

# **Book Review\***

## Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy

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David Milne



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**David Milne**

*Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy*

Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2015, 609 pp.

*Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* is a different book to admire. It is more academically substantial than Henry Kissinger's latest book *World Order*. David Milne is a senior lecturer in modern history at the University of East Anglia. In his new intellectual history of American Diplomacy, Milne presents some of the most important figures in modern American diplomacy and statecraft, including Alfred Thayer Mahan, Woodrow Wilson, Charles Beard, Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Henry Kissinger, Paul Wolfowitz, and Barack Obama.

The book starts with the ideas that Alfred Thayer Mahan set forth in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, which have resonated through the ages. In this section, Milne focuses on Mahan's views on national interest, naval bases, firepower, and lines of communication. Through an analysis of Mahan's principal argument - that the United States must abandon the small satisfactions of regional hegemony and any hope of attaining economic self-sufficiency - Milne gives an account of the disagreement between Woodrow Wilson and Mahan. According to Milne, Wilson drew little instruction from Mahan's hardheaded realism and incessant lobbying for greater naval "preparedness". (p. 22)

Unlike Mahan, Wilson was worryingly dogmatic in his approach to domestic and foreign affairs. Milne presents Mahan's understanding through Wilson's vision, which was informed by his own belief that democratization was the key to creating a more peaceful world, on the basis that democracies are far less likely to resort to war with each other.

In the next section, Milne delves into historian and political scientist Charles Beard's understanding of American power and American moral rectitude. Milne points out that Charles Beard was unimpressed by Woodrow Wilson's efforts to avoid involvement in the European conflict from 1914 to 1916. He supported early American entry into the First World War. The main cause of Beard's celebrity was a book reviled by millions of patriotic Americans: *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* was a provocative reinterpretation of the founding of America. Beard's main argument was that while

most political actors are driven to some degree by economic self-interest, the Founding Fathers had elevated this imperative to a fine art (p. 123).

Milne also examines Walter Lippmann, an American writer, columnist, an political commentator. Lippmann is included because he was the man to coin the term “the Cold War”. Through this term he defined the age that would shape the strategic thinking of his successors. In addition, Milne quotes Beard on Lippmann: “Lippmann is a man of agile mind and great natural gifts ... He thumps his tub as if he were God. He is handicapped only by his inability to emit fire and brimstone through the printer’s ink of his column.” (p. 168).

In section five, Milne depicts George Kennan, a diplomat and historian, as an elitist. He describes him as “fluent in Russian and German, a voracious reader of Chekhov and Tolstoy, conservative in diplomatic sensibility and modus operandi, Kennan doubted whether elected politicians could behave intelligently and responsibly between politicians and civil servants. Professional diplomats with linguistic and historical skills should cultivate America’s external relations.” (p. 217). From this perspective on foreign policy, Milne categorizes Kennan as one of the artists of American diplomacy.

In introducing another significant figure in American diplomacy, Milne notes that he was one of the first Americans to visit the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. That man was Paul Nitze, a government official who helped shape the Cold War defense policy. Nitze recommended that the United States devote a far higher proportion of its GDP to military spending in order to deter Soviet aggression. He recognized that this course would prove a hard political sell, but he believed that the American people were willing to pay higher taxes, and sacrifice a little material comfort, in order to better safeguard their nation.

The last three heroes of American diplomacy presented in Milne’s book are Henry Kissinger, Paul Wolfowitz, and Barack Obama. Milne suggests that Kissinger viewed liberal idealism as his main ideological adversary. Kissinger supported policies that emulated his hero, and arch-exponent of balance-of-power diplomacy, Prince Metternich. From this point of view, Milne emphasizes that Kissinger shaped American diplomacy through his belief in the balance of power and the domino theory. On Wolfowitz, Milne points out that like Wilson, his world view is founded on a single principle: substantive geopolitical stability is

contingent upon the spread of democracy. Wolfowitz begins by imagining what a peaceful world looks like, and works backward in order to realize that utopian aspiration. Milne states that of all the individuals this book has surveyed, Barack Obama is the most intuitive and averse to ideology. In concluding, he observes that: “The insight that the incumbent president drew from the Second Iraq War is similar to that which Oliver Wendell Holmes drew from the Civil War: ‘certitude leads to violence.’” (p. 523)

The ideas set forth in this book have transcended their historical moments, some more obviously than others. There is useful instruction to be drawn from the range of actual and aspiring diplomatic leaders discussed herein. If there is something to criticize, it is Milne’s choice of political personae; his list is questionable. The fact that not a single woman features on the list is also regrettable. Aside from those issues, it is a solid read that delivers a good general overview of American diplomacy from Mahan to Obama.