

## Cold War Revisionism: A Practitioner's Perspective\*

"Excuse me, sir," an aide interrupts the president. "History is here to see you." George W. Bush perks up. "History?" The assistant explains: "He seems ready to render a judgment." Taken aback, the chief executive asks: "What about my papers? I don't want him snooping around my papers!" No problem. "Already locked up forever, sir. As per your orders."<sup>1</sup> This cartoon dialogue hints at what we have been doing since SHAFR's founding, although we would substitute "historian" for "history," "interpretation" for "judgment," and "keep classified" for "locked up," and we would remove the gender bias. Despite official "orders" to deny scholars access to the public record, historians have been writing imaginative and controversial works, revisiting the past with new approaches and research discoveries, reading familiar documents afresh, and mining more deeply U.S. and foreign archives. Permit me a personal pathway here to focus on just one of the significant changes in the field that has influenced and continues to influence many of us: Cold War revisionism.<sup>2</sup>

Born to a French-Canadian mother and Scottish father in 1941, just months before Pearl Harbor, I grew up on the Oregon Coast during the early Cold War. Seaside no doubt typified a small town of the times—youth baseball, Lions Club paper-recycling drives, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Sunday church services,

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1. Gary Trudeau, "Doonesbury," *Medford (Oregon) Tribune*, August 27, 2006.

2. Space does not permit discussion of other important changes, especially the cultural dimension, with its revealing themes of cultural diplomacy, cultural transfer, cultural reception and rejection, globalization, consumerism, and the cultural context of decision making, including the prisms of race, gender, and class that so condition how leaders view "the other." The cultural dimension speaks to and expands the revisionist themes of power and empire. Also worthy of attention are studies of "emotion" in international and interpersonal relations, such borderless issues as the international environment and international communications, and nonstate actors. Furthermore, the 2006 SHAFR program reveals panels on foreign relations and labor, women, child welfare, humanitarianism, race, sport, travel, food, religion, and technology.

patriotic parades. My state's maverick senator Wayne Morse kept newsrooms astir with his outspoken style and go-it-alone politics, though I cannot attribute my occasional bent for independence to him, much as I would like to claim such lineage. I certainly knew about the Cold War before I ever thought about it. Pinned to the wall of my grammar-school classroom was a map with huge blotches of vibrant red covering the Soviet Union and China, and menacing neighbors. In the 1950s, television programs such as "I Led Three Lives" reinforced public worries about Communist infiltration, if not nuclear doomsday.

My undergraduate education at the University of New Hampshire, 1959–1963, featured, first, the "realist" school of George F. Kennan and Hans Morgenthau, who argued that the pursuit of power, not elusive, fuzzy ideals, best defined the national interest, and, second, the "nationalist" school of Samuel Flagg Bemis, known for his grand narrative of American exceptionalism and benevolent imperialism. My superb professors showed me that an intellectual's responsibility was not only to build knowledge but also to be a skeptic of doctrine, a critic of fashionable thinking.

From my graduate-school years of 1963–1967, I emerged a "revisionist." There is no mystery why. Somebody once pegged me as "an Oregon populist with a Berkeley attitude,"<sup>3</sup> but especially influencing me were the horrific Vietnam War, the assaults and embargo against Cuba, and the invasion of the Dominican Republic—events that spawned antiwar teach-ins, protest songs such as Phil Ochs's "Cops of the World," the Fulbright Senate hearings, and essays by public intellectuals such as Henry Steele Commager on the abuse of American power. I took special notice of Morse's vote against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and his bold statement that "our hands are dripping with blood in Southeast Asia."<sup>4</sup> The concurrent civil rights movement, antipoverty campaign, women's rights advocacy, and environmental movement also encouraged new ways of thinking, challenging prevailing assumptions and worldviews—especially at the University of California, Berkeley, in the days of the Free Speech Movement. Enter, too, the provocative work of scholars who questioned the orthodox version of a Cold War in which an innocent America faced an aggressive Soviet Union bent on world conquest and driven inexorably by an intransigent Marxist-Leninist ideology. Asking us to think differently were William Appleman Williams, Walter LaFeber, Gar Alperovitz, Lloyd Gardner, Barton Bernstein, Athan Theoharis, Gabriel Kolko, and Richard Barnet, among others. Before them came Charles Beard, Walter Lippmann, and Frederick Schuman, who also challenged consensus views.

The government's constant claims to be containing communism to justify the wars in Southeast Asia and elsewhere prompted me to study the origins of Cold War ideology and policies. Fortunately, the 1940s volumes in the Department

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3. Walt LaFeber is the culprit, I am sure.

4. Quoted in Mason Drukman, *Wayne Morse: A Political Biography* (Portland, OR, 1997), 8.

of State's series, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, were appearing regularly, permitting historians like me to test revisionist queries. The question that soon guided me was hardly original, but it focused my study: "Who or what has power?" That is, the power to deny, dominate, create, destroy, shape, condition, inspire, and cooperate at home and abroad. Over time, I delved into the competition for power among individuals, interest groups, governments, economic systems, empires, cultures, ideas. In a sense, seeking to be inclusive and eclectic, I eventually wedded aspects of realism and revisionism.<sup>5</sup>

Although I had early discovered how generous the foreign-relations history community could be when traditionalist-minded scholars like Robert Ferrell thoughtfully answered this novice's research questions, the intellectual ferment sometimes became an unpleasant storm. "There's three things that can happen in a ball game," Hall of Famer Casey Stengel once said. "You can win or you can lose or it can rain."<sup>6</sup> It rained quite a bit. Shrillness and hyperbole too often engulfed debate on Cold War history. For example, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., historian and former assistant to John F. Kennedy, became the partisan referee in 1966: "Surely the time has come to blow the whistle before the current outburst of revisionism regarding the origins of the Cold War goes much further."<sup>7</sup>

It came as no surprise, then, that after I submitted my first dissertation chapters on 1940s foreign economic policies, based on research in newly opened documents in the Truman Presidential Library and other archives, one of my advisers groaned, "You may be right, but this will ruin your career."<sup>8</sup> After Les Adler and I published an article in the *American Historical Review* on "Red Fascism," which explored U.S. images of totalitarianism that moved policymakers toward an uncompromising, sometimes emotional, Cold War posture, contrary letters flowed to the journal, some impugning our scholarly integrity.<sup>9</sup> After my lecture at a military academy, one faculty member insisted that I had no business speaking on the Cold War because I had not lived through its early tortuous years. When I asked him what his own field of study was, he replied: "The Civil War." At a professional meeting, one panelist uttered in essence "Go back to Russia where you belong," implying that my critical perspective

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5. I took a multidimensional approach in *On Every Front: The Making and Unmaking of the Cold War* (1979; rev. ed., New York, 1992) and in *Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution* (New York, 1994).

6. Quoted in Steve Rushin, "Delay Gratification," *Sports Illustrated*, May 29, 2006, 17.

7. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., letter, *New York Review of Books*, October 20, 1966. Available at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/12322>.

8. Parts of the dissertation evolved into "The Abortive American Loan to Russia and the Origins of the Cold War, 1943–1946," *Journal of American History* 56 (June 1969): 70–92, and *Soviet-American Confrontation: Postwar Reconstruction and the Origins of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1973).

9. "Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930's to 1950's," *American Historical Review* 75 (April 1970): 1046–64. For the letters and our responses, see *ibid.*, 75 (December 1970): 2155–64; *ibid.*, 76 (April 1971): 575–80; *ibid.*, 76 (June 1971): 856–58.

somehow meant I was apologizing for the Soviets' brutal behavior in their empire or that I saw a moral equivalency between the United States and the Soviet Union. I did not, but that charge became familiar in the traditionalists' rebuttal, as did labeling revisionists "the New Left," a misfired attempt to shoot down revisionism as a political position rather than treat it as a scholarly interpretation. For example, Herbert Feis, the State Department official turned diplomatic historian, belittled the writings of "historians of the New Left" as "just poor imitations of Communist official doctrine."<sup>10</sup>

A newspaper headline blared: "Racine Board Bans 5 Books from Curriculum." One of the five was the foreign-relations history textbook I wrote with Garry Clifford and Ken Hagan. By a 5 to 3 vote, the Racine Unified School Board in Wisconsin expunged it from a college preparatory course. (Two books for home-economics courses fared even worse, by 6 to 2 votes, apparently because the texts might "promote premarital sex.") During fierce debate, one board member declared that our text contained "a lot more funny pictures of Republicans and nicer pictures of Democrats." That dilly in the discourse did not convince some parents, librarians, the teachers' union, which threatened to sue, or a dissenting board member, who sarcastically recommended more favorable portraits of "warmongers." In this "wildly serious" case of censorship, the board reversed itself by a 5 to 4 tally and reinstated our text.<sup>11</sup>

Despite doubts and dismissals, the research-based interpretations of Cold War revisionists have endured. They have framed our debates for the last several decades, even though the controversy might seem like a lot of fuss over some sensible conclusions that now have been incorporated into the main body of historical scholarship. Revisionism would not have survived if it had been merely debunking. "The real question about revisionist history," writes one observer, "is whether it turns something flat into something three-dimensional or just hangs it on the wall upside down."<sup>12</sup> In its many variations, revisionism has made the history of the Cold War multidimensional. Revisionists have established that both the United States and the Soviet Union shared responsibility for the onset of the Cold War and that systemic tremors unleashed by World War II loaded the international agenda with massive problems for which no nation and no leader was wholly responsible. The Soviets carved out a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, but scholars have unwrapped the complexity of the Cold War by detailing the war-wracked USSR's terrible economic condition and studying Joseph Stalin's caution and defensiveness in foreign policy even as he ran an

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10. Letter, Herbert Feis to *New York Times* editor John Leonard, April 15, 1971, quoted in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity" Question and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 450. For other passionate criticisms of revisionism, see the Herbert Feis Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

11. The story appears with quotations in *Milwaukee Journal*, June 12, 1984; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 12, 1984; *Boston Globe*, June 13, 1984; *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* 33 (September 1984): 158.

12. Adam Gopnik, "Headless Horseman," *New Yorker*, June 5, 2006, 80.

oppressive, bloody police state at home. Americans exaggerated the Communist threat, blaming the Soviets for troubles they never started and failing to anticipate or understand fissures within an assumed Communist “bloc” that included Tito and Mao.<sup>13</sup> Weaker nations, resisting dependency on the great powers and on occasion exploiting opportunities for independent choice, were players in the Cold War, too—for example, Marshall Plan members in the American sphere and Eastern Europeans in the Soviet sphere. The post-Cold War opening of documents from the archives of former Communist states has buttressed revisionist conclusions. In short, the story of the Cold War is not the either-or, Soviet-American, saints-and-sinners drama once told by the traditionalists, by postrevisionists (“orthodoxy plus archives”<sup>14</sup>), and recently by neoconservatives, who blame the whole Cold War mess on the brutish Stalin and rigid Communist ideology and who hype U.S. “victory” in the Cold War. Such views were too simple decades ago, and they are far too simple now.

Revisionists put “empire”—whether invited, consensual, imposed, coerced, predatory, resisted, benevolent, informal, formal, open, or closed—at the center of our discussion. Historians have demonstrated that the Cold War was a contest over spheres of influence, over empire, fought with a host of military, economic, political, ideological, and cultural instruments. Revisionists have made the point in the broad context of the American quest for empire since the early republic, interpreting the expanding empire in the 1940s not simply as a reaction to Soviet machinations but as another and more accelerated step in a long imperial journey from continental to global power. Most historians, emphasizing strategic-economic elements, now accept the proposition that the United States behaved as an expansionist imperial power in the postwar period, pursuing a deliberate, purposeful, not an inadvertent and aimless, foreign policy, flexing its unmatched muscle in a shattered international system. Striving to avoid a repeat of the calamities of the 1930s, American leaders talked openly about remaking the world in the mold of the United States. They worked to implant a dollar-dominant capitalism and enhance American security by expanding trade and investment interests through the traditional U.S. open-door policy, by creating and dominating with a veto power the World Bank and other international bodies, by co-opting Germany into a U.S.-led Western Europe, by forming the European Recovery Program and NATO that linked the Atlantic community as never before, and by ensuring the importation of strategic raw materials. The United States tried to slow decolonization by blunting nationalist aspirations and enhanced Yankee hegemony in Latin America. Washington sought and gained nuclear primacy and built military alliances, bases, and intelligence posts across the globe. Impressive foreign-aid and relief initiatives spurred postwar reconstruction and relieved suffering while advancing the American frontier.

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13. A subject explored in my *Meeting the Communist Threat: Truman to Reagan* (New York, 1988).

14. Warren Kimball, “Response,” *Diplomatic History* 7 (Summer 1983): 198.

An asymmetry—not a balance—of power existed in the international order in the United States' favor. Even American allies, who certainly enjoyed more freedom of choice than did members of the Soviet empire, understood the permissible limits on their challenges to American preferences. In negotiations for an American loan, for example, the British acknowledged that “we weren’t in a position to bargain,” and the French knew that if they obstructed U.S. plans for Germany, they did not stand “a ghost of a chance of benefiting from Marshall aid.”<sup>15</sup> U.S. power was not absolute, to be sure, and Washington never obtained all that it wanted, but it did not suffer or tolerate many constraints, either.

The United States in time found itself in a security dilemma. As theories of hegemony have suggested, vigilant containment required constant expansion, because the threat to U.S. interests was deemed global. As the United States expanded its stakes abroad, its interests became more exposed. As top dog, it became top target. With an enlarged empire came less security, not more. Washington executed one intervention after another, overtly and covertly, to defend the worldwide U.S. presence. In the end, burdensome expenditures mounted, alliances fractured, and the domestic infrastructure eroded, as evident in increasingly poor school graduation rates. Revisionism changed the discourse on the origins of the Cold War from one that stressed a defensive, reactive U.S. stance to one that highlighted preponderant U.S. power and empire building and its attendant perils.

Some writers, contesting the revisionist case, have sought redemption for U.S. Cold War policies in the “empire by invitation” thesis.<sup>16</sup> This benign interpretation suggests that the United States acted reluctantly and hesitantly, seemingly having to be dragged into overseas commitments. Discussing this thesis is “like holding a mirror up to a mirage,” and the approach has been so qualified by its own adherents that it is unclear what remains of the argument.<sup>17</sup> Supporters of the thesis concede the revisionist case that there *was* an American empire, that in measurements of hegemonic power the United States was in “a league of its own.”<sup>18</sup> Proponents also allow that invitations from Western Europe for U.S. economic and military assistance did not determine American foreign policy—that, indeed, U.S. interests trumped others. They even quote a

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15. Prime Minister Clement Attlee quoted in Francis Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers: The War and the Post-War Memoirs of Rt. Hon. Earl Attlee* (London, 1961), 134; Foreign Minister Georges Bidault quoted in Hans-Jürgen Schröder, “The Economic Reconstruction of West Germany in the Context of International Relations, 1945–1949,” in *Power in Europe? Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany in a Postwar World*, ed. Josef Becker and Franz Knipping (Berlin, 1986), 313.

16. Geir Lundestad has especially articulated this thesis. Two of his most recent renditions are “‘Empire by Invitation’ in the American Century,” *Diplomatic History* 23 (Spring 1999): 189–217, and *The United States and Western Europe since 1945: From “Empire” by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift* (Oxford, 2003).

17. Lloyd Gardner, “Empires by Invitation,” H-Net Discussion Networks, H-DIPLO, March 18, 1997.

18. Lundestad, “Empire,” 194.

statement by Secretary of State Dean Rusk that undermines the usefulness of the term “invitation”: “We are in Europe not because the Europeans want us there but because our presence there is essential to the defense of the U.S.”<sup>19</sup> Instructive in contrasting the Soviet empire by imposition with the more consensual nature of the American empire, in which methods of persuasion and control were often more compatible with local wishes, thesis advocates nonetheless acknowledge that elements of imposition and conflict accompanied invitation and cooperation in the U.S. sphere. Still, the thesis underplays Washington’s dominant agenda setting and narrowing of the range of options for desperate nations who needed U.S. help but bristled against a “ham-fisted” American style.<sup>20</sup> No cooperation on American terms might mean no or fewer dollars, and many Western Europeans, wary that the United States’ intent to confront the Soviet Union might ignite war and suck them in, saw NATO as the lesser of two evils. Invitation theorists, moreover, admit that the theme is less useful as an interpretive tool after the first decade of the Cold War and that it is geographically circumscribed, mostly fitting Western Europe, and within that region, primarily Great Britain. The thesis becomes less workable elsewhere in the world because so often no invitations whatsoever were tendered prior to U.S. interventions. “The many examples of imposed interventions provide a clear warning against taking the invitational aspect too far,” the originator of the thesis concludes.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to their exploration of empire, revisionists have successfully examined decision making in the U.S. national security state, studying leaders, most of them white males with business and law backgrounds, who manipulated public opinion and thus shaped the very opinion they wanted to hear. Leaders also red-baited critics to silence them, to discredit their policy recommendations, and to defeat them in elections.<sup>22</sup> Emphasizing the vitality of postwar debates, revisionists have treated with respect dissenters who bucked the Cold War mentality and offered viable alternatives while the governing elite dismissed many of them as irrational or Communist tainted.<sup>23</sup> Congress proved submissive

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19. Summary Record of NSC Executive Meeting no. 39, January 31, 1963, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963: West Europe and Canada* (Washington, DC, 1994), 13: 161. Lundestad quotes only part of this Rusk remark in *United States and Western Europe*, 11, leaving out the critical words before the second “because.” Thanks to Shane Maddock for bringing the full quotation to my attention.

20. British Foreign Office official M. E. Denning, quoted in Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay, 1941–1945: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire* (Oxford, 1977), 550.

21. Lundestad, “Empire,” 213.

22. One of my early attempts to study this topic is “Presidential Foreign Policy, Public Opinion, and Congress: The Truman Years,” *Diplomatic History* 3 (Winter 1979): 1–18, which is reworked in *On Every Front*.

23. See the essays by several scholars on Walter Lippmann, Claude Pepper, I. F. Stone, Henry A. Wallace, James Paul Warburg, and others in my *Cold War Critics: Alternatives to American Foreign Policy in the Truman Years* (Chicago, 1971) and my “Isolationism Revisited,” *The Nation*, September 1, 1969, 166–69.



and permissive, shirking its responsibility to check and balance executive power. The House and Senate succumbed to alarmist presidential declarations; passed resolutions giving the president great latitude in foreign ventures; and neglected to practice oversight.<sup>24</sup> Challenging the hero worship that traditionalist accounts lavish on President Harry S. Truman and his self-proclaimed toughness, revisionists have explored his parochialism, prejudices, impatient diplomacy, and apparent inability to see nuance or envision alternatives. American leaders, committed to a militarized containment, often rejected diplomatic engagement. Truman and his successors also initiated economic development projects under the mantras of “modernization” and “nation building” in countries whose pasts and social complexities they did not grasp.

A dangerous combination of ignorance and arrogance too frequently characterized U.S. leaders. Long after the end of the war he helped orchestrate, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara confessed “our ignorance” about Vietnam, a “terra incognita” region. American policymakers did not “understand or appreciate its history, language, culture, or values.”<sup>25</sup> At the time of the Vietnam War, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee J. William Fulbright diagnosed “arrogance” as a “malady” driving a “pontificating” United States toward an “overextension of power and mission,” toward empire. “We strut around as if we owned” the world, he wrote, “acting like Boy Scouts dragging reluctant old ladies across streets they do not want to cross.”<sup>26</sup>

Historians have documented beneficent American assistance to appreciative people, but revisionists more than others have spotlighted the hypocrisy and immorality—and ultimate tragedy—of American foreign policy. U.S. officials lectured about democracy while they and their covert operatives undercut free speech, bought foreign politicians, encouraged fixed elections, and plotted to assassinate foreign leaders—“years of trying to buy stability at the expense of democracy,” as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has inadvertently admitted.<sup>27</sup> The United States pressed certain nations to honor human rights while turning eyes away from human-rights violations committed by allies and trading partners. American policymakers championed the principle of self-determination while they clung to decaying colonial regimes and snubbed the nonaligned movement. Washington lobbied for open trade doors abroad while practicing the closed door at home. The United States raced toward nuclear supremacy while it demanded nuclear nonproliferation for others. If the double standard did not undercut American assertions of moral superiority, other

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24. See my discussion in “Oversight or Afterview?: Congress, the CIA, and Covert Actions since 1947,” in *Congress and United States Foreign Policy: Controlling the Use of Force in the Nuclear Age*, ed. Michael Barnhart (Albany, NY, 1987), 154–87.

25. Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1995), 105.

26. J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York, 1966), 3, 10, 18, 138, 245.

27. Quoted in James Mann, “Rice’s Toughest Act Yet,” *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, August 21–27, 2006, 21.



behavior did. U.S. bombing campaigns and sabotages left millions jobless, homeless, or dead. The unsavory embrace and arming of dictatorial strongmen such as Batista, the Shah, and Marcos facilitated their schemes to spy on, jail, and murder their domestic critics. The United States fueled civil wars, often through covert actions, disrupting societies and economies, keeping the poor poor, and spawning a plethora of anti-Americanisms.

Revisionist or otherwise, we cannot dig out the story and write compelling narratives if the U.S. government wields its restrictive classification system to block access to documents. Very alarming, for example, is the George W. Bush administration's recent reclassification program to reseal at least 55,000 pages of public records, some dating as far back as 1948. Now locked up, these documents had once been open to researchers. The United States may have more liberal declassification rules than other countries, but that is no defense for policymakers who keep secrets to protect themselves and to perpetuate the dominant narrative of American exceptionalism. "The greater the secrecy," the sagacious former Lyndon Johnson aide and public commentator Bill Moyers reminds us, "the deeper the corruption."<sup>28</sup> Government leaders and censors have not gone so far as to burn books. But they have prevented and are preventing books from being written.<sup>29</sup> In this period of presidential affinity for secrecy, tolerance for torture, and use of ambiguous if not manipulated intelligence data to sell policies, we celebrate SHAFR with greater urgency as an essential forum in which historians can defend the principle of public accountability and the indispensability of archive-based scholarship.

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28. Bill Moyers, "In the Kingdom of the Half-Blind," address, National Security Archive, December 9, 2005. Available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/anniversary/moyers.htm>.

29. See my chapters (one with Frank Costigliola) in the two editions of Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (1991; 2d ed., New York, 2004), and my statements: "The Present Danger of Thought Control," *SHAFR Newsletter* 15 (September 1984): 32–41; "Thought Control and the Writing of History," in *Freedom at Risk*, ed. Richard O. Curry (Philadelphia, 1988), 60–68; "Politics and Perils at the Presidential Libraries," *OAH Newsletter* 21 (May 1993): 5–6.

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