Introduction

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More than fifty years have elapsed since Henry Luce penned his famous editorial on the American Century. The editorial, republished in this volume, urged the American people to accept their destiny and use their influence to remake the world according to their own values. Luce lamented that isolationist attachments had kept the United States from its rightful place in world affairs, although he seemed to understand that current events, notably the wars in Europe and Asia, made continued isolation impossible. The issue was whether American involvement in these struggles would lead to permanent engagement with the world. Would the American people reshape the world in their own image, would the twentieth century be the American century, and would historians look favorably on the American contribution?

The essays that follow wrestle with these and related questions. Written by political scientists as well as historians, by area specialists as well as Americanists, by conservatives as well as liberals, some of the essays deal with the U.S. role in different parts of the world, others with the politics of foreign policy in the United States, and still others with such topics as change and continuity in American foreign policy, the Americanization of world culture, the nature of the modern American empire, American efforts to make the world safe for democracy, and the tension between democracy and capitalism, isolationism and internationalism, in the record of American diplomacy.

Certain issues run through the essays and lend coherence to the volume as a whole. All of the authors seem to agree that American foreign policy had a major influence on the twentieth-cen-
tury world. They focus on different influences, however, and often reach different conclusions about whether the American contribution was to the good. To be sure, no one dissents from the view that American policy played a pivotal role in the defeat of fascism and communism, nor from the conclusion that the world is a better place without the Nazi and Soviet regimes. Perhaps this is the most that can be said of U.S. policy; perhaps it is all that needs to be said. But most of the authors go on to ask whether American policy was beneficial in other ways, whether the United States did indeed reshape the world in its own image, and to what extent was the American role contested at home and challenged abroad?

Three of the essays concentrate primarily on the thinking behind American foreign policy and on the struggle to control it. H. W. Brands focuses on the core concepts of prosperity, security, and democracy in the American definition of the national interest. Each of these concepts dominated American thinking at different points over the last one hundred years: turn-of-the-century imperialists emphasized prosperity, which they tried to promote through the acquisition of foreign markets; Wilsonians wanted to make the world safe for democracy; and Cold Warriors subordinated everything to their concern for the nation’s security. For the most part Brands is critical of American foreign policy in each of these eras, arguing, in effect, that the best policies are those that achieve a reasonable balance between the three core concepts he has identified.

Like Brands, Godfrey Hodgson argues that American foreign policy has been shaped by often competing concepts or impulses. Of the two that he identifies, one stemmed from the frontier experience and looked to U.S. expansion abroad, while the other grew out of the immigrant experience and sought to isolate the United States from a world that was both corrupt and corrupting. The globalization of national economies has rendered isolationism less and less practical, or so Hodgson argues, but isolationist sentiment is still evident in the Republican party, where Luce had located it fifty years ago, and especially in the party’s resistance to American interventions abroad, to foreign aid programs, and to
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the UN, the IMF, and other international organizations. Following a somewhat similar line, my contribution to the volume also traces the relationship between foreign policy and party politics in American history, focusing especially on the twentieth century and on the fear, articulated by American nationalists, that national security policies would undermine the country’s democratic traditions and institutions.

The connection between American foreign policy and American life runs through other essays as well, although most of these essays concentrate instead on the way American policy has influenced the world. The rosier pictures emerge from the provocative essays by Robert Jervis, Geir Lundestad, and Tony Smith. According to Jervis, an American approach to foreign policymaking – one informed by democratic norms – has spread throughout the world and is especially evident in the developed countries that now constitute the American security community. Together with nuclear deterrence, this development has produced a remarkable period of international peace, has reduced or eliminated most major threats to U.S. security, has yielded an international system in concert with American values, and has done all of this and more without serious consequences to American society.

For his part, Lundestad builds on an argument that he pioneered several years ago, and specifically on the notion that America’s twentieth-century empire was an “empire by invitation.” Moving from Wilsonian diplomacy through the Cold War to the new world order that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lundestad argues that American hegemony was welcomed, even encouraged, by policymaking elites and ordinary people in most parts of the world. Their interests and the interests of the American people corresponded more often than not, so that “when push came to shove” they were likely to side with the United States, as they did in the struggle against communism. The United States was “the partner of choice,” concludes Lundestad, who generally downplays any resistance to the American imperium as an exception to the rule, and thus as something that should not always “be taken at face value.”
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Smith develops a similar argument in celebrating the contribution that Wilsonianism made to the global order of the twentieth century. Luce’s editorial, Smith argues, repeated Wilson’s call not only for a world made safe for democracy but also for a world made safe by democracy. This was a call that Americans answered, Smith says, partly by using their military muscle to defeat fascism and contain communism but also by giving the world “a distinctively American foreign policy.” This policy rested on “more than raw power and the calculations of Realpolitik.” It was grounded in the American principles of liberal capitalism and democracy, which, when applied globally, helped to create a “stable,” “more humane world order” organized “in a morally positive direction.”

For Smith, in other words, the spread of American power led to the spread of American ideals, so that the American empire was not only an empire by invitation but also an empire of liberty. Both Smith and Lundestad see the collapse of the Soviet Union as essentially a victory for democracy over totalitarianism. As a result, the world became a more democratic place and democracy, to a large extent, was a gift of the American people. Robert Jervis advances a somewhat similar argument, as we have seen, as do other contributors to this volume, including Reinhold Wagnleitner and Rob Kroes. Like Lundestad, Wagnleitner believes that most Europeans actually welcomed American influence over the course of the century, particularly the influence of American mass culture. What is more, the spread of American popular culture, of mass markets and mass consumption, had an egalitarian effect on the European countries. It liberated them from “the strait-jackets of traditional customs and mores,” argues Wagnleitner, and contributed “positively” to the “democratization” of their societies. Kroes makes a similar point in an essay that focuses on the commodification of American values in modern European advertising. Over the course of the century, he argues, advertising tended to blend capitalist principles with democratic theory, and thus had “the effect of a civics lesson, if not of a subversive or anti-authoritarian call.”
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Others are more critical. Walter LaFeber, Joan Hoff, Gerald Horne, and Bruce Cumings are less inclined to draw a positive connection between American foreign policy and American democracy. LaFeber argues that American elites worked consistently to limit popular democracy in the United States. Hoff sees a parallel between the decline of participatory democracy in this country and the American failure to promote human rights around the world. Horne makes the case that democracy had little meaning for large segments of the American population, who often felt that freedom for colored people at home and abroad depended on curbing U.S. foreign policy. Cumings agrees. The major project of American diplomacy, he says, especially after the Great Depression and World War II, was the reconstruction of a global capitalist economy that turned most people of color into victims of a grossly inequitable distribution of resources.

Although Jervis celebrates the absence of superpower conflict and world war during the period of America’s postwar leadership, others note the regional conflicts and the record of death and destruction that marked the era of American hegemony. For LaFeber, this record is part of a pattern of American failure, which also includes the failure to promote democratic values around the world – the kind of values that Smith sees at the heart of American foreign policy. Like Cumings, LaFeber views the twentieth century as indeed the American century, but measured only by the spread of market capitalism, not by the spread of democracy. Starting with the acquisition of Cuba and the Philippines at the turn of the century and continuing through the Vietnam War, he says, U.S. efforts to promote democracy were the exception, not the rule, which held instead that democracy had to give way whenever it hampered the spread of market capitalism.

Horne, Michael Hunt, and Joan Hoff reach similar conclusions. For Horne the twentieth century was not the century of democracy but of racial conflict and oppression, beginning with the U.S. subjugation of the Philippines and continuing through the Pacific War, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the postwar American efforts to bolster colonial and racist regimes in Africa and Asia. But if white supremacy captured U.S. foreign
policy, it also encountered resistance, both at home and abroad. Cumings argues that people of color, especially in Asia, often resisted American hegemony. Horne notes the resistance of black nationalists in the United States, who identified with Japan’s early challenge to white supremacy in Asia, with those seeking independence from U.S.-supported colonialism after World War II, and with those who opposed U.S. hegemony in the early years of the Cold War. Even at the end of the century, Horne concludes, neither the collapse of the Soviet Union nor the alliance between the United States and Japan could conceal the continuing relevance of race to global politics and diplomacy. On the contrary, the rise to power of Japan and China pointed to a resurgence not a reversal of the racial discourse that marked the American century.

Joan Hoff and Michael Hunt also develop arguments that run in a critical direction. Hoff sees the whole century as marked by the American practice of independent internationalism, by which she means the more-or-less narrow pursuit of national interests by multilateral means if possible, but unilateral means if necessary. This policy did little to promote stability or democracy, argues Hoff, who, like LaFeber, sees American leaders as more committed to market capitalism, and to a conservative version of self-determination, than to democratic principles. American leaders did little to promote social justice globally, she argues, and instead acquiesced in the erosion of national sovereignties and in the spread of an unregulated global capitalism.

For his part, Hunt, like Smith, sees in Luce’s editorial an American missionary philosophy similar, no doubt, to the missionary zeal that animated Wilsonian diplomacy and that still inspires many of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that Akira Iriye discusses in his contribution to this volume. Like Horne and other critics, however, Hunt does not see much good coming of this philosophy. On the contrary, missionary zeal often drove Americans to the most destructive and undemocratic policies, as was the case in the Philippines and in Vietnam. It also blinded them to the limits of their power, led them to support unpopular dictators, and encouraged them to discount the vision of nationalist elites and the resilience of the Asian masses. Though less
critical of the phenomenon than LaFeber and Cumings, Hunt also seems to argue that American capitalism, not American democracy, had the most enduring appeal in Asia, and that democracy took hold there less because of American policy than in spite of it.

Hunt's emphasis on the appeal of American products in Asian markets introduces another important theme that runs through several of the essays in this volume. According to this theme, the American century may not be the result of state policy and geopolitical calculations but of private influences and contributions. As noted earlier, the role of NGOs is the central focus of Akira Iryie's essay, which argues that the American century might best be understood if examined from the perspective of these private groups rather than government authorities. These groups, including education, health, human rights, environmental, and peace groups, gave the century its American character. According to Iryie, they transferred to the world stage a uniquely American experience in voluntary social organization, introduced a moral element into world affairs, and embodied America's values more reliably than its economic power and military might. They also dedicated themselves to developing an international community, and in the process, Iryie argues, kept alive the One World vision that Wilsonians had celebrated and that was threatened by the great geopolitical struggles of the century.

Volker Berghahn takes up a similar theme in his contribution to this volume. Berghahn focuses on private American philanthropical organizations, especially the Ford Foundation, and on the important role they played in breaking down resistance abroad, notably in Europe, to the spread of American technology, industrial organization, and consumer culture. In this sense, the defining aspect of the twentieth century was not the military power of the American state or the geopolitical program of American leaders but the rise of American technological and cultural hegemony, beginning with the Paris World Exhibition in 1900 and continuing through the triumph of Taylorism in the interwar period to the CIA-sponsored Congress of Cultural Freedom in the Cold War.
Berghahn’s emphasis on the triumph of American mass culture, especially the culture of mass consumption, reinforces Reinhold Wagnleitner’s conclusion that American popular culture, not American military power, won the hearts and minds of the Europeans after World War II and laid the basis for U.S. victory in the Cold War. Indeed, the pervasiveness of American popular culture, of blue jeans and basketball, of jazz music and rock-and-roll, of Hollywood movies and television, represented one of the most important cultural developments of the century. According to Wagnleitner, it promoted the old American vision of One World – or at least of a Pax Americana in popular culture – even though some of its greatest ambassadors, such as black jazz musicians in the 1950s, were denied the rights and privileges of citizenship in the United States.

Emily Rosenberg’s essay also takes off on Luce’s assertion that American mass culture had become the common currency of the world by 1941. For Rosenberg, too, the twentieth century can be defined in terms of the export of American consumer culture and of the popular images that went with it, especially the tendency in these images to equate mass production and mass consumption with modernization, including the rise of the modern woman. Rosenberg examines these images as evident in mass advertising and commercial exhibits over the course of the century, from the marketing campaign of the American automobile industry after World War I through the famous Kitchen Debate between Khruschchev and Nixon in 1959. She also notes the resistance abroad to American consumer culture and the images that went with it, especially the image of the liberated woman, so that debates about the benefits of Americanization often became debates over gender roles and the status of women.

Rosenberg’s emphasis on European opposition to American popular culture is similar in some respects to Hunt’s emphasis on how the people of Asia, though intrigued by American mass production, nonetheless managed to Asianize American products and thus resist the victory of American culture. Berghahn and Wagnleitner strike a similar note, as does Rob Kroes. The world has been Americanized, Kroes argues, much as Luce had envi-
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sioned, but only in the sense that non-Americans have turned American symbols and values into an international language, detached from its association with the United States, available to people everywhere, and used to suit their own purposes.

Absent in most of these essays is the kind of triumphalism that marked much American popular thought at the end of the Cold War and that we see to some extent in the essays by Smith and Lundestad. Even Smith and Lundestad, however, seem anxious to take the edge off their arguments. Smith notes that Wilsonian principles could sometimes cause problems, such as a polarization of wealth in and among nations, and he cautions against applying these principles in such places as Africa, China, and the Muslim world. Lundestad concedes that the twentieth century witnessed a good deal of uninvited American intervention and seems to admit the high price that others have sometimes paid for American imperialism, in the Philippines, for example, or in Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, Panama, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

Although this part of Lundestad’s essay sounds more like LaFeber than Smith, he closes on a positive though contentious note about the future of the invited empire. He disputes the notion, popular several years ago, that America’s imperial overstretch has undermined its economic might and set the stage for its decline as a global power. On the contrary, he seems to celebrate the dawning of a unipolar age in which Soviet power has collapsed, Japan’s economy is in shambles, and the United States, once counted out by its critics, is resurgent as a global economic power and as the only military superpower in the world. Given this setting at the end of the twentieth century, Lundestad apparently sees no reason why the next century should not be the second century of American hegemony. Berghahn shares a similar view, arguing at the close of his essay that the American century is still unfolding, at least in cultural, industrial, and technological terms, while Smith actually urges American leaders to continue to push for a Wilsonian liberalization of the world.

Others are not so sure. Drawing on Walter Lippmann’s famous critique of American foreign policy in the early Cold War,
my own essay implies that American leaders would be better off following a more realistic and less expansive diplomacy in the new century. Hunt also urges American policymakers to be more cautious, more restrained, and less arrogant in the century ahead. He will not concede that the twentieth century was the American century and even suggests that the twenty-first century could be the century of Asia – the current Asian crisis notwithstanding.

Drawing a somewhat similar conclusion, Horne notes the recent emergence of a racialist nationalism in Asia and wonders if we are already “experiencing the preliminary stages of a ‘general crisis of white supremacy’” that will continue in the new century. For LaFeber and Hoff, the crisis has to do with the future of democracy in the twenty-first century. LaFeber implies that democracy faces an uncertain future unless the United States becomes more concerned with its prospects than with the spread of market capitalism, while Hoff predicts an increasingly globalized economy in which the power of democratic governments will give way to that of powerful transnational corporations.

Readers will determine for themselves which of these predictions and recommendations make sense, and which of the essays provide the best assessment of American foreign policy over the last one hundred years. The goal here is to offer a variety of voices by scholars who approach the same general subject from different backgrounds and points of view. Indeed, the different views that follow, whatever their individual shortcomings, lend a certain strength to the volume as a whole. Besides interpretative and ideological diversity, they explore a range of important issues and utilize a variety of methodological approaches. In these and other ways, they may help readers to think about the way historians conceive of their subjects and to reach their own conclusions about American foreign policy over the past century. If this is the case, our authors will have done their jobs very well.