REVIEW ESSAY

Veterans at Work:
The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations

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Series editor Warren I. Cohen and his authors—Bradford Perkins, Walter LaFeber, Akira Iriye, and Cohen himself—have written a sweeping synthesis of U.S. diplomatic history for Cambridge University Press, assessing the successes, failures, and enduring themes of American statecraft from the Revolution to the end of the Cold War—The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, 4 vols. (New York: 1993). On many important matters the authors fail to achieve interpretive unity, but academics will almost certainly assign these books to their students. Undergraduates especially will profit from the books’ manageable length (from 216 to 261 pages of text), steady focus on broad themes, and avoidance of historiographical ax-grinding. Scholars looking for new stimuli, however, will find some of these books less satisfying.

Eschewing historiographical quarrels was probably a conscious editorial decision but stems, too, from the authors’ secure professional reputations. This is the work of veteran historians, all, by autumn 1994, in their sixties, whose reputations need none of the heat arising from historiographical controversy. We might wonder, however, whether younger and less sanguine scholars with much to prove would have written more exciting books. Cohen says he was looking for the “best writing” available from “leading students of diplomatic history, regardless of approach” (Perkins, p. vii). How different would the results have been had he recruited more junior scholars? Since today’s historians rarely mine the old veins of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, few alternatives to Bradford Perkins would have come to mind, but Jonathan R. Dull, Thomas R. Hietala, John M. Belohlavek, or William Earl Weeks could have written the first volume. Alternative authors of Volume Two include Richard H. Collin, Joseph A. Fry, Glenn A. May, Louis A. Pérez, Jr., Brenda Gayle Plummer, William F. Sater, and Thomas D. Schoonover. For Volume Three, a series editor might have sought out Frederick S. Calhoun, Mark T. Gilderhus, Thomas J. Knock, Brian J. C.
McKercher, Frank A. Ninkovich, Klaus Schwabe, or William O. Walker III. Numerous (relatively) junior candidates for the Cold War volume come to mind: Michael Boll, H. W. Brands, Roger Buckley, Gordon H. Chang, Bruce Cumings, Rosemary Foot, John Lewis Gaddis, Fraser Harbutt, Richard H. Immerman, Ralph B. Levering, David Mayers, Robert J. McMahon, Thomas G. Paterson, Michael Schaller, or William W. Stueck, Jr. Finally, several younger authors could qualify for more than one work in the series: Jules R. Benjamin, Roger V. Dingman, Michael J. Hogan, Melvyn P. Leffler, Frederick W. Marks III, or David Reynolds. Pick your combination (such as Hietala, Plummer, McKercher, and McMahon) and imagine the results.

Besides the common disdain for historiographical fireworks, Cohen asserts that all four books stress America's "relentless national pursuit of wealth and power," the constant constitutional "struggle for control of foreign policy," a preoccupation with "what constitutes American identity on the world scene," and concern with "the impact of the country's global activity on its domestic order" (Perkins, p. x). In other respects, however, the volumes differ considerably. Cohen is the most successful stylistically, Iriye the least. The authors' tone ranges greatly: Perkins biting in resumption of his 1960s evisceration of Jefferson and Madison, LaFeber relentless in advancing his new synthesis, Iriye cool and a bit shadowy in his evenhandedness, Cohen mordant in his judgments of men and policies. Though striving to write "international" history, all fit snugly within the old paradigm, emphasizing American policy-makers and policy-making. LaFeber is most assiduous about linking foreign policy to socioeconomic issues. The authors make uneven forays into "cultural" analysis. Where pertinent, they spotlight racism's role in American policy but show no interest in the impact of gender formulation on either the origins or values of the policy elite. (Though Cohen quips that "Issues of race and gender seemed peripheral in the closing months of 1945—at least to the society's dominant white males" [Cohen, 23]). All but Iriye are sufficiently of the view that "great men" dominate events to wax contemptuous about leaders arousing their scorn—Perkins on Jefferson, LaFeber on Theodore Roosevelt, and Cohen on Kennedy and Johnson.

What of their general theses and arguments? A "realist," Perkins plows old ground in his invidious comparisons of Federalist cleverness and the "disgraceful antics" of the Jeffersonians (Perkins, p. x). LaFeber forges the most venturesur new thesis in contending that Americans consistently sought "opportunity" abroad, even at the cost of revolution and disorder; Iriye is the blandest, repeatedly balancing mild criticism with indulgent words of mitigation. Cohen's framework