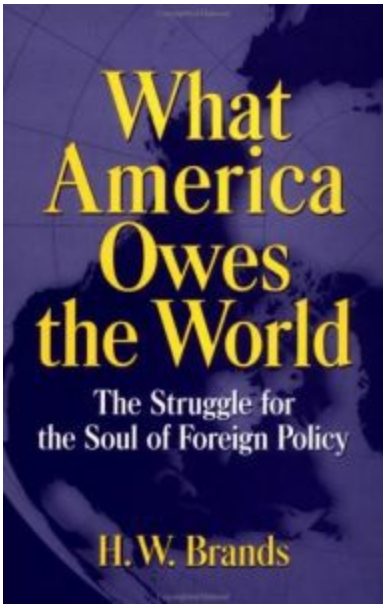

Book What America Owes the World

The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy

H. W. Brands
Cambridge UP, 1998

Recommendation

H. W. Brands provides an excellent historical review of the complexities of United States foreign policy. He analyzes all major foreign policy positions from the intellectual ground staked out by the major political writers of each period. This book is an invaluable tool for anyone who wishes to develop or supplement knowledge on the subject, up through the Reagan years. The reader must be prepared to invest time and effort to maximize the benefits from reading this book. However, it is worth the effort. *BooksInShort.com* recommends this book to anyone interested in United States foreign policy, and in relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Take-Aways

- Two opposing camps, vindicators and exemplars, have driven United States foreign policy.
- Vindicators believe the U.S. must aggressively seek out and protect good against evil wherever the struggle exists.
- Exemplars believe the U.S. should lead by example and focus on internal reform.
- George Kennan’s writings on containment framed U.S. cold war foreign policy.
- "Manifest Destiny" and "Imperialism" were two vindicator movements in United States foreign policy.
- The 1930s depression focused U.S. foreign policy inward; and this focus was maintained until WWII started.
- The New Left used historical revisionism to question the validity of U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam.
- The League of Nations and the United Nations were designed to require the formations of coalitions to implement foreign policy decisions.
- The Carter administration and the Reagan administration provide contemporary examples of exemplar and vindicator foreign policy positions.
- Ideology - for example, the Soviet Union was an evil empire - was an effective tool of vindicator foreign policy.

Summary

Exemplars, Vindicators and the First Hundred Years

United States foreign policy is driven by an obligation to better humanity. The precise nature of this obligation is represented in two different schools of political thought:

1. The exemplars - This school believes that the United States owes the world an "example of a humane, democratic, and prosperous society. It believes that the United States should set its own house in order and not meddle in the affairs of other nations. Others nations will see the power of U.S. domestic policy and will emulate the strengths of the U.S. system.
2. The vindicators - This school believes that the United States should "undertake active measures to enforce the right." Others nations are evil and the U.S. must use its power, even if it includes military might, to counteract evil.

> "If a single theme pervades the history of American thinking about the world, it is that the United States has a peculiar obligation to better the lot of humanity."

The debate on United States foreign policy began even before the country was formed. John Winthrop, a Puritan founder, declared that the settlement "would be a model for the entire world." Thomas Jefferson, a founding father and the third U.S. president, also believed that colonial Americans were uniquely situated to be the role model for less privileged colonies. Jefferson used exemplar phrasing in the Declaration of Independence. He stated, "all men not simply Americans, possessed inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." According to Jefferson, the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and eventually the United States Constitution stood as exemplary blows for liberty globally. Alexander Hamilton, a second exemplar voice, believed that the U.S. had enough problems. It should not be concerned with other people's affairs, he felt, but should simply serve as an example.

> "If hard cases make bad law, they do no better for shaping foreign policy."

The vindicator position became fully articulated during three periods of the nineteenth century:

1. U.S. land expansion under "manifest destiny" - This doctrine took it as implicit truth that the United States' way of life was the preferred way of life for the entire continent.
2. Opening of Japan and the Alaska purchase - The opening of Japan by Matthew Perry in 1854 gave vindicators the opportunity to claim that the Japanese should adopt U.S. "rule of law" government. The Alaska purchase was held out as a means to enforce the vindicator position in Japan.
3. Application of the theory of social Darwinism - This was the most direct statement that the best government was the U.S. government. The chief writer on this theory, William Sumner, believed that Anglo-Saxon domination in North America and beyond was a result of vigorous social Darwinism.

Imperialism, WWI and WWII

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the clash of two political movements, progressivism and imperialism. Progressivism favored reform of the United States system of government; imperialism favored expansion of U.S. values throughout the world. Progressivism sought to reform society in the U.S. to reflect their view of education, efficiency, and middle-class values. Imperialism sought to secure U.S. access to markets, investments, and strategic defense positions. Imperialism, which initially won, became the driving force of United States foreign policy toward Cuba and the Philippines. The movement was strong from the 1890s until the start of World War I in 1916.

> "To the degree isolationism took hold in America during the post-Vietnam era - a degree that neoconservatives overstated - its appeal lay less in the contention that America lacked the right to act for democracy abroad than in the claim that it lacked the ability."

Brooke Adams was a leading proponent of United States imperialism. His book, Law of Civilization and Decay, established an intellectual underpinning for imperialism from the social Darwinist perspective. He argued that since man inherited the drive to act in his own best interest, imperialism did not need moral justification. Vindicators used Adams' writings as intellectual support for U.S.

involvement in the Spanish American war, and for the annexation of the Philippines. His ideas provided a counterweight to Marx and Lenin's socialist ideas. Adams' work supported the idea that U.S. imperialism was inevitable.

> "Considering the means by which the Anglo-Saxons had helped themselves to North America and the other parts of the globe then under Anglo-Saxon sway, the Social Darwinists' vision of the world empire implied vindicationist policies of the most vigorous, not to say brutal, nature."

With World War I, United States foreign policy shifted away from imperialism and toward progressivism. Progressive forces elected President Woodrow Wilson. He believed that the U.S. could apply exemplar reforms to foreign policy through cooperation among nations. The emerging war in Europe tested Wilson's progressive beliefs. After thirty-months of non-involvement, Wilson entered the conflict.

> "But at a more primitive level, the two movements ran parallel, for each demonstrated a disbelief in the ability of ordinary people to improve their lot without guidance from above."

Walter Lippman, of The New Republic magazine, was a leading supporter of U.S. foreign policy at the time. He believed that the United States must be pragmatic about public affairs engagements. Although he thought the country must prepare for war, he also believed it must share the work of preserving world order by aligning with Europe. His editorials called for the creation of a "League of Peace" and the more formal League of Nations. When criticized for not going far enough, he issued additional editorials calling for a "grand system of international security in which the vital interests of the least powerful received protection equal to that afforded the strongest," with the United States as the central enforcer. The U.S. should be a force in international affairs but - following exemplar traditions - it should not impose its judgment on the world.

> "Both the exemplarists and the vindicators had, at various times, been burdened with being branded "idealist," a label often applied as a derisive synonym for utopian."

The progressive movement remained popular through the 1930s, as the depression created a strong national introspection. Even though the country favored internal reform, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was convinced that the growth of worldwide evil would never yield to an unarmed U.S. standing as an example of good. Despite his opinion, writers of the period, particularly Charles Beard, still advocated internal reform and isolationism.

> "Yet the United States more than any other nation possessed the political, economic, and military power to impose its chauvinism on others, and in doing so it negated the high principles of its humanitarianism and its belief in self-determination."

Beard believed the U.S. could do more for world peace by reforming itself. He felt interventionists were driven by economic motives. He wrote, "the supreme interest of the United States was the creation and maintenance of a high standard of life for all its people," and internationalism might actually jeopardize the standard of living. However, by the time Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Beard and other exemplarists had lost ground. Germany's invasion of France turned the tide against isolationism and toward an interventionist program.

> "Kennan's invocation of god and faith, while hardly the hinge of his argument, suggested that the religious element in American thinking about the world, so noticeable in the nineteenth century, still lived."

In 1940, writing comprehensively against intervention, Beard analyzed three periods of thinking about United States foreign policy. The first was "continental Americanism," marked by the securing of physical and political control over territory. The second was the age of imperialism, including a propaganda campaign supporting expansionism. The third was the current or internationalism age, when U.S. foreign policy focused on achieving world peace. Beard's analysis was critically debated, but his point became moot when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

The Cold War

The U.S. struggle with the Soviet Union began with the end of WWII. In February 1946, Stalin declared that capitalism and socialism were incompatible. That March, Churchill declared that an "iron curtain" separated the repression of Russian-dominated lands from

the free world of the democracies to the west. This forced the United States to develop a policy on Soviet expansionism. That policy was "containment," the brainchild of George Kennan, a State Department official. Essentially, it said there could be no accommodation with the Soviet Union on any foreign policy issue. The Soviet Union was sensitive to the use of force and the U.S. must use force to "contain" Soviet expansionism. The policy was based on the inherent belief that the Soviet Union considered time as an ally and so the West must be prepared for a long struggle.

> "Nevertheless the American people, beguiled by their unrelenting moralism, treated the Cold War as if it were predominantly a problem of ideology, the consequence of the existence of communities."

Walter Lippmann denounced Kennan's "containment" policy as sweeping internationalism. He did not believe Kennan's assumption that the United States alone could "contain" the Soviet Union and predicted that the U.S. would be forced to use proxies to enforce the policy. He questioned the policy's long-term cost and its ten to fifteen-year time frame. He attacked Kennan for usurping the president's authority to determine foreign policy.

> "The recognition that political ethics was the ethics of doing evil was the key to understanding the real world of international affairs."

At the same time, Hans Morgenthau proposed the "new rationalism." In his book Scientific Man vs. Power Politics, Morgenthau criticized eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism for assuming the universal validity of market economics, free trade, and negotiation as an alternative to war. He asserted, "interests, not ideals, and stability, not democracy, should be the objectives of American foreign policy. In Politics among Nations, he further assaulted liberalism. Power, he said, is the primary goal in any struggle between nations. Ideology exists principally as a way to explain and justify the desire for power. Under this new realism, he maintained, the U.S. must make foreign policy choices that result in partial, precarious solutions. In his view, the nation's ability to avert ongoing war lay in its ability to balance power globally by forming coalitions. Morgenthau's cold war legacy became a foreign policy touchstone: the balance of power.

> "The wonder of Reagan was his ability to cause Americans to feel warm and fuzzy about a presidency devoted to a crabbed and dismal view of human nature - to a conviction that individuals responded to no higher sentiment than self-interest and that the world would never know peace short of the annihilation of dissent from America's official anticommunist ideology."

Deterrence was another intellectual component of the cold war. The reality of Soviet nuclear weapons added a new component to the U.S. foreign policy debate. In his book, Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy, Henry Kissinger attempted to lay a foundation for the concept of limited nuclear war. Kissinger argued that deterrence created a climate of massive response to any threat and thereby increased the chance of any confrontation escalating out of control. On the opposite side stood scientists Linus Pauling and Albert Einstein, who warned that the tremendous power of atomic weapons would tempt even the most sober nations. In his 1958 book, No More War, Pauling warned that a U.S. foreign policy that favored the use of nuclear weapons put efficacy before morality in the struggle against communism.

Vietnam and the New Left; Détente and the New Right

University of Wisconsin history professor William Williams wrote several books questioning twentieth century U.S. foreign policy. In the Tragedy of American Diplomacy, he triggered the school of historical revisionism. His work led other intellectuals to question the policy of containment. They determined that Vietnam was a logical outgrowth of this policy, and reasoned that if the situation in Vietnam was a bad idea, so was the policy.

The view that Vietnam was wrong lead to a crack in U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union. The crack was called détente and President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger initiated it. The New Right of the 1970s dismissed détente as a cold war form of appeasement. When President Jimmy Carter attempted to steer away from the aggressive vindicationism which lead to Vietnam, the New Right attacked him for exemplar-style isolationism. In 1997, Carter announced that his "administration wouldn't allow an inordinate fear of communism to dictate its actions." The New Right viewed this as a direct threat to national security because it "distracted the American from the overriding struggle against communism."

Ronald Reagan's election established the New Right's foreign policy agenda. U.S. foreign policy moved again to aggressive

vindicationism. The Soviet Union was the evil empire, military spending was increased, and the U.S. sent troops, arms, and money to conflicts around the globe.

About the Author

H. W. Brands, the Ralph R. Thomas Professor of History at Texas A&M University, holds degrees from Stanford University, Reed College, Portland State University, and the University of Texas. His previous books include *The Spector of Neutralism, Inside the Cold War, The United States in the World, The Wages of Globalism, The Reckless Decade*, and *T.R.: The Last Romantic*.