



**Mary Ann Heiss, “The Evolution of the Imperial Idea and U.S. National Identity” (Bernath Lecture), *Diplomatic History*, Volume 26, Issue 4 (Fall 2002): 511-540.**

Commentary by **Frank Ninkovich**, St. John’s University, [ninkovif@stjohns.edu](mailto:ninkovif@stjohns.edu)  
*Published by H-Diplo on 3 November 2002*

The title of Mary Ann Heiss’s Bernath lecture, as dressed up for publication in *Diplomatic History*, is misleading. Instead of “The Evolution of the Imperial Idea and American Identity,” it would have been truer to its contents had it been called “Anti-Imperialism versus Interests in U.S. Foreign Policy.” Her title suggests that perceptions of self had an impact on policy toward empire, but her analysis argues that these perceptions were in fact secondary to hard national interests or needs. Unattractive though it is, at least my suggested wording would have made clear that her screenplay was based on realist-idealist distinctions, not upon the cultural and/or ideological modes of analysis promised on the marquee.

I have no quarrel with her chief point, which is that anti-imperialism was not a central feature of US foreign relations over the past 225 years. This is about as surprising as the discovery that liberals who favor racial equality object to having non-whites move next door, but it is an important point none the less. In order to drive this message home, it is obvious that she has read more deeply in the literature of US foreign relations than is the norm among diplomatic historians, for which she deserves our thanks and congratulations. For anyone seeking guidance in the selection of readings in this area, her essay is a fine place to start.

However, once that significant point is stipulated to, it is clear that definitional vagueness has had an impact on the body of the text as well as on the title. The mismatch between label and contents appears to originate in the muddy way in which key analytical terms are defined and employed. The various definitions of empire, imperial, and imperialism, are much too broad, with the result that they conflate what are analytically quite distinct phenomena. For example, her definition of empire could be used to describe relations between greater and lesser sovereign powers. Her definition of “imperial” seems to make room for just about everyone. As for imperialism as “effective domination,” that would seem to be what Shintaro Ishihara had in mind when he wrote *The Japan That Can Say No*. Indeed, it would be possible, using her definitions, to categorize international relations as a whole as merely a series of variations on the theme of imperialism.

Her definitions also fail to make some crucial distinctions between the diplomacy of imperialism, the colonialism imposed upon underdeveloped societies by the developed West, the relationship of imperialist diplomacy and colonialism to geopolitics, and the connection of all these variables to what we today tend to call globalization. Once such distinctions are allowed, it becomes evident that it was possible for Americans to favor colonialism, though not necessarily for themselves, while opposing the diplomacy of imperialism. For example, Americans in the late 19th century heartily approved of racially and culturally hierarchical European colonialism while they disdained the geopolitical diplomacy of imperialism among developed nation-states. This

distinction helps to explain why public opinion in the late 1890s was favorable to empire. A positive outlook on colonialism had been germinating for some time, even as American imperialism and the diplomacy of imperialism remained beyond the pale. The Open Door Policy provides a good illustration in practice of this dual tendency.

The relationship of colonialism and the diplomacy of imperialism to geopolitics and to globalization are obscured by the ambivalent way in which Heiss employs the concept of need, which, I suppose, is meant to suggest something resembling hard national interest, though I can't be sure. "Need and necessity," she says in a typical remark, "triumphed over ideology, principle, and mission." But later in the essay she talks about "perceived need," which she places in the same class of phenomena. It is as if a pain-driven statement like "I need to see a doctor" belongs to the same category of meaning as Woody Allen's need to see a psychiatrist every week of his life. One is a transparent statement of objectively compelling self-interest (unless one happens to be a Christian Scientist), while the other is an indulgence affordable only by elite types for whom the unexamined life is truly not worth living.

All need is perceived need, to be sure, but some needs are subjectively determined only, which is how I understand the meaning of "perceived need." Thus, while it is true that anti-imperialism has tended to take a back seat to geopolitics, where is it written that geopolitics automatically qualifies as realistic or need-driven? All nations make policy on the basis of national interest, but that tells us nothing at all about how those interests are defined. I, for one, don't believe that the U.S. needed, as a matter of objectively dictated circumstance, to become a global power. The globalization of American policy was, to a significant degree though not exclusively, a matter of identity-based choices rather than externally dictated necessity. Putting the spotlight on identity helps to explain why so-called "perceived needs," which are not interests at all in objectivist terms, played such a large role in the globalization of American foreign relations in the twentieth century. But if geopolitics, too, can be about identity, the distinction upon which Heiss bases her analysis disappears. Unfortunately, Heiss gives not so much as a nod to the problematic character of all this, even though the knotty question of what counts as an "interest" or the "national interest" is central to the cultural and ideological turn that has taken place in the profession in recent years. For that matter, she fails to address the argument of neo-progressives that economic motives generated a policy in which imperialism, not geopolitics, was the most important policy outcome throughout the history of U.S. foreign relations.

Why she chose to use the term identity is also not clear, though the thought does occur that it is simply a more vogueish term for idealism. The relationship between identity and empire is well worth exploring, but only if identity is taken seriously. Take, for example, the title of an article that appeared in the New York Times in 1999, "Threat to Lobster Way of Life," which detailed the decline of lobstering on Long Island. It would have been possible to run the story under the headline of "lobstermen losing their livelihood," but clearly there was more to it than that. One's identity and way of life are bound up with economic interests, but they are not reducible thereto. It makes a huge difference whether one makes one's way as a lobsterman or as a factory worker, even if incomes are comparable. The satisfaction of needs can take place in many ways precisely because identity plays such a central role in answering the question of "How." In other words, identity is not simply a passive appendage to interests. Unfortunately, in Heiss's account, identity has no independent causal life of its own.

The unremitting triumph of the practical (whatever that might be) leads Heiss, in her conclusion, to pooh-pooh American exceptionalism as a delusion. Heiss says that “the United States is - and always has been - a nation like all other nations, motivated by practical and realistic considerations and calculations and prepared to abandon principle if need be to achieve its larger policy goals.” Anti-exceptionalist statements of this kind, which pass for gospel truth in some quarters, are at best half-truths that deserve to be taken exception to. While nations are indeed alike, it should be obvious that all nations are also different in all kinds of ways and that these differences are expressed to some extent in their foreign relations. To me, it is this uniqueness that requires explanation. The challenge is to explain how and why the U.S. differs from other nations, especially as its contemporary role is historically unprecedented. But if one confines oneself to the realist framework of analysis in which sameness is presumed, what remains to explain except those irritating national fantasies?

Even on its own terms, the analysis is lacking in nuance, most notably in Heiss’s suggestion that the US abandoned anti-imperialism entirely After World War II. There was indeed considerable backsliding in the commitment to self-determination, but what is so strange about a nation having conflicting ideas that are reflected in a menu of conflicting policy choices? Choosing one does not automatically mean the repudiation of the other, which may well remain dormant in the background. Thus the US did, indeed, fail to provide enthusiastic support for independence movements for the first twenty years of the cold war, but it did finally reconcile itself to decolonization. Decolonization was made to ride in the back seat; it was not thrown out of the car. This sort of thing happens all the time, which realists well understand.

Which leads to the question: is her realism a mode of analysis or a policy preference? In the end, I was puzzled about where Heiss stands because she fudges her conclusion in the same way that she waffles on realism when she admits “perceived needs” to the charmed circle of interests. Are we to presume, given the growing gap between ideals and realities, that the US has become more realistic, more interest-driven, more motivated by “real considerations about security and stability”? That it is in the US national interest to be a global hegemon? The mode of analysis suggests that the triumph of interests is a good thing, a victory of the real over the phony, but in the conclusion she appears to be intimating the contrary. When she asserts that by turning a blind eye to anticolonialism during the cold war the United States paid a price in “credibility and global understanding,” she appears to be accusing the U.S. of failing to live up to its ideals. Was her essay, then, the lament of a closet idealist? Maybe not. But if so, she would have had to make a much stronger case for idealism as a historical mode of analysis and as an integral component of policy - which, after much circling about, marks the point at which I came in.

---

**Copyright © 2002-2004 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo Article Discussion Co-ordinator, George Fujii, [gfuji@umail.ucsb.edu](mailto:gfuji@umail.ucsb.edu).

---