A Reckoning for the Field

By Graydon Dennison
PhD Candidate, Temple University
Assistant Editor, *Diplomatic History*

Seventy-seven to twenty-nine. This lopsided score, which, at a glance, one might think was from an uneven college basketball game, reflects a divide within our field. Specifically, these numbers represent a striking chronological emphasis in recent historical scholarship published among historians of the United States in the world. Emily Conroy-Krutz, in her 2022 Bernath Lecture for the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), cited this statistic as evidence how SHAFR's journal *Diplomatic History* has published more than twice as many manuscripts on the 1970s as the entire pre-1898 period since 2010.[1] These numbers reflect an infatuation with the post-1945 era that many within the field have recognized but failed to overcome. But why are historians of the United States in the world so obsessed with studying post-1945 topics? Likewise, why is this periodization so important? This chronological fixation, though often supported by a steady stream of newly declassified records, holds a host of potential problems. It runs the risk of telling the story of U.S. foreign relations as one that emerged out of World War II. It has the danger of making U.S. power—and empire—seem like recent phenomena with little connection to developments of previous centuries. When not contextualized or supported by broader analysis, this focus siloes the nineteenth and eighteenth (and the early twentieth) centuries as periods of historical aberrations or, worse, isolationism.

Lumped in with the periodization fix is concern over the historical actors under study. The cultural and transnational turns furnished studies of U.S. foreign affairs with a wide array of themes, theories, and concepts designed to enhance our understanding of past decisions and actions. Gender, race, and class feature prominently here—but so have the roles of nonstate, and non-U.S., actors in the development of American diplomacy and power. But in their provocative and popular essay "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall—two titans in the field—argue that the field needs to bring the U.S. state, and the actors traditionally at the center of decision-making, back to the core of studies relating to the United States in the world. Though they acknowledge the value of nonstate actors and a transnational lens, Bessner and Logevall believe the field has gone too far astray from

[1] Emily Conroy-Krutz, "What is a Missionary Good for Anyway?: Foreign Relations, Religion, and the Nineteenth Century," *Diplomatic History* 46, no. 3 (June 2022): 437.

the chief sources of U.S. diplomacy, that being the executive, legislative, and judicial apparatus of the U.S. state.[2] Again, their analysis lays only in the post-1945 period. Further, it collides with Conroy-Krutz's call to keep studying the nonstate actors who were prime movers of American foreign policy well before and after 1945. In Conroy-Krutz's case, it is missionaries that were there through wars, acquisitions, and administrative changes that defined U.S. interactions with the wider world. In studying missionaries, and breaking down the barriers of strict periodization, Conroy-Krutz believes we can trace how continuity, rather than change, defines most of U.S. diplomatic history.[3] Other historians have said similar things about merchants, settlers, soldiers, or corporate figures in their attempts to understand U.S. force and diplomacy on a wide spectrum from the eighteenth century down to the present. That said, the increasing prevalence of studies that focus exclusively on the past few decades and the calls for a return to more traditional approaches begs attention from our scholarly community.

"But why are historians of the United States in the world so obsessed with studying post-1945 topics?...This focus siloes the nineteenth and eighteenth (and the early twentieth) centuries as periods of historical aberrations or, worse, isolationism."

So how can we square these two divergent approaches? How can we, as a scholarly community, rethink periodization and our historical actors? A good start would be to reexamine our tendency to strictly periodize the history of U.S. foreign relations. Our work often falls into chronological categories—colonial period and early republic, the long nineteenth century, and post-1945 to name a few. These categories serve a purpose in joining scholarship on a certain time period, for cultural mores, power dynamics, and historical actors change over time. As historians, we are interested in turning points and forces of historical change. However, this periodization, when unchecked, traps historians into focusing almost exclusively on one time period, seeing it as distinctive and putting other eras into silos. As Conroy-Krutz points out in her Bernath Lecture, this has become a problem for historians studying the twentieth century, and specifically those fixated on the post-1945 period, where chances for richer histories with new questions are left on the table in lieu of studies that see U.S. power and foreign affairs as uniquely different since 1945.[4] Bessner and Logevall wish to return to seeing U.S. state actors as the straw that stirred the proverbial drink during the Cold War and thereafter. But why is this the case? Sure, the United States exercised an unprecedented level of hard and soft power in the postwar years. This is especially true of its military power as it sought armed primacy over the world in the name of *pax Americana*.[5] But, as some historians have noted, this power and influence was not created in a vacuum. Nor was it entirely unique to the history of the

[2] Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 39, 40–41.
[3] Conroy-Krutz, "What is a Missionary Good for Anyway?," 439.
[4] Ibid., 441.
[5] See: Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2019), esp. 278–316; David Vine, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York: Macmillan, 2015).

United States in the world. American power did not emerge in 1945 and neither did its interests in matters the world over.[6] Much of what the United States has done in the realms of force and diplomacy since World War II have roots in its actions well before that turning point—a hinge conflict the field has given so much weight to. By continuing to free ourselves of the periodization barrier, we can better understand the long history of the United States in the world and center that understanding on themes rather than eras. For example, we can trace American imperialism and racial paternalism across centuries as well as matters of economic or military policy and cultural diplomacy from time periods often overlooked by scholars of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy.

"American power did not emerge in 1945 and neither did its interests in matters the world over. Much of what the United States has done in the realms of force and diplomacy since World War II have roots in its actions well before that turning point…"

One of the most important themes to uncover in this retreat from recency bias is that U.S. power has taken on a hegemonic character since well before 1945. Just ask a scholar of Latin America, Asia, or even the North American continent. In none of these instances did the United States not "exert a major (and often) decisive impact," as Bessner and Logevall would say about the post-1945 world.[7] Painting with this broader brush exposes the second major theme: how continuity, rather than simply change, defines the history of the U.S. role in the world. For instance, historians have charted how the young republic, though relatively weaker than the empires surrounding it, carved a path for its commercial penetration of global markets and its mastery over the continent. Even prior to the Declaration of Independence, settlers served as important power brokers on the borderlands of North American empires and used such leverage to take Great Britain—the most powerful of these empires—to task for their restrictions on the settlers' drive to seize land and kill Indigenous peoples. The settlers ultimately prevailed in this struggle, using their position "among the powers of the earth" to spread their nation to the west, south, and north.[8] Though not unchallenged—from either Indigenous peoples or other rival powers—the United States soon supplanted all other suitors for primacy over the continent. From the first excursions over the Proclamation Line, to the Louisiana Purchase, the ultra-imperialistic war with Mexico, and the last wars with Native American nations,

[6] See: David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020); Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2006); George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: American Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and A.G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[7] Bessner and Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the History of American Foreign Relations," 40.

[8] Many studies elucidate these points. Some of the best ones include: Eliga Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Paul Mapp, *The Elusive West and the Contest for Empire, 1713–1753* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

the United States came to subjugate a territory that one scholar has taken the liberty to define as unmatched "in breadth and scope." This aggrandizement may have "operated from the bottom," but the state almost always backed it.[9] Through force, finance, and diplomacy, the U.S. state rolled with its citizens who pushed the bounds of British, French, Spanish, Mexican, Russian, and Native American (yes, they were foreign nations) territories to subsume them under one flag—a position that gave the United States the wealth and strategic positioning to continue its hegemonic pursuits into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The pattern becomes ever more apparent when one looks further abroad. In nearby Latin America, U.S. power colored international affairs from the mid-nineteenth century. The ambitions of both private citizens and the U.S. government came to place the region firmly in the crosshairs of this new empire. The government was interested in the rich sugar trade of Cuba as well as the prospects for an interoceanic canal at Panama. Both enterprises would shore up the nation's aspiring position in global commerce and shelter its expansion from external threat. Corporations came to dominate the former and the U.S. government, through treaties and the ever looming threat of the Monroe Doctrine, kept rivals at bay in the case of the latter. Soon, determined filibusters, primed to expand their manifest destiny as well as the institution of slavery, created colonies throughout Latin America. Never permanent, these missions did bring the region further under U.S. influence, creating the image of the North American colossus in the minds of Latin Americans.[10] These incidences make the all too familiar story of the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War less of an aberration, as one prominent historian once called it, and more of a continuation of U.S. imperial hegemony that started on the continent and soon spread to the wider world.[11] That war, the spoils of which brought the United States sovereignty over Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, also convinced North Americans of the need to finally annex Hawai'i and build a Panama Canal on its own terms. These accomplishments, especially the dissection of Panama by 1914, gave the United States a base for power projection in both the Caribbean and Pacific and a platform from which to continue its economic exploitation of the mineral and resource wealth of the Western Hemisphere.

A look to Asia develops these ideas even further. Many scholars of the modern era focus on relatively recent affairs in the Middle East or with China, but these developments are neither strange nor unprecedented. Asia has been a critical center of U.S. foreign policy for centuries and the nation's involvement in Asian affairs has set the table for these current situations. The forced opening of Japan in the 1850s paved the way for a deluge of diplomatic overtures and commercial pressures that sought to make Asia the safety valve for American overproduction. Further, the acquisition of the Philippine Islands gave the United States an opportunity to pursue an "Open Door" in China and have a seat at the table in all matters Asian. When conflict continued throughout the archipelago, U.S. forces learned and adapted new counterinsurgency techniques they would later apply in places like Nicaragua, Haiti, and, to lesser effect,

[9] Walter Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1, 9.
[10] See: Robert May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854–1861* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002); Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Michel Gobat, *Empire by Invitation: William Walker and Manifest Destiny in Central America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
[11] Samuel Flagg Bemis, "The Great Aberration of 1898," in *A Diplomatic History of the United States* (New York: Holt, 1936).

Vietnam and Afghanistan.[12] Diplomatically, the United States brokered the 1905 peace between Russia and Japan and used its increasingly preponderant position in Asia to try to check Japanese encroachment on its allies' interests. When that failed, U.S. forces brought the weight of the nation's military and industrial might to bear in the destructive Asia-Pacific War, a process that, from 1941 onward, won the United States a position, both in territory and dollars, to exact influence over the postwar Asian order.[13] This frame of reference places the United States at the heart of Asian affairs from well before 1945 and contextualizes the nation's fixation with the region ever since.

So, why the scholarly preoccupation with periodization, and specifically, with post-1945 studies? The United States was clearly never isolationist—a claim that risks being both ahistorical and Eurocentric. Likewise, U.S. power did not emerge in 1945, but rather developed gradually over the longue durée of the nation's drive to hegemony. Historical forces of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and, perhaps especially, the early twentieth centuries contributed greatly to the developments that animate scholars of the post-1945 ilk. The centrality of continuity, and not change, to studies of the United States in the world can only enrich our field. Broader analyses that focus less on strict periodization and, instead, on themes and concepts across a wider chronological lens could remedy the disparity highlighted by Conroy-Krutz. Sure, this may produce bigger books and longer articles. It may also move some scholars away from the cohort of modern historians that commands so much attention in field-specific journals. But those who take up the mantle may find value in the history they often leave on the table. In some cases, one will not even need to change archives.[14]

"Historical forces of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and, perhaps especially, the early twentieth centuries contributed greatly to the developments that animate scholars of the post-1945 ilk."

Dovetailed nicely with this issue is that of the historical actors we choose to frame our histories around. The cultural and transnational turns have guided scholarship since the 1980s. The result has been a bevy of books, articles, and volumes that has charged the historian with thinking about how certain mechanisms, such as race, gender, class, or ideology, informed past decisions and events. Even further, the field has adjusted to see U.S. force and diplomacy as not merely the object of Washington, but rather a complex set of forces involving multiple places and people. Those on the ground or at the margins—including the subaltern peoples the field used to see as merely "acted upon"—reveal much about the history of international relations. These actors, through their roles as agents, resistors, intermediaries, or delimiters of U.S. power, shed new light on past decisions and help flesh out our understanding of historical

[12] See: Brian McAllister Linn, *Guardians of Empire: The U.S. Army and the Pacific, 1902–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) and James Arnold, *The Moro War: How America Battled a Muslims Insurgency in the Philippine Jungle, 1902–1913* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

[13] See: Vine, *The United States of War*, esp. 153–193.

[14] The National Archives and Records Administration, Library of Congress, and plenty of university-sponsored archives—popular among historians of the post-1945 world—contain rich caches of material on different time periods. This leaves much room for novelty still.

developments.[15] A catchphrase of late has been the "nonstate actor," someone outside the purview of the state who shapes or reshapes how foreign policy is executed. These actors may be in the service of the state's mission or may use the state to further their ends (like settlers have many times over), but they differ from those traditionally seen as the prime movers of foreign policy, namely the president, his close advisors, or cabinet members at the center of decision-making. Nonstate actors, especially those who implemented or resisted foreign policy on the ground, help historians see the nuance and contingency so rife in historical events.

Bessner and Logevall wish to see us table studies of these influential nonstate actors for a return to more traditional understandings of foreign policy. Conroy-Krutz, however, represents a push within our field to consider the roles played by nonstate actors even more than we already do. In many instances, taking the plunge into these actors illuminates much about the formulation and implementation of U.S. force and diplomacy. Conroy-Krutz's missionaries were present in China, Japan, and throughout Latin America, spreading North American cultural mores and serving as the advance guard of U.S. penetration in these regions. The missionary, though motivated by their own religious goals, often felt connected to the overarching task of civilizing "others" and remaking societies in the image of the metropolitan culture. Consciously or not, missionaries informed decision makers of the progress made in these areas of interest and helped pave the way for further exploitation.

"Keeping an eye on these crucial [nonstate] actors only serves to enrich the field and provide it with more novel approaches to the history of the United States in the world."

Similar points are made about merchants and military men at the vanguard of empire. On the North American continent and abroad, these actors were important power brokers who planted the seeds of future conflict and negotiated a space for state actors to operate in. It proves difficult to understand U.S.-Latin American affairs without first understanding the United Fruit Company's endeavors and the responses of those the company displaced. Likewise, one will struggle to grasp U.S. exploits of force without studying those on the frontlines who often formed and reformed policy, no matter the side they fought for. More contemporary examples bear the same token. Private citizens in Panama provided intelligence and some of the muscle required to launch occupations of that republic throughout the twentieth century. Labor unions and professional technocrats took the pulse of U.S. modernization efforts in Latin America, Africa, and Asia during the tumultuous Cold War era. And, as is common knowledge now, oil corporations and private interest groups have fueled action in the Middle East for the better part of the past sixty years. Keeping an eye fixed on these crucial actors only serves to enrich the field and provide it with more novel approaches to the history of the United States in the world.

The twin issues of periodization and historical actors are obviously not new to the profession. Historians, like the ones mentioned in this piece, have spilled ink over the merits of various perspectives on the matter. But with calls to recenter state actors

[15] In the case of intermediaries and "middlemen" in the history of U.S. international relations, see: Eric Grynaviski, *America's Middlemen: Power at the Edge of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

and a chronological divide between practitioners still set around 1945, the field needs to further reckon with its priorities. With many forums available for such discussion, perhaps that reckoning will come sooner rather than later.