

Entangling Alliances

America never went it alone, according to this comprehensive history of foreign policy.

BY JOSEF JOFFE

FROM COLONY TO SUPERPOWER

U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776.

By George C. Herring.

Illustrated. 1,035 pp. Oxford University Press. \$35.

THIS is an ambitious work and a steal — a thousand pages for \$35. Such heft is rare these days, and such ambition is even rarer: a single-volume history of American foreign policy from George Washington to George W. Bush. For a similar try, you have to go back half a generation to Eugene V. Rostow's "Breakfast for Bonaparte" or to the four-volume (and four-author) "Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations."

Professionals and interested laymen will always want such a book: an up-to-date, two-inch-thick repository of facts and quotations, with the what, when and wherefore of, say, Manifest Destiny laid out at your fingertips. Or, who first warned against "entangling alliances"? No, it wasn't Washington but Jefferson.

True, you can also find that in Wikipedia, but minus the imprimatur of the Oxford History of the United States series, of which "From Colony to Superpower" is the seventh volume. And wouldn't you rather rely on an established historian who is also the former editor of the journal *Diplomatic History*?

The strength of this book is the author's Herculean power of synthesis. Ours is the age of merciless specialization — no grand prizes for grand sweeps. Yet Herring recaptures a quarter-millennium of American foreign policy with fluidity and felicity. Wisely or warily, he avoids taking sides in the great controversies; a good teacher, he presents the "on the one hand" along with the "on the other," copious references included.

Though the book lacks original research, and rarely cites primary sources, it is not a textbook — or if so, it is a very sophisticated one with about a hundred footnotes per (short) chapter and a 31-page bibliographic essay. Neither is it an interpretative, let alone argumentative history of American diplomacy. For that, a reader will have to go to Walter A. McDougall's "Promised Land, Crusader State" or Walter Russell Mead's "Special Providence."

Herring's argument comes rather by way of indirection. From the first to the last page, this book whispers that the conventional narrative of *America insulata* is dead wrong. Never did the United

States follow as a "great rule of conduct" the advice laid out in Washington's Farewell Address: "to have... as little political connection as possible" with Europe. Isolationism has been a myth and a fighting word, but not a policy.

The ex-colonists could never have won the war against the British without the French. When Jefferson doubled the country's size through the Louisiana Purchase, he was playing diplomatic hardball with the best of them, pitting France, Britain and Spain against one another. "Regime change" is not W's invention. During the four-year war against the pirate-extortionists of Tripoli, Jefferson and Madison launched the "first U.S. attempt to replace a hostile foreign government" by trying to topple the Pasha and install his exiled brother. Did Americans really despise power politics as a corrupt game of princes? By 1851, Secretary of State Daniel Webster crowed that America would eventually "command the oceans, both oceans, all the oceans."

AMERICANS think the Civil War was all theirs; in fact, both sides "recognized that their success or failure" depended on the "European great powers." During the Gilded Age, the nouveau riche Republic felt cocky enough (in the words of *The New York Herald*) to tell Britain: "She need not bother with this side of the sea. We are a good enough England for this hemisphere." At the end of the century, hyperbole knew no limits. "We are... a great imperial Republic destined to exercise a controlling influence upon the actions of mankind," a pundit of the period declared.

Even in the post-1919 heyday of "isolationism," America's foreign entanglements actually thickened. Direct investment in Europe more than doubled in the 1920s; some 1,300 American companies were established there. Though the Senate vetoed membership in the League of Nations, American financiers and diplomats saved postwar Europe from economic disaster (see the Young and Dawes Plans).

Another between-the-lines argument is about the interconnectedness of it all. This is not as trite as it sounds because a vast majority of the literature on American di-

plomacy focuses on specific regions and countries. Herring diligently draws out the global dimensions of the nation's foreign relations. Still, when he takes a jab at "Eurocentricity," he loses his balance. About the 1920s he complains: "In a strange, almost surreal way ... the postwar world remained Eurocentric." Considering what followed — Stalin, Fascism, Hitler, World War II — the problem, one would think, was rather too *little* "Eurocentrism."

And this problem is symptomatic of a larger failing. "From Colony to Superpower" is a tale without a theory. Herring writes about the grand sweep of history without providing even a middling idea about its drivers; it's like composing music without themes, tempos and crescendos. The fateful progression toward war with Japan gets about the same amount of space as *do relations with Latin America*.

Worse, because the book lacks a conceptual framework, the titanic power struggle of states dwindles into a string of all-too-human mishaps. Japan's ambassador to the United States, Kichisaburo Nomura, and Secretary of State Cordell Hull "often talked past each other" in the run-up to the war, Herring reports. "They spoke without an interpreter, and Nomura's limited understanding of English at times misled him regarding the progress that had been made." Get your English right or get an interpreter is apparently the wide-eyed moral of this story.

Personalization leads easily to demonization, as when Herring invokes a naval clash in the Atlantic three months before Hitler declared war to claim that "an opportunist F.D.R. used an allegedly unprovoked attack to escalate the naval war" against Germany. Gee, if Roosevelt had been a bit nicer, he could have kept the country out of war. And let Hitler have Britain and all of Europe?

Herring takes the same approach to the cold war, ever so softly fingering Truman

as culprit with suggestive sentences like: His "first moves did not mark Truman's abandonment of F.D.R.'s effort to cooperate with the Soviet Union." Hmm, is that to say he did abandon the effort? Yes, 32 pages later: "The dramatic initiatives of 1947-48" like the Marshall Plan "hardened the division of Europe."

This is a mildly revisionist version of history that authors like Gar Alperovitz began to push full blast in the 1960s. But the issue here is trying to distinguish between contingency and necessity. Thucydides wrote about the foibles of the players in the Peloponnesian War, but in the light of an overarching theme — that the growth of Athenian power had made war with Sparta inevitable. And so too, regarding wars in modern times, with Japan and Nazi Germany (hot) and the Soviet Union (cold).

The closer Herring comes to the present, the shakier the ground on which he walks. There are some classics he seems not to have read, like Robert E. Osgood's "NATO: The Entangling Alliance," the standard account of coalition-building in the cold war. Or Samuel Huntington's monumental volume "The Common Defense." Curiously, he uses "Gulliver's Troubles" as the title for his chapter on Kennedy and Johnson, but he does not cite Stanley Hoffmann's study with the same name.

We have long been waiting for a single-volume history like this one, and "From Colony to Superpower" deserves a place on the bookshelf, if only for sheer effort and sweep. But it won't replace the volumes of the Cambridge History, or a few dozen of the classic authors from Samuel Flagg Bemis to Norman Graebner, from George F. Kennan to John Lewis Gaddis. Sometimes more is less. □

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Stephen Decatur and Daniel Fraser in combat during the Barbary Wars.