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Much of the American public may still associate the 1970s with economic decline, political drift, and peculiar aesthetic tastes, but historians over the past several years have been coming to different conclusions. There’s no denying the realities of stagflation, scandalous behavior in the White House, and Pet Rocks and polyester pantsuits. But scholars have begun to discern momentous shifts in this decade in domestic American history, in world history, and in U.S. foreign relations. From the most intimate questions of personal relationships thrown open by the rise of feminism, to the most Earth-straddling challenges of climate change pressed forward by environmentalism, the 1970s seem increasingly the ground of contemporary American society and international relations. The same was true for U.S. foreign policy, as the nation’s leaders faced a novel landscape of military defeat in Vietnam, dependence on imported oil, and declining popular support for U.S. involvement abroad.

No development of the 1970s, with the possible exception of climate change, has proven as momentous as the acceleration of the integrating processes we know as globalization. The administrations of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter were the first to face the challenges of the relative U.S. economic decline and the uncertain position of the United States in the transmogrifying global political economy. Unilateral dominance was out—but it was not clear what would replace it. How U.S. policymakers navigated the daunting new challenges of this era is the topic of Daniel Sargent’s important new book, *A Superpower Transformed*, which recently won an Honorable Mention in the Stuart L. Bernath Book Prize competition of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

Methodologically, *A Superpower Transformed* tracks the intersection of high politics and global economic change. The focus rests primarily on elite U.S. policymakers in the realms of diplomacy, economics, and politics. Indeed, Sargent’s emphasis on economic management makes the book stand out in the current historiographical trend of cultural analysis within U.S. international history. Sargent is well versed in the latter literature, but his quarry here consists of those responsible for trying to manage the complex transitions of U.S. foreign policy in a new era of starker limitations. The book thus traces the drama of destabilizing changes and strategic responses, a combination drolly captured in reviewer Daniel Immerwahr’s historiographical comparison: “It is as if you locked the historians Akira Iriye and John Gaddis in the Nixon Library and told them to write a monograph.”

The five reviewers here generally agree on the significance of Sargent’s topic—the management of the U.S. political economy during the transition from the Cold War to globalization—and the scope of his achievement in this book. Thomas Schwartz lauds “its skillful integration of foreign policy, domestic politics, and international economics,” making it “a major contribution to the study of America’s foreign relations and the processes of globalization” and marking its author as “a leading historian of the United States in the world and the impact of globalization.” Schwartz finds that “Sargent succeeds brilliantly in taking complicated matters like exchange rates, international capital flows, and balance-of-payments issues and demonstrating how they affected both international politics and the lives of ordinary citizens.” Immerwahr observes “how authoritatively” *A Superpower Transformed* “covers the landmarks of the globalizing 1970s. Sargent’s deep

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research, even-handed judgment, and luminous prose make this book the first place to go for an understanding of the oil crisis, the Biafra War, or the declaration of a New International Economic Order at the UN.” Immerwahr also notes the book’s “glimmering achievements on the level of the sentence and paragraph” and calls it “an indispensable guide to the tumult of the 1970s.”

Mario del Pero highlights Sargent’s “admirable and often elegant narrative coherence” in “a book that covers so much ground.” Del Pero finds “the most solid and convincing part of the book” to be Sargent’s portrayal of the foreign policy of Nixon and National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger as essentially conservative and “Cold War-centric.” Itai Sneh concludes that the author “treats controversial issues in a judicious manner” and “is prudently critical of policy-makers.” Sneh considers Sargent’s discussion of “human rights diplomacy during détente . . . particularly instructive” and lauds “Sargent’s erudition” and “his capacity to see both the micro-trees and the macro-forest in studying multiple, intertwined economic, strategic, and regional subjects during the Cold War.” Barbara Zanchetta’s review, which is somewhat of an outlier in its critical attitude toward *A Superpower Transformed*, believes it “indisputably makes an important contribution to the rapidly growing scholarship on the 1970s” and is “a work of outstanding scholarship.”

Beyond such praise, however, the reviewers also raise various issues in their comments. Immerwahr astutely calls our attention to the book being “ultimately about structure overcoming agency,” as the “men of the White House appear less as history-makers than history-takers”—and he highlights several ways in which presidents and their advisers in the 1970s still retained impressive power and agency in both foreign and domestic affairs. Schwartz raises implicit questions about whether Sargent may be taking on too much of a White House perspective; he finds the author “surprisingly sympathetic to Kissinger’s attempts to adapt to the new conditions he faced” and “think[s] Sargent may be too generous to Carter.” Del Pero worries about “U.S.-centrism” in the book and believes that “the rest of the world is often missing or tends to appear as a canvas on which the United States projects its power.” Del Pero also finds Sargent a bit too admiring of Kissinger’s policies and wishes the book paid more attention to “domestic variables” such as “the cultural, political, and societal transformations in 1970s America [that] impacted U.S. foreign policy.” Sneh expresses a desire for greater discussion of President Woodrow Wilson.

Zanchetta’s review offers multiple criticisms. These range from repeated assertions that *A Superpower Transformed* makes “conventional” arguments on a variety of policy issues and that “the themes addressed are less novel and the results less groundbreaking than the author seems to suggest,” to an accusation that the book contains “what I consider some factual mistakes” that Zanchetta details. Readers will want to compare her evidence with Sargent’s detailed response. It is worth noting here, however, one challenge to Zanchetta’s argument that “Sargent tells the conventional story of U.S. (or rather, of Henry Kissinger’s) bias for Israel throughout the 1973 war” while “[i]n reality, the U.S. position was much more nuanced” by Kissinger’s ongoing negotiations with the neighboring Arab states. This challenge appears in Salim Yaqub’s forthcoming important and learned new book, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans and Arabs in the 1970s*, which illuminates in great detail how skillfully and intentionally Kissinger shaped U.S. diplomacy in 1973 to benefit Israel at the expense of its neighbors.2

For any readers who worry that the study of U.S. international history may have moved too far into cultural matters and strayed too far from its disciplinary roots in high diplomacy, the reviews and author’s response

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2 The publisher is Cornell University Press.
here will be particularly reassuring. *A Superpower Transformed* is rightly helping put the 1970s back into the historiographical spotlight.

**Participants:**

**Daniel J. Sargent** is Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley. He is a Ph.D. graduate of Harvard University in 2008 and has held fellowships at the Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard and at International Security Studies at Yale University. He is the author of *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and a co-editor of *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Harvard University Press, 2010). He is presently completing a co-authored textbook on U.S. history and researching two book-length projects: a history of international economic governance in the modern era and a study on the uses of history and historical thinking in U.S. foreign policy.


**Daniel Immerwahr** is an Assistant 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), offers a critical account of the United States’ pursuit of grassroots development at home and abroad in the middle of the twentieth century. He is now researching another book, *How to Hide an Empire*, about U.S. overseas territory in the twentieth century.

**Thomas Schwartz** is a Professor of History and Political Science at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of the books *America’s Germany: John J. McCloy and the Federal Republic of Germany* (1991) and *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (2003), and with Matthias Schulz, the edited volume, *The Strained Alliance: US-European Relations in the 1970s*, (2009). He is currently working on a biography of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger entitled *Henry Kissinger and the Dilemmas of American Power*.

**Itai Sneh** is Associate Professor of History for World Civilizations, Human Rights and International Law at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York. Sneh completed his doctorate in
history at Columbia University. He holds a law degree, and a Masters in Eastern European Jewish Studies, from McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and a B.A. in Jewish History (with minors in International Relations, Biblical Studies, and Yiddish Language and Culture) from Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel. His first book was published in 2008 by Peter Lang Publishers as Vol. 5 of the series Studies in International Relations: *The Future Almost Arrived: How Jimmy Carter Failed to Change U.S. Foreign Policy*. Sneh’s next book in progress is *Torture through the Ages*.

The 1970s – long or short, as we choose them to be – have represented a key transformational period in the history of modern international relations. In this rich and comprehensive study of U.S. foreign relations during such a pivotal decade, Daniel Sargent discusses how the administrations of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter dealt with the gradual implosion of the Cold War order and the vanishing of the post-1945 *pax Americana*’s fundamental pillars: the embedded liberalism of Bretton Woods that balanced globalization and the welfare state; the Atlantic security compromise between the United States and its European allies; deterrence and the nuclear equilibrium; and the persistence, and even consolidation, of a model centered on territoriality and the primacy of the nation-state.

Sargent’s elegant narrative focuses on the inevitable clash between this territorialized system of international relations and new transnational actors and dynamics, which contributed to foster new forms of interdependence that eroded the sovereignty and freedom of action of the United States itself. The ‘transnational’ – whether in the form of unrestrained money flows or of human rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO)s and activists who rejected traditional distinctions between internal and external affairs – challenged the fundamental axioms and rules of the Cold War regime. Interdependence, so well on display, for example, in the realm of energy, revealed how impracticable unilateral responses could be, and the resultant necessity of imagining and designing a new model of global governance.

Examining the policies of Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter, Sargent highlights (and sometimes exaggerates) their differences, practical and strategic, as well as their impact on the transformation of the nature and forms of U.S. power. Whereas Nixon worked to stabilize and preserve the Cold-War order and the *pax Americana* that came with it, Sargent argues, Ford (via Secretary of State Henry Kissinger) tried to imagine and devise new tools to cooperatively manage a changing international system. On the other hand, according to Sargent, Carter pursued a bold, as well as unsuccessful, effort to finally move beyond the Cold War: to transcend it in order to effectively tackle a world where the management of interdependence had to be the key priority. In the end, all three achieved limited successes vis-à-vis historical forces that proved often capable of derailing their projects or twisting them in unwanted directions, the unintended consequences of a given choice or policy being a key, and often convincing, narrative tool deployed by Sargent to highlight how messy and non-consequential history can be.¹

In what is in my view the most solid and convincing part of the book, Sargent shows how conservative the foreign policy of Nixon and Kissinger was: how their “Cold War–centric image of world politics” (50) shaped their vision and actions. For the President and his National Security Czar, “keeping the Cold War going” (59) was somehow necessary to preserve U.S. leadership and safeguard the *pax Americana*. But their status quo policy required changes and adaptations, creativity and ruthlessness. Détente served to stabilize the bipolar order and co-opt the USSR in its management (depriving, incidentally, the Cold War of its fundamental ideological content and making it thus less of a ‘cold’ war). Burden-sharing, the Nixon Doctrine strategy of delegating tasks and responsibilities to regional anti-Soviet allies, was a way to address new limits and

¹ The end of Bretton Woods, “the ascent of finance and the retreat of state power,” Sargent writes, were “the work of unintended consequences, not intelligent design” (108); discussing Carter, he stresses instead “the inability of overarching strategic concepts to reduce history to legible narratives and actionable formulas … the general limitations of grand strategic thinking as a tool for apprehending – and mastering historical complexity” (262).
constraints without abandoning the fundamental goals of containing the USSR and maintaining an advantageous global balance of power. Ending, in the end, unilaterally, the Bretton Woods compromise was a brutal way to solve the crisis of the dollar and the U.S. balance of payments that threatened Washington’s leadership, weakened the competitiveness of the American economy, and concurred to erode the domestic consensus on Nixon’s foreign policy. In Sargent’s words, Nixon and Kissinger played the “Cold War managers” (67). They acted, often unscrupulously, “within the paradigm of Cold War geopolitics” (67) in a world, however, that “was too complex for a grand strategy … fixated on the Cold War” (67). The solutions they offered were at best partial and incomplete, and at worst counterproductive or ineffectual. The unilateral decision to end the convertibility of the dollar stemmed from the desire to reinvigorate the U.S. economy, address a domestic public (and a Congress) tempted by protectionist solutions, and boost Nixon’s popularity. Instead, it accelerated, and rendered even less controllable, a radical reconfiguration of the international monetary system, hastening the transition to floating exchange rates and the removal of capital controls. Nixon and his Treasury Secretary, John Connally, Sargent convincingly argues, did not want “to relinquish control over the monetary order” (115). What they hoped for when they decided to close the gold window was “to provoke a crisis in the Bretton Woods system that they believed would create the political leverage that would enable the United States to secure the dollar devaluation that its allies would not willingly grant. This was a profound miscalculation. Already prone to instability, the Bretton Woods system could be preserved only through extensive international coordination to counteract the disruptive influence of short-term capital flows” (115-6).

Actions in the Middle East produced similar unwanted (and unanticipated) outcomes. Here the Nixon doctrine and the Nixon/Kissinger Cold-War frame of mind dictated the support and arming of friendly regimes such as those in Saudi Arabia and Iran. A spike in oil prices was therefore not entirely unwelcome. Petrodollars could be used to finance the trade deficits of oil importers, beginning with the United States. Furthermore, when (as invariably with Nixon and Kissinger) geopolitics was king, monetary considerations could be subordinated to grand-strategic imperatives. Containing the Soviet Union in the Middle East, with the view of expelling it from the region, meant bolstering the security partnership with local clients who were only empowered by higher oil revenues (to be used, incidentally, for purchasing massive amounts of sophisticated military hardware from the same United States). “Higher oil prices”, Sargent writes, were “a price that Washington would accept if that meant that Iran would bear the military responsibilities the Nixon Doctrine demanded of it” (145). Oil appeared therefore to be “the solution to the strategic vulnerabilities that energy interdependence wrought” (146), the first being the impact on the cohesion and solidity of the U.S.-led bloc. But oil, both as a political weapon and tangible driver of novel forms of interdependence, was bound to have a dramatic impact on the Cold-War order and on the relationship between the United States and its main allies. The post-1945 capitalist system had been based on a specific and, for its most powerful members, highly convenient energy regime. Triggered by skyrocketing oil prices, the demise of this regime played a crucial role in ending the golden phase of capitalist prosperity and opening a period of crisis, stagnation, and incertitude.

The first oil shock and the energy crisis are used by Sargent to introduce the second part of his three-act story: the Kissinger-Ford period or, better, the Kissinger-reversal, marked by the attempt – Sargent claims – to finally deal (and engage) with the disruptive forces of globalization that Nixon had overlooked or vainly tried to keep at bay. Lightning-struck on the road to Damascus, Kissinger abruptly transmuted from Cold-War manager to proto-prophet (and senior foreman) of orderly globalization. Benefitting from Nixon’s misfortunes and making good use of his new role as Secretary of State, Kissinger suddenly saw the necessity to imagine and develop new mechanisms of global governance. According to Sargent, “Ford and Kissinger
worked to reorient US foreign policy toward challenges that would define a post–Cold War world … As a consequence, decision-makers moved in directions that paralleled the national debate on foreign policy: away from a Cold War concept and toward interdependence issues” (167).

Creativity was needed to develop the tools for mastering interdependence and Kissinger certainly did not lack it. Sargent offers three (far from successful, one must say) examples of this alleged Kissinger turn and the attempt “to embrace the management of interdependence as a priority for US foreign policy” (176). The first was Kissinger’s Southern Strategy: a response to the requests for a New International Economic Order coming from Third-World leaders bolstered by the oil crisis and the difficulties of the West. To the increasingly vocal G-77 - the caucus of African and Asian countries at the United Nations formed in the 1960s - Kissinger tried to offer a new world food policy that he hoped could appease some of its members while preserving a (timidly) reformed capitalist international economic order. The second example offered by Sargent is Kissinger’s effort to concoct a coordinated response of the oil-importing countries to the blackmail of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries’ (OPEC). Beginning with the Washington Energy Conference of February 1974, this attempt to create a counter-cartel of oil consumers “marked the beginning of Kissinger’s effort to invigorate the West by reorienting the alliance toward challenges defined not by the Cold War but by economic interdependence” (158). The effort to hold together the traditional Cold War front – the United States, Western Europe, and Japan – was based on a significant departure from the Nixon years and the Cold War in general: “cooperation to manage common economic dilemmas would supplant containment of the Soviet threat as the source of cohesion among the nation-states of the West” (183). The third exemplar of Kissinger’s conversion to the gospel of managed interdependence was that of informal (but highly substantial) cooperation among the most powerful capitalist countries, which began with the Franco-American summit in Martinique of December 1974 and evolved in the successive G-6/G-7 meetings of Rambouillet and Puerto Rico. The G-7 format institutionalized ad hoc summitry: it de facto affirmed, as Sargent rightly notes, that “informal cooperation among the most powerful countries would, in the future, substitute for the rules-based approach to international monetary order that had existed under Bretton Woods” (190).

Results were often meager; this Kissinger reversal – partial and overstated by Sargent – was plagued by patent contradictions and inconsistencies. I will return to this in my concluding remarks. Suffice it to say here, however, that Kissinger’s alleged awakening to the dynamics of interdependence and globalization did not extend to realms where the power of “the transnational” was manifesting itself in unprecedented forms. This was the case with human rights, where transnational activism and Congress’s sudden awakening after years of lethargy caught Kissinger off guard. His response was (and appeared to many) at best cosmetic, as Sargent recognizes: when it came to human rights, Kissinger was “out of step with historical changes that were blurring the boundaries between nation-states and exposing even closed and cloistered societies to the scrutiny of transnational activism and the assertions of universal human rights” (209). Hence, Kissinger’s failure to understand the magnitude of the changes under way, the importance of the third basket of the Helsinki accords and, more generally, the concrete possibility to exploit human rights to overcome Cold-War divisions in Europe.2

2 Sargent has an emblematic Kissinger quote on this: “I don’t believe that a bunch of revolutionaries who manage to cling to power for fifty years are going to be euchred out of it by the sort of people we have got negotiating at the European Security Conference…Being able to buy the New York Times in Moscow won’t change the Soviet system.” (216)
Perhaps Kissinger did love the Cold War – or at least its geopolitics - too much to wish it away. And he certainly had little or no sympathy for those Western Europeans who dreamt of overcoming the bipolar divide of the continent and who threatened destabilizing what Ford’s Secretary of State considered instead to be a very expedient and stable geopolitical status quo.

The person who really tried to transcend the Cold War, Sargent argues, was instead the third president of the 1970s, Jimmy Carter. Heavily influenced by the works of the Trilateral Commission and by the belief that the world had become too complex to be constrained within the binary simplicities of the Cold War, Carter tried to develop a new foreign policy approach imbued with a strange mix of technocracy and ethics. The management of interdependence (with its multiple, and sometimes frightening faces) had to be matched by unprecedented attention to human rights and disarmament. Only through this combination could the United States reoccupy the moral high ground and rebuild the domestic and international consensus that was indispensable to the exercise of global leadership.

“World order politics” had thus to replace “balance of power politics” (233). Carter’s best and brightest were enthusiastic Trilateralists like the National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Ambassador to Italy, Richard Gardner and the Special Representative for Economic Summits, Henry Owen. Such people had long reflected on the necessity to move beyond the East-West Cold War framework in order to effectively “renovate the machinery of international order” (233).

Human rights, as we all know, were at the center of Carter’s foreign-policy rhetoric: the “centerpiece of the American historical project and a transcendent idea toward which the United States must strive” (236). A human-rights informed approach to world affairs could help absolve the United States of the sins of Vietnam, confer a new morality to Washington’s foreign policy, and provide the administration with a renewed universalistic code replacing that, now discredited, of Cold War liberalism. As for the economy and monetary issues, Carter tried to use, and contributed to strengthen, those non-rules based institutions that had been set up before his election. The G-7 was central and became the theatre of the decisive dialogue between the United States and the hegemon to-be in Western Europe: the Federal Republic of Germany which was then led by the right-wing Social-democrat Helmut Schmidt. However, instead of a new German-American convergence, facilitating policy coordination and the management of interdependence, we often had a clash of interests, approaches and, perhaps, even basic political philosophies. Initially, Carter proposed international Keynesian solutions to the difficulties of transatlantic (and transpacific) capitalism: a transnational stimulus – the so-called ‘locomotive theory’ - where export-led economies such as those of Japan and Germany would increase the level of domestic consumption and thus contribute greatly to global growth. More concerned with inflation, and with preserving the competitiveness of the West-German economy, Schmidt resisted Carter’s pressures. Talks of interdependence notwithstanding, everyone eyed short-term national interests, including Carter, who understood that “getting Germany and Japan to stimulate their economies” would enable the United States “to pursue expansionary domestic policies without exacerbating the US balance of payments deficit” (240). The locomotive strategy went nowhere. The United States remained the consumer of last resort: the empire of consumption living with structural, and ever expanding, current-account deficits. This role (and key, contradictory driver of America’s post-1970s hegemony) only intensified in the following decades.

A new oil crisis, the weakness of the dollar, trade imbalances, and out-of-control inflation led Carter to imagine, and implement, other, more radical alternatives. The attempt “to retool Keynesian policies for the circumstances of interdependence” (249) gave way to policies “that prioritized monetary stability and fiscal
restraint” (273). Combined with German obstructionism and domestic political imperatives (the new cultural hegemony of the individual consumer being a dimension on which Sargent does not reflect much), financial interdependence and monetary speculation appeared to leave limited room for traditional recipes. With huge and expanding quantities of dollar-denominated assets in the hands of foreigners, Carter’s choices were radically circumscribed: international stability, and a U.S. world leadership still founded on credibility of the dollar, came before domestic economic expansion. Appointing Paul Volcker at the head of the Federal Reserve in August 1979 offered a clear indication of where the priorities of the administration lay. Painful monetary rigor ensued. Along with it came low inflation and a strong dollar, which contributed to accentuate long-term trends: high consumption, low savings, and current-account deficits among them.

Meanwhile, the Cold War was still there, and geopolitics, Sargent argues, was about to take its revenge. In part, the juxtaposition between the Cold War and interdependence was cosmetic: one of the key examples of interdependence was nuclear deterrence and mutual assured destruction. Tackling interdependence thus meant also engaging the Soviet Union and finding ways to institutionalize deterrence while rendering it less costly and dangerous. On this, Carter acted clumsily, urging deep cuts the Soviets did not want and inserting the issue of human rights within a U.S.-Soviet détente that was already challenged and on the defensive, particularly in the United States. A new escalation of the bipolar competition in the Third World, Brzezinski’s desire to use the Chinese card against Moscow, Soviet missteps, the new geopolitical centrality of the Middle East, the dual standards of Carter’s human rights crusade (from which China was curiously exempted), all contributed to the return, with a vengeance, of the Cold War and the temporary entombment of the Trilateralists’ post-Cold War fantasies. “Inverting Kissinger’s pivot toward interdependence issues in 1973-74,” Sargent writes, “the Carter administration in 1979-80 reprioritized anti-Soviet containment” (291). The Cold War was thus back, “but the American superpower and the international system” had been “transformed” (302) for good in the process. What we had was a market-oriented globalization, a further, significant weakening of the post-World War II rules-based international order, and a strange and new beast of a world hegemon - the United States - which imported huge amounts of goods and investments, spent lavishly on defense, maintained and expanded its global military preponderance and, at least until recently, paid limited attention to the fiscal implications and inner contradictions of all of this.

Daniel Sargent is to be commended for having written a book that is detailed and comprehensive, encompassing as it does multiple dimensions and theatres. He successfully uses some of the quintessential manifestations of transnational interdependence of the 1970s – finance, human rights, energy – as threads connecting the different dots of his story and providing it with an admirable and often elegant narrative coherence.

In a book that covers so much ground a certain degree of simplification and generalization is sometimes inevitable. It would be unfair to criticize Sargent for this, although specialists will certainly find parts to quarrel with (for instance, I found the section on Southern Europe and Eurocommunism unconvincing, given its importance for those very transatlantic trends which are at the center of Sargent’s analysis). In more general terms, I’d like to suggest three main criticisms of this book.

The first is on its excessive, and in a few occasions misleading, U.S.-centrism. In the book opening, Sargent stresses the importance of studying the relational dimension of American power (were the term not so out of vogue nowadays, one could say its inner dialectical nature). In a global and holistic system, even superpowers have a limited control of their destiny and are constrained by other actors’ choices and behavior. Throughout the book, Sargent shows how frequently accidental, unwanted, or unintended the consequences of given U.S.
foreign policy choices were. And he convincingly stresses the limits and constraints that interdependence posed to the United States itself: to its autonomy as well as its freedom of action. The problem is that the rest of the world is often missing or tends to appear as a canvas on which the United States projects its power. Perhaps, this is the inevitable consequence of the persistence of vast archival asymmetries for the Cold-War years (and even more for the 1970s); or of a research, that – enormous and admirable as Sargent’s is – considers only sources in English (and, with the exception of Kew, only U.S. archives). But such an approach poses relevant problems. The sort of comprehensive and exhaustive account Sargent aspires to offer would have required a much broader and diverse archival research. The Federal Republic of Germany – just to name one example - is certainly a key actor in Sargent’s narrative, particularly during the Carter years. But Bonn’s actions are studied, discussed, and narrated exclusively through the filter provided by U.S.-produced documents. Noble intentions notwithstanding, the study of the transformation of U.S. power becomes a study of the changes in the way such power was projected more than an examination of the impact of its relational/constraining dimension.

Directly connected to this is my second criticism, which concerns the emphasis on Kissinger’s alleged U-turn of 1973-74. Sargent makes too much of it and overplays the importance and results of the examples he selectively uses (the world food policy and the collaboration among oil importers, in particular). Bipolarism and Cold War geopolitics still loomed large in Kissinger’s outlook and remained, more than attentiveness to the new dynamics of globalization, the key drivers behind the thinking and policies of Ford’s Secretary of State. Sargent engages with the problem quite ambivalently and overstates the novelty and originality of Kissinger’s proposals. More important, by focusing exclusively on Kissinger and the United States, he overlooks the role played by other actors in devising the very tools, beginning with the G-6/7, of the new, informal architecture of governance, that were put in place in the second half of the 1970s. One could plausibly argue that not only was Kissinger not the mastermind behind this, but that he went along grudgingly, accepting this new ‘non rules’-based multilateral approach out of necessity and weakness more than choice. Such was the case of the quadripartite (U.S.-British-French-German) management of the mid-1970s Southern European crises and, in part, of the Puerto Rico summit.

My third and final criticism concerns the absence of any reflection on how cultural, political, and societal transformations in 1970s America impacted U.S. foreign policy and its discourse. Sargent is clearly interested in Potomac-centric high policy: its design, implementation, and outcomes. He is at ease, and does a superb job, in dissecting the dialectics within the different U.S. administrations and the intellectual and political origins of the different and often conflicting views of key U.S. governmental players (not just the usual suspects, like Kissinger and Brzezinski, but also Connally, Shultz, Volcker and many others). He has instead little patience for (and interest in) other domestic variables, notwithstanding occasional forays into the role of the often parochial and short-sighted Congress. This is unfortunate. Multiple factors that help explain U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s and the very transformation of American power are not engaged with or are dismissed out of hand. The rise of new conservatisms, the new centrality of individual rights and the primacy of the citizen-consumer, deindustrialization, environmentalism and anti-nuclearism, the long shadow of Vietnam: these and other issues did not necessarily have to be at the core of a book focusing on high foreign policy. But their absence is sometimes puzzling, given their importance in igniting those very policies destined to change the position (and the power) of the United States in the international system.
At this point, it has become a cliché to remark that the field of U.S. foreign relations has changed. The job postings are no longer for ‘diplomatic historians’ but for specialists in ‘the United States and the world.’ That latter category is intended to be broad enough to encompass all sorts of actors—from saxophonists to physicists—and a host of new topics: development, gender, human rights, popular culture, emotions, immigration, and the environment. It is not your father’s SHAFR anymore and, frankly, it has not been for years.

In many ways, Daniel Sargent’s ambitious book, A Superpower Transformed, resonates perfectly with the new scholarship. Its topics—oil, human rights, the global South, the rise of markets, and the decline of state sovereignty—are precisely the ones that historians have learned to care about in the past few years. One of its chief virtues, in fact, is how authoritatively it covers the landmarks of the globalizing 1970s. Sargent’s deep research, even-handed judgment, and luminous prose make this book the first place to go for an understanding of the oil crisis, the Biafra War, or the declaration of a New International Economic Order at the UN. Even notoriously complex topics, such as the collapse of the gold standard, are rendered here with merciful clarity.

Yet there is one aspect of Sargent’s account that is conspicuously old-fashioned: his tight focus on U.S. presidents and their closest advisers—“American decision-makers at the pinnacles of power” (7). Outsiders and even lower-ranking government officials have partial views, Sargent explains. It is only “at the very highest levels that policies cohere and overarching strategic purposes emerge” (8).

This is a book about globalization, in other words, but it is also a book about high politics. The tension between the two supplies its central drama. On the one hand, you have the destabilizing forces unleashed in the 1970s. On the other, you have a handful of powerful men trying to make sense of the changing world, desperately spinning out grand strategies for dealing with it. It is as if you locked the historians Akira Iriye and John Gaddis in the Nixon Library and told them to write a monograph.

The 1970s was not an easy time to be the president. Two things had happened, and they both happened at the same time. First, globalization reached a tipping point, after which all governments found it considerably more difficult to control the flows of money, ideas, and people across their borders. Second, the United States lost its position of undisputed global primacy as the economies of Japan and Western Europe began to catch up. The United States was still first among equals, but it was a little less first and a little more equal. Neither of these developments was entirely surprising, but they still came as frustrations to the men who ran the government.

It is no accident that this book ends on the word ‘constraint.’ From the presidential perspective, the 1970s was a decade of limits. Dollars were leaving the country at an alarming rate, forcing a retraction in military force and ultimately destroying the Bretton Woods system that had guaranteed U.S. centrality within the global economy. Longstanding allies grew restless. Lunar expeditions, once the measure of national ambition, became prohibitively expensive, and NASA cancelled the Apollo program. Human rights activists at home checked the ability of the White House to make foreign policy. And then there was OPEC, which drove up the price of oil upon which the consumer economy rested. “We are now living in a never-never land,” lamented Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, “in which tiny, poor, and weak nations can hold up for ransom some of the industrialized world” (155).
Step outside the Oval Office, though, and things did not look quite so grim. Environmentalism, feminism, and human rights were palpably on the rise. The Cold War, though not over, meant less than it used to. The United States was losing some of what the French Finance Minister called its “exorbitant privilege.”1 So was the executive branch, as journalists finally managed to crack open the hardened case of secrecy that surrounded the White House and the CIA, and the hidden truths came tumbling out—a blow to the presidency but a gain for the public. Similarly, the same new communication and transportation technologies that made it harder for states to control flows of information and money put considerable power in the hands of everyday people.

Sargent credits the Ford and Carter administrations with responding to some of these new developments creatively. President Gerald Ford’s embrace of summit diplomacy and Jimmy Carter’s enthusiasm for Trilateralism and human rights are examples of this sort of productive engagement. And yet, even as they spoke of interdependence, they never fully achieved it. The book ends uneasily, with the “revenge of geopolitics” (261). One can appreciate Sargent’s narrative difficulty. This book is about how presidents sought to accommodate the shift from a Cold War world to a globalized one. To tell that story in full would require a long time horizon, one stretching into the Clinton and George W. Bush years. Yet this book focuses on the 1970s, a decade which, somewhat awkwardly, ended with a brief revival of the Cold War. Sargent quotes philosopher Karl Marx’s dictum that history repeats itself, once as tragedy and then as farce. “Reagan for Truman, Brezhnev for Stalin, Afghanistan for Korea, and Poland for Poland; events and personalities at the end of the 1970s looked to confirm Marx’s point” (297).

The mention of Marx is appropriate, for this book is ultimately about structure overcoming agency. “Even the most powerful nations and even the wisest planners of the future remain themselves creatures as well as creators of the historical process,” wrote theologian Reinhold Niebuhr—a line that Sargent uses as the epigraph to his conclusion (284). “The historical process” is a formidable actor here, humbling presidents and confounding their politics. The men of the White House appear less as history-makers than history-takers. Hence Sargent’s title, with its suggestion of passivity: not A Superpower Transforming but A Superpower Transformed.

A caveat is necessary. Powerful people, even at the very top, frequently perceive themselves to be outmatched by larger forces. Consider President Harry Truman, who, at the end of the Second World War, presided over a country that produced 60% of the world’s industrial goods, possessed 59% of its oil reserves and 80% of its gold, and had troops in roughly sixty foreign countries.2 The United States had never before held such an advantage over the rest of the globe. And yet even Truman felt hemmed in, pushed into a Cold War that he

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didn’t seek.3 Or consider Truman’s successor, President Dwight Eisenhower, lamenting in his farewell address that his administration had been reluctantly “compelled to create a permanent armament industry of vast proportions.”4 Sargent is undeniably correct that the 1970s were a time of waning hegemony for the United States, but it is possible that his emphasis on constraint derives in part from his immersion in the worldviews of men like President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Certainly, those outside the White House did not feel the problem to be that Nixon and Kissinger lacked agency. This was the decade of The Imperial Presidency, Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s 1973 warning about the unshackling of the executive branch. Schlesinger spoke for many when he wrote that Watergate was “not an aberration but a culmination,” carrying to “reckless extremes a compulsion toward presidential power” that was “deep-running” and ongoing.5 Nowhere was this trend more evident, Schlesinger noted, than in foreign policymaking, where the effective power to make war lay entirely within the White House.

Schlesinger had a point. In response to the boycott by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Kissinger reflected that it might be time to “take some oil fields.” “I’m not saying we have to take over Saudi Arabia. How about Abu Dhabi, or Libya?” (185). What is most remarkable about such talk is not Kissinger’s bellicosity but his casual indifference to the location of the war. It is a reminder that, even as the White House was losing the ability to unilaterally dictate world affairs, it remained capable of imposing itself dramatically on other nations. To quote a Rolling Stones song from the era: presidents couldn’t always get what they wanted. But they tried sometimes, and they found that they could still carpet-bomb quite a lot of Southeast Asia.

The question of presidential agency in the 1970s will generate discussion among Sargent’s readers, since it is his interpretive through-line. Yet it is by no means the whole of the book. When I read Sargent’s book with some of Northwestern’s graduate students, our conversation degenerated more than once into a babble of appreciative comments—“Wasn’t the section on Moynihan great?” or “I never really got how oil prices worked before.”6 To read A Superpower Transformed for the argument, as is often the custom in our field, would be to miss Sargent’s glimmering achievements on the level of the sentence and paragraph. Taken altogether, they make this an indispensable guide to the tumult of the 1970s. And that, in the end, is the best argument for Sargent’s adoption of the presidential perspective. Looking out onto the world from the North Lawn, there is an awful lot you can see.

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Let’s face it – the 1970s was a wretched, awful, depressing decade.”¹ Reading this recently on the Real Clear Politics blog got me thinking. As someone who came of age during the “Me Decade,” I should probably take more offense. That is, if I did not think there was not some large element of truth in that judgment. Watching CNN’s new documentary on the decade that gave us disco and bad fashion has tended to reinforce those feelings. But after reading Daniel Sargent’s *A Superpower Transformed*, I can see the decade in a different light, recognizing why it was such a difficult time but also the ways in which it was a transitional period and even foreshadows our own era.

The book begins with an introductory chapter that provides a cogent summary of the history of America’s role in the international economic system, and the efforts of the United States to shape that system in the aftermath of World War II. Sargent does an excellent job of evaluating the strengths and weakness of the Bretton Woods system, and the reason it was in crisis by the end of 1968. This sets the stage for examining the dilemmas that were faced by President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger when they came into office in January 1969. Beginning with the impact of the Apollo 8 missions and its view of ‘Earth-rise,’ Sargent notes how this contributed both to the concept of global unity as well as the sense that the country was on the verge of an era of change and transformation. But Nixon and Kissinger’s geopolitical strategy and hopes for maintaining American preeminence soon came into conflict with new and powerful transnational economic and political forces. Sargent looks at two transnational humanitarian issues, the Biafra crisis arising from the Nigerian civil war, and the Bangladesh issue, arising from Pakistan’s repression of East Pakistan. We have become so familiar with such crises in our own time – Syria, Ukraine, the Congo, etc. - that it is fascinating to see what these looked like more than four decades ago. Sargent establishes the connection between these humanitarian issues and some of the underlying technological and communications changes that were also facilitating globalization. His discussion of Nixon and Kissinger’s different reaction to the Biafra and Bangladesh humanitarian crises is particularly insightful in showing how Cold War priorities could warp the perception of such humanitarian disasters.

The next two chapters, in their discussion of the end of Bretton Woods and the impact of the oil crisis on international politics, draw fascinating connections between the standard, geopolitical, narrative of the Nixon years – the opening to China, détente with the Soviet Union, the end of the Vietnam War - and the development of economic interdependence and the erosion of the authority of the nation state. Most recent works that discuss transnational issues focus on cultural questions and usually emphasize issues of race and gender. There have been very few works dealing in depth with the financial and economic issues which contributed to the development of transnational movements. Sargent succeeds brilliantly in taking complicated matters like exchange rates, international capital flows, and balance-of-payments issues and demonstrating how they affected both international politics and the lives of ordinary citizens. He argues that the Nixon Doctrine, which sought to use surrogate powers to maintain American primacy, was also reflected in the economic measures which the President undertook, including the decision to break the link between the dollar and the price of gold, the core of the Bretton Woods system. Sargent makes a compelling case that it is difficult “to see how the collapse of Bretton Woods could have been avoided” (129). Nevertheless I do think he underestimates how much these economic decisions in the Nixon White House were driven by

¹ Craig Shirley, “A Brief Shining Moment in the Sorry 70s,” [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/06/10/a_brief_shining_moment_in_the_sorry_70s.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/06/10/a_brief_shining_moment_in_the_sorry_70s.html)
domestic political imperatives rather than structural necessities or international considerations. By extensively using the Nixon White tapes for this period, Luke Nichter’s new book shows how obsessed Nixon was with the effect his decision would have on his image and electoral chances.2

Although the timing of Nixon’s Bretton Woods action was influenced by domestic considerations, it proved particularly unfortunate when the oil crisis of 1973 struck the world economy. Precipitated by the Arab embargo against the United States in the wake of the Yom Kippur war, the oil crisis deeply intensified divisions within the West as well as throwing the world economy into recession. Sargent conveys the significance of this moment, as the oil crisis demonstrated that “the sinews of the Pax Americana were fraying” (161). Yet Sargent is surprisingly sympathetic to Kissinger’s attempts to adapt to the new conditions he faced, and to shift from his obsession with geopolitical maneuvering into experimenting with various forms of multilateral cooperation, such as the Washington Energy Conference. In particular, and especially after Gerald Ford took over for Nixon, Kissinger’s efforts to coordinate economic and energy policies among the industrialized countries, and to orchestrate a world food policy, become far more central to the story of his tenure as Secretary of State. It reflects well on Kissinger that he was able to adjust to the new circumstances that the United States faced during the turbulent decade, including his effort in 1976 to facilitate the transition to majority rule in Southern Africa. Nevertheless Sargent rightly notes that Kissinger resisted the growing importance of the issue of human rights in foreign policy, particularly as it affected such issues as the American relationship with repressive regimes like that of Augusto Pinochet in Chile. One question arises: Why was Kissinger so open to adapting to the new transnational forces shaping the world economy but so resistant to those pushing for human rights? Does this suggest that human rights posed a far more revolutionary challenge than economic forces to the international system, something a traditionalist like Kissinger could not abide?

Sargent’s remaining chapters bring to the foreground the issue of human rights in American foreign policy, its impact on détente, role within the American political process, and importance to the presidency of Jimmy Carter. He describes the Carter administration’s attempt to define a new path for American foreign policy, one which broke with the Cold-War dynamics and sought to emphasize interdependence and human rights. Sargent argues that Carter wanted to undertake a post-Cold War foreign policy, but the moment for such a policy had not really arrived. He explores in considerable detail the problems and challenges which Carter faced, reflecting a fairly sympathetic perspective on Carter’s presidency. His last chapter, dealing with the “revenge of geopolitics,” underlines Sargent’s argument that the “problem was not the absence of strategic thinking but that strategy itself proved, in the end, to be unequal to the innate complexity of a tumultuous and transformative decade” (295). Although he makes a strong case, I think Sargent may be too generous to Carter. In thinking about Jimmy Carter being ahead of his time, I confess to being reminded of George McGovern, another politician who was always told he was ahead of his time. McGovern later told audiences that, “You know, sometimes, when they say you’re ahead of your time, it’s just a polite way of saying you have a real bad sense of timing.”3 The humor aside, timing is an important consideration, and Jimmy Carter’s

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rush to declare that Americans had shed their “inordinate fear of communism” was premature. The Cold War was not over in 1977, and making policy on that basis was a serious misjudgment.

The book has certain overtones in the United States’ current foreign policy. In Jimmy Carter’s hope that he could transcend the Cold War it is not hard to see a comparison to Barack Obama’s belief that his foreign policy would similarly transcend the unilateral military adventures and war on terrorism of the Bush years, and usher in a new era of multilateral cooperation and peaceful resolution of disputes. What Sargent calls the “revenge of geopolitics” seems to recur with a certain regularity, be it Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev’s intervention in Afghanistan or Vladimir Putin’s recent seizure of Crimea in the Ukraine and support for separatism in the eastern Ukraine. Perhaps the real lesson underlined in Sargent’s book is that foreign policy leaders should recognize the need to adapt to new circumstances and crises, and that a rigid ideological approach which rejects a learning curve is of little use in confronting the complexities of our own ‘tumultuous and transformative decade.’

Sargent’s book, with its skillful integration of foreign policy, domestic politics, and international economics, is a major contribution to the study of America’s foreign relations and the processes of globalization. There may be some criticism that apart from British materials, Sargent has not explored the archives from some countries, notably Germany and France, which play a role in international economic questions. Undoubtedly another book could be written on the impact of globalization within the West that uses more of these archival materials. But for the issues which Sargent is concerned with, particularly the impact of globalization on the power of the American state, his research is comprehensive and impressive, and between government archives, congressional hearings, collections of personal papers, and a wide range of periodicals, he has done an excellent job in capturing the major sources.

Daniel Sargent ends his book about the United States in the 1970s with a powerful quote from the famed theologian and political philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr: “Even the most powerful nations and even the wisest planners of the future remain themselves creatures as well as creators of the historical process” (310). Seeing American leaders in the 1970s as both creatures and creators of the changing international system they worked within helps to tie together the many and diffuse strands of this remarkable book. Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Carter’s National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski are all given their due, beginning with the remarkable photo on the book’s jacket that captures four of the five together at some event. (It is a shame Brzezinski could not have been photo shopped in.) Comprehensive in its research, *A Superpower Transformed* is bold in its claims, examining the changing nature of American power through the long 1970s. It is a book which marks Sargent as a leading historian of the United States in the world and the impact of globalization.

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The presence of international order and the utility of diplomacy are impermanent, as is currently evident. An inability of traditional politics to address fundamental challenges, or a failure of customary policies to counter unexpected conflicts, fuels uncertainty, fosters new power structures, facilitates creative solutions, and launches the foundations of new eras. The twentieth century saw several such paradigm shifts.

By definition, and by practice, scholars who focus on the 1970s eclipse the 1940s, which were previously and generationally seen as the decisive era for contemporary patterns. German, Japanese, and Italian aggression and atrocities during World War II, especially The Holocaust, were memorable. Responses like the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials were important precedents, as was the creation of the State of Israel. Accomplishments, noticeably the formation of the United Nations, and its General Assembly’s 1948 proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention against Genocide, involved collaboration with the Soviets. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt shepherded the U.S. to become a benevolent and collaborative superpower by articulating common interests and an activist, multilateral agenda in rhetoric evidenced in his Four Freedoms Speech, the Atlantic Charter, and the United Nations Speech. Decisions at Bretton Woods and Dumbarton Oaks established the pillars of an orderly and resilient global economy following the U.S, template. The subsequent onslaught of the Cold War with the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO’s formation was monumentally pivotal.

Naturally, the 1950s, the 1980s, and even the 1990s are also in contention, although to an arguably lesser extent. The 2000s may be too recent for a full analysis, notwithstanding the horrific impact of 9/11.

The historian Daniel J. Sargent is a fine, emerging scholar. He has published several relevant articles in the field. Thanks also to his first book, as a co-editor, *The Shock of the Global: The International History of the 1970s*, Sargent’s cutting-edge research constitutes a significant part of this major trend. As archives are increasingly open and frequently digitized, and while many relevant leaders and diplomats are still accessible for interviews, a surfeit of more studies can be surely expected and welcomed.

In this context, too, fall the contributions, trials, tribulations, and contradictions between global norms and sovereign concerns inherent in the international human rights movement and in popular culture are prominent. The universal agenda pursued by both nongovernmental organizations as well as the United Nations was often practical, although imperfect. International human rights helped replace failed utopian ideologies, especially Communism. Scholarship highlights the 1970s as the origin of contemporary

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philosophical and political foci that do transcend national boundaries. Such an approach is significantly expressed in the recent, distinguished work of Samuel Moyn.4

This book both followed as well as provided a leading role in this pattern with an American-centric path. To be sure, an academic concentration on U.S. foreign policy during the 1970s is complicated and controversial. The 1970s have implicit (and sometimes explicit) contemporary applications. By then, America was an established superpower well engrossed in the Cold War, often acting unilaterally, with power, as the undisputed leader of the West.

Dr. Henry Kissinger, who served as President Richard Nixon’s National Security Adviser and then as Secretary of State under both Nixon and President Gerald Ford, was clearly a, if not the, key figure. He was often deemed responsible for meddling in the affairs of sovereign counties in Latin America, and for atrocities committed in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, including the clandestine extension of American involvement into Cambodia. Kissinger was often castigated for his reliance on his amoral (morally neutral is the generous phrase) outlook of realpolitik in handling diplomacy, especially the Soviet bloc during the détente era, and for prioritizing stability and perceived security over promoting and protecting human rights and justice among authoritarian allies such as Argentina, Chile, Indonesia, and Pakistan. Kissinger is, however, widely credited with the opening to China, ending the Vietnam War, and for advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process. Sargent largely does justice to Kissinger by showing the complexity of both his motives as well as his actual record with its moral shortcomings.

Indeed, Sargent contributes new points of view about this seemingly well-trodden era. He skillfully weaves newly available archival materials from American and foreign sources with a careful interpretation of pre-existing analysis, as evidenced by his meticulous endnotes. Sargent offers nuanced analysis and a sophisticated aggregation of micro-history research on complex and variegated acts of diplomacy. The contents are largely sinuous both in the chronological sense as well as thematically, and in following lead personalities. Sargent’s citations, sourcing, and the index are impeccable. He presented helpful background for ordinary readers. Examples within a few randomly selected pages include his primer on the Council of Foreign Relations (173), and on President Gerald Ford (175). Sargent also explicates and clear the conspiratorial theories concerning the establishment and function of the Trilateral Commission (esp.170-172).

Sargent contributes many insights. Ignoring hype and the vested interests of actors who still live and function among us, he treats controversial issues in a judicious manner, putting the 1970s in its proper global and historical context. Fluctuating geopolitical challenges are the main and reoccurring themes of this book. Sargent frequently used the positive phrase Pax Americana regularly (as the very first chapter is titled) to designate a stable international order dominated by the U.S. He prefers it (for example on page 19, in comparison to Pax Britannica) to negative terms such as the ‘world policeman,’ or to pillorying the United States as a global-supremacy seeking imperial juggernaut. Pax Americana follows past incarnations such as Manifest Destiny or American Exceptionalism, and today’s ‘indispensable nation.’

Another major theme in the text may be termed as plus ca change. The patterns of conduct, at home and abroad, change much less than the issues, which are often fluid by nature. Since the early days of the republic, U.S. policy makers came from various branches of government, legislative and executive alike. Statesmen

possessed differing ethnic, professional, and ideological backgrounds that shaped their worldly outlooks and level of partisanship. Representatives of various groups had complex personalities. Politicians competed for influence and prestige. Diplomats perennially wrestled with military emergencies. Negotiators created complicated alliances. Presidents often preferred economic and strategic interests over idealism and humanitarian concerns. Leaders blended reliance on persuasion by negotiation and coercion by power. Strategists and mediators vacillated between cultivating, confronting, reconciling, and accommodating current and former allies, friends, neutrals, and enemies as they approached relative balance of powers and (sometimes absolute) spheres of influence. Regrettably, accountability and transparency were often wanting among public servants, even amid a growing scrutiny by the media. Indeed, U.S. foreign policy-makers faced similar international, strategic, and diplomatic challenges before, during, and after this tumultuous decade. So was the United States really transformed in the 1970s? The title of the book itself may be hyped.

Sargent mentions his intellectual debt to Akira Iriye’s focus on the strength of “global civil society” at the expense of nation-states and statism (36). Sargent also conveys National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski’s appreciation for the fusion and intersection of domestic politics and international relations (36). This explicit buildup on a mighty scholar and on a senior practitioner is reflected in this book’s preference to actions by groups beyond states, and in Sargent’s approach to the formation of U.S. diplomacy.]Substantively, Sargent is prudently critical of policy-makers. An analysis of selective portions and issues follows. Sargent considers Nixon and (although to a lesser extent), Kissinger as too rigid, and as too focused on the Cold War. He highlights President Jimmy Carter’s (and, as importantly, Brzezinski’s) slow adaptation to fast changing realities and pre-existing constraints.

In chapters 4 and 5, Sargent documents the significance of the global recession on American diplomacy in the aftermath of the oil embargo. Problems included U.S. dependence on international trade, access to foreign resources and investments, and the resulting high inflation in the United States. His presentation is capacious. He offers illuminating diagrams on U.S. balance of payments, interest rates, flows of private capital, and federal funds, alongside the decline of the dollar. Interestingly, to illuminate the roots of the crisis, Sargent goes back to the 1971 Tehran Agreement. By giving Persian Gulf States a larger ratio of revenue, it significantly raised the price of oil, well before the traditional launching of this crisis in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

Chapter 7 on human rights diplomacy during détente is particularly instructive. Sargent cogently stresses the leading role of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. As the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in 1975-1976, he advocated a moral agenda and debating tyranny in the international arena. Moynihan faced totalitarian regimes —mostly Communist, and some from the developing world—that denied their citizens basic rights. Simultaneously, however, representatives of these adversaries used democratic discourse and procedural techniques to impose their will on the UN General Assembly, and, (to a lesser extent, given the veto powers of Western permanent members, the U.S., Britain, and France) on the Security Council. Moynihan, moreover, often acted independently from Kissinger. Moynihan’s vantage point was that of the universal applicability of human rights. He lambasted murderous dictators such as Uganda’s Idi Amin. Moynihan also staunchly defended Israel and activists such as Andrei Sakharov in the Soviet Union. Kissinger, by contrast, focused on strategic needs. Thus, he was more favorable to pro-American authoritarian regimes, prioritizing détente and stability over the plight of oppressed minorities and imprisoned persons (198-201).

Sargent seamlessly moves analysis to congressional scrutiny, testimonies, and legislation on transnational concerns. Coverage includes the 1973 Fraser Hearings on human rights conditions worldwide in the House of
Representatives, and the 1975 Harker Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act that prohibited economic assistance to any country that commits gross human rights violations unless it can be shown that the aid will directly benefit the poor and needy. Particularly interesting are the struggles between idealist internationalists such as Senator Edward (Ted) Kennedy and Cold Warrior Neoconservatives such as Senator Henry (Scoop) Jackson. Both were Democrats—the former from Mass., the latter from Washington—but had divergent agendas. (201-206). Sargent then ties these threads by highlighting Kissinger’s growing focus on human rights as a tool of U.S. foreign policy and related State Department activities amid the prowess of non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International (206-209). These issues blended in the negotiations with the Soviets at the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe in the mid and early 1970s. The CSCE tried to reconcile the two seemingly irreconcilable concepts of international order: superpowers controlling countries within their bloc, on the one hand, and interdependence, sometimes even independence, of weaker states, on the other (209-220).

The resulting “Helsinki Paradox” (216-217) involved a border-piercing (primarily Western) agenda accentuating the promotion and protection of collective and individual human rights, contradicted by the desire (primarily Soviet) for the continuity of the primacy of sovereignty, borders, and noninterference. According to Sargent, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act seemed like significant Western concession to continued Soviet domination in Eastern Europe in exchange for meaningless promises for universal human rights principles. Instead, these embedded norms quickly became a rallying cry for activists like Czechoslovakia’s Vaclav Havel behind the Iron Curtain. Similarly, Sargent highlights how, to Kissinger’s surprise and chagrin, congressional advocates used the Helsinki Final Act to affect U.S. foreign policy (219-220).

Had Kissinger—otherwise a master of diplomatic history, especially of nineteenth-century Europe, drawing constant lessons from it for contemporary application—thought about President Woodrow Wilson, and the Irreconcilables Republicans who opposed multilateral commitments in the aftermath of the 1919 Versailles Treaties, he would not have been amazed. Regrettably, Sargent does not make that connection, either, although he does continually appreciate the linkage between the intricacies of domestic politics and the formation of foreign policy. Disappointingly, perhaps astonishingly, Wilson is only mentioned once in this book. On that occasion, Sargent compares his and Nixon’s sense of realism (47).

Sargent continues chapter 7 with the 1975/6 demise (he calls it “eclipse,” 220) of détente due to Soviet intervention through sending Cuban troops, which was countered by South Africa and by the CIA, in the Angolan civil war. He concludes this chapter with a fine analysis of how foreign policy, in general, and support for human rights, in particular, informed and affected the evolution of the 1976 presidential election campaign, from that of Ronald Reagan through Gerald Ford, and especially Jimmy Carter (222-228).

The last substantive chapter, 9, is intriguingly called “The Revenge of Geopolitics.” Indeed, geopolitics is the main theme of this book. This portion is a splendid testament to Sargent’s erudition, especially to his capacity to see both the micro-trees and the macro-forest in studying multiple, intertwined economic, strategic, and regional subjects during the Cold War. He also marshals statistics, data, and useful quotes to explain Carter’s difficulties with the Soviets, the Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and Iran.

Sargent’s elucidation is twofold. He both recreates the fast-paced events of the late 1970s, as well as interprets the strengths and (more noticeably) the weakness of the Carter administration in its problematic handling of its concurrent problems. Sargent appreciates Carter’s only-partially self-inflicted poor timing for a vision that would have been more fitting for the post-Cold War era. He also cogently and concisely concludes in an
elegant sentence worth repeating: Carter’s “problem was not the absence of strategic thinking but that strategy itself proved, in the end, to be unequal to the innate complexity of a tumultuous and transformative decade.” (295)

To be sure, few books are perfect. As mentioned above, Sargent relies on the perspectives of Brzezinski and Kissinger in an otherwise a critical academic treatise. The memoirs of these leading statesmen of that era naturally offer self-interested narratives in depicting important tales. Sargent, not infrequently, follows pages of nuanced and well-researched analysis with a synthetic paragraph that is not fully supported by evidence. Thus, unnecessary declaratory sentences occur repeatedly. Few of many examples concern the looming of “Nixon’s shadow” (220); a list of obstacles for America in 1977 (245); and a generalization that subsumed (or confused) British practical control over Egypt from the late nineteenth century with subsequent British conquest, and formal rule over Iraq and Palestine (141).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, methodologically, this book is much easier to understand backwards, namely retroactively rather than prospectively. Indeed many of events in the 1970s, when seen through the prism of history, too often take on an aura of inevitability. The reality is, however, that most, if not all, of the occurrences, were far from predetermined. Sargent begins the text by mentioning 1979 as a seminal year, professionally, academically, and personally. How domestic U.S. politics and international diplomacy shaped up by 1979 was hardly foreseeable, much less pre-determined in 1970. The sad fate of the Shah’s regime in Iran is a fine example.

All in all, this is book to read on this era.
I would like to thank H-Diplo for giving a chance to review Daniel Sargent’s ambitious book. I was very much looking forward to reading a work of such significant scholarship. Moreover, I was particularly intrigued by the book’s title due to the similarity with the title of my own recent book.1 Interestingly, contrary to what the titles may at first sight suggest, our two books tell completely different stories. Sargent refers to my book as being “framed within the Cold War paradigm” (fn 21, p 314). With this he touches upon a crucial point. Did I frame my work within the Cold War paradigm or was I simply telling the story of policymakers that operated within that reality? In other words – and this is the central question posed by Sargent in his book – did the Cold War still dominate the international system in the 1970s or was the bipolar order cracking in face of new challenges, such as human rights, economic interdependence (or globalization), and other transnational forces that later came to define our contemporary world?

The structure of A Superpower Transformed reflects the chronological evolution of American foreign relations. The first part is dedicated to the analysis of the Nixon-Ford years (with a specific emphasis on the role of National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in particular during the Ford administration), and Part Two assesses the policies of the Carter administration. The author addresses an impressively wide-ranging series of topics and themes, including the rise of détente during the Nixon years, the first so-called ‘humanitarian crises’ (in Nigeria and Pakistan), the fall of the Bretton Woods system, the consequences of the oil shock, the rise of economic summitry in the form of the G-7, President Jimmy Carter’s novel approach to foreign policy (human rights and economic interdependence/trilateralism), and the return to Soviet-centered foreign policy (or the ‘revenge of geopolitics’) in the final year of Carter administration. The book is extremely ambitious in design and scope. It is well researched and mostly based on primary documents from the various American administrations (although I found a majority of Foreign Relations of the United States documents cited compared to documents coming directly from the presidential libraries or the National Archives. Moreover, I wonder about the exclusion of documents from the Treasury – given the extensive focus on economic issues – and whether this was or was not a deliberate choice made by the author).

The book has many positive aspects and indisputably makes an important contribution to the rapidly growing scholarship on the 1970s. The strongest parts of the book (and those on which the author emphasizes) deal with the remaking of American power in the economic-financial domain and with the consequences of economic globalization. The repercussions of the end of the Bretton Woods system and, specifically, the ways in which the U.S. leadership sought to adapt to the end of America’s post-World War II hegemony are comprehensively assessed. The author stresses how the Nixon administration tried to safeguard U.S. primacy (and the benefits of the Pax Americana) in the midst of the relative decline of American power. Although the author underlines that President Richard Nixon’s achievements were largely the result of unattended consequences, he nonetheless stresses how the U.S. managed to successfully adapt to unfavorable circumstances. In particular, he stresses Henry Kissinger’s role and merits in perceiving the necessity of embracing multilateralism in the aftermath of the oil shock and the importance of the creation of economic summitry for the renewed cohesion and recovery of the Western industrial powers (summits that later became the G-6 or G-7). These complex issues are dealt with skillfully and in detail. However, the themes addressed

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are less novel and the results less groundbreaking than the author seems to suggest, as some scholars have already comprehensively assessed the implications of the end of the Bretton Woods era and the rise of economic summitry as a means to manage ‘interdependence.’

A second major strength of the book is its assessment of the rise of transnational forces and the U.S. reaction to challenges of a different kind and nature, compared to traditionally state-centered perspectives. The emergence of human rights and their universalization challenged the notions of sovereignty, as internal affairs of governments were questioned and put under scrutiny from outside. According to the author, in the 1970s the tension between transnational human rights movements and national governments influenced the making of foreign policy in an unprecedented manner. At the same time, technological innovations – from the shipping container to the Boing 707 – dramatically cut distances across the globe. The world, as Sargent points out, was becoming a “global village” or “one great city” (36-37). The author assesses the U.S. reaction to such developments that, ultimately, led to embracing such forces of change.

The author’s treatment of transnationalism – be it the forces of human rights, globalization, technological revolutions, or humanitarianism – is significant and topical, as it builds on previous (and rapidly expanding) literature that identifies in the 1970s a turning point for the emergence of such issues. A very important point made by Sargent is that the United States, though sometimes not coherently nor always deliberately, adapted to the emergence of these global trends while its archrival – the Soviet Union – failed to do so. This, in turn, set the basis for the peaceful end of the Cold War (and of U.S. ‘victory’ and leadership exercised in the post- Cold War era). This is a point already been made by others, but it remains crucial nonetheless.

Without diminishing these major strengths, as one digs deeper into the book, however, various aspects require clarification and, in some cases, elicit criticism. My comments follow the order of the book: first Sargent’s treatment of the Nixon administration, then his assessment of the Ford years and, finally, his appraisal of the Carter presidency.

On the whole, Sargent’s treatment of the Nixon administration reflects the work of most other major scholars. Nixon’s bias for high politics and geopolitics, as well as his search to restore American primacy through a creative foreign policy – first and foremost by crafting U.S.-Soviet détente and the opening to China – are well-known issues, skillfully, but not innovatively, re-elaborated by Sargent. His reading of U.S.-Soviet détente restates conventional wisdom – i.e. that President Richard Nixon acknowledged the Soviet Union’s superpower status and sought – through détente – to stabilize the Cold War and accept the geopolitical status quo (60-62). I forcefully challenge this view in my book by setting forth a different


4 See, for example, Ennio Di Nolfo, Dagli imperi militari agli imperi tecnologici. La politica internazionale dal XX secolo ad oggi (Roma : Laterza, 2007).
interpretation of U.S.-Soviet détente, which I see as a more aggressive and less accommodating policy, particularly in the Third World. But we agree in seeing the Nixon administration as operating within the Cold War paradigm, being — at times excessively — centered on the Soviet Union. According to Sargent, this means that Nixon was “reaching backwards,” as he linked continued U.S. leadership on the global scene to keeping the Cold War alive (59; restated various times, for example, on 55 and 66). I believe, instead, that Nixon — like the Cold War presidents that preceded him and those that followed him — viewed the Soviet Union as the major issue that dominated American foreign policy (subject A, as he once called it) and that this was, to a large extent, inevitable. While Sargent views Nixon’s failure to embrace transnational forces (such as human rights) as a shortcoming, I consider it unrealistic to imagine that a great power such as the United States — embroiled in the Vietnam War and challenged by Soviet nuclear parity — could set aside geopolitical priorities to embrace other issues, notwithstanding their importance.

The fact that humanitarianism was considered important by Nixon in the case of Biafra— where no Cold War considerations came to play (80) — and not considered in Bangladesh (because of the relationship with Pakistan) is emblematic of U.S. priorities. But is not this rather logical, if not banal? Sargent underlines how these cases forced humanitarian dilemmas to the forefront of world politics (93). While this may be true, it is worth noting — just to add some degree of perspective to the issue — that humanitarianism was not, as apparently suggested by the author, born in the 1970s (one needs only to cite the debate that still surrounds the Armenian genocide of 1915 to unveil the deeper origins of issues related to human rights abuses).

Sargent’s two points — that human-rights concerns and activists forced policymakers to consider if the national interest was the only purpose of foreign policy (98) and that Nixon’s misfortune was to be a realistic president at a time when domestic audiences attached greater importance to human rights and the internal character of countries (69) — are worth underscoring. One might ask, however, whether another president would have acted differently, and whether it is even possible for an American leader to set the national interest aside in favor of other considerations.

Two final comments on Sargent’s treatment of the Nixon years concern economic issues and the oil shock of 1973. As rightly pointed out, the ramifications of financial globalization played an important role in bringing about the fall of the Bretton Woods system. However, the end of America’s hegemonic role was also the consequence of the recovery of Western Europe and Japan’s surging economy. Sargent almost exclusively focuses on global transnational trends, while disregarding the shift in real terms of balance-of-power relations that, instead, played a crucial role in challenging American dominance of the Western camp. On the oil shock following the 1973 Middle East War, Sargent is critical of Nixon and Kissinger, as he underlines that Cold War geopolitics blinded US policymakers (152) who overlooked the power of the ‘oil weapon.’ Although I share the assessment that Cold War considerations dominated U.S. policy throughout that crisis, the emergence of the oil weapon could hardly have been foreseen at the time. We now know how the oil-producing countries skillfully exploited this tool, but we cannot apply hindsight to criticize policy choices made under heavily constrained circumstances.


6 See, in particular, Chapter 3 of Sargent’s book (68-100).
Finally, Sargent tells the conventional story of U.S. (or rather, of Henry Kissinger’s) bias for Israel throughout the 1973 war (151). In reality, the U.S. position was much more nuanced. For example, it is not true that a channel to Egypt was not open (as Sargent claims, 153); Kissinger, while of course protecting Israeli interests, was also careful not to alienate the Arab countries in order to set the basis for his post-war shuttle diplomacy and America’s future mediating role in the ensuing peace process.7

Sargent’s treatment of the Ford years focuses mainly on the role and policies implemented by Kissinger, who emerges in his narrative as a more creative and innovative figure compared to his role in the Nixon administration. The author claims that Kissinger, having realized the importance of interdependence following the oil shock, refocused on relations between Western industrial economies, while diminishing his traditional Soviet-centrism (167 and 183). Although Sargent focuses extensively on Kissinger’s supposed embrace of interdependence, I remain skeptical on this point. Kissinger may have grasped the importance of repairing relations with the West after 1973-74, but at the same time he remained very much committed to anti-Soviet containment. Kissinger’s stance on Angola, for example, is emblematic of his continued Soviet-centric vision, and so is his stubborn pursuit of SALT II negotiations despite the obvious domestic difficulties.8 On this issue Sargent focuses mostly on economic issues, disregarding the U.S. leadership’s continued penchant for geopolitics.

Moreover, on the one hand Sargent seems to imply that summitry (the G-7) was a very innovative way to embrace economic interdependence (197). But on the other hand he states that the goals of these summits were to complement and not jeopardize the Cold War equilibrium. Is there not a contradiction here between the praise for Kissinger’s supposed innovative role and the continuity of his broader purposes?

In other words, I think that Sargent pushes his idea of a renewed approach too far when he claims (175) that by 1974 superpower relations were stable and that therefore the U.S. leadership could focus on other issues. This is a questionable statement. In 1974 superpower relations were far from ‘stable.’ U.S.-Soviet détente was in crisis and in rapid decline following the 1973 war. American and Soviet leaders may have spoken to each other about the Cold War in the past tense in order to safeguard the remains of détente. But they certainly did not believe that their rivalry was an issue of the past. The U.S. leadership was, in fact, deeply concerned about the decline of détente and the supposed advantages that the Soviet Union had gained. Here Sargent quotes memoranda of conversations between American and Soviet leaders, but fails to dig deeper into American sources on issues related to U.S.-Soviet relations.

On human rights and détente, Sargent reverts to a conventional narrative of the emergence of human rights in the U.S. domestic scene, and of how Kissinger and President Gerald Ford failed to integrate these concepts – and the transnational challenges they posed – into a strategic design. What is more interesting here is that Sargent concludes his treatment of the Nixon-Ford years by stating how incoming president Jimmy Carter differed from his predecessors because he would “assimilate human rights in a strategic concept” (228). It is on this point, however, that my assessment of the book will become most critical (see below).

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8 See Zanchetta, Chapter 7.
Sargent starts his appraisal of the Carter administration by underlining the different priorities posed at the center of U.S. foreign policy making. He outlines how the incoming President placed human rights, nuclear nonproliferation, and environmental issues at the center of his platform, evoking a de-emphasis on the near obsession with the Soviet Union that had characterized American foreign relations since the beginning of the Cold War. This, according to Sargent, signified a call for a post-Cold War foreign policy (230). President Carter and his advisers (first and foremost National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski) are thus credited for crafting a foreign policy that accommodated transnational trends (be it human rights or economic interdependence), and for envisioning a post-Cold War world in which America would exercise a renewed leadership. Sargent claims that Carter’s “subsequent retreat from world order politics should obscure neither the originality nor the coherence of what Carter attempted at the outset.” (231). Moreover, the author states that human rights were the “master key to the administration’s initial strategic project” (236), thus implying that Carter had an authentic strategic design.

Such statements are not sustained by the evidence. While the originality (and I would add, ambitious aims) of some of Carter’s initial ideas can hardly be disputed, there was never coherence in either planning or implementation of Carter’s agenda. The author himself states (a few pages later, on 253) that administration diplomats complained about the absence of clear guidance as to what Carter’s human rights policy really was. In addition, seemingly contradicting his previous statement, in his final chapter Sargent states that “originality did not equal coherence, and what Carter articulated was a wavering policy, framed within an ambiguous strategic concept” (268). One is thus left perplexed as to where exactly the author stands and what argument he is making.

In any case, claiming that Carter had a strategy to implement his ideas is exaggerated. Carter’s embrace of human rights had nothing ‘strategic’ because, from the start, there were inconsistencies and double standards, as some countries were targeted for human rights abuses more than others. Even in Latin America, rightly dubbed by the author as the main theater for the application of Carter’s policy, abuses were in some cases deliberately overlooked. The author himself points out (257) that when “the stability of a pro-American regime was at stake, human rights would have to take a back seat” (257), as was the case for Iran and South Korea. In other words, there was never a plan on how to tackle with these crucial dilemmas: when would human rights take precedence over national security? How could human rights interventionism be reconciled with claims of sovereignty?

Moreover, Sargent acknowledges that Carter stuck to his initial design for only 18 months (237), and thereafter reverted to more traditional policies. Such short-term achievements can hardly be dubbed as ‘strategic.’ In addition, at the end of the last chapter, Sargent claims again that the Carter administration should be credited for its strategic thinking. The problem, he says, was that the strategy was inadequate to the reality in which the administration operated (295). Apart from constituting a twist of words (that leaves the reader perplexed), this point seems rather futile since a real strategy – in order to be effective – has to necessarily be linked to its operational reality.

In seeking to underscore his point on Carter’s alleged coherence and vision, Sargent states (262) that the president tried, with his policies, to transcend the East/West divide but “unfortunately the United States did not inhabit a post-Cold War world” (262). While I share this comment on the enduring Cold War context that inevitably influenced and limited the Carter administration’s freedom of action, it seems like a reversal of what Sargent has been trying to assert in most of his book – i.e. that the Cold War order had begun to crack in the 1970s, that it was something of the past, and that even the policymakers of the time spoke of the Cold
War in the past tense. There is, therefore, some confusion and lack of coherence in some of the author’s statements. And this, in turn, leads me to question some of the book’s findings and central argument.

Before moving to commenting on the book’s conclusions, I would like to point out what I consider some factual mistakes. On Iran, the author states (258) that in 1977, during his first meeting with the Shah of Iran, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance stressed the importance that Carter attached to human rights. According to the ample evidence I consulted, this is not the case. On the contrary, human rights were not a subject of that conversation, which instead focused on continued U.S. arms sales to Iran. On the Horn of Africa and China, the author states that Vance’s position prevailed over Brzezinski’s and that the China card was not played in reaction to the Soviet Union’s show of force in the Horn (268). The evidence points to the opposite — that Brzezinski’s suggestion to respond to the Soviet challenge by re-activating the China card was the line of action chosen by President Carter. In fact, contrary to the claim made by Sargent (270), China normalization was not a priority at the beginning of the administration. The idea of normalizing resurfaced as a way to strengthen the U.S. geopolitical position in reaction to the perceived aggressiveness of the Soviet Union in the Third World. 9 I am also perplexed to read that Brzezinski wanted to “subsume US-Soviet relations to a post-Cold War strategic concept” while “Vance believed that East-West relations remained the main problem for US foreign policy” (265) I am not sure from which evidence the author draws upon to make this claim, since all the sources I consulted point to the exact opposite (i.e. that Vance was more inclined to consider issues on their own merit, while Brzezinski remained, for the most part, concerned with the Soviet dimension).

A final comment concerns the developments in the arc of crisis, which is dwelt with rather marginally by the author compared to the importance assigned to other topics. In line with his overall bias for economic issues, Sargent claims that the reorientation of U.S. policy that resulted in the placing of the Middle East at the center of priorities was a consequence of the emergence of the oil weapon. While oil was of course an important consideration in the formulation of American policies, it was far from the only element shaping decisions in the critical 1979-1980 juncture. Concern with the Soviet Union and its potential advancement into the Persian Gulf was the main issue shaping policy choices. Geopolitics, as much as economics, led to the making of the Carter Doctrine.

In conclusion, my critical comments notwithstanding, this book remains a work of outstanding scholarship. The author’s effort to search for the roots of the contemporary era in the tumultuous decade of the 1970s is interesting and intriguing. It is, together with my book, one of the only works that covers all three presidencies of the 1970s – and this is in itself is a remarkable achievement, given the sheer amount of sources consulted.

But despite the merits and the achievements of the book, I am left perplexed by both the author’s intentions and his conclusions. It seems to me that in the search for the roots of today’s issues the author has looked to the 1970s with too much hindsight. His use of contemporary terms (such as ‘global south’ or ‘globalization’, as if they were of common usage in the 1970s, reflects what I think is a methodological flaw: one cannot assess historical processes from the standpoint of knowing the outcomes. We now know that transnational human rights activism, for example, played a crucial role in breaking the Cold War blocs, but the significance of this process could hardly have been anticipated at the time.

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The book begins with statements claiming that the Cold War was over in the 1970s, but ends with by acknowledging that, in reality, the Cold War very much still dominated the international system. I think it would have been more accurate to claim that the U.S. hegemonic role in world affairs ended in the 1970s. The Cold War, obviously, endured until 1989.

Moreover, I remain puzzled as to what the author really means to convey with the title of the book. How, exactly, was America transformed in the 1970s? He states that what ensued in the 1970s was “a superpower recasting whereby the United States came to depend upon resources that globalization furnished, and American decision makers came to identify US interests with globalization’s advance. What cohered in the 1970s was a post-Cold War superpower role, distinct in crucial respects from the postwar Pax Americana” (302). But if this is true, what are we to make of the 1980s, and of the renewed Cold War launched by President Ronald Reagan?

I believe that while Carter and Brzezinski may have tackled the issues that later came to define the post-Cold War era, no one (in the Carter and later in the Reagan administration) actually anticipated or foresaw the Cold War’s end. Although the events and unattended consequences skillfully described by Sargent undoubtedly characterize some of the crucial legacies of the 1970s, other, equally important, legacies rotate around the deliberate choices made by U.S. policymakers within the Cold War context and the enduring geopolitical struggle that the book does not assess.
Author’s Response by Daniel J. Sargent, University of California, Berkeley

Our chair for this roundtable began his own history of the 1970s by calling these years a “decade of ill repute.” Thomas Schwartz makes a similar point here, noting that the 1970s remain in popular understanding a “wretched, awful, depressing decade.” Unloved and unlovely as the decade may be, the Seventies are not starving for attention; the historiography is burgeoning. As a participant in the historiographical conversation, I am grateful for the companionship, including in this roundtable on *A Superpower Transformed*.

I would like express my gratitude to Thomas Maddux for convening this roundtable and to Diane Labrosse for her sage editorial engagement; to Tim Borstelmann for introducing the discussion; and to Mario Del Pero, Daniel Immerwahr, Thomas Schwartz, Itai Sneh, and Barbara Zanchetta for participating in it. For my part, I will use this author’s response to restate core hypotheses, address concerns, and redress misrepresentations.

*A Superpower Transformed* is a book in two parts. In the first, decision makers struggle to buttress America’s faltering superpower position and are confounded by new global challenges, including human rights and economic globalization. In the second, decision makers attempt to reorient U.S. foreign policy towards novel challenges including human rights and globalization but end up embroiled in a resurgent Cold War. Participants in this roundtable subject this argument to an array of incisive questions, so many that I will have to be selective in my response, and focus, for the most part, on common themes that emerge.

*A Superpower Transformed* presents an interpretation grounded in historical documents. Reviewers, appropriately, probe at its empirical foundations. The book uses mainly U.S. sources: “government archives, congressional hearings, collections of personal papers, and a wide range of periodicals,” as Schwartz comments. The book’s core argument, as Immerwahr and Sneh note, is immersed in the documents and worldviews of American leaders. Reviewers divide in their assessments of the sources’ adequacy to the analysis. While Schwartz considers the evidence sufficient to the argument, Del Pero critiques the book’s “U.S.-centrism.” Writing an international history of the 1970s, Del Pero emphasizes, “would have required a much broader and diverse archival research.”

Del Pero is right to imply that *A Superpower Transformed* is not an international history of the 1970s. Rather, it is an interpretation of U.S. foreign policy making. Researching a truly international history of the Seventies would indeed have required engagement not only with European sources, as Del Pero suggests, but also with documents from beyond the North Atlantic world. East Asian sources would have been crucial, while the necessity of Persian and Arabic sources ought to be self-evident. Writing international history on such a grand scale would far eclipse the capacities of this historian, but what might such a study reveal were some historian bold and polyglot enough to undertake it? A truly international history of the 1970s could be revelatory, but I am myself skeptical that an archive-based international history of the 1970s—offering a grand sweep of world events and privileging no particular perspective—could be written except perhaps via synthesis when the object of analysis is world politics in a global era. We can write histories of the Cold War, of defined episodes and crises, of dyadic relationships, and of the foreign policies of nation-states, but to write an international history of world politics would be a quite different quandary. For my part, I believe that there is value,

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perhaps even necessity, to historical reconstruction of global developments that proceeds from particular historical vantages—whether those of national governments, non-governmental organizations, or individual human beings. From a position of particularity, we may achieve at least some perspective on global change.

What I set out to write in *Superpower Transformed*, then, was not a truly international history of the 1970s but an interpretation of U.S. adaptation to dynamic global circumstances. Readers will have to assess for themselves both the adequacy of the source material to the task and what the book reveals of changing world politics. I would argue that there is intellectual integrity in attempting to explicate even grand and systemic change from specific vantages—in this case the perspective of American decision makers. Adopting the freewheeling perspective of a disembodied narrator might permit the historian freer rein over global developments, but it would also permit selection of the evidence to fit the argument. By adopting the perspective of American leaders who presumed for themselves certain systemic responsibilities, I have at least had to deal with world politics as those decision makers encountered it. I am heartened by Immerwahr’s conclusion: “Looking out onto the world from the North Lawn, there is an awful lot you can see.” This verdict flatters the author’s accomplishment, but it encapsulates his intent.

Before concluding the discussion of sources, I would like to address Zanchetta’s discussion of what she calls the book’s “factual mistakes.” Her first charge is that I mistakenly state that “a [U.S.] channel to Egypt was not open” during the October War. *A Superpower Transformed, in fact, makes no such claim.*2 The word “Egypt” does not appear on the page of the book (153) that Zanchetta cites. Next comes my claim that Secretary of State Cyrus Vance “emphasized the importance” that President Jimmy Carter attached to human rights when he met Iran’s Shah on May 13, 1977 (258). “Human rights were not a subject of that conversation,” Zanchetta states. Yet the evidence I cite corroborates the factual assertion, while other historians make similar factual claims.3 Even Zanchetta in her own recent book writes that Vance, when he met the Shah, noted that the issue of human rights “was important for the United States.”4 Next Zanchetta disputes my alleged claim that “On the Horn of Africa and China…Vance’s position prevailed over [National Security Adviser Zbigniew] Brzezinski’s and that the China card was not played.” This conflates two issues

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2 Although it is not discussed in *A Superpower Transformed*, Henry Kissinger’s backchannel dialogue with Egyptian national security adviser Hafiz Ismael during the October War is well-known and well-documented. Kissinger discusses the backchannel in his memoir *Years of Upheaval* (New: Little Brown, 1982), while *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Volume XXV documents its development.


4 Barbara Zanchetta, *The Transformation of American International Power in the 1970s* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 249. For sure, Zanchetta stresses that the discussion was cursory and that human rights remained subordinate to other priorities, but so does *A Superpower Transformed.*
and misrepresents my argument. The passage that Zanchetta critiques reads: “Vance prevailed; Carter opted for a policy of restraint on the Horn of Africa” (268). While the previous sentence discusses China, the verb “prevailed” here points to “US policy towards the Horn of Africa.” The claim that Vance prevailed on the Horn ought not be controversial. “I did not carry the day,” Brzezinski’s memoir admits. Another so-called error involves China policy. “Contrary to the claim made by Sargent,” Zanchetta writes, “China normalization was not a priority at the beginning of the [Carter] administration.” This is yet another misrepresentation. I do not state that normalization was “a priority,” only that the administration decided at the outset to pursue normalization (270). The evidence I cite supports the factual claim, while documents published in *Foreign Relations of the United States* further buttress the point.

Zanchetta also invokes unspecified “sources” to challenge my argument that Brzezinski aimed to “subsume US-Soviet relations to a post-Cold War strategic concept” while “Vance believed that East-West relations remained the main problem for US foreign policy” (265). “I am not sure from which evidence the author draws upon to make this claim,” Zanchetta writes, “since all the sources I consulted point to the exact opposite.” My point here is not that Vance was more the Cold Warrior than Brzezinski but that Vance construed sustaining détente as the central task for U.S. foreign policy, while Brzezinski favored elevating alternative purposes, including the management of interdependence. Brzezinski makes the same point in his memoir, quoting at length from a mid-1978 diary entry. The argument in *A Superpower Transformed* is extensively documented, especially in the endnotes that correspond with pages 263-9. Documents cited across these 18 endnotes include speeches, meeting minutes, campaign memoranda, diary entries, and memoirs. Others will have to decide whether I have represented the record or distorted it. But if readers want to know upon what evidence my analysis draws, they need only turn to my endnotes.

In these and other instances, Zanchetta’s review distorts and/or misrepresents *A Superpower Transformed*, such as when she criticizes the “exclusion of documents from the Treasury,” documents that the book in fact utilizes. She asserts that I suggest that humanitarianism was “born in the 1970s,” when I in fact situate twentieth-century developments in relation to earlier humanitarian causes, such as the Greek Revolt of the 1820s and the Bulgarian horrors of the 1870s (92-3). Similar distortions are also deployed to criticize my methodology. Zanchetta suggests, for example, that my critique of U.S. decision-making during the October War of 1973 is illegitimate because I know what protagonists did not: that an oil crisis was about to explode.

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6 “From the very outset,” Vance writes in *Hard Choices*, “normalizing relations with the People’s Republic of China was my goal and that of President Carter” (75). Brzezinski concurs, stating in *Power and Principle* that “normalization of relations with China was a key strategic goal of the new Administration” (196). Also see *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1981*, Volume XIII, especially no. document no. 34.

7 *Power and Principle*, 519-20.

8 See *A Superpower Transformed*, Chapter 4, n. 49, 69, Chapter 5, n. 20; Chapter 6, n. 21, 55, 59. Some of the most intriguing documents I uncovered while researching *A Superpower Transformed*—pertaining to a March 1974 seminar that Admiral Elmo Zumwalt convened on “economic interdependence and the nation’s future”—were in fact located in NARA’s RG-56: the papers of the Treasury Department.
“The emergence of the oil weapon could hardly have been foreseen,” she writes. What Zanchetta does not mention is that my analysis invokes contemporaries such as State Department analyst James Akins, who in 1972 warned that energy interdependence had political implications, and Saudi Arabia’s King Faisal, who committed in August 1973 to deploy “oil as a weapon” (152).

Zanchetta’s catalogue of the book’s “factual mistakes” is, in sum, without merit. Returning to more substantive questions, I will first address historical points that reviewers raise, including the role of domestic politics in *A Superpower Transformed* and the nature of Kissinger’s adaptation to changing international circumstances after 1973/74.

Reviewers divided on the book’s treatment of domestic affairs. Sneh praises the book for its handling of the “linkage” between domestic politics and foreign policy, while Schwartz suggests that I underplay the extent to which political calculations animated Richard Nixon. Del Pero is more critical, chiding the “absence of any reflection on how cultural, political, and societal transformations in 1970s America impacted U.S. foreign policy.” I would counter that the book does, in fact, acknowledge the impact of domestic developments including the effects of Watergate; the influence of neoliberal thought; and the stirrings of neo-conservatism. Yes, these (and other) topics could have been treated at greater length, but exposition mandates selection. Expanding the treatment of American domestic politics (and international politics, as Del Pero also urges) would have required either a longer book or a diffusion of the book’s core analytical focus.

While the presentation of domestic developments is necessarily selective, domestic politics are integral to the argument of *A Superpower Transformed*. Drawing on the work of Samuel Huntington (i.e. 187-8), I stress the resistance that democratically elected leaders encountered in the 1970s when they attempt to manage economic interdependence via international collaboration. An example may elucidate. Jimmy Carter in 1978 presumed to trade the decontrol of domestic U.S. oil prices for a West German fiscal stimulus, but he could not persuade Congress to honor his understanding with Helmut Schmidt. Recounted in *Superpower Transformed* (243-9), the episode indicates the structural obstacles that democratic politics pose to the collaborative management of economic interdependence when economic activity is transnational but political authority remains territorial. In this respect, domestic politics are integral to one of the book’s core arguments. Domestic politics are also central to the book’s argument about the impact of human rights, which stresses the blurring of “distinctions between foreign and domestic politics” (43).

Another specific concern that emerges in reviews is the book’s handling of Henry Kissinger, especially after 1973/74, when I posit an adaptation to novel international challenges. Del Pero is skeptical of my argument, suggesting that I exaggerate Kissinger’s reorientation towards interdependence issues and, by implication, his creativity as a historical figure. Schwartz observes, correctly, that *A Superpower Transformed* provides a “sympathetic” portrait of Henry Kissinger, especially in his role as Secretary of State. I will not reprise here the positive reinterpretation of Kissinger that the book develops (especially in Chapter Six); suffice to say that it was the historical record as I encountered it, not my own preconceptions, that led me towards the interpretation I present in *A Superpower Transformed*.

I will however clarify my argument, since it bears upon the book’s broader conclusions. In Del Pero’s rendering, I present Kissinger’s 1973/74 reorientation towards interdependence issues as an about-turn, a road-to-Damascus conversion. This is not quite right. While I emphasize Kissinger’s engagement with new global dilemmas, I also stress his enduring commitment to the sustenance of Cold War détente (especially in Chapter Seven). What unfolded from 1973/74, I argue, was strategic adaptation, not transmutation.
did not renounce Cold War purposes; he assimilated new priorities to existing ones. The pursuit of intra-Western cooperation on interdependence issues and North-South dialogue were compatible with established Cold War priorities. More threatening to détente and more subversive of prevalent concepts of international legitimacy, human rights could not be so easily assimilated, as Schwartz notes and Chapter Seven explains.

This brings me to one of the large questions that the book engages: the nature and utility of strategy. Here Zanchetta raises probing questions in response to my discussion of Carter’s strategic agenda. Zanchetta doubts my assertion that Carter “had a strategy,” arguing that inconsistencies in the implementation of foreign policy belie my ascription of coherent strategic design. We may disagree, but I welcome the opportunity to clarify my point.

Strategy as defined in *A Superpower Transformed* (8) is akin to historical interpretation: the strategist attempts to discern broad historical developments—or patterns—and infers formulae for managing—or at least surviving—those trends. Inferring Soviet truculence, George Kennan prescribed containment. Fearing decline, Nixon sought stability. Perceiving interdependence, Carter and Brzezinski aimed to manage globalization. The point is not that ensuing choices were always coherent, especially not in implementation; such a standard would render strategy a practical impossibility, for inconsistency and even hypocrisy are inherent to the making of foreign policy. Strategy guides, but it seldom dictates particular policy choices and far less presumes consistency.

Strategic adaptation, a central concern for *A Superpower Transformed*, occurs when decision makers modify their existing strategic concepts to incorporate phenomena that are present in world politics but were marginalized in prior strategic designs. Such adaptation occurred in both 1973-74 and 1979/80. As I write in *A Superpower Transformed* (262):

“Like Kissinger’s embrace of interdependence after 1973, Carter’s strategic reorientation of 1979–80 demonstrates the inability of overarching strategic concepts to reduce history to legible narratives and actionable formulae.”

Strategic adaptation was necessary, the book argues, because initial distillations of complex and plural historical realities resulted in oversimplification, which obscured as much as it revealed. Schwartz is right to perceive in the book’s favorable treatment of both Kissinger’s and Carter’s adaptations an argument that (as Schwartz puts it) “foreign policy leaders should recognize the need to adapt to new circumstances and crises.” This, both Kissinger and Carter accomplished. Thus the credit that *Superpower Transformed* accords the Carter administration attaches less to the coherence of the administration’s initial strategic concept and more to its subsequent reevaluation of its own strategic precepts.

Having in *A Superpower Transformed* critiqued decision makers for presuming to infer coherent patterns in the world of the 1970s, it would ill behoove me to do the same. Yet this is what Zanchetta in her opening paragraph invites us to do: did the Cold War still dominate the international system in the 1970s, she asks, or was the bipolar order cracking? The question is crucial, but it bears no easy answer, at least not for this historian. The Cold War endured and sometimes raged during the 1970s, but globalization and human rights also stirred, transforming world politics. Myriad forces shaped the world; what forces we chose to accent is, I believe, inevitably a matter of perspective. To paraphrase an icon of ambivalence: there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in historical (or strategic) interpretation. Having decided to narrate the 1970s from the perspective of U.S. decision makers, my presentation of world politics follows the sources I
read, which evoke the Cold War’s waning, the proliferation of new dilemmas, and the Cold War’s subsequent escalation as the decade’s central themes. Future historians may adjudge the central theme of the 1970s to have been neither the Cold War nor globalization but humankind’s rapid consumption of carbon fuels accumulated over millions of years. Those future historians will not be wrong; in the end, we can see the past from no vantage except our own, even when we try—as I have done—to reconstruct the perspectives of its protagonists.

Through the tumult of the 1970s, the United States became, I argue, a superpower transformed. Immerwahr suggests, correctly, that I intended the title to signal passivity—the superpower as history’s object more than its subject. Other reviewers, including both Sneh and Zanchetta, nonetheless question the extent to which the 1970s wrought transformation. This is a question that I address at length in my conclusion (esp. 298-302), so I will not prolong my response here. I will however restate the book’s core argument: until the late 1960s, the United States was the non-Communist world’s great disseminator, a hub from which resources flowed outwards, sustaining a worldwide anti-Soviet front. This Cold War order fractured in the 1970s, as a result of developments that included globalization and U.S. relative decline.

What ensued however was not the end of American hegemony (which still endures today) but its transformation, as the United States became dependent upon transnational resources to sustain its fiscal deficits, its global military reach, and its ideological appeal. I use the phrase “post-Cold War” to identify the transformed superpower that emerged from the 1970s, language I intended to signal both the disjuncture from the high Cold War order of American hegemony that prevailed from the 1940s into the early 1970s and the continuities with the present-day. I nonetheless envy the pithiness of my mentor Charles Maier’s differentiation between an American “empire of production” that endured from the 1940s to the 1970s and an “empire of consumption” that cohered thereafter; his language signals more clearly than mine the change that A Superpower Transformed traverses.9

What role did the decision makers who populate A Superpower Transformed play in the recasting of America’s superpower role during the 1970s? Agency, as one reviewer perceptively notes, is the book’s core analytical dilemma, its “interpretive through-line,” in Immerwahr’s words. “This book,” Immerwahr writes, “is ultimately about structure overcoming agency.” Yet the point is not that decision makers were merely the captives of history, pawns whose misdeeds can be exculpated and triumphs discredited. They exercised agency, but the nature of their agency was ironic, manifested in unintended consequences and thwarted designs, not the realization of clear-sighted strategic concepts.

In response to Immerwahr’s perspicacious comments, I will make a concluding distinction between what I will call “impact agency” and “historical agency.” Equipped with diverse modalities of power, including the capacity to inflict far-flung military violence, American leaders in the 1970s exercised—as their heirs still exercise—vast impact agency, an agency inscribed in the wounds of Southeast Asia, Central America, and Mesopotamia.

Yet the resources that enable impact agency do not always, or necessarily, confer the historical agency that would enable American leaders to determine for themselves their nation’s role and place in an evolving

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historical process. This evokes an irony in America’s ascent to superpower status. As the republic has expanded its imperial reach and acquired ever-greater capacities for achieving impact agency, its historical agency, what George Washington called “the command of its own fortunes,” may also have diminished. Transformative perhaps, the 1970s were hardly unique; rather, the transcendent dilemmas that I have attempted to highlight in *A Superpower Transformed* still vex us today.

I am grateful to Mario Del Pero, Daniel Immerwahr, Thomas Schwartz, Itai Sneh, and Barbara Zanchetta for participating in this conversation and to Tim Borstelmann and Thomas Maddux for facilitating it.