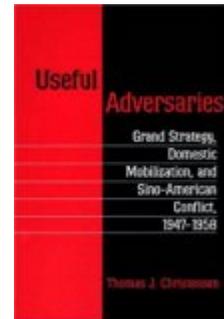


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas J. Christensen. *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996. xiii + 319 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-02637-4; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02638-1.

Reviewed by Alan K. Lathrop (University of Minnesota)
Published on H-Pol (July, 1997)



It is reasonable to assume that the post-World War Two Cold War era in American history will continue to be a rich source of study for historians for decades to come. The primary reasons are, first, more and more archival evidence is likely to become available in the next decade or two that will force new interpretations of events in the 1945-1960 period; and second, the era is a complex one because the world's political and military alignments underwent rapid and significant change, forcing the leaders of the western nations to formulate new strategies for dealing with alterations in the balance of power between east and west.

An important part of the new strategic planning, as Thomas Christensen points out in this book, was the need by leaders to mobilize their citizens in order to gain support for what were largely unpopular decisions. Christensen believes that historians have not usually paid sufficient attention to the underlying domestic issues that deeply affect the formulation of strategic policy at the top. He sets up a "mobilization model" designed as a template to be applied by historians to any situation to aid in analyzing how strategic decisions were made. The model makes the general public the "key intervening variable" between the external factors or pressures that a nation and its leaders might be facing and the strategy developed to meet those pressures. Christensen acknowledges that, for the model to work effectively, the historian must become extremely knowledgeable about the country whose grand strategy he/she is studying. This includes in-depth knowledge about how previous strategies were formulated, how resources are accumulated or assembled for support of strategic decisions in the target country, and what the leaders had in mind when they embarked on grand strategic decisions. In order to obtain this kind

of background, Christensen asserts that one needs to conduct a great deal of research, chiefly in archival sources.

This seems little more than an attempt to clothe familiar, well-known research techniques in new garb. If a historian is properly trained, he/she will quickly grasp the need to become familiar with a nation's history, culture and political climate to understand why its leaders acted as they did. It seems sensible to assume that a critical part of that understanding is gained from studying internal, domestic issues and, in particular, the need of national leaders to mitigate as much as possible the mood of the populace—even in autocracies. A necessary step in the process of researching any subject in depth is to consult a wide spectrum of archival sources.

Speaking as an archivist as well as historian, the reviewer finds Christensen's assertion just a bit condescending. He is, in effect, telling his fellow historians to pay attention to the primary sources, which they have presumably been overlooking. While the reviewer has found, in his experience, instances of historians not being sufficiently trained in the effective use of archival materials, he has never encountered anyone who isn't at least aware that they exist.

To test his model, Christensen uses Truman's decision to request the largest peacetime military budgets in U.S. history for employment in the containment of communism. This began in 1947 and extended through the early years of the Korean War. He traces the administration's use of its "shock" at discovering Britain's inability to uphold its end of the containment effort in the Mediterranean due to its bankrupt economic condition as an excuse to expand peacetime spending. The Mediterranean became a crucial area in 1947 when the Commu-

nists put pressure on Greece and Turkey. Truman made up his mind that the United States would have to pick up the slack and moved to mobilize the American people for the battle (hot or cold) that lay ahead against Communist aggression worldwide. By “mobilize” Christensen means the administration’s efforts to swing the collective public mind around to the support of the president’s highly controversial programs of enormous aid packages (principally the Marshall Plan) and unprecedented peacetime military expenditures. It took several years to accomplish this, which meantime included clashes between Truman and a fiscally conservative Congress, and large-scale efforts to sell to the people his conviction that communism was an evil that had to be stopped. His conviction took the form of NSC 68, a policy paper of the National Security Council which called for tripling the defense budget in order to confront militarily the growing Communist threat and contain it. While this paper was closely held, Truman used its tenets in speeches to drive home a fear of Communist power worldwide.

No sooner did World War Two end in the Far East than fighting erupted between the forces of Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists (CCP) for control of China. Truman found himself in the midst of a political and military maelstrom which swirled about the issues of involvement or noninvolvement of American troops in the civil war and, eventually, of recognition of the new Communist government which succeeded the Nationalists in the Fall of 1949. Any decision to deploy American forces to China in support of the Nationalists—as a continuation of wartime military and political strategy—was bound to run afoul of the American people’s demand for the “boys to be brought home.” Demobilization of the massive U.S. military presence in the Pacific and in mainland Asia was uppermost in everybody’s mind and Congress, as the voice of the popular will, clamored for the return of American soldiers and sailors as quickly as the overtaxed transportation facilities would allow. For the Truman administration to have advocated a combat role for Americans in China after 1945 would have been political suicide. The increasing possibility that the government of Chiang Kai-shek would fall became a cause for confusion rather than resolve in the Truman administration. The President’s advisors were split on the issue of support and recognition of the CCP, and it is interesting to note that Truman’s policy of fighting Communism was aided by the growing influence of McCarthyism and the China Lobby on the public mind.

In the end, as Christensen points out, the “real lost chance in China” (to paraphrase Freda Uutley, Joseph Al-

sop, Anthony Kubek and others) for the United States to establish any kind of relations with the People’s Republic of China came during the early months of the Korean War. Due in large measure to the lack of direct communications between Mao Zedong and Truman, each misread the other’s motives. The United States viewed China as a potential threat to Korea, Japan, and Formosa, while Mao construed U.S. intervention in Korea as a threat to China’s territoriality in Manchuria. The sad result was not only a missed opportunity to develop closer ties—trade or diplomatic—with China but open combat between them in Korea starting in November 1950. The rift that was created then is still not fully closed to this day.

Christensen argues that, for Truman to succeed in his strategy of containment of communism in Asia, he had to convince the American people of the danger which communism posed to the stability of Asia—and to the entire world. His calculated plan to achieve his goal is an example, the author believes, of an instance in which deep knowledge of a nation’s domestic issues is vital to understanding its foreign policy.

Christensen’s other test case is the 1958 Chinese artillery attack on the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu for the purpose of driving the Nationalist forces off of them and testing the United States’ commitment to Taiwan’s defense. Instead, it led to greater determination by the Eisenhower administration to defend Taiwan, which the author believes “surprised and disappointed” Mao and resulted in his adoption of a much less aggressive military posture. Christensen argues that Mao was seeking to demonstrate to his own people that China was not a weakling and that it had the military clout to embark on adventures on its own without either Soviet approval or support. On the domestic front, Christensen sees Mao’s instigation of the Great Leap Forward at the same time as aimed at making the masses into one big militia and at dramatically increasing China’s industrial base so that Beijing could be recognized by the Soviets and the United States as a serious player in the world arena.

The author uses a wide array of sources, including recently published Chinese and Soviet documents. He does not, however, specifically cite Chinese archives, instead listing a number of publications issued by various government agencies and presses. For Soviet documents, he relies heavily on scholars who have accessed Russian archives and published translations of their findings—especially of Soviet involvement in the Korean War. He cites numerous records groups in the National Archives,

notably the State Department Decimal Files and State Department records on China foreign and internal affairs, the records of the Office of Chinese Affairs, and the Policy Planning Staff, among others. He also consulted collections at the Truman Library; but he does not mention any sources from the Eisenhower Library, which might have shed additional light on the administration's handling of the Formosa Straits crisis of 1958. The bibliography is extensive and is divided into Chinese-language and English-language sources.

Overall, this book will be of interest to historians and political scientists specializing in the early Cold War pe-

riod and strategic studies. It will also be useful for the new interpretations Christensen places on critical post-war events in East Asia. His "mobilization model," however, seems of limited value as an investigative and analytical tool and it remains for other scholars to further test its utility and validity.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Alan K. Lathrop. Review of Christensen, Thomas J., *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1106>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, 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 any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.