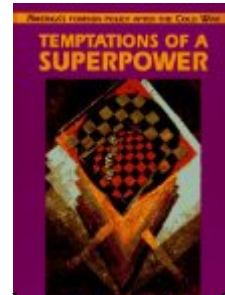


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ronald Steel. *Temptations of a Superpower*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. 144 pp. \$18.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-87340-7.

Reviewed by Andrew Milton (University of Puget Sound)
Published on H-Teachpol (March, 1997)



Temptations of a Superpower is a speculative and argumentative essay that ponders a wide range of issues in post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy. In this short book Steel raises many questions, offers few concrete answers, and generates plenty of room for discussion, debate, and argument. The main thrust, such as it is, of the book is that the world is now a confusing and more complex place after the evaporation of the Cold War as an organizing principle for world politics and U.S. foreign policy. But the real value of the book is not in any central argument that it makes. Rather, the lines of reasoning, the general claims, the specific assertions about foreign policy and world politics past, present, and future that Steel drops, almost off-handedly at times, along the way provide innumerable opportunities for thinking about the politics and processes of foreign policy in the United States.

I used *Temptations* in a mid-level undergraduate course on U.S. Foreign Policy at the University of Oregon. We read the book (as well as other articles) for the last unit of the course, in which we considered the future of foreign policy in the United States. Students wrote a brief review essay, for which I encouraged them to focus their discussion on some particular aspect or issue in the book, rather than on the central theme, as they did previously with two more conventional scholarly books. The last course meeting was also devoted to a discussion of the future, drawing heavily on Steel and student responses to him. The bulk of the course was devoted to examining the processes of foreign policy making (drawing loosely on Allison's conceptual models), and some of the actors (the media, the executive, Congress, think tanks, public opinion) that participate in those processes.

Temptations was a good choice to end the course for

at least two reasons. First, it launched a discussion of relevant issues about foreign policy making today, and through this discussion the students were able to refocus the knowledge, information, and ideas acquired in the course toward an on-going understanding of policy processes beyond (both conceptually and chronologically) the course. The book and the thinking it generated, in other words, gave the students the opportunity to apply their knowledge to issues and circumstances outside the realm of the course. For instance, several student papers—and part of the in-class discussion—dealt with China, and the likely policy issues that will arise in the future. This reopened a consideration of the way in which public concern in the areas of human rights violations can have an impact, in comparison to the effect of economic and business interests on issues such as copyright protections.

In the class discussion, this whole complex of issues was brought forward to a consideration of whether the capacity of public opinion to influence foreign policy making will change as a result of changes in the international political environment—where economic policy is now surpassing traditional security policy in importance. In another example, Steel calls for the reconnection of domestic politics to foreign policy because effective foreign policy cannot be undertaken in unfavorable domestic political and economic circumstances—such as fear of crime, economic dislocation, social division, etc. In pursuing this line of reasoning further, the students also had to reconsider the processes and actors of foreign policy. Public opinion has a different role in foreign policy making than in domestic policy, for instance. So too do the news media. A reconnection of foreign policy and domestic policy means that these actors will perform differently from before in the processes of policy making. One thing many of the students insisted was that the pub-

lic would have to “get as informed” about foreign policy issues as they are about domestic issues.

The second reason that *Temptations* was a good choice for ending the course is that this practical reapplication of new insights (discussed above) required students to recover some of the earlier material of the course. Throughout the course we had applied, among other things, insights about the way that bureaucracies work to a wide range of foreign policy decisions and implementation. In considering some of the issues that Steel raised about the need to cut military spending some students wrote or spoke about the barriers to substantial spending reductions that result from bureaucratic resistance to budget cuts, the maintenance of bureaucratic essential missions, and the professional self-interest of bureaucrats.

To cite another example, NAFTA was an important and oft-debated issue during the course. Discussions of NAFTA during the final course sessions reflected one of the essential realities of both scholarship and politics—nothing is final, the process is never over. To make their points, students created nuanced arguments about shifting public opinion, following from possible unforeseen economic or environmental consequences of the treaty; or they extrapolated from evidence of overwhelming media support of NAFTA to assert that an agenda-setting media will try to screen out much of the negative consequences of NAFTA, and will also continue to generally support free trade.

Clearly, the students made arguments of varying cogency, coherence, and persuasiveness, but they did gather and use argumentation and evidence from throughout the course and their own experience to fashion an explanation of specific policy issues and the relevant processes and actors that would be involved. This discussion (as had earlier ones) created an interesting range of cross-cutting cleavages, generating the opportunity to discuss another important aspect of politics—one particularly relevant to the claim, made by Steel and others, that foreign policy consensus evaporated along with the Cold War. For instance, we discussed whether economic foreign policy (which Steel and so many scholars now assert, rightly or wrongly, to be the dominant as-

pect of our international interaction) could generate the same kind of consensus that security policy during the Cold War did. The cross-cutting cleavages in a group of just 35 students indicated that it is unlikely—for instance, some from rural timber communities that were hurt by free trade opposed both NAFTA and environmental laws; others opposed NAFTA because of environmental concerns; still others opposed NAFTA over concerns about increasing concentrations of corporate power, while, of course, others supported it.

A final reason for using *Temptations* was that it is an accessible primer on U.S. foreign policy from the last fifty years. The myriad assertions, claims, and brief analyses on issues ranging from the domestic economic importance of the Cold War to the way “American exceptionalism” underwrites the isolationist impulse provide a useful background to the historical legacies that inform current policy circumstances. While Steel’s propositions are no doubt arguable (that’s the point, after all), coming from a reliably scholarly source this brief review of foreign policy history helps students new to the politics of foreign policy contextualize the current policy issues and debates. In short, it gives students a sense of the broad strokes of history (a self-professed inadequacy over which many students lament).

Temptations of a Superpower is not like most of what we read in US Foreign Policy—it’s not scholarly in the conventional sense. There are few citations. There is not an elaborately developed theoretical framework that is deployed to explain some issue or circumstance or process. To a certain extent it is more like a long and well-developed conversation about politics, foreign policy, and changes to both. It raises questions about new themes, processes, and relationships among relevant actors in the changing international political environment. It served as a useful point of departure for a discussion about the future of U.S. foreign policy that closed the course in a way that did not, I think, close the topic for the students.

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.

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

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

Citation: Andrew Milton. Review of Steel, Ronald, *Temptations of a Superpower*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. March,

1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=885>

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.