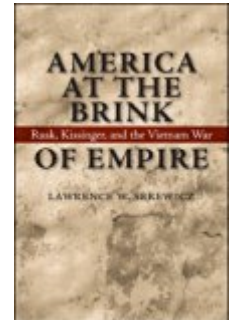


**Lawrence W. Serewicz.** *America at the Brink of Empire: Rusk, Kissinger, and the Vietnam War.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007. x + 233 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-3179-4.



**Reviewed by** Edwin Moise

**Published on** H-1960s (March, 2007)

*America at the Brink of Empire* is an extended essay on Dean Rusk, Henry Kissinger, and their contrasting views of the role of the United States in world affairs, played out against the background of the Vietnam War. It is heavy on abstractions and very light, at all levels, on facts. Its picture of the differences between republics and empires seems based more on the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli, filtered through those of J. G. A. Pocock, than on the historical record of the actual behavior of republics and empires. Its application of this theory to the U.S. government during the Vietnam War is not well grounded in the facts of U.S. behavior during that war. And its picture of the attitudes and beliefs of individual policymakers (especially Kissinger) is not adequately grounded in the details of what they did and wrote.

Lawrence Serewicz argues that Rusk, secretary of state in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, had a very expansive view of America's role. "He viewed the United States as a country that would bring freedom to the world.... The United States' role was to support the revolution

of freedom against the forces of coercion" (p. 144). Rusk favored a very broad American commitment to the Vietnam War and more generally to the preservation of a "decent world order" (p. 22). But the magnitude of the Johnson administration's commitment to Vietnam not only compromised the president's ability to deal with America's domestic needs, it threatened the foundations of the republic by centralizing power in the executive branch. According to Serewicz, by 1968 the United States was approaching what he calls a "Machiavellian Moment," a point at which a republic commits itself so heavily to foreign affairs that it cannot remain a republic and becomes an empire.

Serewicz has two ways of defining the difference between a republic and an empire. One refers to internal political structure: a republic has a divided government, with checks and balances, while an empire has power centralized in a small group or a single individual. The other looks at a foreign-policy issue: the degree to which each is committed to maintaining international order. "Simply put, a republic, reflecting its limited domestic structure, takes on a proscribed role in

maintaining the world order. It supports the world order but does not identify itself with it. An empire, by contrast, because its survival depends on the security of the global order, takes responsibility for defining, defending, and promoting that world order" (p. 2). The assumption that both republics and empires support the "world order" is odd in the light of history. Both republics and empires had existed for many centuries before there arose something that could reasonably have been called a "world order" for them to support. The omission of domination or exploitation of other peoples from both definitions of empire is also odd. This omission allows Serewicz to refer to American defense of South Vietnam against Communist conquest as "taking on an imperial role" (p. 8), even though he does not appear to believe that there was any American effort to dominate or exploit South Vietnam.

The two sets of definitions are linked by an exaggerated belief in the need to centralize power in the executive if one is to conduct foreign policy effectively. "A republic requires an unlimited, unitary government in the external realm, in which issues are indivisible" (p. 159). A republic that becomes too heavily involved in international affairs will find itself forced to centralize power in its executive, and cease to be a republic in its domestic arrangements.

Serewicz does not present enough evidence to make convincing his application of the theory of the Machiavellian Moment to the situation of 1968. He says the Vietnam War required Lyndon Johnson to centralize power in ways that threatened the republic, but he does not clearly describe any actual centralization that Johnson carried out or contemplated, beyond the mere fact that Johnson conducted an undeclared war. He discusses the way the cost of the Vietnam War crippled Johnson's "Great Society" programs as if this were evidence for his "Machiavellian Moment" thesis, but it is not. Being unable to finance a major do-

mestic reform program is not the same as being unable to preserve the republic.

Serewicz says of Johnson that, "by failing to accept the notion that the alternatives he faced, withdrawing and letting South Vietnam be defeated by North Vietnam or declaring war and invading North Vietnam, would have unacceptable domestic and international political consequences, he showed a lack of vision" (p. 48). This is the exact opposite of the truth. Johnson's firm belief that those alternatives would have unacceptable consequences lay at the very foundations of his policy.

In 1969, Richard Nixon became president, with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger running his foreign policy. Kissinger rejected Rusk's belief in American exceptionalism; he saw the United States as a "normal" (pp. 10, 113, 137, 145) or "ordinary" (pp. 10, 116, 144) country with distinct limits to its ability to influence the world.

Serewicz limits himself, unfortunately, to describing Rusk's and Kissinger's policy approaches in broad, and often vague, outline. He makes sweeping general statements, and then repeats them over and over, but he is reluctant to provide details that would have made them more meaningful. For the most part he discusses a Rusk who saw few if any limits on what the United States could and should do to promote and defend a "decent world order." In his concluding chapter, Serewicz more realistically acknowledges that Rusk and Johnson had been "constrained by the Cold War, the associated technological, political, and military limits to American power, and their belief in the UN system" (p. 152). But Serewicz never explains even in broad outline where the limits were in Rusk's mind, which potentially desirable goals Rusk thought were within reach and which out of reach. What positions did Rusk actually take, when top officials in the Johnson administration were debating how far the United States could and should go in Vietnam and elsewhere? Serewicz does not say.

Kissinger is described as having had a much narrower, indeed very pessimistic, view of American capabilities. The more extreme statements of this are notably lacking in support from actual quotes, statements of Kissinger's pessimism in his own words. Summaries presented without illustrative quotes often either have no source note, or have a note pointing to a source that, if one checks, points to a source that does not actually support the statement that has been made. "Decline rather than the possibility of renewal was America's fate, according to Kissinger" (p. 116) is followed three lines later by a note citing a source that says no such thing.[1] "Kissinger saw his role as playing for time against the impending decline because the situation looked so bleak" (p. 131) is immediately followed by a note citing a source that says no such thing.[2] A comment on Kissinger's lack of belief in progress appears to be supported by a quote; Serewicz says Kissinger "rejected liberalism's main tenet: a belief in progress.... What he had written years earlier, in *A World Restored*, could be applied to Johnson's approach to Vietnam: 'Only the liberal leader, governed by a shallow doctrine of progress and the illusion of rational reform, fails to appreciate the meaning of the limits of necessity; his efforts are bound to end in defeat'" (p. 133). But the words Serewicz has quoted did not come from Kissinger's book *A World Restored*. They were written by Michael J. Smith.[3]

These extreme, and probably exaggerated, statements of Kissinger's pessimism are very vague. Serewicz does not say even in broad outline how much power Kissinger actually thought the United States had to shape world affairs. Not having said even approximately what the limits to American power were in either Rusk's or Kissinger's mind, he has not made it possible to discern how much difference there really was between them on this issue.

Serewicz's tendency to omit the details reaches its greatest extreme in his concluding chapter,

"Applying the Machiavellian Moment to the Presidency of George W. Bush." This comparison of George W. Bush's policies with those of Lyndon Johnson appears to have been written late in 2005. It is so abstract that it contains only brief and vague references to the fact that Bush's policies had included a war in Iraq. This reviewer cannot find in this chapter any mention, for example, of Saddam Hussein.

*America at the Brink of Empire* cannot be recommended for any category of readers.

#### Notes

[1]. *Department of State Bulletin*, January 27, 1975, 96-102. There is not even a page 96 in the January 27 issue of the *Department of State Bulletin*; that had been the last numbered page of the January 20 issue. The January 27 issue starts with page 97.

[2]. Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 45.

[3]. Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 199. Smith claimed to be summarizing an idea from chapter 17 of *A World Restored*, but did not cite any particular page.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

**Citation:** Edwin Moise. Review of Serewicz, Lawrence W. *America at the Brink of Empire: Rusk, Kissinger, and the Vietnam War*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12935>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.