

National Security and Core Values in American History

There is no book quite like *National Security and Core Values in American History*. Drawing on themes from the whole of the nation's past, William O. Walker III presents a new interpretation of the history of American exceptionalism; that is, of the basic values and liberties that have given the United States its very identity. He argues that a political economy of expansion and the quest for security led American leaders after 1890 to equate prosperity and safety with global engagement. In so doing, they developed and clung to what Walker calls the "security ethos."

Expressed in successive grand strategies – Wilsonian internationalism, global containment, and strategic globalism – the security ethos ultimately damaged the values citizens cherish most and impaired popular participation in public affairs. Most important, it led to the abuse of executive authority after September 11, 2001, by the administration of President George W. Bush.

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WILLIAM O. WALKER III



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*To the memory of
Charles A. Beard
and
William Appleman Williams
and for
Joan Hoff
Students of history, practitioners of civic virtue*

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The leaders of the New World Order would seem to be married to Fear . . . As a result they become unfamiliar with reality, whilst continuing to dream about, and of course to exercise, power.

John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

I unknowingly began this book many years ago as an undergraduate at Ohio State University after reading *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1962) by William Appleman Williams; I continued it as a graduate student when the United States was still deeply involved in Vietnam and I read *Twelve against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists of 1898–1900* (1968) by Robert L. Beisner. Williams's book, whatever its shortcomings, and they are few, remains the seminal study of the foreign policy of the United States as a world power. *Tragedy* emphasizes the existence of a coherent worldview among policymakers and demonstrates that such a perspective fundamentally derives from an economic base. The conduct of American diplomacy has therefore served to protect and advance a market-based political economy. Beisner's book, by recreating the fears and anxieties of the anti-imperialists of the late nineteenth century, helped me understand that a republic, let alone a democracy, was only as strong as those who would defend its basic values against what Walter Millis, in his classic 1931 account of the war with Spain, called "the martial spirit."¹ Both the Williams and Beisner studies broached what then became for me the crucial, troubling question: Could the American republic truly exist as an imperial power?²

In search of an answer, this book asks whether the demands of national security undermine the integrity of liberty and weaken, perhaps irreparably, the values associated with it. The dependence of liberty on security policy became a matter of intense public debate in the late 1890s as the

¹ Walter Millis, *The Martial Spirit: A Study of Our War with Spain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931).

² William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2d rev. and enlarged ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972); Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898–1900* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968). My introduction to Williams came with the 1962 edition of his book, first published in 1959.

United States engaged in its first imperial exploits outside the boundaries of North America. Symbolically arrayed on the opposite sides of the issue were two of the more formidable personalities of the day: the arch-expansionist Theodore Roosevelt and the avowed anti-imperialist Mark Twain. At the center of that heated struggle over empire was the question of how, or perhaps whether, traditional American values fit into a modernizing society that was increasingly global in its material ambitions. The emergence at that time of a novel, ultimately ingrained way of thinking about security – herein termed an ethos – among authorities and, increasingly, a public attuned to international affairs gave the question its vitality. Within two generations, this security ethos was taking precedence over individual rights and liberties whenever real or perceived threats to the nation appeared.³ The extent to which American distinctiveness – cast throughout the nation’s history as “American exceptionalism” – did or did not survive these various crises into the twenty-first century is an underlying concern of my study.

From the outset of my career, I realized that it was impossible for the United States to revert to a time when it was not yet a world power. Could it retain its distinctiveness if it continued acting as an imperial state as it was then doing in Southeast Asia and Latin America? For some years thereafter, other subjects of inquiry held my immediate interest, even though I viewed them as windows on larger matters of U.S. foreign relations and American history more generally. Finally, after reading Michael J. Hogan’s *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (1998) and reviewing for publication the second edition of Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (2005), I knew it was time to grapple with the questions I had earlier pondered.⁴ In addition to Williams’s *Tragedy*, another book examining the roots of modern American foreign policy that has influenced my thinking is Michael H. Hunt’s *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1987).⁵ Hunt presents a typology identifying a national mission to promote liberty, the conundrum of race as a factor in the making of foreign policy, and a profound aversion to revolution as the most crucial determinants of policy. He has recently explored America’s swift rise to global dominance, hegemony rather than empire in his telling, finding that a “union of wealth, confidence, and leadership provides the basis for sustained international

³ Influential for framing the idea of a security ethos was Richard J. Barnet, *Roots of War: The Men and Institutions behind U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Atheneum, 1972); Barnet’s concern was the mindset of U.S. policymakers in the early Cold War.

⁴ Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2d. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

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success.”⁶ The present study is meant to be something of a complement to those of Hunt and Williams.

It is my contention that too many books concerning the early Cold War and U.S. foreign relations suffer from a debilitating liability: They are surprisingly ahistorical in both concept and exposition.⁷ According to these books, the world and thus history, too, essentially began anew after World War II. As a result, an emphasis on state-to-state relations trumps other plausible ways of conceptualizing and writing history. That is, I submit, like calling oneself a geologist without examining anything more revealing than topographical maps; one has a general idea about what the earth looks like, but knows scarcely anything about its complex subsoil composition. The past therefore nearly becomes anathema to the present, in this case to informed scrutiny of the roots of American foreign policy.

A number of questions lie at the heart of my critique of Cold War scholarship and its uneasy relationship with the past. Could modern history be understood only through a so-called realist lens focused on a presumptive Soviet challenge to American national interests? What precisely were those interests? Had they sprung from nothing? Or did U.S. policy reflect the contours of American history, to borrow a phrase from Williams?⁸ Melvyn P. Leffler, some of whose work I have criticized, has written that the Truman administration formulated national security policy with an eye to protecting America’s core values.⁹ How could it be otherwise if the study of history is to have any utility for an informed citizenry? Yet, what were those values or principles? In his superb book about Soviet-American relations, *For the Soul of Mankind* (2007), Leffler with little elaboration identifies them as “liberty, individual opportunity, and free enterprise.”¹⁰ How had they influenced the shaping of the national interest throughout history? And in that process, did American core values remain intact? About those questions, Leffler, Hogan to an extent, and other leading American scholars of the period commonly referred to as the Cold War, including John Lewis Gaddis

⁶ Michael. H. Hunt, *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained and Wielded Global Dominance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). For a postmodern perspective on America’s global presence, see Walter Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁷ My thoughts about this issue are similar to those of Michael H. Hunt, “Ideology,” in Hogan and Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 221–40.

⁸ William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History*, paper ed. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966).

⁹ Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); William O. Walker III, “Melvyn P. Leffler, Ideology, and American Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History* 20 (Fall 1996): 663–73.

¹⁰ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 39.

(with partial exception in *The Cold War: A New History* [2005]), Bruce Cumings, Carolyn Eisenberg, and Walter LaFeber, remain essentially silent.¹¹ A curious example of this genre is Wilson D. Miscamble's *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (2006). Miscamble, a native of Australia, mentions core values in passing while contending that Harry Truman was hamstrung by both the untrustworthy Soviets and his predecessor's naïveté.¹²

One cogent exception to this general pattern, written by a non-American, is Odd Arne Westad's prize-winning volume, *The Global Cold War* (2005).¹³ Westad's notable contribution to historiography of the Cold War is his locating in Soviet-American rivalry an unbridgeable divide about what it means to be modern. That is, should modernity for the Third World – a lamentably inelegant and demeaning appellation – in the post-1945 period emanate from America's Jeffersonian empire of liberty or what he calls the Soviet empire of justice? Values nourished in American history and spawned by the Bolshevik experiment are reflected in the antithetical imperial pretensions at play in the global struggle Westad describes. Whereas Westad implicitly addresses the problem that ethical behavior and values pose for the making of foreign policy, Joan Hoff places the matter at the center of her analysis in *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility* (2008).¹⁴ Hoff writes that "the United States was born in a fit of self-determination." That did not necessarily make for a responsible foreign policy. She briefly surveys American diplomacy since independence, noting that the fact of "[s]elf-determined, but not necessarily democratic, self-government . . . lay at the heart of its . . . drive to become the example for how the rest of the world should operate."¹⁵ Woodrow Wilson transformed the ideal of self-determination into a universal guiding principle in foreign policy. Whether it actually fostered democracy was another matter.¹⁶

¹¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); idem, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005); Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–2006*, 10th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007); Bruce Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 1: *Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Carolyn Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹² Wilson D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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My rather disappointing encounter with Cold War scholarship has led me to pose the questions asked previously and raise others about values, interests, and American history that inform this study: What, for instance, has been the relationship between American core values and U.S. security policy? Did the republic, in becoming an imperial power in the 1890s, retain a capacity to protect the principles that made it distinctive commencing in the colonial era? Did the many individuals who presided over the growth of America's global power incorporate core values into their understanding of the nation's security? Can basic values, rights, and liberties, having been compromised in the name of security throughout modern American history, endure in the twenty-first century? Finding answers for these questions traces back to the colonial era.

A project of this scope, particularly one so long in the making, owes a lot to many people – some for their inspiration, others for the assistance they gave in a variety of ways. At Cambridge University Press, Lew Bateman, with whom I have worked for years, and especially Eric Crahan and Emily Spangler, who saw the book to publication, were marvelous editors. I thank, too, the readers for the Press; their splendid efforts helped make the book what it now is.

There are many others to thank. Father Robert Luchi showed me in high school at St. Charles in Columbus, Ohio, how passionate the study of history could be. At Ohio State University, no one was more helpful than John C. Rule; with a few kind words, he rescued me from law school. I would never have studied American foreign relations were it not for David Green and Marvin Zahniser. To this day, I recall with fondness the long conversations about history and the state of the world with Mark Rose and Mel Leffler. And thanks to Marvin, I did my doctoral work with Alexander DeConde at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Alex always supported the breadth of my interests, and I deeply thank him for that.

I was fortunate to have a somewhat peripatetic career. At California State University, Sacramento, one of the first persons I met was the now-eminent historian of the American West, Al Hurtado, then an MA student. At Rancho Ben Ali, in Rio Linda, or on camping trips high in the Sierra mountains, we talked endlessly about history. Those conversations continue to this day. Working as one of two American historians for sixteen years at Ohio Wesleyan University allowed me to continue to read and teach broadly as my research became more specialized. Two of my students there, Bob Buzzanco and Peter Hahn, were a joy to work with; they have my admiration for the ways in which they took on the study of history as their life's work. In my time at Florida International University in Miami, we had a marvelous, young department. The hours spent talking history and politics with Alex Lichtenstein and Clarence Taylor influenced portions of this book. At the University of Toronto, I would not have had the rewarding teaching experiences I did without the efforts of Bob Bothwell, Carol Chin,

and Ron Pruessen. To thank them is not sufficient, though it will have to do. Also, *abrazos* for my “brothers,” Rick Halpern and Ken Mills; what a time we had. Thanks to Bill Colgate and Joan Bendon, Cam and Lana MacInnes, Stephen Bright, Joe Gaitanis, Bruce Moffet, and Shiraz Tayyeb. What great sounds: the paradise of Saturday afternoons at the Dominion. You kept me sane and were nice enough to ask about the book. And a special thanks to Khrist Harrold, for enduring friendship and a place to visit near the Rockies.

In writing this book, I have drawn on the work of many scholars. I thank Carol C. Chin and Jonathan Rosenberg, who provided help with several sources. For the example of their own work or the encouragement they gave this project, I thank Bruce M. Bagley, John M. Belohlavek, Robert Bothwell, Robert Buzzanco, Carol C. Chin, Frank Costigliola, Paul Gootenberg, Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, Rick Halpern, Walter Hixson, Joan Hoff, Michael J. Hogan, Michael H. Hunt, Albert L. Hurtado, Susan Kellogg, Stephanie Kelly, Walter LaFeber, Melvyn P. Leffler, Robert McMahon, Dennis Merrill, Thomas F. O’Brien, Stephen G. Rabe, Donald M. Rodgers, and Emily S. Rosenberg.

Two other groups deserve special mention. Years of reading U.S. History Advanced Placement exams were made memorable by the good times and discussions with, among others, John Belohlavek, Carol Berkin, Betty Dessants, Jim Giglio, Cheryl Greenberg, Nat Jobe, Tammie McDaniel, Mary McDuffie, Ted Morse, Linda Murdock, Berky Nelson, Lynn Rainard, Eric Rothschild, and Tom Zoumaras. Woody, Michael Woodward, knows how much our friendship and hours on hours of conversation mean to me. At the University of Toronto, a number of students in HIS 344 and TRN 410 improved the book with their love of learning, their questions, and their ideas, including Ohad Abrahams, Wendell Adjetey, Rahul Bhat, Sean Fear, Maria Felix Fernandez, Alison Jenkins, Mike Lawrence, Wynne Lawrence, Victor MacDiarmid, Steven Masson, Igor Puzevich, Stephanie J. Silverman, and Vinka Woldarsky. They were remarkable.

The dedication needs some elaboration. A fellow MA student at Ohio State introduced me to Charles Beard’s work. The more I read, the more I understood that truly being a student of history is a lifelong endeavor, in which not everyone succeeds. I met Bill Williams once, some years after he moved to Oregon. The legendary fire for teaching and public engagement still burned bright. Fortuitously, as it turned out, my first job was as a temporary replacement for Joan Hoff. Her kindness then and our friendship over the years are a gift I hold dear.