Sammelrez: F. Cameron: US Foreign Policy after the Cold War


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This is a textbook written primarily for undergraduate students of American politics and the role of the United States in international affairs. The author presently holds the position of a Foreign Policy Advisor at the European Commission and was formerly the Head of Political and Academic Affairs at the Delegation of the European Commission in Washington, DC. Thus Cameron fortuitously combines the perspectives of European observer and long-time Washington insider, both of which shape his arguments and interpretations. European students, in particular, will benefit a great deal from this text.

The book is well organized and highly readable. Its ten chapters (plus a conclusion) cover the historical background of US foreign policy, an overview of the post-Cold War decade, the key institutional players, lobbying interests, the media and public opinion, foreign trade and America’s position in a globalized economy, the US response to international terrorism, regional priorities, and the current strategic debates over America’s role as a world leader. Each chapter begins with a shortlist of key facts and most chapters contain one or more case studies on US policy making toward different countries or in different areas, including, for example, the significance of oil for US foreign policy, and American efforts in combating the global AIDS epidemic. Each chapter offers summarizing conclusions and a selected list of suggestions for further reading, complemented by a comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book. Tables and figures provide much useful quantitative and organizational information. A glossary of key terms will be welcomed especially by novices to the field. Cameron deliberately excludes the theory of international relations, although key concepts such as realism or hegemony are central to his analysis. As an introduction and an overview the book is accessible to undergraduates and useful as a reference guide for advanced students and even specialists. Its language is clear-cut and matter-of-fact; it appears particularly suitable for use in German undergraduate seminars.

Cameron is judicious in his assessments and always tries to present both sides of an argument, often illustrated by quotations from key actors or analysts. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that his perspective is a distinctly European one. For example, he bitterly complains, based on personal experience, that US foreign policy makers are reluctant to accept the European Union as an equal partner. The major reason for this, he suspects, is that the Americans are used to NATO as the core institution of the Western alliance, which the US was able to dominate for decades. Although the EU has offered closer cooperation in many fields, Washington continues to prefer bilateral relationships (p. 158-59). While this is certainly true, in all fairness one should add that the European nations do not always speak with one voice when it comes to vital international issues. Only a few months after the book was published, the war against Iraq not only led to a serious transatlantic divide, but also to an intra-European rift that was gloatingly commented upon by key members of the Bush administration.

According to Cameron, the Americans are not yet beyond the Cold War mind-set in dealing with the EU. On the one hand they urge increased spending on defense and peacekeeping, on the other they oppose all efforts at building independent European defense capabilities. As far as trade relations between the US and Europe are concerned, however, Cameron does not see any mounting potential for serious conflict. Ninety-nine percent of this trade, he writes, flows without problems, while one percent receives all the negative attention.

Although the book is critical, and rightly
so, of American unilateralism and reluctance in submitting to international agreements and law, Cameron, like most members of the transatlantic intellectual community, considers US world leadership as indispensable for a stable international order. Unfortunately, the enlightened approach to hegemony that America practiced during the Cold War – at least in its relations to Western Europe - is in danger of giving way to a narrow definition of national interest and an often insensitive display of the arrogance of power that did not begin with the present administration. „Madeleine Albright,“ he observes, „may have been right in describing the US in 1996 as the ‘indispensable nation’ but few foreigners enjoyed being lectured at by a nation that did not pay its UN dues and chose selectively what international agreements it would join“(p. 194). With the tremendous challenges emanating from terrorism, ethnic and religious conflict, economic globalization, and environmental problems lying ahead, American power and leadership are as necessary in the future as they were in the past.

While most European observers will readily agree with Cameron’s conclusions, the book’s chapters on the domestic foundations on US foreign policy do not contain much good news for a bright future of liberal internationalism. Perhaps most importantly, the public interest in and media coverage of international issues has sharply declined since the end of the Cold War – and it never was great in the first place, at least by European standards. Not surprisingly, since September 11, 2001, security issues have been foremost on the minds of most American citizens who consider fighting terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to „rogue states“ as the top US foreign policy priority. Combined with the notorious „CNN effect“ and short public attention spans, these dispositions clearly limit the options for a sustained effort at nation-building and stabilizing democracy that characterized US policy toward Western Europe after 1945.

Cameron is surely right in observing that the Unites States has yet to define its role as a global leader in the post-Cold War world. Will it be the reluctant sheriff who is prone to rely on military means whenever vital American interests are at stake, but forfeits international commitments and responsibilities that might limit national sovereignty? Or will America be a true leader working with its partners in multilateral frameworks and yield to international law and institutions, even if this might not serve its short-term national interests? Needless to say that most Europeans hope for the latter. Still, European thinking about how America should use its power, including Cameron’s book, often appears to be guided by a curious nostalgia for the Cold War. But while America’s relationships with Western Europe during this period may have been a „hegemony by invitation“ – to paraphrase Geir Lundestad – this is definitely not the case in the rest of the world.


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