial player on the world stage, the US must get its own economic house in order and "learn to function in a world where it can no longer call the shots" by embodying democratic ideals without trying to impose them.
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