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Some Reflections on the Historiography of the Cold War

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AS A GRADUATE STUDENT and novice historian in the 1960s one of my least favorite areas of study was historiography. At that stage of my training the task of mastering a body of historical literature detailing the numerous interpretations about a particular historical period such as the American Revolution, or a historical topic such as abolitionism, was a distasteful, albeit mandatory, chore that my mentor assured me was essential if I hoped to pass the comprehensive examinations. Dutifully I grappled with what I believed was the sterile world of historiography in which one engaged in endless labeling of historians into this category or that school and confronted a seemingly interminable rehash of the same issues. Occasionally while working in my carrel, I entertained the irreverent notion that the historical profession was composed of individuals who were much like cows forever chewing their cuds. Being an intellectual child of the '60s, I preferred Carl Becker's anarchistic, if somewhat unliberated, call for every man to be his own historian. By the time I completed the rite of passage of graduate school, my personal dicta had become: "beware of excessive labeling" and "let me at the documents."

Since then I have gained a deeper appreciation of the value and importance of historiography to the historian's craft and to teachers of history. In historiography, as I now recognize, it also is a necessity to

label historians and their interpretations. But in all candor I must admit that my belated conversion is hardly that of a true believer. I still prefer the excitement of confronting the primary documents—the letters, diaries, speeches, memos, diplomatic correspondence, newspaper editorials, etc.—that remain the bricks and mortar of historical inquiry. Given my prejudices and preferences, let me explain why I feel an understanding of the historiography of the cold war is useful to those of us who try to impart to the young the wisdom of playwright Arthur Miller’s observation that a society is “99 percent its history.” Primarily because we live in one of a number of societies where the government systematically, if at times slowly and begrudgingly, makes its documents available to public scrutiny and scholarly use, and because we also have a tradition, shared by other countries as well, of open access to private and personal papers, new documentary data are steadily becoming available. Cold war studies represent what amounts to a working laboratory from which emanate at exhilarating frequency new revelations and interpretations. Hence, a familiarity with cold war historiography acquaints one with a wealth of fresh information and data on the nature of the cold war. Equally important, the study of historiography in this instance also illuminates the nature of history and the inner workings of the discipline.

In a tantalizing, if necessarily imperfect sense, cold war historiography presents us with a classic illustration of how the Hegelian/Marxian dialectic operates—the process whereby an original thesis is challenged by an antithesis and both ultimately merge in the resolution of synthesis. In this case the original thesis has been designated as the traditional or orthodox explanation of the origins of the cold war. The antithesis, or the challenge to the conventional wisdom of orthodoxy, has been labeled revisionism. The synthesis, or pseudo-synthesis in the eyes of some historians, has been classified as postrevisionism. In reality the process is not as neat and tidy as I have outlined it. There is an artificiality to such categorization that obscures the richness and complexity of the historical tapestry that emerges from the efforts of individual historians. Nonetheless, as I think the reader will agree, there is value in discussing the nature of the historiographic process in order to convey to students the evolving nature of history. Ideally, this process is a quest for historical understanding as opposed to a dogmatic belief that absolute historical truth can be obtained.

In order to see the historiographic process at work, let us examine the most salient points of the three interpretations explaining the origins of the cold war. The first to appear was the traditional or orthodox interpretation. Historians who have developed this viewpoint, to name but a few, include Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Herbert Feis, and Louis J.

Halle. As is true with each of the interpretations of the cold war, historians placed in the orthodox category are not necessarily in total agreement on each specific point. With that clarification in mind, let me outline the basic features of orthodoxy. I have identified five points that I feel are at the heart of this interpretation:

1. The aggressive and expansionist actions of Stalin and the Soviet Union caused the breakup of the Grand Alliance and, consequently, the Russians were assigned responsibility for the cold war.

2. In the immediate postwar period, specifically until 1947, the United States's foreign policy was passive and American leaders sought continued harmony and cooperation in Soviet-American relations.

3. When confronted with communist aggression, the United States reacted in defense of democracy, the free world, and free men.

4. The United States sought no territorial aggrandizement and was not motivated by pernicious self-interest. America was an innocent in world affairs.

5. In the aftermath of World War II the United States was committed to a policy of universalism, a belief that "all nations shared a common interest in all the affairs of the world." In other words, American leaders rejected "a sphere of influence" perception of the world where a great power would be assured by the other great powers of an acknowledged predominance in its own area of special interest.¹

One perhaps can best comprehend the main thrust of the orthodox interpretation through the words of two of its most prominent advocates. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has asserted that "the Cold War was the brave and essential response of free men to communist aggression."² For Louis Halle, American reaction to Soviet designs represented "the commitment of the United States to active responsibility for freedom and justice throughout the world."³

By now it should be apparent that the orthodox explanation of the Cold War's origins closely paralleled the official view presented by the United States government. Not surprisingly, several orthodox historians,

notably Herbert Feis and Louis Halle, served in the State Department or other government agencies and experienced firsthand the events of the early cold war years. In their scholarly writings these diplomats turned historians relied on their personal recollections, interviews with prominent government leaders with whom they were acquainted, and the pertinent documents then part of the public record. In some instances, they also had privileged access to government and private records that were not yet open for general scholarly use. One orthodox account, Joseph Jones's *The Fifteen Weeks*, was clearly a participant's justification for the actions of the Truman administration. Accounts of this sort, while having the attraction and excitement of an insider's view of events, must be used with extreme care and caution. More often than not, an insider's history is neither impartial nor objective in its historical judgments. As a result, some historians questioned the validity of this interpretation because much of what became orthodoxy was shaped by personal experience and colored by political conviction. The more severe critics simply dismissed the orthodox view as "court history," the work of former government officials who now served as chroniclers for the ruling elite.

The formal antithesis, or challenge to the orthodox explanation of the cold war's origins, began in 1959 with the publication of William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. In a sweeping re-evaluation of American foreign policy since the 1890s, Williams argued that the United States pursued a policy of Open Door expansionism that served as the basis of American empire throughout the twentieth century. The Open Door policy was designed to assure continued expansion of the domestic economy, and thus assure domestic well-being, by securing markets abroad for America's surplus agricultural products and manufactured goods. What this meant for the post-World War II era was a United States intent upon creating an open international capitalist trading system that would provide expanded opportunities for American agricultural, industrial and financial enterprise. But Williams's analysis must not be mistaken for crude economic determinism, for he demonstrated that American leadership operated from a sophisticated *Weltanschauung* that incorporated cultural, religious, political, and ideological aspects as well.

As part of his challenge to the conventional wisdom on the nature and scope of American foreign policy, Williams offered what in the context of the late 1950s can best be described as a controversial explanation of the beginnings of the cold war. He directly confronted the main themes of the orthodox view by asserting that the United States was not a passive power merely reacting to Soviet transgressions, but a nation that wished to implement an economic, political, and ideological agenda that would

usher in the American century. It was the Russians who had no real choice on the key issues:

Particularly after the atom bomb was created and used, the attitude of the United States left the Soviets with but one real option: either acquiesce in American proposals or be confronted with American power and hostility. It was the decision of the United States to employ its new and awesome power in keeping with the traditional Open Door Policy which crystallized the cold war.⁴

But to say, as Williams did, that the United States pursued its own interests in the international arena in the postwar period was not to say America started the cold war. Williams's point was that the Soviet Union was not *solely* to blame for creating cold war tensions. As reasonable as that argument may sound to many American historians today, in the political and intellectual climate of 1959 it was easily dismissed as a heretical notion.

In the 1960s a flood of revisionist works followed Williams's *Tragedy* and irrevocably altered the historical landscape of cold war scholarship. American actions in Vietnam and the Caribbean spurred the efforts of revisionist historians while simultaneously lending credence to their radical analyses of the American empire. Quickly the revisionist scholarship of such historians as Gar Alperovitz, Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, Lloyd Gardner, Walter LaFeber, and Barton Bernstein, whose scope frequently ranged far beyond the chronological limits of the early cold war years, was labeled "New Left" history. Again such labeling proved a hazardous endeavor. Broad disagreements existed among these historians who were so carelessly pigeon-holed in this manner. In this case, I suspect that initially this lumping together of such disparate viewpoints under the "New Left" rubric, which it should be pointed out carried for many in the profession as well as to the public at large a pejorative connotation, automatically brought the intellectual legitimacy of these scholars into question. Admittedly, by the late 60s and early 70s the "New Left" tag was less odious as the thrust and validity of this revisionist scholarship no longer could be ignored. The exception to this was the publication in 1973 of Robert James Maddox's *The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War*, which in sheer nastiness surpassed most other attacks on revisionism.

Of the various themes developed by cold war revisionists, I wish briefly to touch upon only two. The first is the question of what has been referred to as atomic diplomacy. The second has to do with the United States's use of economic levers to promote its diplomatic and political

objectives. Without getting into the substantial differences of interpretation on the question of the use of the atom bombs, let me outline what I see as the crux of current revisionist thinking on this issue. The Truman administration dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki not only for the primary purpose of bringing Japan to surrender but also to serve as a warning to the Soviets that they had better limit their imperial ambitions in the Far East and accept American proposals for free elections and representative governments in Eastern Europe. Then in the early postwar years the United States identified the atom bomb as the "winning weapon," brandishing its nuclear monopoly before the Russians to intimidate them into accepting American goals for the postwar world. Among the ranks of revisionist historians there is virtual unanimity that atomic diplomacy was a failure, perhaps singularly notable for its counterproductive capacity to exacerbate tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The other revisionist theme I wish to consider involves the question of how the United States employed its vast economic predominance to achieve its postwar foreign policy objectives. To understand this aspect of the revisionist argument, one must first realize that the United States, as opposed to all its prewar industrial rivals, emerged from World War II totally unscathed and in the enviable position of having its economic capacity, as measured in terms of gross national product, more than double in the years 1939-1945. And as America's industrial and agricultural output achieved new heights, most of Europe and a good portion of Asia lay in ruins. The Soviet Union had been mauled horribly both in human and physical terms. Great Britain, the other member of the victorious Grand Alliance, was on the verge of bankruptcy, a great power whose impending imperial demise was painfully apparent to its stalwart wartime leader, Winston Churchill. In this context, revisionist historians make the case that lend-lease, reconstruction aid, and postwar loans were used as economic levers to extract concessions from recipient countries. The United States sought, among other things, the breakdown of tariff and exchange barriers and the end to preferential trade practices in order to establish an open trading world based on the principles of multilateralism. The American drive for multilateral practices and a global open door proved a persistent source of Anglo-American tension. In late 1944 Prime Minister Churchill, under American pressure to accept a postwar civil aviation agreement, rather plaintively spoke to this issue. He appealed to President Roosevelt's sense of fair play, implying Americans should be generous because at the conclusion of the war: "You will have the greatest navy in the world. You will have, I hope, the greatest air force. You will have the greatest trade. You will have all the gold."⁵

With this brief synopsis of the revisionist interpretation as background, let me enumerate the major points made by revisionist historians:

1. The Soviet Union and Stalin were not solely responsible for the cold war.

2. American foreign policy was neither passive nor simply reactive prior to 1947. The United States had its own economic and strategic agenda, which it actively, if not always successfully, pursued.

3. To explain the cold war as an American defense of “free men” in the face of communist aggression does violence to the complexity and subtlety of the historical record.

4. The policies of the United States under the Roosevelt and Truman administrations were not those of an innocent, disinterested power intent upon international justice.

5. The United States’s commitment to universalism was haphazard at best, and at times hypocritical in view of the “double standard” apparent in American concern for protecting its sphere of influence in Latin America.

In sum, the overall impact of revisionism has been to dispute on all counts the orthodox interpretation of the outbreak of the cold war.

While the revisionist onslaught on orthodoxy changed the terms of the historical debate on the cold war and succeeded in putting orthodox historians on the defensive, a number of historians continued to dismiss this interpretation out-of-hand. Quite clearly revisionism had not produced a scholarly consensus on the issue of the cold war’s origins. Serious questions and doubts remained about the historical validity of this interpretation. The emphasis on economic factors frequently was equated with “economic determinism” by critics of the revisionist approach. Revisionists such as William Appleman Williams also were charged with “presentism” because they advocated using history as a tool for changing the system. At one point in what became an increasingly bitter debate, the dean of the orthodox historians, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., preemptively announced it was time to “blow the whistle” on the revisionists.

In the last decade or so, as passions inevitably cooled, attempts at synthesis and resolution of these opposing interpretations have been made. The current label for this school of thought which seeks a cold war

synthesis is “postrevisionism,” although it also has come under the rubrics of “neo-orthodoxy” and “eclecticism.” The early works in this genre, such as John Lewis Gaddis’s *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947*, published in 1972, and George Herring’s 1973 book, entitled *Aid to Russia, 1941-1946: Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Origins of the Cold War*, were indeed eclectic studies that in interpretation conveyed an updated and more sophisticated orthodoxy. But at the same time when presenting evidence for their views, postrevisionists often stressed many of the same points made previously by revisionists, including the emphasis on economic factors and the United States’s expansionist postwar agenda. This willingness to accept the evidence cited by revisionists but not their conclusions has led one scholar to tag the postrevisionist effort a “toothless revisionism.” Remember my earlier admonition: “Beware of excessive labeling!”

Several years ago, Gaddis, considered by many to be the father of postrevisionism, presented the most extensive brief to date for an emerging synthesis on the origins of the cold war. His first observation on postrevisionism and what gave it validity as the new consensus was the fact that it was based on an impressive body of research, much of it in newly declassified sources. He next presented what he believed to be the basic propositions of New Left revisionism. After critically evaluating the revisionist arguments, Gaddis outlined his synthesis by listing those areas where postrevisionists were in agreement with orthodox historians and then proceeded to detail the areas of agreement with revisionist historians. To begin with, postrevisionists accepted, among other things, the two basic orthodox contentions that “Soviet expansionism was the primary cause of the cold war” and “that American officials worried more about the Soviet Union than about the fate of capitalism in designing the policy of containment.” But, despite agreement on these crucial points, Gaddis insisted that postrevisionism was something new and not merely “orthodoxy plus archives.”⁶

In making the case for how postrevisionism transcended orthodox accounts, Gaddis acknowledged four areas in which revisionism had shaped the new synthesis:

1. Postrevisionist historians accept that the United States used economic instruments to secure political ends.
2. They emphasize that Stalin had no ideological blueprint for communist world revolution. Instead he is seen by postrevisionists as an opportunist who exploited any opening to advance Russian national influence.

3. Postrevisionists confirm the revisionist contention that the United States government did at times exaggerate the external danger of Soviet communism in order to achieve certain internal political objectives.

4. They accept the existence of an American empire, although they contend it was primarily a defensive empire, erected by invitation and not through coercion.

It is on this last point that Gaddis believed the new synthesis departed most sharply from the orthodox interpretation. The shared adherence to the imperial framework of analysis represented as well the basic line of continuity between revisionist and postrevisionist historians.

With this overview of cold war historiography in hand, including my asides about the labeling game, let me offer some observations on the validity of postrevisionist claims for their interpretation as *the* synthesis that represents a new consensus. The immediate disclaimer of a number of historians across the board, whether they be orthodox, revisionist, postrevisionist or some hybrid thereof, would be to deny that a consensus is possible, let alone desirable. (Least of all desirable because it might put so many cold war historians out of business.) The attempt to get our history straight to everyone's satisfaction may be a Sisyphean task, since the very process of "doing history" is most imperfect, untidy, and highly individualized. It involves ideological, political, and career factors as well as the symbiotic relationship between the historian and his material. Consensus, were it possible to achieve, would be suspect because in the opinion of one postrevisionist historian it "will always be as much a matter of fashion as of 'truth.'"⁷

But for the sake of discussion let us assume that some form of synthesis, if not consensus, is not only possible but desirable. For, after all, synthesis and consensus are not the same thing, and it would be foolish to abandon the pursuit of synthesis on the specious grounds of the necessity of consensus. As one might expect, the postrevisionist synthesis outlined by Gaddis and his adherents has come under heavy attack from several revisionists, and even a few unreconstructed orthodox historians have questioned its basic propositions. The major deficiency that revisionist critics complain of is postrevisionism's lack of philosophical substance, or more precisely, the absence of a basic concept that forms the core of the synthesis. Perhaps the harshest revisionist critic is Thomas McCormick, who argues that postrevisionism "largely does patch-jobs on traditional retreats." He also charges that the "postrevisionist bridge is not a synthesis, it is a rope bridge that will not

support heavy intellectual traffic between revisionists and traditionalists.”⁸ It is this charge, that postrevisionism is primarily an eclectic, grab-bag approach, that surfaces most frequently and consistently. For McCormick that is the nature of the beast, for he believes it accurately reflects the postrevisionist’s aversion to systematic analysis and their preference for a historical approach that stresses the multiplicity of causation.

In his dismissal of postrevisionism, McCormick does present an alternative which he labels a corporatist synthesis. His corporatist concept goes beyond the narrow confines of cold war historiography and applies to the full scope of twentieth-century American diplomatic history. Corporatism is a fairly complex concept, and it undoubtedly meets that criterion for synthesis that demands philosophical substance. It would be difficult to give a full exposition of this concept briefly, but allow me to try to outline the most important features of McCormick’s corporatism. First of all, it is defined as the attempt by twentieth-century American leadership “to adjourn national conflict abroad” and through “productionism” to mitigate class warfare at home. This is accomplished by “forging a collaborative consensus on the imperatives of growth.” Let me clarify that “productionism” becomes the key sub-concept. As used by McCormick it means continually enlarging the economic pie in order to forego having to redivide an existing pie into more equal segments. Thus the need for consensus on continued economic growth, or “the imperatives of growth.” Within the concept of corporatism, then, the United States’s approach to the cold war is best understood as one of “promoting, protecting, and legitimizing productionism both globally and on the home front.”⁹ (Need I add at this juncture that Gaddis makes the countercharge that corporatism is just a retread of revisionism and not a true synthesis?)

Despite the continuing disagreement between revisionists and postrevisionists, there has been a breakthrough in the impasse over the question of a viable synthesis. The opening arises, I believe, with the acceptance by Gaddis and other postrevisionists of the concept of an American empire. Gaddis pinpointed “the imperial framework of analysis” as one basis for future cold war studies. I believe this might serve as the point of convergence between the two opposing positions on the nature of the cold war synthesis. Admittedly, postrevisionists qualify their acceptance of an American empire by defining it as primarily defensive and created by invitation from nations on the imperial periphery. But if one approaches the invitational aspect as a generic characteristic of imperialism and not unique to the American experience, then it becomes no obstacle but rather a point of comparison in analyzing historical varieties of imperialism. Certainly this would mesh with at least

two points of McCormick's corporatist agenda that call for an investigation of global and domestic aspects of American imperialism in the postwar period. To initiate this quest for an imperial synthesis, one might declare a moratorium on the presently unresolvable question of blame and responsibility for the cold war. The next step, actually already undertaken by several historians, would be to evaluate American and Russian postwar actions within the framework of competing imperialisms, each seeking geopolitical advantage to promote its conception of national interest. The obvious corollary to the imperial/comparative imperial framework would be the idea of virtual complicity between the two great powers in seeking and maintaining global stability in the cold war era.

In offering the concept of American empire and a comparative imperial framework as common ground for an emerging synthesis, allow me to make another confession about my own preferences. I have an intellectual attachment to that group of revisionists who represent what has been called the Wisconsin school of diplomatic history. Led by Williams, LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, and McCormick, the work of this school, including my own, consistently has ranged beyond the cold war period and has focused on the issue of American empire and American expansion throughout the nation's history. Within that context, I think it is clear why the imperial approach has such appeal to me as the basis for a cold war synthesis.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that although agreement on a cold war synthesis, either through the postrevisionist criteria or the corporatist formula, has not been reached and for that matter may never be reached, there are several examples of cold war scholarship that point the way for what needs to be done. Over the last decade the work of Scandinavian scholar Gier Lundestad has provided us with a balanced and judicious appraisal of American imperial objectives in Western and Eastern Europe in the early cold war years. Lundestad, who identifies himself as a postrevisionist, has shown that the United States and the Soviet Union ultimately exercised a measured restraint in their actions, if not in their rhetoric, to create the postwar division of Europe that suited both parties and remains with us to the present day. This theme of restraint and concern for global stability above ideological purity has been explored most imaginatively by Lloyd Gardner in his *A Covenant with Power*, which was published in 1984. *A Covenant with Power* is a "think piece" that in a series of thematic essays covers the period from Woodrow Wilson to Ronald Reagan. In those chapters dealing with the post-World War II period Gardner provocatively argues that American leaders sacrificed a universalist approach in behalf of a "limited Atlantic

imperium” and a stable world marked by an acceptably divided Europe. Finally, I wish to mention an article by Melvyn Leffler that appeared in the *American Historical Review* in April 1984.¹⁰ In his essay Leffler relied heavily on newly declassified documents in the records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense. In developing his very penetrating analysis of the national security issue, Leffler has nicely tied the American conception of national security to the nation’s imperial needs and “its quest for power” in the immediate postwar period. Although not as explicitly within the imperial framework as I might prefer, the works of Lundestad, Gardner, and Leffler do meet my broad criteria and so I will close my discussion of cold war historiography by presumptuously placing them in the new “comparative empire” interpretation of the cold war.

Notes

1. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of Confidence, Ideas, Power and Violence in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), pp. 106-107.
2. Lloyd C. Gardner, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Origins of the Cold War* (Waltham, MA: 1970), p. 43.
3. Gier Lundestad, *America, Scandinavia, and the Cold War, 1945-1949* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 11.
4. William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, rev. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962), p. 206.
5. Winston Churchill to Franklin D. Roosevelt, November 28, 1944, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers*, 1944, 2:590-92.
6. John Lewis Gaddis, “The Emerging Postrevisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History*, 1983, 7:180.
7. *Ibid.*; comment by Bruce R. Kuniholm.
8. Thomas J. McCormick, “Drift or Mastery? A Corporatist Synthesis for American Diplomatic History,” *Reviews in American History*, 1982, 10:318-19.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
10. [“The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-48,” *American Historical Review*, 89:2 (April 1984), 346-81—Ed.]