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Review by **Tony Smith**, Tufts University

Rasmus Sondergaard’s major concerns are two-fold: to establish the importance of ideological constructs in the making of American foreign policy through the exposition of a Danish approach to analysis called ‘securitization theory’; and to apply this form of investigation to the decision of President Bill Clinton and his closest foreign policy makers to elevate to a central position in their rhetoric and actions the promotion of democracy abroad during his two terms as president (1993-2001). Let us look at each of these matters in turn, then relate them to the use that can be made of them not only to better understand the course of the Clinton presidency in world affairs but to the character of American foreign policy more generally speaking in the post-cold war era.

The theory itself is an aspect of what is often called ‘constructivism,’ that is the argument that ideas are basic elements that structure group behavior. Even if these constructs are related to emotions or concerns that originate apart from themselves, they have an identity and a logic to be appreciated in their own terms. Sondergaard’s more specific effort is to analyze the way in which foreign policy elites ‘securitize’ their thinking. Thus, securitization “is fundamentally concerned with security as a speech act and therefore focuses on analyzing discourses that address issues in security terms... an actor can attempt to move an issue from a political perception to one perceived as a security threat by addressing it in security terms and hereby legitimise the use of extraordinary means. What matters is not the existence of an actual threat but the representation of a security threat. (536).

Sondergaard applies this approach primarily to the team Bill Clinton assembled about himself in his first administration as Washington looked for a conceptual approach for American involvement in world affairs now that containment had become a thing of the past. The answer came with an argument for “Democratic Enlargement and Engagement” as the administration authoritatively defined its approach in its National Security Strategy published in July 1994 (but announced in a series of high level speeches starting in 1993).

The origins of the Clinton White House arguments lay, obviously enough, in what by 1993 was known (as it still is today) as ‘democratic peace theory’ (DPT). Sondergaard does not examine the origins of this
argument, which had first appeared in academic circles in the early 1980s, nor does he indicate the growing conviction the argument had in liberal internationalist circles in the United States by the 1990s. Yet he is correct to assume that there was something of a ‘food chain’ afoot whereby academics joined think tanks visited by policy makers who then conceived of the outlines of American foreign policy in terms of debates they had reviewed. With the end of the Cold War the times were obviously ripe for fresh arguments to appear.

Certainly the most important of these so far as Washington’s eventual involvement in global matters was concerned was democratic peace theory. Thanks to its blessings, democracy promotion (along with support for increased market globalization) could replace containment during the Clinton years as the hallmark of America’s role abroad, for far more than empty rhetoric, here was a concept that had conceptual legs to it. The fact that DPT could be tied back to the thinking of Woodrow Wilson’s presidency (1913-1921), and from there to what might be called “Wilson’s Decade”—the 1940s, that is—made the arguments all the more persuasive. More, because the essentials of DPT had been sounded by none other than President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), the administration’s position had a bipartisan patriotic ring to it that made it sound firmly in the American tradition.

As Sondergaard reports, the concerted effort to launch this ideological agenda involved a host of top government officials. Not only the President himself, but a virtual who’s who of the administration’s foreign policy leadership—Madeleine Albright, Strobe Talbot, Warren Christopher, Anthony Lake, and John Shattuck, among others—made their commitment known to promoting democracy abroad for the sake of American national security at an early point. Each high-level official took up the matter for his or her own reasons and in individual ways, to be sure. Nonetheless, the message remained the same: democracy promotion abroad was fundamental to the American national interest and would be pursued vigorously by Washington. In making his case, Sondergaard cites both American officials themselves and analyses of the centrality of this argument by such scholars as Michael Cox, Kathryn Olson, John Dumbrell and Jason Edwards. ¹

To be sure the message was more complicated than simple democratization Bible-thumping. The administration was careful to link its calls to increased economic globalization, which was assumed to go hand in hand with democratization. And it was targeted to specific parts of the world, especially those where Communism was in retreat and both the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization might in time expand. But as Sondergaard points out in the major examples he explores—Haiti and Kosovo—other countries, which were of arguably marginal national interest to the United States, could be involved as well in the reasoning that legitimized American interventions in these places.

A major virtue of this essay is that it establishes what remains something of a missing link between the Reagan years and those of President George W. Bush (2001-2009). For it was Reagan who announced a ‘freedom’ or ‘democracy” crusade as early as his famous speech at Westminster in June 1982. In my opinion, this was the

most important foreign policy speech any American president had given since the 1940s and this for its originality, its complexity, its clarity, but most of all for the impact it had on successive presidents including most recently Barack Obama. Still, the question remained of filling in the links that stretched from Reagan to Bush 43 and Obama. What Sondergaard does is to paint in important parts of the intellectual canvas that stretches from 1982 to the invasion of Iraq 21 years later in 2003.

Obviously, much remains to be done. There are many blank spots on the intellectual trajectory that led to Iraq and the ensuing disasters that we see around us on every side today. Democratic peace theory is only a part of the story, essential though it be. The neoconservatives around George W. Bush claimed authorship of the Bush Doctrine (understood as the National Security Doctrine of the United States issued in September 2002) and they are right to do so. But they did not author DPT; they only used it to their own purposes. While the link between the Clinton years and those that followed are evident so too are the discontinuities, as Sondergaard recognizes. The story should ultimately stretch from Reagan through Obama (even if others will try to take it back to Wilson or even the American Revolution, as for example Robert Kagan has done, mistakenly in my opinion.)

Filling in the picture in Washington and the think tanks that fed it during the 1990s so as to have a clearer understanding of the mindset in the Clinton White House is a task of utmost importance. We should hope that this young Danish scholar will continue to make his contributions to our understanding of a period of such importance not only to the history of American foreign policy but to world affairs in general.


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