American EMPIRE
THE REALITIES AND CONSEQUENCES OF U.S. DIPLOMACY
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To my mother
and
to the memory
of my father

DESPITE THE PASSING of a decade since its end, few Americans who lived through the Cold War view it as mere history. Especially for those born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, reaching maturity in the 1960s and 1970s, the controversies roiling those decades—McCarthyism and communist subversion, the nuclear arms race and the rise of the military-industrial complex, the Cuban missile crisis and Vietnam, the assassination of one president and the toppling of another—remain indelibly part of “our times.”

Those events not only shaped the consciousness of successive generations but also divided members of those generations into opposing camps: right and left, hawks and doves, anticommunists and anticommunists, the uptight and the hip, the credulous and the skeptical. Underlying this split was a fundamental disagreement regarding the Cold War itself. One group accepted the orthodox interpretation that U.S. policies were necessary to defend the free world from communist aggression, actual or potential. The other group saw the American preoccupation with communism, at home and abroad, as unhealthy and probably unnecessary.

By upbringing, education, and youthful occupation, I identify with the former group. As a serving military officer, I accepted the view that American power provided the essential check upon those who conspired against freedom. Compared to the comprehensive horrors perpetrated by the regimes it opposed, the sins attributed to the United States during the Cold War—Washington’s complicity with unsavory dictators, the conspiracies to overthrow unfriendly regimes, the mindless invasion at the Bay of Pigs, and the assassination of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem—seemed venial. I never saw Fidel or Che, Mao or Ho as agents of liberation and human fulfillment. Nor do I see reason to modify my view on these matters today.

And yet: in the years after the dismantling of the Berlin Wall—the event that validated U.S. exertions across the previous half-century—American statecraft seemingly jumped its traces. Whereas before
1989 U.S. foreign policy appeared in the main realistic, with the stated objectives of diplomacy quite limited—to protect our homeland, to preserve our values, to defend our closest allies—in the 1990s those objectives aimed at nothing short of a full-scale transformation of the international order. Whereas during the Cold War Americans had justified the maintenance of a great military establishment as a necessary (but presumably temporary) departure from the Founders' republican vision, they now flaunted their nation's status as the world's only superpower.

I was by no means alone in being troubled by these developments; others of the conservative and "realist" persuasion expressed dismay at the policies pursued by the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton. The explanations fashioned by these critics differed in their particulars. Yet tacitly at least, they tended to share two assumptions. First, they took for granted that the events of 1989—when the Soviet Union effectively called off the Cold War—marked a culmination: at that moment, the United States had fulfilled its strategic purpose. In this reading, the breaching of the Berlin Wall rendered obsolete the policies that had guided American statesmen for decades. By extension, the overriding imperative facing the current generation of statesmen was to devise a new policy, one as coherent in design and as prudent in conception as the strategy that in achieving success had outlived its usefulness. The 1990s, therefore, challenged the architects of American statecraft to think anew and offered an opportunity for creativity not seen since the immediate aftermath of World War II.

Second, these observers generally agreed that first Bush and then Clinton muffed that opportunity. American activity in the international arena during the 1990s—as measured by summits convened, agreements signed, interventions undertaken—was ceaseless, but critics interpreted that activity as aimless flailing about, as evidence of a strategic void.

At first glance plausible, this interpretation struck me as increasingly unpersuasive as the events of the decade unfolded. Examining more closely the clichés to which political leaders reflexively resorted when explaining foreign policy, I began to see them for what they were: coded messages deeply rooted in American history and as such freighted with meaning. When describing America's role in the world, leaders like George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton believed that they spoke great truths.

The difficulty lay in extracting from the ritualistic allusions to freedom, world peace, and global leadership the hard reality embedded within. For that I needed a key. Once I found it—and viewed the events of the 1990s through the interpretive framework that it offered—the conventional notion that American statecraft in the 1990s amounted to little more than confused and capricious improvisation collapsed. Linking American words to American actions, the key revealed a pattern and offered evidence of a coherent grand strategy conceived many decades earlier and now adapted to the circumstances of the post–Cold War era.

The strategy is a problematic one, and the scope of the project is nothing short of stupendous. Related to that project are large prudential questions (about feasibility and cost) and even larger moral ones (about justification and consequences) that remain unanswered, indeed, all but unexamined. (Pretending that the United States really doesn't have a strategy offers one way of dodging those questions.)

This book offers a critical interpretation of American statecraft in the 1990s. It invites readers to reexamine what they "know" regarding the guiding principles and underlying purposes of U.S. foreign policy—because what they think they know is becoming increasingly irrelevant. It advances the proposition that the partisan debate over U.S. policy—for the past decade little more than a pseudodebate—has reached a dead end. It proposes a reconciliation with a couple of patriot-heretics whose long-discredited ideas anticipated the snares and pitfalls awaiting a democracy playing the role of sole superpower. To Americans frightened or bewildered by the events of September 11 and their aftermath, it posits at least one answer to the question "How did we get here?"
INTRODUCTION

This book is a venture in contemporary history, an effort to place in perspective developments that in some respects are not yet fully resolved. Its subject is U.S. foreign policy during the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, with a coda encompassing George W. Bush’s first year as president.

During this period, members of the foreign policy elite, breathing deeply the intoxicating vapors released during the annum mirabilis of 1989, concluded that history stood poised at a turning point. Bill Clinton interpreted the end of the Cold War as signifying “the fullness of time”—a scriptural allusion to the moment when God chose to transform history.¹ The collapse of communism and the triumph of liberal democratic capitalism offered similar prospects for transformation, this time through human rather than divine agency.

As the bloody twentieth century drew to a close, God’s promise of peace on earth remained unfulfilled; it was now incumbent upon the United States, having ascended to the status of sole superpower, to complete God’s work—or, as members of a largely secularized elite preferred it, to guide history toward its intended destination.

President Clinton and his secretary of state Madeleine Albright were explicit on this point: the United States had emerged at the dawn of the new millennium as the “indispensable nation” endowed by providence with unique responsibilities and obligations.² Republican leaders employed different language but endorsed the sentiment. Average citizens, though attending only fitfully to the world beyond America’s borders, tacitly agreed. In their eyes, the advantages accruing to the world’s only superpower promised to be substantial. The costs of sustaining that position appeared minimal. Except among a crabbéd minority on the far right and far left, a concept of the United States shaping a new global order in its own image evoked more satisfaction than complaint.

Existing alongside this broad acceptance of America’s transcendent mission and transcendent status was a second and paradoxical asser-
tion: that once the Cold War ended actual U.S. policy languished in permanent disarray. That the United States found itself after 1989 he
tle of strategy became part of the next decade’s conventional wis
dom. What passed for policy amounted, it was said, to little more
than improvisation and crisis management. “There is an absence of
any grand design,” lamented the diplomatic historian John Lewis
Gaddis. Gaddis and other observers could discern no overarching
conception that explained U.S. behavior. There was no Big Idea. The
only consistent pattern Gaddis could detect was “one of responding to
crises. There’s a kind of incrementalism and ad-hocism to things.”
Pundits, talking heads, editorial writers, politicians, and more inter
ested citizens without number echoed this view.

As early as April 1992, a Democratic aspirant to the White House, a
southerner with only the flimsiest foreign policy credentials, took
the incumbent president to task for failing “to articulate clear goals
for American foreign policy.” Governor Bill Clinton complained that
“George Bush has invoked a new world order without enunciating a
new American purpose.” Eight years later the partisan tables had
turned, but the critique remained unaltered. During his two terms as
president, Bill Clinton had “pursued a feckless, photo-op foreign pol
icy,” charged John McCain, the influential Republican senator from
Arizona. The Democrats had made “little or no effort to define a co
herent plan for United States engagement in the world.” Clinton had
failed to establish an “overarching intellectual framework” for policy,
ought Richard Haass, who had served in the Bush White House.
The result, according to Robert Zoellick, another veteran of the elder
Bush’s foreign policy team, had been “ad hocery and case-by-case
actions lacking in strategy.”

In short, according to the conventional wisdom at least, the record
of American statecraft in the 1990s was one of opportunity wasted.
At the very moment when the United States should have acted with
purpose and resolve, policymakers dawdled and diddled.

This book takes issue with that view. Since the end of the Cold War
the United States has in fact adhered to a well-defined grand strategy.
To be sure, given the exigencies of politics in the real world, that
adherence has been less than perfect. From time to time, considerations
unrelated to strategy—the influence of domestic politics prominent
among them—caused the ship of state to tack to port, then to star-
board, and then back again. Yet to interpret this zigzag pattern as
indicative of confusion is to sell short those charged with the ship’s
navigation. Those who chart America’s course do so with a clearly
defined purpose in mind.

That purpose is to preserve and, where both feasible and conducive
to U.S. interests, to expand an American imperium. Central to this
strategy is a commitment to global openness—removing barriers that
inhibit the movement of goods, capital, ideas, and people. Its ultimate
objective is the creation of an open and integrated international order
based on the principles of democratic capitalism, with the United
States as the ultimate guarantor of order and enforcer of norms.

In the eyes of American policymakers, an open world that adheres
to the principles of free enterprise is a precondition for continued
American prosperity. An open world that is friendly to liberal values
seemingly assures American security. The operative “signs of the
times”—both technological and cultural—fuel expectations that the
world is indeed moving, inexorably and irreversibly, toward greater
openness. Should events belie either of those expectations, the
United States will employ its dominant military power to thwart any
conceivable challenge to its preeminence.

From the perspective of its architects, this “strategy of openness” is
benign in its intent and enlightened in its impact. On this point, the
views of those subjected to the Pax Americana vary. Many accept it,
with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm, as preferable to any
plausible alternative. Some accept it grudgingly; for the moment at
least, they have little choice but to do so. Others denounce U.S. hege
mony as a variant of imperialism, distinctive in form but nonetheless
relying on repression and exploitation. Whether through direct or in
direct action, they resist. Quelling that resistance mandates the use of
force. As a result, not only the nurturing of military power but also its
expenditure become integral to U.S. strategy.

This book argues that the strategy of openness derives directly
from U.S. principles and practices elaborated and implemented dur
ing and even before the Cold War. Rather than marking the culma
tion of U.S. strategy, the collapse of the Berlin Wall simply inaugu
rated its latest phase.

In short, this book finds continuity where others see discontinuity
and identifies purpose and structure where others see incoherence.
This book also explains why most Americans remain oblivious to this strategy—why the notion that throughout the 1990s Republicans and Democrats alike were making things up as they went along received ready acceptance, with observers dismissing as mere rhetoric official explanations of the principles guiding American policy. The culprit, in this instance, is an abiding preference for averting our eyes from the unflagging self-interest and large ambitions underlying all U.S. policy.

Thus, for example, do we enshrine the Cold War as a crusade against the evil of communism. The Cold War was that, but it was never only that. To conceive of U.S. grand strategy from the late 1940s through the 1980s as “containment”—with no purpose apart from resisting the spread of Soviet power—is not wrong, but it is incomplete. More to the point, such a cramped conception of Cold War strategy actively impedes our understanding of current U.S. policy.

No strategy worthy of the name is exclusively passive or defensive in orientation. Evidence that from the outset of the Cold War the United States sought something more than simply to check the spread of evil was available all along, recognized by a few, largely ignored by the majority. Lord Ismay’s famous description of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s several founding purposes captures the point: the alliance was formed in 1949 to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down. Of course, Ismay’s was a British perspective; an American might have inserted after the preposition “in” the phrase “and on top.” For the United States viewed NATO not only as a bulwark against Soviet aggression but as an instrument to promote Europe’s political and economic transformation while cementing the advantageous position that America had secured in Europe as a result of victory in World War II. A politically integrated Europe open to American enterprise and dependent upon the United States for its security suited Washington just fine.

In short, U.S. grand strategy during the Cold War required not only containing communism but also taking active measures to open up the world politically, culturally, and, above all, economically—which is precisely what policymakers said they intended to do. Consider a speech made at Monticello on July 4, 1947, by President Harry S Truman. Addressing a crowd gathered around the east portico of Thomas Jefferson’s home, Truman described America’s purpose as world peace, “not peace in our time—but peace for all time.” The balance of his presentation constituted a blueprint for fostering that peace.

That blueprint contained no reference to containing communism. Indeed, although his administration was even then putting the finishing touches on its strategy of containment—Mr. X’s essay unveiling “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” had just appeared on the nation’s newstands—the president never mentioned the Soviet Union by name. Only twice did he refer even obliquely to the Kremlin, chiding Soviet leaders for opposing U.S.-sponsored reconstruction efforts on the “fallacious” grounds that “this would mean interference by some nations in the internal affairs of others.”

Looking beyond the essentially negative objective of restraining communism, the strategy sketched out at Monticello outlined a comprehensive vision for constructing a new international order. That vision had two main features. The first Truman described as the great lesson of the recently concluded world war, namely, that “nations are interdependent and that recognition of our dependence upon one another is essential for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness of all mankind.” The second was that peace is indivisible. “So long as the basic rights of men are denied in any substantial portion of the earth,” the president declared, “men everywhere must live in fear of their own rights and their own security.”

Recognition of the interdependence of nations and the indivisibility of peace demanded the removal of barriers between nations. Truman called for the “full exchange of knowledge, ideas, and information among the peoples of the earth, and maximum freedom in international travel and communication.” He expressed support for “economic and financial policies to support a world economy rather than separate nationalistic economies.” Crucial to this end were ongoing efforts to reduce tariffs and to create what Truman referred to as an International Trade Organization.

The responsibility of the United States was to take the lead in removing such barriers. In this effort, technologies in which the United States enjoyed a pronounced advantage would play a key role, eliminating obstacles that traditionally separated nations. “We have the mechanical facilities—the radio, television, airplanes—for the creation of a worldwide culture,” a prospect that the president clearly welcomed.

As Truman’s Independence Day oratory suggests, from the earliest
days of the Cold War the United States entertained a strategic vision that looked well beyond the imperative of defending the free world against communist aggression. More was required to fulfill that vision than the defeat of the Soviet Union and the demise of Marxism-Leninism.

The collapse of communism at the end of the 1980s offered an unprecedented opportunity to fulfill Truman’s vision. In the ensuing decade the architects of U.S. policy consciously set out to make the most of that opportunity. Seeking to perpetuate American preeminence and to foster an international order conducive to U.S. interests, the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton revived the project that Truman had sketched in July 1947. Whereas the orientation of U.S. policy had been primarily defensive, it now became largely offensive. This shift in emphasis did not imply that Americans had developed a sudden yearning for conquest or old-fashioned empire. In fact the overall objective remained unchanged from Truman’s day.

Though garnished with neologic flourishes intended to convey a sense of freshness or originality, the politicoeconomic concept to which the United States adheres today has not changed in a century: the familiar quest for an “open world,” the overriding imperative of commercial integration, confidence that technology endows the United States with a privileged position in that order, and the expectation that American military might will preserve order and enforce the rules.

Those policies reflect a single-minded determination to extend and perpetuate American political, economic, and cultural hegemony—usually referred to as “leadership”—on a global scale. The chapters that follow describe the strategy of openness whereby the United States since the Cold War has pursued that purpose.

Our point of departure, however, lies earlier, in the writings of two long-deceased and largely discredited scholars, one now regarded as a proponent of so-called isolationism, the other an ardent critic of U.S. foreign policy from what purported to be the radical left. Each in his own day got the very biggest question dead wrong. But together they developed a distinctive angle of vision that exposed the underpinnings of American statecraft. That perspective is their legacy, one that is today more valuable than ever.

CHAPTER 1

THE MYTH OF THE RELUCTANT SUPERPOWER

Of course, our whole national history has been one of expansion.

Theodore Roosevelt, December 1899

“SOME NATIONS ACHIEVE GREATNESS,” observed the historian Ernest May; “the United States had greatness thrust upon it.” Rendered forty years ago at the very acme of the Cold War, May’s judgment referred specifically to the events culminating in the great outward thrust of 1898 and America’s dramatic emergence on the world stage. Yet it also encapsulates the story of America’s rise to power the way Americans themselves prefer to tell it.

Above all, May’s pithy remark directs attention not to purpose but to posture: greatness was not sought; it just happened. In this view, American policy is a response to external factors. The United States does not act in accordance with some predetermined logic; it reacts to circumstances. Although the events of 1898 accelerated its ascent to world power, the United States—unlike other nations—achieved preeminence not by consciously seeking it but simply as an unintended consequence of actions taken either in self-defense or on behalf of others.

Thus, in 1898 Americans chose war only when the continuing depredations of Spain’s General Valeriano (“Butcher”) Weyler in Cuba had become intolerable. When in 1914 the “Great War” began, the United States remained neutral, intervening only in response to Germany’s violation of U.S. neutral rights. Even then, in contrast to every other belligerent, the United States fought for altruistic purposes, seeking to end war itself and to make the world safe for democracy. Similarly, when a new European war began in 1939, Americans
again stayed on the sidelines until provoked by Japan’s surprise attack at Pearl Harbor to enter the conflict and to embark on another crusade for democracy.

This pattern of evil spurring the United States into action persisted into the postwar era. Hence American engagement in the Cold War marked, in Arthur Schlesinger’s classic formulation, “the brave and essential response of free men to Communist aggression.” Even after the Cold War, distant events continued to compel the United States to exert—and perforce to expand—its power. In 1990, Iraqi aggression threatening the West’s access to Persian Gulf oil obliged the United States once again to respond. As the century drew to a close, events came full circle: Americans found themselves going to war on behalf of a tiny province in Serbia, the brutality of Slobodan Milošević in Kosovo having become as intolerable as that of General Weyler in Cuba a century before.

Few scholars specializing in American diplomatic history today accept such an outline of twentieth century U.S. foreign policy. But in practice, the myth of the “reluctant superpower”—Americans asserting themselves only under duress and then always for the noblest purposes—reigns today as the master narrative explaining (and justifying) the nation’s exercise of global power.

The myth survives in the post–Cold War era less because it is true than because it is useful. Its utility stems in large part from the fact that it comes complete with its own cast of stock characters. Its heroes are “internationalists,” wise, responsible, and broad-minded in outlook. Opposing the internationalist project is a motley crew of narrow-minded, provincial, and frequently bigoted cranks, known collectively as “isolationists.” For leading politicians and members of the foreign policy establishment, endlessly recounting the internationalist struggle offers the preferred method of inoculating successive generations of citizens ostensibly susceptible to the isolationist virus.

The myth of the reluctant superpower serves other purposes as well. Aspirants to the inner circle of national politics testify to the narrative as a means of signaling their trustworthiness and reliability. Here, for example, is a thumbnail sketch of postwar history offered by presidential hopeful Bill Clinton in December 1991:

> I was born nearly a half century ago, at the dawn of the Cold War, a time of great change, enormous opportunity, and uncertain peril. At a time when Americans wanted nothing more than to come home and resume their lives of peace and quiet, our country had to summon the will for a new kind of war—containing an expansionist and hostile Soviet Union which vowed to bury us. We had to find ways to rebuild the economies of Europe and Asia, encourage a worldwide movement toward independence, and vindicate our nation’s principles in the world against yet another totalitarian challenge to liberal democracy. Thanks to the unerring courage and sacrifice of the American people, we were able to win that Cold War.¹

In such a rendering of the tale, “we” acted as one; doubts, divisions, disappointments disappear. By reciting this sanitized version of the postwar era, Clinton not only affirmed its essential truth but also situated himself among those who fought the good fight against totalitarianism on behalf of democracy.

The myth of the reluctant superpower also curbs any inclination to consider anew the purposes served by America’s now unquestioned global dominance. In a post–Cold War world, does the paradigm of America having “greatness thrust upon it” retain its explanatory power? If so, with the United States now clearly on the top of the heap, who or what is doing the thrusting? These questions go unasked. Foreign policy “debate,” such as it is, confines itself to matters of tactics: Are the sanctions working? Will bombing alone suffice? How could we have been surprised? As if by default, the hallowed precepts of liberal internationalism perdure.

That those precepts imply a conception for marrying instruments of national power to broad policy objectives serving concrete American interests goes unmentioned and all but unnoticed. Instead politicians, abetted by the media, offer political theater: Republicans berate a Democratic president for failing to articulate a foreign policy “vision”; given the chance, Democrats return the favor. Lost amidst the posturing is the extent to which both parties and virtually the entire foreign policy elite tacitly share a common vision and conform in practice to a strategic consensus of long standing.

➤ On two occasions during the century of America’s rise to global preeminence, critics mounted a vigorous challenge to that consensus. First during the decade leading up to World War II and subsequently during the protracted crisis centered on the Vietnam War, dissenters
subjected the myth of the reluctant superpower to sustained assault. They began by rejecting the premise that America's foreign policies were a function of developments beyond its borders. They argued instead that those policies—commercial relationships, decisions for war and peace, the designation of others as "friends" or "enemies"—derived from influences closer to home. Underlying those specific decisions and actions and endowing them with an overall unity was a particular worldview rooted in calculations of political and economic self-interest.

These dissenters viewed those policies as wrongheaded, undemocratic, unnecessary, even dangerous. They formulated their own alternative to the myth of the reluctant superpower and campaigned energetically to convert the American people to that alternative.

In each instance, events discredited that alternative, an outcome for which Americans should be grateful. For the critique mounted in the 1930s discounted the threat posed by Adolf Hitler. Had it prevailed, Nazi Germany might well have escaped destruction. For their part, the dissenters who appeared during the Cold War, while acutely sensitive to America's flaws, were seemingly oblivious to the defects of communism and to the danger posed by Soviet power. Had they succeeded, the Cold War might have had a different and less satisfactory outcome.

The failing to which these critics were prone was astigmatism. They were blind to inconvenient facts (usually pertaining to American adversaries) to which others attributed paramount importance. Meanwhile, they assigned great significance to matters (typically pertaining to America's own behavior) that others viewed as inconsequential or benign. Obsessed with unearthing the inner logic of U.S. policy, they called attention to a different set of inconvenient facts that the defenders of liberal internationalism preferred to overlook. In short, their efforts yielded hitherto undiscovered insights into the origins, motives, and actual conduct of U.S. foreign policy, insights that discomfited those dedicated to preserving the mythic rendition of America's ascent to global power.

Neither the course of World War II nor the outcome of the Cold War has invalidated those insights. Indeed, as a point of departure for examining U.S. policy in the post–Cold War era—notable for the absence of any adversary remotely comparable to Hitler's Reich or Stalin's Soviet Union—views deriving from the premise that external factors have never adequately explained American behavior deserve respectful consideration.

The chief proponents of these heresies—rejected in their own day, relevant to our own—were the American historians Charles A. Beard and William Appleman Williams.

Through the first half of the twentieth century, Charles A. Beard (1874–1948) was by common agreement the most influential historian in America. Widely ranging in his interests, boldly original in interpretation, politically progressive, personally courageous, and astonishingly prolific, Beard could wield his pen as "either shillelagh or stiletto" and was equally adept at writing for academics, policy professionals, or the general public. From the publication of his controversial *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* before World War I until his death, he remained a towering figure in American intellectual life, frequently the source and subject of controversy and seldom outside of the public eye.

Raised in Knightstown, Indiana, in middle-class comfort, Beard attended a Quaker school and then DePauw University, graduating in 1898. Over the next four years he studied at Oxford, where he was instrumental in the founding of Ruskin College, a school to provide educational opportunities for members of the British working class. In 1902 Beard returned to the United States and enrolled at Columbia University, earning his doctorate two years later. He immediately accepted an offer to join Columbia's history department, then among the country's most distinguished.

Beard taught at Columbia until 1917, resigning in protest against the firing of a colleague who opposed U.S. entry into the European war. Retreating to his dairy farm in Connecticut, he remained there after an independent scholar and commentator on events of the day. Over the course of his career, Beard published forty-two volumes of history and political science and coauthored another thirty-five. His masterful overview of U.S. history, *The Rise of American Civilization*, written with his wife, Mary R. Beard, became a bestseller and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. His histories alone sold 11.3 million copies during his lifetime. Beard's articles and reviews—numbering in the hundreds—appeared in virtually all the leading scholarly and general-circulation journals of his day.

Yet by the time of his death Beard's reputation stood, in the words
of another prominent scholar, as "an imposing ruin in the landscape of American historiography." His views on foreign policy—the subject that preoccupied Beard beginning in the 1930s—amounted to a "tattered shambles," of interest only to crackpots and conspiracy theorists. Long an outspoken advocate of reform, Beard found himself in the last decade of his life denounced as an apologist for fascism. In the words of Lewis Mumford "a passive—no, active—abettor of tyranny, sadism, and human defilement."10

If by the end of Beard's life his reputation lay in ruins, it was because Beard himself put a torch to the edifice. In an extraordinary act of professional self-immolation, he closed out his career by denouncing as fraudulent the text most crucial to sustaining the myth of the reluctant superpower: the orthodox account of U.S. entry into World War II.

In two scathing volumes—American Foreign Policy in the Making (1946) and President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941 (1948)—Beard accused Franklin Roosevelt of outright deception in his conduct of foreign affairs. Running in 1940 for an unprecedented third term, FDR had famously declared, "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars." In doing so, Roosevelt, in Beard's view, had made a solemn covenant with the American people.11 Without missing a beat, the president then proceeded to violate that covenant. Indeed, according to Beard, even as he was promising to keep the country out of the war, Roosevelt was conniving to maneuver the United States into it.

Historians today admit to a modicum of truth in Beard's charge.12 Roosevelt's lack of candor, notably in misrepresenting U.S. naval involvement in Great Britain's battle against the U-boat threat, is well documented. But in the war's immediate aftermath—and with internationalists rousing Americans to support another great crusade, this time against communism—Beard's attack was not just impolitic; it was impermissible. By indicting the recently deceased Roosevelt, he forfeited whatever authority and credibility he had accrued over several decades of research and writing. Refusing to recant the isolationist creed, Beard consigned himself to the status of miscreant, guilty not only of scholarly malpractice but of having committed an unforgivable act of civic blasphemy.

Beginning his career in the camp of left-leaning heterodoxy, reaching in midlife the heights of respectability and influence, Beard in his dotage had seemingly fallen into the embrace of the disreputable right. However, Beard's intellectual journey proceeded from the center out—from the inner workings of the republic at its founding to America's external relations as it approached maturity. Coming to maturity himself in the heyday of Progressivism, Beard was stirred by the social ills afflicting that era, by-products of the laissez-faire attitudes that had with brutal efficiency propelled the United States into the forefront of industrialized nations. As a result, he initially devoted his attention to domestic concerns: How had such a society come into existence? What explained the distribution of wealth and power within it?

Beard approached his task by examining the past through the lens of political economy. His first major book, Economic Origins of the Constitution, scandalized patriotic-minded defenders of historical orthodoxy by arguing that the Framers had pursued their task less under the spell of the high ideals of 1776 than with their eyes trained on the main chance.13 Encouraging commerce and manufactures, protecting private property, establishing financial instruments essential for economic development—these were the issues that preoccupied those participating in the secret deliberations in Philadelphia—issues in which they themselves had a large personal stake. The product of their labors preserved that stake. "The Constitution," Beard concluded, "was essentially an economic document based upon the concept that the fundamental rights of property are anterior to government and morally beyond the reach of popular majorities."14

Beard's characterization of politics as a bargaining process aimed at satisfying the disparate interests of economic elites informed much of his subsequent writing. Thus, the metanarrative of The Rise of American Civilization portrays U.S. history as a dialectic between the agrarian ideal of Thomas Jefferson and the capitalist vision of Alexander Hamilton. For Beard, the Civil War became the pivotal event in the history of the republic, resolving that competition and thus opening the way for the next stage in the nation's development. At root, this "second American Revolution" was not a dispute over slavery, Union, or states' rights, but a contest between two irreconcilable economic systems, each pushing to expand and facing inevitable decline if de-
ried the opportunity to do so. On the one side was the burgeoning “industrial vortex” of the North, on the other a plantation economy confined to “a limited territory with incompetent labor on soil of diminishing fertility.” Appomattox settled the issue once and for all. Although in destroying slavery the North’s victory brought some modest benefit to those freed from bondage, the real winners were rapacious captains of industry in the North and, to a lesser extent, the South. The result was the Gilded Age, a paradox of creativity, plunder, and excess that gave rise to the nation into which Beard was born.

Preoccupied until the 1930s with recasting U.S. history in terms of class conflict, Beard relegated foreign policy to the status of afterthought. Foreign policy derived from domestic policy. Its primary purpose was to advance commercial interests. Writing before U.S. entry into World War I, Beard acknowledged the American tradition of “splendid isolation,” only to dismiss it as fiction. Whatever its pretensions to distancing itself from the rest of the world, he noted, “at no time has the United States refused to defend American commercial enterprise in any part of the globe.” From the very outset, the United States had “been a world power, as far as has been necessary.”

American participation in World War I alerted Beard to the hazards implicit in commercial diplomacy. Although Beard supported U.S. entry into the war as necessary to check German militarism, his enlistment in Wilson’s internationalist crusade proved short-lived. No sooner had the guns fallen silent than the debacle of the Paris peace conference and the release of documents from German and Russian archives began raising doubts that the war had been, as advertised, a war of German aggression that threatened the survival of democracy. In short order, skeptical journalists and historians were advancing arguments that undercut the official interpretation of America’s own role in the war. Specifically, these revisionists challenged the notion that the United States had remained genuinely neutral during 1914–1917 and that in entering the war it fought to advance democratic ideals. Discounting Wilson’s high-sounding rhetoric, revisionists characterized U.S. wartime policies as self-serving, reflecting an eagerness to cash in on Europe’s misfortune. A phony neutrality permitted a massive trade in arms with the Allies, propped up by American loans. The result at home was large profits for bankers and arms merchants and a general economic boom, sustainable only so long as the slaughter on the western front continued. By 1917 those policies culminated in intervention at the behest of Wall Street tycoons who would face ruin if Great Britain and France lost the war. Once in the war, Wilson’s idealistic posturing notwithstanding, the U.S. government turned a blind eye to secret deals and became complicit in Allied schemes of imperial aggrandizement.

Throughout the 1920s the revisionists piled up evidence and argued their case. Like many other scholars, Beard eventually found that case persuasive. With perhaps the majority of Americans, he concluded by 1930 that U.S. entry into the war had been a mistake and that Wilson’s peddling of the elixir of internationalism had been tantamount to fraud. This conclusion transformed his thinking about American statecraft.

Looking back from the 1920s at U.S. foreign policies well before 1914, Beard now discerned the outlines of a more complex and sinister dynamic. In the decades following the Civil War, he wrote, “as the domestic market was saturated and capital heaped up for investment, the pressure for the expansion of the American commercial empire rose with corresponding speed.” Henceforth, sustaining American prosperity under existing political arrangements would require the unimpeded growth of trade and investment abroad. Here for Beard was the master key that unlocked the inner secrets of American statecraft. It not only explained why the United States had gone to war in 1898 and in 1917, but also revealed more fully the nexus between politics and diplomacy: American leaders chose intervention abroad in order to dodge politically difficult decisions at home—decisions that might call into question the constitutional framework that guaranteed the privileges of the propertied classes.

Asked once to describe his own ideal for America, Beard responded: “It is a workers’ republic.” For Beard and other progressives, World War I had quashed their hopes for creating that republic—a society more genuinely democratic, more equitable, and more humane. The onset of the Great Depression barely a decade later only highlighted the consequences of that earlier failure. But economic crisis also suggested the possibility of reviving that effort. Thus, when Franklin Roosevelt, wrapping himself in the mantle of progressivism, won the presidency in 1932, Beard enthusiastically endorsed FDR’s promise of a New Deal.

Yet wariness tempered that enthusiasm. Disillusionment at Wil-
son's hands heightened Beard's concern that Roosevelt might lack the courage to make good on his bold promises. He feared that, in the manner of past administrations, FDR might opt for adventurism abroad to evade the imperative of change at home. That way, in Beard's view, pointed toward a repetition of the error of imperialism as in 1898 and, worse, the disaster of all-out war as in 1917. Ominous developments overseas in the early 1930s—Japan's incursion into Manchuria and Hitler's coming to power in Germany—suggested that a president seeking to dodge the need for structural change at home could easily find a pretext for finding solutions to the country's ills elsewhere.

Throughout the 1930s Beard devoted his formidable talents to averting such an eventuality. In a torrent of books, pamphlets, and articles, he warned against being dragged into problems that were Asia's or Europe's, but not America's. He labored furiously to alert his fellow citizens to the folly—and the danger—of reviving Woodrow Wilson's project. He insisted that if the United States did go to war, it should at least do so democratically, not as a result of backroom machinations by a handful of politicians.

In advancing these arguments, Beard was fully alive to current trends toward interdependence. "Nations are no longer isolated entities represented by rulers who may make or break official intercourse at will," he acknowledged in 1930. "Underlying the whole fabric of modern civilization is a network of physical, economic, social, and cultural connections. Railways, steamships, telegraphs, cables, and wireless communications unite homes, offices, industries, and farms in a universal web."21

Beard had flirted briefly with the notion that this universal web might spell the obsolescence of war. But the depression convinced him otherwise. Despite "growing interdependence," he concluded in 1934, "the tendency of nations to engage in armed conflicts has not disappeared."22

By 1934 the possibility of renewed war on a large scale, whether in Asia or Europe or both, was becoming self-evident. Beard's reading of American history over the preceding half-century convinced him that, barring a major recasting of its foreign policy, the United States would almost inevitably find itself drawn into such a war, with dire consequences. But reorienting U.S. policy was unlikely unless Ameri-
cans confronted the underlying assumptions and principles that for decades had determined U.S. behavior toward the world beyond its borders. Beard took it upon himself to instruct his fellow citizens accordingly.

His own interpretation of American statecraft derived from his belief in two controlling maxims: that foreign and domestic policy "were parts of the same thing" and that "nations are governed by their interests as their statesmen conceive these interests."23 In the case of the United States—whose chief business, after all, was business—economic considerations ranked foremost among the factors determining how policymakers defined those interests.

Industrialists, bankers, and farmers—and their advocates in Washington—had long since concluded that the domestic market alone would not satisfy their own or the nation's requirements. They believed, wrote Beard, that "American industry, under the regime of technology, is producing more commodities than the American people can use or consume, and the 'surplus' must be exported." The same applied to capital and the products of American agriculture. Influential members of these constituencies believed that failure to secure outlets for these surpluses would have (and in the 1930s was having) ruinous consequences, not only obliterating individual fortunes and causing widespread economic hardship but also threatening the social order.24

For these "adepts at the center of things," therefore, the essence of statecraft was not the once-in-a-generation crisis that obliged a McKinley or a Wilson to choose between war and peace. What really mattered were the long stretches between wars, when the attention of the press and public lay elsewhere. That was when the adepts, left alone, addressed the issues that really counted. Reduced to its essentials, U.S. foreign policy was an either/or proposition: "a question of commercial expansion or stagnation and decay; world power or economic decline."25

Viewed in this light, exporting economic surpluses—the "industrialist way of escape"—constituted the overriding national interest. It was not simply a matter of making money—although it included that, of course—but of preserving long-standing arrangements for allocating power and privilege within American society. According to Beard, efforts to protect that interest ran like "a powerful motif through state
papers from the inauguration of President McKinley to the retirement of President Hoover.” For all the peculiarities in style and temper distinguishing McKinley from Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft from Wilson, or Warren G. Harding from Calvin Coolidge, each of those presidents had adhered to a common strategy. Though cloaked in professions of America’s aversion to old-fashioned imperialism and its hopes for world peace, the centerpiece of that strategy was economic expansionism. Implementing that strategy involved “pushing and holding open doors in all parts of the world with all the engines of government ranging from polite coercion to the use of arms.” Only by opening the world to American trade and investment could the United States flourish and ensure the permanence of its existing domestic order.

Beard faulted this strategy on five separate counts. First, he ridiculed dreams of endless economic expansion as illusory. There simply was “no way of securing ever-expanding outlets abroad for the ever-expanding potentials of great technology by any system of foreign exchange and trade promotion.”

Second, the more insistently the United States pressed in its determination to open the world, Beard believed, the greater the opposition it was likely to encounter. He cautioned against the American tendency to see the world as “something mechanical, on a plane surface.” Such an oversimplified view led to “the exclusion of the national cultures—ideas, loyalties, passions, political traditions, the development and clash of races and nations” that were the very stuff of history. The contrary claims of internationalists notwithstanding, the world was not completely malleable. Others would not obligingly conform to American preferences. To insist otherwise was to court perpetual conflict.

Third, in provoking resistance, the effort to open doors for American trade and investment abroad also opened the door, Beard feared, to militarism at home. To overcome that resistance the United States would find itself increasingly resorting to force. Indeed, the officer corps stood ready with arguments explaining the need to expand U.S. military capabilities. But any nation “compelled to devote immense energies and a large part of its annual wealth production to wars, to preparation for wars, and to paying for past wars” risked becoming Sparta, its civil and cultural institutions transformed into “the servants of military purposes and the military mind.”

Fourth, by Beard’s estimate, American political culture and the composition of American society were ill suited to such an expansionist strategy. Divided ethnically and religiously, celebrating individual liberty and self-gratification, and “without the cement of a long-established monarchy, State Church, or fixed landed aristocracy,” Americans lacked the cohesion, the habits of self-abnegation, and reflexive deference to authority. That is, they possessed few of the qualities suggesting an aptitude for arduous and protracted campaigns to rearrange the international order. America’s inherent virtues were not those of imperial Rome or imperial Britain.

Fifth, and above all, Beard insisted that the preoccupation with opening doors misconstrued the nation’s true interests. To be sure, “the supreme interest of the United States” properly included a commitment to providing all Americans with a decent standard of living. But the desideratum of economic growth did not trump all other considerations. The nation’s true interests required statesmen to pursue economic objectives in a way “conducive to the promotion of individual and social virtues within the frame of national security.” In Beard’s view, the importance of this final point was paramount. To pursue the nation’s material well-being by venturing beyond the frame of national security—by engaging in frequent interventions abroad or in wars not involving national survival—was to court overextension, exhaustion, and collapse. Furthermore, the “frame” of American security, in Beard’s view, was not difficult to identify. Defined by the two great oceans that set the New World apart, it coincided with the limits of the Western Hemisphere.

To those who believed that the United States could not prosper without access to European and Asian markets, Beard pointed to the underdeveloped condition of America’s own vast internal market. The periodic economic woes besetting the United States stemmed not from a lack of aggregate wealth, resources, productive capacity, or population. The problem, he believed, was that an insufficient proportion of that population functioned as effective consumers. But for that problem, a by-product of an inequitable distribution of wealth, there existed a simple remedy: redistribution.

Beard generally viewed moral and humanitarian arguments on behalf of internationalism as mere camouflage. But to those given to the “theological assertion” that God had anointed “American law, order, civilization, and flag” to serve as his agents, he replied by calling at-
Amplification shrouded the motives and actions of states—including those of the United States.

In a series of essays published in 1936, Beard warned Americans against seeing international politics as the handiwork of nefarious individuals. “War is not the work of a demon,” he insisted. “It is our very own work, for which we prepare, wittingly or not,”—meaning that statesmen responded to the demands or expectations of the populations they governed. Americans possessed the power—if they would recognize it—to prevent the nation from sliding toward another Armageddon.

By early 1937, with German rearmament well under way and Spain’s civil war fixing the attention of American elites, Beard sensed that FDR himself was showing signs of becoming “intoxicated by moral exuberance.” By summer’s end—with Japan now fully engaged in a war to conquer China—he concluded that Roosevelt had “made it manifest that he still follows the creed that the United States must do good all around the world. That creed will plunge him into war,” Beard predicted. Roosevelt’s call that autumn for an international effort to “quarantine” aggressors confirmed those fears.

With mounting urgency, Beard both denied that foreign quarrels had a moral basis or that involvement in those quarrels would produce anything but disaster for America. In professing their devotion to peace, Britain and France sought primarily to guarantee their “possession of all that they have gathered up in the way of empire by methods not entirely different from those recently employed, let us say, by Italy in Ethiopia.” Beard mocked those calling for “another preposterous crusade for democracy on the battle-fields of Europe.” To Americans who believed that in failing to stem aggression abroad the United States was “shirking” its responsibilities, he again invited attention to problems festering in their own backyard. “[A]nnybody who feels hot with morals and is affected with delicate sensibilities can find enough to do at home,” he wrote on the eve of the Anschluss, “considering the misery of the 10,000,000 unemployed, the tramps, the beggars, the sharecroppers, tenants and field hands right here at our door.” How could a nation that had manifestly failed to get its own house in order “have the effrontery to assume that we can solve the problems of Asia and Europe, encrusted in the blood-rust of fifty centuries?”
Beard warned as Hitler dismembered Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939, "is a sense for the limitations of power and for the consequences that may flow from the exercise of power... As a matter of cold fact—men, guns, ships, and equipment—the United States cannot 'whip creation' and police it."42

Beard had placed himself at the forefront of a grassroots movement opposing U.S. intervention in the war that now loomed on the immediate horizon. For their efforts, Beard and his allies were savaged as "isolationists," a caricature that has ever since proven of incalculable value to proponents of American globalism. But the isolationists gave as good as they got.

Even the Wehrmacht’s invasion of Poland in September 1939 did not shake Beard’s conviction that this was not America’s war. If anything, the reverse was true. As Roosevelt responded to German military successes by edging ever closer to direct American involvement, Beard continued to insist that flaws within the American system of political economy, not distant security threats, determined U.S. policy.

In a last-ditch effort to make the case for restraint and self-sufficiency, Beard in 1940 reiterated his arguments in A Foreign Policy for America, emphasizing that “foreign and domestic policies are inseparable parts of the same thing."43 Reviving Wilsonian arguments about America’s grandiose obligations to the rest of the world, FDR was taking the United States into the war to compensate for the inadequacies of his own New Deal. Thus, when Roosevelt vowed in the fall of 1940 that American boys would not be fighting in another foreign war, Beard knew—at least to his own satisfaction—that the president’s promise was a cynical political gesture that he had no intention of honoring.44

Thirteen months later—a period that saw the passage of Lend-Lease, the tightening of sanctions against Tokyo, offers of military support to China and the Soviet Union, and the launching of an undeclared naval war in the Atlantic—Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The argument about whether or not the United States would avoid involvement in another world war abruptly ended. Brooding and embittered, disregarding his expressed belief that war is not the work of demons, Beard proceeded to construct his own "devil theory" to explain American intervention, with Franklin Roosevelt standing in for Satan. After the war, at precisely the moment—the onset of the Cold War—when the myth of Roosevelt as heroic "soldier of freedom" stood at its zenith, he charged FDR with dishonesty and deception and with hijacking the Constitution. Critics rightly lambasted Beard’s two books on U.S. entry into World War II as tendentious and meandering. On Hitler, Roosevelt had been right, and Beard’s 1940 prescription for U.S. foreign policy would have been a disaster.

Yet six decades later, with the United States now a globe-straddling colossus—but with peace nowhere to be seen—it becomes apparent that although he had missed one large truth, Beard had hit upon others. Resurrecting those other truths provides an essential point of departure for understanding American statecraft today.

Like Beard, William Appleman Williams (1921–1990) was a midwesterner; but there any similarity in upbringing ends.45 Williams was born and raised in Atlantic, a small town in rural Iowa. After his father was killed when the boy was eight, his mother left him temporarily in her parents’ care, enrolled in college, earned a degree, and eventually returned home to reclaim care of her only child and to work as a schoolteacher. Williams later portrayed his mother as an exemplar of self-reliance and strong-willed individualism and his hometown as the embodiment of “community.”46 After high school, Williams spent a year at Kemper Military Academy on a basketball scholarship and won an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy. Commissioned in 1944, Williams served until the war’s end in the Pacific.

In 1947 Williams left the Navy to study history at the University of Wisconsin, an institution famous, among other things, for its "notorious loyalty" to the teachings of Charles Beard.47 An assignment in Corpus Christi, Texas, just after the war, exposing him to racial segregation and the embryonic civil rights movement, had begun his political awakening. In short order, the heady progressivism of Madison completed his transformation into a self-described radical.

At Wisconsin, Williams earned a doctorate in U.S. diplomatic history. His first book, American-Russian Relations, 1781–1947, published in 1952, implicitly questioned orthodox views of the Cold War’s origins, much as Beard had questioned the conventional wisdom about American entry into World War II. After a series of short teaching ap-
points elsewhere, Williams returned to Wisconsin in 1957 and quickly established himself in the front rank of American historians. Politically, he was also among the most controversial. Williams became the founding father and abiding inspiration of the "Wisconsin School" of revisionist history that examined the underside of U.S. foreign policy and found there an American variant of imperialism. With events in Cuba and then Vietnam lending added salience to his views, he gained access to noted journals of opinion such as Commentary, The Nation, and the New York Review of Books. On campus, he was a wildly popular teacher. During this period he published his two most influential works, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (1959) and The Contours of American History (1961).

Though an avowed man of the left, by the mid-1960s Williams found himself increasingly out of sympathy with the political views of the Vietnam-era student radicals, among whom he had achieved the status of icon. He considered the antics of the counterculture to be childish and self-indulgent. He found the sexual revolution to be repugnant. In 1968, exhausted and with his personal life careening out of control, he fled Madison for the Pacific coast, where he remained until his death. Although he continued to write, he had little to offer except self-parody. Aside from a one-year term as president of the Organization of American Historians in 1980, his final years were largely reclusive.

In his writings, Williams freely acknowledged his debt to Beard at a time when Beard’s professional reputation was hitting rock bottom. Insights taken from Beard—that foreign policy "is intimately connected with domestic affairs," that "empires are not built in fits of absent-mindedness," and that expansion "complicates and deepens" rather than resolves problems—provided the foundation of his own critique of U.S. history.48

Williams endorsed Beard’s view that expansionism was integral to the American story. Rather than tracing the expansionist impulse to the rival visions of Jefferson and Hamilton, however, Williams saw it as an expression of a struggle for America’s very soul. The crucial question was not whether American society would be predominantly rural or urban, or whether citizens would earn their livelihood as virtuous agrarians or as merchants, craftsmen, and factory workers. Rather, the central question was whether Americans would descend into shallow, grasping materialism or keep faith with the intentions of the Founders to create a “Christian commonwealth.”49 As Williams saw it, Americans faced a choice. They could either give themselves over to the pursuit of hedonistic and ultimately dehumanizing individualism, or they could accept “the demands and the self-discipline of living with other human beings in a truly responsible, humane fashion.”50 An expanding frontier and an expanding economy deferred the day of reckoning. Thus, the weltanschauung guiding American politics was a simple one: "problems are solved by growth or further expansion." As a result, according to Williams, a "charming but ruthless faith in infinite progress fueled by endless growth" became central to the American way of life. But the closing of the frontier by the 1890s and the onset of severe economic crisis in the same decade obliged Americans to look farther afield. Henceforth, expansion abroad "provided the sine qua non of domestic prosperity and social peace."51

But the United States pursued expansion abroad in a way that reflected particular American interests and values. After a brief, unsatisfactory experiment with old-fashioned empire in the wake of the Spanish-American War, American leaders abandoned efforts to assemble an array of distant possessions as the preferred means of sustaining economic growth. Given the costs of pacification, administration, and defense, colonies offered a poor return on the dollar. In addition, the nation’s own revolutionary heritage and its traditional anti-imperial sympathies were at odds with the notion of U.S. soldiers subduing alien populations. The challenge confronting American leaders was to formulate policies that provided the benefits of empire without its burdens. In that regard, what mattered was not ownership or even administrative control but commercial access.

To secure that access, American leaders devised a supple and highly innovative strategy that Williams dubbed "Open Door imperialism." The famous Open Door Notes issued by Secretary of State John Hay in 1899 and 1900 both inaugurated this shift in strategy and provided its definitive expression. The Open Door Notes declared America’s interest in preserving China’s territorial integrity and in claiming for the United States the same privileges enjoyed in China by the European powers and Japan. Nominally, Hay’s diplomatic initiative amounted to a brief on behalf of fairness. Williams saw it as
of the Soviet regime. The abuse of human rights, denial of freedom, and absence of democracy in the communist world did not figure prominently in Williams’ narrative. Purges, mass starvation, the wholesale displacement of populations, and the system of prison camps that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn labeled the Gulag Archipelago likewise received short shrift. Though careful not to defend communism as such, Williams could find no useful moral distinction between one side of the Iron Curtain and the other. “There is, and always has been,” he observed in 1962, “good and evil in the United States, in the Soviet Union, in Nigeria, in Cuba, and on down the list.”

Williams’ iconoclasm and polemical style were tailor-made for the 1960s. Discovering that the age of Eisenhower had been an era of repressive conformity, the products of Middle America who filled his classroom and the readers who devoured his books delighted in the zest with which Williams skewered sacred cows. Ostentatiously contrarian, he presented Abraham Lincoln not as the Great Emancipator martyred for the nation’s sins but as the dark prince of capitalism. At a time when most Americans held Herbert Hoover personally responsible for the Great Depression, Williams celebrated the thirty-first president as a courageous visionary. Favorable allusions to Karl Marx and Fidel Castro conveyed a frisson of bravura and insolence.

The decade’s unfolding events—with the body count from assassination climbing, domestic turmoil on the rise, and Vietnam becoming the war without apparent end—transformed Williams, in the eyes of his admirers, from gadfly to seer. His critique seemed not only provocative but true: open-door imperialism made sense of developments that otherwise seemed senseless. Above all, Williams’ insistence that America’s never-ending quest for new frontiers invited the ultimate disaster—“the frontier was now the rim of hell, and the inferno was radioactive”—lent urgency to the efforts of those promoting radical change.

Beard’s attempt to legitimize a revisionist perspective on the origins of World War II had destroyed his reputation. In contrast, Williams’ challenge to Cold War orthodoxy became both fashionable and immensely influential. The Wisconsin school did for all of U.S. diplomatic history what the revisionists of the interwar period had done for American entry into World War I. The new revisionists threatened the internationalist consensus undergirding postwar U.S. policy, and with it popular support for the ongoing crusade against communism. That prospect outraged and dismayed defenders of orthodoxy, both inside and outside the academy, among them the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who was determined to “blow the whistle before the current outburst of revisionism regarding the origins of the cold war goes much further.” As in Beard’s day, politics and scholarship had become inextricable.

What alternative did Williams offer to a strategy of continuous expansionism? With the rest of the world “clearly moving toward” a “true human community based far more on social property than upon private property,” he wanted the United States to hop onto the bandwagon. The only real challenge left to Americans was “to create the first democratic socialism in the world.” But for all his apparent radicalism, the specific remedy he offered reflected a deep-seated conservatism—and was even more improbable than Beard’s plea for Americans to tend their own garden while Nazi Germany was over-running most of Europe.

For Williams, democratic socialism was indistinguishable from Atlantic, Iowa, in the 1930s. Above all, socialism meant community. Williams yearned to recover the remembered—or idealized—life of a small boy growing up in the American heartland, watched over by hardworking plain folk, who were neither corrupted by great wealth nor afflicted with extreme poverty. To revive that world, he believed, required an experiment in radical decentralization. The radical historian’s alternative to empire was to dismantle the Union of fifty states, “breaking the Leviathan into community-sized elements.”

Williams’ advocacy of national dismemberment generated no discernible interest. By the end of the 1970s, his own growing disillusionment with the left had displaced nostalgia. Apart from its opposition to the Vietnam War, the New Left had failed to develop a coherent program and had sunk into irrelevance.

In the last years of Williams’ life, his grim warnings of Armageddon sounded increasingly preposterous. The Cold War did reach a denouement, but it did so quietly. The Soviet empire rather than the American-led free world cracked up, and the United States reached a new apogee of power and self-confidence. By the time of his death,
much more. Underlying Hay’s appeal to permit U.S. access to China’s market were expectations that, given half a chance, Americans would reap more than their fair share of the benefits. An ostensibly level playing field actually tilted in favor of American enterprise. In short, the policy of the open door was “a classic strategy of non-colonial imperial expansion.” Moreover, the policy devised for China applied equally well to other regions of the world. Hence, concluded Williams, for decades to follow “the history of the Open Door Notes became the history of American foreign relations.”

In Williams’ view, the architects of the open-door policy did not foist it on the masses. They had no need to: Americans embraced the policy as their own, because it encompassed aspirations that extended well beyond the economic realm. Bundled into the concept of openness were several other values. A world open to American enterprise and influence was a world conducive not only to economic opportunity but also to political liberty. In the eyes of most Americans, according to Williams, the two were linked inextricably. “Expanding the marketplace enlarged the area of freedom. Expanding the area of freedom enlarged the marketplace.” Openness became a precondition of freedom and democracy. It implied stability and security. (Resistance to openness evidenced untrustworthiness if not outright antagonism.)

America’s own commitment to openness testified to its own benign intentions—and therefore justified American exertions on behalf of an open world. Openness was not simply a cover for exploitation. “Most imperialists believed that an American empire would be humanitarian, and most humanitarians believed that doing good would be good for business.”

The dogma of openness became a component of American ideology, the principle upon which the world should be organized, the basis for a broad national consensus on foreign policy, and a rationale for mustering and employing American power. In essence, wrote Williams, the open-door policy legitimized “the endless expansion of the American frontier in the name of self-determination, progress, and peace.”

Williams laid the template of the open door upon the major events of the twentieth century and pronounced the fit to be precise. In doing so he turned the myth of the reluctant superpower on its head. In taking the United States into World War I, Woodrow Wilson had revealed “the Imperialism of Idealism,” a crusade to graft American values onto the entire world and to thwart all others—such as Lenin—who fancied themselves engaged in an analogous undertaking. The isolationism reputed to characterize American diplomacy during the interwar period was, according to Williams, little more than “legend.” World War II—commonly viewed as a conflict thrust upon the United States and fought against aggression—became, in Williams’ view, “the War for the American Frontier.” But it was in interpreting the war’s aftermath in light of the open door that Williams showed himself at his most audacious.

The war’s end, wrote Williams, left Americans “casually confident that their earlier visions of Manifest Destiny were materializing as the reality of the present.” Viewing the atomic bomb as a “self-starting magic lamp,” they looked forward to the arrival of “their long-sought City on the Hill in the form of a de facto American Century embracing the globe.” The officials who directed U.S. foreign policy took it for granted that “such benevolent Americanization of the world would bring peace and plenty without the moral embarrassment and administrative distractions of old-fashioned empires.”

Josef Stalin, however, entertained aspirations of his own. Refusing to open the devastated Soviet nation to the outside world, suspicious of Western eagerness to rebuild Germany, and determined to establish a protective buffer of compliant satellites, the Soviet dictator marked himself in the eyes of American policymakers as not only supremely ungrateful but also dangerous. His acquisition of the atomic bomb in 1949 confirmed his hostile intentions. Soviet military power now posed a threat without precedent. When other political movements, armed insurgents, and revolutionaries in Europe, Asia, and even the Western Hemisphere proclaimed fealty to socialism and looked to the Kremlin for support, officials in Washington concluded that the United States was facing a global conspiracy.

Williams rejected the orthodox view that fastened blame for starting the Cold War squarely on Moscow. Soviet behavior, he believed, could plausibly be explained as defensive in nature. It was the United States more than the Soviet Union that was bent on exploiting victory in 1945 to expand its influence, an effort consistent with America’s long-term strategy of shaping a world order receptive to its own values and conducive to its own prosperity.

This version of the Cold War’s origins all but ignored the character
although Williams still commanded a following in faculty lounges, most Americans probably credited Ronald Reagan with possessing a surer—or at least more accurate—instinct for history.

Yet if the quiet passing of the Cold War demolished Williams’ credibility as prophet and polemict, it also made it easier to assess his scholarly legacy with dispassion. As with the master, so, too, with the disciple: lodged within the ruin of the enterprise Williams inspired lies much to inform our understanding of the present.

When Williams insisted in 1971 that “The issue is the nature and dynamic of the American empire, not the validity of Lenin’s thesis,” he was wrong. If in 1971 Lenin’s thesis did not qualify as the only issue, it certainly ranked as a very important one. Three decades later, with events having resoundingly exposed communism’s failings, “the nature and dynamic” of American power has indeed become the question.

From Williams’ efforts to understand American power, four noteworthy points survive. The first is that during the twentieth century the United States came to play a role that cannot be understood except as a variant of empire. That notion, employed in the midst of the Cold War more as an epithet than as an explanation, became by the 1990s almost a statement of the obvious. In the aftermath of the Cold War, references to an American empire or to American hegemony, which formerly came with barbs attached, were no longer fighting words. Though still avoided by government officials, such terms infiltrated the lexicon of everyday discourse about U.S. foreign policy. As even Schlesinger, Williams’ particular nemesis, conceded, “who can doubt that there is an American empire?—an ‘informal’ empire, not colonial in polity, but still richly equipped with imperial paraphernalia: troops, ships, planes, bases, proconsuls, local collaborators, all spread around the luckless planet.”

A second element of Williams’ legacy was to render untenable claims that this informal empire “just grew like Topsy,” coming into existence as an accident of nature or an unintended consequence of events beyond American control. Williams showed that the American empire emerged out of a particular worldview and reflected a coherent strategy to which the American people gave their support.

Third, Williams identified key elements of that American strategy. Building on insights first developed by Beard, he unearthed the assumptions underlying the doctrine of liberal internationalism, explained its logic, identified its purposes, and divined its implications. He showed that the essential aim of liberal internationalism was to open the world to American enterprise. He revealed the conviction, widely shared among successive generations of American statesmen, that only an open world could permit the American system of political economy to function effectively while also assuring U.S. national security.

Finally, Williams understood that in practice, the only sure way to guarantee openness was through the exercise of dominant power. Openness adapted the logic of empire to suit the needs of democratic capitalism.

Whereas Beard first identified the underlying logic of American expansionism, Williams went a step further, urging Americans to contemplate the implications of their imperium. “Assume empire is necessary,” he wrote; “what is the optimum size of the empire; and what are the proper—meaning moral as well as pragmatic—means of structuring, controlling, and defending the empire so that it will in practice produce welfare and democracy for the largest number of the imperial population?”

As the United States embarked upon a new century, those questions returned to the fore.