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Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy

Or Rosemboim

The emergence of the new world order after WWII is shrouded in many myths, but the most influential of these is the one about the American transition from an 'isolationist' approach to foreign affairs to 'internationalism'. According to the conventional account, the Second World War generated a shift in the American mentality, leading politicians and the public alike to embrace the role of global leadership, expanding its presence and influence worldwide. In his new book, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*, Stephen Wertheim challenges this narrative and offers a persuasive alternative history of the rise of the United States to global power after the war.¹ Wertheim, a research scholar at Columbia University and Director of Grand Strategy Program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, is a historian of the United States and the World. In his scholarly work as well as in op-eds and commentary, he seeks to advance a new critical perspective on American foreign policy, based on responsibility and restraint. The book provides, therefore, not only a sharp and well-argued historical analysis of American foreign policy, but also a persuasive political argument about America's place in the world today.

The core of the book revolves around a revisionist argument, suggesting that the post-war 'debate' between 'internationalism' and 'isolationism' is largely a historical fiction. This idea follows the path opened up by historians, such as John A. Thompson, who have already suggested that American isolationism is not more than a myth, and challenged the notion of bipolar competition during the Cold War.²

Wertheim seeks to locate the moment of 'original sin' from which emerged, for him, the long-term American strategy of expansion and militarism. He suggests that the crucial point was not the supposed debate between 'isolationists' and 'internationalists' but between two kinds of 'internationalism': a Wilsonian pacifist approach that emphasised the political importance of public opinion and international cooperation, and a new kind of militant and expansive internationalism that considered the use of power necessary to guarantee United States global supremacy after the war. If earlier internationalists considered 'power politics' a threat to global peace and order, the latter saw power as the only way to guarantee order, and wanted it to be in American hands.

As recent histories of the American global expansion have shown, the United States has never planned on limiting its power within its borders.³ Since its foundation, the US envisioned its political existence not merely as an expression of the sovereignty of its people but as a beacon of a particular political vision that should set the standards for the rest of the world. In this sense, already in the 1920s the influential American geographer Isaiah Bowman argued that Americans could never restrict their influence to their sovereign territory. If by economic relations, trade, cultural influence or political interactions, the United States' mission was to spread its ideas and values around the world.⁴ When Germany posed a real threat to the American capacity to peacefully interact with the rest of the world – beyond the Western hemisphere that remained the traditional spatial domain of the Monroe Doctrine – Americans embraced an interventionist form of internationalism that considered global supremacy as its ultimate goal. Yet how did this transformation come about?

In the book, Wertheim puts his finger on the people who developed and propagated this new interventionist internationalism. In the process, he shows the historical links between scholars and decision-makers. The protagonists of the story are, therefore, a group of white male elite, a cohort of scholars, bureaucrats and politicians who joined forces for a common cause during the Second World War in the effort to plan a post-war order. Although we learn little about their previous opinions or their intellectual and political trajectories, Wertheim shows that they were in a position to influence policy at a moment when the United States needed to respond to a major crisis, the collapse of the democratic regimes of Europe and the eminent risk of Nazi occupation.

Wertheim does an exceptional job at outlining the transition from a peaceful internationalism to a militant one, which came about around 1939. This change marks, for him, a conscious decision of the United States to employ military means to sustain its global position, an approach that is still supported today. The particular moment, in the early years of the war, led to such a dramatic change in American foreign policy, because it embodied a change of will. Wertheim emphasises throughout the book the importance of the decision, the informed choice to follow a particular route towards global dominance that would render the temporalities of war and peace malleable.⁵ The rise of the American Empire was not facilitated by 'absent-minded' policy makers. Instead, the drafters of the plan were very much aware of their own ambitions while not necessarily sharing them with the wider public. For Wertheim, their ambitions transformed the course of US foreign policy ever since.

In 1941, Henry R. Luce, the publisher of Life Magazine, announced the emergence of the 'American Century',⁶ with the rise of the United States to world political, economic and cultural dominance. Wertheim shows that rather than a prophecy, it was a choice. Proponents of the 'American Century' thesis after the war assumed that America could not act globally alone, because that would seem imperialistic, but doubted that others, like Britain or Russia, could be reliable partners. Internationalism became, therefore, a cloak hiding different projects united by an ambition to expand globally the American way of life. Even the nascent international organization, the United Nations, served American policy makers as a source of legitimacy for a predominantly American-led vision.

One of the key concerns for the planners of American supremacy seems to be the question whether others would follow 'America's script'. Why would other countries accept American supremacy in the way they did? Is it a question of material abilities, both military and economic, that settled the American rise to global dominance? Or is there also a moral stance, an acceptance that the United States indeed should set a model for the world?

In the mid-twentieth century, these questions preoccupied many American political thinkers and commentators. The journalist and indefatigable federalist campaigner Clarence Streit was, for instance, undeterred by the challenges facing American expansion, suggesting that the United States should actively promote the transformation of world order into a federation of democracies, or at least a democratic union of the United States and the British Empire. His proposals echoed the Wilsonian idea that the international order should make the world 'safe for democracy', pitching this political regime – and moral ethos – at the pinnacle of human achievements, but embodied a more ambitious vision of American hegemony and leadership.⁷

Streit and his supporters founded their claims for American global hegemony on the ideals of American democracy. Curiously, democracy does not feature much in Wertheim's book and is indeed absent from the book's index. In America's global vision, democracy serves to legitimate the symbolic internationalism of the Atlantic Charter in the eye of the American public (p. 131), and to demarcate the opposition to German dictatorship (p. 53). According to Wertheim's thesis, the justification for global supremacy was not the defence or exportation of democracy, but a more prosaic, material claim about the will of the United States to guarantee its future freedom of economic and political interaction. But once the US attained this hegemonic position, democratization – in peaceful or more militant ways – became a central part of its foreign policy.

In a sense, global attempts at democratization were the next chapter in Wertheim's story. When the World War ended, one of the major aspirations of the new world power was to introduce American democracy to the world. Democracy became not merely a system of government, but a set of values and ideas that could advance American influence in the bipolar world order of the Cold War. Thus, in the early 1950s, the United States Information Service prepared pamphlets for overseas use, depicting American democracy as a success story. The United States could offer the world a lesson in doing democracy well: as the global

harbinger of democracy, the United States overcome racial conflict and discrimination. This story of redemption could be replicated in other racially mixed societies abroad, especially in post-colonial and 'underdeveloped' countries.⁸ American visions of democracy became, therefore, a universal token of modernity.

American academic institutions and philanthropic foundations became part of the effort to rethink democracy as a global principle in the Cold War by developing a body of knowledge for the exportation of the principles of (Anglo-)American democracy overseas.⁹ Modernization theory, as it became known, was a political project aimed at expanding American influence abroad by highlighting the advantages of democracy as a global principle of political order.¹⁰ American social scientists reimagined democracy as a token of modernity, a universally applicable political regime, unlimited to particular countries or to specific historical context.

According to the precepts of modernization theory, the universal applicability of democracy transcended cultural, political and geographical boundaries, and promised to become a truly unifying element in the post-war modern world.¹¹ Modernization theorists considered the democratization of developing countries desirable, but were not always optimistic about its potential success. While the implementation of the American model of democracy – whatever this might be – was seen as advantageous for both developing countries and the world order more generally, some scholars argued that certain societies might be unprepared for democracy.¹²

Nicolas Guilhot highlights the significant ambivalence about democracy that characterized modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, democratizing reforms that increased political participation in post-colonial and developing societies were deemed positive, but on the other, such reforms were criticized as an obstacle for ensuring the ongoing political influence of American political elites on these countries. The expansion of democracy was a proof of world-spanning American influence during the Cold War, but also a potential limit to it. Moreover, while the Cold War ideology prioritized stability, democracy promotion on a world scale necessarily endorsed change. Imagining democracy on a global scale introduced new contradictions to the American project of global supremacy, whose origin Wertheim skilfully outlines.¹³ These processes resulted and advanced the mind-shift that Wertheim traces in his book, as the United States re-imagined its international role as a hegemonic power that can intervene – often by military means – in other parts of the world.

The shift to an interventionist internationalism was not unchallenged. Wertheim shows how key thinkers, like Quincy Wright, resisted the transition to an 'internationalist' foreign policy based on unconditional military and political supremacy, which he categorised as imperialist. But these people were, apparently, sidelined in political debate at the time. It is possible that others, like Wright, opposed the new global vision of American supremacy. They might have envisaged a different world, in which the United States would co-exist with other leading powers, such as China, without accepting that totalitarian powers like Nazi Germany could prevail. By focusing on the construction of a strong argument around the turn to 'internationalism', Wertheim leaves the reader wondering about the roads not taken. Who were the alternative thinkers who opposed the US rise to hegemony? What alternative visions did they propose? In a sense, the answer to this question is embodied in Wertheim's current involvement with the Quincy Institute, which aims to outline a new prospect for American foreign policy. The alternative roads are newly painted as the result of the American decision for global supremacy is still visible in contemporary world politics.

Tomorrow, the World is an instructive and insightful read for historians and International Relations scholars. The book offers an exceptionally readable blend of intellectual history, foreign policy and international theory. It offers a fresh interpretation of one of the key moments in American foreign policy, and draws a clear line between historical trajectories and contemporary politics. By emphasising the

importance of a willed decision in shaping America's rise to supremacy, Wertheim invites his readers to consider the contingent origins of the current state of affairs, and to imagine alternative futures.

Notes

¹ Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2020).

² See, for example, John A. Thompson, 'The Geopolitical Vision: The Myth of an Outmatched U.S.A' in Duncan Bell and Joel Isaac (eds.), *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012); John A. Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2015).

³ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (Farrar: Straus and Giroux 2019).

⁴ Lucian M. Ashworth, 'Mapping a New World: Geography and the Interwar Study of International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 57/1 (2013) 138–49.

⁵ See Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶ Henry R. Luce, 'The American Century', [1941] reproduced in *Diplomatic History* 23/2 (1999), 159–71.

⁷ Clarence K. Streit, *Union Now: A Proposal for a Federal Union of the Democracies of the North Atlantic* (New York, London: Harper & Brothers 1939).

⁸ M. L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000), chapter 2.

⁹ I. Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (New York: Columbia University Press 2012); K. Rietzler, 'Fortunes of a Profession: American Foundations and International Law, 1910–1939', *Global Society* 28/1 (2014), 8–23.

¹⁰ N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory and the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press 2007); D. Bessner and N. Guilhot (eds.) *The Decisionist Imagination: Sovereignty, Social Science, and Democracy in the 20th Century* (New York: Berghahn Books 2019.)

¹¹ Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers*, chapter 3.

¹² Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers*, 111.

¹³ Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers*, 32.

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