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## Michael Cox and Doug Stokes, eds. *US Foreign Policy*

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# Michael Cox and Doug Stokes, eds. *US Foreign Policy*

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- 1 Michael Cox and Doug Stokes, eds. *US Foreign Policy*, 2nd Edition
- 2 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 512pp. ISBN: 9780199585816.
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Many readers of this review will already be familiar with the first edition of this work, which is a staple of university libraries and undergraduate reading lists. For that reason, this review will provide only a brief summary of the overall text, discussing those chapters considered especially useful or problematic, before focusing upon the changes that have been made for the second edition.

In terms of structure, the introduction is followed by a chapter on the theories underpinning US foreign policy and another chapter on the vexed issue of American exceptionalism. The remaining twentyone chapters are organized into five sections: "Historical Contexts," "Institutions and Processes," "The United States and the World," "Key Issues" and "Futures and Scenarios." A number of features make this textbook particularly useful for teaching undergraduates. The text is frequently accompanied by timelines, maps, questions and information

boxes to encourage students to stop and think (for example, "Key Quotes," "Major Debates," "Key Points"), and the book comes with access to a complementary website. This website contains separate student and lecturer sections. The lecturer resources, including seminar activities and essay questions, should prove popular with module convenors. The interactive map, which merely opens a PDF document when a particular region is clicked on, is not especially interactive; however, each document provides a useful summary of US policy towards that region and a selection of website links which go some way to making up for the paucity of 'further reading' suggestions in the book.

According to the introduction, the work focuses on five broad and interrelated themes: the necessity for using history to understand contemporary debates, the relationship between short and long-term goals, the power exerted by the domestic sphere in shaping foreign policy, the fact that America is "too important to be ignored" (Cox and Stokes 2012: 4), and the need to maintain critical balance when assessing US foreign policy. Putting aside the question of whether "balance" really counts as a theme, it is nonetheless a laudable effort, particularly following the often absurd levels of vitriolic partisanship which often stood in for foreign policy analysis during the Bush Jr. years. The editors maintain this balance in their introduction, and it also works well in chapters dealing with theoretical debates, when both sides of an issue are often represented; however, it is less successful when the book turns to matters of historical context. For example, the "American exceptionalism" chapter (Daniel Deudney) is full of unexamined over-generalisations (e.g. neoconservatives were "intoxicated with power and righteousness," 22). This would be fine if other chapters provided opposing perspectives, but this is not really true. Kennedy-Pipe's chapter, "American foreign policy after 9/11," is another noticeably polemical inclusion. It is essentially a defence of the Obama years and a critique of the Bush years. It contains a very limited discussion of the neoconservatives, including a definition box (382) making the erroneous claim that their thought is "based on the thinking of Irving Kristol" (in reality, he was one of a number of early neoconservative thinkers, many of whom disagreed with one another on important issues). "Theories of US foreign policy" by Brian Schmidt gives an especially good overview of competing theories; however, like most chapters in the book, the section on "further reading" is extremely limited.

This is clearly an intentional attempt to make sure that undergraduates are not overwhelmed with information; however, it does not quite strike the right balance between breadth of coverage and concision. Yes, pages and pages of bibliography after each chapter would be intimidating; but providing only a handful of works for further research severely limits the scope for students to delve deeper into topics which such a survey work can only cover superficially.

All chapters have been updated to include discussion of the early years of the Obama presidency, but the remainder of this review will focus upon the major additions that have been made for the second edition. Two new chapters have been added, a number of useful maps are now included in the text, existing chapters have been updated to include recent developments such as the repercussions of the Arab Spring and the global financial crisis, and more detail has been included on the practicalities of conducting foreign policy. The first section of the 2008 edition, focusing on the historical context of US foreign policy, comprised three chapters which respectively explored the history of American foreign relations up to 1945, the Cold War and America's search for a new role in the 1990s. The second edition contains a further chapter on the Obama administration and its self-proclaimed use of "smart power," but the historical context of the George W. Bush administration is ignored. Issues and debates over that period crop up in later chapters, but this significant gap in the historical section is noteworthy, reflecting the general lack of balance throughout the work.

The new "Obama and smart power" chapter is authored by Joseph Nye, undoubtedly one of the most influential foreign policy thinkers of the past thirty years, responsible for coining and popularizing the term "soft power." His piece is clearly argued, concise and it breaks precedent by containing a very good "further reading" section at the end. Despite these strengths, this chapter does somewhat fall short of the editors' stated goal of achieving balance. Nye worked in the Carter and Clinton administrations and since this book's publication has joined the Obama administration; he is not an impartial observer. He focuses, rightly, on the problems inherited by the Obama administration, but even Nye's rose-tinted view of Obama's first term cannot disguise its lack of achievement. Nye writes a lot of about Obama building "narratives" and

making “symbolic gestures” and gauges his success using international opinion polls. This sounds plausible in theory, but what will the final narrative of America’s involvement in Libya and Syria portray?

The other main addition to this edition is the final chapter, “US decline or primacy? A Debate.” The decline thesis is argued by long time “declinist” Layne, whilst the continuing primacy argument is made by Wohlforth and Brooks. Understandably, this format makes this chapter one of the most balanced in the book. A major problem for the ‘declinists’ is that their analysis of today looks strikingly similar to their analysis of the 1980s, with China today standing in for 80s Japan. Since their earlier predictions of US eclipse were (apparently) so wrong, it would be easy to dismiss today’s pessimists, but Layne is prepared for this response. He points out that if the “declinists’ had been listened to in the 80s, today’s problems would look very different. For example, the Great Recession has made their warnings about US debt-fuelled consumption in the 80s appear merely premature, if not prescient. Even so, Layne makes the same mistake as that made by the gloom-merchants of the 80s: in focusing obsessively on US problems, he ignores the mounting problems faced by the state supposedly set to supersede it. America may have many long-term financial bumps on the horizon, but China, like Japan and the USSR in the 1980s, faces even bigger challenges, not least the prospect of a soon-to-be rapidly ageing population.

Wohlforth and Brooks argue that large-scale shifts in power tend to take a long time and caution against exaggerating the effect of the Great Recession. In terms of overstretch, they observe that American military spending is still significantly lower than during the Cold War and, anyway, American commitments can more easily be scaled back, without major reductions in American power, than “declinists” would have us believe. They also contend that American predominance will not be challenged because the gulf between America and its competitors is so large, and America is so benign, that potential competitors have no incentive to attempt to bridge such an expensive gap for such a small gain (conversely, if China attempted to substantially increase its power, other regional states would seek to balance China, thus aiding American hegemony). As with Layne, some of these arguments focus on one area to the detriment of others. For example, comparing today’s

defence burden with that during the Cold War is a valid point, but it should not be viewed in isolation: America was not running trillion dollar deficits and facing an imminent social security funding crisis during the Cold War. Nonetheless, both pieces take a forthright stand for their respective positions and the chapter could provide useful readings for seminar discussions on the question of US decline.

Overall, this is a well-edited and wide-ranging survey of the key debates, issues and factors driving US foreign policy today. It deserves to be the first point of call for undergraduates looking to quickly and painlessly develop their understanding of US foreign policy for years to come.

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