

Melvyn P. Leffler

***Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920–2015***

(Princeton University Press, 2017, ISBN: 978-0-691-17258-3, 360 pp., \$39.95/\$30, hb.)

The book is a collection of essays Melvyn P. Leffler, one of the most distinguished foreign policy historians, has published since 1972. It consists of 11 chapters (or essays) preceded by a preface and an introduction that provides additional (and helpful) comments on the essays. Speaking from International Relations (IR) perspectives, especially its subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), the chapters, each of which is preceded by brief (again, helpful) remarks, are primarily concerned with what independent variables influenced US foreign (and national security) policy from the end of WWI to Bush's Global War on Terror (GWOT).

The book makes an effort to answer some critical foreign policy questions, including: Why did US policymakers refuse to allow the United States (US) to play a leading role in European financial affairs after WWI? Conversely, why did US officials involve America heavily in the Cold War against the Soviet Union and thus took an "expansive conception of national security?" Why did the Cold War originate (and persist)? Why did the US win the Cold War? If there were concerns about balancing means and ends during the 1990s, why did the GWOT disregard it? Did the GWOT demonstrate a change in US foreign policy? How would "budgetary retrenchment" due to post-GWOT failures in Iraq and Afghanistan affect "the future of American security"? (IX, X, 21).

Wrestling with these questions over the decades, Leffler gradually has come to believe that economic considerations have not been the primary causal factors in foreign policy. Given the complexity of US political system (and IR), other sources equally have played a significant role in the decision-making process. Internal sources/structures (including domestic players such as Congress/other influential actors as well as ideals/values, public opinion and domestic economic considerations), external factors (including the international system) and human characteristics are shown to have motivated policymakers to act the ways they do.

But whatever causal factors are invoked, US foreign policy, maintains Leffler, has always been about safeguarding or protecting democratic capitalism from foreign threats. He defines "democratic capitalism" as core US political and economic values: that is, "democratic" stands for political values such as personal liberty, representative government, individual freedom, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the rule of law, "safety of American lives, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity"; and "capitalism" implies economic principles such as free enterprise, private property and open markets (24–5).

Over the course of almost 50 years, he has made use of different approaches or interpretative lenses (at times refined or even combined existing methodologies) to inform his study (x). His recent writings (chapter 11 in particular) attempt to create a new approach based on the concept of national security (explained below). This book, therefore, is partly about the evolution of Leffler's "own intellectual journey" (x) over the past several decades.

Chapter 1 (28–46) deals with the Republican War Debt policy between 1921–23. In his analysis on the role of domestic sources, he, in challenging the prevailing views of US-European relations ("the open door thesis"), discovered that "isolationism was a myth" (5), that US policymakers were *not* ignorant about the importance of European stability and its link to US prosperity, and that they were aware of how negatively the war debts impacted Britain, France and Italy. But the policymakers found themselves unable to come up with a coherent strategy to cancel debts or reduce interest rates due to opposition by domestic actors, such as bankers, traders and farmers. Cancellation or reduction of the war debts would have led to an increase in tax at home; something unacceptable to the American people or their representatives in Congress (38–9). Due to domestic opposition and economic considerations, the policymakers, in the end, had to go for a trade-off.

Chapter 2 (28–75) focuses on Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover during 1921–29, particularly his efforts to solve contentious financial and political issues at home and abroad while trying not to hurt the interests of competing groups or countries. Hoover was "progressive", not isolationist. He understood well the importance of the well-being of international economy to the well-being of the domestic economy and employed an economic approach to try to bring about "a new era of perpetual democracy" and prosperity (10, 48, 54). But Hoover failed because he would not fully commit all US powers to solve those international economic issues, as, firstly, the Secretary of Commerce believed he might overestimate their relevance to US prosperity, and, secondly, he did not see US interests to be threatened by them. He was wary of both isolationism and "dangerous overcommitment" (75). Again, Leffler demonstrated that events at home influenced foreign policy decisions.

Chapter 3, "Political Isolationism, Economic Expansionism, or Diplomatic Realism: American Policy towards Western Europe, 1921–1933" (76–116), is concerned with US policy towards Western Europe during 1921–33. Through analysis of the evidence, he concludes that the Republican officials, as "realist" scholars claimed, neither were irresponsibly or naively isolationist nor, as economic expansionists argued, economically "expansionist"; they were "pragmatic and opportunistic" (10–11, 76). They committed to Europe to the extent that US interests allowed them, especially when they saw no serious threats to US security. They would not engage US resources in something that they seemed to go beyond US

powers and interests. Furthermore, they assumed that supporting one country (France) would have weakened/alienated another (Germany) and thus had the potential to facilitate conditions that could lead to inevitable war (10). Equally, they had to take into consideration the domestic opposition to overinvolvement in European affairs. So, neutrality and arms limitation with limited engagement “to promote world stability and international order” (which they *did* see as crucial to the expansion of US markets abroad) were strategies that seemed politically realistic (and prudent) at the time, and the WWII could have hardly been foreseen (11).

The first three chapters highlight how the decision-makers dealt with difficult choices as well as with pressures applied by different actors and structures with competing interests, how the decision-makers worked hard to strike a balance between commitments and interests, how challenging it was for the policymakers to reconcile domestic imperatives with foreign policy objectives, how they tried to design a coherent foreign policy, and most importantly, how none of the prevailing theories (including political isolationism, economic expansionism, diplomatic realism) could alone be used to interpret US-European relations accurately because decision-making was complex/complicated. Over the years, notably after he served as a dean at the University of Virginia, Leffler has developed empathy for policymakers (13, 22, 25–6, 46, 79, 113–16).

Chapter 4, “The American Conception of National Security and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945–1948” (117–163), argues that after WWII, in contrast to WWI, US policymakers became heavily involved in world and European affairs because of their perception of threats. Using extensively declassified military records as his sources, Leffler discovered that US military leaders and civilian officials felt threatened by the Soviet Union even though they knew the Soviet leaders, aware of their weak military capabilities compared to those of the US, had no intention to go to war with the US. Nevertheless, US military leaders were worried that, given how capitalism was seen as a cause of injustices in parts of Europe and the Third World, the Soviet way of life could prove attractive to many in those continents. US officials had learned from WWII that a country or a collection of countries (such as the Soviet Union) could conquer other states and use their human and other resources against the US. So, the US felt compelled to take a “very expansive definition of security requirements” (16) that necessitated a large number of overseas bases and military commitments (124–25). The Soviet Union saw US expansion as a threat, and they equally embarked on similar measures. Thus the “sequences of actions and reactions” (16) created the Cold War. This article shows that it was the perception of US military leaders and the way they define the concept of national security that impacted decision-making in Washington, DC, and, as Leffler boldly argued, originated the Cold War (117).

Chapter 5, “Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945–1952” (164–186), likewise is concerned with the same causal factor: it was US military requirements (including the quest for strategic dominance) in the region or US national security imperatives, rather than threats posed by the Soviet Union (as the neoconservatives would lead one to believe) that shaped US relations towards Turkey, making Turkey a member of NATO (185–6). Turkey was perceived by American officials to play an essential part in case war broke out with the Soviet Union (173).

Chapter 6, “Adherence to Agreements: Yalta and the Experiences of the Early Cold War” (187–220), studies the diplomacy during the first decades of Cold War and explains how US and Soviet leaders accused each other of not sticking to pledges in the treaties made in the early Cold War years and how both sides took measures to expand their respective spheres of influence. In trying to “chart a middle road” (188) between traditionalists (who blamed the Soviet Union for violations of the treaties) and revisionists (who blamed US expansionist instincts), he concluded that these measures were shaped by both domestic politics (including US security goals to expand) and by “ambiguities” and “uncertainties” (16–18, 118, 218–20).

Chapter 7, “Victory: The “State,” the “West,” and the Cold War” (221–242), contends that winning the Cold War was not about, what the “triumphalist interpretation” (21) would argue, “the defense build-up and moral clarity of Ronald Reagan”. But it was to do with a “struggle about alternative ways of life” (20). The West offered a better way of life by empowering the *state* to enable conditions to meet “the needs” of its people (239–402). It was not so much about making diplomacy or policy function abroad, but instead it was about making democratic capitalism *work at home* to provide a *superior* way of life (222).

Chapter 8, “Dreams of Freedom, Temptation of Power” (243–280), covers “the neoliberal decade” (20), the period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the terrorist acts of 9/11. The emphasis on what motivated US foreign policy in this article (and chapter 9) shifted from “structures, interests, and processes” to “human agency [human characteristics] and contingency” (21): now he relied on how the role of human agency – Reagan, and especially, Mikhail Gorbachev (256) – played a crucial part in bringing about the sudden and dramatic end of the Cold War.

Human characteristics (values, perceptions, memories, past experiences, beliefs, emotions, fear, power, individual understandings of why the US “won” the Cold War) played a crucial part in the era between the two events and in the making of the GWOT. The George H. W. Bush and the Bill Clinton Administrations believed that it was US military might (and its “superior” values) that won the Cold War, and they warned against isolationism and instead preferred to promote the democratic peace worldwide; though *prudently*. But once 9/11 happened “[f]ear trumped

prudence" (244), and thus, aware of the Cold War memories that freedom would eventually win over evil, George W. Bush invaded Iraq even though the mission of liberating and spreading democracy in the Middle East seemed a difficult task.

Chapter 9, "9/11 and American Foreign Policy" (281–302), asserts that, as far as historical perspectives were concerned, Bush's GWOT and the National Security Strategy Statement 2002 (NSSS) were not revolutionary. The GWOT and NSSS were concerned with protecting American ideals, expanding open markets and free trade, and preserving US military superiority. These were all the "basic goals" (281) of US national security policy, and all previous administrations protected them. Equally, acting unilaterally when necessary and taking preventative action when essential had been considered previously. Consequently, unlike many foreign policy analysts claimed, there was not a radical transformation of US foreign policy; there were continuities of the previous administrations' policies (283).

For Leffler, what did change though was the way Bush and his advisers calculated the threat posed by terrorism (threat perception) and what resources (means) they were willing to dedicate to achieve their goals. For them, inaction (deterrence or containment) were no longer an option. They had to become offensive to deter the threats of further attacks, especially those involving some kind of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Overreliance on preventative action or militarism did not change goals, but it rather altered "tactics". Meanwhile, the Bush Administration relied more and more on the spread of America ideals, democracy in particular, especially when no WMD were found in Iraq, and in the process, the "balance between ideals and interests has been dangerously skewed in the favour of the former." (301)

This article demonstrates how human agency played an important part in the making of the GWOT and NSSS: the level of fear (of further attacks), perception of threat (which they "sincerely" felt to be excessive), sense of responsibility (to protect the 300 million or so Americans and the values that were dear to them), concern with credibility (another attack would have questioned the credibility of the Bush Administration), domestic politics (Americans wanted their president to bring the perpetrators of 9/11 to justice) and role of organisational factors (assumably bureaucratic politics) were all independent variables that motivated foreign policy (294–302).

Chapter 10, "Austerity and U.S. Strategy: Lessons from the Past" (303–316), uses examples from the past and claims that, unlike what the dominant assumption asserted that austerity was a threat to democratic capitalism, periods of austerity resulted in creative foreign policy and national security choices (304). It was so because policymakers managed to think creatively. They assessed the perception of threat carefully (309);

prioritised goals; found a balance between means and ends and thus made “tough trade-offs” between “priorities at home and commitments abroad” (304); relied more on diplomatic solutions than military; and talked to adversaries. Examples were the Harry S. Truman Administration’s Marshall Plan, the Richard Nixon Administration’s policies of *détente* towards the Soviet Union and rapprochement towards China (315). The opposite has equally been true: “generous defense spending often tempted too much intervention and nurtured a sense of overweening power.” (24). Prime examples were the decisions to go to war in Vietnam and decades later in Iraq (316).

Chapter 11 (317–335) defines the concept of “national security” as the defence of “core values from external threats.” (317) Core values, or “democratic capitalism”, are already explained above. It is stated that foreign policy would turn into national security policy if American policymakers believed that events abroad posed a risk to these core values within America. Individual characteristics were argued again to have played a part in assessing levels of threat from abroad posed to US core values. Most importantly, the chapter proposed that national security could be used as an interpretive framework for analysing American foreign policy (24, 25).

Leffler’s arguments/conclusions reached in the essays leave one with a number of questions. Firstly, how could revisionism and realism be a complementary interpretive framework? Leffler does not provide a precise definition of what he means by revisionism. According to Robert Jackson and George Sørensen, revisionism is a critical theory such as Marxism, which, briefly speaking, assumes that material (i.e., economic) conditions motivate foreign policy. Realism, in which, generally speaking, policymakers are assumed to be rational: that is, they think and act in terms of national interest defined in terms of power and in turn defined as social influence, control, resources or material wealth. The concept of power enables one to understand the action of policymakers regardless of their intentions or views. So, it is unclear how Leffler combines elements from the two opposing theories (realism and revisionism) to constitute an approach for studying the decision-making process; a model that the explanans is national security (25), which, as Leffler himself agrees (317), is an elusive concept that can be given any interpretation. It can include sources from all three levels of analysis: the individual, the state, and the international system. What source or sources should one analyse as the driving explanans to explain a foreign policy choice? Is his approach not closer to FPA, in which the causal factors are equally ‘multifactorial’, multileveled, and ‘multidisciplinary’? FPA has also been subjected to much criticism, as the critiques argued that it was impossible to trace all influences (and to measure their impact) on a given foreign policy choice, or even on decision-making in the abstract.

Secondly, did Reagan not have moral clarity and a unified grand strategy?

Furthermore, was Gorbachev not given too many credits when he was held as the primary factor to have caused the end of the Cold War? What about the role the Afghan resistance played in the weakening of the Soviet Union?

Thirdly, would overreliance on military archive can provide an accurate picture of the decision-making process or a foreign policy choice, specifically when civilian leaders, the President in particular, are responsible for making foreign policy and military leaders dutifully follow instructions?

Finally, and most importantly, many foreign policy analysts would disagree with the conclusion that there was no change in the post-9/11 American foreign policy. *America in Afghanistan* found no previous administrations to have taken preventative action on *the scale* the Bush Administration did following 9/11 with the goal to *defeat* terrorism *worldwide*. There should be a difference between what an administration – for example, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration or the Clinton Administration (286, 291–94) – *said* (or took *minor* actions) in the past with what an administration *did* (Bush Junior)! Leffler agrees with the enormity of the GWOT and its ambitious objectives, but he links this to change in tactics. Does using a new tactic that leads to disastrous consequences not amount to a new policy? (Many would agree with Leffler though that bad policies were due to poor judgement, arrogance and false assumptions rather than some other ulterior motives. They would also concur that human agency was crucial in the making of the GWOT.)

What really motived foreign policy, however, has been a subject of a decades-long debate between foreign policy analysts (and competing theories) and no conclusive answers have ever been put forward. It would, therefore, be unfair to expect *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism* to provide a clear-cut solution. What the book does offer though is a well-researched and brilliantly written piece of work. Leffler's efforts to quest for objectivity, his courage to reach a conclusion that his research would lead him to even if it could question the prevailing views and the theoretical approaches invoked to reach those viewpoints, and his attempts to create a new theory are exemplary. The book is an excellent source for understanding the decision-making process and the factors that impact it. Consequently, it can be a vital book for FPA and IR courses.

Moreover, the book not just only offers answers to some critical questions (stated above) relating to different aspects of US foreign policy over the course of the past several decades, but also provides a number of lessons to both foreign policy historians/analysts and policymakers. Firstly, young scholars should not be discouraged by rejections/criticism. If they have written something "good", they should stick to it. His

academic journey narrated in the introduction demonstrates how over his almost five-decade-long academic journey Leffler faced numerous difficulties/rejections/disappointments/criticism but refused to be defined by them. Instead, he learned from them and, through hard work, managed to become who he is today: an outstanding historian of his generation – someone who has had many of his books and articles published. Secondly, historians should seek objectivity/truth and interpret events accurately as incorrect interpretations of past history could lead to disastrous outcomes in the future (though few historians would agree that their interpretation is inaccurate or biased) (26–7).

Thirdly, it is equally important that both US policymakers and foreign policy scholars read the book to ascertain the guide he offers about how to safeguard American core values (and avoid making poor foreign policy choices). It includes: define goals carefully; balance between interests and commitments; open market is good for the US but should be regulated by an enlightened state; go for multilateralism than universalism; when necessary, do not hesitate to make difficult trade-offs; always be prepared to talk to your adversaries; do not overreach; avoid rhetoric as it could overtrap; and it is the domestic economy that makes a country great (26–7, 218–20, 241–42, 299, 301–03). President Donald Trump with his American First approach seems to be blatantly ignoring these lessons.

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