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## Main content

Article Preview :

The Cambridge History of American, Foreign Relations (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Volume I: Bradford Perkins, The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865. Volume II: Walter LaFeber, The American Search for Opportunity, 1865-1913. Volume III: Akira Iriye, The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945. Volume IV: Warren I. Coben, America in the Age of Soviet Power, 1945-1991.

The past is an unreliable guide to the future, but it is the only guide we have. With the end of the Cold War, the future of American foreign policy is even murkier than usual; the impulse to turn to the history of relations between the United States and the rest of the world for clues to what lies ahead is thus particularly strong now. Happily, the new, four-volume Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations provides an opportunity to scan the past two centuries for indications of the shape of foreign policy in the post--cold War world.

Each of the four books stands on its own. Each offers a clear overview of a particular period written by a distinguished historian drawing on a considerable body of research itself the product of decades of scholarly endeavor. None is simply a chronicle of events. Each presents interpretations of the events it covers. While none is intended to be entirely original, each author departs in one way or another from the received wisdom or the dominant approaches of both his contemporary colleagues and predecessors.

Bradford Perkins, for example, is no admirer of the diplomacy of two presidents other historians have accorded respectful and sometimes reverential treatment: Thomas Jefferson and James Polk. Walter Lafeber argues that, rather than supporting the status quo beyond its borders, as some have claimed, the effect of American policy was to disturb it. He portrays pre--First World War America as the (often unintentional) fomenter of revolution abroad. The aim of American foreign policy during this period, he asserts, was not to restore order where it had broken down but to seek economic opportunity, a search that in fact promoted disorder in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

Akira Iriye's account of the period from the beginning of the First World War to the end of the Second World War emphasizes the importance not only of treaties, conferences, and wars but also of what he calls "cultural" factors. By this he means the movement across borders of ideas, values, manufactured goods, and people on an ever-larger scale. This was the era in which a genuinely transnational society was born, and much of it originated in the United States. Warren I. Cohen incorporates into his history of the Cold War a number of useful concepts from political science, among them the "security dilemma"--the idea that an increase in the security of one country can diminish the security of others. The security dilemma can lead to the "spiral model," in which measures undertaken by one country for defensive purposes appear threatening to another, which responds with measures it deems defensive but that are seen abroad as aggressive....

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