Reviews

The Dictatress and the Decisionmakers

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Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy, by Stephen Wertheim. *Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 272 pp. $29.95.*

How did "American exceptionalism" come to be synonymous with global military supremacy, and an older approach to international affairs with "isolationism"? For a long time, Americans averred that foreign entanglements were the vestiges of an old world passing away, and international combinations reminiscent of the "Holy Alliance." These scruples arose, however, not from a disdain for the world at large but rather from a drive for moral purity animated by liberal sympathy. While Americans feared Caesaeristic, Napoleonic figures as exterminators of republican liberty, that did not mean they admired, as an alternative, the restored monarchs who held the popular forces of Europe in check, or the statecraft of a figure like Klemens von Metternich. Better, they thought, to leave that all behind.

Tomorrow, the World, a new book by Stephen Wertheim, co-founder of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft and currently senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is intent on telling the story of one particular moment in this transformation, and as such it does not aim to recount the entirety of American foreign policy history, as a thousand-page work like George C. Herring's *From Colony to Superpower*, or a shorter attempt to tell the story, like Walter McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State*, do. Accordingly, *Tomorrow, the World* treats the period from 1776 to about

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1930 as prologue, and very briefly. This choice is justified, for as Wertheim explains, while earlier surveys sought to evaluate figures and ideas from a longer tradition that had been unjustly branded "isolationist," they did so by looking at the figures and events themselves and "not [at] how the opponents performed the branding."[1] This, then, is a book of professional (and exhaustively researched) history making a factual contribution to a bigger question. But if it begins as an explanation of tactics, it is one that is so well done that it ends up recasting strategy.

The upshot of Wertheim's approach is that he brings into sharp focus the doings of elites rather than attempting to study social movements or anything as sprawling as, say, "civil religion." America's pursuit of global supremacy was, in his engaging and studious retelling, less the final outcome of long-simmering forces or of latent but unreasoned belief systems than a "deliberate decision" made by a numerically small group of individuals at a very specific moment in time and within a brief window of opportunity. It can be traced, essentially, to the years between 1940 and 1945, and not to government itself but to "the burgeoning field of American semiofficialdom," a "proto-national security state"[2] that involved constellations of small groups including the Commission to Study the Organization of Peace, the Council on Foreign Relations, grand strategy seminars at Yale and Princeton, and free-floating offices in the State Department that brought in outside experts to think ahead to the end of the war and to the kind of world an 'isolated' America (initially) or a triumphant America (as the tide turned) might organize.

While insistent that these groups did not constitute a "conspiracy" (indeed, their thinking evolved dramatically during the years in question),[3] Wertheim is clear that the decision for supremacy was an elite choice and that it also involved a conscious willingness to discount (and indeed mischaracterize and render unacceptable) any opposition to the new direction. A good portion of the book is in fact an extended exploration and debunking of the term "isolationism," the utterly effective and utterly disingenuous tip of the rhetorical spear for the advocates of global armed supremacy.[4] Wertheim's interest in the career of this word is pervasive throughout the book and almost seems to be his original inspiration for writing. A shrewd rhetorical repackaging, he shows, managed to turn "internationalism," which had hitherto implied a commitment to international law and the peaceful resolution of conflict, into a

[1] Wertheim, 188n8.

[2] Ibid., 38. Furthermore, these organizations did not all agree with each other or always work in perfect concert.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Not only did 'isolationism' badly mischaracterize the long American commitment to neutrality, but there were virtually no real isolationists to be found in the 1940s—even Sen. Robert Taft supported the creation of a world body with the ability to deploy force to stem conflict. Nevertheless, "the *idea* . . . proved spectacularly generative" (152-153).

synonym for armed intervention and global policing. The precise nature of the American tradition of nonentanglement must be understood, Wertheim argues, as a species of liberal internationalism, albeit an older, more Enlightenment-inflected one that put its hopes, above all, in the potential to transcend power politics and was underwritten by a faith in humanity's capacity for moral progress and the progressive realization of peace and mutual self-interest.

At the same time, the new 'i-word' slur—of which there are very few instances in the historical record before 1935—began making its way through Congressional debates, historical writing, and other channels of high discourse, until it was put into the mainstream by Walter Lippmann. In a 1939 *New York Herald Tribune* column, he presented it to the public as an accurate description of "the nation's default foreign policy,"[5] replacing the older and more accurate terms of "neutrality" and nonentanglement, which dated back to George Washington's Farewell Address. Once conjured, the specter of "isolationism" was quickly adopted by the more middlebrow opinion-forming organs and projected onto an array of figures, left, right, and center who expressed any qualms about this new project of global armed supremacy. Elites succeeded in polarizing the debate into "isolation or internationalism,"[6] both of which had become phantom terms.

Among the profound ironies of this new discourse of internationalism-as-global-armed-supremacy, Wertheim notes, are the ways its rhetoric came to resemble that of its ideological adversaries in communism and fascism. Henry Luce, founder of *Life* magazine, argued that "freedom requires and will require far greater living space than Tyranny," and to the prospect of a "thousand-year Reich" proposed a more modest "American Century."[7] To President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the only possible riposte to a "new order of tyranny" would be a new order of democracy: to spread the capacious Four Freedoms "everywhere around the world."[8] Progressive historian Charles Beard noted the irony: advocates of American supremacy seemed to share "the childish exuberance of the Bolshevik internationalists who preach the gospel of one model for the whole world."[9]

Yet the planners had their way. Public opinion, before which many mid-century intellectuals felt compelled to genuflect, meant to them not what the public actually wanted at any given moment so much

[5] Wertheim, 32-33; 205n94.

[6] To be sure, this change in opinion was a multi-stage process, and elite opinion was not changed at a single stroke. Operating initially within the premises of the older tradition of nonentanglement, planners came up with the concept of a "Quarter Sphere," (55) an expansion of the Monroe Doctrine of hemispheric defense, then gradually moved to a wider notion of an Anglo-American alliance (68) that could encircle totalitarian Europe, before finally coming to believe that American interests could not be delineated by any geographical boundaries at all.

[7] Quoted in Wertheim, 81.

[8] Quoted in ibid., 87.

[9] Quoted in ibid., 90.

as what the planners believed was good for them.[10] Polls, as Wertheim shows, shifted almost in tandem with elite opinion change, from 75 percent opposition to involvement in the European conflict in 1939 to 70 percent in favor of permanent American military supremacy (not simply participation in the war) by 1943. It was the "debate that wasn't"—"what transpired from 1943 to 1945 was less a debate than a campaign of legitimation."[11] The brilliance of the United Nations—a late addition to the design for postwar order—is, in Wertheim's telling, that it allows the United States to maintain the facade of an older, collaborative internationalism while concealing the bare fact of supremacy. It served for the advocates of global armed supremacy as an excellent diversion and a salve to conscience: America cannot be an empire, then, because its power is used in the service of right—in the service of defending and advancing beneficent humanitarian goals.[12]

Still, some readers may not be wholly convinced that the turn can be located entirely in the few years under study. In order to center the period he does, Wertheim must explain earlier American imperial ventures in Latin America and Asia as fundamentally different from the pursuit of global armed supremacy. He must also sidestep Woodrow Wilson and his expansive (though aborted) vision for remaking the world, arguing that American involvement in World War I was about defending neutral rights.[13] But a larger point of inquiry that might be raised concerns the broader question of the direction of history that Wertheim occasionally but provocatively evokes.

A significant part of the power of the "isolationist" label, Wertheim shows, comes not only from its implicit accusations of small mind and small soul but from the way it evokes, subconsciously, a view of history that has long pervaded American thinking—*even* non-interventionist and pro-internationalist thinking. To be 'isolated' would

[10] This distinction—between what the people claim they want and what they really, truly need—evokes Rousseau's distinction between the *volonté de tous* and the *volonté générale*. Supporters of global armed supremacy knew public opinion would follow once they had a chance to "re-educate the American people" (quoted in ibid., 129).

[11] Ibid., 147.

[12] A 1941 planning document from the State Department's postwar research division, for example, was prescient enough to raise concerns about a future "United States Empire," but its preoccupation was with whether American supremacy might generate opposition by other states, not how such a development would be received at home (ibid., 125).

[13] Ibid., 2; 23. He quotes Wilson as arguing for the League of Nations as a "disentangling alliance" (24) meant to drive states toward "[adopting] an enlightened conception of their interests" (25) that would lead to global disarmament. Wertheim does concede that sending American troops into a European war marked a break with previous foreign policy tradition, but argues that Wilson was severely mischaracterized by a later generation (including, not insignificantly, in the Academy Award-winning 1944 film *Wilson*) which tried to make him into a visionary but ineffective "prophet" standing against "isolationism" and for American supremacy (149-150).

mean to be cut off spatially and economically from global opportunities, yes, and to be in a perilous security situation as dictators conquer friendly nations. But, worst of all, isolation implies separation from civilization and from time: from the very march of history itself.[14]

In this way, the period covered by the book is like ours: the *imperium sine fine* of the liberal imagination again runs up against the limits of power politics, cultural resistance, and human nature. Once again the promised democratic future seems in deep question. For true believers, these diversions and reversals are a kind of eschatological failure and provoke numinous anguish. Assurances that the "arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," or even more urgent claims that history has a "right side" suddenly seem less assuring. What if history was not simply tarrying in producing its guaranteed outcome, but its course was actually being reversed or diverted into unimagined channels?

This sense of historical panic ensued, Wertheim explains, when Hitler's Germany conquered France in the summer of 1940, *the* event (and not Pearl Harbor or the outbreak of the war itself) that set off much of the elite planning that he catalogues. Then, for perhaps the first time in the American experience, a widely accepted historical myth was thrown into doubt. From the founding era through the long nineteenth century, it was largely taken for granted that, whatever reversals or upheavals might occur in the short run, what was broadly denominated 'democracy' was the wave of the future.[15] Forget the usual blame cast at German historicism—even a sage of 'moderate' democratic liberalism like Tocqueville could assert, in the introduction to *Democracy in America*, a claim as startling as that "to attempt to check democracy [is] to resist the will of God."[16] John Quincy Adams, in his "Speech on Independence Day," proffers a similarly grand and linear narrative of democratic advancement. That oration is known—justly—for offering the finest distillation of an older American foreign policy tradition, one which "abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings," and sought not to venture out "in search of monsters to destroy."[17]

Yet those lines, however quotable, are but one part of a lengthy medita-

[14] Ibid., 176.

[15] Ibid., 30.

[16] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* Volume I, trans. Henry Reeve, Francis Bowen, and Phillips Bradley. (New York: Vintage, 1990), 7.

[17] John Quincy Adams, "An Address Delivered at the Request of a Committee of the Citizens of Washington; On the Occasion of Reading the Declaration of Independence, On the Fourth of July, 1821" (Washington, DC: Davis and Force, 1821), 29. Pamphlet containing the original (full) version of the speech digitized at <https://archive.org/details/addressdelivered1821adam/page/n9/mode/2up>. The full version of this speech is not as easily found as one might expect, and even academic sources often reproduce only very short excerpts.

tion on the place of the United States in a long line of political forms that have preceded it. That speech, a touchstone of many who critique the global armed supremacy whose birth Wertheim chronicles, is a wonderland of historical, literary, and classical references, and even those who suppose themselves to be well-read will likely find at least one allusion that they are unable to discern without research (it could, indeed, almost serve as the basis of a liberal arts syllabus for an educator).

Yet amid all the literary refinement and the eloquent culmination that warns against becoming the "dictatress of the world" and so losing our national soul, there coexists a crude view of world history that divides it into light and dark, oppression and goodness. The Declaration of Independence is the first time the legitimate principles of government have ever been proclaimed, Adams says; it is "the corner stone of a new fabric, destined to cover the surface of the globe," which "demolished at a stroke the lawfulness of all governments founded upon conquest" and "swept away all the rubbish of accumulated centuries."[18] It may take time, and only happen if Americans resist the temptation to interfere in this process by force of arms, but the rest of the world *will* democratize too.

It is worth asking, then, whether there is not something in this view, as well, that is worth critiquing. If Adams is really saying "this far and no further," is such a formulation entirely sound, and can the two tenets of boundless democratic progress and national restraint (manifested in an internationalist strategy of nonentanglement) be held together in perpetuity? What if this older view of internationalism, whatever its many merits, also contains a flaw, an error about human nature and what it is possible to achieve in the world? For as different as the policy prescriptions of the old nineteenth-century internationalists and the twentieth-century architects of American supremacy were, they had this in common: "Both aspirations expressed . . . opposition to power politics and an exceptionalist exemption from the norm." The dilemma that occurred in 1940 is this: "whereas once avoiding entanglements and ordering the world went together, now Americans had to choose between the two."[19] And the problem is that "against appeals to America's nonentanglement tradition, interventionists could reply that the higher objective was always to redeem the world."[20] If "liberty" and "force" really are incommensurable ways of approaching international relations, will an apparent failure of the former mandate cynical recourse to the latter?[21]

If the United States is to make something of a "return to tradition" in its foreign policy as the twenty-first century advances—and it is arguably long past time it did so—then there is at least one aspect of

[18] Ibid., 21-22.

[19] Ibid., 58.

[20] Ibid., 74.

[21] Adams, "An Address," 21.

that worthy tradition that it ought to revive more cautiously and with a keener sense of limits. That aspect of exceptionalism that slides into assumptions about the predestined democratic trajectory of history and about one nation's messianic role in bringing about the millennium—or century, as it may be—is what requires careful correction, even excision, from the tradition. Meeting the challenge requires more than, though it certainly does not exclude, another revival of international law or a rereading of John Quincy Adams. It might even involve approaching Metternich.