RECENTERING THE UNITED STATES IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS

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In the last three decades, historians of the "U.S. in the World" have taken two methodological turns — the international and transnational turns — that have implicitly decentered the United States from the historiography of U.S. foreign relations. Although these developments have had several salutary effects on the field, we argue that, for two reasons, scholars should bring the United States — and especially, the U.S. state — back to the center of diplomatic historiography. First, the United States was the most powerful actor of the post-1945 world and shaped the direction of global affairs more than any other nation. Second, domestic processes and phenomena often had more of an effect on the course of U.S. foreign affairs than international or transnational processes. It is our belief that incorporating the insights of a reinvigorated domestic history of American foreign relations with those produced by international and transnational historians will enable the writing of scholarly works that encompass a diversity of spatial geographies and provide a fuller account of the making, implementation, effects, and limits of U.S. foreign policy.

Part I: U.S. Foreign Relations After World War II

The history of U.S. foreign relations in the American academy is uniquely situated between two broader fields: international history (the study of international society, the international system, and inter-, supra-, and substate interactions), and U.S. history (the study of domestic processes and events). Since the early 1990s, the historiography of post-1945 U.S. foreign relations has been shaped by two trends that have emphasized the former rather than the latter. To begin with, the “international turn” (turn being the standard term among historians to denote major shifts in disciplinary emphasis) has underlined the ways in which foreign nation-states, peoples, and cultures have influenced American foreign relations, and how American foreign relations have informed the lives of people living abroad. In addition, the “transnational turn” has highlighted that nonstate and transstate processes, organizations, and movements have often

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1 As this sentence suggests, this article refers explicitly to the American academy. In other academic contexts, especially the United Kingdom and Europe, the fields of international and transnational history have different histories.

2 For the sake of style, in this essay we use the adjectives "U.S." and "American" interchangeably, though we recognize that "American" does not necessarily refer to the United States.
impacted American global behavior.

In important respects, these two trends have had salutary effects on the scholarship and the field more broadly, demonstrating that historians must frequently look beyond the United States and its government if they are to understand fully the origins, development, and consequences of U.S. foreign policy. In particular, the international and transnational turns have had three crucial benefits. First, international history has underlined the agency of foreign peoples by showing that conditions “on the ground” have shaped U.S. policy's impact in myriad ways. That is to say, it has demonstrated that although the United States is the world's most powerful nation, it has often been constrained, and sometimes informed, by the actions of weaker states and groups. In this way, the international turn has “de-exceptionalized” the history of U.S. foreign policy by placing it in a comparative or global context. Second, the transnational turn has established that nonstate actors, people-to-people relations, and transstate processes have regularly influenced American policy and the nation's relations with the rest of the globe. Finally, the two turns have together helped diversify the scholarship in U.S. foreign relations history, especially in terms of incorporating women into the professional fold. The overall effect of the outpouring of scholarship over the past three decades has been to deepen and broaden scholars’ understanding of America’s role in the world and the field itself.

Nevertheless, in this article we argue that the turns to international and transnational history have led historians, at least implicitly, to deemphasize unduly subjects that traditionally stood at the center of the historiography of U.S. foreign relations: policymaking and its relationship to the projection of power. Simply put, since the end of the Cold War many historians of the “U.S. in the World” — the current, if somewhat awkward, designation of choice — have examined this history in relation to its international and transnational contexts, which has had the effect of downplaying the domestic institutions and processes that, we argue, are crucial to understanding why American decision-makers have made the policies they have. Thus, while we are rapidly gaining a deeper understanding of the impact and limits of American power abroad and the ways in which foreign actors and conditions have shaped the implementation of U.S. foreign policy, we do not know nearly enough about topics such as the institutionalization of the national security state; the perceived political imperatives that have shaped foreign policymaking; the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other military voices in U.S. foreign relations; the impact of interest groups on foreign policy; the elite networks that have shaped U.S. decision-making; the emergence, character, and limits of the bipartisan consensus that has underwritten the American empire since at least 1945; and, in the broadest sense, the nature of U.S. national power and the American political-military state.

In no way do we wish to deny the utility of international or transnational approaches to the history of U.S. foreign relations. Rather, we are arguing that these approaches, while crucial, do not fully explain why the United States — particularly the U.S. state and associated institutions — acted in the world as it did. More to the point, we believe that the recent turn toward international and transnational history, which has encouraged historians to train their analytical lenses on non-American actors and states, has tended to tacitly deemphasize three important realities of U.S. — and, indeed, global — history since 1945. First, the United States has been, by far, the most dominant nation of the post-1945 world, sufficiently powerful that whenever it has intervened in a particular world region, it has exerted a major (and often decisive) impact. Throughout the postwar era and down to today, the United States has enjoyed more military, political, economic, ideological, social, cultural, scientific, and technological power than any other nation — and by a colossal margin. To use the metaphor of our solar system, the United States is the sun that delimits the entire system’s structure. Though other states may have followed their own unique trajectories, they all have orbited around America. As Marilyn Young argued in 2002, “for the past fifty years, the United States has been the most powerful country in the world,” and therefore all nations “had little choice but to engage the centrality of American power.” (Years earlier, Raymond Aron made the same key point: “In each period the principal actors [in the international system] have determined the system more than they have been

determined by it."

Second, the U.S. state has been the chief maker and implementer of American foreign policy. While in some instances nonstate actors, non-governmental organizations, and international institutions have been influential, when it comes to the subject of U.S. foreign relations, government agencies and departments have been more important — they have had more causal impact on the nation's relationship to the rest of the world and on the world itself. State power, we must always remind ourselves, matters, and as such we must give deep and sustained attention to the wielders of that power. In the case of the United States, that means, above all, the presidency and the executive agencies of the federal government. After all, in every foreign country, American executive politics is a topic of major, even pressing concern. Why? Because foreign peoples know what most of us based in the United States also intuitively know: that since World War II the occupant of the Oval Office has had an extraordinary impact on the direction of global affairs. Foreign peoples might even know this better than those who reside in the United States, as it is they who most directly suffer the often malign influence of the U.S. state. That influence is circumscribed in important and sometimes unforeseen respects, that American presidents often find themselves stymied in unexpected ways, and that U.S. power abroad is often limited, does not refute the point. If historians hope to understand the course of post-1945 U.S. foreign policy and international politics, they must take seriously the governmental and other elites who formulated and implemented this policy and must therefore immerse themselves in American archival sources.

Third, we argue that domestic processes and phenomena — elections, institutions, coalition-building, business interests, ideologies, individual pride, and careerist ambition — often have had more of an effect on the course of U.S. foreign relations than international processes. “The primacy of domestic politics,” the historian Fritz Fischer famously called it with respect to Germany and the outbreak of World War I — we’re suggesting that the same applies to many American foreign policies enacted after 1945. Because of the tremendous geographic advantages afforded by two oceans and the presence of geopolitically weak neighbors, as well as the sheer power of U.S. military might, Americans have not had to concern themselves with external realities to the degree that others around the world did — they could afford to remain parochial. Or, as Young put it, “Fundamentally, other countries simply do not have much purchase on the American imagination.”

Thus, in contrast to structural realists such as Kenneth N. Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer, we do not believe that the actors who comprised the American state ever merely reacted to “objective” international considerations. Instead, these considerations were always filtered through domestic frameworks and processes that gave them new meaning. Accordingly, the international and transnational turns don’t actually help us answer key questions about the sources and nature of U.S. power, even as they teach us a great deal about the effects and limits of American foreign policy. For all these reasons, an important task domestic historians of the United States have recently refocused their own attentions on the history of the American imperial state. See, James T. Sparrow, Warfare: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Iris Katsnelson, Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time (New York: Liveright, 2013); Anne M. Kornhauser, Debating the American State: Liberal Anxieties and the New Leviathan, 1930–1970 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Jennifer Mittelstadt, The Rise of the Military Welfare State (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), and William Bendix and Paul J. Quirk, eds., “Governing the Security State,” special issue, Journal of Policy History 28, no. 3 (July 2016). For other takes on the importance of the U.S. state to 20th-century history, see, Brent CEbuL, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams, eds., Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

7 Walter LaFeber’s assertion from almost four decades ago is worth recalling: “The present world system, to a surprising extent, has been shaped not by some imagined balance-of-power concept but by the initiatives of Woodrow Wilson and his successors. The United Nations, multilateral trade institutions, ideas about self-determination and economic development, determining influences on international culture, and strategic military planning have sprung from the United States more than from other actors in the global theater.” “Responses to Charles S. Maier, ‘Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations,’” Diplomatic History 5, no. 4 (October 1981): 362, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1981.tb00788.x. We are not, of course, saying that U.S. international relations remained static after 1945. We are, however, arguing that despite relative shifts in power, from the end of World War II until today the United States has been the most influential military, economic, political, social, and cultural force on earth.
10 Young, “The Age of Global Power,” 275–76. This is also a main theme in Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
for historians of U.S. foreign relations in the coming years will be to recenter the United States and concentrate their analytical lenses more squarely on its domestic history.

Skeptical readers will wonder if we’re making our case rather too strongly. Surely, they will say, most scholars in the field accept the centrality of U.S. power, of the U.S. state, and of domestic imperatives to the history of the United States in the world. But implicit recognition of these realities does not mean that the complexities of these historical phenomena are being worked out in detail. Indeed, the inherent difficulties of international history (which requires one to work in multiple national archives, read documents in numerous languages, and triangulate the interests of various state, suprastate, and substate actors) and transnational history (which requires one to trace often-elusive flows of people, ideas, and capital across time and borders) make this an almost impossible task. Put simply, in our considered judgment international and transnational historians collectively deemphasize the above realities, even if most would admit them.

Our call to recenter the United States does not mean we are advocating for a return to the time when diplomatic history meant just that — the history of high-level interactions among governments — and when the impact of U.S. foreign policy on peoples abroad was downplayed or even ignored. Indeed, one of the most exciting and productive developments in the field of foreign relations history in the past 30 years has been its expansion to include previously marginalized voices, and we hope and expect for such work to continue. We are also not suggesting that every historian study the American state and ignore the plethora of organizations and movements that inform the nation’s overseas actions and relationships. Rather, we are calling for two things: first, a rebalancing in which the study of U.S. foreign policy, and in particular the domestic history of policymaking, reclaims a — not the — central place in the scholarship; and second, a general recognition that the overweening power of the United States in the period after 1945 enabled the nation to set the terms of international relations, even as these terms were often resisted.

If historians heed our call, in the coming years it will be possible to incorporate the insights of a reinvigorated domestic history of American foreign relations with those produced by international and transnational historians. This will enable the writing of scholarly works that encompass a diversity of spatial geographies and provide a fuller account of the making, implementation, effects, and limits of U.S. foreign policy.

Part II: Historicizing the International and Transnational Turns

Over the past four decades, scholars have repeatedly implored historians of U.S. foreign relations to adopt a broad perspective that places American policymaking in an international or comparative context.12 Doing so, historians like Sally Marks argued in the 1980s, would force diplomatic historians to recognize that the most important sources for U.S. foreign policy were frequently foreign in origin. As Marks put it, “Although the American government can and does undertake major policy initiatives, it is often reacting to situations or policies elsewhere.”13 By developing the requisite linguistic skills that would enable them to use foreign archival sources, diplomatic historians could, according to critics like Marks, combat the ethnocentrism and exceptionalism that limited their scholarship.

Until the Cold War’s end, however, internationalists in this Marksian sense remained a minority within the subfield of diplomatic history — the majority of historians were reticent about taking an international turn. Walter LaFeber gave voice to many in the field when he argued in 1981 that, given the reality of U.S. dominance after World War I, it would “be misleading if all parts of the [international] ‘system’ are considered to be roughly equal, or if the influence of that system on the United States is assumed to be as great as the American influence on the system.”14 The majority of LaFeber’s colleagues shared this perspective, and, in fact, doubted whether one could write sophisticat-
ed international history involving several states. As Richard H. Immerman remarked in 1990, international history requires the practitioner to be sensitive to the personal, social, cultural, economic, geopolitical, ideological, systemic, and other considerations that influence each nation’s foreign outlook and postures, each’s fears, values, interests, objectives, and available resources, and each’s estimations of its own power and perceptions of its allies and enemies.

This was, he averred, impossible — it simply lay beyond the capacity of even the most tireless and talented researcher. Moreover, it was the sad reality that in the era of the Cold War many foreign archives remained closed to Western researchers. For these reasons, on the eve of the Soviet Union’s collapse most diplomatic historians considered their field to be part and parcel of a broader American history. This consensus, however, began to fray with the end of the Cold War and the piecemeal opening of archives from the (soon-to-be-former) Communist Bloc. In the summer of 1990, the deteriorating Soviet Union started to release previously classified materials. These releases, as John Lewis Gaddis noted in 1991, led many scholars to conclude that “[t]he prospects for a truly ‘international’ approach to Cold War history had suddenly brightened.” Furthermore, in late 1990, at the urging of Gaddis and William Taubman, the MacArthur Foundation awarded the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars a grant of $987,100 to establish the Program on International History of the Cold War (which eventually became the Cold War International History Project), which was intended to, first, gather, translate, and disseminate documents from the Communist Bloc, and, second, begin building a community of scholars dedicated, to borrow Gaddis’ phrasing, to “reassessing the Cold War from the perspective of the ‘other side.’” The availability of new sources and the financial support of the MacArthur Foundation engendered a newfound interest in international history among diplomatic historians.

During the 1990s, international history received the imprimatur of several leading members of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), diplomatic history’s chief scholarly association. None made a bigger splash than Michael H. Hunt, who in his 1990 SHAFR presidential address advocated multinational, multilanguage research as a means to broaden and enrich scholarship. Hunt’s program quickly won enthusiastic support within the field and the broader profession. It is not difficult to see why. First and foremost, the international turn allowed historians to address novel questions using new sources recently made available from the previously inaccessible “other side.” More prosaically, by the early 1990s the field of diplomatic history had been riven by 25 years of paradigm disputes that pitted “orthodox”...


16 Immerman, “The History of U.S. Foreign Policy,” 575.


19 Gaddis, “The Soviet Side of the Cold War,” 525. As this quote indicates, Gaddis, and many in his intellectual generation, viewed international history primarily as bipolar, East-West history, bypassing non-communist countries of the Global South.


21 More research needs to be done on the apparent disconnect between the fact that, at the very height of America’s post-Cold War global hegemony, diplomatic historians decided to deemphasize U.S. power in their scholarship.


historians against “revisionists,” who themselves battled “post-revisionists” and “corporatists.”

Many scholars of foreign relations were weary of this squabbling, which, they insisted, made it difficult for non-specialists to understand their work and prevented the field from presenting a united front to outsiders. As Melvyn P. Leffler argued in his 1995 SHAFR presidential address, “to make significant contributions to the larger enterprise of American history,” diplomatic historians needed to “overcome our own tendencies to fragment into ... warring schools of interpretation.”

Embracing international history enabled scholars of foreign relations to move beyond their paradigm wars.

The international approach also enjoyed the benefit of appealing to scholars on all sides of the political spectrum. Those on the left could use foreign archives to give voice to previously neglected populations affected, often negatively, by American foreign policy. More conservative historians, meanwhile, could use recently declassified materials from the Communist Bloc to demonstrate that the Soviet Union was as bad as they had always claimed. Moreover, many historians were convinced that after the Cold War, U.S. power was in decline and multilateralism was on the rise, which necessitated the examination of non-American actors. Finally, since the 1970s, diplomatic historians had believed that social and cultural historians looked askance at their work because they focused largely on elite white men, which pruned scholars entering the field to endorse a historiographical trend that encouraged them to examine and give agency to Western and nonwhite — or, at the very least, non-Anglo — actors.

The rise of international history was soon everywhere to be seen, and essays that explored the holdings of foreign archives began to appear in droves. Additionally, the use of such foreign materials became an important source of professional recognition and a key way by which the significance of a given monograph, scholarly article, or

24 In brief, orthodox historians took a positive view of the motivations behind U.S. foreign relations, while revisionists linked U.S. foreign policy to the search for foreign markets. In contrast to revisionists, post-revisionists emphasized the centrality of security to U.S. foreign policymaking, while corporatists underlined the importance of institutions. The best account of these approaches is found in Steven Hurst, Cold War US Foreign Policy: Key Perspectives (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).


26 Though it is difficult to quantify, the change in tone in Diplomatic History, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations’ journal, between the 1980s and today is striking. Gone, for the most part, are the sometimes-rancorous — yet intellectually exciting — disputes of the past.


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national flows of people, ideas, and capital, as well as by nonstate actors. This perspective, which swept the field, often implicitly downgraded the government’s significance to history.

Somewhat surprisingly for members of a subfield whose raison d’être had traditionally been the analysis of the state, many foreign relations historians embraced the transnational turn with enthusiasm. Why did they do so? Similar to other Americanists, they were impressed by processes of globalization and the impact of nonstate actors, both of which seemed to demonstrate the decreasing prominence of the state to political, economic, social, and cultural life. Moreover, transnational history provided an opportunity for diplomatic historians to, as Thomas W. Zeiler put it, “reintegrate themselves into the mainstream of the historical profession [in which they were once the leaders]” but from which they had long felt excluded. After all, who better than diplomatic historians, who had taken an international turn that encouraged them to work abroad, to help Americanists colleagues familiarize themselves with the foreign archives upon which transnational history relied? Indeed, within a remarkably short amount of time — less than 10 years — the examination of nonstate and transnational actors, movements, and processes became popular topics in the subfield.

By 2020, the international and transnational approaches had become central to the study of U.S. foreign relations. Much of this scholarship, it must be emphasized, was excellent — deeply researched, conceptually sound, and highly instructive in illuminating areas of the “U.S. in the World” that had been little examined in the past. We ourselves have adopted international and transnational approach-


es in our own work, as have our students.40 Something important, though, was lost. Subjects central to the history of U.S. foreign relations — presidential decision-making, diplomacy, partisan politics, the resort to military force, state-making — were deemphasized. Even more important, the sheer ability of the United States to shape the character of international systems, processes, and events was downplayed. Therefore, while the international and transnational turns were salutary developments in many respects, they were also problematic. In particular, they sometimes had the effect of distorting the past by attributing too much causal force to international and transnational actors. To demonstrate this phenomenon, we now turn to examining the historiography of the Vietnam War (by which we mean what is sometimes referred to as the Second Indochina War, as distinct from the First, or French, Indochina War), which has emerged as one of the topics most affected by the intellectual developments of the last 30 years.41

**Part III: The Vietnam War in Domestic, International, and Transnational Perspective**

For a long time during and after the Vietnam War, the literature was dominated by American accounts addressing U.S.-centered questions. Even before the guns fell silent in 1975, a consensus took hold among many authors that successive presidential administrations had blundered into a struggle they did not understand, on behalf of a series of Saigon governments that lacked authority and popular support, and which were riven by infighting and corruption. American leaders, according to this “orthodox” view, chose disastrously to intervene in a struggle in which their adversaries — the Communist government in Hanoi originally led by Ho Chi Minh, and the southern insurgency known as the National Liberation Front — enjoyed the bulk of nationalist legitimacy. Though U.S. forces fought ably and effectively, these authors claimed, they faced an impossible task because no strategic victory was possible. Or, to be more precise, the political struggle was always more important than the military struggle, and therefore the United States and its South Vietnamese allies never had a realistic chance of winning.

Thus David Halberstam’s widely influential book, *The Best and the Brightest*, which appeared in 1972, described how hubris and a historical sense of inevitability had pulled American leaders, step by step, into the “quagmire” of Vietnam.42 And thus Frances FitzGerald’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fire in the Lake*, published the same year, argued that Americans foolishly blundered into another people’s history, blithely ignorant of Vietnamese nationalism’s resiliency.43 In the context of Vietnam’s culture and history, FitzGerald argued, America’s awesome military might was ultimately irrelevant, powerless to halt the inexorable force of Ho’s nationalist revolution. As such, for FitzGerald, as for Halberstam, it was pointless to talk of alternative U.S. strategies that might have brought success in the struggle: No such options existed, as the enterprise was doomed from the start. Other early accounts that endorsed this basic line of argument — though they differed among themselves in other important respects — included works by Chester Cooper, Daniel Ellsberg, Bernard Fall, George Herrling, Paul Kattenburg, and Hans Morgenthau.44 This consensus view, which still has broad sup-


41 The Second Indochina War is also sometimes referred to as the Second Vietnam War, the American War in Vietnam, or, in Vietnam, as the American War.


A problem, however, emerges when the scholarship gives equal or near-equal causal weight for the war’s military, political, economic, and social course to non-American or transnational actors.

45 Notable revisionist works include, Guenter Lewy, America in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Harry G. Summers, Jr., On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981); Lewis Sorley, A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999); and Mark Moyar, Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Even while the war was still ongoing, President Richard M. Nixon tried to build support for an argument that anticipated later revisionist claims. See, e.g., “Key Points to Be Made with Respect to Vietnam Agreement,” Folder “Vietnam 2,” n.d., H.R. Haldeman Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, as cited in, Jeffrey P. Kimball, “Peace with Honor: Richard Nixon to Build Support for an Argument that Anticipated Later Revisionist Claims,” in The Vietnam War, 1954–65 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Over the past two decades, an important shift has occurred. Historians, influenced by the international and transnational turns, have broadened their research focus to include Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet archival materials, which now bolster the voluminous English- and French-language sources upon which the earlier historiography of the war was premised. In so doing, scholars have produced a more well-rounded picture of the struggle that has brought needed attention to North Vietnamese decision-making as well as to South Vietnamese culture, politics, and society. Not least, we now have a much better understanding of the Diem years, thanks to studies illuminating the complexities of southern Vietnamese political conditions from both the view


attitudes and policies in the war’s final years. 48 This recent work is hugely important, and we can expect more excellent research exploring the non-U.S. dimensions of the war in the years to come as more archival materials in Vietnam and elsewhere become available and as more scholars gain the linguistic ability to work with them. To the extent that this new work has the effect of decentering the United States, however, it carries a risk: specifically, that too many interpretations of the war become ahistorical by attributing too much causal force for the war’s course to local and transnational actors. One sees this in the increasingly common conception of the Vietnam conflict as primarily a civil war into which the United States improvidently stumbled. This view, which to be sure can already be identified in some of the orthodox literature, is not so much wrong as incomplete. The struggle unquestionably pitted Vietnamese against Vietnamese. It bears emphasizing that, as numerous scholars have shown, skirmishing among and within rival anti- and pro-colonial factions had commenced well before France made its bid to retain control of Indochina after World War II, and may have erupted into some sort of violent conflict whether or not Western powers intervened. 49 Still, it’s unlikely that, absent first French and then American military intervention, there would have been a decades-long, large-scale, and, especially, globalized, Vietnam War at all. 50 As Daniel Ellsberg averred more than four decades ago in the documentary Hearts and Minds, “A war in which one side [i.e., the Republic of Vietnam] is entirely financed and equipped and supported by foreigners is not a civil war.” (He might have added that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam too had major outside assistance, especially from China, even if this aid was always dwarfed by what the United States provided to Saigon.) In Ellsberg’s view, Americans should not have asked whether “we were on the wrong side in the Vietnamese war”; instead, they should have recognized that “we are the wrong side.” 51 Andrew J. Bacevich recently echoed Ellsberg’s claim in his review of Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s documentary The Vietnam War, asserting that “[t]he United States screwed up not because it picked the wrong side in the Vietnam conflict, but because it stuck its nose where it didn’t belong.” 52 Of course, none of the recent international and transnational histories deny the centrality of the United States to the war in Vietnam. Indeed, many include sophisticated analyses of U.S. motivations and decision-making. A problem, however, emerges when the scholarship gives equal or near-equal causal weight for the war’s military, political, economic, and social course to non-American or trans-
national actors. That is, the problem comes in the implicit decentering of the United States from the struggle when the war’s history so clearly underlines America’s centrality to it. In the aftermath of World War II, French leaders made the decision to put down by force of arms the Ho Chi Minh-led Vietnamese revolution. The violent conflict that followed quickly became America’s almost as much as France’s — Washington footed much of the bill, supplied most of the weaponry, and pressed French policymakers to hang tough when their will slackened. Long before American ground troops set foot in Indochina, the United States was the principal player in making the struggle what it became, and its importance only grew as time went on.53 Though the (ostensibly temporary) partition of Vietnam in 1954 was not primarily an American gambit, and though the basic political structure of what became South Vietnam was already then emerging, the U.S. role in building up and sustaining that state was from the start vital in shaping its, and the subsequent conflict’s, character.54

When large-scale fighting resumed in 1965, the Lyndon B. Johnson administration tried hard to get Allied nations to commit ground forces under the “More Flags” program, but the results were modest — it was Washington that committed millions of troops to the war effort, and it was Washington that dropped some 8 million tons of bombs on North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos between 1962 and 1973.55 The war-fighting capabilities of Saigon and Hanoi could not, and never did, come anywhere near America’s, even when Hanoi was aided by China and the Soviet Union. Although Washington found from an early point that its influence over South Vietnamese political developments was limited, this did not seriously hamper its ability to prosecute the war as it saw fit. The fact remains that only the United States sprayed some 19 million gallons of defoliants on South Vietnam in an attempt to deny enemy forces jungle cover and food, and only the United States spent billions on nation-building programs and other nonmilitary activities that prolonged and defined the conflict.56

When one combines the insights of the new scholarship with those of the old, it is clear that American policy bore major responsibility for a war that generated some three million deaths, perhaps two-thirds of them civilians, and immense physical destruction in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.57 To repeat, we are not claiming that absent Western intervention postcolonial Vietnam necessarily would have been at peace — some sort of internal conflict was likely inevitable. Neither are we maintaining that the United States ever had political control of South Vietnam — it very clearly did not. The United States also did not determine the conflict’s end — after all, it lost the war (although the American public’s growing unwillingness to pay the cost of continued fighting certainly affected the timing of the Paris Peace Accords). What we are asserting, however, is that without the massive U.S. intervention any postcolonial conflict in Vietnam would have taken a very different, more localized, form, one having at most a marginal impact on American and global diplomacy, politics, and society.

Ultimately, ours is an argument about causality, and specifically about constructing causal hierarchies.58 Methodologically, we are in accord with E.H. Carr, who argued in his classic work What Is History? that historians must not simply list X number of causes of whatever phenomenon they are investigating, but rather must distinguish among them in an attempt to establish a ranking

53 See, Logevall, Embers of War.

54 This is not to argue that the United States installed Diem or that he was an American creation. U.S. officials knew little about him in the spring of 1954, and moreover he had his own power base in Vietnam. But the U.S. role in his ascension to power was nonetheless crucial. See, Logevall, Embers of War, 588–90; and Miller, Misalliance.


56 As Max Hastings remarked: “An extraordinary aspect of the decision-making in Washington between 1961 and 1975 was that Vietnamese were seldom if ever allowed to intrude upon it. Successive administrations ignored any claims by the people who inhabited the battlefields to a voice in determining their own fate: business was done in a cocoon of Americanness.” Max Hastings, Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975 (New York: Harper, 2018), 121. We’re grateful to Andrew Preston for this reference.

57 See here the penetrating analysis in Christian G. Appy, “What Was the Vietnam War About?” New York Times, March 26, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/opinion/what-was-the-vietnam-war-about.html. With respect to the “Vietnamese civil war” argument, Appy suggests a counterfactual “thought experiment. What if our own Civil War bore some resemblance to the Vietnamese ‘civil war’? For starters, we would have to imagine that in 1860 a global superpower — say Britain — had strongly promoted Southern secession, provided virtually all of the funding for the ensuing war and dedicated its vast military to the battle. We must also imagine that in every Southern state, local, pro-Union forces took up arms against the Confederacy. Despite enormous British support, Union forces prevailed. What would Americans call such a war? Most, I think, would remember it as the Second War of Independence. Perhaps African-Americans would call it the First War of Liberation. Only former Confederates and the British might recall it as a ‘civil war.’”

58 Of course, not all histories of U.S. foreign relations must be centrally concerned with causality, and there are many worthy historical topics able to legitimately elide such issues.
of importance. In the case of Vietnam, it becomes all but impossible to imagine large-scale war after 1954 absent the decision of three successive U.S. administrations to build up, sustain, and defend by force of arms the government of South Vietnam. There is no question that Hanoi’s decision-making also influenced the course of the war, but it’s surely telling that through the spring of 1965 North Vietnamese leaders hoped to avoid a major military conflict with the United States. Put another way: Without the United States, the history of the Vietnamese struggle would have looked very different.

One occasionally hears the argument that a certain decentering of the United States in the scholarship on Vietnam is warranted because all the U.S.-related questions about the war have already been examined. But this seems misguided. To cite only a few examples, we need more studies on the process by which the Americanization of the war deepened between 1965 and 1967; the growing disillusionment within the Johnson administration with the war; the bureaucratic politics of the war;

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60 As Sophie Quinn-Judge recently argued in an *H-Diplo* roundtable, “studies of ‘Hanoi’s War’ foreground the hardline, aggressive nature of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) throughout the American Vietnam War. They go back to the original U.S. interpretation of the war as a case of Communist aggression against an independent RVN [Republic of Vietnam]. Saigon’s flaunting of the Geneva final statement on the holding of nationwide elections in 1956 and the legitimate right of the DRV to fight for unification (that they thought they had won in 1954) are downplayed. In other words, there is no dramatic new evidence that the war was initiated by Hanoi or was Hanoi’s responsibility.” Sophie Quinn-Judge’s response in George Fujii, “H-Diplo Roundtable XX, 6 on Sophie Quinn-Judge’s *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace, 1954–1975*, *H-Diplo*, Oct. 8, 2018, https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/2671535/h-diplo-roundtable-xx-6-sophie-quinn-judges-third-force-vietnam. For the contrary view that suggests it was Hanoi that initiated the major escalation in 1965, see, Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road*; and Zachary Shore, “Provoking America: Le Duan and the Origins of the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 86–108, https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00598. An analysis that assigns broadly equal responsibility to both sides is Goscha, *Vietnam*, chaps. 7–9.
the growth in congressional assertiveness on Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s; and the war's lasting effects on global finance and the demise of Bretton Woods, among other topics. Nonetheless, we appreciate that, as the new histories of Vietnam demonstrate, the United States was never omnipotent and was never able to rule by fiat, and to understand the war in all its dimensions we must study non-U.S. and transnational actors. Indeed, an exciting future undertaking would be to integrate Vietnamese and other non-U.S. sources with the rich — and recently declassified — archival materials available at repositories across the United States.\(^6\) And certainly, scholars should be wary of explicit or implicit claims that international and transnational approaches are more important merely because they emphasize the non-U.S. dimensions of the story and draw on non-English-language sources.

Furthermore, the history of U.S. foreign affairs during the Vietnam War highlights the salience of several points we made in this article's introductory section: First, that the United States was the most dominant nation in the post-1945 world, that this dominance was recognized by all global policymakers, and that U.S. power enabled Washington to shape the character of conflicts in which it involved itself; second, that the American state was the chief maker of foreign policy; and finally, that domestic determinants were the primary, if not only, sources of U.S. foreign policy.

To a degree difficult to fully recapture today, World War II witnessed the emergence of the United States to a position of predominant power in global, and especially Asian, affairs. Even before the defeat of the Japanese Empire in the summer of 1945, all sides in the incipient struggle for Indochina grasped just how important the American role was likely to be in the postwar world. “What will the Americans do?” was the question that resonated in the halls of power in Paris, London, Hanoi, Saigon, Chongqing, and Moscow. Small wonder that on Aug. 30, 1945 — before Japan officially surrendered — Ho Chi Minh sent a letter to President Harry S. Truman asking for the Viet Minh to be involved in any Allied discussion regarding Vietnam’s postwar status. (Truman, similar to Woodrow Wilson before him, ignored Ho.) The Vietnamese leader was right to worry about U.S. policy. As described above, American resources soon enabled the French to maintain their tenuous — and bloody — hold on the country for almost a decade, before the Americans themselves assumed responsibility for the newly created Republic of Vietnam. As Ho’s appeal to Truman reveals, long before France’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, North Vietnamese leaders recognized an emergent United States, not an enfeebled France, as their principal foe, and adjusted their strategy accordingly.\(^6\)

In fact, from the start of the conflict in 1945–1946 until the fall of Saigon 30 years later, the American state did much to determine the course of the First and Second Indochina Wars. To be sure, other actors, especially North Vietnam, South Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union, as well as nongovernmental organizations of various kinds, influenced the conflict in various ways, but on balance it was American officials ensconced in the White House, Defense Department, State Department, and CIA who exerted the most profound effect on the wars. Moreover, U.S. policymakers’ decisions were motivated mainly by the notion of “credibility,” in two specific senses. First, the Cold War led decision-makers to be concerned with the geopolitical credibility of the United States. Would Western European allies trust America to defend them if it failed to stop the ever-growing communist menace in Southeast Asia? Would the nations of the emergent “Third World” conclude that capitalism was feeble if South Vietnam fell? In other words, the logic of the Cold War compelled U.S. policymakers to intervene in Vietnam. Put crudely and counterfactually: No Cold War, no American military intervention in Vietnam. Second — and more important — from beginning to end, perceived domestic political imperatives were crucial to the formation of U.S. policy toward Vietnam. For each of the six presidents who dealt with Vietnam after World War II (Truman through Gerald Ford) the struggle there mattered principally, if not solely, because of the damage it could do to their domestic political position. Presidential administrations always viewed the stakes in Vietnam — and the millions of Vietnamese killed and maimed during the wars — through the prism of their own domestic interests, anxieties, and experiences. For these reasons, the key to understanding America’s role in the Indochina Wars ultimately lies not in Vietnam, or in the broader international community, or in various transnational movements, but at home.

\(^6\) In addition to the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford presidential libraries, there is abundant material available at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD, the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the National Security Archive in Washington, DC, and the Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, TX. The personal papers of individual policymakers and lawmakers are scattered at institutions across the country.

\(^6\) This is a theme in Logevall, Embers of War.
Part IV: The U.S. in the World after the International and Transnational Turns

The Vietnam War is only one of several topics central to post-1945 U.S. and global history that a domestic perspective steeped in American sources can help illuminate. First and foremost, historians must analyze the rise of U.S. hyperpower, primacy, and unilateralism. (Henry R. Luce’s notion of an “American Century,” articulated in 1941, has had its share of critics, but the label has stuck for a reason.63) Though foreign archival materials are not without utility in the quest to understand U.S. dominance — indeed, they can teach us much about how leaders overseas viewed that emerging dominance, and adjusted to it — the most important source material for explicating the formation and exercise of U.S. power (if not its effects) is located in presidential and other American archives. Second, historians do not yet know enough about the origins and operation of the bipartisan consensus that has, since World War II, assumed U.S. primacy and hegemony. How and why did policymakers, lawmakers in Congress, think tank analysts, mainstream journalists, and other elites in the United States come to share similar assumptions about U.S. globalism that remained remarkably stable over a long period of time?64

Third, we need to learn more about the peculiar evolution of the U.S. national security state. One of the major developments of the post-WWII American state was the creation of a network of paraestate institutions — e.g., think tanks, corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and university research centers — that worked primarily on government contracts. Furthermore, after 1945 the official organizations of the state, especially those groups concerned with war-making, significantly increased in size. Though several historians have examined this subject, much more work on the ways in which the postwar national security state grew and spread its tentacles throughout American society remains to be done.65 Relatedly, we should know more about how the executive branch and the “imperial presidency” came to accrue enormous authority over Congress in matters of war and foreign policy.66 Fourth, historians have tended to elide, or at least de-emphasize, the central role domestic politics played in determining U.S. foreign relations during the Cold War. Since 1945, electoral considerations, the machinations of special interest lobbying groups, and the vagaries of political coalitions have profoundly shaped U.S. foreign policy, yet we do not know enough about this complex process.67 Indeed, historians have largely ceded this scholarly ground to political scientists.

Fifth, the steady marginalization of elite-centered or “traditional” military history — i.e., the study of strategy, tactics, and the influence of high-ranking military officers on foreign affairs — in the American academy has engendered significant gaps in diplomatic historians’ understanding of U.S. pow-

er. In a nation in which the budget of the Defense Department has long dwarfed that of the State Department, we must know more about how military elites informed, and in some cases drove, U.S. foreign policy. Sixth, historians ought to analyze the impact that intelligence and the intelligence community have had on U.S. foreign affairs. In the last several years, the CIA and other groups have declassified massive amounts of material that could transform our understanding of America’s role in the world, and these documents should occupy a central place in future scholarship.

Finally, historians have not explored fully the concatenation of political, economic, cultural, and ideological factors that have encouraged the United States to engage in what Bacevich has pungently referred to as “permanent” or “endless” war. In the eight decades that have elapsed since Pearl Harbor, the United States has been in a state of near-constant war and has deployed military force abroad scores of times. We must know more about why and how this state of affairs came to be. Of course, this list of topics could be expanded, and every historian will have her own specific set of subjects in which she is most interested. The important point is that each of the above topics is America-centric and best explored through deep immersion in U.S. archives.

There are several important steps scholars can take to help recenter the United States in the historiography of U.S. foreign relations. First, prospective graduate students who intend to focus on U.S.-centered histories of foreign policy and decision-making should be admitted to doctoral programs at the same rate as those who intend to adopt international and transnational approaches in their work. Second, prize and fellowship committees should give full consideration to works examining U.S. decision-making and the role of domestic determinants, including partisan politics, careerism, and elections, in shaping it. Finally, scholars should organize conferences and panels with the explicit purpose of bridging the gaps between domestic, international, and transnational scholarship. In particular, such gatherings should emphasize the importance of establishing causal hierarchies, which might provide a means of integrating the insights of recent international and transnational scholarship with those of domestic-focused histories.

Buoyed by the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization, in the 1990s and 2000s U.S.-based diplomatic historians took international and transnational turns that moved their subfield away from methodological nationalism. While these turns in some ways reinvigorated the field, their broad adoption threatens to ahistorically reify a unique historical moment—that of post-Cold War neoliberal capitalist globalization—by reading this moment into the past. Though scholars must of course be always on the lookout for innovative ways of analyzing history, we must also be careful not to embrace innovation for innovation’s sake. After 1945, the United States was the most


powerful nation in the world; when it wanted to, it shaped global affairs; and it usually did so for domestic reasons. As such, to understand the history of the U.S. in the world, we must recenter the United States.


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Photo: Department of Defense