

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF A DEMOCRACY

- America's Outward Thrust. Approaches to Foreign Affairs, 1865-1890.* By MILTON PLESUR. De Kalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois U.P., 1971. Pp. x + 276. \$12.50.
- The Great Campaigns: Reform and War in America, 1900-1928.* By OTIS L. GRAHAM, JR. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971. Pp. xiv + 386. \$8.95.
- Righteous Conquest. Woodrow Wilson and the Evolution of the New Diplomacy.* By SIDNEY BELL. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1972. Pp. 209. \$10.95.
- For Peace and Justice. Pacifism in America, 1914-1941.* By CHARLES CHATFIELD. Knoxville, Tenn.: U. of Tennessee P., 1971. Pp. xiv + 447. \$11.95.
- Illusions of Security. North Atlantic Diplomacy, 1918-22.* By MICHAEL G. FRY. Toronto: U. of Toronto P., 1972. Pp. xii + 221. £6.00.
- The Aftermath of War. World War I and U.S. Policy Toward Latin America.* By JOSEPH S. TULCHIN. New York: New York U.P., 1971. Pp. xii + 287. \$10.00.
- Leadership in Crisis. FDR and the Path to Intervention.* By GLORIA J. BARRON. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1973. Pp. xii + 145. \$7.95.
- The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War.* By ROBERT JAMES MADDOX. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1973. Pp. x + 169. \$7.95.

What these eight books, otherwise very disparate, have in common is some concern with American foreign policy. It is not much to hold them together, for American foreign policy has some of the character of the abominable snowman. It has been identified as powerful and fierce, and as feeble and timorous. Some have denied the existence of the beast, and remain unimpressed when others point to footprints, contending that footprints prove nothing, or that they are forgeries, or that they are really those of some quite ordinary animal. Paradoxically the root of the difficulty is the desire to impose consistency on American foreign policy. For long it got little attention from American historians, even when they were concerned to criticize their society. It was commonly accepted that the new United States, founded on sound political principles, would have a sound foreign policy as well as sound domestic policy, but those who wanted to argue that at some point the country had fallen into bad hands found more to complain of in the domestic consequences than in the foreign. The present revision of diplomatic history is clearly and directly a consequence of present concerns. It is at its most intense in the history of the cold war, and the ripples become fainter as subjects more distant are chosen.

One conventional starting point for diplomatic historiography used to be the 1890s, the period of imperialism so shortly to be followed by the First World War, the period which saw the rise of America to world power, or America's appearance on the world stage, or any of several other clichés. Mr Plesur's book is devoted to establishing that Americans were looking abroad even before those years. He has accumulated a great deal of information on all sorts of subjects: trade, cultural

links, travellers, exiles abroad, missionaries and so on. There is not much in his book that is strictly new – most of it has already been provided at greater length by a series of specialist studies – though some of it will be new to almost any reader. Perhaps its chief strength is in marshalling a great deal of evidence from the periodical literature of the time. What is false is the conception underlying the book – that a range and variety of links with the outside world somehow support each other, and that the student of international relations must give them independent weight in his analysis. But those links are neither cumulative nor so important as Mr Plesur supposes. In order to claim novelty he must rely on the proposition that Americans were once thought to have lived remote from the outside world. But of course they never were. Allowances made for changing circumstances, they always traded, travelled, settled, invested, where they chose. Why not? What for long they did not feel the need of, and did not have, was anything that can be dignified as a foreign policy. Because they did not need it, it would have been ridiculous to invent it. That allowed, their activities fall into a natural pattern, so that Mr Plesur's thesis is true but not significant.

Mr Graham's book is concerned largely with domestic politics, the Progressive movement and its post-war epilogue, as well as with the intervening war. It is a good specimen of a type more familiar in the United States than here – the long essay accompanied by illustrative material and a critical bibliography (which Mr Plesur's book has also) – and it is worth reminding ourselves that American politics was not cut in two by the war, ending and then beginning again. Though most of Mr Graham's book is given to reform, the important section for purposes of this review is the central section on the war. The direct effect of the war on reform is handled in the sections which precede and follow it. Here Mr Graham mounts, without mincing words, a full-scale attack on Wilson's diplomacy. He concludes that Wilson had a real chance to keep America out of the war, that if he had done so Germany would probably have won the war, but that the consequences – for American security, for the course of American reform, and even for the world – would have been no worse than what actually transpired. From our vantage point in the twentieth century, there is much plausibility in this argument. But it is unhistorical. It rests upon knowledge that neither Wilson nor his critics had. The men who opposed American entry into the war may well have been right on that point, but they were not the men to build the splendid society which Mr Graham depicts as the alternative; nor indeed was Wilson. To speak of the possibility of 'an intensification of that surge of internal reform to which [Wilson] had already become committed' (p. 95) is surely to distort both Wilson's position in the Progressive movement and the degree of his support.

The scope of Mr Bell's book is adequately indicated by his subtitle. It has a good deal in common with Mr Graham's, though it seems to take issue with him by challenging Wilson's commitment to any large measure of domestic reform. Rather it contends that Wilson, while couching his programme in moral terms, also had a keen sense of America's national interest, and saw to it that his programme never damaged that interest. As Mr Bell puts it, he 'defined himself as right, and America as right whenever it was going his way. He gradually reached a definition of America's needs and interests, and this he defined as right' (p. 8). Unfortunately this will not do. First, there is no explanation in that statement for a quality to which Mr Bell draws attention almost at once. '[Wilson] disdained consistency and despised legalisms' (*ibid.*). But more significant, all statesmen, indeed all men, act in just this way. In international affairs we form moral judgements in which national interest plays a large part, but

it is common in all countries that men differ over both national interest and morality. When they do, leaders must form their own judgements and define as right those of their countrymen who agree with them. Small and weak states are relieved from this process to some extent, but they are so only by their lack of power. Powerful states, and the statesmen who speak for them, because they have a wide range of choice, cannot do other than cast their policies in moral terms. They cannot take refuge in necessity. Wilson spoke for the open international society which has always given most benefit to the economically powerful, but he was neither less moral nor less realistic for that.

The point may be approached differently through Mr Chatfield's book, probably the most learned and considerable of this group. His work is not in the full sense a contribution to the study of American foreign policy since he is dealing with a group no more successful in the United States than elsewhere. Moreover we might suppose that of all peace groups, or indeed of all groups active in foreign policy at all, the pacifists would be the most rigid. Pacifists, after all, can do no less, and need do no more, than say that they will not fight in any war, against any foe, for any purpose. Yet they did. It is Mr Chatfield's strength that he analyses with great skill both the differing moral dilemmas which faced pacifists in different circumstances – those of the First World War, for example, and those of the appeasing thirties – and the differing tactics which they employed. Peace, however valuable, could not satisfy them unless linked with justice, and the effort to maintain that link, both for themselves and against their critics, gave tension to the work of some subtle and sophisticated minds. This is a first-rate piece of intellectual history, which never loses sight of the realities which pacifists faced. If these men differed among themselves, as they did, both in their analyses and in their chosen methods of winning support, then even more so did Americans in general. The debate on American foreign policy has never been still in this century, but in that country as in others it has commonly turned on how to deal with highly specific problems in which no policy has had clear and outstanding superiority. In such a situation 'Wilsonian diplomacy' is hard to identify even when it is seen as merely the creation of one man. It disappears completely – as we should expect – when it is defined as a moral approach to diplomacy to which Americans, by reason of their history or lack of history, are especially prone. Mr Chatfield has no axe to grind, and his work is the better for it.

Mr Fry's study casts light on American policy only by indirection, for it is a study of British policy, centred on that group whom Mr Fry terms 'Atlanticists'. These were the group among the makers of British policy – such men as Grey, Robert Cecil, Smuts, Borden, Philip Kerr – who hoped for permanent Anglo-American co-operation as the basis of the world order after the First World War, and who were prepared to sacrifice other interests for it. Unfortunately – from their point of view – they were opposed by various other groups even among the makers of British policy: those who looked to some kind of traditional alliance system, those who placed their faith in the League of Nations, and those who were merely empirical, with or without much hope of success. As Mr Fry himself admits, 'the Atlanticists reached for an illusion' (p. 200), but perhaps the most telling weakness of his thesis is in his admission that there were degrees of adherence to Atlanticism among those who claimed to hold it, and that Atlanticists constantly moved away from their allegiance on this issue or that. One may reasonably doubt whether a group so shifting and so lacking in the will to fight can be said to have existed at all. That they accomplished nothing is less damaging

than that they so quickly identified any matter in which they were interested as an exception to their own rules. As one reads Mr Fry's work one feels the weight of his evidence leading him to a conclusion which his organization rejects: that specific issues were settled by specific negotiation, in which the predilections of individual statesmen gave way perforce to reality.

The same conclusion may be drawn from Mr Tulchin's excellent book. Alone among these authors, so it seems, he has selected a theme – that of United States policy towards Latin America after the First World War – which gives him not only the opportunity but also the cue to examine American policy in detail and with precision. Although his chosen area is Latin America, the chief opponent of the United States was Britain, much weakened by the war, but not without residual assets which might yet be restored unless the United States moved with speed and skill. Mr Tulchin brings out well that action is required of a state when some result hangs in the balance, not when it is either helpless or so powerful that its interests are safe. A less powerful state may well be forced to act more vigorously than one more powerful, and be so just because it is weaker. It is this obvious proposition that is most often overlooked by those whose concentration is on ideology, yet it is this which explains why ideology is seldom a guide of any use to students of diplomacy: ideology affects rhetoric, not policy. Mr Tulchin has more than this to tell us. He describes well the debates, or rather the disputes, between different branches of the United States government, especially between the State Department and the Commerce Department under the active leadership of Herbert Hoover, for control of Latin-American policy. The strong claim of businessmen, and of their spokesmen in Commerce, to have the chief voice in Latin-American policy is one reason why Mr Fry's Atlanticists had no chance of success. In the United States as in Britain – more than in Britain – there was and there could be no master plan. Each issue was settled by the balance of the forces immediately deployed, and those most locally concerned always carried the day.

With Dr Barron's book we come to a later period, but one in which the same considerations still apply. It is an odd work, which in many ways seems to be labouring the obvious at the expense of neglecting the detail. As the dust jacket puts it, 'Dr Barron makes a powerful case for Roosevelt as a strong and resourceful president'. Well no doubt, but few even among his opponents would have disputed that verdict. Her picture is of a president who faced great opposition to mobilization, and who, therefore, had to edge the country towards slow acceptance of it. Her emphasis is therefore on the period after Britain was at war. But it is fair to say that the evidence is not very strong. In fact, on Miss Barron's interpretation, it could not be, for she depicts the president as a man forced by opposition to be less than frank, forced to avoid giving a clear lead. When Roosevelt says anything that can be cited as evidence, there are his real views; when he does not, it is because he is clever enough to conceal his real views. Those who want to argue that if the Japanese had not attacked at Pearl Harbor, the Americans might never have come into the war – whether because Roosevelt could not bring them in or would not bring them in we shall never know – remain free to do so after Dr Barron's work. The picture of Roosevelt proceeding 'slowly and with infinite patience to prepare a country to be ready to fight for its survival' (p. 115) does not carry conviction at a time when many have already wondered whether anything so important as 'survival' was really at stake, or whether the burden on the United States could have been greater in the post-war world if the Axis powers had won the war in Europe and the Far East.

The point is reinforced if we turn to Mr Maddox's book. Not that the historians with whom he is concerned argue that the United States should have stayed out of the Second World War. Their revisionism is of another sort. They argue that the United States should not have started the Cold War. Against these revisionists Mr Maddox wins his case. He documents convincingly what has long been common gossip in the profession – that the historians of the New Left are more than usually casual in their handling of evidence. His is purely destructive work. He has nothing to contribute to the historiography of the Cold War beyond his criticism, useful though it is. He does not even establish that the historians of the New Left are wrong, though he leaves a strong supposition that if they had had better evidence they would have used it. Yet it may be worth suggesting that these New Left historians fall into a pattern which is all too familiar. They are looking for the great guiding clue to American diplomacy, the determining factor. Because they are affected by modern sociology, they suppose that it is to be found in American domestic society; because they are in some degree men of the left, they suppose that American foreign policy naturally reflects the evils of an acquisitive and conservative American society. If the evidence is not there, that is a matter of trivial accident. These historians are not deliberately cooking their books in order to deceive anyone. Against the main sweep which they believe it important to describe, the details are simply unimportant.

All this Mr Maddox brings out well and moderately. We still wait, however, for a study of the Cold War – or indeed of almost any other period of American foreign policy – which will start from different assumptions. These will be that the men engaged in the conduct of foreign policy have little room for manoeuvre. Their actions are determined much more by the specific circumstances in which they find themselves than by any grand design. Among those circumstances are power or the lack of it, and claims inherited from the past – but not ideology. It is a poor ideology, as both Marxists and democrats have demonstrated again and again, that cannot be called upon to justify any action in foreign affairs not clearly absurd, just as it is a poor ideology that cannot be called upon to attack it. Most decisions in American foreign policy were narrowly taken, as the best available choice among alternatives none of which was ideal. Some actions proved more successful than their advocates hoped; some less. There is nothing in this that distinguishes American foreign policy from that of other nation states, and it is surely legitimate to add that few but Americans would expect to find it otherwise.