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Review of Daniel J. Sargent. *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s.*

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The presence of international order and the utility of diplomacy are impermanent, as is currently evident. An inability of traditional politics to address fundamental challenges, or a failure of customary policies to counter unexpected conflicts, fuels uncertainty, fosters new power structures, facilitates creative solutions, and launches the foundations of new eras. The twentieth century saw several such paradigm shifts.

By definition, and by practice, scholars who focus on the 1970s eclipse the 1940s, which were previously and generationally seen as the decisive era for contemporary patterns. German, Japanese, and Italian aggression and atrocities during World War II, especially The Holocaust, were memorable. Responses like the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials were important precedents, as was the creation of the State of Israel. Accomplishments, noticeably the formation of the United Nations, and its General Assembly's 1948 proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention against Genocide, involved collaboration with the Soviets. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt shepherded the U.S. to become a benevolent and collaborative superpower by articulating common interests and an activist, multilateral agenda in rhetoric evidenced in his Four Freedoms Speech, the Atlantic Charter, and the United Nations Speech. Decisions at Bretton Woods and Dumbarton Oaks established the pillars of an orderly and resilient global economy following the U.S. template. The subsequent onslaught of the Cold War with the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO's formation was monumentally pivotal¹

Naturally, the 1950s, the 1980s, and even the 1990s are also in contention, although to an arguably lesser extent. The 2000s may be too recent for a full analysis, notwithstanding the horrific impact of 9/11.

The historian Daniel J. Sargent is a fine, emerging scholar. He has published several relevant articles in the field.² Thanks also to his first book, as a co-editor, *The Shock of the Global: The International History of the 1970s*,³ Sargent's cutting-edge research constitutes a significant part of this major trend. As archives are increasingly open and frequently digitized, and while many relevant leaders and diplomats are still accessible for interviews, a surfeit of more studies can be surely expected and welcomed.

In this context, too, fall the contributions, trials, tribulations, and contradictions between global norms and sovereign concerns inherent in the international human rights movement and in popular culture are prominent. The universal agenda pursued by both nongovernmental organizations as well as the United Nations was often practical, although imperfect. International human rights helped replace failed utopian ideologies, especially Communism. Scholarship highlights the 1970s as the origin of contemporary

¹ A classic piece on that era is Louis Henkin, *The Age of Rights*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

² See, for example, Daniel J. Sargent, "An Oasis in the Desert: America's Human Rights Rediscovery," in *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, edited by Jan Eckel and Sam Moyn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

³ Niall Ferguson, Charles Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel J. Sargent, *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s In Perspective*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

philosophical and political foci that do transcend national boundaries. Such an approach is significantly expressed in the recent, distinguished work of Samuel Moyn.⁴

This book both followed as well as provided a leading role in this pattern with an American-centric path. To be sure, an academic concentration on U.S. foreign policy during the 1970s is complicated and controversial. The 1970s have implicit (and sometimes explicit) contemporary applications. By then, America was an established superpower well engrossed in the Cold War, often acting unilaterally, with power, as the undisputed leader of the West.

Dr. Henry Kissinger, who served as President Richard Nixon's National Security Adviser and then as Secretary of State under both Nixon and President Gerald Ford, was clearly a, if not the, key figure. He was often deemed responsible for meddling in the affairs of sovereign countries in Latin America, and for atrocities committed in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, including the clandestine extension of American involvement into Cambodia. Kissinger was often castigated for his reliance on his amoral (morally neutral is the generous phrase) outlook of *realpolitik* in handling diplomacy, especially the Soviet bloc during the détente era, and for prioritizing stability and perceived security over promoting and protecting human rights and justice among authoritarian allies such as Argentina, Chile, Indonesia, and Pakistan. Kissinger is, however, widely credited with the opening to China, ending the Vietnam War, and for advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process. Sargent largely does justice to Kissinger by showing the complexity of both his motives as well as his actual record with its moral shortcomings.

Indeed, Sargent contributes new points of view about this seemingly well-trodden era. He skillfully weaves newly available archival materials from American and foreign sources with a careful interpretation of pre-existing analysis, as evidenced by his meticulous endnotes. Sargent offers nuanced analysis and a sophisticated aggregation of micro-history research on complex and variegated acts of diplomacy. The contents are largely sinuous both in the chronological sense as well as thematically, and in following lead personalities. Sargent's citations, sourcing, and the index are impeccable. He presented helpful background for ordinary readers. Examples within a few randomly selected pages include his primer on the Council of Foreign Relations (173), and on President Gerald Ford (175). Sargent also explicates and clear the conspiratorial theories concerning the establishment and function of the Trilateral Commission (esp.170-172).

Sargent contributes many insights. Ignoring hype and the vested interests of actors who still live and function among us, he treats controversial issues in a judicious manner, putting the 1970s in its proper global and historical context. Fluctuating geopolitical challenges are the main and reoccurring themes of this book. Sargent frequently used the positive phrase *Pax Americana* regularly (as the very first chapter is titled) to designate a stable international order dominated by the U.S. He prefers it (for example on page 19, in comparison to Pax Britannica) to negative terms such as the 'world policeman,' or to pillorying the United States as a global-supremacy seeking imperial juggernaut. *Pax Americana* follows past incarnations such as Manifest Destiny or American Exceptionalism, and today's 'indispensable nation.'

Another major theme in the text may be termed as *plus ça change*. The patterns of conduct, at home and abroad, change much less than the issues, which are often fluid by nature. Since the early days of the republic, U.S. policy makers came from various branches of government, legislative and executive alike. Statesmen

⁴ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010

possessed differing ethnic, professional, and ideological backgrounds that shaped their worldly outlooks and level of partisanship. Representatives of various groups had complex personalities. Politicians competed for influence and prestige. Diplomats perennially wrestled with military emergencies. Negotiators created complicated alliances. Presidents often preferred economic and strategic interests over idealism and humanitarian concerns. Leaders blended reliance on persuasion by negotiation *and* on coercion by power. Strategists and mediators vacillated between cultivating, confronting, reconciling, and accommodating current and former allies, friends, neutrals, and enemies as they approached relative balance of powers and (sometimes absolute) spheres of influence. Regrettably, accountability and transparency were often wanting among public servants, even amid a growing scrutiny by the media. Indeed, U.S. foreign policy-makers faced similar international, strategic, and diplomatic challenges before, during, and after this tumultuous decade. So was the United States *really* transformed in the 1970s? The title of the book itself may be hyped.

Sargent mentions his intellectual debt to Akira Iriye's focus on the strength of "global civil society" at the expense of nation-states and *statism* (36). Sargent also conveys National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's appreciation for the fusion and intersection of domestic politics and international relations (36). This explicit buildup on a mighty scholar and on a senior practitioner is reflected in this book's preference to actions by groups beyond states, and in Sargent's approach to the formation of U.S. diplomacy.]Substantively, Sargent is prudently critical of policy-makers. An analysis of selective portions and issues follows. Sargent considers Nixon and (although to a lesser extent), Kissinger as too rigid, and as too focused on the Cold War. He highlights President Jimmy Carter's (and, as importantly, Brzezinski's) slow adaptation to fast changing realities and pre-existing constraints.

In chapters 4 and 5, Sargent documents the significance of the global recession on American diplomacy in the aftermath of the oil embargo. Problems included U.S. dependence on international trade, access to foreign resources and investments, and the resulting high inflation in the United States. His presentation is capacious. He offers illuminating diagrams on U.S. balance of payments, interest rates, flows of private capital, and federal funds, alongside the decline of the dollar. Interestingly, to illuminate the roots of the crisis, Sargent goes back to the 1971 Tehran Agreement. By giving Persian Gulf States a larger ratio of revenue, it significantly raised the price of oil, well before the traditional launching of this crisis in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

Chapter 7 on human rights diplomacy during *détente* is particularly instructive. Sargent cogently stresses the leading role of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. As the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in 1975-1976, he advocated a moral agenda and debating tyranny in the international arena. Moynihan faced totalitarian regimes—mostly Communist, and some from the developing world—that denied their citizens basic rights. Simultaneously, however, representatives of these adversaries used democratic discourse and procedural techniques to impose their will on the UN General Assembly, and, (to a lesser extent, given the veto powers of Western permanent members, the U.S., Britain, and France) on the Security Council. Moynihan, moreover, often acted independently from Kissinger. Moynihan's vantage point was that of the universal applicability of human rights. He lambasted murderous dictators such as Uganda's Idi Amin. Moynihan also staunchly defended Israel and activists such as Andrei Sakharov in the Soviet Union. Kissinger, by contrast, focused on strategic needs. Thus, he was more favorable to pro-American authoritarian regimes, prioritizing *détente* and stability over the plight of oppressed minorities and imprisoned persons (198-201).

Sargent seamlessly moves analysis to congressional scrutiny, testimonies, and legislation on transnational concerns. Coverage includes the 1973 Fraser Hearings on human rights conditions worldwide in the House of

Representatives, and the 1975 Harker Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act that prohibited economic assistance to any country that commits gross human rights violations unless it can be shown that the aid will directly benefit the poor and needy. Particularly interesting are the struggles between idealist internationalists such as Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy and Cold Warrior Neoconservatives such as Senator Henry (Scoop) Jackson. Both were Democrats—the former from Mass., the latter from Washington—but had divergent agendas. (201-206). Sargent then ties these threads by highlighting Kissinger’s growing focus on human rights as a tool of U.S. foreign policy and related State Department activities amid the prowess of non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International (206-209). These issues blended in the negotiations with the Soviets at the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe in the mid and early 1970s. The CSCE tried to reconcile the two seemingly irreconcilable concepts of international order: superpowers controlling countries within their bloc, on the one hand, and interdependence, sometimes even independence, of weaker states, on the other (209-220).

The resulting “Helsinki Paradox” (216-217) involved a border-piercing (primarily Western) agenda accentuating the promotion and protection of collective and individual human rights, contradicted by the desire (primarily Soviet) for the continuity of the primacy of sovereignty, borders, and noninterference. According to Sargent, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act seemed like significant Western concession to continued Soviet domination in Eastern Europe in exchange for meaningless promises for universal human rights principles. Instead, these embedded norms quickly became a rallying cry for activists like Czechoslovakia’s Vaclav Havel behind the Iron Curtain. Similarly, Sargent highlights how, to Kissinger’s surprise and chagrin, congressional advocates used the Helsinki Final Act to affect U.S. foreign policy (219-220).

Had Kissinger—otherwise a master of diplomatic history, especially of nineteenth-century Europe, drawing constant lessons from it for contemporary application—thought about President Woodrow Wilson, and the Irreconcilables Republicans who opposed multilateral commitments in the aftermath of the 1919 Versailles Treaties, he would not have been amazed. Regrettably, Sargent does not make that connection, either, although he does continually appreciate the linkage between the intricacies of domestic politics and the formation of foreign policy. Disappointingly, perhaps astonishingly, Wilson is only mentioned once in this book. On that occasion, Sargent compares his and Nixon’s sense of realism (47).

Sargent continues chapter 7 with the 1975/6 demise (he calls it “eclipse,” 220) of détente due to Soviet intervention through sending Cuban troops, which was countered by South Africa and by the CIA, in the Angolan civil war. He concludes this chapter with a fine analysis of how foreign policy, in general, and support for human rights, in particular, informed and affected the evolution of the 1976 presidential election campaign, from that of Ronald Reagan through Gerald Ford, and especially Jimmy Carter (222-228).

The last substantive chapter, 9, is intriguingly called “The Revenge of Geopolitics.” Indeed, geopolitics is the main theme of this book. This portion is a splendid testament to Sargent’s erudition, especially to his capacity to see both the micro-trees and the macro-forest in studying multiple, intertwined economic, strategic, and regional subjects during the Cold War. He also marshals statistics, data, and useful quotes to explain Carter’s difficulties with the Soviets, the Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and Iran.

Sargent’s elucidation is twofold. He both recreates the fast-paced events of the late 1970s, as well as interprets the strengths and (more noticeably) the weakness of the Carter administration in its problematic handling of its concurrent problems. Sargent appreciates Carter’s only-partially self-inflicted poor timing for a vision that would have been more fitting for the post-Cold War era. He also cogently and concisely concludes in an

elegant sentence worth repeating: Carter’s “problem was not the absence of strategic thinking but that strategy itself proved, in the end, to be unequal to the innate complexity of a tumultuous and transformative decade.” (295)

To be sure, few books are perfect. As mentioned above, Sargent relies on the perspectives of Brzezinski and Kissinger in an otherwise a critical academic treatise. The memoirs of these leading statesmen of that era naturally offer self-interested narratives in depicting important tales. Sargent, not infrequently, follows pages of nuanced and well-researched analysis with a synthetic paragraph that is not fully supported by evidence. Thus, unnecessary declaratory sentences occur repeatedly. Few of many examples concern the looming of “Nixon’s shadow” (220); a list of obstacles for America in 1977 (245); and a generalization that subsumed (or confused) British practical control over Egypt from the late nineteenth century with subsequent British conquest, and formal rule over Iraq and Palestine (141).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, methodologically, this book is much easier to understand backwards, namely retroactively rather than prospectively. Indeed many of events in the 1970s, when seen through the prism of history, too often take on an aura of inevitability. The reality is, however, that most, if not all, of the occurrences, were far from predetermined. Sargent begins the text by mentioning 1979 as a seminal year, professionally, academically, and personally. How domestic U.S. politics and international diplomacy shaped up by 1979 was hardly foreseeable, much less pre-determined in 1970. The sad fate of the Shah’s regime in Iran is a fine example.

All in all, this is book to read on this era.