AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

CYCLES IN US FOREIGN POLICY SINCE THE COLD WAR

THOMAS H. HENRIKSEN

Thomas H. Henriksen

Cycles in US Foreign Policy since the Cold War

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Thomas H. Henriksen
Hoover Institution
Stanford University
Palo Alto, California, USA

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American Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

Series Editor

Thomas Henriksen
Stanford University
Palo Alto, California, USA

This series seeks to provide serious books on the U.S. response to contemporary global challenges. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a new and altered stage in U.S. foreign relations. The United States now confronts a very broad spectrum of problems in the post-Cold War period. These include issues such as environmental degradation, climate change, humanitarian disasters, piracy, globalization, ethnic civil wars, sustainable economic development, non-state terrorism, and the role of international law in global affairs. Even more familiar troubles such as state-to-state relations have taken on new trappings with the threats from rogue nations and the return of great power rivalries with a rising China, a resurgent Russia, and a self-reliant European Union. Nuclear weapons, energy dependence, democracy promotion, regional problems in the Middle East or Africa, along with ascendant China and India are now viewed differently than in the previous era. Additionally, there are important and troubled bilateral relationships. Today, these state-to-state difficulties include Pakistan, Venezuela, and Mexico, to name just a few that scarcely appeared on State Department radar two decades ago. This series publishes monographs on topics across these foreign policy issues, and new ones as they emerge. The series editor is Thomas H. Henriksen, a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, USA.

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Note from the Editor

As the decades slip by since the Berlin Wall's collapse, international observers have gleaned a clearer view of America's post-Cold War role and of the conduct of US foreign policy in the absence of the bipolar standoff with the Soviet Union. During the past three decades, Washington administrations have had to face a variety of international crises. The global scene has witnessed a host of failed and failing states, some marked by appalling human tragedies. Civil wars in the former Yugoslavia yielded mass death and huge flows of refugees before producing a handful of new sovereign states. Worse still, the Arab Spring upheaval tossed the Middle East into catastrophic violence. Terrorism and warfare have become prevalent in the aftermath of the September 11 attack within the United States. Terrorist movements have plagued not only Middle Eastern states but also North and sub-Saharan African countries along with the Philippines and Indonesia. Geopolitically, the world has been transformed by the resurgence of Russia and the emergence of China as great powers. America has not been a bystander in this changing environment and its varied reactions more than deserve our attention.

This current volume falls within the Palgrave series American Foreign Policy in the Twenty-first Century, which has as its goal to narrate, analyze, and comprehend US global involvement in the still-new era since the Soviet Union vanished, ending the Cold War. Interested readers and students, it is hoped, will gain knowledge and insights about America's foreign policy in the unfolding global order from reading volumes in the series. As the United States becomes more enmeshed in international

affairs, it behooves American and foreign audiences to develop awareness and understanding about Washington's policies from different perspectives. This series strives to contribute to the clarification and, perhaps, even the illumination of how the United States confronts a host of world issues.

The first volume in the series was Howard J. Wiarda's valuable book, *American Foreign Policy in Regions of Conflict.* Professor Wiarda concentrated on the familiar basics of international relations by focusing on the history, geography, culture, and economics of the global regions. He eschewed the mathematical modeling techniques embraced by many contemporary political scientists. A reliance on the fundamentals, he advocated, will more likely lead to a sounder American policy and a clearer understanding of the international landscape.

The second book, *America and the Rogue States*, was my own addition to the series. It deals with US policy toward a small number of belligerent powers, which depart from the norms of international relations by their sponsorship of terrorism and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, chiefly nuclear arms. The origins of these international pariahs date from the Cold War but they emerged menacingly on the world stage with the end of the Soviet Union. Countries such as North Korea, Iran, Syria, Sudan, Cuba, and pre-US invasion Iraq preoccupied Washington for decades because of their threats to their neighbors as well as regional peace and stability. Washington tended to treat the rogue regime differently from one another, just as it characteristically approached other problems in varied ways. The rogue-state phenomenon still persists but it has been joined by other growing threats to American interests, such as terrorism and great power rivalries.

How and why American responses fluctuate toward overseas challenges is the subject of this current volume. *Cycles in U.S. Foreign Policy since the Cold War* is the third volume in the series. It addresses the proposition that American foreign policy cycles alternated between bouts of engagement and disengagement in global affairs. Scholars, philosophers, and enlightened commentators have observed the pendulum-like swings of political activity and inactivity since Classical antiquity. As recently as the 1980s, an eminent historian and several political scientists have described these political cycles. My study concentrates on the post-1989 era by analyzing international policies of the four US presidential administrations that governed after the Soviet Union fell. The book aspires to make the

study of cycles an enlightening factor in appreciating the past and in offering an expectation for the future.

Thomas H. Henriksen
Senior Fellow
Stanford University's
Hoover Institution

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Cycler Nature of US Foreign Policy

This book hypothesizes that pendulum-like cycles took place in US foreign policy alternating broadly from engagement to disengagement and back again in the four American presidencies since the Cold War. These cycles of international extroversion and introversion reflected political sentiments of the presidents, major parties, and the voters themselves. Engagement-cycle presidents resorted to military power and diplomatic pressure against other powers, whereas disengagement-cycle presidents retrenched from international entanglements, while relying on normal economic and political interaction. These cyclical arcs reflected public sentiments, as mirrored in national elections and public opinion polls. But the policies carried out by the White House occupants must take into account presidential decisions made to secure US interests or to nail down historical legacies, which could run counter to the national mood.

Much has happened to America and the world since scholars wrote in the 1980s about political cycles in the American past. The Iron Curtain fell, and with it the former bipolar standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, which bifurcated the planet into two armed camps. Communism's expansion no longer frightens Western democracies. The United States, in fact, emerged after the Soviet Union's demise as the sole remaining superpower, although today, it faces a more multipower world.

"Full knowledge of the past helps us in dealing with the future." Theodore Roosevelt[1]

T.H. Henriksen, *Cycles in US Foreign Policy since the Cold War*,
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When the Cold War still seemed permanent, American scholars wrote convincingly about interpreting America's past through a prism of cycler ebbs and flows of international activism and in-activism. The renowned US historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. called attention to the cycles between liberalism and conservatism in US domestic annals in his book, *The Cycles of American History*.[2] The Harvard professor drew for theoretical guidance on the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Adams, and his own father, who was also a prominent academician. Another scholar, Frank L. Klingberg, identified what he termed "mood cycles" in American society, which impacted foreign policy pendulum swings as described in his book, *Cyclical Trends in American Foreign Policy Moods*. Professor Klingberg paid close attention, over many years, to pendular alterations between "extroversion" and "introversion" in America's foreign policy dating from the founding of the Republic to beyond World War II.[3] Neither of these scholars were the first to comment on the patterns or recurrence in history. Famed illuminati such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Giambattista Vico, Arnold Toynbee, and others have posited some form of historical repetition.[4] The two American advocates, nonetheless, were among the most recent and precise observers of the cycler alterations in US policies.

Professors Schlesinger and Klingberg perceived cyclical arcs spanning different time spans. For Schlesinger, the "model of a thirty-year alternation between public purpose and private interest" fit the political history of the United States.[5] During "public purpose" times, according to Schlesinger, the country moved toward the expansion of federal government programs for the general welfare of its citizens. But in the years of "private interest," the nation's "public problems are turned over to the invisible hand of the market" in a reference to Adam Smith's metaphor of the economic market bestowing unintended social benefits.[6] For Klingberg, who wrote about the shifts from "introversion" and "extroversion" in "international mood phases," the "average length of the introvert phase was 21 years, and of the extrovert phase about 27 years" dating from 1776 to 1983.[7] Extroversion denoted "a willingness to use direct political or military pressure on other nations." Introversion, on the other hand, "stressed domestic concerns as well as normal economic, humanitarian, and cultural relations abroad."[8]

These definitions suffice for this current book about the post-Cold War's engagement–disengagement alternations. The use of military force or strong diplomatic pressure defines an engagement strategy, while

emphasis on domestic concerns and routine diplomacy identifies a disengagement game plan. This study found that the back-and-forth cycles in the post-1989 timeframe were much briefer than the observations advanced by Schlesinger or Klingberg of an earlier period. The post-Cold War cycles roughly conformed to the presidential terms. Writing in the *American Political Science Review*, three additional scholars examined cycles in electoral politics from 1854 to 2006 by using statistical evidence. In their analysis of "realignment cyclicity," they posited that the "partisan seat share of the Democratic and Republican parties has not varied randomly over time." Rather, it has "oscillated back and forth in a fairly regular pattern for the past 160 years." The period of "oscillation ... is approximately 25 to 30 years."[9] This political science article pertains to political party dominance but its relevance here points to the cycler nature of American politics.

Yet another political scientist assessed the pendulum shifts in the American mood, or political opinion, as a factor related to governance. Commenting on "liberalism and conservatism in public preference," this professor wrote about "the public changing its attitude toward government action" as a reaction to its approaches. The academician concluded that "this common national mood we know responds thermostatically to government policy. Mood becomes more conservative under liberal governments and more liberal under conservative regimes."[10] The same factors impacting the public mood, domestic political parties, and their programs also influences public opinion on international engagement and disengagement cycles. Fatigue, weariness, fear, disenchantment with the status quo can sway the public mood. Professor Schlesinger wrote about how "disappointment is the universal modern malady" and how it might drive political cycles:

> People can never be fulfilled for long either in the public or the private sphere. We try one, then the other, and frustration compels a change in course. Moreover, however effective a particular course may be in meeting one set of troubles, it generally falters and fails when new troubles arise. And many troubles are inherently insoluble. As political eras, whether dominated by public purpose or private interest, run their course, they infallibly generate the desire for something different.[11]

Arthur Schlesinger and Frank Klingberg concluded that a cycler theory offered insights into history and even about the possibility of what was to come. About the future, Schlesinger wrote: "The dialectic between past

and the future continue to form our lives."[12] And the other proponent of historical cycles, Frank Klingberg argued that cyclical trends were not only an "important element in the interpretation of past events" but also "the prediction of likely directions for the future."[13]

Such strong convictions in the forecasting power of historical analysis might be less than 100 percent on the mark. But they are one reason—not the only one—to look again at the hypothesis of rhythmic patterns in the most recent period of US foreign policy. Did cycler fluctuations occur in the post-Cold War era? Where the historical cycles just a fluke before Berlin Wall toppled? Or, can we divine cycles in the contemporary timeframe? Finally, why did these purported oscillations take place at all?

The hypothesis of this work is that post-Cold War US foreign policy, indeed, has swung between the poles of active international involvement and disengagement, or at least detachment. Cycles of international engagement coincide with the use of direct military power or diplomatic pressure against other nations or entities. But cycles of international disengagement reflect a strong domestic orientation and dissociation from risky overseas problems. A sub-hypothesis centers on the observation that both engagement-orientated presidents—George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush—modified their initial pronounced internationalism prior to leaving office in recognition of growing domestic opposition to engagement actions. On the other hand, the two disengagement-orientated presidents—William Clinton and Barack Obama—largely maintained their inward-looking focus to the end of their terms. These two theses are confirmed by abundant empirical evidence, which will be presented in subsequent chapters. But first a little historical perspective about the search for cycles in the past is necessary.

Searching for Cycles in the Past

Seeking historical patterns is a time-honored practice. Notable figures have examined the past as a means to divine the outcome of present-day events. Cycles or reoccurring patterns in the past seemed to offer a way of prognosticating what lay beyond the horizon. Among the first Western references to the notion of cycles came from a Greek historian, Polybius (circa 200 to circa 118 B.C.), who asserted that governments cycle through different forms starting with primitive monarchy, includes kingship, tyranny, aristocracy, as well as oligarchy, and concludes with ochlocracy (or mob rule).[14] The comings and endings of governmental types were taken

up by other thinkers. The Italian philosopher and Enlightenment thinker Giambattista Vico wrote about recurring cycles in what he saw as the three epochs in history: the divine, heroic, and human in his influential book, *The New Science*, published in 1744.[15] The notion of cycles in the rise and decline of civilizations was touched upon by the eminent British historian Herbert Butterfield in his treatment of the Classical Greek and Roman historians.[16]

The idea took root that history could be studied so as to foresee what lies ahead. In the Middle Ages, as Paul Johnson wrote, wise men counseled: "History is the school of princes."[17] A counselor to men of power, Machiavelli, the Florentine Renaissance political thinker held that a prince must look to the past for guidance:

> Whoever considers present and ancient things, easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been. So it is an easy thing for whoever examines past things diligently to foresee future things in every republic and to take remedies for them that were used by the ancients, or, if they do not find any that were used, to think up new ones through the similarity of accidents.[18]

Perhaps the most incomparable expression of this repetitive proposition flowed from the pen of the Spanish philosopher George Santayana. He admonished humanity to learn and apply the lessons of history in his oft-quoted aphorism: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."[19]

Others have dismissed the whole notion of deriving eternal truths or even insights from studying times long past. The renowned British historian A.J.P. Taylor, insisted: "The only lesson of history is that there is no lesson of history."[20] More succinctly, Henry Ford, the American automotive titan, thought history was "bunk."[21]

The utmost that can be derived from the study of history is that exact prediction is unwarranted but it may be possible to develop a foresight so as to pinpoint factors that are starting to influence the direction of events. Lewis Namier, another eminent British historian, held that the "enduring achievement of historical study is a historical sense, an intuitive understanding—of how things do not work."[22] Intuitively perceiving how things might work out—or won't work out—quite possibly is as near as professional scholars, statesmen, or political figures should venture about forecasting coming events. Forebodings and premonitions about writings

on the wall can at least temper the enthusiasm for a possible catastrophe; if not totally alter the course of a misadventure.

This author shares the skepticism about historians or politicians having crystal balls or clairvoyant powers. The complexities of major events, with a multitude of variables, make for vagaries, not replications. Even taking up analogies can result in misleading conclusions, because the analogies mostly rest on superficial understanding of events and debatable premises. In brief, this author makes no claims to the prediction of specific events. Yet, a circumspect review of the ebb and flow of tides encompassing American foreign policy offers a way to understand the past and to anticipate probable behavior ahead. Seeing cycles in US foreign policy since the fall of the Berlin Wall is the case this book sets out to make.

Cycles do abound in human activity. Fatigue follows exertion. Economic busts trail financial booms. Retreats come after crusades. Ying and yang alternate. The precise characteristics of each of these cycles can be distinct but their yawing phenomenon is expected, just as ebbing precedes flowing tides. Moods, or public sentiments, have fluctuated as America's past indicates. The changes, in part, account for bouts of America's engaged internationalism oscillating with periods of disengaged insularity toward the outside world. Internationalist lurches reflect a willingness to employ direct military power or diplomatic pressure against other states. Insular swings, on the other hand, exhibit strong domestic concerns and dissociation from overseas problems.

Cycles Before the End of the Cold War

Cyclical swings between international engagement and disengagement appeared before the post-Cold War era. There were, in fact, cycler movements dating from founding of the Republic. In the early history of the United States, a turn outward was characterized by an expansion of territory to the south or west. Inward turns, by contrast, were "years of consolidation" in preparation for renewed territorial aggrandizement.[23] As the United States rose to be a world power, the pendulum phenomenon materialized most dramatically in the twentieth century. America's strategic withdrawal from international affairs followed its military involvement in World War I. The interwar years are considered a decidedly isolationist chapter in American history. The next global conflict dragged the United States back into world affairs. Following World War II, Washington took up the defense of the Free World against aggressive designs by the Union

of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In that role, America introduced security and financial institutions to prop up European and non-Western allies the world over against the USSR's expansionism. Washington's collective defense alliances, military assistance, and monetary aid proved durable and successful over the long haul in countering the Kremlin's advances.

Still, there were times of American retrenchment during the Cold War. The most notable disengagement came after the traumatic Vietnam War, when "there was great public doubt and confusion about the future direction of American foreign policy."[24] The fall of South Vietnam to the Communist North's invasion two years after the US military withdrew "had severely shaken American self-confidence."[25] To limit US international commitments and interventions, President Richard M. Nixon fell back on a strategy known as the Nixon Doctrine, which embraced "a devolution of American responsibilities in the Third World upon regional powers like Brazil, Iran, Indonesia, and Zaire" (now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo).[26]

This mood of introversion lasted until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which nearly coincided with the end of President Jimmy Carter's cautious retrenchment.[27] President Ronald Reagan introduced steps toward greater engagement in the lingering, post-Vietnam insular mood. His international involvement overtures carried forward into the post-Berlin Wall years and the presidency of George H.W. Bush. Even though, the post-Cold War era recorded cycler movements in US foreign policy, the Vietnam War still cast a shadow over war-making policies.

The chief two proponents of perceiving cycles in US foreign policy, as noted above, wrote books on the subject in the 1980s. In *The Cycles of American History*, Arthur Schlesinger described mainly domestic cyclical swings "between conservatism and liberalism, between periods of concern for the rights of the few and periods of concern for the wrongs of many."[28] The Harvard historian readily acknowledged the role of "sacrifices" during World War I "to make the great world outside safe for democracy," as a factor in the nation's fatigue during the 1930s. But he also called attention to domestic exertions to explain the change in American sentiments. After the activism of the Progressive Era as well as the Great War, Schlesinger wrote, the American people "had had their fill of crusades" by the interwar years. This disenchantment with "discipline, sacrifice, and intangible goals" played out, as we shall, see in post-Cold War presidencies too.[29] The eminent professor expressed in the mid-1980s an observation, which still