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Introduction by Andrew Preston, Cambridge University

Three decades ago, historians bemoaned a lack of interpretive ambition in the field, specifically the decline of broad syntheses and grand narratives. The splitters, it seemed, had crowded out the lumpers. How times have changed. Now, grand narratives covering huge blocks of time and space are more common, and within the academy much more acceptable. We have seen the grand narrative emerge with particular force in the field of the U.S. and the world, with ambitious works reframing a significant part, or even all, of American foreign-relations history appearing in the last ten years.

Into this moment steps David Milne and his monumental interpretation of intellectuals and U.S. foreign relations. Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy is a wide-ranging, erudite, and beautifully written synthesis that enhances our understanding of the U.S. in the world. It is a series of biographical yet analytical case studies, ranging from the nineteenth-century naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan to the twenty-first-century President Barack Obama, of how intellectuals have grappled with the dilemmas of American power in the modern world.

The reviewers here all agree on Worldmaking’s importance as a massive historical undertaking and a bold reinterpretation of American history. Interestingly, the reviewers also agree on the quieter virtues of Milne’s scholarship, especially his elegant, effortless way with words and his humane fair-mindedness. James Wilson hails Worldmaking as “terrific,” while Brooke Blower calls it a “subtle and engrossing account” that is written “elegantly, with quiet humor and even-handed judgment.” Robert Brigham agrees, praising Worldmaking as “compelling” and lauding Milne’s ability to write with “splendid prose and penetrating analysis without belaboring his thesis.” Ryan Irwin offers what is perhaps the consensus view when he declares, “Milne has crafted a nuanced portrait of America’s diplomatic mind. Worldmaking should be required reading in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, and a point of departure for debates about the state of political history.”

At the heart of Worldmaking’s argument is a novel distinction between the art and science of American diplomacy. Milne devised this dichotomy as a replacement for the tired, hidebound competing categories of ‘realist’ and ‘idealist.’ The reviewers are accepting of the ‘art vs. science’ dichotomy. Irwin points out that the book “does not belabor its organizing dichotomy, and art and science never feel reductive in Milne’s hands. He uses his metaphors to squeeze out complexity rather than mask it.” Moreover, art vs. science seems to have more nuance than realism vs. idealism. Milne’s figures, Brigham writes, “are complicated thinkers who do

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more than prescribe to unyielding dogma.” Fair-minded though he is, however, it is also clear that Milne’s own sympathies lie with the artists who are steeped in history and aware of its complexities. As Blower puts it, “Worldmaking reads as a compelling defense of the humanities.”

Even a book as big and ambitious as Worldmaking cannot cover everything, and the reviewers point out several areas which Milne could might possibly have also explored. Blower, for example, highlights the book’s exclusive focus on elite men (and, with the exception of Obama, white men). “Milne might have attended to a wider range of perspectives,” she argues; his “large roster might have included greater diversity.” Irwin regrets that Milne “says relatively little about government revenue or state capacity” and that he “glides past” some of the major developments of the last half-century, such as the information and digital revolutions, that have so profoundly changed the United States and its relationship with the world. Yet there are few quibbles with Milne’s actual treatment of his subjects, which is surprising given the wide cast of characters and the contentious policies they forged. Wilson wonders if Milne’s view of Obama has already started to shift, a point that is all the sharper now that he has been succeeded by perhaps the most un-intellectual president in American history. Brigham’s critique is more pointed, in that he finds Milne’s chapter-length treatments of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz to be a little too fair-minded. But for a book as wide-ranging as Worldmaking, the relative absence of criticism of his biographical portraits is remarkable.

Overall, it is clear from the reviews in this roundtable that David Milne’s Worldmaking is a groundbreaking book deserving of celebration and admiration. And as with the best historical syntheses, it will open up new avenues for future scholars seeking to analyze the intellectual foundations of America and the world.

Participants:


Andrew Preston is Professor of American History and a Fellow of Clare College at Cambridge University. He is the author of The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam (Harvard, 2006) and Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy (Knopf, 2012), and the editor of four other books. He is currently writing a book on the idea of national security in American history as well as editing Volume 2 of The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War (with Lien-Hang Nguyen) and Volume 3 of The Cambridge History of America and the World (with Brooke Blower).


Ryan Irwin is an associate professor at the State University of New York at Albany, where he teaches U.S. foreign relations and modern world history. He’s the author of Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order (Oxford, 2012), and he’s currently writing a collective biography about midcentury liberal internationalism.

James Graham Wilson is a Historian at the Department of State, where he compiles volumes for the Foreign Relations of the United States. He is the author of The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev’s Adaptability, Reagan’s Engagement, and the End of the Cold War (Cornell University Press, 2014). He received his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 2011.
“When you’re looking out at those endless plains of Kansas, ask yourself why we are in Afghanistan.” This is what the distinguished military historian Andrew Bacevich said to me at a backyard barbeque, when I mentioned I was leaving Boston for a cross-country road trip.\(^1\) Having packed David Milne’s *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy*, it turns out that this is exactly what I was wondering about while speeding across I-70 this summer. My copy of the impressive tome, weighing in at more than 500 pages, passed through Pittsburgh and that improbable sliver of West Virginia between Pennsylvania and Ohio. I read it before ascending the St. Louis arch, spilled bug spray on it in the Rockies, and almost knocked it off a beach-house balcony in California. The book, and its arguments, were no worse for the wear. Milne has written a subtle and engrossing account of the impact of nine men, their dreams and ideas, on U.S. foreign policy since the late nineteenth century. As Milne would have it, American troops are in Afghanistan—and at hundreds of other military bases around the globe—because ever since the consolidation of the continental United States at the turn of the last century, the endless plains of Kansas have not been enough for the nation’s leading politicians and their chosen intellectual advisors, men who, rather than being content to simply live in the world and admire its wonders, have endeavored to actively shape it to their own advantage.

*Worldmaking* proceeds chronologically with one meaty chapter for each of its nine subjects, beginning with the naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan and President Woodrow Wilson, who Milne portrays as the founding fathers of modern American diplomacy—figures as oppositional in their political philosophies as Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Next up are the complex lives and times of the historian Charles Beard and the journalist Walter Lippmann, who grappled with the fallout from one world war and the road to another. The diplomat George Kennan’s chapter takes the reader across the 1940s as the Soviet Union became first an ally and then an arch nemesis. Chapters on the policy adviser Paul Nitze, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and the political scientist Paul Wolfowitz chronicle a high-water mark of U.S. intervention overseas from the Korean War to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. A final chapter assesses President Barack Obama’s leadership in the light of this longer history. Milne writes elegantly, with quiet humor and even-handed judgment, about the choices and legacies of these actors. He also manages to cover an impressive amount of more general history in the process, making *Worldmaking* useful not simply as a study of a handful of important policymakers, but as a sweeping synthesis of American foreign relations in the long twentieth century.

The merits of biography as a historical framework are on full display in Milne’s work. Rather than writing about abstract powers, alliances, or a personified ‘America,’ he writes about flesh-and-blood human beings with inconsistencies, changes of heart, noble intentions, and grievous flaws. One of Milne’s primary aims in *Worldmaking* is to explore the “contrasting manners of thought and expression” of the nation’s statesmen, which, he argues, have had far-reaching effects on United States foreign policy (16). Finding the common distinction that scholars often draw between realists and idealists a “little tired,” Milne instead sorts his protagonists into two other camps: those, such as Kennan, Kissinger, and Obama, who saw diplomacy as an art that required case-by-case creativity and those, such as Nitze and Wolfowitz, who practiced it as a science that could be mastered by uncovering patterns and applying theories (16). Art versus science certainly has a nice ring, but more precisely what Milne delineates here is a consequential divergence in the worldviews,

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\(^1\) Date of conversation: 10 June 2016.
temperaments, and “operating style” of those who were drawn to humanities subjects and those who by contrast had been schooled in political science and international relations (5). The few who resisted the social science “seductiveness of crafting grand strategy,” who saw the world as somewhat unknowable and unconquerable, have often been chided for lacking coherence or resolve by others who yearned to live by unwavering principles (120). But those attuned to the art of the possible (when not overly conniving or focused on building their own careers) fare better in Milne’s estimation, and indeed on one level Worldmaking reads as a compelling defense of the humanities and a plea for more leaders with an appreciation for disciplines such as history, philosophy, and literature.

Constructing his story as biography also allows Milne to draw out some illuminating continuities across time. The protagonists from each of Milne’s chapters reappear in others as supporting players. Personnel overlap from war to war. Kennan especially haunts all storylines that come after his like the Ghost of Christmas Past. Individual lives stubbornly resist the careful periodizations of historians, spilling out in especially satisfying ways over Cold War boundaries. In the process, Milne’s biographical method reveals in clear, sobering ways how networks are built and how power works. The reader comes away from the book with a chilling sense of how much some of these men disdained broad democratic process, about how many plans that would mean life or death for millions were hatched over tea or cocktails, in Harvard drawing rooms or elite New York gentlemen’s clubs, where the self-appointed best and brightest gathered, as Beard put it, “to polish off the unfinished business of the universe” (185). Indeed this story is so tightly drawn around the government’s inner sanctum that by the end readers might muse about whether social movements mattered at all in ending the Vietnam War or any number of other events in the history of U.S. foreign relations.

Putting a handful of elites at the center of his study, of course, also opens Milne up to all kinds of quibbles about his choice of subjects, most obviously the lack of any women in his pantheon of worldmakers. Milne justifies this decision by arguing that the contributions made by women such as Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice simply did not “compare, in terms of traction and longevity, to those made by Mahan, Kissinger, and Wolfowitz” (19). Leaving aside the question of whether Charles Beard really did have a greater policy legacy than those two recent Secretaries of State or, say, First Lady and United Nations delegate Eleanor Roosevelt, I do think there is a way that Milne might have attended to a wider range of perspectives without writing a different book, displacing any of his chosen nine subjects, or misrepresenting how seriously elite men, and until very recently white men, have monopolized the upper echelons of government.

The book brims with memorable supporting characters whose ideas and actions Milne uses to contrast with, build off of, or put in conversation with those of the book’s leading figures, among them presidents like Theodore Roosevelt, senators like J. William Fulbright, and scholars like Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. That large roster might have included greater diversity—W.E.B. Du Bois, Clare Boothe Luce, or a number of other interesting thinkers with long-running careers come to mind—but until Worldmaking reaches the 1970s, this background cast, too, consists only of white men.

Important questions therefore go unanswered about the costs of the nation’s racial and gender hierarchies for the American foreign-relations story Milne traces so carefully. If a wider range of people had enjoyed access to the halls of power during the twentieth century, would that have changed the assumptions, the operating style, the culture of foreign policymaking? If people of color had played a role in the mid-twentieth-century State Department, for example, would less cynical predictions have been made about the probable outcomes of decolonization? If a critical mass of women, rather than only a token minority, had been seated at the decision table, would “coming off like men” (Kissinger, 374) or not wanting to look “like a total wuss” (Bill
Clinton, 500) have proven so resilient as a motive for going to war? Or perhaps tracking the opinions of a broader variety of Americans would have only revealed that the urge to worldmake has been widespread, that American hubris and entitlement run deep, and that the split between humanistic and social scientific thinkers often proved more profound than other social divisions. That, too, would have been a significant conclusion worth discovering.
D avid Milne has written a fascinating and thought-provoking book. He believes that the traditional distinction between realism and idealism in U.S. foreign policy has grown tired and outdated. Instead, Milne offers a subtle new binary: art versus science. In nine compelling portraits of some of the most influential U.S. thinkers, Milne suggests that a few were drawn to history, philosophy, and literature, while others were more inclined toward the social sciences. The former believed that there were halting lessons to be learned from the past, that caution and tragedy should rule the day. For men like Alfred Mahan, naval officer and historian; journalist Walter Lippmann; George Kennan, American diplomat; Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor and Secretary of State in the Nixon and Ford administrations; and President Barack Obama, intuition and humility were essential to dealing with an uncertain and dangerous world. The latter group, the scientists, represented by President Woodrow Wilson; historian Charles Beard; Paul Nitze, State Department official and arms control negotiator; and Paul Wolfowitz, former U.S. ambassador and Deputy Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush administration, believed that an American moral vision could change the course of international relations, thereby transcending history. What is so compelling about Milne’s book—and argument—is that he uses splendid prose and penetrating analysis without belaboring his thesis.

For Milne, Kennan and Nitze perfectly illustrate the differences between artists and scientists, and so he begins his book with their intellectual rivalry. Milne takes us back to 1949 when Secretary of State Dean Acheson asked Kennan, then Director of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department, and his Deputy, Paul Nitze, to develop a critical policy recommendation for President Harry Truman: In light of the Soviets’ testing of an atomic bomb, should the United States move forward with its own efforts to develop a more powerful hydrogen bomb? For Kennan, the destructive capacity of the hydrogen bomb meant that the policy recommendation could not be reduced to a mere question of strategic concerns; Kennan believed that development of the fusion bomb was also a moral issue. Ultimately, Kennan submitted a “seventy-nine-page paper, rich in history and philosophy,” warning “against building this fearsome weapon” (4). Quoting William Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, “And appetite, an universal wolf, so doubly seconded with will and power, must make perforce an universal prey, and last eat up himself,” (4) Kennan feared that fusion weapons could lead to a world where military victories were illusory, creating instability in the international system. He also argued that no nation should be trusted with a weapon so dangerous. “In such a time there is only one thing a nation can do which can have any really solid and dependable value,” Kennan concluded, “and that is to see that the initial lines of its policy are as close as possible to the principles dictated by its traditions and its nature” (5).

Nitze, in stark contrast, sought to understand the science of nuclear fusion. He met with several nuclear scientists, including Robert Oppenheimer, and joined the Atomic Working Group within the State Department. Milne paints a vivid picture of Kennan facing this tough problem alone in his office surrounded by his history and philosophy books, while Nitze embraced the larger scientific community to gain a better understanding of the changing world around him. The message was clear: for men like Nitze, Kennan was stuck in the past and did not clearly understand the transformative nature of U.S. power. Nitze ultimately argued that declining to develop the hydrogen bomb would give the Soviets a tactical advantage and prove to be “foolish and reckless” (6). Truman shared his concern, arguing that the United States had “no choice” (7) but to develop the hydrogen bomb.
This vignette is emblematic of Milne’s approach. Beginning with Mahan, the author of the highly influential *The Influence of Sea Power* (1890), which argued that the U.S. needed to follow the British model and build up a large navy to enhance its security and prosperity without succumbing to imperialism, Milne traces the ways in which U.S. thinkers engaged in a process of worldmaking that considered how and when to deploy the nation’s vast military and economic power to achieve its geo-political objectives. Some, like Mahan, doubted that the U.S. could transform other societies and peoples, and should therefore base its foreign policy totally on the narrowly defined self-interests of the United States. Mahan also believed that international efforts to mediate conflict and limit armaments were a fool’s errand. Milne uses Mahan’s long career to outline the thinking among those who believed that the progressive impulse in American history had produced some disastrous results. Mahan, ever critical of Woodrow Wilson’s liberal interventionism, believed that Wilson’s theories were “the wrong key to a lock” (68), and that they would lead the U.S. into dangerous adventuresome policy abroad while sacrificing domestic tranquility. Mahan was especially critical of Wilson’s support of democracy promotion and regime change in Mexico. We hear echoes of this debate throughout the entire book.

But Milne does not fall into a foolish consistency either. His chapters on Beard and Lippmann show the complicated way in which foreign policy ideology is both malleable and situational. Both men changed their views over time on a number of important issues, and Milne captures the shifting sands perfectly. Beard once believed in the Jeffersonian notion that the U.S. should tend to “its own Edenic garden” (160), was critical of Mahan’s brute materialism, and condemned Wilson’s self-deluding altruism, and yet he initially believed that American participation in the First World War was essential because Germany had something rotten in its heart (124). Eventually, Beard grew disillusioned with Wilson and this led him to reject U.S. participation in the Second World War. Though he supported a Jeffersonian democracy, Beard’s isolationism and resistance to moral considerations made him a pariah among many of his peers. In contrast, Lippmann despised Roosevelt’s liberal domestic policies, feared ‘the bewildered heard’ produced by mass democracy, but applauded Roosevelt’s war effort. Lippmann, who coined the term ‘the Cold War,’ also supported Roosevelt at Yalta and thought that the President had struck the right tone in compromising on key issues with the Soviets. This is all to say that Milne’s figures are complicated thinkers who do more than prescribe to unyielding dogma.

We do see the long shadows that Wilson and Kennan cast, but Milne is careful to let each of his protagonists develop on their own. Paul Wolfowitz, one of the major architects of the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, is far more than just a modern and more muscular version of Wilson. He marches in the civil rights movement, gives up tenure at Yale for government work he believes in, and eventually admits that the war in Iraq may have been poorly conceived and executed. Some might find this portrait of Wolfowitz more sympathetic than it should be. I do believe Wolfowitz is still a strong believer in beliefs, and this makes him dangerous to the artists. But Milne’s treatment of Wolfowitz is fair and enlightened. Likewise, President Barack Obama is given a sympathetic portrayal. He does not merely repeat Kennan’s cautions, but has a subtle and sophisticated worldview. During his first term, Obama surrounded himself with liberal internationalists and human rights hawks who eventually grew impatient with his caution. Obama is an inspirational world leader in Milne’s hands, but he remains a pragmatic realist. Wilson and Kennan, the scientist and the artist, still have a place in all U.S. foreign policy discussions.

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If I have any quibble with this excellent book, it is with its treatment of Henry Kissinger. The Harvard professor turned National Security Advisor shares Kennan’s fear of liberal adventurism abroad and democracy’s “gaping blind side” (331). And yet Kissinger supported deadly policies in places that Kennan thought way out of bounds because they were not vital to U.S. national-security interests. Kissinger blamed Vietnam on the liberals, but it was President Richard Nixon’s administration that expanded the war into Laos and Cambodia, supported genocide in then East Pakistan, and paved the way for Augusto Pinochet to come to power in Chile. Milne gives Kissinger’s intellectual rationale for détente a thorough airing, but I think his interpretation is far too sympathetic to Kissinger’s policy justifications. Milne is on firmer ground when he states that Kissinger was content to endlessly endorse his credibility theory of U.S. foreign policy that America must honor its commitments or lose credibility with allies and adversaries, no matter how many dead bodies it created and how little evidence there was to support it. Milne also rightfully criticizes Kissinger for interfering in the 1968 Vietnam peace talks for political purposes. Are these the actions of an artist or a scientist? Maybe Kissinger deserves a special category of his own.

In the end, Milne favors the artists. He believes, as did Oliver Wendell Holmes after the U.S. Civil War, that “certitude leads to violence” (523).
ow do we explain the paradox of modern political history? Everything is political today. We are saturated in analogies about the political past, and primed to see politics in everything from charitable giving to education curricula. Yet the field called political history appears to have fallen on hard times. As historians Fred Logevall and Ken Osgood noted recently, history departments hire surprisingly few scholars who claim politics as a field of inquiry.¹ Today, policymaking and leadership are frequently subsumed within categories such as ‘U.S. and the World’ or ‘International History,’ which explore politics as an outgrowth of ideology and activism. The results have been exciting—and a little perplexing. Everyone is a political historian, yet we no longer study governance on its own terms.

This paradox provides an interesting backdrop to David Milne’s *Worldmaking*. Milne’s book looks at nine influential Americans who have wrestled with the United States’ relationship to the outside world. The “writing of history is clearly not a zero-sum game,” Milne explains, as he positions himself within the historiographical landscape. “Social, cultural, intellectual, political, military, economic, and diplomatic historians contribute in different and equally legitimate ways to collective knowledge” (18). But *Worldmaking* is a story about policymakers and public thinkers, specifically Alfred Thayer Mahan, Woodrow Wilson, Charles, Beard, Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Henry Kissinger, Paul Wolfowitz, and Barack Obama. As Milne reviews the particulars of each man’s career, he explains how certain tropes have shaped American diplomacy since the early twentieth century. “Each of the individuals in this book approached foreign policymaking with contrasting manners of thought and expression,” Milne suggests, and they drew upon different metaphors and conceptual paradigms to rationalize and explain their actions (16). In explaining these manners of thought, Milne lingers on the tension between art and science, framing some of his subjects as gardeners—forever cultivating relationships and environments—and others as engineers, aligning U.S. foreign policy with various universalisms and manipulating their surroundings to advance America’s latest grand plan.

Milne mines this dichotomy expertly. His chapters can be read as standalone essays, but the book unfolds as a series of conversations. Many of Milne’s characters maintained a correspondence and engaged each other’s ideas, and because their debates happened in different contexts, the chapters combine for an unpredictable yet coherent intellectual history of U.S. foreign relations during the twentieth century. As Milne’s story moves through different decades, he astutely compares and contrasts his thinkers, adding depth and complexity to each biographical essay. The book does not belabor its organizing dichotomy, and art and science never feel reductive in Milne’s hands. He uses his metaphors to squeeze out complexity rather than mask it. Along the way, he elegantly eviscerates more familiar binaries such as realism-idealism. Although policy insiders like Henry Kissinger or Paul Wolfowitz framed themselves as hard-nosed realists, they had a lot more in common with an ostensible idealist like Woodrow Wilson than a realist paragon like George Kennan. Where Kennan saw an uncertain thicket, Wilson, Kissinger, and Wolfowitz perceived universal rules and patterns. Neither

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ambition nor rationality separated the titans of American empire. They were divided, in Milne’s retelling, by a
deeper, existential riddle: How does one make a world?

The question was hubristic, and Worldmaking tackles it with admirable nuance. Rather than advocating a
particular outlook, or criticizing specific policies, Milne focuses on the way his subjects—diplomats, teachers,
advisors, and presidents—oriented themselves to the world. Some chapters retell familiar stories, while others
delve into less recognizable tales. Milne uses the historian Charles Beard, for instance, as an avatar of interwar
isolationism, then turns to columnist Walter Lippmann to consider America’s ambitions during World War II. Milne’s pairing is atypical and effective, aided by the way he explains the three-way relationship between
Beard, Lippmann, and President Franklin Roosevelt. Worldmaking’s examination of the early Cold War is
equally astute, rooted in the story of Kennan and Paul Nitze, the first two directors of Policy Planning at the
U.S. State Department. Framing these analysts as archetypes of the art-science dichotomy, Milne not only
upends caricatures about U.S. grand strategy but also exposes why foreign policy became more mechanized
after the Korean War. The book’s final two chapters, which juxtapose Wolfowitz and President Barack
Obama, draw more heavily on public speeches and newspaper coverage, but Milne carries his argument
forward effectively. When I finished Worldmaking I not only found myself studying the metaphors and
discursive slips of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump; I also started interrogating my own habits and
assumptions.

What does Milne’s analysis reveal about the state of modern political history? The book is sweeping—it covers
a hundred plus years and touches on most of the major events of U.S. diplomatic history—yet it is principally
a story about internal assumptions. Milne tackles politics as an intellectual enterprise, and even when he
roams, contextualizing his characters for the reader, he always returns to metaphors and their meaning. The
approach is instantly familiar. Milne is such a good writer that it is easy to overlook the way he draws on an
older literature about language. Postmodern analysis is everywhere today, and Milne’s principal claim—that
tropes affect behavior—is both original and familiar. After all, politics has become a battle over words and
comparisons in 2016, which is one of the reasons why the political history of yesteryear—the literature
memorialized by Logevall and Osgood—feels so old-fashioned. Worldmaking treats politics as narrative. The
book is not about policymaking, and it does not offer profound insights into alliances or military pacts. But
Milne compensates by digging deeper into truth itself, and he emerges with a story about powerful Americans
who stitched together a series of distinct worldviews. In different ways, we have all imbibed the truths they
made.

In this respect, Worldmaking embodies a paradox at the heart of modern political history. By foregrounding
discourse, the book downplays materiality. Although Milne’s characters talk constantly about power, they
rarely ask why they have so much of it in their hands. Worldmaking says relatively little about government
revenue or state capacity, and it glides past the public-private partnerships that altered the American economy
and led to the computer revolution. Lingering on such stories would make little sense, since Milne’s characters
seldom bothered with mundane details about the bureaucracies that paid their salaries. This blind spot is
central to our own political process, and illuminates the downside of narrative politics. Partisans seem to
develop their positions in hermetic think tanks these days, and use pre-tested metaphors to sell realities that
do not always overlap with material considerations. Worldmaking folds this process inward, taking the reader
on a journey through the mindscapes of particularly influential people, and moves the story backward to the
beginning of the twentieth century. But the dynamic at the heart of Milne’s analysis—the relationship
between words and truth—resonates because it is so familiar. In 2016, world-making is politics.
Milne’s skill in explaining this dynamic prompts the riddle: Do we really shape the world we inhabit, or is it more accurate to suggest we are responding to stimuli beyond our control? The choice is overdrawn, of course, but, as Milne argues on *Worldmaking’s* opening pages, dichotomies can be useful. Milne uses the art-science contrast to nudge us toward the former interpretation, and he does so persuasively. Yet his analysis may prove to be a requiem for the era of American world-making. As U.S. power ebbs in the coming decades, perhaps political historians will drift back to the considerations highlighted by Logevall and Osgood. Historiographical conversations rarely stand still. In the meantime, Milne has crafted a nuanced portrait of America’s diplomatic mind. *Worldmaking* should be required reading in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, and a point of departure for debates about the state of political history.
David Milne has written a terrific intellectual history of U.S. foreign policy from the War of 1898 to 2014. In it, he focuses on nine individuals whose ideas and critiques have played an outsized role in shaping decisions about war and peace. Milne casts the nine (men) as either artists or scientists, and contends that this distinction approximates character types better than realists versus idealists. His artists and scientists appreciated both power and the potential uplift that liberal and democratic institutions can provide. The artists—naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, journalist Walter Lippmann, diplomats George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, as well as President Barack Obama—maintain a tragic view of humanity yet strive to craft and uphold artifices of peace, whereas the scientists—President Woodrow Wilson, historian Charles Beard, and high-ranking government officials Paul Nitze and Paul Wolfowitz—propound a theory of history as a vector with a discernible destination. Neither type has exercised a monopoly on success or failure—although artists more readily admit that they were wrong, Milne informs us. Former National Security Advisor Walt Whitman Rostow, the subject of his first book and unofficial tenth man in *Worldmaking*, never apologized for the Vietnam War, because the accelerated growth of the ‘Asian Tiger’ economies and collapse of the communist model validated his theory of development at the expense of Karl Marx.

U.S. diplomats during the Cold War were probably determined, on some level, to disprove Marx’s theory of history; yet they would probably not identify themselves as scientists. At least, that is not how they tend to talk about each other. “Very few people will just come at foreign leaders as hard as he did and as effectively as he did,” former President of the Council on Foreign Relations Leslie Gelb described the late foreign service officer and four-time ambassador Reginald Bartholomew. “That’s an art.” More recently, in an otherwise very favorable review of *Worldmaking* in the March/April 2016 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, former Ambassador to Pakistan Cameron Munter took slight issue with the subtitle, remarking that diplomacy and foreign policy are not the same. Indeed, those interested in a case study of the difference might consult pages 117-120 of Mark Landler’s *Alter Egos*. One might also peruse the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training’s superb and underutilized collection of Oral History Interviews and draw one’s own conclusions about whether the artist vs. scientist model applies equally to the execution of policy as its formulation.

Suffice it to say, this is a book about the top and the center. In my reading, three themes cut across time in ways Milne might elaborate further. The first two have to do with perceptions of threat. In the cases of submarine warfare, strategic bombing, and the hydrogen bomb, technological change often intercedes, mid-

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1 The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of State or the U.S. government.


chapter, and settles high-minded debates steeped in social science or historical inquiry. We know the decisions that followed; I wonder whether these moments fundamentally changed how Milne’s artists and scientists perceived external threats—at least, in their own minds—and, whether artists and scientists tend to react differently.

A second theme involves elite threat perception and the public. Among Milne’s nine, only Wilson and Obama successfully won elections. Few of the remaining seven espoused great confidence that democracies intrinsically support foreign policies that advance the nation’s interest. Throughout the second half of his life, George Kennan may even have perceived internal threats as more damaging than external ones. Fairly earned or not, Paul Nitze and Paul Wolfowitz have reputations for overstating external threats during that same period. I wonder whether Milne sees a model for responsibly assessing threats, calibrating responses, and educating the American people? President Franklin Roosevelt, who absorbed ideas from Walter Lippmann and others, did this rather effectively—yet he was also a political genius who championed freedom at a time when the world could have gone either way.

A third theme in Milne’s book is the long-term slackening of opportunity to redraw boundaries, recast societies, or even reconfigure coalitions. As we approach the centennial of Woodrow Wilson’s trip to Paris to craft a ‘scientific peace’ after the First World War, one defense of Obama is that he grasped more clearly than critics (and even many supporters) the phenomenon of the diffusion of power that Munter identifies in his Foreign Affairs review. A final and somewhat predictable question for Milne is whether he would revamp or revise his chapter on Obama, now that the President is nearing the end of his second term. In Worldmaking, Obama is an artist who embraces complexity, pragmatism, and Reinhold Niebuhr’s sense of humility when it comes to political objectives. Yet in The Long Game, a spirited defense of the President’s foreign-policy record, Derek Chollet describes a mental checklist by which Obama triages problems just as an emergency room doctor would patients.6 Perhaps these two depictions are not so far apart. Still, among Milne’s nine, Obama could be either artist or scientist. I think that one could make the case that the President has been guided by a theory, which is that Asia will be the locus of dynamism for the remainder of the century. And that, in his post-presidency, he might well be quoting Alfred Thayer Mahan (and David Milne) at the opening of a U.S. Naval War College extension campus next to Cam Ranh Bay.

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I have read many H-Diplo roundtables over the years, contributed reviews to a few, and am truly honored to respond to one dedicated to Worldmaking. I am grateful to Thomas Maddux for commissioning the reviews, to Andrew Preston for his generous introduction, and to Brooke Blower, Robert Brigham, Ryan Irwin, and James Graham Wilson for their smart and incisive commentaries. I have gained a great deal from each reader’s distinguished body of work, and I am thus pleased that all identify merit in my approach. But I am also grateful that they shine a light on some of the book’s deficiencies, to which I am pleased to respond below.

As Blower notes at the beginning of her very fine review, Worldmaking is a long book. You don’t need a coast-to-coast trip across the United States—or an extended period of forced immobility—to finish it in good time, but such circumstances can only help. This makes me doubly grateful to the reviewers for accepting this commission and reading the book so closely. But each review has also caused me to ponder how I might have written the book differently. What were the opportunity costs?

I am instinctively drawn to biography. My first book, a study of Walt Rostow, an influential foreign policy adviser to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson—correctly identified by James Graham Wilson as “the unofficial tenth man in Worldmaking”—explored the specifics of Rostow’s academic and policy career and toggled back to survey the broader era in which his ideas carried luster. Why was the Kennedy-Johnson era one in which Rostow was viewed as a good answer to this question: how should the U.S. defeat Communism in the developing world? After finishing America’s Rasputin, I decided to write a book that used individuals and their ideas to explore American diplomacy over a much longer period.¹

In making casting decisions, I tended to select individuals who developed a distinctive thesis about what constituted America’s proper role in the world. But I also favored individuals who clashed with one another – in print or in person – to give the book its narrative drive. I am acutely conscious that I chose nine men, and I accept Brooke Blower’s criticism that it did not need to be this way. The question then becomes: how could I have organized the book differently? What proportion of chapters might have focused on women without skewing the reality that twentieth century ‘worldmaking’ was an overwhelmingly masculine milieu? As I wrote in the introduction, I wanted to clearly depict “the gender discrimination present in foreign policymaking, academia, and journalism throughout the twentieth century, and which persists – more subtly – to this day. ‘Grand Strategy’ is a masculine discourse (one of its many problems), and this has discouraged female participation, or worked against women who have entered that realm.” (19)

Blower is entirely correct to observe that former First Lady and U.S. delegate to the UN General Assembly Eleanor Roosevelt, and former secretaries of state Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice, were all more influential than Charles Beard. But the choices that I faced were more era-specific—in this case, which individual would best allow me to explore the 1920s and 1930s and attend to the way in which the United

States turned away from President Woodrow Wilson’s vision and toward retrenchment? In this case, Beard seemed a good fit. He provided the only intellectually coherent, fully developed rationale for isolationism—or “continental Americanism” as he described it—and wrote critically on Mahan, Wilson, and the journalist Walter Lippmann. For this book, Beard was an excellent fit.

To my mind, the best opportunity to write discrete chapters on female policymakers and intellectuals arrives with the publication of Jeane Kirkpatrick’s “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” and thereafter I could well have written chapters on Albright and Rice. Instead, I wrote a long chapter on Paul Wolfowitz, who served in multiple roles during the Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush administrations, which begins in 1977 with Wolfowitz critiquing Henry Kissinger’s *A World Restored,* and ends in the introduction of the book’s final chapter, with Barack Obama excoriating Wolfowitz “and other armchair, weekend warriors” for leading the United States into a “dumb” war against Iraq for reasons of “ideology” (458).

This chapter allowed me to cover a lot of ground (1977-2005), and I also happen to think that Wolfowitz’s ideas on democracy-promotion as grand strategy were emblematic of that era, even when he was on the sidelines during the Clinton presidency. But my choice was largely driven by structure and narrative, and I accept culpability in making decisions based on these criteria. Although I discuss Kirkpatrick, Albright, Rice, former chair of policy planning at State, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and the former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power in some depth in the final two chapters, it is Paul Wolfowitz and Barack Obama whose paths I principally follow—they make an effective yin and yang. Yet I could, and perhaps should, have made alternative choices.

This point regarding paths not taken is developed skillfully when Blower observes that “the story is so tightly drawn around the government’s inner sanctum that by the end readers might muse about whether social movements mattered at all in ending the Vietnam War or any number of other events in the history of U.S. foreign relations.” Or to put it slightly differently, as Ryan Irwin does in his fascinating review, *Worldmaking* “is principally a story about internal assumptions.” Irwin’s appraisal here is fair and insightful:

By foregrounding discourse, the book downplays materiality. Although Milne’s characters talk constantly about power, they rarely ask why they have so much of it in their hands. *Worldmaking* says relatively little about government revenue or state capacity, and it glides past the public-private partnership that altered the American economy and led to the computer revolution. Lingering on such stories would make little sense, since Milne’s characters seldom bothered with mundane details about the bureaucracies that paid their salaries.

In focusing closely on these nine individuals I suspect that I sometimes replicate their blind spots. Attending closely to some of the issues Irwin highlights above would have entailed injecting my own voice into the body

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of the book to identify these lacunae and criticize a narrowness in outlook. I pick up on certain varieties of myopia, but clearly not them all.

On similar lines, Blower asks “If a wider range of people had enjoyed access to the halls of power during the twentieth century, would that have changed the assumptions, the operating style, the culture of foreign policymaking?” In regards to race, I observe of Obama’s speech at Cairo University in June 2009: “in front of a crowd of three thousand, a black American president with the middle name Hussein began his speech with the words Assalamu alaykum, a traditional Muslim greeting that translates as ‘Peace be upon you.’ It was clear that Obama possessed points of connectivity to the non-Western world that were unavailable to his predecessors.” (473) But I wish I had explored these issues in more depth across the full span of the twentieth century.

In a generous and perceptive review, Robert Brigham observes that, in regard to the art versus science binary, “perhaps Kissinger deserves a special category of his own?” This is an excellent point. As I write in the conclusion, “while Kissinger drew from historical precedent, he also followed some formulas… He was not an obvious practitioner of diplomacy as science. But he clung doggedly to his axioms and was rigid in his approach to many diplomatic crises.” Kissinger believed himself to be a practitioner of the art of the diplomacy, but his rigid actions suggest otherwise – particularly in regard to his veneration of credibility, which was pursued brutally when combined with a zero-sum mentality toward crises in the developing world.

Yet Brigham finds my approach “far too sympathetic to Kissinger’s policy justifications.” Others have found my take on Kissinger to be unduly harsh. Salon ran an excerpt from my book with the title “‘They Died for Henry Kissinger’s ‘credibility’: The Real Story of Our Vietnam Immorality,” which led to some strong pushback from readers.4 Kissinger continues to polarize for obvious reasons. Although I discuss and condemn the expansion of the Vietnam War into Laos and Cambodia, Nixon and Kissinger’s reprehensible support for Pakistan in 1971, and their role in the ousting of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, I could of course have spent more time on these and other issues. Throughout the book, I tried to detail the contribution of each individual as dispassionately as possible and let the reader decide – to show rather than tell. But that approach carries risks, particularly as many of the individuals I survey advised, or pretended not to see, some terrible things.

In his probing review, James Graham Wilson asks three questions – first, if step-changes in military technology “fundamentally changed how Milne’s artists and scientists perceive external threats… and whether artists or scientists tend to react differently.” Broadly speaking, I think that the artists tended to consider more fully the philosophical and theological quandaries that follow such “scientific revolutions,” as was the case with George Kennan, the architect of America’s “containment” strategy, and the Hydrogen Bomb. Rostow certainly gave little thought to the ethical questions raised by mass aerial bombing, the potential deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, or the destruction of the dikes in North Vietnam to induce flooding and famine – all courses that he considered and urged at various points. He was wedded to a determinist theory that such actions would place an unbearable economic strain on North Vietnam that would compel its leadership to sue

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4 David Milne, “‘They Died for Henry Kissinger’s ‘credibility’: The Real Story of Our Vietnam Immorality” http://www.salon.com/2015/10/18/they_died_for_henry_kissingers_credibility_the_real_story_of_our_vietnam_immorality/
for peace. To generalize: artists pause to consider the tragic aspect of the means; scientists focus more intently on the ends.

Second, Wilson asks if I “see a model for responsible assessing threats, calibrating responses, and educating the American people?” I confess that I do not – at least not in the form of a single person. I agree with Wilson that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the exemplary presidential communicator who skillfully prepared his nation for war and displayed adroit leadership and a deft diplomatic touch thereafter. Partly this was because Roosevelt was so attentive to the lessons of recent history – in this case leading a step-change in America’s world role while avoiding Woodrow Wilson’s overreach and inattentiveness to the domestic political calculus. Beyond that, though, I offer cautionary tales as much as models to emulate.

Finally, Wilson asks if I would revise my chapter on Obama based on the final two years of his presidency, which the book does not assess. I must confess that the chapter on Obama was the one that concerned me the most as I researched and wrote it. Writing on a moving target was a real challenge, and presidential legacies often take time to emerge into clear view. Yet I do not think I would substantively alter my depiction – following James Kloppenberg’s Reading Obama – of Obama as a Jamesian pragmatist. I still believe that William James’s classic definition of pragmatism stands as a fair approximation of Obama’s method and worldview: “at the outset, at least, it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method… The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.” This method does not necessarily run contrary to Derek Chollet’s depiction of Obama as an emergency room doctor. Throughout his presidency, Obama’s actions suggested that he does not believe it wise to attend to all ailments with the same course of treatment. This is identifiably pragmatic.

In the final paragraph of his review, Ryan Irwin generously notes that Worldmaking could become “a point of departure about the state of political history.” This would be a wonderful validation. My greatest hope for the book is that it generates further discussion and new research. Unsurprisingly, I also agree with Irwin’s observation that “dichotomies can be useful,” although I hope I have avoided making extravagant explanatory claims on behalf of my own. I am grateful for this opportunity to further sketch out some of the book’s themes and respond to the points of criticism, which are skillfully and fairly developed, and very well taken.

