The Age of War: The United States Confronts the World

by Gabriel Kolko

Whether one agrees or disagrees with him, there is no getting around the fact that Gabriel Kolko is one of the most prominent historians to practice that craft since the Second World War. The Harvard-educated distinguished research professor emeritus of York University in Toronto is the author of more than a dozen books, including The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943–1945, whose original 1968 edition was hailed in the New York Review of Books by the late Professor Hans J. Morgenthau, founder of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, as “a book of major importance” that represented “the first revisionist book concerned with the origins of the Cold War which is also a work of first-rate scholarship.”

Over the course of his career, Kolko has engaged in what the late Raymond Aron called paramarxist historiography, attempting to explain the international and military policies of the United States in terms of the demands of the country’s capitalist economy. (He also applied this analysis, arguably more convincingly, to the domestic political sphere, where his early study, The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916, forever demolished the myth of the Interstate Commerce Commission as a defender of the “little guy” by showing that its true beneficiaries were big business and organized labor.) His work has broadly influenced entire generations of later critical historians of American foreign policy, including Robert Buzzanco of the University of Houston, Bruce Cumings of the University of Chicago, Lloyd C. Gardner of Rutgers University, Walter LaFeber of Cornell University, and Thomas J. McCormick of the University of Wisconsin, all of whom are influential in their own right.

Unfortunately, as his latest book, The Age of War: The United States Confronts the World, reveals, over that same time span, even as his evident talent won him wide acclaim, Kolko’s ideological parameters progressively trapped him in a narrow straightjacket that renders little honor to the historian’s métier. Rather than taking economic data as an element for a historical reinterpretation of political decisions, as was the case in his early works, Kolko now postulates—but never quite proves—that American militarism is inextricably linked to the U.S. economy and everything else is subjugated to the benefit of a “ruling class” that he described in one earlier work as “the final arbiter and beneficiary of the existing structure of American society and politics at home and of United States power in the world.”

Carried to the extreme that Kolko takes it, this almost paranoid Marxist Weltanschauung belittles some of the greatest foreign policy successes of the last half century with its stridently ideological reading of the motivations behind U.S. policy. NSC 68, which laid down in policy terms the late George Kennan’s vision of containment, is reduced to being “the principal counter-cyclical economic tool” on which a military-driven economy depended. NATO was really intended by Washington to serve “as its instrument for maintaining its political hegemony over Western Europe.” According to
Kolko, “sustaining the image of an allegedly omniscient and omnipotent Soviet menace after 1946 kept both the U.S. Congress and public mobilized behind the expensive, hazardous Cold War,” that is, anticommunism was little more than window dressing for an “economic policy to attain full employment and growth [that] was based on arms outlays rather than direct satisfaction of social needs.” Pace John Lewis Gaddis’s recent magisterial volume The Cold War: A New History, for Kolko that’s all there ever was to the history of the “long war”: All the domestic and foreign political forces at work in that conflict can be collapsed into the American ruling class’s single-minded pursuit of mammon. (In contrast, Kolko has incredibly insisted that the Soviet bloc countries managed to avoid “the crises of war, stagnation, and unemployment that inflicted misery on the working class of the capitalist economies of the West”—a claim that, apart from the seriousness of the human toll, deserves to be greeted with hearty laughter when one considers that, a decade and a half after the fall of the Berlin Wall, unified Germany has yet to recover economically from the costs of absorbing the former German Democratic Republic.)

These rather cartoonish premises are hardly an auspicious beginning for a slender volume. A rather annoying consequence of its brevity is the author’s constant referrals to his “other books” or “other works” rather than presentations of supporting evidence for the truth of his claims—with ambitions to diagnosing the current crises in U.S. foreign policy and prognosticating about the shape of the world order in the twenty-first century. Here Kolko’s now obsessive anti-Americanism comes to the fore, as revealed by his disregard for any inconvenient facts. According to the author, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, “it was the overweening ambition of the United States to continue to play an activist role in the world that created much of this unpredictability.” Never mind that the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations both tried to get America’s European allies to take the lead in the disintegrating Yugoslavia and that after the debacle in Somalia the latter abstained from intervening during the Rwandan genocide. Never mind that it is the pursuit of nuclear weapons by regimes like those of the eccentric Kim Jong-II in Pyongyang and the radical mullahs in Tehran that threatens to open the gates for regional arms races. According to Kolko, “the twenty-first century has begun very badly because the United States continues its aggressive policies” and “the world will be safer to the extent that U.S. alliances are dissolved and it is isolated.”

What Kolko thinks of the current Bush administration’s war on terror hardly needs detailed rehearsing: He pronounces its foreign policy “a disaster,” whereas its “domestic economic policies have only aggravated the public’s alienation.” Despite the overwhelming contrary evidence exhaustively assembled by scholars like Alan B. Krueger at Princeton University, Jitka Maleckova at Charles University in Prague, Reuven Paz at the Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Herzliya, and Marc Sageman of the University of Pennsylvania, among others, as well as the words of Osama bin Laden and other jihadi leaders, Kolko insists on forcing militant Islamism into his reductive “paramarxist” schema. According to the author, people became terrorists “for the same economic reasons that people once became secular revolutionaries, and to a great extent the rise of such groups is due to capitalism’s failure to bring prosperity to poorer countries.” Not only is such dogmatism profoundly unhelpful with respect to both analysis and prescription, it runs once more counter to the empirical evidence: of the 32 countries listed last year as having “low human development” according to the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Report, the citizens of only one of them—Yemen—have figured prominently in transnational terrorist activities. Kolko would do well to take note of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s observation: “The poor of this
world suffer enough; one should not in addition brand them as potential terrorists.” (At least in the current book, Kolko implicitly acknowledges that there might at least possibly be such a creature as a “terrorist”; in his post-9/11 Another Century of War?, he argued that “whether they are ‘terrorists’ or ‘freedom fighters’ depends wholly on one’s viewpoint, because those seeking to attain political goals fight with what they have: hijacked airplanes and concealed bombs.”)

In the end, The Age of War is a rather disappointing work. Its author largely repeats and amplifies polemical themes in his previous books rather than developing a panoramic account that his earliest works indicated he is more than qualified to do. In fact, given his affinity for economic explanations, it is rather surprising that Kolko chooses to dedicate nearly half of a rather slim volume to rehashing his judgments concerning America’s old conflicts in China, Korea, and Vietnam, although having practically nothing to say about Africa, despite the latter’s increasing strategic importance to the United States, not least because of its hydrocarbon resources that now supply nearly one-fifth of the North American economy’s seemingly insatiable thirst for energy.

If his unreconstructed Marxist analytical tools are conceptually flawed, Kolko’s deconstructionist (and isolationist) policy prescriptions are downright irresponsible in the interconnected world that the forces of globalization have wrought for better or for worse: “Americans and those people who are the objects of successive administrations’ efforts would be far better off if the United States did nothing, closed its bases overseas and withdrew its fleets everywhere, and allowed the rest of the world to find its own way.”

Kolko is correct, of course, in asking the questions that he does in his penultimate chapter, “Things Go Wrong: The United States Confronts a Complex World” about the wisdom of some of the policy choices made by the United States government in recent years and their long-term implications. In fact, Kolko’s most illuminating point is his argument, nearly lost in the polemical fireworks of his last chapter, “The Age of Perpetual Conflict,” that although the United States has been increasingly willing in recent years to use force to impose its will, it is not quite sure what that will is. Others, however, have raised the same basic issue and have done so without the burdens of the rigid ideological paradigm that Kolko seems to force everything into. It is perhaps to these latter foreign policy scholars and thinkers—Andrew J. Bacevich, Ian Bremmer, Richard N. Haass, Dimitri K. Simes, and Nancy Soderberg are just some of the names that come to mind—that one might more reliably turn for guidance in the task of elaborating for the twenty-first century a realistic doctrine of America’s global role and what means it might bring to bear and when in pursuit of its national interests.

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News and Views

Ambassador Donald Blinken’s generous support has made it possible for the National Committee on American Foreign Policy to publish this special issue of American Foreign Policy Interests devoted to U.S.–UN relations.

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The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan has invited an NCAFP delegation back to Kazakhstan as guests of the Ministry the week of June 26, 2006. NCAFP Central Asia Project delegates will be Professor Michael Rywkin, Donald S. Rice,