

[H-Diplo Article Review 818 on Daniel J. Sargent, “Pax Americana: Sketches for an Undiplomatic History.”](#)

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Daniel J. Sargent. “Pax Americana: Sketches for an Undiplomatic History.”

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Review by **Daniel Immerwahr**, Northwestern University

Daniel Sargent is a superb historian, known for bringing rare clarity to complex topics of international politics. His book *A Superpower Transformed* interpreted the shocks of the 1970s from the perspective of the White House, showing how presidents and their advisers

felt their grip on the levers of power slip in that transformative decade.^[1] Now, zooming out, he offers a meditation not only on that dramatic rupture within postwar international relations but on the whole period from 1945 to the present. It has been a period marked by a 'structured hierarchy' in international relations, with the United States at the apex. This has been the time of the Pax Americana, and it is fast coming to an end.

The notion that the United States has been powerful and that its power is retreating is not novel. What is distinctive is Sargent's focus on the structural elements. The Pax Americana, in his understanding, is not defined by the United States' imperialistic attitude. It is defined rather by the primacy of the United States within a hierarchically organized international system. It can be seen in the dollar's use as the chief currency of global finance, in the diplomatic centrality of the United States to nearly every conflict on the planet, in the orchestrating role that the United States has played in the "diffusion of industrial modernity" worldwide (370).

Sargent announces that he does not seek to "debate whether the United States is an 'imperial' power" (358n10). Yet the main thrust of his essay can be best appreciated by comparing it to the position, frequently held among historians, that the United States is an empire because of its outsized ambition. The prominent historian Andrew Bacevich describes this as the "relentless personal quest" on behalf of inhabitants of the country "to acquire, to consume, to indulge, and to shed whatever constraints might interfere with those endeavors." This hunger for the fruits of the earth has led the United States to expand, Bacevich argues, "by any means necessary," including war and other forms of violent coercion.^[2] The country's drive to dominate, on this theory, explains much of the history of its foreign relations.

Sargent's understanding is strikingly different. The Pax Americana, he argues, was not the consequence of any particular character trait, either of the elite or the larger population. The United States "has been neither exceptionally virtuous, nor exceptionally vicious in the conduct of its foreign policy," he argues. "What the United States has been is exceptionally lucky" (362). That luck first took the form of the "outlandish endowments" that the United States has enjoyed—the result of historical happenstance such as the relative freedom that North Americans of European descent enjoyed from great power competition from the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries (362). The freakish abundance of the United States up to 1945 then allowed—strongly encouraged, even—the country to assume hegemonic functions after World War II, at the time when the present world system was being consolidated. "Americans surfed history's leading edge," Sargent writes (366). They caught the big wave at the right time.

Central to Sargent's argument is an understanding of 'hegemony' that is common within international relations circles. The hegemon in his understanding functions as the world-

orderer, the rules-setter. That the United States has played this role—first within the ‘free world’ and then, after 1991, on a nearly planetary scale—is undeniable. And yet, president after president has nevertheless denied it, presenting the country as simply one nation-state among others. This has led to what Sargent helpfully identifies as the “paradox of Pax Americana”: the United States “conducts its diplomatic relations on the basis of formal equality among sovereign states,” and yet at the same time it sets the institutional frame for all international relations. It is, using a sports metaphor, at once a competitor and the league commissioner.

When seen as merely a nation-state, the United States appears wildly aberrant. Why should this one country, out of all others, have some eight hundred overseas military bases, while all the other countries of the world combined have somewhere around thirty?^[3] Why should one country, out of all others, have its mother tongue spoken by the affluent and aspiring on every part of the planet? Why should this one country, out of all others, broadcast its music, televisions, and films all over the world? If you see the United States as just a nation-state, then it appears to be either an exceptionally great or an exceptionally rapacious one. Sargent rejects this all. Such features of the United States have to do not with its character but its structural position. Of a nation-state, they would be exceptional. Of a hegemon, however, they are perfectly normal.

Hegemony has not come for free. Sargent notes the costs of maintaining a military with a global ambit. These costs, we are learning, are not just economic. As historian Kathleen Belew has recently shown in *Bring the War Home*, they have also warped the United States’ domestic scene by encumbering it with the pathologies provoked by frequent and violent military engagement.^[4] Beyond the military, the United States has paid for the Pax regularly with its foreign aid and trade concessions. It has also at times borne burdens involved in maintaining the global currency.

But there have been benefits as well. The United States has enjoyed what France’s Finance Minister (and later its president) Valéry Giscard d’Estaing aptly called “exorbitant privilege” on the world stage.^[5] He was referring particularly to the centrality of the dollar in global finance, but the term applies equally to other perks of the Pax. The United States’ ways of doing things—from language to industrial protocols to cultural products—have been globally adopted. Its corporations, enjoying first-mover advantages, have benefited enormously from this. At the United States has had the privilege of picking winners and losers in global politics, tipping the balance in wars and negotiations. Its allies have had the wind at their backs, its enemies have faced serious headwinds.

Just how beneficial the Pax has been, however, is worth exploring. In the potted history offered here, Sargent notes that the institutions of the Pax were designed in the period immediately after the Second World War, when the material endowments of the United

States easily outstripped those of the other great powers. Yet as its economic lead has been lost in more recent decades, those institutions have grown increasingly unsteady. Washington has grown less and less able to pay the cost of the Pax, and voters have been less and less protected from the perceived burdens of it. The rise of the Pax-scoring Donald Trump is thus, in Sargent's understanding, not a freak event but the culmination of structural shifts long in the making.

Indeed, if there is a constant note in the cacophony of Trumpism, it is resentment of the burdens of the Pax Americana. Trump first stepped onto the political stage in the 1980s, complaining that the Japanese were exploiting U.S. largesse. "They come over here, they sell their cars, their VCRs. They knock the hell out of our companies," he complained on Oprah Winfrey's television show. Trump had a point. The United States had for decades forgone its short-term interest in its trade and aid with Japan in the hopes of turning its ally into a regional economic powerhouse. Japan's privileged place within the architecture of the Pax was an important reason why Japanese firms had grown to the point where they could outcompete U.S. rivals. Trump, dismissive of the Pax's benefits but keenly appreciative of its costs, regarded this as Japan taking advantage of the gullible United States. Winfrey was impressed, and she asked Trump if he would consider running for president on this message. "Probably not," Trump replied. "But I do get tired of seeing the country ripped off."^[6]

That feeling has changed little. Although Trump, as president, has fetishized U.S. military force, he has consistently turned against the international institutions that the United States has, for decades, designed and led. He has threatened to shutter military bases, cancel joint military exercises with allies, remove the United States from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and exit longstanding trade agreements. When asked to distill Trump's foreign policy, his advisers sketched a novel role for the United States, not as the head of a grand and sturdy coalition but as a defiant rogue power. "We're America, Bitches," is how one senior official articulated the Trump Doctrine.^[7]

This posturing, Sargent argues, should not come as a surprise. It is the death-rattle of the Pax Americana, the expression of an obsolescent institutional configuration. "Our mad king," Sargent writes, "appears to grasp a reality that has escaped many of us. An institutional order centered upon the singular capacities of the United States is today unsustainable." In exposing the structural crisis of the Pax Americana, Sargent continues, "Trump may be the world-historical figure of our times" (373).

This Hegelian flourish draws our attention to Trump, but Sargent is clear that the individual is himself of concern only insofar as an expression of the forces of history. Indeed, a distinctive and important methodological feature of Sargent's account is that it is, as he writes, an "undiplomatic history." In using that term, Sargent means to distinguish his historical sketch from work of diplomatic historians by emphasizing "structure over agency"

(361). The Pax Americana, he argues, was not the “creation of visionary statecraft” but rather the consequence of larger forces, chiefly economic, of which U.S. hegemony was a predictable consequence (361). Diplomats have implemented the Pax Americana, but they have not been its “animating force” (362). Readers of Sargent’s *A Superpower Transformed*, which shows presidents ineffectually seeking to reverse the tides of globalization in the 1970s, will recognize Sargent’s skepticism about the abilities of powerful men to shape global affairs.

Sargent’s history is “undiplomatic” in a second sense, too. Though historians are “well-practiced at exposing the failures and hypocrisies of American foreign policy,” Sargent invites his fellow scholars to “contemplate the Pax Americana’s successes” (374). Indeed, though the phrase “Pax Americana” sounds ironic, the period of the Pax has also been a time free of great-power wars, which are the deadliest of conflicts (the last was in the 1950s, when the United States and China fought over the Korean Peninsula). At the same time, Sargent reminds, “our species is today healthier, wealthier, and more numerous than ever” (375). And the two most plausible threats to the planet today, climate change and nuclear bombs, both seem as if they are best approached through the exertion of concentrated international power rather than by the dismantling of coercive mechanisms above the level of the nation-state.

This is a formidable lecture, both clarifying and provocative. With it, Sargent lays down an articulate challenge to the field of U.S. foreign relations, so much of which has been concerned with chronicling the “tragedy of American diplomacy,” as the great historian William Appleman Williams famously put it. Sargent rejects two of Williams’s core terms. The Pax Americana, he insists, is not the story of diplomacy. And it is not a tragedy.

I hope and expect historians will argue about this lecture (and the connected book Sargent is writing) for some time. In that expectation, I would like to suggest two areas where further exploration and debate will, I think, be especially fruitful: the benefits and necessity of the Pax.

The benefits first. Sargent judges the Pax to have been, “on balance, more positive than negative” (375). This will very likely raise eyebrows, and I hope it will provoke sustained inquiries. Imperial historians have long sought to draw up the balance-sheet of European empires, to determine who gained and how. Such questions have not been easy to answer for the complex phenomenon of formal empire, nor do I expect they will be for something as large, multifarious, and diffuse as the Pax Americana, which involved both distribution of resources and the exertion of privileges. Yet given Sargent’s important exploratory points about the differential benefits of U.S. power within the United States, particularly the current political power of the “Pax Americana’s left-behinds,” it seems that it would be extremely useful to have a fuller understanding of who in the United States profited from

the Pax and how (372).

And who benefited outside the United States? Sargent points to the relatively happy state of historical affairs since 1945—fewer war deaths, more wealth, longer lives. Yet this is the area where his “sketch” is the most visibly unfinished. The trends toward peace, wealth, and longevity were already apparent before the Pax Americana, even despite the cataclysms of the world wars.^[8] So one has to ask: What is the relationship between U.S. hegemony and global flourishing? One can see it both ways. Sargent describes the United States as “a great disseminator to its friends and allies,” spreading the benefits of modernity while ensuring international stability (367). Yet historians have at various times seen its aid as counterproductive and its ‘peacekeeping’ as needless violence on a massive scale.^[9] And how much should the United States, which lags behind Slovenia and Costa Rica in the life-expectancy rankings, be credited with the worldwide trend toward longer and healthier lives?^[10]

The United States has incontrovertibly had an important part in determining the current state of global affairs. But it is not easy to disentangle the effects of the Pax Americana from other large structural factors such as scientific and technological advancement, democratization, and the gradual economic unshackling of the Global South.

Understanding the benefits and costs of the Pax requires taking up a second central question: Is a Pax necessary? Sargent says so. “History has revealed no good alternatives to hierarchical international order,” he argues. International systems run by formally equal nation-states “have produced more violence and instability” than those that are hierarchically organized (375). If realized, the hope of anti-imperialists to abolish the Pax Americana, Sargent holds, would pose far greater dangers than the Pax itself has. A better hope would be for a “more collaborative” Pax with a “meaningful reallocation of responsibilities,” but attempts to achieve this have thus far been unpromising (375, 376).

Judging the necessity of the Pax is hard. When asking about the desirability of gun control, we can look to other, similar countries with different laws to judge whether restricting guns helps or hinders. We cannot do this with the Pax Americana, however, because it is worldwide: there are no similar systems outside of it to which we can compare it. Our best comparators are past international orders that are decades if not centuries old, when so many historical factors differed that it is difficult to set them on the same analytical plane.

There is one thing we *can* observe, though. According to Sargent, the Pax Americana has been in a slow crisis since the 1970s, and aspects of it have failed even if its general structure has persisted. One might expect a fraying Pax to offer some preview of the chaos of a post-Pax world. But it has not. The era since 1971 has seen the rise of powerful competitors to the United States and new forms of violence, most prominently international terrorism. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrably more peaceful than the 1945–1971 era,

when the Pax Americana was in full force. Per-capita deaths in violent conflicts have been declining precipitously since the 1970s.^[1] In short, less Pax, more peace. This point is suggestive rather than conclusive, since other factors are clearly also at play. But it raises the important possibility that the planet could sustain a significantly more democratic international order than it is currently enjoying, and that the further recession of U.S. power might meaningfully contribute to this.

Such large questions as the benefits and necessity of the Pax cannot be answered in a twenty-page lecture. For a fuller exposition, we will have to wait for Sargent's book. Yet already one can appreciate the importance of this project as an intervention in the field, one that proposes to shift the terms we use to discuss post-1945 U.S. power and to offer a hard-to-dismiss structural account of its rise and fall.

Daniel Immerwahr is an associate professor at Northwestern University. He studies U.S. and global history and specializes in development, empire, and the history of ideas. His first book, *Thinking Small* (Harvard, 2015), is a critical account of the United States' pursuit of grassroots development at home and abroad in the middle of the twentieth century. His second, *How to Hide an Empire*, offers a narrative of U.S. history with U.S. overseas territories included. It is due out with Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2019.

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Notes

[1] Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[2] Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 16, 20.

[3] David Vine, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015), 5.

[4] Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[5] Barry Eichengreen, *Exorbitant Privilege: The Rise and Fall of the Dollar and the Future of the International Monetary System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

[6] *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, ABC, 25 April 1988.

[7] Jeffrey Goldberg, "A Senior White House Official Defines the Trump Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, 11 June 2018.

[8] A case made most recently and succinctly in Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

[9] Two recent reflections will serve to represent a large body of literature here. David Engerman

tallies up the political costs of receiving U.S. foreign aid for India, a prominent Cold War aid recipient, in *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). Paul Chamberlin reflects on the Cold War from the vantage of southern Asia, where much of the superpower-fueled killing occurred, in Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018).

[10] World Health Organization, *World Health Statistics 2016: Monitoring Health for the SDGs* (Luxembourg: World Health Organization, 2018), annex B.

[11] Data from Peter Brecke's *Conflict Catalog* and the PRIO Institute's Battle Deaths Dataset mapped against global population in Max Roser, "Global Deaths in Conflicts since the Year 1400," *Our World in Data*, <https://slides.ourworldindata.org/war-and-violence/#/6>.