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Book Reviews

Schonberg, Karl K.
Pursuing the National Interest:
Moments of Transition in Twentieth Century American Foreign Policy
Westport, CT & London: Praeger, 2003. 280pp.

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By the dawn of the twentieth century the United States had already acquired its first overseas colonial assets in the form of Guam, Hawaii, and the Philippines after its victory over Spain in the war of 1898. By the end of the century the old-style colonies had all but disappeared, but the US had become the preponderant global power economically, militarily and politically. Karl Schonberg's study attempts to elucidate how this happened and why established realist and systemic theories of international relations fail to adequately explain it. Such theories fail to account for what Schonberg calls "national ideology", the culture and worldview specific to the United States, its leaders and policy-makers. This ideology encompasses, all at once, strands of liberal internationalism, conservative isolationism, Wilsonianism and national pre-eminence. At pivotal moments of transition during the twentieth century (and beyond), one strand or another of this uniquely American political culture has triumphed to define foreign policy for the next twenty or so years. Schonberg is not the first author to write about the effect of culture on policy, but he is the first to use it to scientifically refute established realist theory.[1]

Schonberg extrapolates from five case studies, which all presented an opportunity to redefine US foreign policy: entry into World War I, rejection of the League of Nations, entry into World War II, establishment of the Nato alliance, and the post-cold war to post-9/11 period. He argues convincingly that it was not just the changing international and domestic environments at these pivotal junctures that affected policy, but also the "national ideology". Accordingly, policy is the result of "a complex array of interacting forces" rather than simply fixed structures (p.6).

The contest between competing strands of the national ideology (Wilsonianism, 'isolationism' etc.) is conveyed most cogently in the earlier chapters of the book that focus on pre-World War II case studies, when Washington was less entangled with the rest of the world than it would later become. However, Schonberg searches too hard for elements of Wilsonianism and isolationism in the post-1945 period and ends up missing more salient trends that reflect the reality of post-war US preponderance and the broad consensus that it should be perpetuated. This certainly does not mean that his concept of a multi-faceted national ideology is redundant, but the fact of US supremacy did narrow the debate. Active perpetuation of the US position became the centre ground and the debate in the foreign policy establishment increasingly revolved around means more than ends. Schonberg later muses that ideology "does seem to change over time", but the point is tagged on in the final concluding remarks and is not sufficiently incorporated into the post-1945 analysis. (p.248)

His choice of the establishment of Nato as the most important post-war transition point is unusual since it came after the enunciation and adoption of the containment policy. Also ignored is the establishment of the enduring US–led global economic system in 1944, despite Schonberg's discussion of the increasing economic power of the US in the inter-war years

Moreover, his argument that George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton established a new "internationalist consensus" around multilateralism and democracy-promotion that has essentially been continued by George W. Bush, is empirically unsound to say the least. The older Bush resolutely refused to countenance democratisation of Iraq in 1991. The Clinton administration's 1993 directive on 'assertive multilateralism' (which was only intended to apply to second-tier conflicts) was shelved after the debacle in Somalia, and its 'enlargement' of democratic market states always focused more on the markets than the democracy.[2] The younger Bush's (somewhat erratic) desire for the support of international organisations does not stem from "a new consensus for global engagement" (p.221) but from the pragmatic realisation that American power is less likely to be challenged if its actions are approved by international institutions. A more appropriate area of continuity between the Clinton and Bush administration's might have been the 'rogue states' doctrine, repackaged in 2002 as the 'axis of evil'.

Schonberg's book is an interesting and provocative read and is certainly a welcome antidote to realism and systemic theory which ignore the uniqueness of each political culture; but its limits lie in the author's failure to sufficiently recognise the reality of US preponderance in the post-WWII period.

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[1] Other excellent historical studies on the effect of culture and ideology on US foreign policy include Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The US Crusade Against the Soviet Union 1945-1956* (Manchester University Press, 1999); and Michael Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 1998).

[2] On the older Bush and Iraq, see James Mann's *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (Viking, 2004) chapter 12. On the fate of Clinton's "assertive multilateralism", see Jennifer Sterling-Folker's essay "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Assertive Multilateralism and Post-Cold War US Foreign Policy Making," in James M. Scott, ed., *After the End: Making US Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World* (Duke University Press, 1998): 277-304. On the subservience of human rights to economic policy in the case of China, see John T. Rourke and Richard Clarke, "Making US Foreign Policy toward China in the Clinton Administration," in Scott ed., *After the End*: 201-224.