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**Andrew Rotter.** “Foreign Relations Biography and the Cultural Turn.” DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00729.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00729.x> .

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Review by **Robert Dean**, Eastern Washington University

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**F**rank Costigliola, Jeremi Suri, and Randall Woods have given us three insightful, well-crafted, and persuasive essays on powerful figures in twentieth-century American history. Whether they can all be meaningfully shoehorned into a single category of “cultural” biography seems less certain. I agree that the essays (perhaps especially Suri’s and Woods’s) seem largely premised, as Andy Rotter perceptively argues in his forum commentary, on a kind of “psychohistorical” analytical model derived more from Freud than from Geertz, Foucault, or any other post-modern intellectual titan that one prefers.

That is to say that the narrative is propelled by the elucidation of the individual, and in some sense the idiosyncratic, experience of the great man during his formative years. The patterns of response produced by the traumas of those formative experiences are then invoked to explain selected actions of the great men under scrutiny (in these cases, Henry Kissinger and Lyndon Johnson). For these narratives to fit unambiguously in a cultural

model of historical inquiry, I would expect to find more focus on explicitly questioning and analyzing the ways that collective, shared cultural discourses reciprocally shape the understanding and actions of statesmen. Woods in fact uses the term “psychohistory,” and alludes to the Freudian family drama. There is, of course, no bright line boundary separating “cultural” biography or history and social history, intellectual history, psychohistory, or even “traditional” diplomatic history. It is, I suppose, a matter of emphasis. Nonetheless, I do not see the form and method of these two pieces as a radical shift from the form and methods of biography as often practiced for many decades; I do not think that without the prompt of the forum title that I would especially see them as exemplars of the “Cultural Turn,” (whatever that might actually be). They are, nonetheless, perceptive, well-argued examples of the historian’s craft. Before addressing the specifics of Suri’s and Woods’s work, I want to situate the other essay in the forum in relation to cultural history.

Frank Costigliola’s essay is a more difficult case. He is doing something new. Clearly informed by the “cultural turn,” he is asking questions about the emotional experience of social interaction and its effects on both the powerful and the policy that they make, questions that no one else has been asking in exactly this way. In a series of articles since the late 1990s Costigliola has been questioning the role of emotion in the history of diplomacy. With each essay he has opened up new ways of thinking about how foreign policy “reason” actually operated in the real world of the embodied, all-too-human men who acted as agents of the state. Costigliola has enriched our sense of the complexity of motivations that animated many of the major figures of the era of the Second World War and the early Cold War, and his work carries important implications for other scholars engaged in similar inquiries concerning the workings of bureaucracies, the role of leaders, and the formation and implementation of policy.<sup>1</sup>

I must admit to a slight skepticism early on about how productive the exploration of “emotion” in foreign relations history might prove. Like many others I’m sure, my doctoral study had provided encounters with a range of methods and explanatory models, but none of them employed “emotion” as a fundamental analytical concept. Various strands of feminist, Marxist, and post-structuralist “theory,” urging scholars to think carefully about race, class, and gender, as well as more traditional models of historical explanation came my way. None did very much with emotion, and by the time that I encountered Frank Costigliola’s 1997 *Journal of American History* article on “Gender, Pathology, and Emotion”, I had already embarked on a culture and gender study of American Cold War elites, and had come to think that there was little meaningful practical distinction in the policymaking process between “emotion” and “reason.” Nonetheless, I have since abandoned my skepticism, because Costigliola has repeatedly shown the ways that the concept of “emotion” can be used to describe and analyze the

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<sup>1</sup> For an earlier discussion of some of the epistemological and ideological implications of the cultural turn in diplomatic history, see Robert Dean, “Commentary: Tradition, Cause and Effect, and the Cultural History of International Relations,” *Diplomatic History*, 24:4 (Fall 2000).

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operative intersection between elements of identity formation, the individual actor in all of his or her complexity, and the outcomes of political practice. Each of his articles also, I think, demonstrates how closely bound together are foreign policy reason and emotion in the actual contingencies of lived experience where political decisions are made.

With this piece Costigliola has again produced a complex and original argument. Here the focus is not on a single heroic agent making history, but on an intricate set of relationships and processes that produced meaningful outcomes. Franklin Roosevelt, he argues, was at the center of a complex web of social interaction in his personal circle of advisers, mistresses, flatterers, and functionaries, several of whom made indispensable contributions to his effective functioning as a national leader. As that social support system disintegrated, Roosevelt's health and capacity to make policy suffered. With his death, perhaps partly a result of his increasing social and intellectual isolation, relations with the U.S.S.R. dramatically worsened.

Costigliola's subject is not merely a disembodied "decision-making process." What makes it remarkable, even a bit radical, is the central place that bodies occupy in his analysis. Roosevelt and those of his circle are fully embodied in this argument. The frailty of bodies, the intertwined physical and emotional consequences of social life, sexual desire and jealousy, personal ambition and homophobia; these processes shaped the context where power was exercised, and ultimately helped shape political events.

The creative and careful use of sources ("gossip," personal medical histories, etc.) not traditionally associated with conventional versions of diplomatic history has enabled Costigliola to demonstrate the relevance of the assertion that "the personal is political" to the history of the high politics of international relations. By doing so, he has further enriched the language of diplomatic history. A powerful humanism underlies his inquiry, and produces a narrative that, as Andy Rotter suggests, exhibits elements of classical tragedy. Roosevelt, Costigliola argues, possessed a "charismatic glow and icy core" that, over time, consumed the social circle that enabled his political competence and maintained his physical well-being. Given FDR's evident willingness and capacity to reach a practical and peaceful accommodation with the Soviets, this was a tragic flaw that ultimately contributed to the brutalities of the Cold War. An argument of that kind is not very indebted to any post-modernist theoretical orthodoxy, but at the same time the elements that ground the narrative emerge from the analysis of cultural constructions of gender, sexuality, and interestingly, "disability."

Each of the three essays in the forum teaches me something new about their subjects, FDR, Kissinger, and LBJ. Costigliola's, however, forces me, in ways that the other two do not, to re-evaluate what I thought I knew about the history he engages. Each of the three essays does feature a kind of common thread, however, by implicitly or explicitly posing questions about the significance of formative psychic trauma among leaders, and the extent to which their political acts are in some sense a product of what might be termed "pathologies" of personality. Each author indicates the possibility of this: Roosevelt, with

a “shattered place where many people harbor empathy”; Kissinger, traumatized by his childhood in Germany and his escape from the horrors of the holocaust that decimated the European Jews; LBJ, torn between an alcoholic father and an impossibly demanding mother grew into a “tormented” man, a self-described “wild animal on a leash.” (686,752) Costigliola’s argument about FDR is again the outlier. Roosevelt’s “vagaries” of personality subverted the conditions he needed to continue to make wise policy, whereas Suri and Woods suggest that the obsessions that drove Kissinger and Johnson led them to make questionable or even destructive policy decisions.

Jeremi Suri argues that diplomatic history might usefully expand the exploration and analysis of motivations animating “the human beings who make foreign policy decisions.” Explanation that simply invokes “general phrases about an economic ‘open door,’ ‘national security,’ ‘anticommunism,’ and ‘racism,’” he tells us, are “often persuasive, but they are not sufficient.” (730) Having been involved for quite a few years in exactly this endeavor, I agree with his position. Nonetheless, I am a little surprised to find myself persuaded by his argument about the significance of Kissinger’s Jewish identity and his adult position as simultaneously bureaucratic insider and outsider, while somehow concluding that the argument is not entirely “sufficient” to explain the particular ferocity of Kissinger’s actual policy behavior. Suri, using careful language, identifies a central paradox of Kissinger’s career: “He defined the American State as the foundation for all values, even to the point of justifying the flagrant violation of basic principles in its defense.” (746)

The functionaries of imperial power always love to make ends-justify-the-means arguments, buttressed by fear mongering of one kind or another. I suppose I am persuaded that the psychic trauma of Kissinger’s upbringing during the era of the Holocaust meant that in some ways he had genuinely internalized a fear of “civilization’s descent into another Nazi or (Stalinist) darkness.” (731) But there is an even greater paradox at work here, one that demands a deeper explanation of “emotion,” “reason,” and their intersection in the “motivation” of the individual. The fundamental problem is that in the case of Kissinger (and many others before and since) the means themselves undermine the ostensible ends. The proposition that Kissinger “had to sacrifice some deeply held principles for the protection of the core values embodied in the American State” contains its own negation; the “core values” *are* the “deeply held principles” discarded in the quest for power. (726) The very black irony here is that Kissinger’s bombing sprees and his alliances of convenience with little Hitlers all over the world subverted claims that “western civilization” was itself any less brutal or bloodthirsty than the lawless barbarian empires he despised. He helped create or perpetuate pockets of the very “darkness” that he supposedly feared.

For those that have seen various memos obtained by the National Security Archive that provide a relatively unmediated account of his “statesmanship,” one cannot but wonder if blunter language might help get to some of the issues that are still somewhat obscured by Suri’s rather cautious formulations. Most recently, the Archive published on the web a

recently declassified “TELCON” of April 15, 1972, in which Nixon and Kissinger discuss their current B-52 bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Kissinger describes the effects of the bombing, estimating that the ongoing campaign had already killed 15,000 people, and that the B-52s had just dropped “a million pounds of bombs . . . in the Haiphong area.” Kissinger flatters Nixon by comparison with LBJ: “Johnson never had a strategy; he was sort of picking away at them. He would go in with 50 planes, 20 planes. I bet you we have had more planes over there in one day than Johnson had in a month.” His sycophancy toward the powerful, as Suri terms it, is fully evident. So is a kind of crass brutality, left unexamined in the essay.<sup>2</sup>

To “bomb the bejesus out of them all over Vietnam,” as Kissinger suggested, does not look much like a “defensive” alliance with a “strong leader” (Thieu) or a manifestation of Kissinger’s “intense patriotic nationalism.” An equally plausible interpretation could cast it as a form of misguided *realpolitik*: a bungled alliance with a weak dictator; the orchestration of mass killings while clinging desperately to failure; the ruthless pursuit of imperial ambitions at odds with the “core values” of the U.S. Even a cursory familiarity with other episodes reveals an imperial contempt for the law of the republic: Kissinger on the phone secretly assuring Augusto Pinochet of U.S. support in the wake of the Operation Condor murders of Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffit in the streets of Washington D.C., despite the necessity of official statements condemning the assassinations; or the meeting with Indonesian dictator Suharto, who asked permission from Kissinger and Ford to invade East Timor, and was told to go ahead and finish it quickly since the use of U.S. supplied weapons for such a purpose was in violation of laws passed by Congress. A complete list, of course, is much too long for a short piece like this, but it is clear that Kissinger was deeply complicit in forms of repressive terror around the globe that for all practical purposes resemble “Nazi darkness.”

This dimension of Kissinger’s career is largely missing in Suri’s essay. A traumatized immigrant who narrowly escaped “extermination” in Nazi-dominated Europe, acts as agent of the revered American state in ways that enable the extermination of Chilean, Argentine, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian (again the list could be much longer) “subversives” by “authoritarian” governments that are lesser analogues to the Fascist states he fled as a youth. If the biographer confronts the extreme repressive violence at the center of Kissinger’s conception and use of state power, it begs for an interpretive leap that bridges the gap between Kissinger’s professed “defense” of “civilization,” and the sly barbarism central to his practice of statecraft. This is not a simple problem. A grateful, but insecure, immigrant’s love of country is not quite answer enough.

Suri, of course, is a very talented historian, and is fully aware of the “darkness” at the core of much of Kissinger’s diplomatic practice. His book on Kissinger is replete with examples. Nixon and Kissinger, he tells us, “transformed the White House into more of a

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<sup>2</sup> The memo is available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB263/19720415-1130-Nixon.pdf>

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gangster den than a place for considered policy decision.” “His policies made the United States a visible sponsor of oppressors . . . .” Kissinger “nurture[d] personal relations . . . with shady partners who could do America’s dirty work.” Nonetheless, Kissinger, redeemed by his brilliance and cultivation perhaps, gets a pass. “He was a man who made many mistakes in trying circumstances but he was not a war criminal.”<sup>3</sup>

My question, I guess, is what exactly, besides his instrumental, imperial/cosmopolitan, policy “brilliance” made Kissinger really any different from Pinochet, or the generals of the Argentine Junta, or other authoritarian thugs that he embraced as proxies for U.S. policy ends? They were all committed to “saving” their societies from “Stalinist darkness,” and were contemptuous of democracy and the rule of law just as Kissinger was.

Randall Woods emphasizes the family drama as the fundamental motivation for LBJ’s compulsive need for “containment” of threatening developments that might spiral out of control and violate his vision of himself as the man in the middle, masterfully preventing domestic ruptures. This pattern originated in Johnson’s childhood, where as a boy Lyndon had to negotiate the emotional minefield that lay between his alcoholic father and his unreasonably demanding mother. As U.S. president, it played out as an attempt to contain the rupture of American society in the 1960s, torn between the right wing “ultras” with their racism and obsessive anti-communism and demands for social justice from blacks, youth, and progressives generally. This is certainly a plausible, if rather sketchy, explanation of motivation in psychological terms. I would like to see much more on the cultural dimension of the “divided self” that seems implicit in this approach. An analysis of the shaping effect of gender seems largely missing here, although language that points to its significance pops up several times. To take just one instance, the image of LBJ screaming at Mac Bundy about “sissies” rather begs for some unpacking. (760)

LBJ was formed by the dynamics of the Johnson family in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Texas, but also by the prescriptions and proscriptions of Texas-style “manhood” ideologies. His professional life was in some sense a constant struggle for power; perhaps even dominance, and his actions were shaped those experiences. Johnson had seen first-hand Washington’s bitter internecine exclusionary battles of the Red and Lavender Scares as a Senate leader. The purge of homosexuals in positions of power and the linked discourse about “weakness” and “appeasement” demonstrated the very profound costs of finding oneself vulnerable to such smears. Thus the fear of the anti-communist “ultras” that Woods rightly points to as a profound influence on Johnson’s ill-advised intervention in the Caribbean, was also inseparable from a politics of “manliness.” I venture to suggest that the folly, or even “pathology” of the intervention there, or in Vietnam, can also plausibly be attributed to the domestic political double-bind that demanded unswerving “toughness” as a fundamental measure of legitimacy in leaders, even in the face of much evidence that military force would not accomplish the intended ends. Perhaps the next

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 210, 248, 239.

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step in a “cultural” biography of LBJ would be to interpretively link the childhood double-bind of pleasing two antagonistic parents and the conundrum of political masculinity that contributed to such vast imperial havoc around the world. An analytical integration of the “Freudian” family drama with the wider, historically specific, processes of gender socialization and indoctrination might open up new insights into the human complexities of political leaders, and the constructive and destructive legacies they leave in their wake.

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