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Dale Copeland’s sweeping overview of US foreign policy from the Revolutionary War through the present makes the purposefully counterintuitive argument that American leaders over two-and-a-half centuries have been “careful calculators of national security through the lens of economic and commercial power,” usually with their eyes firmly focused on the future (p. x). In this executive-driven vision of foreign policymaking, presidents and secretaries of state operate rationally and efficiently, unconstrained by idealism, to pursue the nation’s long-term economic self-interest. US leaders, including less exalted presidents like James K. Polk and John Tyler, are “extremely smart and savvy realists” who “intuitively” understand the imperative to defend threats to future American prosperity (p. 4).

A political scientist rather than a historian, Copeland offers an alternative to offensive and defensive realism that he calls “dynamic realist theory.” Dynamic realism shares with those variants of realism the presumption that external threats force great power leaders toward similar policies regardless of partisan orientations and public pressure. Given his international relations (IR) training, Copeland has not written a traditional history but rather “historically based political science” (p. 4). He criticizes the existing literature for applying IR theory to only “a few specific events or time periods” in the history of US foreign policy. To demonstrate the broad application of dynamic realism, Copeland takes on “the full range of events in American foreign policy history” from the American Revolution to sharpening conflicts with China today (p. 14).

Readers of this volume will not find detailed discussions of Caribbean or Latin American history, although elite American concern with Western Hemisphere trade is a repeating trope. That said, they may appreciate Copeland’s theoretical ap-
approach as a way to understand a previously unrecognized common denominator in US foreign policy—not territorial expansion nor the quest for military supremacy, but rather the safeguarding of “access to vital goods and markets” in the face of an uncertain future (p. 2). Indeed, it is the American foreign policy elite’s far-sighted, calculating “fear of the future” that is the essence of Copeland’s dynamic realism, the “true taproot of great power competition” (pp. 15, 20).

Following two theoretical chapters that establish how dynamic realism fits within existing IR theory, Copeland presents chronological chapters starting with the trade-based anxieties underlying the American Revolution and then taking up the tensions leading to the War of 1812, the Mexican War of 1846-48, and the Spanish-American War of 1898. Historians of foreign relations will find Copeland decidedly old-school, focused on the great white decision-makers with little attention to gender, race, the environment, or other preoccupations of recent scholars. Memoirs, diaries, and State Department documents in *Foreign Relations of the United States* make up nearly the totality of the primary source documents cited in the volume. Similarly, when he engages with historians, Copeland addresses an earlier generation—for example, Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood on the American Revolution and William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber on the late 1800s—in order to gently refute their alternative reading of events.

For Copeland, the War of Independence “set the foundation for much of ... American foreign policy over the next two centuries” (p. 64). A parallel set of fears animated British leaders and American patriots: the British worried that the spectacular economic growth of North America would lead Americans to recognize their own power and break free of London’s control, as in fact happened, while the Americans initially attempted to pursue “greatness” within the empire before realizing—thanks to whistleblowers like Samuel Adams and Tom Paine—that London had a master plan to suppress emerging American commercial ambitions.

To support this thesis, Copeland shifts the focus from the immediate impact of post-1761 trade restrictions to argue that colonial “resentment of British mercantile policies had deep roots going back a century” (p. 68). How, Copeland asks, could one minor revenue policy—the Tea Act of May 1773—have had such outsized consequences? He answers that Sam Adams and other radicals guided colonists to perceive a British design to thwart the “rising greatness” of the colonies and force Americans to toil as dependent producers of staples (pp. 81, 85).

Copeland’s analysis of the Revolution sets up a repeating dynamic in which American leaders steadfastly pursued future commercial greatness, peacefully as long as impediments remained negotiable, violently when threats became more acute. During the nineteenth century, “almost every time the United States was threatened with an immediate or looming cut-off or restriction in its access to resources and markets, US leaders, regardless of their stripes, reacted swiftly and harshly” (p. 97). Thus, with 1812, 1846-48, and 1898, “commercial forces ... played dominant propelling roles” (p. 94). The annexation of Texas and the Mexican War answered “British scheming” to curtail future American trade with Asia (p. 113). In provoking Mexico into war, James Polk “was thinking about the long-term commercial competitiveness of the United States vis-à-vis Britain,” with the “primary objective” of acquiring world-class harbors in California (pp. 133, 138). Pursuit of future commerce rather than land hunger per se likewise drove the country’s less-violent expansion through the Louisiana Purchase and Oregon Cession. In Oregon the big prize was the natural harbor at Seattle (p. 129).
After the defeat of Mexico, the United States avoided foreign wars for the simple reason that the “threats to US commerce” were not as “viscerally salient as the ones in the first half of the century” (p. 152). By the late 1800s, however, elite leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt, Alfred Mahan, and Henry Cabot Lodge had rethought the logic of formal empire: “European great powers had already gobbled up Africa in the 1880s. By 1895-97 they were actively engaged in a similar effort to carve up China” (p. 155). Therefore “large-scale colonial expansion was ... the second-best option to open-door trading” (p. 161).

Caribbeanists will be particularly surprised by Copeland’s analysis of the Cuban intervention of 1898. Largely indifferent to the “ties of singular intimacy” between the United States and Spain’s jewel of the Caribbean, he quite literally reorients that conflict to place the Philippines, not Cuba, at its epicenter. Roosevelt and Lodge “understood the connection between the Cuban and Far Eastern problems,” and they conveyed that connection to William McKinley, another president perfectly willing to provoke war in order to ensure future commercial greatness. “By defeating the Spanish Pacific fleet and capturing Manila harbor, America would be able to project power directly against the great powers scrambling over China” (p. 158). A war that seemed to concern the Western Hemisphere was in fact about Asia.

Later chapters carry the “trade-anxiety” thesis through the twentieth century. Reversing his view of the war with Spain, Copeland argues that fears about trade in the Western Hemisphere loomed large in Wilson’s call to war against Germany. Germany took advantage of “upheaval in Mexico and certain Caribbean states to increase its financial and political penetration of the region,” and the US military occupation of Haiti in 1915 followed from Wilson’s concern about German participation “in the financial restructuring of Haiti’s customs collections” (pp. 192, 207). Arguing that “an updated version of the Monroe Doctrine was the key to [Wilson’s] whole international outlook,” Copeland finds that the Zimmerman telegram of February 1917 triggered US intervention in Europe (p. 194). If the Spanish-American War was about US trade with Asia, World War I primarily concerned roping the Western Hemisphere off from German commercial competition.

Copeland’s case for American pursuit of trade supremacy is less audacious for the 1940s. Most historians would agree that FDR sought “a new international order” founded on US commercial and broader economic hegemony (p. 234). Less intuitive is Copeland’s argument for “the underappreciated and often surprising significance of economic factors in the ups and downs of the Cold War” (p. 287). Agreeing with revisionists that “Americans helped provoke the spiral of hostility and mistrust we call the Cold War,” Copeland highlights the US desire to strengthen a Japan-centric Asian economy as a reason for Stalin to greenlight North Korea’s invasion of the South (p. 235). He chronicles Nikita Khrushchev’s efforts to expand trade under Eisenhower and Kennedy that the U-2 crisis and Cuba undermined, then traces moments of successful trade détente under Richard Nixon and George H. W. Bush. A final chapter on tensions between the United States and China today attempts to use historical lessons to create a predictive model of Chinese behavior that “can help the United States avoid decisions that lead to the second Pacific War in a century” (p. 389).

Copeland is quite aware that his is an iconoclastic reading of US foreign policy, one that he variously calls “highly revisionist” and “designed more to provoke than to fully convince” (pp. 229, 287). Although the text is well documented, its coverage is broad and selective, and historians specialized in the many fields Copeland touches on will no doubt recall details that contradict or at least qualify the master thesis he employs. That said, it is bracing and potentially productive for historians to ap-
proach familiar events from an unexpected angle. Insisting on the significance of potential trade benefits as a motivator across the whole of American history may not shift the paradigm, but it does put critical moments—the Potsdam meeting, the Berlin blockade, Henry Kissinger’s policy of détente—in a new light. And by making the US executive branch the far-sighted champion of global commerce, the work is in harmony with recent studies, such as Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton* (2015), that insistently place state power behind capitalist expansion.

That said, and leaving the theoretical dimensions of this work to the political scientists, historians may find some elements here problematic. Presidents great and small appear in full Machiavellian mode: “As with Madison and Polk, McKinley manipulated public opinion to achieve the war he wanted” (p. 167). Later presidents fare no better: Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman embrace war with no moral compunction whatsoever. More debatable, perhaps, is the near omniscience of these executives in their teleological pursuit of a future commercial hegemony, with the unique exception of Donald J. Trump.

Econometric historians will be puzzled that a study stipulating the transcendental importance of commerce contains not a single statistical table and only the broadest assertions about US trade with Latin America, Asia, and Europe. Those familiar with such statistics will question the claim that the “British rightly saw Monroe’s declaration in December 1823 as part of an American effort to keep Britain from exploiting the vast trade potential of the newly independent Latin American states” (p. 117). In fact, Britain did dominate both investment in and trade with Latin America, especially South America, for many decades after the Monroe Doctrine was unilaterally promulgated.

An even bigger question concerns the relative weight of foreign commerce in American economic development before World War I, a topic Copeland mentions briefly but does not seriously address (pp. 143, 153). According to Historical Statistics of the United States, the total value of US exports in 1880 was $836 million, of which $11 million went to Cuba and $8 million to Mexico, $1 million to China and $3 million to Japan.[1] The UK, which Copeland presents as the great trade nemesis of the United States, bought $454 million of US goods the same year—54 percent of the total, while Europe as a whole took $719 million, or 86 percent. Did relatively minor trade partners in Latin America and Asia really wag the dog of US trade with Europe? Copeland makes clear that he is speaking of “a realist-based logic focusing on the changing expectations of the future trade environment,” not the nation’s current account at any given moment (p. 141). But at what point does that future arrive? Nearly sixty years after the Monroe Doctrine, US trade with Latin America remained modest, and with Asia close to negligible. Is it reasonable to think that long-term commercial strategy in those regions trumped the more immediate domestic and geopolitical concerns of American presidents?

Copeland defends his “dynamic realist” theory from assault by historians armed with trade statistics by insisting that “in situations where current trade and commerce is low or nonexistent, leaders’ expectations of future trade and commerce can still be critical to their decision-making processes” (p. 244). That caveat may save him from quantitative-oriented historians, but historians of foreign policy and the presidency may still ask how salient “nonexistent” trade can be among the pressing domestic and external issues that presidents face. They may conclude that a fascinating counterintuitive argument at times becomes counterfactual.

Note

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