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American Diplomatic History in Search of Synthesis (1945–2000): An Overview

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the transformation of American diplomatic history from the end of the Second World War to the beginning of the twenty-first century, tracing its evolution from monolithic narratives to methodological fragmentation and a sustained quest for synthesis. Focusing on the second half of the twentieth century, it demonstrates how the discipline developed under the influence of contemporary foreign policy events as well as other social sciences. This development is analyzed through a review of key historiographical schools and trends—from the postwar division between consensus historians, realpolitik advocates, and revisionists, through post-revisionist and corporatist attempts at synthesis, to the emergence of the so-called "cultural turn." Within this framework, the paper shows how new historiographical approaches grappled with the challenges generated by the discipline's rapid expansion. The central argument is that, despite a productive broadening of topics and methodologies—including gender, race, ideology, and culture—the field failed to produce a comprehensive synthesis. Instead, a profound epistemological divide between traditionalists (focused on the state, power, and economics) and culturalists (concerned with discourse and identity) resulted in a persistent ambivalence within the profession. Ultimately, American diplomatic history at the turn of the

millennium, although enriched by a vast body of scholarship, remained in a crisis of legitimacy, caught in a continuing search for its own identity and for a balance between analytical depth and interpretative breadth.

KEYWORDS**:** American foreign relations history, U.S. diplomatic history, historiography, synthesis, methodology

Introduction

American diplomatic history, or the history of foreign relations, owes its contemporary significance to intellectual debates that took place within American academic circles after the Second World War. At the core of these controversies were disagreements over the fundamental driving forces behind American foreign policy and, consequently, over the possibility of constructing a synthesis capable of explaining the United States' transformation from a continental power into a global empire. Within this debate, various interpretations emerged, each aspiring to become a universal model for understanding the entire course of American foreign policy. It is precisely this quest for synthesis in the latter half of the twentieth century that constitutes the central thematic framework of this study.

The concept of synthesis is employed here as an analytical lens through which to examine the methods used by different groups of historians in the United States to identify the primary motives underlying American conduct in global affairs. Some historians, as will be shown, endeavored to encompass the entirety of the American past, while others focused on major episodes in U.S. foreign policy, such as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the process of globalization. Thus, in the 1950s, consensus school historians interpreted U.S. foreign policy as a product of its liberal-Protestant heritage, whereas nearly half a century later, culturalists situated the United States within the considerably broader framework of the international system.

In light of the foregoing, this overview of American diplomatic historiography pursues several objectives. First, it seeks to trace the development of the discipline in the second half of the twentieth century through an analysis of its principal historiographical schools and trends. Second, it offers broader reflections, assessments, and perspectives on the future development of the profession in the United States at the close of

the twentieth century. Finally, the author aims to stimulate greater interest within the Serbian academic community in these topics, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of non-European historiographical debates.

Postwar Debate and the Cold War (1945–1960)

What the Cold War enabled within the American academic sphere was a renewed re-examination of the driving forces behind American foreign policy and, consequently, its history. One of the earliest approaches to undertake this task was grounded in the principles of realism in international relations, from which it derived its name. The most prominent representatives of the realpolitik approach included figures such as George Kennan and Herbert Feis. Their analysis rested on the principles of grand strategy and on the assumption that decision-makers acted with a rational awareness of national security imperatives.[1]

At the core of the realpolitik paradigm lies the assumption that states behave like billiard balls, driven by an equal desire to acquire power. This analysis further proceeds from the conclusion that the international system is in a state of anarchy, meaning that there is no higher authority above the nation-state, which compels states to do everything necessary to protect their raison d'état. Following this logic, realpolitik thinkers rely on an analysis of the international system as such, without the influence of ideological or other secondary factors. Their approach, therefore, interprets the US–Soviet conflict through the lens of the genuine geopolitical objectives of both sides, rather than through the prism of a desire to export democracy or world revolution. According to this interpretation, the USSR, drawing on its experience of the direction of the German attacks in both World Wars, aimed to secure its security perimeter in Eastern Europe out of fear of potential future revanchism from a resurgent Germany, rather than to spread communist ideology.

[1] Realists such as Kennan and Feis were regular contributors to the work of the academically closed circle of selected commentators in the journal Foreign Affairs; it was here that one of the most famous backgrounders, "Article X," was published. For the most important works by realists, see: George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950*, (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1951); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); Herbert Feis, *Between War and Peace: The Potsdam Conference,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

However, realpolitik thinkers were unable to adequately explain instances in which both sides were genuinely guided by ideological assumptions, as they frequently subsumed such cases under rational behavioral models. This was not always consistent with the actual decision-making processes of political leaders. For this reason, realpolitik analysis remained partially limited to the study of foreign policy decision-making, often without engaging more deeply with its ideological foundations.

Alongside the realpolitik thinkers, the need to frame the conflict with the USSR within the broader current of American foreign policy tradition was also felt by representatives of the consensus school of historiography. The name of this intellectual current originates from the strong postwar sentiment among a certain group of American historians to emphasize the unifying factors of the American people throughout history, in contrast to the class and social conflicts highlighted by the Progressives. This consensus partly arose from the need for a strong ideological shield with which the United States could defend itself against the "harmful" influence arising from the USSR. The most prominent members of this school were historians Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Richard Hofstadter, and Daniel J. Boorstin.[2]

What characterizes these authors is that, at certain points in their careers, they were either part of, or closely connected to, the Washington establishment. For this reason, they tended to assign responsibility for the outbreak of the Cold War in a largely autonomous manner, adopting distinctly apologetic positions regarding the American role in the origins of the conflict.

In methodological terms, unlike the realists, consensus historians devoted considerably more attention to ideological motives in the decision-making process. Consequently, American public and private leaders were seen as being guided not only by geopolitical objectives but also by motives rooted in the country's liberal tradition and political culture. With a strong emphasis on individuals and their role in shaping foreign policy, these historians portrayed US behavior in the world as a product of its republican values and exceptionalism.

[2] For reference works by the mentioned historians that best represent the consensus school of historiography (in the broadest sense), see: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: Politics of Freedom,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform From Bryan to FDR: Populism, Progressivism, and the New Deal,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

Accordingly, American history, in their interpretation, could be presented as a progressive flow that culminated in 1945 in the reluctant assumption of the role of defender of world democracy against the communist threat. In a similar vein, they generally identified Stalin and his ideologically motivated decisions as the principal cause of the escalation of the Cold War.

However, despite their patriotic inclinations and their close alignment with official narratives emanating from Washington—which earned them the label of "court historians"—these authors were unable to provide a convincing explanation for why American advisers became involved in Vietnam following the French defeat. In other words, the arguments that had previously served to justify American interventions abroad—such as the defense of democracy against communist totalitarianism—were no longer sufficient to persuade the American public. Addressing this intellectual impasse required a comprehensive re-examination of the intentions and ultimate objectives of the American political elite and, consequently, of the entire history of US foreign policy. The opportunity for such a reassessment emerged with the academic revolt against American involvement in Vietnam in the early 1960s.

Widening the Discussion (1960–1970)

The 1960s represented an exceptionally turbulent chapter in American history: the struggle for civil rights, the rise of student activism, and the Vietnam War were defining features of the decade. These developments also generated a deep and far-reaching academic critique of American society associated with the New Left.

Although this was by no means an intellectually homogeneous movement, the central argument advanced by the revisionists—as the historians of this current came to be known—was that the USSR was not responsible for the outbreak of the Cold War. Moreover, some authors within this group placed responsibility for the conflict on the opposite side, attributing it to the postwar policies of the United States. It is precisely this interpretation, fundamentally at odds with the arguments of the consensus school, that explains why these historians are designated as revisionists.

Within this reinterpretation of American foreign policy, the most significant contribution was made by the group of historians associated with Professor William Appleman Williams at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Williams's magnum opus—and an indispensable point of departure for any serious engagement with his thought—is *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, published in 1959.[3] Upon its publication, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* provoked considerable astonishment within American academic circles, which at the time were largely shaped by the interpretations of consensus historians. In contrast to them, Williams's approach struck at the very core of what had been understood as American exceptionalism, challenging the notion of American innocence in relation to the origins of the Cold War.

Yet he did not stop there. His fundamental premise was that Americans, from the very outset, conceived of their republic as an "empire of liberty." In other words, the Founding Fathers themselves envisioned the United States as a new kind of empire—one that would distinguish itself from the traditional powers of the Old World.

Williams's methodological framework also introduced a fundamentally new explanation for the driving forces of American foreign policy: an interpretation that proceeded "from the outside in." To substantiate this argument, Williams advanced the *Open Door* thesis as the central formulation of American behavior in foreign affairs.[4] Building upon this premise, Williams sought to demonstrate that the economic imperatives of the American capitalist system constituted the primary driving forces behind U.S. foreign policy. In his interpretation, the Cold War effectively began with the Soviet closure of Eastern European markets to American economic expansion, a development that stood in direct contradiction to the assumptions advanced by consensus historians. Williams further reinforced his thesis by extending this line of analysis to the broader sweep of American history in his subsequent works.[5] His students continued on

[3] William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy,* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1959).

[4] One author described it as "Williams, in the style of Columbus, rediscovering America" : Warren Susman, "The Smoking Room School of History", in *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970 (Critical Perspectives on The Past),* ed. Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 44.

[5] See: William A. Williams, *The Contours of American History,* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1961); William A. Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire, a Study of*

the foundation of his achievements, forming a distinct school of historiography – the Wisconsin School.[6] This circle included historians such as Lloyd Gardner, Thomas McCormick, and Walter LaFeber. It is also important to emphasize that the revisionist discourse they advanced functioned as a direct antithesis to the arguments of the consensus school. Its influence reached its peak during the Vietnam War, as it redirected analytical attention to the American side when examining the causes and consequences of military interventions.

The central argument of this paradigm was closely connected— as previously noted— to the broader developments within American society in the 1960s, particularly the growing refusal to accept official narratives concerning the rationale behind American military involvement in Indochina.

The Quest for Synthesis and Fragmentation (1970–1980)

In the early 1970s, the intense historiographical debate between realpolitik thinkers, consensus historians, and revisionists began to lose momentum. This shift was partly the result of the reduced confrontational rhetoric that accompanied the era of détente and partly due to the emergence of a new interpretative synthesis that sought to construct a broader consensus by incorporating selected elements from all three camps while distancing itself from their moral and ideological polarizations. This approach—often described as *neo-orthodoxy*, *eclecticism*, or, most commonly, *post-revisionism*—represented an attempt to transcend the earlier binary divisions within Cold War historiography.[7] At the center of their interpretative synthesis, post-revisionists such as John Lewis Gaddis incorporated elements from all the aforementioned approaches, while directing particular criticism toward revisionist arguments. In their assessment, revisionism constituted a broad and internally diverse current of thought, within

the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society, (New York: Random House, 1969).

[6] For further elaboration, see the author's master's thesis on this topic: Брано Рикановић, „Висконсинска школа и спољна политика САД" (Мастер теза, Филозофски факултет Универзитета у Новом Саду, 2025), 6–11, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://remaster.ff.uns.ac.rs/?radb9f940bca6ce045b7857d9e88cd3cc24

[7] John Lewis Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War", *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 3 (1983): 172, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1983.tb00389.x.

which the coherence of specific arguments was not always fully sustained, even if its overarching conclusions appeared consistent.

Proceeding from this premise, post-revisionists argued that revisionist analyses—often influenced by Lenin's thesis concerning the structural dynamics and eventual collapse of imperialism—tended to obscure other, arguably more decisive imperatives shaping American decision-making, most notably considerations of national security.[8] More precisely, postrevisionists believe that the economic needs of the American system were used as a means to achieve long-term foreign policy goals, not as a primary motive *per se*. [9] For this reason, post-revisionists argued that revisionist interpretations which elevated a single explanatory factor to decisive status risked becoming reductive. This tendency frequently resulted in accusations of economic determinism, particularly in relation to Williams's work.

A further point of contention concerned the revisionist attribution of a greater degree of rational strategic coherence to Stalin's decisions. In this respect, post-revisionists tended to align more closely with the assessments advanced by consensus historians.

The divergence also extended to the revisionist understanding of the hegemonic position of the United States in Europe and its role in the formation of postwar military and political alliances. In contrast, post-revisionists adopted the interpretation proposed by the Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad, who advanced the concept of an "empire by invitation." This perspective rests on the assumption that Western European states, weakened by the devastation of the Second World War, voluntarily accepted American leadership in the postwar order.

Such an interpretation stands in clear opposition to the revisionist conclusion that Europe found itself in a geopolitical vacuum after 1945—one that the United States moved swiftly to occupy.[10] Despite their effort

[8] Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis", 172–175.

[9] For the main postrevisionist works, see: John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977); William Taubman, *Stalin's American Policy: From Entente to Détente to Cold War* (New York-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982).

[10] See article: Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952" *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 3 (1986): 263–277, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://www.jstor.org/stable/423824.

to construct a broader consensus by reconciling two previously opposing paradigms and selectively incorporating elements compatible with their interpretative framework, post-revisionists were often criticized for failing to articulate sufficiently compelling arguments in support of their eclectic synthesis.

This stance toward revisionist scholarship provoked a series of critical responses from other historians. Among them, Bruce Cumings argued that the central purpose of the post-revisionist project amounted, in essence, to an exercise in "labeling."[11] Thus, Williams's work gets lumped together with significantly more radical authors, thereby losing the essence of the postrevisionist critique by placing all revisionists in the same basket. In other words, postrevisionist discourse insists on what things are called, while the essence behind the meaning itself is completely neglected. With such assumptions, one can conclude that the postrevisionist attempt at synthesis failed precisely because of its intention to present itself as a new approach from the very start, while in reality, it was a new reworking using older methods. Furthermore, it is unjustified to claim that revisionism is a single, monolithic approach in historiography where differences are minimal and conclusions identical. By framing things this way, postrevisionists focused on the more extreme conclusions of their predecessors, automatically taking them as universal for all historians writing in this vein. Thus, the nuances evident among revisionist authors were replaced by preconceived conclusions that reduce them all to the same extremist level. This very flaw represents the main shortcoming of the postrevisionist synthesis, which at one point seemed like a compelling alternative.

Driven by the need for a synthesis that would meet at least several criteria already established in other disciplines, a new approach called *corporatism* was formulated. This new discourse pertained to the analysis of the evolutionary phases of American capitalist society, specifically its political consensus based on the corporate organization of the

[11] Bruce Cumings, "'Revising Postrevisionism,' or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History." *Diplomatic History* 17/4 (1993): 549–556, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1993.tb00599.x; Lloyd Gardner, "Responses to John Lewis Gaddis, 'The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War.'" *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 3 (1983): 191–204, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1983.tb00390.x.

state. The aforementioned Williams made a tremendous contribution to the development of this model through his analysis of the structure of the American capitalist system. In this context, Williams contributed to the development of this synthesis by considering not only corporations but also workers, farmers, and the state apparatus as main drivers of foreign policy. Proponents of corporatism start from the assumption that the American system consists of relatively equally represented segments of capitalist society: workers, industrialists, bankers, farmers, and finally the state, which serves as an accommodator or arbiter. A second assumption is that such an organization of the American capitalist system directly influences the formation of foreign policy in Washington. Despite initial skepticism, the corporatist approach proved useful, particularly in debunking the myth of American isolationism during the *interbellum* period.[12] However, this analysis also faced significant criticism, especially for its tendency to explain all events and processes, including those where no consensus existed among the political elite regarding all foreign policy decisions. Another shortcoming was the insufficient scope of the new synthesis, which excluded groups outside the syndicalist organization, such as think tanks, universities, and mass media.

An additional weakness of corporatism lies in its neglect of the broader geopolitical dimension, leading to the danger of determinism—that is, understanding one paradigm as the driving force behind everything that happens in foreign policy.[13] Despite its obvious flaws, a large number of diplomatic historians utilized the corporatist approach in researching American diplomacy. However, to solidify itself as a quality synthesis, corporatism must find a clear link between diplomatic history and other disciplines; otherwise, in the words of Michael J. Hogan, it risks

[12] Michael J. Hogan, *Informal Entente: The Private Structure of Cooperation in Anglo-American Economic Diplomacy, 1918–1928* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977).

[13] This critique is part of Gaddis's response to McCormick's earlier article, in which he positively evaluates the corporatist approach; see: Thomas J. McCormick, "Drift or Mastery? A Corporatist Synthesis for American Diplomatic History," *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): 318–330, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.2307/2701835; John Lewis Gaddis, "The Corporatist Synthesis: A Skeptical View," *Diplomatic History* 10, no. 4 (1986): 357–362, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1986.tb00465.x.

to "forfeit these important topics to experts in other disciplines."[14] In that direction, historians applying this approach increasingly use terms such as "corporate liberalism," "neo-capitalism," and "associativism" to describe the political-economic system characterized by a clear organizational form, ideology, and a specific direction of development.[15] Although different methodological approaches to studying the American capitalist system exist, a large portion of historians agree that corporatism represents an exceptionally promising approach.[16] The future viability of this synthesis will depend on its ability to adapt to new spheres of research in American foreign policy, which demand greater interdisciplinarity and engagement with other social sciences.

The search for a more comprehensive synthesis, partly in response to intellectual pressures from other disciplines, prompted diplomatic historians to pursue an approach capable of encompassing interpretive frameworks broader than those offered even by corporatism. In this context, as early as the 1970s—at the height of revisionist criticism—a new paradigm emerged under the label of "national security.".[17] This type of synthesis was conceived to avoid the divisions over axioms that existed during the debate among realists, revisionists, and later postrevisionists, regarding the main driving forces of American foreign policy. As an attempt to overcome these simple determinants, the national security approach aimed to force historians to incorporate into their methodology the analysis of both internal and external factors that are interconnected and influence foreign policy formation. That is, the goal was to link perceived external threats with the internal "core values" of a nation-state, in

[14] Michael J. Hogan, "Corporatism: from the new era to the age of development," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations (third edition),* eds. Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 52.

[15] For the main characteristics of the "new school" as defined by Michael J. Hogan, see: Michael J. Hogan, "Corporatism: A Positive Appraisal," *Diplomatic History* 10, no. 4 (1986): 363, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1986.tb00466.x.

[16] Hogan, "Corporatism," 363–365.

[17] For more about this synthesis, see: Melvyn P. Leffler, "National Security," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations (third edition),* eds. Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 25–41; Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

this case, the U.S.[18] Thus, historians in their work would have to be aware of the difference between real and false dangers to those same core values—in other words, when a threat is present and when its perception causes unfounded alarm among decision-makers.[19] To achieve this, greater interaction with other scientific disciplines, their methods, and techniques is required. Historian Melvyn P. Leffler believes such a complementary approach can be found in the *world systems* approach from political science.[20] With this theoretical background, historians after the end of the Cold War attempted to find a synthesis by once again searching for the causes of this conflict, this time using, among other things, the imperative of national security. The goal of the new approach was to show that the U.S. did not occupy the power vacuum in Western Europe solely due to its expansionist ambitions, but that the formation of a military alliance was necessary due to the complexity of American national security, which is influenced by numerous factors.

Although a large number of works emerged that take this concept into account, the integration of the still-fragmented field of diplomatic history under this new synthesis did not occur. This approach also did not escape criticism from historians who were skeptical of its intention to present itself as a comprehensive synthesis. The main shortcoming concerned the very semantic meaning of the term *national security*, which can imply a very ambiguous and broad spectrum of concepts.[21] The most

[18] Historian Melvyn P. Leffler states in his 1990 article that core values emerge through an exchange between interest groups and become established through the formation of a distinct consensus: Melvyn P. Leffler, „National Security“, *Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 145–146, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.2307/2078646.

[19] Leffler, "National Security," 144–145.

[20] This theory was elaborated in detail by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein as early as 1974 in his seminal four-volume work *The Modern World System*. The book begins with an analysis of the capitalist system from the 16th to the 20th century, and his work has also been translated in our region: Imanuel Volerstin, *Moderni svetski sistem I-II* (Podgorica: CID, 2012); For the usefulness of this analysis in the field of diplomatic history, see: Thomas J. McCormick, "World Systems," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 125–132, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.2307/2078644; For a critique of its implementation, see the review of McCormick's book: Frank Ninkovich, "The End of Diplomatic History?," *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 3 (1991): 439–448, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1991.tb00140.x.

[21] The National Security Act of 1947, which created U.S. agencies such as the CIA and the NSC, is a direct derivation of the postwar understanding of this term. For an excellent

striking critique of this synthesis was given by historian Anders Stephanson. He rejects the arguments of its apologists, considering it a form of "neorealism," which strips history of the influence of ideology and class belonging. According to Stephanson, the consequences of such an approach are concerning, as they lead to "empirical proliferation, explanatory contraction."[22] From such an assessment, further shortcomings of this approach can be derived, which arise directly from its intention to establish itself as a totalizing synthesis. The first problem lies in the assumption that American political leaders consistently make rational decisions driven primarily by concerns for national security. As a result, secondary motives that do not fit within this framework tend to be relegated to the background and overlooked. A second issue is the approach's exclusive focus on the executive branch and the military-industrial sector, which marginalizes the influence of economic structures, domestic conditions, and social movements. Another shortcoming concerns the contemporary semantic fluidity of the term itself, whose definition continues to evolve. Consequently, proponents of the national security approach risk falling into presentism—that is, the use of contemporary conceptual frameworks to interpret past events. Despite these limitations, the approach may nevertheless prove valuable precisely because of its interdisciplinary character, combining insights from history and political science, and therefore should not be dismissed prematurely.

Crisis of Legitimacy (1980–1990)

Since the consensus around the new synthesis did not last long, parallel calls emerged to incorporate broader imperatives that would include a greater number of factors influencing foreign policy. Such demands reflected the rapid changes in other social sciences, where previously neglected cultural aspects of society were being extensively studied. However, this was not the case with the discipline of diplomatic history,

semantic dissection of the term, see: Emily S. Rosenberg, "Commentary: The Cold War and the Discourse of National Security," *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 2 (1993): 277–284, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1993.tb00551.x.

[22] Paraphrased from: Anders Stephanson, "Commentary: Ideology and Neorealist Mirrors," *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 2 (1993): 285–286, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24912199.

where the focus remained on studying personalities and official diplomatic correspondence. It was precisely this delay behind other sciences that formed the basis of the critique presented by historian Charles Maier in his well-known 1980 article.[23] Maier begins his critique by analyzing other areas of the profession, concluding that by the late 1970s, diplomatic history as a discipline could not be considered a pioneering field of historical science. The reasons for this were the lack of broader systematization, but also symptoms of a technical nature, such as historians' disinterest in learning foreign languages, methodological insularity, and the rejection of new methods and techniques from other social sciences. According to Maier, part of the problem was also the still dominant narrative discourse, meaning the persistent "Rankean exegesis."[24] His critique was also connected to broader changes in the understanding of the individual and society under the influence of post-structuralists like Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Under their influence, studies of gender, society, behavior, women, ethnicity, and race became relevant in other social sciences. Meanwhile, in the field of analyzing and studying the international system, transnational studies, bureaucracy, game theory, and dependency theory had emerged very early on. Considering the evolution of other humanities, Maier believed that the traditional approach to studying diplomatic history had fallen into a kind of stagnation relative to other subfields of the discipline.[25] Under pressure to internationalize their field, historians began engaging relatively early with transnational studies—that is, analyzing topics from multiple perspectives beyond national borders. However, even this innovation did not move significantly beyond the existing discourse of foreign policy research. One reason lies in diplomatic history's persistent fixation on narrative, often reducing analysis to "what one clerk said to another." This preoccupation with events, diplomatic correspondence, political elites, and the nation-state prevented historians from exploring subnational social units, which were gaining prominence under the influence of post-structuralist critique. As

[23] Charles S. Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980): 355–387.

[24] Maier, "Marking Time," 355–357.

[25] Responses to Charles S. Maier,"Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations", *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 4 (1981): 353–382.

a result, diplomatic historians remained largely disconnected from the concepts and methods popularized by the study of everyday life, gender, culture, race, multiculturalism, women's history, and local history. The situation, however, began to change rapidly as globalization intensified and pressures for greater inclusivity increased.

The Cultural Turn and the New Divide (1990–2000)

The end of the Cold War left the United States in the position of the world's sole hegemon. Consequently, historians hoped that the opening of archives in Eastern Europe and the former USSR would provide access to previously unavailable materials, enabling a more definitive assessment of responsibility for the outbreak of a conflict that had lasted nearly half a century. One group of historians rushed to substantiate their preexisting conclusions with newly available archival evidence, seeking to confirm the triumph or failure of one side over the other.[26] Another group sought to situate these events within a broader global perspective, moving beyond restrictive frameworks in which every action, process, or development was interpreted primarily through the policies of the United States or the Soviet Union. Instead, they directed greater attention to actors previously marginalized in Cold War historiography, including smaller states, international organizations, and diverse political movements.[27]

The final outcome reflected the state of the discipline of diplomatic history in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. Rather than open access to archives fostering cohesion among previously divergent interpretations, it merely reignited longstanding controversies. Diplomatic historians thus found it increasingly difficult to keep pace with broader scholarly trends, which were moving decisively toward social history, while the nation-state—their central analytical paradigm—was steadily losing its primacy as the principal object of inquiry. Moreover, the end of one era did not produce a more comprehensive synthesis in diplomatic history, at least not regarding its most contentious issue—the origins of the Cold War. On the contrary, the field witnessed a further

[26] Džon Luis Gedis, *Hladni rat: mi danas znamo*, prev. Predrag Simić (Beograd: Clio, 2003).
[27] Od Arne Vestad, *Globalni Hladni rat: Intervencije u Trećem svetu i oblikovanje našeg doba*, prev. Ana Ješić (Beograd: Arhipelag, 2008).

retreat into narrowly defined thematic frameworks within the study of U.S. foreign policy and its global role.[28]

However, the situation did not appear entirely bleak to a group of historians who viewed the fragmentation of the discipline—that is, the divergent paths taken by diplomatic historians—not as a weakness but as an advantage. This renewed self-confidence was reflected in the maturation of various thematic specializations within the field, each contributing to a more coherent understanding of the foreign policy decision-making process. In essence, this fragmentation resulted in the division of historians into roughly three distinct groups.[29]

What characterizes each of them is that they did not represent closed systems, as historians actively positioned themselves within one or another sphere, and sometimes prepared analyses using multiple approaches simultaneously. Of course, this interdisciplinarity did not always function without obstacles, which most often pertained to the different techniques and research methods employed.

The subsequent decade, rather than silencing controversies, provoked the opposite reaction, leading to a veritable explosion of interest in various structural units of society. While some of these topics had been opened earlier, their true proliferation was achieved precisely during the period of the "culture wars" and the globalization that intensified in the 1990s. These processes heightened the need to find a discourse that would transcend the real boundaries between nation-states. Such an approach would address a topic across multiple countries, employing a multi-archival method, whereby foreign policy would be viewed exclusively as a field of research with multiple actors. In response to these needs, transnational history eventually emerged, disregarding national borders in the study of foreign policy. This discourse was compatible with older approaches, as it could continue analyzing power in international relations but from a significantly broader causal perspective. In such a cumulative

[28] For more detailed implications regarding the search for synthesis in Cold War historiography, see the review: Richard Crockatt, „The Origins of the Cold War and the Problems of Synthesis: A Review of Recent Work", *Contemporary European History* 4, no. 3 (1995): 383–392, accessed 21. 12. 2025. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20081561.

[29] For a comprehensive overview of the fragmented discipline, see: Michael Hunt, "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History: Coming to Closure," *Diplomatic History* 16, no. 1 (1992): 117–138, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1992.tb00492.x.

synthesis, diplomatic historians who used a culturalist discourse for their analysis took the lead.[30] Indeed, this approach aligned with the disciplinary transformations that emerged during the 1980s, reflecting the increasing pressure from other social sciences to discard old constructs and analyze the individual components of society through deconstruction.[31] Among the first analyses to incorporate such methods is the "ideological" approach, one of whose most prominent representatives is historian Michael Hunt. Proponents of this approach take a central idea that ran through an entire nation-state's past—like Manifest Destiny—and attempt to position it among the main driving forces in foreign policy decision-making.[32] However, similar to previous approaches, here too lies the danger of overemphasizing one determinant and completely neglecting other factors that influence foreign policy formation. Thus, in this case, the impulse to export democratic values can become the primary motivator of foreign policy decision-making, isolated from other equally important social and material parameters. Although such analyses are certainly not new, the increased interest in them at the end of the 20th century showed that diplomatic historians still have much to offer their discipline.

The emergence of new methods and approaches to researching foreign policy did not mean the automatic creation of a sufficiently strong synthesis that would include all the imperatives influencing decision-makers. Moreover, the consequence of this development was direct fragmentation, or the parochialization of the discipline of diplomatic history.[33] New approaches were initially viewed as a form of detached research, but when the pressure for implementation grew strong, ways were sought to

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[30] See: Akira Iriye, "Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War 1941–1945," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

[31] For an overview of the influence of "social theory" on American historiography, see: Dorothy Ross, "The New and Newer Histories: Social Theory and Historiography in an American Key," *Rethinking History* 1, no. 2 (1997): 125–150, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529708596309.

[32] Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1987); Michael Hunt, "Ideology", *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 108–115, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.2307/2078642.

[33] Geir Lundestad, "Moralism, Presentism, Exceptionalism, Provincialism, and Other Extravagances in American Writings on the Early Cold War Years," *Diplomatic History* 13, no. 4 (1989): 527–545, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24911795.

connect seemingly completely opposite concepts, such as culture and international relations. Another problem was that new approaches often ignore traditional frameworks for studying foreign policy, such as realism and idealism, public and private, domestic and foreign policy. The culturalist approach aimed not only to move beyond these old frameworks but also to directly question the validity and relevance of their old interpretation. The first such reinterpretation involved reconciling seemingly dichotomous concepts like foreign and domestic policy through so-called "discourse analysis."[34] To accomplish this task, American historian Geoffrey S. Smith argues it is necessary to uncover new sources and subject already known ones to more rigorous criticism, and that the problem itself must be approached "detectively."[35] However, this approach, like its predecessors, suffers from several flaws that prevent it from becoming a quality synthesis. By focusing on social constructs such as language, ideology, and identity, there is a risk that discourse analysis will neglect material factors as well as the personal motivations of political leaders. Parallel to this, there is a certain diminishing of the importance of traditional factors of foreign policy, such as a nation's military and economic power. Finally, with the intention of moving "outside the smoke-filled rooms," this analysis loses sight of key parts of the communication mechanism between two states and the decision-making process.

The exceptional flexibility of the culturalist approach in encompassing various concepts and, most importantly, finding a two-way connection between them, proved extremely useful for erasing the traditional boundaries between foreign and domestic policy. A second level of integration moved toward clearly merging cultural analysis with the history of international relations, thereby developing a much broader framework for global or international cultural history. This approach entered the realm of diplomatic history by studying ideology—that is, the main characteristics that constitute a nation-state, which can be self-perceived or

[34] Emily S. Rosenberg, "'Foreign Affairs' after World War II: Connecting Sexual and International Politics", *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 1 (1994): 60, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1994.tb00195.x.

[35] Geoffrey S. Smith, "Commentary: Security, Gender, and the Historical Process," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 1 (1994): 90, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1994.tb00197.x.

used in the vocabulary of other states as a kind of stereotype.[36] The goal was to show how other peoples viewed and reacted to processes and phenomena originating in a foreign state, which then flowed through various channels and were assimilated into their society. Another connection was made by studying the ways nations use propaganda channels to achieve various goals, and then by investigating the experiences of ordinary people, state officials (ambassadors, consuls), missionaries, and soldiers.[37] In this context, historians became particularly interested in the concept of Americanization as a source of the soft power of U.S. foreign policy.[38] The study of this concept found especially fertile ground in European historiography, and former Yugoslavia itself can represent an interesting example of such influence.[39]

With the proliferation of cultural themes in the social sciences, a segment of American diplomatic historians began to incorporate previously secondary factors into their analysis of international relations, such as race, gender studies, the women's movement, environmental studies, borderlands history, non-governmental organizations, and various international institutions.[40] The use of these models for research led to the development of the aforementioned transnational approach in America in a significantly different form compared to Europe. That is, in their transnational analyses, U.S. diplomatic historians focused most on gender and

[36] Rosenberg, "'Foreign Affairs' after World War II," 59–70; Elaine Tyler May, "Commentary: Ideology and Foreign Policy: Culture and Gender in Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 1 (1994): 71–78, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1994.tb00196.x.

[37] See for example: David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942–1945* (New York-Toronto: Random House, 1995).

[38] See: Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1999); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-colonization and Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill-London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

[39] Radina Vučetić, *Koka-kola socijalizam: amerikanizacija jugoslovenske popularne kulture šezdesetih godina XX veka* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2012).

[40] See for example: Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1998); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960,* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Gregory Nobles, *American Frontiers. Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997)

racial factors, which was not the case with their European counterparts. Specifically, this new model of analyzing international relations brought with it several different characteristics suitable for the authentic development of American diplomatic history. In addition to interdisciplinarity, this approach borrows and extends the trend of decentralizing the nation-state in its research but does not completely abandon it, unlike culturalist analysis. This fact enabled American historians to build a bridge between old models of foreign policy research and the new methods used in other humanities. Supporting this conclusion is the observation by historian Petra Goedde, who notes that in the US, "transnational history has been at the forefront of synthesizing the cultural approach with other, more traditional approaches."[41] This model was also receptive to analyzing perennially relevant topics in American historiography, such as the Second World War, the Cold War, and globalization.[42]

Despite the initial enthusiasm, the culturalist approach and its derivatives faced substantial criticism from historians belonging to the traditional school of diplomatic history. The first objection concerned its unsystematic treatment of culture as a source of decision-making—specifically, the tendency to select certain cultural factors arbitrarily and elevate them to the status of primary driving forces behind foreign policy.The second criticism concerned the tendency of culturalist scholars to overemphasize the role of cultural elements at the expense of neglecting the "wider structures that condition policy choices."[43] The third objection touched upon the very interpretation conducted by these historians, where past events are studied through the lens of contemporary experience, thereby obscuring the real picture of what actually happened. Furthermore, the new approach erased the boundaries between the two once clearly distinct spheres of the historian's craft—domestic and foreign policy—which was unacceptable to a segment of the profession. Similar criticism

[41] Petra Goedde, "Power, Culture, and the Rise of Transnational History in the United States", *The International History Review* 40, no. 3 (2017): 10–11, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1284142.

[42] A prime example of this approach can be found in the work of American historian Frank Costigliola: Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton-New York: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[43] Paraphrased from: Peter Jackson, "Pierre Bourdieu, the 'cultural turn' and the practice of international history," *Review of International Studies* 34, no. 1 (2008): 156, doi: 10.1017/S026021050800795X.

of culturalist analysis came from followers of William Appleman Williams's work.[44] These historians believe that the same goals this approach intends to achieve could be accomplished via the path Williams himself once took. In their view, erasing intranational boundaries is possible even without resorting to fashionable idioms like "discourse analysis," which they consider "intellectual junk." These "uncompromising revisionists" argue that the validity of the culturalist approach can only be demonstrated through writing prosopographic studies of American businessmen and politicians.[45] Criticism further extended to the new approach's persistent dismissal or neglect of traditional components of the international system. Thus, it ignores the connection between foreign policy, the global market, and international institutions—elements once considered the *sine qua non* of any foreign policy research. Historian Robert Buzzanco is of the opinion that ideology and culture taken as separate, with no connection to other pillars of society like geopolitics and economics, have shaky epistemological foundation.[46] Although skepticism persisted into the early 21st century, it no longer carried the animosity present when this approach first emerged through postmodernist critique in the 1980s. On the one hand, some authors, like Buzzanco, continued to argue that there is a fundamental epistemological difference between the new and old approaches that prevents their synthesis. On the other hand, other historians maintain that such hasty conclusions should be avoided, as it might simply be a matter of a "preference for different kinds of theory."[47] Despite these discussions, the discipline remained fragmented, with a tendency for the emergence of new methods and models for analyzing foreign policy to increase its already existing heterogeneity.

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[44] Jackson, "Pierre Bourdieu, the 'cultural turn' and the practice of international history," 162.

[45] Bruce Kuklick, "Commentary: Confessions of an Intransigent Revisionist about Cultural Studies," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1 (1994): 122–123, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24912607.

[46] Robert Buzzanco, "What Happened to the New Left? Toward a Radical Reading of American Foreign Relations", *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 4 (1999): 606, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/0145-2096.00186.

[47] Patrick Finney, "Still 'marking time'? Text, discourse and truth in international history," *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 295, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097737.

Conclusion

The state of American diplomatic history at the end of the twentieth century was profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, traditionalists defended the integrity of the field and called for new studies to remain more firmly anchored in established paradigms such as economics, power, and technology—elements they regarded as indispensable for constructing an accurate account of a nation's conduct within the international system.[48]

On the other hand, culturalist scholars continued to introduce new topics and reinterpret already established ones. At the same time, calls for synthesis grew stronger than ever, as diplomatic history increasingly found itself on the periphery of the historical discipline. The principal source of this pessimistic assessment was the field's ongoing fragmentation, which persisted despite repeated efforts to overcome it.[49] For this reason, calls for the constant assimilation of new approaches and the integration of old ones grew increasingly persistent, as only through joint efforts is it possible to confront the most significant problems facing the historical profession.[50] This situation indicated that some aspects of Maier's critique, which had appeared almost two decades earlier, still remained relevant.[51]

The beginning of the twenty-first century was marked by the continued debate over the relevance of diplomatic history, particularly the question of whether a synthesis could be achieved that would reconcile the old and the new without granting primacy to either. The debate persisted along familiar lines of division and was partly driven by the rapid pace of disciplinary change—that is, new methods were adopted more

[48] Robert Buzzanco, "Commentary: Where's the Beef? Culture without Power in the Study of U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (2000): 623–632, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/0145-2096.00240.

[49] Allan Megill, "Fragmentation and the Future of Historiography," *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (1991): 693–698, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/96.3.693.

[50] Melvyn P. Leffler, "Presidential Address: New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (1995): 179, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1995.tb00655.x

[51] Mark P. Bradley, "The Charlie Maier Scare and the Historiography of American Foreign Relations, 1959–1980" in *America in the World: The historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941 (second edition)*, eds. Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 9–29.

quickly than they were critically evaluated. Although the field moved increasingly toward interdisciplinarity and the tensions provoked by emerging approaches gradually subsided, traditionalists largely remained committed to a fundamentally Rankean epistemology.

The culturalist approach, in line with its propensity for disciplinary fragmentation, became an obstacle to traditional historical research in its attempt to create a "synthesis or master narrative."[52] Parallel to this, pressures for the internationalization of the discipline increased. Some, therefore, saw the need to discard old journal and organization names that contained national symbols and to replace them with terms that would more clearly indicate the new international direction of diplomatic historiography.[53] Nevertheless, it can be rightly said that American diplomatic history, throughout the second half of the 20th century, struggled to find a synthesis and, in that process, produced a plethora of high-quality scholarly works.

The future development of American diplomatic history depends on its capacity to incorporate new methods without abandoning the core elements of foreign policy research. On the one hand, this situation requires proponents of the traditional approach to become more receptive to methodological innovation. Such openness entails a greater willingness to learn foreign languages, conduct research in foreign archives, and integrate secondary factors that shape foreign policy. Methodological innovation, however, should enhance clarity in the analysis of decision-making processes rather than produce the unintended consequence of disciplinary insularity.

On the other hand, historians who adopt newer approaches to the study of foreign policy—particularly those emphasizing cultural dimensions—should not dismiss established models of international relations from the outset. Research on the role of women, language, NGOs, and discourse undoubtedly contributes to a more systematic understanding of foreign policy decision-making, yet it does not require the exclusion of

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[52] Robert Dean, "Commentary: Tradition, Cause and Effect, and the Cultural History of International Relations," *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 4 (2000): 621–622, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24914142.

[53] Michael J. Hogan, "The "Next Big Thing": The Future of Diplomatic History in a Global Age," *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 1 (2004): 18–21, accessed 21. 12. 2025. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2004.00396.x.

traditional explanatory variables. Negotiations conducted behind closed doors, diplomatic correspondence, and public statements by political leaders therefore remain central sources for the study of foreign policy. New methods and analytical perspectives should serve to deepen and broaden the interpretation of such material rather than to replace it.

Ultimately, both sides must demonstrate a greater willingness to compromise, as neither methodological rigidity nor continued fragmentation offers an adequate response to the increasingly complex challenges involved in studying American foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

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Америчка дипломатска историја у потрази за синтезом (1945–2000)

У раду се испитује метаморфоза америчке дипломатске историје (историје спољних односа) од краја Другог светског рата до почетка 21. века, кроз праћење њене еволуције од монолитних наратива ка методолошкој фрагментацији и сталној потрази за синтезом. Фокусирајући се на другу половину 20. века, у раду је приказан начин на који се дисциплина развијала под утицајем спољнополитичких догађаја и других друштвених наука. Тај развој је анализиран кроз преглед кључних историографских школа и праваца, од послератног раскола између консензус историчара, реалполитичара и ревизиониста, преко покушаја синтезе постревизиониста и корпоративиста, до фундаменталног културног заокрета. У оквиру тога, приказан је начин на који су нови историографски приступи излазили у коштац са различитим захтевима који су били одраз брзог развоја дисциплине. Главни аргумент рада је да, упркос продуктивном проширењу тема и метода (укључујући род, расу, идеологију и културу), дисциплина није успела да створи свеобухватну синтезу. Уместо тога, дубока епстемолошка подела између традиционалиста (фокусираних на државу, моћ и економију) и културалиста (фокусираних на дискурс и идентитет) довела је до трајне амбивалентности унутар професије. Крајњи аргумент рада је да је америчка дипломатска историја на прелазу миленијума, иако проширена огромним опусом радова, остала у кризи легитимитета, заглављена у потрази за сопственим идентитетом и балансом између дубине анализе и ширине тумачења.

Кључне речи: Америчка историја спољних односа, дипломатска историја, историографија, синтеза, приступ