

solutions to the problems at hand. Knowing the limitations of military power might be just as important as knowing its capabilities.

## **Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama** by Stephen Sestanovich

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The recent spate of writing decrying the decline of American power and influence centers on issues of domestic decay and turmoil, with the view that the United States has somehow lost its way in the world. Some authors argue these domestic political, economic, and social challenges have hamstrung the current administration in pursuing the kind of aggressive, engaged foreign policy needed in this volatile time. Stephan Sestanovich, author of *Maximalist*, shows the current challenges of the Obama administration are not new, but part of a cycle that can be traced back to the post-World War II Truman administration.

Sestanovich is a former US diplomat, who served under both Presidents Reagan and Clinton. He is currently a professor of international relations at Columbia, as well as a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Sestanovich has written a highly-readable and thorough history of US foreign policy since 1947. The book does not offer much in the way of new research or detail. However, the author succeeded in repackaging previous works and incorporating a great many anecdotes to retell this story with a slightly new twist. It is a worthy addition to US foreign policy scholarship, and should be read by any serious student of diplomatic history, or for anyone in a position to advise on or craft future foreign policy.

The book expands on the author's earlier thesis, regarding the "maximalist" tradition in US foreign policy, one advanced in a Spring 2005 article in *The National Interest*. Sestanovich, describes foreign policy and diplomacy in a continuum cycling between periods of maximalism and retrenchment. One criticism of the book is the author never defines these two terms, which are so central to his argument. The reader quickly summarizes that maximalism equals overreach, with retrenchment the "do less" corollary that follows when America must pick up the pieces. The author details the approach administrations have taken cycling between these two extremes: the maximalist Truman followed by a retrenching Eisenhower; who is then followed by maximalist Kennedy/Johnson administrations; then by a long period of retrenchment under presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter; the maximalism of Reagan; a pause in the cycle under presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton; the maximalism of George W. Bush; and finally this current period of retrenchment under President Obama.

A few unanswered questions linger below the surface of a linear story long on narrative but short on analysis. My central criticism is the cycle is described as far too simplistic. Can any administration be categorized as purely maximalist or retrenching? The author concedes most administrations made decisions and set policies that ran counter to the general direction of their foreign policy. These decisions were almost always influenced by external events, beyond the influences of



**Maximalist**

AMERICA IN THE WORLD  
FROM TRUMAN TO OBAMA

Stephen Sestanovich

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the president and his team of advisors. Sestanovich was unable to categorize the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations cleanly for these very reasons, and the author notes it was not President George W. Bush's initial intent to be a maximalist. The second- and third-order effects of policy decisions are often to blame for these shifts. The decisions of our partners and allies, unforeseen world events, and black swans such as 9-11 are also responsible for shifts in focus. Campaign rhetoric and an administration's "going-in position" rarely survive first contact with future realities. The author would have been better served to incorporate more of this dynamic into his analysis, and to examine why presidents seem so often to misjudge or fail to anticipate events that shake their preferred interrelationship with the world.

Sestanovich spends most of the book examining the foreign policy realm of presidential decision making, and what drives administrations to "go large" or "go small" when pursuing national interests and exporting American values. This examination is interesting but it is also incomplete. Sestanovich, like many other scholars, fails to account for domestic political dynamics and issues that influence our ability to act globally. It is as if the author believes international credibility trumps domestic will. This *Innenpolitik*—*Realpolitik* interplay and tension—best explained in Peter Trubowitz's book *Politics and Strategy*, is ground-zero for grand strategic development. Just as unforeseen events abroad can derail foreign policy, so too domestic challenges will often cause an administration to be more inward-focused. Sestanovich's argument would have been strengthened by acknowledging this relationship and implicitly weaving more examples throughout his narrative.

The author's lack of detailed analysis weakens his argument that the United States must remain actively engaged in the world, and be more a maximalist than a retrencher. Sestanovich never convinces the reader why a more balanced and pragmatic policy position, similar to that taken by the Obama administration, can be an effective, or at least a suitable course for present realities. These criticisms aside, *Maximalist* remains an excellent history of US foreign policy, and provides yet another lens through which to view presidential decision-making in the modern era. Future policy makers, politicians and strategists would do well to take note.