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A Test of Character?

The Cambridge History of America and the World, Volume IV: 1945 to the Present testifies that “diplomatic history,” while becoming “US and the world,” has moved from the margins of the history discipline to its very center. This remarkable, 795-page volume deserves to be read as I have just read it, proceeding straight through from the first page to the last. We usually read huge reference books selectively, consulting only the articles that promise to meet our individual needs for instruction on specific topics. Not this one.

Why read it cover to cover? Because this capacious volume enables the reader to absorb the latest scholarship on a multitude of topics within a domain that is becoming more multitudinous more swiftly and with more far reaching analytic consequences than any other subfield of American history. The newest work in this exceptionally dynamic subfield reveals how the global dimensions of modern American history impinge on one another. Reading all of it all at once will better equip anyone to carry out even the narrowest of projects more confidently, thinking of connections that one might not otherwise contemplate. The Cold War is here, and so is Afghanistan, but in relation to much else.

Every professional scholar is bound to find a few articles that do not add to their own stock of knowledge, but rare will be anyone who feels this way about more than a handful. From the compelling essay on the monetary matrix (Vanessa Ogle’s “Global Capitalist Infrastructure and U. S. Power”) that opens the volume to the concluding, provocative piece on the earth’s physical terrain (Joshua Howe’s “America and the World in the Anthropocene”), the editors confront us with an imposing and refreshing expanse of important facts and well-considered interpretations.

Editors David Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, and Melani McAlister, working together with the general editor of the four-volume oeuvre, Mark Philip Bradley, have earned the special respect of anyone who has tried to manage even a small collection, to say nothing a cast of 31 authors. The judicious and comprehensive introduction to Volume IV (8-28) calls attention to articles that depart from diplomatic history while retaining that tradition’s sound commitment to the study of power.

Two major contributions to the study of America and the World since 1945 appeared since this volume went into production: Daniel Immerwahr’s *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* and Louis Menand’s *The*

Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War.¹ These books show how quickly this subfield is changing, and prompt the somewhat disquieting fear that much of *America and the World 1945 to the Present* will soon lose its currency. Hence my advice: read it now!

But for all their commanding contributions to the study of “America and the World” subfield, I am not sure that the books by Immerwahr and Menand would have affected this volume very extensively. Immerwahr’s pointillist analysis of the character and dynamics of American power has quickly achieved wide influence, and would almost certainly have led the authors of several of the relevant articles in this book to construe “empire” somewhat more widely. None mention the seven-city Puerto Rican revolt of 1950 culminating in an assassination attempt on President Harry Truman, nor even the 1954 armed assault on the Congress of the United States by four Puerto Rican nationalists. Immerwahr uses these events to call attention to the importance of Puerto Rico and to the ferocity of anti-colonial feelings within what he calls “the greater United States.” But Immerwahr’s book would not have fundamentally challenged this volume’s main arguments. Empire is a constant theme in these pages, and the authors are careful and convincing in their treatment of it.

The case with Menand is probably a bit different, or should be. The United States in the post-war era was almost as central to cultural productivity as it was to the world economy and to the global distribution of military power. Menand’s 857 pages call attention to how important the United States was in painting and music and in several other fine arts, and in philosophy, and in political thought, and in social theory. Menand’s extensive discussion of French-American connections following the war shows how the United States found itself, for more than just a few years, with close to a monopoly on the cultural production earlier found in Western Europe.

But the editors, while properly engaged with popular culture, display little interest in the realms of learning, theoretical argumentation, and the fine arts. “American Knowledge of the World,” by Nicholas Dirks and Nils Gilman, is one few articles that engage directly with any part of the post-war world’s intellectual history. Dirks and Gilman describe and critically assess the increase in “information” about things foreign within the federal government, corporations, and academia, and analyze the uncertain relation of this information to what can properly be called “knowledge.” In “Human Rights” Barbara Keys documents the leadership of American theorists and activists in and out of government to make human rights a major aspect of international politics. Daniel Sargent (“Neoliberalism as a Form of US Power”) analyzes the theorization as well as the implementation of neoliberalism. Here and there, among articles on a variety of topics, there are occasional mentions of American thinkers.

Yet, volume IV of *The Cambridge History of America and the World* makes no reference to Hannah Arendt, John Cage, Erik Erikson, Pauline Kael, Thomas Kuhn, Hans Morgenthau, Robert K. Merton, Reinhold Niebuhr, Joseph Nye, Talcott Parsons, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, John Rawls, Richard Rorty, Paul Tillich, or Andy Warhol. Since World War II the United States has been far the most productive national setting for natural science, but the word “science” does not appear in the index, and the editors do not explain why the history of science is less important to “America and the World” than many of the topics on which they commissioned articles. The formidable Frankfurt School is mentioned only in passing, amid Petra Goedde’s “US Mass Culture and Consumption in a Global Context.” Popular culture is effectively addressed in a number of other articles, too, including Penny von Eschen’s “Imperial Visions of the World,” Deepa Kumar’s “The US Construction of ‘Islam’ as Ally and Enemy on the Global Stage,” Kenneth Osgood’s “The American Construction of the Communist Threat,” and Julio Capo, Jr.’s “The Queering of US Geopolitics.”

Volume IV of *The Cambridge History of America and the World* does so much for us that we should not be overly concerned with what it does not do. Among the book’s signal achievements is to integrate non-state actors into a field that has long been focused on the actions of governments, and to attend carefully to causal forces outside the United States. Happily, the editors do not allow the actions of the US government to be neglected while expanding the scope of the field. But here we do

¹ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019); Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

find probing, illuminating articles on environmental dynamics, communications technology, security systems, the world capitalist economy, nuclear weaponry, the politics of oil, and how Native Americans understood themselves in relation to world affairs.

Demography is not named as a topic, but two articles explore salient aspects of the changing population of the United States in relation to international politics. Stephen R. Porter's "Refugees, Statelessness, and the Disordering of Citizenship" reviews the sometimes confused and inconsistent process by which two-and-a-half million people were admitted to the United States outside of normal immigration rules and procedures. Maddalena Marinari ("Migration, War, and the Transformation of the US Population") addresses normal immigration. Both explain how a series of wars-- around the world, including those involving the United States--propelled and directed these population transfers. For all their value, however, these two articles leave at the margins a demographic fact of world-historical significance: the United States, for all the influence of white supremacy on its policies and practices, has managed as we move into the third decade of the twenty-first century to maintain one of the most ethnoracially diverse and genetically mixed democracies in history. "The Amalgamation Narrative" is only one part of the American story, but demographics do distinguish the United States from most other nations.² Arguably, a more forthright exploration of demographics could stand alongside Ogle's capitalism essay and Howe's earth contribution to frame the volume.

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Closely related to these demographic developments has been the proliferation of transnational networks of politics and culture. Several of these networks brought African Americans into sustained cooperation with decolonizing peoples abroad. Charisse Burden-Stelly and Gerald Horne's "Third World Internationalism and the Global Color Line" calls attention to connections made by participants in the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements with anti-colonial initiatives in Cuba, Africa, and parts of Asia. Burden-Stelly and Horne have surprising little to say about India, where Nico Slate's *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* is one of the richest monographs we have on transnational networks.³ Burden-Stelly and Horne are also oddly unengaged with Mexico, where the story told by Ruben Flores in *Backroads Pragmatists: Mexico's Melting Pot and Civil Rights in the United States* is exactly on point.⁴

Transnational religious networks have been no less important, but Zareena Grewal's "Christian and Muslim Transnational Networks" falls short of what this article might have achieved. She observes that Muslims now constitute only about 1.1 percent of the American population [445], yet devotes just as much time on connections between American Muslims and Muslims abroad as she does on the much larger and vastly more consequential Protestant and Catholic international networks. Moreover, the discussion of the politics of American Protestants and Catholics is not convincing. Grewal describes the National Council of Churches as "anti-Communist" [446] in an era when it was the largest American organization of any kind to lobby for the diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China and when it was under vigorous attack by evangelicals for being a dupe of the Soviets. Grewal further declares that "De-provincializing US religious history requires scholars to de-center Christianity and attend to the global flows of other American religions" (464). Fair enough, but one must also allow for the fact that Christianity has been dominant in the United States.

Every article in this volume invites critical scrutiny, but I move quickly to the most powerful conclusion vindicated by the volume as a whole. *The United States brought to the post-war world a concentration of economic, military, and cultural power*

² I have developed this theme in "Amalgamation and Hypodescent: The Question of Ethnoracial Mixture in the History of the United States," *American Historical Review* CVIII (2003), 1363-1389,

³ Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). See also Nico Slate, *The Prism of Race: W. E. B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robson, and the Colored World of Cedric Dover* (New York: Pantheon, 2014).

⁴ Ruben Flores, *Backroads Pragmatists: Mexico's Melting Pot and Civil Rights in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

unique in the modern history of the human species, but largely squandered the opportunity to use that power to advance its proclaimed aims beyond assuring the safety and prosperity of its own citizens.

Not everyone would agree with the ethical principle I invoke here: that any society in possession of a radically disproportionate quantity of the globe's resources has a responsibility to deploy those resources not only in the immediate interests of that society's own population, but also to serve as much of humankind as its policies and practices can reach. The editors quote George Kennan to the contrary, explaining to his State Department colleagues in 1948 that "the real task" ahead was to "devise a pattern of relationships that" would allow the US "to maintain" the current "disparity" by which it had "50 percent of the world's wealth but only 6.3 percent of its population." Kennan had come, the editors crisply remark, "not to solve inequality, but to save it" (19).

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But whatever one's own ethical values, a worldly truth increasingly visible to historians of our own time invites our sustained reflection: when the US government and non-governmental American actors have tried to prevent starvation, to protect people from violence, to diminish economic inequality, and to promote the rule of law and democratic institutions, their efforts have been crippled repeatedly by myopic security calculations and by poorly informed decisions about who to try to help, and when, and how.

The most obvious of these mistakes—and the scholars given voice in this volume do not shrink from calling them that—were war-related decisions involving Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, and Korea. "From 2002 to 2017, the United States spent roughly \$3 trillion countering terrorism around the world," notes Aaron O'Connell ("The Global Wars on Terror"). "During that same period," O'Connell continues, "the number of people killed from terrorism around the world increased five-fold; the number of terrorist fighters quadrupled, and the number of terrorist groups doubled" (729). Countless scholars in the H-Diplo orbit have analyzed in great detail the earlier, colossal sequence of unwise decisions involving Vietnam. In this volume, those decisions are dealt with the most directly by Christopher Goscha ("Decolonization and US Intervention in Asia") but are mentioned by many other contributors. Mark Atwood Lawrence ("The Fractured World of the Cold War") analyzes the portentous decision of President Harry Truman to carry the Korean War north of the 38th parallel, forsaking the narrow goal of defending the status to try to "roll back communism" only to end up with a Korea divided almost exactly as before (156). US efforts often ended up achieving results different from, if not opposite to what was intended, and not only in military contexts. The billions of American dollars invested in Latin American economies through the Alliance for Progress, concludes Corinna R. Unger ("American Development Aid, Decolonization, and the Cold War"), "rather than promoting liberal democracy... helped to anchor authoritarian governments in countries like Guatemala, Bolivia, and Brazil, and in some cases triggered civil wars" (208).

This critical take-away on the role of the United States in global history during the last 75 years—instantiated in many articles I do not cite here—can be overdrawn. It is not the whole story. After all, one can argue that the Marshall Plan in Europe and the reconstruction of Japan achieved the avowed American aims reasonably well. Moreover, as Daniel Sargent has reminded us, the scale and frequency of warfare during the decades of *Pax Americana* could have been much more horrendous, given the context of nuclear weapons and the magnitude and volatility of the decolonizing process.⁵ In terms of demographic composition and the protection of civil rights, the United States today is a decidedly more effective exemplar than it was in 1945 of the anti-racist ideals it claimed to be defending against the Axis Powers. And even the most wisely designed and executed policies can have unanticipated and deeply unwanted consequences.

Yet, given the prodigious resources at America's command in 1945, the record detailed with great honesty and skill by the contributors to this volume should sober any observer capable of a remotely generous view of what Americans might achieve on behalf of their fellow human beings. While praising Lincoln for his responsible use of power, Robert Ingersoll remarked,

⁵ Daniel Sargent, "Pax Americana: Sketches for an Undiplomatic History," *Diplomatic History* XLII (2018), 357-376.

“Any man can stand adversity, but if you want to discover someone’s true character, give him power.”⁶ So it may be with nations.

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⁶ This statement has often been attributed to Lincoln himself, but scholars find no indication that Lincoln ever said it, and that Ingersoll did say it in a speech about Lincoln, <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-abrahamlincoln-power/fact-check-test-a-mans-character-quote-misattributed-to-abraham-lincoln-idUSL1N2PA1VZ>. I quote the traditional, gendered language, aware that we would make the point differently today.

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