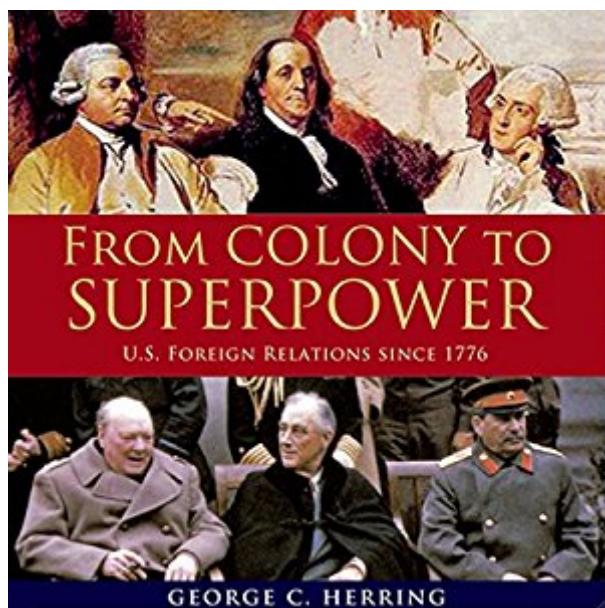


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From Colony To Superpower: US Foreign Relations Since 1776



Synopsis

A finalist for the 2008 National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, this prize-winning and critically acclaimed history uses foreign relations as the lens through which to tell the story of America's dramatic rise from 13 disparate colonies huddled along the Atlantic coast to the world's greatest superpower. Robert Fass narrates George C Herring's stunning history of successes and sometimes tragic failures with calm engagement, capturing the fast-paced narrative that illuminates the central importance of foreign relations to the existence and survival of the nation, and highlights its ongoing impact on the lives of ordinary citizens. From Colony to Superpower is the most recent volume in the peerless Oxford History of the United States, which was described by the Atlantic Monthly as "state of the art" and "the most distinguished series in American historical scholarship." Please note: The individual volumes of the series have not been published in historical order. From Colony to Superpower is number XII in The Oxford History of the United States.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Studying this book gives ample justification for the belief that the United States is an empire that is built upon the ashes of old empires. However unlike the empires of the past, the United States has through subtleness and tact caused many of its citizens to believe that empire-building is not only historically and economically justified, but also the morally proper thing to do. Even the use of military force, which has been used over and over again in US imperial adventures, is viewed as an ethical imperative, even "healthy to a nation," as Henry Cabot Lodge

is quoted as saying in this book. Other empires in history have been deemed “evil” for carrying out the same sort of actions that the US has indulged itself in for the last 200 years, and is continuing to do, albeit under the guise of “security” rather than under the banner of “extending civilization to lesser peoples abroad”. This book however is not a study in the psychology of mass hysteria, xenophobia and jingoism, but rather a detailed account of the policy-makers/plunderers who attempted to maneuver events to their benefit throughout American history. This story is not a pretty one, but readers who desire the raw, naked truth about US foreign policy will find sound scholarship in between the covers of this book. There is much more waiting to be uncovered when it comes to this aspect of US history, but the author gives a fairly unbiased account, and one that does not show any signs of being seduced by the doctrine of American exceptionalism or sycophancy to any political party. After finishing this book one can conclude with fairness that there does not seem to be any country in the world that has not been touched by US foreign policy. But even though the violence the US has deployed to attain its goals does not compare perhaps with other nations, many countries that showed promise for development and self-determination were decimated by the decisions made by weak-minded, ethically austere American government officials. Countries like Cuba, Chile, Haiti, Guatemala, and Vietnam come to the immediate forefront in the carnage, terror, and body count they experienced as the result of misguided US foreign policies, but there are many other places that have found themselves under the yoke of these policies. Newcomers to the history of American foreign policy may be surprised to hear for example of US presence in the Russian revolution, the US invasion of Mexico, or the attempts to force Japan into opening up its markets. The attempted control of the “weak and semi-barbarous people” delineated in this book has not only lead to disasters for the peoples trampled upon, but also for the United States. Using a pistol rather than rational persuasion has been viewed as the more intelligent alternative, and like other empires in the past, the United States is now feeling the burden of its loyalty to this alternative. It remains to be seen of course what country in the world will attempt to build upon the ashes of the American empire.

Herring presents ably a very long history (from 1776 to 2000) of US diplomacy in a relatively small space, and this is the major drawback of the book. Important events need to be treated in a very short space that is too small to really talk about the nuances. To give an example, liberation theology appears in a single sentence in the chapter on Reagan’s presidency as something

developed by radical priests "following principles set forth by Pope John XXIII" with gives short shrift to the role of the Catholic church in Central American politics and to liberation theology itself. A difficult topic that deserves a more nuanced treatment cannot receive it in a single volume. This problem shows up repeatedly. By having to concentrate on the US site, the narrative frequently glosses over big changes in the minor players of the drama be that the fall of the fourth republic and the coming of de Gaulle or the shift from Christian Democrat led government to Social Democrat led one in Germany. I am not sure about the quality of fact checking, but Egon Bahr was not Brandt's foreign minister (he was a secretary of state and the chancellery), but nevertheless the architect of his foreign policy. Did the May 1968 upheaval in France "helped to bring down de Gaulle"? He did resign in April 1969, but the Gaullist had won the election in June 1968. Again, lack of space prevents a nuanced description that needs to be given.

This is an interesting book that gives the history of US foreign policy from colonial days through 2007. It was a huge undertaking for this author. It flows well from era to era, giving a good sense of continuity. History often is taught as chunks of time with no transition from one generation to the next. This book avoids that pitfall. The author does a good job of explaining how the US was expanding territorially and commercially even during times in which the country had on the surface turned inward. I particularly liked learning how the US acquired our overseas possessions. For example, islands in the Pacific that we learn about when studying World War II were acquired much earlier, and this book explains how they came to be US possessions. The US expanded in many different ways. Early on it was treaties with European nations. There were treaties with or expulsion of native American tribes. We bought some land (Louisiana Purchase, Alaska, Gadsden Purchase), went to war to acquire others (the American Southwest from Mexico; and Florida, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Phillipines and Guam from Spain), and annexed others when enough Americans had moved there to influence those decisions (Texas, Hawaii). We helped create new countries when it was in our interest to do so (Panama broke away from Colombia and secured its independence by allowing the US to build a canal across the isthmus, earning the protection of the US). In more modern times, we established military bases in many countries around the world. We also have intervened much more than I realized in Central America and the Caribbean. The filibusters of the 1850's were very interesting. These were small groups of private people in the US, not affiliated with the government, who banded together to try to take over small, weak countries. They were usually from Southern States trying to find new areas to expand slavery. The author is fairly even handed with his criticisms of US presidents, and there are many criticisms. He gives credit where credit is

due, but these are much fewer than the criticisms. He is overall pretty critical of US foreign policy as a whole, and seems to only reluctantly recognize good works and humanitarian missions by the US in foreign affairs. He is quick to label almost all foreign activities as "imperial" even if it is simply trying to establish trade relations with another country. I understand the perspective that the US often had superior bargaining power and that once a country became a trading partner, they became dependent on the US. I bristle at the idea that expanding our trade creates an empire. Compared to other empires, most of which were intent on dominating people, the US must be viewed as almost benevolent. In this book, there is sometimes a sense that the US could do no right no matter what it chose to do. He is critical when the US intervenes to help a country and when the US chooses not to intervene. The author is far too fond of labeling people and policies as 'foolish.' He also repeatedly states that the fear of a Soviet threat was exaggerated or imagined without providing any details or rationale. The Soviets were very aggressive and imperialistic, and this book tends to downplay that. Despite my criticisms of the author's criticisms, I enjoyed the book. It is interesting how we as a nation can accept our past actions and presidents more easily once they are securely in our past. The author does a good job of showing how some like Adams, Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson and Truman were heavily criticized at the time, but are considered model presidents today. Will history be as forgiving to our most recent presidents, Clinton, Bush and Obama? When the book transitions from past history to recent history, it reads more like how I remember watching these things unfold on the evening news. It reminds me that today's current events are tomorrow's history, and that the way the story is told is how we will remember it forever.

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