

## Book Review

***American Foreign Relations: A Very Short Introduction.* By Andrew Preston.** Oxford University Press. 2019. 166pp. £8.99 (pb).

*American Foreign Relations* is a remarkable book in which Andrew Preston marshals significant evidence to demonstrate how the United States has shaped world history and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Thematically, Preston's approach to American foreign relations strengthens the conceptualisation and execution of this concise volume. As he explains in his introduction, seven key themes work individually and in concert to orient the reader as helpful signposts.

The first theme consists of the importance of values and a sense of mission in the development and implantation of American foreign relations. The second theme is closely related to the first and centres on how ideas of progress and expansion 'have played a critical role in how Americans envision the world around them' (p. 2). In Preston's description, these themes 'act first and foremost as interpretive lenses that can be used on their own or, if the picture is particularly complex or unclear, by overlaying one or more on top of another' (p. 5). This conceptual framework is helpful on its own merits and is one of many reasons why this short book is ideal for classroom settings, as well as for scholars seeking an incisive overview of the subject.

The volume also serves as a pedagogical tool for students framing and analysing American foreign policy. In their scholarship, undergraduate students may find the numerous arrays of analytical methods overwhelming as they develop historical analyses. The variety of thematic 'lenses' Preston employs in this useful book may serve as a model worth adopting among younger scholars as they refine methodological frameworks in their scholarship. In turn, students may benefit from the education gained in reading this well-written volume, but they will also find Preston's engaging study a well-organised example that demonstrates how to think and write historically about the complex and interrelated elements of American foreign relations.

Structurally, the book is divided into six chapters. Principles forming the American Republic are assessed in chapter 1 and American expansionism, as conceptualised through Manifest Destiny, is explored in chapter 2. The United States' global role in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is concisely analysed in chapter 3 and the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War and the post-Cold War era form chapters 4–6. The Spanish–American War, during which the United States gained colonies in Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines in 1898, described in chapter 3, exemplifies Preston's methodological approach and accessible writing. His ability to contextualise the difficult and chaotic events that constituted this early period of American internationalism is representative of the historical skill that permeates the book.

## 2 BOOK REVIEW

The unusually bloody war for control of the Philippines between 1898 and 1901 is recounted in a manner that demonstrates the darker sides of American liberalism and it does so with honesty and evidence. In brighter contrast, the United States' entry into the First World War, also recounted in chapter 3, demonstrates the positives found in idealism but also its downsides. Experts in the field may find the book's articulate style and brevity refreshing while students, and their teachers in particular, will find that nothing substantive is lost in Preston's analysis. Younger readers, for example, are reminded that Woodrow Wilson's objective was 'to safeguard the interests of the United States in an interdependent world – a world in which Americans could no longer avoid foreign entanglements' (p. 58). Meanwhile, seasoned scholars may recall with greater sympathy that Wilson's hope for a better world was not unreasonable, especially after the First World War and the concomitant flu epidemic of 1918–20, when life on earth looked remarkably bleak.

The United States' role after the Second World War and during 'The American Century' should also remind students how ideology, poor decision-making, contingency and other factors shaped interventions in Korea, Vietnam, Latin America and elsewhere. Chapter 6, 'Hyperpower and its Discontents', assesses the advent of the post-Cold War era and the implementation of what Stephen M. Walt has described as 'Liberal Hegemony' (Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (2018), p. 54). Preston's analysis of American foreign relations after 1993 shares Walt's concerns that the United States has often overreached and done so because it could, but with neither foresight nor wisdom. This, regrettably, was destructively demonstrated through intervention and regime change in Iraq during and after 2003.

Finally, there are other important lessons for readers to find in this short book. For example, Preston's perspective on the transition from 'self-defence' to 'national security' forms a watershed moment in American and, as a result, global history as well. He explains, 'Under the narrower terms of the former (self-defence), the need for U.S. intervention in world affairs was fairly limited. But, under the sway of the latter (national security), U.S. foreign policy became much more proactive' (p. 72). The Franklin D. Roosevelt administration was the starting point for this broadened conception of self-defence during the Second World War and this security pathos quickly expanded until it 'included the worldwide protection of America's ideas and values'. Proactive indeed. Readers and students, especially those in secondary and undergraduate settings with an interest in international security and policy, will benefit from Preston's work. For scholars already working in this field of study, the book is a refreshing and thought-provoking reorientation.

*Harvard University*

NATHANIEL L. MOIR, PH.D.