

Robert G. Kaufman. *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016. 304 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-6720-6.

Reviewed by Robert J. Lieber

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2017)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Donald Trump's surprising political victory in the 2016 presidential election has caused foreign policy observers to turn with alarm, apprehension, or anticipation to the new president's foreign policy. In doing so, they have understandably shifted their attention away from his predecessor. However, Robert G. Kaufman's recent ambitious book does a major service in identifying and critiquing not only the foreign policy doctrine developed and pursued by President Barack Obama but also the manner in which this represented a profound break from the post-World War II mainstream of "muscular internationalism" and in the author's judgment damaged America's national security and endangered its allies (p. 197).

Kaufman, in focusing on the period from the January 2009 inaugural through the 2014 midterm congressional elections, dismisses arguments that Obama's policies reflected inexperience or absence of a real foreign policy strategy. Instead, he identifies a coherent Obama doctrine, derived from a synthesis of classical realism, neo-realism, and liberal multilateralism, adding that this doctrine "appropriates the most problematic features of these paradigms without their countervailing virtues" (p. 185). The unifying theme that runs through Kaufman's work is a critique of retrenchment in Obama's foreign policy.[1]

In seeking to categorize Obama's foreign policy orientation, Kaufman opts not to utilize any of the four designations that Walter Russell Mead set out a decade and a half ago in his widely cited work, *Special Providence*.^[2] Mead's menu of categories—Jeffersonian, Hamiltonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian—might seem tempting, for example, in suggesting that Obama's policies could in some respects be considered Jeffersonian in his preference for a less interventionist foreign policy with more emphasis on domestic concerns, but Kaufman finds that Obama does not belong to any of these schools of thought. Instead, a particular virtue of Kaufman's book is that he embeds his analysis of American foreign policy and the Obama doctrine in contemporary international relations theory (chapter 2). Here the author notes that while the Obama doctrine defies easy categorization, in effect it synthesizes elements from several foreign policy paradigms. He identifies Obama as "an unrealistic defensive realist with a strong pre-disposition to multilateralism minus the grace of liberalism" (p. 38). In practice this meant a disinclination to promote liberal democracy and a dangerous disinterest in regime type—a significant difference from Reinhold Niebuhr, whose philosophy the 43rd president claimed to embrace. As a consequence, Obama was prone to conciliate America's adversaries without taking

sufficiently into account the challenges and threats they posed.

To buttress his case for an alternative foreign policy strategy, Kaufman reaches back to draw on traditional geopolitical thinkers' work, including Halford J. Mackinder's 1904 essay, "The Geographical Pivot of History,"[3] which warned that any power gaining control over Eurasia, the "World Island" or "Heartland," would possess resources enabling it to dominate the world, and Nicholas Spykman's 1942 book, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, arguing instead for the importance of the "Rimland," the coastal territories encircling Eurasia (p. 61). In weighing their concepts, Kaufman also incorporates the ideas of Henry Kissinger to argue that "the United States has a vital and enduring interest in preventing a hostile hegemon from dominating any or all of the world's major power centers—Europe, East Asia, the Middle East" (p. 61).

For foreign policy scholars and policy experts, the book—with its sixty-two pages of footnotes and bibliography—will be a rich source of information about policy debates. Here too, Kaufman provides valuable comparisons with the foreign policies of previous presidents. In doing so, he makes copious use of Obama's speeches and foreign policy documents including the administration's national security strategies. Based on this work, he identifies seven "tenets" of the Obama doctrine: 1) protection of the world from the arrogance of American power and exceptionalism; 2) preference for multilateralism as the preferred option in foreign policy, with "leading from behind" in Libya a case in point; 3) the discounting of the significance of regime type or ideology (including radical Islam); 4) the use of force only as a limited or last resort; 5) preference for soft power and diplomacy along with a relaxed view of great power threat; 6) retrenchment as a strategic necessity; and 7) the engagement or conciliation of rivals.

Kaufman makes frequent reference to how international relations scholars have understood Obama, not only in doctrinal terms but also in the assessment of specific regional and functional policies. The advantage of this approach is to provide the reader with a copious range of analyses by leading scholars and policy experts. While valuable, repeated reference to these interpretations and analyses at times slows the narrative thrust of the author's arguments. For example, in the space of five pages on Obama's policy toward China, Kaufman works into the text the ideas of Josef Joffe, Nicholas Eberstadt, Charles Krauthammer, Paul Krugman, George Shultz, Bryan McGrath and Seth Cropsey, Andrew Krepinevich, and James Holmes.

Kaufman's treatment of Obama's foreign policy is unique in several respects. One is that he unabashedly writes from a "neo-Reaganite" point of view and in doing so advocates a strategy of "moral democratic realism" (pp. 150, 4, 39), which he identifies with foreign policies pursued by Democratic and Republican presidents, especially Harry Truman, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush, not only during the Cold War but after it as well. Kaufman defines what he calls the "enduring principles" of moral democratic realism and argues that these must inform alternatives to the Obama doctrine (p. 191). These principles include the need for the United States to strive to remain the world's default power; restoration of strong defense as the best means of deterrence; emphasis on regime type for discerning friends, foes, and threats; the need to think geopolitically; the importance of American exceptionalism; and a recognition that "different times call for different strategies to best preserve America's national interest" (p. 196).

In an epilogue to the book, written well before the 2016 election, Kaufman concludes with a partisan call for "a series of Republican presidents in the hawkish internationalist tradition to restore the American power and prestige that the

Obama Doctrine has so imprudently squandered” (p. 211). In his view, this restoration will be the work of decades, but in the near term, one wonders what he would make of the unfolding Trump presidency and whether it foreshadows a return to muscular internationalism or instead an idiosyncratic continuation of the Obama era.

Notes

[1]. This theme is analogous to one I set out in *Retreat and Its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[2]. Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xvii.

[3]. Halford J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (April 1904): 421-437, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1775498?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents. Kaufman also cites Mackinder’s *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Policies of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt, 1919).

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

Citation: Robert J. Lieber. Review of Kaufman, Robert G. *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48813>



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