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# FACES



CONSTANCY AND CHANGE IN

# OF

UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY



# POWER



FROM TRUMAN TO OBAMA

# SEYOM BROWN

THIRD EDITION

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Constancy and Change in United States  
Foreign Policy from Truman to Obama

SEYOM BROWN

THIRD EDITION



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## PREFACE

**T**HIS BOOK IS THE LATEST installment of my continuing effort to discover and analyze the basic assumptions held by the top U.S. policy makers since the end of World War II about the country's international interests and purposes and about the power of the United States to protect and further them: What, in the eyes of these officials, has been at stake? How have they prioritized U.S. interests and assessed the threats and opportunities implicating those interests? And why have they—particularly these twelve presidents—taken (or avoided) certain actions that defined the course of U.S. foreign policy?

The presidential-level concerns and decisions I have selected for analysis have all been defining moments for U.S. foreign policy. Although my exposition proceeds sequentially from the start of the Truman administration through the first two-thirds of the Obama administration, it does not purport to be a full history of this period's foreign policy. Nor is it my objective to determine whether and when the decisions have been right or wrong—though occasionally I cannot resist the temptation to point out fundamental contradictions and distortions of reality, particularly when prevailing assessments of other powers' intentions or capabilities were way off base. In coming to such judgments, I have been informed by the works of other scholars of the period—especially John Lewis Gaddis, Melvin Leffler,

Thomas Patterson, Robert Dallek, William Taubman, Walter LaFeber, and Marc Trachtenberg. My own research for this volume, however, as reflected in its interpretive narrative, has been directed mainly toward discovering the assumptions about the capabilities and intentions of other governments and significant political actors that have been *in the minds of those who have guided the international relations of the United States* as they chose or rejected certain courses of action—not whether these assumptions were correct or wrongheaded.

The principal questions guiding my research and writing: As the highest U.S. officials made their foreign policy decisions, how weighty were geostrategic considerations as distinct from economic calculations? Were certain policies undertaken and others rejected because of moral considerations? To what extent did domestic politics—garnering congressional support, anticipating the next election, dealing with turf battles among agencies—affect the priority given to certain international interests over others? What about the emotional factors (concerns about appearing weak or strong; willingness to admit and correct mistakes; risk-taking propensities) that inevitably creep into even the supposed rational calculus and conduct of national security policy?

And how can one know with any degree of confidence what the presidents and their key advisers were thinking when making moment-of-truth decisions? Memoirs, interviews, recorded telephone conversations, “Wikileaks” of official cables and e-mails, declassified memoranda of inter-agency meetings—all of these, along with the thick trail of public pronouncements and papers—are aids in the effort to “get into the heads” of the top policy makers. Admittedly, however, they are hardly conclusive as even the recollections of the responsible officials and their closest advisers are often self-serving reconstructions. A partial remedy is to make sure to at least read the memoirs of those who have been opponents on major issues.

So this is, yes, an impressionistic interpretation. But it is offered by someone who has been professionally and closely attentive—as scholar, think-tank analyst, and participant in the policy process—to the pertinent official deliberations during a good part of the era covered by this narrative.

My effort is at the same time modest and immodest.

I offer no dramatic, previously secret revelations. Most of the public papers, memoirs, published interviews, and other primary sources, including a trove of now-declassified archival material—that I have explored can

also be accessed by lay readers of this book. In addition, I rely on and cite authoritative works by other historians, political scientists, and journalists who have meticulously mined the relevant archives.

My intended contribution is to connect the dots (or splotches) already out there, so to speak, to discover the underlying but sometimes unarticulated worldviews and philosophies of U.S. foreign policy that were held by the key decision makers and determined their major moves. In comparing my interpretive characterizations of the assumptions driving U.S. foreign policy across twelve presidencies with the narratives of scholars and journalists who have concentrated on particular administrations and who have assiduously probed the archival materials, I have been gratified to learn that most of my interpretations in previous editions are strongly supported by subsequent archival and declassified materials, and this has encouraged me to publish early interpretations of the foreign policies of recent and ongoing administrations even before much of the record is declassified and thoroughly analyzed by fellow researchers. For although some of this early analysis of what the president and other high officials had in mind is conjectural and can be prefaced by the phrase “it appears to me that,” I write convinced that it is important for the attentive public to engage in serious deliberation—before all the evidence is in—over the basic assumptions that seem to be underlying the country’s actions abroad and that addressing such assumptions will make for more informed debates and, hopefully, better policies.

Those of us working in this field—historians, political scientists, serious journalists—know that even the previously confidential or secret statements by officials about the motives for their decisions are necessarily incomplete. Between the explanations by officials and their observed behavior there often remains a hazy area: the articulated premises do not lead inevitably to the actions taken, nor can one infer the premises backward from the particular actions. Some of the crucial considerations remain unarticulated, not necessarily out of an official design to hide them but just as much because actions by governments, like actions by individuals, are often the result of conditioned responses, of preprogramming, in which the actor “knows” what to do but is unable to summon to consciousness all of the reasons.

Thus the search for the determinative policy assumptions cannot stop with public documents, archival materials, or directly elicited interview material. It must go behind the words and between the lines to seek out the most crucial premises—those that do in fact make the difference at forks

in the road. The effort is not so much a science as it is an art, a collective art involving the sharing of information and insights among analysts and practitioners alike about the considerations prevailing at critical junctures.

My informational and intellectual debts are therefore quite large. In addition to the standard primary sources in the public record and the published memoirs of policy officials, I have drawn on archival-based histories of the administrations under scrutiny and on various excellent “insider” accounts by Washington journalists. Much of my interpretation of these materials, however, is the product of informal and “off-the-record” exchanges over the years with a great number of individuals who have been involved in the policy process as policy makers or consultants to the responsible policy makers.

Having stated my indebtedness to others in these general terms, I would like to be excused from specifically identifying here all those from whom I have obtained useful ideas and information in oral discussion. I have two main reasons (in addition to preserving the confidentiality of some of the exchanges): First, the acknowledgment ritual can too easily become an attempt to legitimate one’s claim to the truth by name-dropping. Second, acknowledgment lists are hazardous to friendships and cordial associations. Somebody is going to be left out, and no subsequent apologies will remove the suspicion that this was an invidious exclusion. The only way around this risk for a book like this, which is based on hundreds of interchanges, would be to include all the names in my old Rolodexes and the current contact list on my computer. (Perhaps I flatter myself that those excluded would care, but I do not wish to carry the burden of that anxiety.)

I do, however, want to express special appreciation to the individuals who gave me invaluable help in the research and editing phases of putting together this updated version of the book: Sanjeev Kumar, a doctoral candidate in economics at Southern Methodist University, who became *my* mentor when it came to understanding the economic assumptions and controversies that affected the foreign policies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and three very smart and resourceful research assistants—Lily Gebru, April Zinober, Ryan Swick—whose skill in using digital information resources largely compensated for my anachronistic search methods.

A note on the expository form and style: Some of the policy deliberations and events are presented in greater detail than others. The detailed episodes are usually those around which there has been considerable controversy—among decision makers or policy analysts—over contending

policy options and the reasons certain ones were finally selected. For the especially controversial actions (or decisions not to act), my narrative delves more extensively into the nuances of the various options being considered and the texture of the debates they generated at the highest levels. In many instances, the nuances and texture symptomatic of the underlying assumptions have been especially well captured in newspaper reports and interviews close in time to the unfolding events, and where this has been the case, I have retained my original rendering of the policy story rather than revise it retrospectively with more recent source material.

The result—in places, journalistic-type accounts of who said what to whom; in other places, hermeneutic exegeses of presidential statements; in still other places, philosophical ruminations as to the implications for America's role in the world—could pose an insurmountable challenge to a book editor. But not to my editor, Anne Routon and her staff at Columbia University Press and Ben Kolstad and his staff at Cenveo Publisher Services whose precise attunement to the purposes of my efforts provided me with just the kind of guidance I sought and needed. If and where the narrative flows, it is mainly the result of their felicitous channeling. Where it may bog down, my stubborn pedantry is the cause.

Finally, I come to what some readers might think is the author's pro forma acknowledgment of spousal support. Far from it. Those who have read Vanda Felbab-Brown's own work or have had intellectual exchanges with her will know that my statement of professional indebtedness to her for keen critiques of both the structure and empirical substance of the analysis is hardly the stuff of marital obligation. It is rather the gratitude of one who has been privileged to have his insights sharpened and deepened by testing them out on an extraordinary mind.



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## FACES OF POWER





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# INTRODUCTION

## *Constancy and Change Since World War II*

Nixon and I wanted to found American foreign policy on a sober perception of permanent national interest.

—HENRY A. KISSINGER

**S**INCE THE COUNTRY'S FOUNDING, all U.S. foreign policy officials have been required, by oath of office and politically, to serve the three-dimensional irreducible national interest: the physical survival and safety of the nation, its economic well-being, and the perpetuation of the American way of life—in the familiar words, “to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” This obligation, enshrined in the nation's laws and traditions of public service, which most high officials have striven to fulfill, has been the principal source of the constancy in U.S. foreign policy from Harry S. Truman to Barack H. Obama.

Yet this obligation to serve the irreducible national interest leaves a great deal open. Its implementation varies with changing perceptions of international and domestic conditions and according to differing definitions of the country's physical safety, economic well-being, and political liberty. Also, crises can occur that require prioritizing and making trade-offs among safety, well-being, and liberty—at least temporarily. Presidents will be besieged in such situations by political advisers concerned about congressional reactions to and electoral consequences of the particular trade-offs being considered, and the resulting foreign policy decisions may not be fully consonant with, let alone derived from, the irreducible national interest.

Nor do the foreign policy officials in noncrisis situations or periods of relative international quiescence necessarily make decisions with forethought and deliberation or systematically—that is, with objectifiable criteria and shared methodologies for assessing the conditions and evaluating the costs and benefits of alternative policies. Often policies are formulated and implemented intuitively (“by the seat of the pants”) or by default (where nondecisions allow programs already in place to keep running). Indeed, in the absence of crises that demand intense and focused attention at the presidential level, policy outcomes are often the product of lower-level bureaucratic politics (contests for ascendancy and funds among agencies with overlapping responsibilities) and congressional authorizations and appropriations responsive to interest-group pressures more than to informed deliberations about the national interest.

The resulting pattern of constancy and change in U.S. foreign policy is briefly summarized below. Subsequent chapters provide a closer, administration-by-administration look at the principal policy choices, the debates surrounding these choices, and the assumptions on which the key decisions were based.

## THE BASIC PATTERN

United States foreign policy from Harry Truman to Barack Obama has comprised responses to two very different worlds: the world of the Cold War, perceived from Washington as essentially bipolar in its alignments and antagonisms, and the world since the Cold War, perceived as loosely multipolar—even as the Ukraine crisis of 2014 generated US-Russian tensions reminiscent of the Cold War. Although each of these basic configurations has been seen, sometimes quite differently, through the lenses of the successive administrations and by factions within each administration, the contrasts between the Cold War and post-Cold War period are profound enough to be regarded as different eras. Some policy makers and analysts also regard the period since September 11, 2001, or the period of upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East starting in the winter of 2010–11, as new eras. Whether seen as a new era or not, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the so-called Arab Awakening (or Arab Spring) spawned new divisions in the U.S. policy community over which threats and opportunities must be urgently tended to and the appropriate tools for doing so.

## THE COLD WAR IMPERATIVES

Throughout most of the four decades following the defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II, U.S. officials considered the irreducible interest in all three of its dimensions (the country's survival, its economic well-being, and its basic liberties) to be in jeopardy from the Soviet Union. The Soviet leaders were seen to be devotees of a way of life antithetical to the fundamental values of the American nation and bent on imposing their system on the world. But it was widely assumed that a major war to stop the Soviets would also place the irreducible national interest in jeopardy.

Under eight presidents, these fears sustained the twin imperatives of containing Soviet expansion without starting World War III. This meant the highest priority was to be given to policies for (1) dissuading the Soviet Union from attempting to enlarge its territorial sphere of control, especially by military means or intimidation through military superiority, and (2) strengthening the ability of other countries to resist Soviet aggression and pressure.

The major debates within the U.S. foreign policy community during the Cold War were rarely about these overriding objectives. Even before the end of World War II, a consensus coalesced within the Truman administration around the necessity of maintaining a *balance of power* vis-à-vis the Soviets that would dissuade them from expansionist moves. But, as will be elucidated throughout this narrative, there were substantial differences among and within the administrations over the definition of “power” and its ingredients and thus also over the appropriate “balance” of power in any situation. These differences were central to many of the foreign policy issues that preoccupied the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan administrations—issues concerning

- the size and kind of military establishment to keep in being, and the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. grand strategy;
- where to draw the line against Soviet expansion—everywhere around the world or only selectively where major U.S. geostrategic interests were in clear and present danger;
- under what circumstances the resort to force was warranted;
- how best to take advantage of the emergent Sino-Soviet split; and
- the extent to which, and by what means, the United States should attempt to affect internal developments within other countries, particularly developments that might result in Marxist governments.

My exposition of the constancy and change in U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War era (from Truman to Reagan) is largely the story of the debates over these issues between the administrations and their critics, and among factions within the administrations, and how they were resolved at the presidential level.

A marked discontinuity in the story appeared early in the administration of George Herbert Walker Bush with the demise of the Cold War. No longer did the irreducible national interest demand that primary and continuing attention be given to countering Soviet expansion while preventing World War III. Without this objective providing a lodestar for navigating international waters, U.S. officials seemed to be suddenly disoriented. And they found themselves buffeted by strange and turbulent currents not on their navigational charts.

### THE POST-COLD WAR PROBLEM OF ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES

With the end of the Cold War, the connections between particular international developments and the irreducible national interest—never that easy to pin down—became more elusive than ever. Without an identifiable primary threat to the country's security and well-being, the question of which developments abroad were important enough for the U.S. government to attempt to influence became a major issue in itself.

Pundits called for a new “vision” or “grand strategy” for U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era to create generally understood criteria for establishing priorities among international undertakings, particularly those competing for scarce resources. It again became politically popular—more so than at any time since the start of World War II—to argue that U.S. foreign policy henceforth should be constrained by a strict definition of national self-interest. The strict definition would thrust the burden of advocacy, case by case, onto those who would have the country devote resources to furthering the security or well-being of other nations, let alone of humankind as a whole.

The Gulf War to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, justified by President George H. W. Bush as necessary for the “new world order” of revived respect for national borders, was an anomaly. The disorder of disintegrating states like the former Yugoslavia (previously held together by the communist dictator Tito) and failed or failing states (mainly in postcolonial

Africa) was not deemed a sufficient threat to vital U.S. interests. “We don’t have a dog in that fight,” Secretary of State James A. Baker is reported to have argued, defending the reluctance of the United States to intervene to stop the ethnic cleansing (a euphemism for genocide) in the Balkans.

But departing from his supposed “realist” stance, President Bush, late in his White House tenure, did deploy a supposedly temporary emergency force of 28,000 troops to Somalia solely for the purpose of ensuring that UN humanitarian relief convoys could pass through roads blocked by feuding warlords. The uncompleted mission, under the aegis of the Clinton administration, was expanded to include broader and more complicated peacemaking functions. However, when U.S. forces began to suffer casualties, President Clinton pulled them out.

While wary of putting U.S. troops in harm’s way, the Clinton administration’s globalist foreign policy was all over the place. A vaguely formulated universalistic doctrine called “enlargement” justified a vigorous push to globalize the free market. National security strategy documents issued over the president’s signature claimed the right, if not the duty, to intervene around the world to protect people against human rights abuses by governments. Friends on one issue would be adversaries on another issue. Alliances would be fickle, yet NATO was enlarged, weakening it as a security institution but reviving Russian fears of encirclement. Multilateralism and support for the United Nations was proclaimed; however, after the pacification fiasco in Somalia, the United States instituted strict conditions on its participation in future multilateral peacekeeping operations.

Ad hoc justifications more than principle produced military action to stanch ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo and a decision not to intervene to stop the genocide in Rwanda. Even the Clinton administration’s vigorous military response to Saddam Hussein’s expulsion of the UN’s WMD inspectorate was a one-off reaction, not a *démarche* derived from a grand strategy on WMD proliferation.

## 9/11 AND THE PRIMACY OF THE WAR ON TERROR

Then came the shock of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on the Twin Towers in Manhattan and on the Pentagon. More than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, there was a felt need at the highest levels to put first things first—to prioritize U.S. interests and to derive particular policies from them. The country was under direct attack. This

was war: a “war on terror.” While some critics objected to that formulation, arguing that the terrorists were criminals and should be countered with beefed-up police action, President George W. Bush insisted on subordinating just about everything to fighting what he never stopped calling a “war on terror”—a war that justified militarily invading two countries, neither of which had militarily attacked the United States. And as his definition of the prime objective of his foreign policy morphed into the Freedom Agenda for opposing tyranny around the world, still it was the quest for allies in the war on terror that dictated who would be friends or enemies and who would receive the bulk of U.S. economic and security assistance.

Finding it necessary to subordinate the Freedom Agenda to the short-term necessities of counterterrorism, the Bush administration attempted to assemble various “coalitions of the willing,” often containing some quite autocratic bedfellows, to maintain advantageous balances of power—regional and global—against al-Qaeda and other radical jihadist movements. This adaptation of the Freedom Agenda to presumed geopolitical realities was openly admitted in the last three years of the Bush administration and was particularly evident in the U.S.–Middle Eastern partnerships with the regimes in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan.

The Obama administration, also committed to the global spread of democracy and human rights, inherited the complex international webs of counterterrorist partnerships with various unsavory regimes. Although initially motivated to move U.S. policy away from the war on terror preoccupation and determined to give new emphasis to arresting the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the problem of global warming, and the alleviation of poverty around the world, Obama found that the threat of terrorist attacks was very much alive and that effective counterterrorism continued to require partnerships with autocratic governments with poor human rights records.

Yet the partnerships constructed for prosecuting the war on terror were very different from the basic partnerships constructed for prosecuting the Cold War. During the Cold War, allies were expected to follow the U.S. lead across a wide range of issues, especially those related to countering the power of the Soviet-led coalition. By the fall of 2001, the pattern of world politics, no longer essentially bipolar, had become polyarchic in that, typically, one’s friend on one set of issues might well be one’s adversary on other issues. Even a traditionally loyal NATO partner, Germany, for example, might well pursue quite different strategies from the United States toward key countries in the Middle East. If the United States were

to insist on across-the-board loyalty on all issues, it would have hardly any allies at all, even for the war on terror.

Accordingly, George W. Bush's early post-9/11 stance—either you're with us or you're with the terrorists—soon gave way to a more pragmatic accommodation to the emergent polyarchic diversity, despite the uncompromising rhetoric of his Freedom Agenda. The next president, Barack Obama, made the more flexible approach the centerpiece of his foreign policy and gave it a name: engagement.

## REALISM AND THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

Some of the variations in U.S. foreign policy since World War II have been a function of changing views in Washington about the extent to which, and how, the country should be committed to promoting democracy, human rights, and well-being around the world. The extremes on this issue are represented by the realpolitik notion that morality and altruism have no place in international relations and by the contrary conviction that it is the divinely given mission of the United States of America to root out evil in the world. For the most part, however, the dominant views among influential policy makers have fluctuated across a range considerably short of these extremes.

The greatest controversies surround policies of moral intent whose likely consequences for the irreducible national interest are highly ambiguous or unpredictable. And altruistic policies have been rejected in cases in which it was evident their costs or effects would seriously undermine the ability of the United States to secure the safety and well-being of its own people.

Policies for protecting peoples in other countries against repression or for advancing their economic well-being have generally commanded widespread support when they reinforced policies for securing the irreducible national self-interest of the United States. The country's foreign policy leadership feels most secure with the electorate when it can satisfy the popular view of the United States as a country doing good for others while doing good for itself. Thus, officials of the Truman administration championed the United Nations, the Truman Doctrine, the European Recovery Program, and aid to the Third World as being consistent with American idealism as well as self-interest. John Foster Dulles preached anticommunism as a universal moral imperative. President Kennedy, unsentimental realist he is supposed to have been, proposed that the United States



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