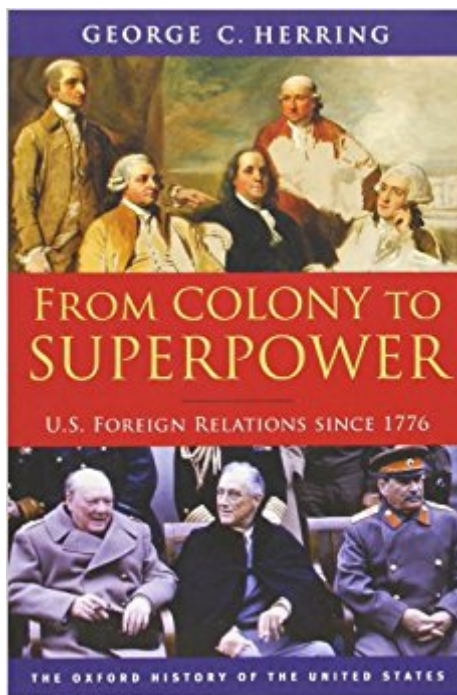


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From Colony To Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776 (Oxford History Of The United States)



Synopsis

The Oxford History of the United States is the most respected multi-volume history of our nation in print. The series includes three Pulitzer Prize-winners, a New York Times bestseller, and winners of prestigious Bancroft and Parkman Prizes. From Colony to Superpower is the only thematic volume commissioned for the series. Here George C. Herring uses foreign relations as the lens through which to tell the story of America's dramatic rise from thirteen disparate colonies huddled along the Atlantic coast to the world's greatest superpower. A sweeping account of United States' foreign relations and diplomacy, this magisterial volume documents America's interaction with other peoples and nations of the world. Herring tells a story of stunning successes and sometimes tragic failures, captured in a fast-paced narrative that illuminates the central importance of foreign relations to the existence and survival of the nation, and highlights its ongoing impact on the lives of ordinary citizens. He shows how policymakers defined American interests broadly to include territorial expansion, access to growing markets, and the spread of an "American way" of life. And Herring does all this in a story rich in human drama and filled with epic events. Statesmen such as Benjamin Franklin and Woodrow Wilson and Harry Truman and Dean Acheson played key roles in America's rise to world power. But America's expansion as a nation also owes much to the adventurers and explorers, the sea captains, merchants and captains of industry, the missionaries and diplomats, who discovered or charted new lands, developed new avenues of commerce, and established and defended the nation's interests in foreign lands. From the American Revolution to the fifty-year struggle with communism and conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, From Colony to Superpower tells the dramatic story of America's emergence as superpower--its birth in revolution, its troubled present, and its uncertain future.

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Customer Reviews

The Oxford History of the United States is the most respected multi-volume history of our nation in print. The series includes three Pulitzer Prize-winners, a New York Times bestseller, and winners of the prestigious Bancroft and Parkman Prizes. From Colony to Superpower is the only thematic volume commissioned for the series. Here, George C. Herring uses foreign relations as the lens through which to tell the story of America's dramatic rise from thirteen disparate colonies huddled along the Atlantic coast to the world's greatest superpower. A sweeping account of United States foreign relations and diplomacy, this magisterial volume documents America's interaction with other peoples and nations of the world. Herring tells a story of stunning successes and sometimes tragic failures, captured in a fast-paced narrative that illuminates the central importance of foreign relations to the existence and survival of the nation, and highlights its ongoing impact on the lives of ordinary citizens. He shows how policymakers defined American interests broadly to include territorial expansion, access to growing markets, and the spread of an "American way" of life. Herring does all this in a story rich in human drama and filled with epic events. Statesmen such as Benjamin Franklin, Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, and Dean Acheson played key roles in America's rise to world power. But America's expansion as a nation also owes much to the adventurers and explorers, the sea captains, merchants and captains of industry, the missionaries and diplomats, who discovered or charted new lands, developed new avenues of commerce, and established and defended the nation's interests abroad. From the American Revolution to the fifty-year struggle with communism and conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, From Colony to Superpower tells the dramatic story of America's emergence as superpower--its birth in revolution, its troubled present, and its uncertain future. [Read an Exclusive interview with author George C. Herring and David M. Kennedy, editor of the Oxford History of the United States series.](#)

Questions for George C. Herring

Kennedy: Your book covers the entire span of the history of the United States. What was the biggest challenge of writing a book of this scope for the Oxford History of the United States series?

Herring: Managing such a large subject and such a vast quantity of source material was daunting, indeed, at times, downright intimidating. Somewhat to my surprise, I also found it more difficult to write those chapters dealing with subjects I knew the most about, the Vietnam War era, for example.

The great joys of doing the book, on the other hand, were to have the opportunity to pull together in some meaningful fashion what I had been teaching and writing about for forty years and especially to find myself learning new things each day.

Kennedy: Do you accept the conventional notion that the United States was isolationist for much of its history?

Herring: The idea of an isolationist America, still included in some textbooks, is one of the great myths of United States history. For good reasons, the nation for its first century and a half did pursue a unilateralist foreign policy, avoiding alliances that would restrict its freedom of action or entangle it in wars. But it was never strictly isolationist. Especially in the realm of economics, Americans sought full engagement with the world. The one time when the United States can accurately be said to have been isolationist is the era of the Great Depression, the 1930s.

Kennedy: What period did you find yourself most surprised by as you wrote this book?

Herring: I'm not sure that surprise is the right word, but I especially enjoyed doing the chapter covering the period 1837-1861. I got to know wonderful characters such as naval officers Charles Wilkes and Matthew Perry, merchant/diplomats Caleb Cushing and Edmund Roberts, filibusterer William Walker, and statesmen Henry Clay, James K. Polk, and Daniel Webster. More than I had appreciated, Americans were engaged in a great variety of activities and running up against different people all over the world. Through the Oregon treaty and the war with Mexico, the United States added a vast expanse of territory. There was so much energy, so much happening.

Kennedy: In what ways has religion shaped American foreign policy?

Herring: From the founding to the present, religion has played a subtle but often very important role in shaping U.S. foreign policy. Americans have seen themselves as a chosen people, "God's American Israel," the Puritans called it, uniquely virtuous and benevolent. In the nineteenth century, they believed it their Manifest Destiny to spread across the North American continent and later to uplift lesser peoples in overseas territories. The influence of religion has especially been felt through individuals such as Woodrow Wilson, a minister's son, whose sense of America's destiny and his own had powerful religious undertones, and the born-again Christians Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush.

Kennedy: How did the current interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan shape your writing of these events as history? Was it a challenge to write about them in a non-partisan way?

Herring: It was of course difficult to treat these events as history since at the time I was writing the outcome in each case was very much in doubt. I had strongly opposed the war against Iraq, and I would be less than honest if I said that my opposition to that war did not influence my writing about it. I do believe that I was able to put the two wars in the larger framework of post Cold War and 9/11 U.S. foreign policies. These wars also caused me to look more closely at earlier interventions of which, going back to 1775, there

have been many and to conclude that while Americans generally have viewed themselves as liberators the principal result in most cases has been to spur nationalism on the part of the people invaded. Kennedy: With all of the foreign policy issues facing the U.S. right now, what will readers take away from reading about the deep history of America's relationship with the world? Herring: I hope, first, that readers will enjoy reading as much as I enjoyed writing about the exciting events and colorful personalities described in these pages. I also hope that they will take away from the book a fuller and more balanced appreciation of America's dealings with other nations. The United States has been a "force for good in the world," as the mantra of this year's election campaign goes, but that is only part of the story, and I hope by gaining a fuller and more complex view they will better understand who we are as a nation and how others see us. I would also hope that readers might gain a better comprehension of the complexity of diplomacy and the reasons why it works or fails to work. Finally, by seeing where we as a nation have been, I hope that readers might have a better sense of where we are and where we need to go. American Foreign Policy in Images Take a look at paintings, an engraving and an photograph that depict pivotal moments in war and diplomacy. Click any detail below for the full image and explanatory text by George C. Herring. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Starred Review. This latest entry in the outstanding Oxford History of the United States is continually engrossing in its overview of American diplomacy. Herring (*America's Longest War*), an authority on the history of American foreign policy, emphasizes that George Washington's 1796 farewell was not a call for isolationism but simply a warning to be careful in forming alliances; America was already enmeshed in the bitter war between Britain and France. Herring details how aggressively U.S. diplomats and soldiers pressured Spain, Mexico and Britain to yield territory as the nation expanded. The passion for spreading American ideals reached its first peak after WWI with Woodrow Wilson, whose principles the author admires though many, such as national self-determination, have proved disastrous. Entering the 21st century, the U.S. was at its peak as the world's sole superpower. Herring take his narrative up through 9/11, the rise of the renewed passion, led by neoconservatives, to spread democracy and the war in Iraq, whose only winner, Herring says, is Iran. Herring's lucid prose and thought-provoking arguments give this large tome a pace that never flags. 51 b&w illus. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Studying this book gives ample justification for the belief that the United States is an empire that is built upon the ashes of old empires. However unlike the empires of the past, the United States has through subtleness and tact caused many of its citizens to believe that empire-building is not only historically and economically justified, but also the morally proper thing to do. Even the use of military force, which has been used over and over again in US imperial adventures, is viewed as an ethical imperative, even “healthy to a nation”, as Henry Cabot Lodge is quoted as saying in this book. Other empires in history have been deemed “evil” for carrying out the same sort of actions that the US has indulged itself in for the last 200 years, and is continuing to do, albeit under the guise of “security” rather than under the banner of “extending civilization to lesser peoples abroad”. This book however is not a study in the psychology of mass hysteria, xenophobia and jingoism, but rather a detailed account of the policy-makers/plunderers who attempted to maneuver events to their benefit throughout American history. This story is not a pretty one, but readers who desire the raw, naked truth about US foreign policy will find sound scholarship in between the covers of this book. There is much more waiting to be uncovered when it comes to this aspect of US history, but the author gives a fairly unbiased account, and one that does not show any signs of being seduced by the doctrine of American exceptionalism or sycophancy to any political party. After finishing this book one can conclude with fairness that there does not seem to be any country in the world that has not been touched by US foreign policy. But even though the violence the US has deployed to attain its goals does not compare perhaps with other nations, many countries that showed promise for development and self-determination were decimated by the decisions made by weak-minded, ethically austere American government officials. Countries like Cuba, Chile, Haiti, Guatemala, and Vietnam come to the immediate forefront in the carnage, terror, and body count they experienced as the result of misguided US foreign policies, but there are many other places that have found themselves under the yoke of these policies. Newcomers to the history of American foreign policy may be surprised to hear for example of US presence in the Russian revolution, the US invasion of Mexico, or the attempts to force Japan into opening up its markets. The attempted control of the “weak and semi-barbarous people” delineated in this book has not only lead to disasters for the peoples trampled upon, but also for the United States. Using a pistol rather than rational persuasion has been viewed as the more intelligent alternative, and like other empires in the past, the United States is now feeling the burden of its loyalty to this alternative. It remains to be seen of course what country in the world will attempt to build upon the ashes of the

American empire.

Herring presents ably a very long history (from 1776 to 2000) of US diplomacy in a relatively small space, and this is the major drawback of the book. Important events need to be treated in a very short space that is too small to really talk about the nuances. To give an example, liberation theology appears in a single sentence in the chapter on Reagan's presidency as something developed by radical priests "following principles set forth by Pope John XXIII" with gives short thrift to the role of the Catholic church in Central American politics and to liberation theology itself. A difficult topic that deserves a more nuanced treatment cannot receive it in a single volume. This problem shows up repeatedly. By having to concentrate on the US side, the narrative frequently glosses over big changes in the minor players of the drama be that the fall of the fourth republic and the coming of de Gaulle or the shift from Christian Democrat led government to Social Democrat led one in Germany. I am not sure about the quality of fact checking, but Egon Bahr was not Brandt's foreign minister (he was a secretary of state and the chancellor), but nevertheless the architect of his foreign policy. Did the May 1968 upheaval in France "helped to bring down de Gaulle"? He did resign in April 1969, but the Gaullist had won the election in June 1968. Again, lack of space prevents a nuanced description that needs to be given.

This is an interesting book that gives the history of US foreign policy from colonial days through 2007. It was a huge undertaking for this author. It flows well from era to era, giving a good sense of continuity. History often is taught as chunks of time with no transition from one generation to the next. This book avoids that pitfall. The author does a good job of explaining how the US was expanding territorially and commercially even during times in which the country had on the surface turned inward. I particularly liked learning how the US acquired our overseas possessions. For example, islands in the Pacific that we learn about when studying World War II were acquired much earlier, and this book explains how they came to be US possessions. The US expanded in many different ways. Early on it was treaties with European nations. There were treaties with or expulsion of native American tribes. We bought some land (Louisiana Purchase, Alaska, Gadsden Purchase), went to war to acquire others (the American Southwest from Mexico; and Florida, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Phillipines and Guam from Spain), and annexed others when enough Americans had moved there to influence those decisions (Texas, Hawaii). We helped create new countries when it was in our interest to do so (Panama broke away from Colombia and secured its independence by allowing the US to build a canal across the isthmus, earning the protection of the US). In more

modern times, we established military bases in many countries around the world. We also have intervened much more than I realized in Central America and the Caribbean. The filibusters of the 1850's were very interesting. These were small groups of private people in the US, not affiliated with the government, who banded together to try to take over small, weak countries. They were usually from Southern States trying to find new areas to expand slavery. The author is fairly even handed with his criticisms of US presidents, and there are many criticisms. He gives credit where credit is due, but these are much fewer than the criticisms. He is overall pretty critical of US foreign policy as a whole, and seems to only reluctantly recognize good works and humanitarian missions by the US in foreign affairs. He is quick to label almost all foreign activities as "imperial" even if it is simply trying to establish trade relations with another country. I understand the perspective that the US often had superior bargaining power and that once a country became a trading partner, they became dependent on the US. I bristle at the idea that expanding our trade creates an empire. Compared to other empires, most of which were intent on dominating people, the US must be viewed as almost benevolent. In this book, there is sometimes a sense that the US could do no right no matter what it chose to do. He is critical when the US intervenes to help a country and when the US chooses not to intervene. The author is far too fond of labeling people and policies as 'foolish.' He also repeatedly states that the fear of a Soviet threat was exaggerated or imagined without providing any details or rationale. The Soviets were very aggressive and imperialistic, and this book tends to downplay that. Despite my criticisms of the author's criticisms, I enjoyed the book. It is interesting how we as a nation can accept our past actions and presidents more easily once they are securely in our past. The author does a good job of showing how some like Adams, Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson and Truman were heavily criticized at the time, but are considered model presidents today. Will history be as forgiving to our most recent presidents, Clinton, Bush and Obama? When the book transitions from past history to recent history, it reads more like how I remember watching these things unfold on the evening news. It reminds me that today's current events are tomorrow's history, and that the way the story is told is how we will remember it forever.

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