Introduction

This is a book about how and why American foreign policy works.

In little more than two hundred years, the United States has grown from a handful of settlements on the Atlantic seaboard to become the most powerful country in the history of the world. Both foreigners and Americans themselves take this remarkable development for granted. Throughout the U.S. rise to world power, most observers have believed that the country did not care very much about foreign policy and was not very good at it. Even today in the United States, most policy-makers and pundits think that foreign policy played only a very marginal role in American life before World War II, and that there is very little to be gained by studying the historical records of our past.

When Richard C. Leone and The Century Foundation commissioned me to write a book about American foreign policy at the end of the Cold War, I found myself increasingly drawn to question this conventional wisdom. I wondered if American success in the rough-and-tumble contest of nations wasn't due just to dumb luck, the special providence for drunks, fools, and the "United States of America that Bismarck believed watched over us. I also wondered if the American foreign policy system had a logic of its own, a different logic from the one that governed the foreign policy of the traditional great powers of Europe.

Two discrepancies led me to ask these questions. First, there was the odd fact that while much conventional discussion of foreign policy assumes at least tacitly that democracy is at best an irrelevance and at worst a serious obstacle in foreign affairs, in the twentieth century democratic states were generally more successful in foreign policy than either monarchies or dictatorships. The clearest examples come from Germany and Japan. Under nondemocratic regimes, both Germany and Japan followed risky, aggressive foreign policies that ultimately brought them to misery and ruin. Starting under much less favorable external circum-
stances after World War II, democratic German and Japanese governments made their countries rich, peaceful, and respected. Was it possible that something about democracy actually improves the ability of governments to conduct their foreign affairs?

Second, I could not escape the fact that the two most recent great powers in world history were what Europeans still sometimes refer to as “Anglo-Saxon” powers: Great Britain and the United States. Besides having a large number of cultural similarities, these two countries have historically looked at the world in a different way than have most of the European countries. The British Empire was, and the United States is, concerned not just with the balance of power in one particular corner of the world but with the evolution of what we today call “world order.” A worldwide system of trade and finance made both Britain and the United States rich; those riches were what gave them the power to project the military force that ensured the stability of their international systems. Both Britain and the United States spent less time thinking about the traditional military security preoccupations of European power diplomacy and more time thinking about money and trade. “A nation of shopkeepers!” Napoleon scoffed about Britain—but the shopkeepers got him in the end.

Could it be that the British shopkeepers and American democrats know something about foreign policy that Napoleon and Bismarck didn’t?

These questions led me to the study of the history of American foreign policy. What I found has changed the way I look at that subject, and at American politics, today.

For one thing, I found that foreign policy has played a much more important role in American politics throughout our history than I expected. Our contemporary battles over the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are the latest installments in a long line of American political contests over trade issues. Long before World War II or even World War I, foreign policy questions were deciding American elections, reshaping American politics, and driving the growth of the American economy.

I also found that American thinking about foreign policy has been relatively stable over the centuries. The arguments over foreign policy in George Washington’s administration—and some of the bitterest political battles Washington engaged in were over foreign policy—are clearly related to the debates of our own time.

Americans through the centuries seem to have had four basic ways of looking at foreign policy, which have reflected contrasting and sometimes complementary ways of looking at domestic policy as well. Hamiltonians regard a strong alliance between the national government and big business as the key both to domestic stability and to effective action abroad, and they have long focused on the nation’s need to be integrated into the global economy on favorable terms. Wilsonians believe that the United States has both a moral obligation and an important national interest in spreading American democratic and social values throughout the world, creating a peaceful international community that accepts the rule of law. Jeffersonians hold that American foreign policy should be less concerned about spreading democracy abroad than about safeguarding it at home; they have historically been skeptical about Hamiltonian and Wilsonian policies that involve the United States with unsavory allies abroad or that increase the risks of war. Finally, a large populist school I call Jacksonians believes that the most important goal of the U.S. government in both foreign and domestic policy should be the physical security and the economic well-being of the American people. “Don’t Tread on Me!” warned the rattlesnake on the Revolutionary battle flag; Jacksonians believe that the United States should not seek out foreign quarrels, but when other nations start wars with the United States, Jacksonian opinion agrees with Gen. Douglas MacArthur that “There is no substitute for victory.”

These four schools have shaped the American foreign policy debate from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first. They are as important under George W. Bush as they were under George Washington and from everything that I can see, American foreign policy will continue to emerge from their collisions and debates far into the future.

While this book is an attempt to explain the U.S. rise to world power, it is not intended as yet another paean to what some seem to see as America’s Manifest Destiny to rule the world. The long economic boom of the 1990s spawned some triumphalist literature about the American way of capitalism and the growth of American power. This book is not a part of that literature; it ends on a cautionary, not a triumphalist, note. After each of the three great wars of the twentieth century—the two world wars and the Cold War—many voices in America proclaimed an “end to history.” With the powers of evil defeated, the United States and its allies, some argued each time, would go on in the postwar period to build a new world order of justice, peace, and democracy.
History, alas, has a way of hanging on. More than a decade after the Cold War, it now seems clear that the twenty-first century is bringing the United States new challenges and new problems. Not all countries will become democratic; not all democratic countries will agree with the United States about how the world should be run. Foreign policy will not become a field of dreams; our choices will sometimes be painful ones, and together with new opportunities and adventures this century may well bring new wars and new problems that are even worse than those of the bloody century just past.

But if this book is not triumphalist, it is optimistic. American foreign policy will not bring history to an end, but it has done a remarkably good job of enabling the United States to flourish as history goes on. I do not know how long the present moment of American supremacy will last, or if the world is due for a second American century. I am not even sure that another century of American global hegemony is what the American people should hope for. But the long and successful record of this country's unique—and uniquely complex—foreign policy system gives me solid grounds for believing that whatever else happens in the world, our foreign policy tradition offers the American people real hope for a prosperous and democratic future.

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