



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Reflections on Melvyn Leffler's Long Career

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Summary

Melvyn Leffler's latest book, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, is a collection of essays spanning his decades-long career. We've gathered together a handful of reviewers to read and reflect on his writings.

1. Truth, Justice, and the American Way

Charles Edel

There are few things as beautiful and as patriotic as summer evenings in the South Bronx. During the 7th inning stretch at Yankee Stadium each night, the announcer asks the crowd to stand and honor those servicemembers stationed at home and around the world, “defending our freedom and our way of life.” While it is usually a unifying moment, it’s also a confusing one. For it is unclear exactly what this phrase means. Why has America’s defense taken different shapes at different particular moments? Why have American leaders sometimes argued that the country’s national security requires deep engagement and sometimes that it demands restraint? What defines and drives American national security policy — domestic circumstances? External realities? The views of individual policymakers?

Melvyn Leffler addresses these questions in *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920-2015*. In so doing, he puts his finger on something elusive, evolving, contentious, and of the highest consequence for explaining American foreign relations.¹ The book is a collection of eleven essays, drawn from throughout his five-decade career, which explore some of the pivotal moments of the American century. The essays cover a range of topics, showing the evolving set of questions that have driven Leffler’s research, and demonstrating a variety of concepts and methodological approaches.

¹ Melvyn Leffler’s *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920-2015* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 24.

Leffler's most famous book, the prize-winning *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (1992), was a field-defining work that analyzed how and why the postwar policymakers acted as they did. It is a work that examines how threat perceptions, political economy, and the demands of military power intersected, clashed, and ultimately led to the formation of U.S. national security policy. Filled with empathy for the difficult decisions faced by those policymakers, steeped in archival research, and judicious in its insights and judgments, Leffler's work stands alone in exploring the origins of the American-led order after World War II.

The dominant discussions in foreign policy today are about the strength, durability, and resilience of that order. Leffler's collection of essays is a timely reminder of the original foundation of that order, the issues it was intended to address, and the evolution of those issues over time. While the individual essays focus on different aspects of American foreign policy, what makes *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism* such a rewarding book is that, taken together, it can be read in at least three different ways.

Three Books in One

First, while it not intended as a history — collections of essays and book chapters seldom are — nevertheless, a history of America's role in the world over the past hundred years emerges. This history is not comprehensive and sweeping, but rather episodic and probing. Leffler uses snapshots of various inflection points in the development of the American-led order from 1920 through 2015, tracing the drivers of American power and examining how they come together to produce

particular outcomes. In so doing, he, in essence, creates an outline of American history over the past century.

This leads to a second, and perhaps more interesting reading of the volume — as a scholar’s personal journey. In the first chapter of the book, and in the short summary comments that introduce individual chapters, Leffler explains the national, personal, and disciplinary questions driving each essay. Throughout, he is unceasingly honest about his own intellectual journey. He writes about his frustrations and setbacks, explains how archival work drove his findings, discusses how empathy for the challenges faced by decision-makers informed his work, and explains why his questions shifted over time. Leffler’s combination of integrity, empathy, and insight are all on display here, and serve as an inspiration for all of us to be similarly candid about our own setbacks, missteps, and reevaluations. Leffler also writes about his work for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the end of the Carter administration and as dean of the University of Virginia’s College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. His reflections upon the latter deserve to be quoted in full:

This experience was revelatory. I learned how hard it was for administrators to set priorities. I saw how difficult it was to manage time and make bureaucracies function smoothly. I witnessed organizational rivalries and participated in nasty budget fights. I entered into personal battles in which emotion and passion often dwarfed reason and calculation. I grappled with unaccustomed responsibilities: do you evacuate buildings when there are bomb threats, even when you know the threats are not likely to be credible? In short, I learned a lot about policymaking. I thought my

background as a policy historian would enhance my administrative skills; at the end of four years, I concluded that my administrative experience would make me a better policy historian. I learned empathy.²

A third reading of this book will be of highest interest for those less concerned with history and more with contemporary policy. For scattered across this volume are the considerable insights and judgments that have formed over Leffler's career. He explores many facets of high-stakes policymaking, including what factors can prompt officials to do too much and what circumstances can lead them to do too little, how elusive prudence and balance are for statesmen, and how ideology might have been integral to the Kremlin, but that it was political and economic conditions that allowed it to spread its influence outward. Conversely, he also explores how American strategy was most competitive and most successful when policymakers demonstrated the superiority of democratic capitalism by showing how it could provide a better set of opportunities than the alternatives; how central to American strategic thinking has been the fear of an adversary, or coalition of adversaries, that could dominate Europe and Asia, integrate their resources, and endanger the security of the United States; and how periods of economic austerity have produced the clearest thinking about American priorities and often catalyzed the most creative diplomatic and military strategies.

Sitting above all of these is Leffler's methodological injunction that analysis benefits from a catholic approach, which includes evaluating the shifting configuration of power in the international arena, the dynamics of global political

² Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 21–22.

economy, the needs of domestic politics, and the perceptions of policymakers. Undertaking such analysis — for historians or for policymakers themselves — is an almost impossibly complex task. But the necessity of embracing this complexity sits at the heart of Leffler’s work.

The Roundtable Reviews

In this roundtable, four scholars review Leffler’s collection of essays. All are remarkably respectful of Leffler’s scholarship, even when they challenge him — and all do. The different perspectives the reviewers take and the questions they raise about methodology, particular events, and the study of national security more broadly make this a particularly rich roundtable.

James Wirtz of the Naval Postgraduate School praises the scope of Leffler’s “incredibly productive career.” He notes that throughout the work, and indeed Leffler’s career, Leffler engaged in the best type of revisionism, using new sources and interpretive frameworks to shed light on past events. Noting that it would be difficult to summarize Leffler’s evolving approach to the field of American foreign relations and national security, he pinpoints the essence of Leffler’s work as a desire to both avoid over-simplification and use a common-sense approach to understand complex events.

Wirtz concludes with a discussion of civilian-military dynamics during the Truman administration, questioning whether the right balance was struck between military necessities and political objectives. He then suggests that this same dynamic is taking place today in the South China Sea, arguing that U.S. military over-eagerness is increasing chances of a clash with Beijing. It’s an important question,

although Wirtz’s framing — “military activities must do no political harm” — suggests that America’s actions to protest Beijing’s aggressive attempts to assert excessive maritime claims, intimidate American allies and partners, and undermine international law are inherently harmful. This is, of course, exactly how Beijing frames the issue by describing America’s normal and routine operations — no less its defensive alliances in the region — as destabilizing, while characterizing its militarization of the South China Sea as in accord with its peaceful rise.

As Leffler reminds us throughout his work, national security demands the articulation of American core values and strategic interests. So while some argue that American policymakers have failed to mount an effective public case for how national security is affected in the South China Sea, successive American administrations have made clear that they seek to defend the rules-based global order against Chinese exceptionalism. In other words, America’s actions in the South China Sea are very much in accordance with both its principles and political objectives — in Asia and globally.

Jacqueline Hazelton, from the Naval War College, highlights the interdisciplinary nature of Leffler’s work, praising him for the rigor of his scholarship, and commending him for the concern his work shows for “real-life policy choices and outcomes.” She focuses most on his more contemporary chapters, asking whether Leffler’s analysis gives too much weight to policymakers’ intentions and not enough to an assessment of their (and their opponents’) capabilities.

As for those intentions, Hazelton observes that America’s determination to preserve its primacy in the post-Cold War era remained undiminished despite a “radical reduction in the threats it faced.” Left unstated is whether or not a

reduction of threats called for a reduction of American goals. She suggests an answer by quoting Leffler's point that "there is a difference between making the world safe for democracy and making the entire world democratic." Leffler wrote those words in 2009, but given that Russia and China are currently working to actively roll back democratic advances in Europe and Asia, a more pertinent question today might be how much of the existing order America and its allies are willing to defend.

Like the other reviewers, the University of Portland's Jeffrey Meiser found Leffler's personal reflections honest, refreshing, and invaluable advice to young scholars thinking about a career-long research agenda. And in a field that has a tendency to prioritize specialization, Meiser is especially appreciative that throughout Leffler's career his work was always "relentlessly rooted in evidence." Leffler addressed big questions relating to the objectives of American foreign policy, policymakers' motivations, and the implications of such choices for America and the world.

Looking at Leffler's treatment of interwar American foreign policy (Chapters 1–3), Meiser raises several challenging questions. He notes how well Leffler highlights the role domestic forces — particularly business interests — played in shaping American foreign policy during this period, but he asks whether an undue focus on the personal beliefs and values of policymakers (especially Herbert Hoover's) is overly reductive. "A more insightful critique," Meiser writes, "would recognize it is impossible, counterproductive, and ultimately unwise to depoliticize vital national issues." Meiser's critique is reminiscent of Dean Acheson's reflection that Washington was "an environment where some of the methods would have aroused the envy of the Borgias," and serves as a useful observation that the politics of

policymaking are often as determinative of their substance as are values, beliefs, and perceptions.

Meiser also sees domestic politics as a critical and mostly absent factor in Leffler's analysis of the restraints on the use of American power. How else, he asks, can one explain Franklin Roosevelt's wariness to make concessions to Stalin at Yalta except for his fear of public backlash? How, he asks, can one understand the "grandiose pronouncements" of the Truman Doctrine, or for that matter George W. Bush's attempts to use idealistic rhetoric, as anything other than attempts to mobilize public opinion for policy ends? Meiser believes that "better awareness of the domestic restraints might have cued Leffler in" to both why, and indeed how, leaders attempt to mobilize public support for security policies in uncertain times.

Sally Paine, an eminent historian in her own right at the Naval War College, captures what she sees as the three different journeys of *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*: the growth of the United States into a superpower, Leffler's professional journey, and the evolution of the field of American diplomatic history. She highlights how much Leffler's scholarship reveals the usefulness of empathy in understanding American policymakers who made difficult decisions "in the face of tractable dilemmas."

Her main critique focuses on the same point, emphasizing that American policymakers, and occasionally historians of their work, often play a game of one-sided tennis, focusing excessively on what is happening on their side of the court and failing to give equal consideration to what is occurring on their opponents' side. She points to Leffler's focus on American decisions in the 1920s (as opposed to European ones), American actions in the late 40s (and not those of the Soviets),

and, most especially, U.S. efforts in the early 1980s (without sufficient attention to the choices of Mikhail Gorbachev).

Paine uses the concepts and frameworks derived from two decades of teaching in the strategy and policy department to “shed light on Leffler’s work from a different angle.” Paine points to the role of critical analysis — of evaluating policy choices in comparison to the available alternatives. The point here is that strategy is the study of prospective choice — not the study of historical outcomes. As with her warning to avoid playing half-court tennis, she underlines that good strategy must rest on the assumption that it is an interactive process between two sides that shape, surprise, and constrain each other’s decisions. Paine writes that international relations take place in a layered setting, and effectiveness at one level can damage those at another. She delineates the difference between limited and negotiable objectives with unlimited ones that threaten an enemy’s existence to explain why antagonism between nations possessing “mutually exclusive global systems” often trumps trust, goodwill, or any amount of confidence-building measures. She cautions students to distinguish between mistakes made by opponents and successfully prosecuted strategies — “suicide” versus “murder” in her words. Some competitions are best served by allowing an opponent to engage in self-defeating actions and others by giving opponents a shove. Emphasizing the importance of alliances, Paine charges strategists to think not only about their formation, but also the factors most likely to act as both adhesives and solvents. Having taught alongside her myself, I’m probably prejudiced, but Paine’s use of Leffler’s work strikes me as not only good teaching, but as essential for good policymaking.

Sadder, Wiser, and Not Despairing

Looking back on his career — and on the course of American foreign policy and national security policy over the past fifty years — Leffler writes that he feels “perhaps wiser and a lot sadder” today. Wiser because he has reached a deeper understanding of the confluence of personal, domestic, and international factors that have drawn America into protracted wars, foreign entanglements, and conflict. Sadder, as he feels more conscious of the human elements that make it so difficult for policymakers to avert them. But sadness, he concludes, “is not despair.”

Despite Leffler’s vote for national security as a useful and capacious tool of analysis, in her review Hazelton found his definition problematic, describing it as “cloudy” and “squishy.” I’m not at all sure that Leffler would disagree with that, as over the course of his career he broadened and refined what “national security” really meant. At its core, Leffler writes that national security is the defense of core values from external threats. Of course the trick is defining what exactly those core values are. And here, perhaps, is a reason that Leffler’s sadness has not turned into despair. Because every generation has the opportunity to define what it believes in and what it is willing to defend, there remains hope that the future leaders will bring courage, conviction, and wisdom to defending “our freedom and our way of life.”

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Brands, of the forthcoming The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order
(Yale University Press).



2. Where the Evidence Takes Him: Melvyn Leffler Casts a Wide Net in Analyzing U.S. National Security Policy

Jacqueline L. Hazelton

Above all, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism* is a work of profoundly humane scholarship. This collection of articles by Melvyn Leffler spanning his career to date evokes E.M. Forster’s injunction: “Only connect!” The essays serve as a valuable reminder of how scholars develop their historical analysis over time. In other words, this book explains how and why understanding of U.S. foreign policy realities changes. In an era of continuing paradigm and methods wars, it is also remarkable for its example of a scholar who changes his analytical lens as his research questions change. It is, finally, an admirable demonstration of Leffler’s continued concern with real-life policy choices and outcomes.

Leffler’s *Bildungsroman* introduction includes terrifyingly familiar tales, such as finding out that his dissertation argument had already appeared in book form,³ as well as triumphs over adversity, including an account of how this scholarly tragedy drove Leffler to greatly strengthen the presentation of his argument when he rewrote his manuscript for publication.⁴ In the strikingly personal story of his intellectual development, Leffler discusses the importance of researchers identifying the contexts of the empirical evidence they find,⁵ stresses how the

³ Melvyn P. Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920–2015* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 7.

⁴ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 8.

⁵ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 4–5.

consideration of context complicates the analysis of policy choices, and recounts how criticism of his own findings has driven him to dig more deeply into the questions he asks and the answers he develops. These are all relevant insights for graduate students and, frankly, scholars in general.

Leffler's intellectual development brings to mind Forster's quote, though the context is neither interpersonal interactions nor the individual's Janus-faced struggle between the inner beast and inner ascetic. Leffler's insistence on continuing to grow intellectually — his struggle to follow where the evidence takes him⁶ — has led him to employ a changing set of analytical prisms as his research questions have changed with real-life political disjunctions, such as the end of the Cold War.⁷ Leffler has shifted his analytical lens as his understanding and focus change, using, for example, political psychology, as well as considering the role of factors at different levels of analysis — the international system, the state, and the individual. He continues to connect one intellectual tradition with another in order to trace continuity and change in U.S. political history and foreign and military policy.

Leffler's work connects diplomatic history, military history, and international relations. It connects the study of agency to the constraints and opportunities of structure. It connects analysis of the international system, the state, and individuals as conjoined tools. It connects the political psychology of emotion with hard-core material security concerns (or the lack thereof). His research connects multiple strands of causation and the ways they intertwine. It connects domestic

⁶ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 25.

⁷ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 20-21.

and international U.S. interests, economics and politics, and, finally, values to interests to ideology to policy promotion to the unpalatable choices policymakers often face. Leffler even connects his own experience as an academic administrator with the difficulties of governmental policymaking,⁸ an example of empathy that enhances rather than obscures his analysis. Any one or two of these connections would not be cause for comment. But Leffler's use of all of these tools and categories is a *tour de force*. He recognizes the analytical power of scholarly categories and the benefits of identifying connections between them to do research that matters.⁹

The Squishy Concept of National Security

National security is a cloudy concept, as is Leffler's own use of the term. His work explores the changing meanings of "national security" as a driver of U.S. policy and as a murky framework for analyzing U.S. choices. Leffler recognizes the difficulty of pinning it down. "National security itself was an amorphous notion shaped by external realities, domestic circumstances, and personal perceptions. It was a dynamic concept, always changing, always contentious,"¹⁰ he writes. Light breaks when Leffler further describes the concept as based on officials' belief

that developments abroad might endanger the preservation of core values at home — meaning private property, free enterprise, personal freedom, open markets, and the rule of law as well as the

⁸ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 21.

⁹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 19.

¹⁰ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 24.

safety of American lives, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity.¹¹

Thus, emotion — specifically fear — is built into policymaking. Thucydides agrees. Many of my students at the U.S. Naval War College insist that vital interests extend beyond the protection of U.S. territorial integrity and governmental sovereignty to the protection of U.S. values and the ideal of the American way of life. I think they would approve of Leffler’s broad conception of national security while at the same time labeling it as “squishy.”

Leffler recognizes his conception of national security as an enabler of threat inflation, but he does not always pull this thread to its full length. In a chapter titled “Dreams of Freedom, Temptations of Power,” he considers the great changes that took place in the international environment from 1989 to 2001. Leffler argues that after the Cold War, “U.S. officials harnessed the past to mold the collective memory of Americans and used the rhetorical trope of freedom to mobilize support for their policies.”¹² They did indeed, though Leffler is perhaps more accepting of their threat assessments than is appropriate or necessary. The trio of great shocks in this period — the end of the Cold War, Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, and the attacks of 9/11 — together increased insecurity and thus fear amongst policymakers in successive administrations, Leffler argues. Leffler’s evidence of fear in the face of uncertainty is persuasive, but his argument lacks an assessment of the degree to which the character of threats to U.S. interests actually changed in this period with the end of the superpower rivalry and then the

¹¹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 24–25.

¹² Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 247.

dissolution of the Soviet Union. Post-Cold War threats, like the spread of weapons of mass destruction and regional conflict, affect U.S. interests, but the traditional Cold War threats of great-power war and nuclear exchange were existentially important and greatly reduced in the 1990s.

End of Cold War Means Reduced Threat, or Does It?

Leffler's two chapters about the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the global war on terror period are not intended to identify the failure of the George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations to recalibrate their identification of U.S. interests and corresponding national security policies in the face of a vastly reduced international threat environment. But they might have been. Leffler's primary goal is to show continuities in threat perception and identification of U.S. interests. These chapters reveal astonishingly little variation in threat perception and military goals over the 12 years examined, from 1989 to 2001, including the continued interest in U.S. hegemony and the stated U.S. willingness to act alone if necessary. This is an important reminder of Leffler's corrective to the image of the loose-cannon first term of President George W. Bush. Any state will act alone if it considers that its security requires such a choice, notwithstanding Winston Churchill's assertion that "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them." The United States is hardly unique in its stated willingness to go it alone, though its ability to do so is unsurpassed. What is most striking about Leffler's findings in these chapters, both stated and unstated, is how little the U.S. determination to remain a military hegemon involved in all corners of the world changed despite the radical reduction in the threats it faced, including the disappearance of its nuclear-armed peer competitor and democratization (now reversing) in its rump state.

Leffler’s subtle consideration of officials’ views on the uses and limits of U.S. power raises important points about how structure and agency interact in policymaking and in its analysis. He admires the recognition of domestic and international constraints that underlay some U.S. national security policymaking during the Cold War and before. H.W. Bush and Clinton were like Woodrow Wilson, Leffler writes, because “they understood that there is a difference between making the world safe for democracy and making the entire world democratic.”¹³ But Leffler also blames external events for costly U.S. decisions in the global war on terror. The attacks on the U.S. homeland, he argues, were the “tragedy and peril [that] transformed the quest for a democratic peace into a national security imperative that justified the use of force and the exercise of America’s unparalleled power.”¹⁴ The transmission belt leading from the external jolt of the attacks to these U.S. policy changes was emotion.

After 9/11, increased fear and uncertainty meant that “the self-imposed constraints [on U.S. power] disappeared.”¹⁵ Leffler’s emphasis on the role of emotion here is empathetic, and consistent with his conception of national security as what one makes of it. It is reasonable that policymakers would immediately react to multiple coordinated attacks on the homeland with panic and fear. But it may be too sympathetic to simply accept that policymakers are driven by fear in continuing to identify an ideology — jihadism — that is armed with will, but not capability, as an existential threat worth the lives lost in more than a decade of fighting as well as

¹³ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 246.

¹⁴ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 277.

¹⁵ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 246.

trillions of dollars spent on forever wars, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the case of George W. Bush's two terms in office during the global war on terror, Leffler might have done more to explore U.S. values as shifting, contested ideological concepts deployed by the administration to support specific policy choices.

In a similar vein, on the matter of using values as ideological and rhetorical tools, Leffler argues that

at times of heightened threat perception, the assertion of values mounts and subsumes careful calculation of interests. Values and ideals are asserted to help evoke public support for the mobilization of power; power, then, tempts the government to overreach far beyond what careful calculations of interests might dictate.¹⁶

This is a counterintuitive and intriguing claim to make about the use of values in times of danger, when the danger itself might be expected to suffice to rally support for policy changes. Yet, Leffler also shows that U.S. values were asserted across administrations during times of reduced threat as well — most notably in the post-Cold War era. He might have further explored this pattern of U.S. officials perceiving existential threats to U.S. values regardless of adversaries' capabilities.

¹⁶ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 283.

Conclusion

There is more here to untangle on the uses of U.S. values within Leffler's conception of national security in the contemporary context. The matter of values even ties into Leffler's discussion of his own intellectual development. He implies that today's dominant political struggle is an effort to undo the legal, political, social, and economic changes of the Progressive era, with its emphasis on "the importance of experts, the development of professional associations, the quest for efficiency, and the desire to find mechanisms that would mitigate political conflict, thwart radical movements, nurture productivity, and create a consumer paradise."¹⁷ Progressive-era campaigns for such novelties as workplace standards, reduced political corruption, and untainted foodstuffs were based on declarations about U.S. values, just as they are in today's efforts to undo these regulations. Leffler's linkage, intentional or not, highlights his belief in the responsibility of scholars to record, observe, and analyze.¹⁸ He argues for good scholarship in service to good citizenship, which in turn serves national interests. To that end, Leffler presents a scholar's manifesto: "We must challenge ourselves as well: using theoretical approaches in neighboring fields to interrogate our own assumptions; wrestling honestly with evidence that challenges our own ideological predilections; and staying focused on explaining causation."¹⁹

¹⁷ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 8.

¹⁸ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 26.

¹⁹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 26.

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3. History and Theory of American National Security Strategy

Jeffrey W. Meiser

When I realized Melvyn Leffler's new book was a collection of essays, I admit I cringed a bit. Then I realized it was a collection of previously published essays and the cringe turned into a grimace. Then I started reading the introductory essay and began to understand that my initial reaction was misguided. *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism* is one of the best essay collections I have come across. A close reading (in some cases rereading) of Leffler's essays was immensely rewarding and the volume is surprisingly cohesive. Leffler does a great job of setting the personal and historiographical context for his scholarship and, in doing so, provides lessons for junior scholars about how to shape a successful research program. His overall intellectual orientation of embracing complexity is compelling, inspiring, and, quite honestly, the only viable way of approaching history or any historically oriented field of study.

Despite the overall cohesiveness, neither the essays themselves nor the book as a whole provides a systematic exploration of American foreign policy. Instead, the book is made up of a series of snapshots evaluating different arguments, theories, concepts, and policy positions, depending on the time period in which a given essay was written. The book demonstrates that, for over 45 years, Leffler has been consumed with the vital questions about the appropriate scope of American foreign policy and what causal factors shape the balance between expansion and restraint in American foreign policy. Or, as the author himself puts it, "why the

United States eschewed political commitments and strategic obligations in one era while it welcomed them in another.”²⁰ Leffler has consistently asked and answered questions about the role of the United States in the world, mainly focusing on empirical questions of what exactly U.S. policy was and why it was that way. At the same time, he has never been afraid to address the normative implications of his findings. All of his writing strives to answer a few key questions: What were the main goals of American foreign policy, why did U.S. leaders pursue those goals, and what were the implications for the United States and the world? In answering these questions, Leffler has been guided by historiographical controversy and theory, while relentlessly remaining grounded in the available evidence.

In the discussion that follows, I engage Leffler’s scholarship through the lens he provides in his wide-ranging conceptual essay defining his national security approach. In that essay, Leffler implores scholars “to examine both the foreign and domestic factors shaping policy ... to look at the structure of the international system as well as the domestic ideas and interests shaping policy.” He argues that “The national security approach seeks to overcome some of the great divides in the study of American diplomatic history.”²¹ Using this standard as an inspiration and guiding light, I offer a slightly different interpretation of American diplomatic history that is rooted in classical liberal and constructivist theory.²² Specifically,

²⁰ Melvyn P. Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920–2015* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 326.

²¹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 319.

²² See Jeffrey W. Meiser, *Power and Restraint: The Rise of the United States, 1898–1941* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015) and Jeffrey W. Meiser, “Liberalism,” in *International Relations Theory*, ed. Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters, and Christian Scheinpflug, (E-

paying closer attention to the domestic political structure of institutions (e.g., the separation of powers and democracy) and strategic culture (e.g., norms about the appropriate way to pursue national security) can supplement Leffler's approach. Leffler notes the importance of historical memory and analogies as powerful ideas and sees values and ideals as important drivers of expansionist American foreign policy. What is missing, however, is an awareness that values can also restrain and are always contested. For example, American strategic culture includes norms such as anti-imperialism, anti-statism, and self-determination.²³ Moreover, institutions like the separation of powers and regular democratic elections ensure that the diversity of values and ideas always have the means to shape the calculations of political leaders and affect foreign policy.²⁴

The remainder of this essay aims to constructively critique Leffler's body of work as a way of enhancing his national security approach, suggesting how scholars can meet the standard of examining both foreign and domestic factors that shape American foreign policy.

International Relations Publishing, 2017), <http://www.e-ir.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/International-Relations-Theory-E-IR.pdf>.

²³ See H.W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Aaron Friedberg, *In The Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Meiser, *Power and Restraint*.

²⁴ See Scott A. Silverstone, "Federal Democratic Peace: Domestic Institutions and International Conflict in the Early American Republic," *Security Studies* 13, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 48-102; William G. Howell and Jon C. Pevehouse, "When Congress Stops Wars," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 5 (September/October 2007): 95-107; Matthew Kroenig and Jay Stowsky, "War Makes the State, but not as It Pleases: Homeland Security and American Anti-Statism," *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 225-270.

The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy, 1921–1933

Leffler's analysis in the first three essays (written from 1972 to 1974) skillfully weaves together strands of open door historiography and *realpolitik*, paying close attention to the domestic incentives that the central decision-makers of this era faced. These essays present Leffler's most thorough evaluation of how domestic politics shape American foreign policy. Leffler's embrace of complexity frees him from the economic determinism of open door theory and the balance of power determinism of realism to take into account the actual policy-making process and the multitude of factors affecting foreign policy decisions. His essays address the big question of the era: Should the United States take on an active, political-military role in world (European) affairs, or should it seek to insulate itself from the corruption and duplicitousness of the outside world by remaining aloof?

In his first essay, chapter 1, Leffler addresses both open door and realist interpretations of the 1920s. In response to the open door interpretation, Leffler argues that, while the U.S. business community did push for a more economically expansionist foreign policy, they were largely stymied by the push and pull of competing interests and institutional and normative restraints. In response to realist critiques of interwar U.S. foreign policy, Leffler argues that Republican political leaders actually did understand the growing problem in Europe, but a more interventionist foreign policy was restrained by the separation of powers among American institutions, public opinion, norms, and elections. In the case of Republican economic foreign policy, the Harding and Hoover administrations attempted to resolve the instability in Europe by moderating the U.S. policy of

German war debt repayment, but their freedom of action was limited by Congress and fears of electoral punishment. For example, Leffler argues,

The Harding administration was caught in a vice: congressional restrictions, fiscal demands, and political expedience encouraged caution in and placing responsibility for the reparations crisis upon France; diplomatic warnings, business pressures, and moral scruples compelled constructive action.²⁵

Thus, one can see the countervailing pressures that are always present in American politics. Despite the diplomatic pressures (emphasized by realists) and the business interests (emphasized by the open door school), a restrained foreign policy in this era resulted from the separation of powers (congressional restrictions), norms (fiscal demands for tax relief), and elections (political expediency).

Leffler does not actually refute either realism or the open door thesis, but instead claims each as only part of the story. Intriguingly, Leffler's analysis supports a broader perspective that pushes domestic institutions and norms to the forefront of interpreting American foreign policy. However, this opportunity is lost. Leffler eschews theoretical or conceptual language to categorize the domestic structural restraints that shaped American foreign policy in the 1920s, but he, nevertheless, communicates the influence of these factors, and in doing so, provides his most comprehensive analysis of the domestic forces influencing American foreign policy.

²⁵ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 43

Leffler's in-depth analysis of President Herbert Hoover's foreign policy in chapter 2 is even more tightly focused on domestic determinates of American foreign policy, but focuses on Hoover's personal beliefs and values to the exclusion of other domestic or international factors. Personal beliefs and values are crucial for understanding foreign policy, and by emphasizing them, Leffler shows his adaptability as a scholar and foreshadows his later interest in constructivism. According to Leffler, Hoover's foreign policy "focused on the need to develop 'scientific' and 'apolitical' mechanisms and formulae capable of fostering world order, European stability, and mutual cooperation" and was "an effort to organize progressively the forces of peace by mobilizing expertise, generating voluntary action, and minimizing political imperatives." In this way, Hoover hoped to "enable the United States to play a continuous and constructive role in world affairs."²⁶ His failing was his inability to change U.S. policy on "tariff barriers, war debts collections, and loan policies [that] strained the entire international economic system, jeopardized the gold standard, and threatened European stability."²⁷ Leffler concludes that Hoover's approach to foreign policy "failed because of its own inherent inconsistencies and because of Hoover's personal failure to live up to the high standards he set for himself."²⁸

Yet, political context is a crucial component of the story. Leffler obliquely refers to politics: political expediency, "playing politics," and "political considerations," but does not explain or develop these points.²⁹ He seems to agree with Hoover's attempts to depoliticize important issues and faults him for not doing so more

²⁶ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 67

²⁷ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 68

²⁸ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 50

²⁹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 67-73.

effectively. A more insightful critique would recognize it is impossible, counterproductive, and ultimately unwise to depoliticize vital national issues. In a sense, Leffler depoliticized the study of history just as Hoover aspired to depoliticize public policy. Domestic politics curb presidential action for a reason. Domestic institutions enable other actors to restrain the president to safeguard democratic capitalism. Leffler's narrow focus on Hoover's belief system largely ignores the historical context. In the 1920s and 30s, the American citizenry — and their agents in Congress — were in no mood for any sort of political-military involvement abroad. Not only was there a significant backlash against involvement in World War I, there was also a backlash against the periodic attempts at imperialism focused on the Caribbean Basin and Asia-Pacific. Regardless of his personal values, Hoover was tightly constrained in what he could accomplish.³⁰ For Leffler, it seems that Hoover's actions are wholly to blame for his inability to bolster stability in Europe.³¹

In his broader study of American foreign policy in the 1920s and early 1930s, chapter 3, Leffler demonstrates that American political leaders had a desire to expand U.S. strategic commitments, but were restrained by their own beliefs about American national interests and “did not want to compromise domestic priorities or overextend the role of government in the American political economy.”³² Political leaders pursued a policy of “prosperity and peace,” focusing on economic and financial tools, rather than political or military tools, to foster peace and cooperation after World War I.³³ But even with this smaller tool set, Republican

³⁰ Meiser, *Power and Restraint*, 194-234.

³¹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 74.

³² Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 76.

³³ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 83.

goals often collided with “efforts to reduce taxes, to combat inflation, to raise tariffs, and to win elections.”³⁴ A key element of restraint was an American public strongly “opposed [sic] entanglement in European affairs.” At least some American elected officials would have liked to take a stronger stance in European affairs (e.g., guaranteeing French security), but those desires were curbed by their understanding that the majority of Americans opposed such a policy.³⁵

Leffler notes the influence of public opinion but generally discounts its influence on American officials, instead maintaining that American officials made their own judgments about American strategic interests, independent of public opinion. Leffler later adds more support to the proposition that domestic politics were a driving factor by noting that “The American peace movement, however, exerted tremendous pressure on behalf of some concrete action to outlaw war and to stabilize international relations” and that “Coolidge and Kellogg succumbed to public pressure and decided to seek a multilateral pact outlawing war.”³⁶ Later, Leffler again suggests that public opinion restrained American leaders when he calls the lack of sanctions in the Kellogg-Briand Pact a “sop to the public.” Hoover hoped to change the pact to “make it more potent.”³⁷ Interestingly, in his conclusion, Leffler does not note any of the domestic restraints on American foreign policy, but instead focuses on Republican efforts to implement a realistic foreign policy.³⁸ He notes, “Republican reluctance to incur strategic commitments and their antipathy to using force to uphold the status quo,” which seems to be

³⁴ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 89

³⁵ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 97

³⁶ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 104

³⁷ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 107

³⁸ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 113–116

the most important aspect of American foreign policy at the time, but does not reference the domestic restraints that largely caused that reluctance.³⁹ A more compelling conclusion would have drawn attention to the ways in which American institutions and norms fostered a foreign policy more restrained than either the open door approach or realism would have predicted.

Threat Perception and the Cold War

Leffler's classic essay, "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War" (chapter 4), is the first of three chapters on one of the more consequential shifts in the history of American foreign policy. The decision by the United States to take on the responsibility of the defense of the free world was so fundamental that it became the core element of American foreign policy for more than 70 years. This decision resulted in the United States possessing a network of military bases around the globe and having the largest military budget in the world. It led to an extensive defensive alliance system, the possibility of global thermonuclear war, and the preservation of democratic capitalism. And it also dramatically empowered the presidency. As commander-in-chief, the president can deploy the U.S. Armed Forces as necessary to defend the national security of the United States. If the forces in-being are insufficient, Congress must appropriate money and the American citizenry must mobilize to create the necessary forces. This process is the fundamental check on the presidential power to use force. However, since the beginning of the Cold War, this check has been almost totally absent. Before the Cold War, Congress declared war and appropriated the necessary funds to create an army. Now, Congress authorizes the

³⁹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 115

use of force and passes supplemental defense bills. The main question, therefore, is what caused the restraint of the 1920s and early 1930s to dissipate so thoroughly by the mid-1940s? This question is, of course, tied directly to the question of the origins of the Cold War, an area of particular expertise of Melvyn Leffler.

Leffler's argument on the origins of the Cold War is, for the most part, balanced and convincing: The United States and the Soviet Union found themselves in a security dilemma in which both felt vulnerable, both took actions to alleviate that vulnerability, and the actions of one undermined the security of the other. Leffler's central innovation (dating from 1984) is his argument that, in the earliest stages of the American-Soviet conflict, the United States did not feel threatened by the Soviet Union. Instead, it felt threatened by the "postwar economic dislocation and social and political unrest" in Europe and Asia, which caused a "growing apprehension about the vulnerability of American strategic and economic interests in a world of unprecedented turmoil and upheaval."⁴⁰ The United States did not feel threatened by Soviet military might, it felt threatened by the possibility of communist exploitation of a Western Europe and Japan that had been devastated by war. However, the state of Western Europe and Japan only mattered in the context of a new American conception of national security based on global defense in depth and power projection. As Leffler elaborates, "Defense in depth was especially important in the light of the Pearl Harbor experience, the advance of technology, and the development of the atomic bomb."⁴¹ The United States would need to dominate the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through a system of naval and air bases and air transit and landing rights, and prevent the Soviet Union from

⁴⁰ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 123, 140–143.

⁴¹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 125.

dominating the Eurasian world island.⁴² The key priority was to keep war away from the U.S. homeland, which required the ability to take the fight to the enemy. For U.S. military planners, Turkey was seen as particularly important for enabling air attacks on the Soviet heartland in the unlikely event of war in the late 1940s. Conversely, the Soviet Union saw Turkey as a significant vulnerability — and U.S. assistance to Turkey as an act of aggression.⁴³ Not surprisingly, the Soviets viewed U.S. reactions to the perceived threat of the spread of communism as itself highly threatening, responding by shoring up its defenses in ways the United States in turn viewed as hostile.⁴⁴

Thus, the U.S. experience in World War II incentivized a global strategy, and the threat of a political takeover of Europe and East Asia by communist movements compelled specific, long-term commitments on the part of the United States. Leffler's argument largely solves the puzzle of why American leaders would view the Soviet Union as a major threat, despite the military superiority of the United States in the aftermath of World War II. In essence, communism was a bigger threat than the Soviet Union, but the Soviets would surely take advantage of any advances by communism in the industrial centers of Europe and East Asia.

Despite Leffler's emphasis on threat perception, he does not offer a full explanation for why military leaders and Truman administration officials began to view the Soviet Union itself as the central threat to American national security. Leffler notes this shift in 1946, and questions its empirical basis, but does not

⁴² Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 126–133.

⁴³ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 172–176, 184–185.

⁴⁴ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 189, 194–220.

explain it. In fact, he makes a strong argument that the Truman administration's threat perception was not objectively very sound and exaggerated the risk posed by the Soviets.⁴⁵ Part of the explanation can be found in domestic politics, especially the powerful impact of electoral incentives, public opinion, and the tools a president uses to break through the restraints imposed by the separation of powers.

Regarding domestic restraint and presidential action, Leffler describes how Franklin D. Roosevelt felt it necessary to hide concessions to Stalin at Yalta because he feared domestic backlash and wanted to save his political capital for "many legislative enactments, including American participation in the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank."⁴⁶ Harry Truman felt similarly restrained. Leffler notes the importance of budgetary restrictions and the Truman administration's difficulty in reconciling the massively expanded security requirements with the belief that a military budget over \$14 billion would cause economic collapse.⁴⁷ Better awareness of the domestic restraints might have cued Leffler in to the need for the grandiose pronouncements of the Truman Doctrine, which in turn may have triggered a higher sense of threat among administration officials. Leffler's analysis of the U.S.-Turkish alliance gives some suggestion that Truman, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and others were cognizant of the difficulty in mobilizing the public and convincing Congress to invest in a global security strategy. Leffler notes Acheson's careful wooing of the press and the exaggeration of a proximate Soviet threat to overcome resistance.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 144-149, 187-220.

⁴⁶ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 192.

⁴⁷ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 127, 153, 156-160.

⁴⁸ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 171.

In another passage, Leffler states that the Truman administration sought to “mobilize domestic support” by emphasizing and even exaggerating Soviet hostility.⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that all of these measures would require new and expansive American commitments. Roosevelt and Truman were aware that these policies would face natural opposition that would have to be overcome. As Leffler states, Roosevelt was concerned that he could “trigger a wave of cynicism and a return to the isolationism of the interwar era” by pushing too hard and fast on American global defense policy.⁵⁰

Idealism and Realism After the Cold War

Leffler’s writings on the post-Cold War world continue his interest in threat perception and the problem of threat manipulation and exaggeration. In Leffler’s interpretation, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton did a reasonably good job of pursuing American national interests through a proper balance of maintaining military superiority while being highly selective in how they used it.⁵¹ However, the Bush administration lost this balance in its response to 9/11. According to Leffler, in

times of heightened threat perception, the assertion of values
mounts and subsumes careful calculation of interests. Values and
ideals are asserted to help evoke public support for the mobilization

⁴⁹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 219.

⁵⁰ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 192.

⁵¹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 270–274.

of power; power then tempts the government to overreach far beyond what careful calculations of interest might dictate.⁵²

The argument is not fully articulated, but he hints that great challenges that require the extensive mobilization of power also necessitate overcoming restraints on mobilizing power. The means of overcoming the domestic restraints on power mobilization entail appeals to values and ideals, which can inspire great passions among the populace, for better or worse. Leffler sees the turn to idealist rhetoric as troubling: “It signifies an evolution from assertive nationalism to democratic imperialism; it justifies and inspires the employment of unprecedented power. It is a worrisome development.”⁵³

For Leffler, the way to overcome or prevent this worrisome development is through “good judgment,” generally defined as basing foreign policy on interests rather than values and ideals.⁵⁴ For example, Leffler argues that “a careful calculation of interests is essential to discipline American power and temper its ethnocentrism.”⁵⁵ This approach is sensible. Unfortunately, Americans have no way of ensuring this kind of self-restraint among their leaders. The historical interpretation that Leffler presents suggests that leaders will not show self-restraint and instead will seek to manipulate threats to increase their freedom of action and to mobilize power. Another way to approach the problem is to draw inspiration from classical liberals, including the American Founding Fathers, and reinvigorate the structural restraint of the American political system. Leffler

⁵² Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 283, 294, 296.

⁵³ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 299.

⁵⁴ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 283.

⁵⁵ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 301.

claims, “The genius of American foreign policy is the capacity to recalibrate the relationship between these variables [values, ideals, and interests].” One of the main mechanisms for recalibration is American separation of powers, elections, and diversity of ideals and values. Leffler’s re-evaluation of austerity is suggestive on this point. Presidents tend to mobilize public opinion in favor of increased power mobilization and projection. They are restrained by Congress and public opinion, which can be a good thing. Presidents and their heroic efforts get the lion’s share of attention, but perhaps Congress — with all of its parochialism, seedy self-interest, influence peddling, and pork-barrel-fueled logrolling — is a hero of a different sort. Or perhaps the institutional makeup and ideational diversity of the United States represents a completely different sort of hero.

By giving short shrift to American domestic structure and the role it plays in restraining foreign policy, Leffler’s more recent scholarship emerges with a jaundiced view of the plausible solutions to overstretch in American foreign policy. To understand the influence of domestic institutions and culture one only has to look to Leffler’s scholarship from the 1970s. *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism* displays the full range of Melvyn Leffler’s research, which allows for a chance to rediscover some of his earlier insights and to find a more robust understanding of when, how, and why the United States sometimes goes “abroad in search of monsters to destroy” and other times stays home to serve as a “shining city on the hill.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ On the competing traditions of American exceptionalism exemplified in these statements see Brands, *What America Owes the World*, vii-x.

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4. Understanding the Choices Made by American Leaders

Sarah C.M. Paine

In Melvyn Leffler's collection of essays, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, he traces three journeys: first, America's journey from an economic power to a superpower; second, Leffler's own intellectual journey from a quiet undergraduate opposed to the Vietnam War to a well-published, chaired history professor at the University of Virginia; and third, the evolution of the discipline of U.S. diplomatic history. The three journeys begin with the aftermath of World War I (or its study) and conclude well into the endless U.S. war in Iraq. Leffler has chosen his most important essays marking his own intellectual way stations in his analysis of the U.S. journey through the 20th century. His scholarship demonstrates the value of empathy in understanding, rather than vilifying, those who, in recent memory, have led America and made difficult choices in the face of intractable dilemmas. After presenting the highlights of each chapter, I apply concepts and frameworks learned from two decades teaching in the Strategy and Policy Department of the U.S. Naval War College, in order to shed light on Leffler's impressive work from a different angle.

The book launches its three journeys in the opening chapter under the title, "Embracing Complexity." Education, both formal and lifelong, teaches that issues are often more complicated than they originally seemed. Each of the reprinted journal articles and book chapters that follow begins with explanatory remarks explicitly putting the chapter in the context of the national, personal, and disciplinary journeys. The chapters start with a political-economic focus on the 1920s (chapters 1 and 2), add domestic political focus on the 1930s (chapter 3), and

then overlay a national security focus on the 1940s and 1950s (chapters 4 and 6). The final chapters turn to examining the Cold War era. The triumph, and soon triumphalism, following victory in the Cold War (chapters 7 and 8) becomes a parable concerning the wisdom of prudence undermined by the emotion of fear when the invasion of Iraq became the solution to 9/11 (chapters 9 and 10). Leffler's career-long embrace of complexity through the aggregation of layers of analysis leads to a counterintuitive lesson concerning the wisdom of U.S. policymakers during periods of austerity and their profligacy in times of abundance (chapter 11).

The Interwar Period

Leffler's first chapter, originally written in 1971, argues that, contrary to the views of past historians, U.S. business leaders in the early 1920s were well aware of the connection between U.S. and European prosperity. Nevertheless, they could not see how to reduce the war debts of the European allies — essential for their return to prosperity — without shifting the tax burden to Americans instead, thus risking U.S. prosperity. Leffler discovered that earlier historians had incorrectly attributed costly economic policy choices in Washington to the unrelenting quest by business interests for overseas markets. The true problem was an intractable dilemma without an obvious solution. As noted by the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, decision-makers must evaluate strategic choices in comparison to the alternatives because all possibilities usually entail trade-offs with something valuable lost in the trades.⁵⁷ The alternatives were all bad in the 1920s, the stakes were high, and economists had yet to normalize deficit spending or debt forgiveness.

⁵⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1976), 161.

In the second chapter, written in 1974, Leffler attributes Herbert Hoover's mismanagement of the Great Depression to a series of flawed assumptions: that international economic problems could be solved through business expertise and cooperation alone, dismissing a necessary role for political institutions, legislation, or treaties; that international economic problems could be divorced from political and security considerations, both at home and abroad; that U.S. protectionism was consistent with European prosperity; that his own reasoning was unbiased by political considerations, despite giving preference to U.S. political interests and dismissing those of France; and that U.S. security did not require strategic commitments to Europe. Overly optimistic assumptions about the human capacity for detached rationality and civic-mindedness had disastrous consequences for all, given the increasingly interconnected world that was emerging at the time. In my thinking, Hoover played a game of half-court tennis in which he focused on the U.S. side of the net without giving equal attention to the other side. He focused on what Americans ought to do without adequate consideration to the likely countermeasures taken by others. In reality, international relations is an interactive process in which the moves of the opposing side are often both unexpected and consequential.

Chapter 3, also written in 1974, concludes that, in the 1920s and early 1930s, U.S. policymakers were not isolationist, they were just mistaken: The quintessentially American assumption that prosperous people do not foment wars appears in Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes' observation that "There will be no

permanent peace unless economic satisfactions are enjoyed.”⁵⁸ Leffler reveals a United States deeply interconnected with Europe but with an ostrich’s sense of security — the operative idea being that if Americans stayed out, no war could undermine their security. Hoover favored disarmament and did not believe that “peace could be safeguarded through the force of arms.”⁵⁹ Republicans shared his antipathy toward “international commitments and ... to using force to uphold the status quo.”⁶⁰ In foreign policy, they saw financial leverage as the single viable instrument of national power and so failed to integrate other instruments, for instance, diplomacy, intelligence, law, institutions, and the military. Instead of integrating multiple instruments, Republicans foundered on two nested policy fights: domestic battles over taxation, inflation, tariffs, and elections situated within an overarching struggle for international stability fought over reparations, disarmament, and European recovery from World War I. Strategies effective in one layer of conflict damaged outcomes in the other. Theories of deterrence had yet to be born. A decade later, Pearl Harbor would make Americans aware of the other side of the tennis net: Others can also decide when wars begin. Until Pearl Harbor, Americans failed to grasp how economic and technological developments were eroding their sanctuary.

⁵⁸ Melvyn P. Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920-2015* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 80.

⁵⁹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 94.

⁶⁰ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 115.

The Cold War

Leffler considers chapter 4, originally written in 1984, the “most important article of my career.”⁶¹ It highlights expansive U.S. requirements for national security and blindness to Soviet interests as major causes of the Cold War. The World War II generation on both sides of the Iron Curtain demanded post-war conditions that each believed essential to preclude a repeat of the massive conflict. The conditions were mutually exclusive. In 1944, Franklin Roosevelt approved plans for a worldwide network of military bases. The Joint Chiefs stuck to the Monroe Doctrine. By 1948, the United States applied the staple British balance-of-power strategy for Europe to all of Eurasia — where no one power would be allowed to dominate and where Russia would be contained. The basing strategy positioned the United States to leverage its maritime position to conduct most wars in distant places, in contrast to a continental power’s agony of fighting on its borders and often on home territory.

Leffler attributes the outbreak of the Cold War to U.S. leaders’ failure to accommodate Soviet interests. One’s position on this question depends on one’s views about Soviet objectives. Clausewitz distinguishes between limited and unlimited objectives, meaning the political aims for which a war is fought. Limited objectives are negotiable, whereas unlimited objectives threaten the existence of the enemy. Compromising with an enemy with unlimited objectives better positions that enemy to come in for the kill. The pejorative term, appeasement, is often used in this context. Yet, compromise is part and parcel of terminating conflicts over limited objectives. If one assumes that the Soviets simply wanted a

⁶¹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 15.

buffer zone in Eastern Europe to protect their own security (a limited objective) and if one ignores their treatment of both those living in Eastern Europe and their own citizens, then one turns a critical eye on the United States. On the other hand, if one assumes that the Soviets took communism seriously and planned to impose it on the rest of the world (an unlimited objective), and if one highlights their treatment of Eastern Europeans and Soviet citizens, then one turns a critical eye on the Soviet Union. The argument can be flipped to note that the United States had the unlimited objective of eliminating communism and has remained on mission ever since, so no wonder the Soviets were reluctant to compromise. Unlimited objectives, rather than the treachery or incompetence of either side, may be the better explanation for why the Cold War lasted so long.

Chapter 5, written in 1985, explores the early days of the Cold War. It emphasizes mistrust as a driver of U.S. and Soviet divisions over Turkey. Intuitively, trust should underlie alliance systems. The Allies of World War II constitute the most effective military alliance of modern times. Yet, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union had mutually exclusive post-war objectives, respectively, of decolonization, empire, and the spread of communism. During the war, the Allies routinely ran end runs against the missing party in bilateral meetings — trust cannot explain their cooperation. Trust is the chimera of international relations. It leads to the false equation that the Cold War was a function of what the United States did or did not do to earn trust. The real drivers of international relations, as Thucydides noted over two thousand years ago, are fear, honor, and interest. By extension, the Cold War was more accurately a function of differing primary adversaries, conflicts over honor, and incompatible interests. The World War II alliance was strong because Nazi Germany sought the unlimited objective of overturning the global order, with genocide in store for millions. These Nazi aims

constituted an existential threat to all three allies, thus, fear accounts for their incredible cooperation. If either the United States or Soviet Union, let alone both, had unlimited post-war objectives, trust was never in the cards and no amount of diplomacy could have saved the alliance. Capitalism and communism were mutually exclusive global systems, so the wartime alliance was never going to last beyond Germany's defeat and dismemberment.

In 1986, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Leffler published the article reprinted as chapter 6, which focuses on the Yalta Agreement and highlights the mixed U.S. and Soviet records for treaty compliance. Just as some smaller U.S. allies wished America to evacuate military bases on their territory right after World War II, likewise, many Eastern Europeans would have preferred that the Red Army vacate after 1945. To avoid implying a false equivalency between U.S. and Soviet actions, it might have been worth noting that the United States paid its allies to stay while the Soviet Union extracted resources *because* it stayed. Leffler makes no mention of Truman's 1945-1947 Pauley Commission, which documented the wholesale removal of the industrial base of Eastern Europe and Manchuria to the Soviet Union.⁶² The economic effects and ratio of coercive-to-diplomatic tools for retaining the bases differed between the U.S. and Soviet alliance systems. In 1986, Leffler knew that the reluctant base hosts of 1945 had remained U.S. allies throughout and that the Chinese and Soviets had split, but he could not know that Eastern European countries would immediately dump the Warsaw Pact for NATO once the Cold War ended. The antithetical reactions of the two sets of allies suggest different experiences — one positive enough and the other overly negative.

⁶² S.C.M. Paine, *The Wars for Asia, 1911-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 241.

The coercive nature of Soviet-Eastern European relations made future conflicts of interest immediately clear to the United States. When Romania and Bulgaria fell in 1944, the Allies put them under Anglo-American-Soviet Control Commissions. But Truman understood by May of 1945 that the Soviet Union had marginalized the Anglo-American commissioners and, by November 1945, that it had taken control of the Romanian and Bulgarian ministries of the interior and justice, allowing the communists to exclude or disadvantage other parties in elections, which the communists won.⁶³ “The total clampdown on Eastern Europe” did indeed follow the Truman Doctrine, as Leffler writes,⁶⁴ but not because of any cause and effect relationship between these two items. It followed the Truman Doctrine because of the time required to consolidate a clampdown over an area as large as Eastern Europe. That process began in 1944, when the Red Army overthrew the fascist governments of Romania and Bulgaria, and was well on its way by 1947. The Soviet deindustrialization of its occupation zones in Europe and Asia preceded the Western decision to unify its zones in Germany and to refuse to subsidize East German reparations to the Soviets. The Soviet Union’s deindustrialization policy had undermined East Germany’s ability to make the reparations payments, which the United States refused to make in its stead. In other words, while the Soviet Union undermined the economy of its occupation zone, the Western Allies strove to rebuild theirs — which helps to explain the post-Cold War realignment of allies from East to West.

⁶³ Truman Archives, President’s Secretary’s Files, Box 150, Subject Folder Foreign Relations, Folder Bulgaria and Romania, May 1, 1945 and November 18, 1945.

⁶⁴ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 212.

The Post-Cold War Era

Chapter 7 jumps to 2013, taking on U.S. triumphalism over its victory in the Cold War. The game of half-court tennis continues in cross-examining the conventional wisdom for the Cold War's end. Rather than emphasizing the role of Ronald Reagan's military build-up, Leffler much more persuasively highlights the prudent decisions of other U.S. policymakers. He rightly emphasizes the better comparative adaptation of the West over the East and the importance of the U.S. "hidden welfare state."⁶⁵ The real question is whether the death of the Soviet Union was a murder — what the United States did — or a suicide — what the Soviet Union did to itself. Leffler's argument falls more into the murder camp, by emphasizing better economic adaptation on the U.S. side of the court.

Yet, it is hard to imagine the Cold War ending as it did without Mikhail Gorbachev, who could have chosen the Tiananmen solution of deploying tanks, but did not. Likewise, it is difficult to envision the Cold War ending as it did without the Sino-Soviet split that caused the budget-busting Soviet militarization of the long Sino-Soviet frontier. Perhaps the denouement is better understood as an assisted suicide. In the Strategy and Policy Department, we encourage students to play the game of "take away." When students gravitate toward mono-causal explanations — say the Reagan arms buildup — it is useful to have them compose a list of all important factors contributing to an outcome and then inquire how removing each factor would change the result. Often, they discover that the result requires the complete package. Half-court tennis explanations attributing outcomes to the

⁶⁵ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 235.

conscious acts of one side assume that the other side could not have chosen differently, and minimize structural issues that constrain choices on both sides.

Chapters 8 and 9, written in 2009 and 2005 respectively, present the U.S. reaction to 9/11 as the triumph of fear over prudence. Whereas George H.W. Bush had taken a cautious approach to the termination of the Cold War and the prosecution of the 1991 Gulf War (the subject of chapter 8), George H. Bush cast prudence aside to take down two countries — Afghanistan and Iraq — in the wake of 9/11 (the subject of chapter 9). Leffler shows how “9/11 dramatically altered the threat perception of U.S. policymakers”⁶⁶ to explain the younger Bush’s decisions. He argues that U.S. policy objectives have remained remarkably stable since the advent of the Open Door Policy, but the chosen strategies in pursuit of free trade, free choice, and freedom of navigation have varied. Preemptive war is not among the variations, but rather an integral part of the American toolkit since the days of Teddy Roosevelt’s “big stick” interventions in the Caribbean and a central element of Bill Clinton’s Presidential Decision Directive 39.⁶⁷

The framework Leffler uses to analyze these choices is an updated version of Thucydides’ trinity of fear, honor, and interest that becomes Thucydides-plus-one: threats, interests, ideals, and power.⁶⁸ Leffler concludes that, in periods of high threat perceptions (9/11 for instance), American leaders appeal to ideals, whereas in periods of low threat perceptions (the immediate post-Cold War period), they stick to American interests. Tragically, the periods of “moral clarity” have

⁶⁶ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 282.

⁶⁷ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 271.

⁶⁸ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 283.

dangerous downsides, alienating U.S. allies and neutrals, and injuring U.S. interests.⁶⁹

In 2014, Leffler reflected on the historical lessons learned over a career studying U.S. diplomatic history, reprinted as Chapter 10. He concludes that U.S. policymakers have been most prudent when austerity has forced carefully calculated tradeoffs between domestic prosperity and national security, and most unwise when an abundance of resources has enabled choices that yielded overextension, which later forced gut-wrenching budgetary retrenchment. He praises as triumphs in the face of adversity Adm. Harold E. Stark's 1940 Plan Dog memo that set America on a Europe-first strategy during World War II, arms control with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China under Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter's human rights policy that resonated among Eastern Europeans. He considers as pitfalls of plenty the march to the Yalu in the Korean War, the 1965 escalation of the Vietnam War, and the second Gulf War toppling of Saddam Hussein. In these three examples, the hubris school of U.S. foreign policy took control with disastrous consequences.

The concluding chapter contains reflections on national security originally published in 2016. It discusses the widening scope of national security as a driver of U.S. foreign policy and a growing topic of study for historians. Nevertheless, the dangerous game of half-court tennis continues. Before doubling down on the primary U.S. interests of "power, economic openness, and the promotion of U.S. ideals"⁷⁰ highlighted in this chapter, Americans should ask what are Russia's

⁶⁹ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 301.

⁷⁰ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 320.

primary interests, what are China's, what are those of America's allies, how do they see the United States, and why? Without adequate attention to the other side of the net, it is no wonder America often blunders into hubris at terrible cost to itself and to others. The book demonstrates the value of multilayered analysis considering economic, financial, commercial, political, diplomatic, military, and human factors. Likewise, it shows the value of leaving the morality tale behind to understand, rather than vilify, the difficult choices made by others.

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5. A Common-Sense View of History

James J. Wirtz

The memories described at the start of this collection of finely crafted essays sounded quite familiar. Growing up a long decade behind Melvyn Leffler, I too was introduced to American foreign policy by revisionists, only in my case they were suffering from post-traumatic stress induced by the turmoil of the Vietnam War. Like Leffler, I was hooked not just by the subject of foreign policy, but also by my professors' approach to history and politics. Some historians of the era were iconoclasts, but most just offered a healthy dose of skepticism about conventional interpretations of the Cold War and a pervasive distrust of authority. Although the facts and debates covered by this collection are not exactly new to me, I still found myself turning the pages of the oddly titled *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism* as if it were a novel, surprised by its brilliant insights and how it left me with a newfound feeling of sympathy for Salieri.

In his latest book, Leffler covers topics that span nearly one hundred years of U.S. foreign policy, from interwar isolationism and the origins of the Cold War, to 9/11 and beyond, making it difficult to summarize the volume without delving into detail. Written during various stages of his incredibly productive career, each essay not only enhances the historical record, but also sheds insight into how previous scholars seemed to focus on the wrong elements of the story. Leffler accomplishes this task without any evident ideological or political bias. Instead, he takes a stand against oversimplification and intellectual fashion to illustrate the essence of the phenomena in question. Each of these beautifully written essays offers an original and compelling observation about U.S. foreign policy.

At times, Leffler generates insight by relying on meticulous attention to detail. In two essays dealing with the interwar period, for instance, he makes a convincing case that Republican administrations were not, in fact, isolationist. Instead, he suggests that they were wary of French policies that were intended to prevent the revitalization of the German economy. Americans envisioned Germany as the engine of European prosperity. What others see as isolationism, Leffler depicts as reluctance to climb on board the French bandwagon. By contrast, in a discussion of why the West was triumphant in the Cold War, it is not new information, but a unique assessment of the accepted facts that produces insight. Leffler notes that the competition between Moscow and Washington was not just about economic productivity per se, but about the ability to translate production into improvements in the quality of life enjoyed by the average citizen. As any good Marxist knows, this is easier said than done. Nevertheless, the West managed to increase economic production while moderating capitalism's externalities by creating social safety nets that reduced collective fears about things like medical care, education, and retirement. The West won the Cold War because its politicians were able to use government regulations and programs to increase production "with a human face," so to speak, despite the fact that they often bemoaned government as part of the problem. Leffler never says it, but he seems to be suggesting that officials in Washington actually won the Cold War because they turned out to be better "Marxists" than their competitors in the Kremlin.

Leffler employs a method in these essays that is easy to describe but difficult to put into practice. Over time, accepted or dominant interpretations of historical events tend toward inappropriate simplification. Sometimes, this simplification is part of a political or even cultural narrative. Other times, it reflects the quest for

power and parsimony as historians work to corral a chaotic and endless stream of facts into a plausible, if not an aesthetically pleasing, explanation of events. This is where Leffler distinguishes himself by demonstrating how rigid and stylized historical accounts miss critical facts or causal factors that offer a better explanation than conventional wisdom. Indeed, he hints that he learned this lesson following his introduction to Cold War revisionism: Both traditional historians who blamed the Soviets for the Cold War and revisionists who blamed the Americans ignored the fact that events were driven by the interaction of both parties. Leffler's insights are based on a common-sense approach. He takes as his starting point that there are two sides to the story and that much of the conventional wisdom on the matter focuses only on one of those sides.

One chapter in the collection raised more questions than it resolved: Leffler's description of how the Pentagon's post-war military planning might have been the driving force behind what some deemed a rather unsympathetic attitude toward Soviet security concerns. In the immediate post-war period, the Pentagon called for the preservation of its global basing structure used to prosecute the war so that power could be projected promptly in the event that the Soviets made serious trouble. It took years and much blood and treasure to secure those bases during World War II, so there was no good *military* reason to abandon that base structure when it ended.

In terms of military logic, the generals were spot on: The force required forward basing to be effective. Nevertheless, no one in the Truman administration seemed to assess the political implications of this strategy, i.e., how this global basing strategy might shape Moscow's perceptions of Washington's intentions. The failure to conduct this strategic assessment, however, seems rather odd since it

came on the heels of five years of great-power war. By this point, one would think that civilians in Washington would have recognized that military planners might give short shrift to the political implications of their military operations. In my own experience, I have found that seasoned bureaucrats are aware of these kinds of biases, although they tend to accept them as a fact of organizational life. One might have expected smoother civil-military relations, whereby strategy benefited from more deliberate balancing between military realities and political objectives. On the other hand, post-war military planners may have simply been continuing the Roosevelt administration's wartime practice of privileging military requirements over political considerations. During the war, it was politically and morally unacceptable to suffer American casualties for purely political objectives, an attitude deemed rather naïve by America's allies and many historians. One wonders if this attitude continued after the war concluded, despite the fact that the post-war period was the time when wartime officials believed political considerations would be paramount.

Leffler is suggesting that a significant American contribution to the origins of the Cold War might have unfolded in either an absent-minded or reckless manner, depending on the reader's attitude toward this type of thing. Nevertheless, the story of post-war Pentagon planning is not just of interest to diplomatic historians preparing for the next round of Cold War revisionism. The chief lesson of Leffler's story underscores the first law of strategy — military activities must do no political harm. Leffler's volume should be read by every officer who works as a planner or is actually in operational command. It is also particularly relevant to the ongoing confrontation between Washington and Beijing in the South China Sea. In the current contest, the exigencies of military operations appear to be outpacing strategic direction and realistic political objectives. Preparations to reduce the

possibility that war will occur may actually be increasing the likelihood of war between the United States and China. Events are unfolding according to a military logic that is increasingly detached from political direction.

In addition to describing the successes and failures of diplomats and policymakers, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism* identifies an unspoken objective behind U.S. foreign policy that has profound global implications. Specifically, as long as capitalism exists in a stable social and political setting, and as long as ideological and military threats to that order can be kept at bay, hope exists for humanity. Americans like to believe that they are building “A city upon a hill.” Leffler suggests, however, they are really maintaining a barnyard that houses a goose that lays golden eggs. Keeping foxes at bay while enjoying an omelet is not a traditional way of interpreting U.S. foreign policy, but it is a theme that pervades Leffler’s work.

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