

Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy, David Milne. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. 609 pp. \$35.00 US (cloth).

There is a long-running debate over whether a defense of values or the pursuit of interests has most shaped American foreign relations—whether principles of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism or raw power and its just deserts have made the United States exceptional in modern history. David Milne maintains that this argument between preachers of virtue and promoters of strength sprang from the competing ways in which they made sense of a complex world. In *Worldmaking*, he surveys nine figures who left indelible marks on America's role in the world both in the field of arts and letters and in the halls of power. Milne wears his expertise and erudition lightly as he paints history on a big canvass without resort to broad brush strokes, eschewing harsh judgments (aside from low-hanging fruit such as Vietnam circa 1965 or Iraq circa 2003) to link the realm of ideas to those of war and peace. The result is a nuanced, illuminating, and propulsive history of the key personalities and events that have defined the relationship between the United States and the world since the Spanish-American War. Together, this series of nine biographical sketches hold out a new prism with which to view “the nexus between knowledge and power” in the making of American foreign policy. (19)

What were the intellectual mainsprings of American foreign policy? Milne's divides his thinkers into two camps: artists like Alfred Thayer Mahan, Charles Beard, Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, and Barack Obama, and scientists, namely Woodrow Wilson, Paul Nitze, and Paul Wolfowitz. In place of the conventional split between realists and idealists—Kennan and Kissinger waged a long proxy war on the “legalistic-moralistic approach to international relations” they associated with Wilson and his ilk—Milne highlights the mental habits, disciplinary backgrounds, and epistemological frames that underpinned to two different models for divining the national

interest and devising judicious policies for its attainment. This binary yields original insights into what motivated these leading lights to espouse the policies and positions they did; to cite one instance, Milne identifies the roots of the rift between Kennan and Nitze over containment's militarization in the early Cold War in Nitze's conviction that the correlation of military forces trumped all rather than a schoolyard feud within the realist academy. The interpretation at times fails to take the analysis to its logical conclusion; the opportunity is lost to recast Kissinger as a scientist whose preoccupation with credibility and the balance of power blinded him to the ethical and economic determinants of American and Western leadership. And other times, the binary risks unraveling under the weight of its own contradictions. Milne cautions that the art-science distinction is "intended as an illuminating background theme, not as a reductive master narrative;" (17-18) yet this discounts its potential explanatory force with but a handful of enhancements.

What does it mean to approach foreign policy as art or science? The former is better itemized: skepticism toward transformative goals, humility about knowledge's limits, a penchant for viewing cases on their own merits. In short, it is the judgment that the subject must view the world as it is, not as it ought to be. The definition of science is foggier. At times, Milne characterizes it as fidelity to evidence-based analysis; at others, it is the tendency to bend facts to fit models. These are not mutually exclusive—policymaking has a sociology just as laboratory work does—but the term would benefit from either greater conceptual precision or theoretical depth.¹ The solution might be to emphasize the lure that parsimony—a heuristic or disciplinary inclination for familiar, straightforward explanations—represents for many social scientists, for example, when Wolfowitz turned a blind eye to contradictory evidence in his crusade to link Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to

¹ Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1986).

Al Qaeda's attacks on September 11, 2001. Milne's scientists were less partisans of the scientific method than zealots who were sure that they alone held in their hands the key to the kingdom.

The impression is left that these individuals were less defined by their backgrounds in the arts or the sciences than the horizons of their curiosity: to use Isaiah Berlin's well-worn zoology, they were either foxes or hedgehogs. The contrast between Kennan and Nitze is exemplary. Nitze shared Wilson and Wolfowitz's dogmatism when he assigned analytical pride of place to the balance of power. Where a desire to remake the world impelled Wilson and Wolfowitz, however, twin fears drove Nitze: America's defeat and his professional marginalization. He was a patriot and an opportunist before he was a realist or a scientist, and it was the density of his intellectual sphere that made him so valuable in Washington.

The "Super" debate that begins the book is symptomatic, though not solely for the reasons to which Milne points. After the first Soviet nuclear test in August 1949, Truman fast-tracked the pursuit of fusion-based explosives whose destructive potential was exponentially greater than the fission bombs that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While Milne presents the episode as a testament to Nitze's scientism and Kennan's artistry, the narrative changes when the work of J. Robert Oppenheimer's General Advisory Committee (GAC) is included. It was the GAC that provided scientific advice to the trio of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, and the Chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) David Lilienthal who in turn advised Truman. Their focus was not just on the Super, but also on how the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission should respond to a world with two nuclear-weapon states: should it pour scarce resources, including precious fissile materials, into a project based on unproven physical principles, or augment the existing arsenal of proven fission bombs? The GAC's scientists and engineers came to these two determinations: fission weapons were a safer bet and the use of fusion bombs was tantamount to

genocide. A minority even called them “an evil thing in any light.”² Nitze did not arrive at a better judgment because he “was data driven and scientifically oriented;” (5) he did so because his calling card was defense analysis. Kennan and other natural and applied scientists who resisted the Super, by contrast, conducted themselves like foxes, leavening their expertise in Russian history or subatomic physics with an appreciation that morality matters in a democracy.

Nitze’s argument won out for the same reason his public service extended from Truman to Reagan and Kennan’s did not: hedgehogs make for better functionaries. Nitze supplied his political masters with the narrow analyses they needed to justify their positions. In the United States, the paramount foreign policy issues are the domain of presidents and their advisors, not mid-level officials or *New York Times* columnists. Milne’s take on Barack Obama is thus enlightening; for all his dismissal of grand strategy, the proverbial buck stopped with Obama. His choices cohered into a strategy that reflected his core pragmatism (a philosophical tradition whose peculiar American genealogy Milne adroitly traces). If Obama once famously observed he did not “even really need George Kennan right now,” his administration was only too happy to use hedgehogs like Anne-Marie Slaughter at Policy Planning, Samantha Powers at the United Nations, and physics Ph.D. Ashton Carter at the Pentagon. (524) The more self-referential one’s knowledge, the more easily it becomes an instrument of power.

Worldmaking brings the marketplace of ideas into closer dialogue with the course of American foreign affairs since the Great White Fleet set sail, challenging various pillars of conventional wisdom and thus joining the short stack of essential readings on U.S. foreign policy and its thinkers. The study’s basic theme edifies as much for the questions it raises as for those it answers. How do disciplinary boundaries and mental habits affect strategic judgment? How much explanatory power

² General Advisory Committee’s Majority and Minority Report on Building the H-Bomb,” October 30, 1949. <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Hydrogen/GACReport.shtml> (accessed 29 December 2016).

should historians accord to a policymakers' education and, more fundamental still, the intellectual schools of thought that lend structure but not necessarily purpose to American foreign relations? Can they reconcile epistemic traditions with the beliefs of *exceptionalists* or *universalists*—those who believe that the United States stands alone in its virtues and those who think the rest of the world should share them—of whom H. W. Brands and Perry Anderson make much?³ It is the mark of an exceptional work of scholarship that it casts such questions in a new light. Whether art and science offer better terms with which to classify those who ply the trade of statecraft, Milne's intervention has certainly enriched the art and science of writing their history.

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³ Perry Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2015); H. W. Brands identifies similar camps—*exemplarists* and *vindicationists* in his classic *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).