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978-0-521-69418-6 - Dissenting Voices in America's Rise to Power

David Mayers

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Dissenting Voices in America's Rise to Power

This book offers a major rereading of US foreign policy from Thomas Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana expanse to the Korean War. This period of one hundred and fifty years saw the growth of the United States from fragile republic to transcontinental giant and David Mayers explores the dissenting voices which accompanied this dramatic ascent. He focuses on dissenters within the political and military establishment and on the recurrent patterns of dissent that have transcended particular policies and crises. The most stubborn of these sprang from anxiety over the material and political costs of empire while other strands of dissent have been rooted in ideas of exigent justice, realpolitik, and moral duties that exist beyond borders. Such dissent is evident again in the contemporary world when the US occupies the position of preeminent global power. Professor Mayers's study reminds us that America's path to power was not as straightforward as it might now seem.

DAVID MAYERS teaches at Boston University, where he holds a joint appointment in the History and Political Science departments. His previous publications include *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy* (1988); *The Ambassadors and America's Soviet Policy* (1995); *Wars and Peace: The Future Americans Envisioned, 1861–1991* (1998). His latest research deals with FDR's wartime diplomacy.

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press,
New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521694186

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First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-87255-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-69418-6 paperback

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To my teachers,
to my students

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Introduction	1
Part I Expansion	
1 Louisiana	13
2 1812	31
3 Greece	56
4 Removals	80
Part II Conquests	
5 Mexico	109
6 Russia	138
7 Reservations	159
8 Philippines	190
Part III Hazards	
9 Armageddon	221
10 Axis	254
11 Containment	289
12 Dissenters	315
<i>Notes</i>	335
<i>Bibliography</i>	415
<i>Index</i>	424
	vii

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[More information](#)

Preface

This book traces the main debates and dissent in US foreign relations during a broad swath of history, from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. My theme is establishment dissenters. My orientation is catholic in that those of progressive and conservative bent are treated with equal seriousness. I aim to explain them in the context of their respective eras. Sometimes the dissenters and their lines were firm and clear, other times meandering or uncertain. In either case, I track the careers of prominent dissenters in the hope of better evaluating the nature of US international behavior at key junctures. Additionally, I try here to identify recurrent patterns of dissent – or strands – that have transcended particular questions and specific personalities. These strands are striking as they ran from the early days of the fragile American republic onward, still evident in one or another form in the twenty-first century, when the United States occupies the position of preeminent global power. The most stubborn line of dissent, with implications for today, has sprung from anxiety over the material and political costs of empire. Other dissents, not always compatible with the foregoing or with each other, have been rooted in ideas of exigent justice, realpolitik, and moral duty beyond borders.

My topic has particular bearing on our time when so much “triumphalist” literature has appeared on the US role as sole superpower. A good deal has been written about America as messianic democracy, peerless empire, hegemon, primary mover and designer of globalization. Much of this recent literature has been affirmative, celebrating an inexorableness in the US march toward glory. The point of my book is to remind readers that the story is not so straightforward or inevitable. Many possibilities and choices were open to Americans at significant moments in their history. At such times there were outspoken critics who questioned the direction the nation was taking, whether with regard to war or territorial expansion. The dissident voices examined in the following pages enriched the vocabulary of domestic political discourse and suggested alternative paths that the United States might have taken.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Preface

This book invites readers to consider the “what ifs” of history while paying tribute to many politicians and others who dared to debunk White House interpretations (“spin”) or questioned policies that enjoyed majority support. There is richness, color, and texture in such a tale, which also gives weight to a side of history that has been understudied. An understanding of the dissenting past has not been well served by dominant paradigms of foreign policy scholarship – presumptions in favor of a rational state actor, formulaic assumptions about the national interest, or facile generalizations concerning White House orchestrated consensus.

In this writing I have benefited from generous institutions. Boston University and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History provided funds. They enabled me to conduct research at archives and allowed leaves of absence from teaching/administration.

Boston University's International History Institute, the International Studies Association, Mount Holyoke College, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and Jerusalem's Spinoza Institute gave me opportunities to present my work-in-progress to thoughtful audiences. My colleagues on the Board of Trustees of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs have been an inspiration.

Scholars, relatives, and friends have helped, demonstrating again that all writing is collaborative. They have given constructive criticism. Several read chunks of this book as manuscript in rough shape. Many thanks to Susan Abel, John Archer, Andrew Bacevich, Silas Blodgett, Donald Brand, Walter Connor, Robert Dallek, Hermann Eilts, Stephanie Fawcett, Michael Field, David Fromkin, Anna Geifman, Erik Goldstein, Cathy Guylar, Gregg Herken, Robert Jackson, Elizabeth Kirkland Jones, Peter Kenez, William Keylor, Michael Kort, the late Murray Levin, Igor Lukes, Stephen Lyne, Peter Kirkland Mayers, Peter Michael Mayers, Carol McHale, Richard Melanson, Charles Neu, Cathal Nolan, Larry Plitch, Joel Rosenthal, Nina Silber, Michael Joseph Smith, William Tilchin, Jose Velasco, Peter Widdicombe, Fred Woerner.

I am also grateful to Michael Watson, the excellent and efficient History editor at Cambridge University Press. Working with him was a pleasure from start to finish. Additionally, the anonymous referees employed by Cambridge did much to improve the book. Its deficiencies are mine alone. They remain despite the best efforts of Michael and his conscientious reviewers.

This book is dedicated to my teachers of whom I will mention one. The late George Lanyi taught political history in the Government Department to generations of Oberlin College students. I was in this lucky multitude. He was a gifted teacher. His decency and intellect had a lasting impact on everyone who knew him. This book is also dedicated to my students.

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David Mayers

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xi

One who has brightened my days was the late Commander Roger Lerseth, United States Navy. He was my Ph.D. student at Boston University. He wrote a first-rate dissertation on the concept and practice of unconditional surrender in World War II. He was not only a splendid scholar. He was also a Vietnam War hero, a man of compassion and courage.

D M

Newton, Massachusetts

March 1, 2006