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*Foreign  
Policy  
Making*  
AND THE  
*American  
Political  
System*

SECOND EDITION

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*James A. Nathan  
James K. Oliver*

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and the  
American  
Political System*  
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James K. Oliver  
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# *Preface*

The formulation and administration of United States foreign policy have long been matters of concern to observers of American society and politics. Early in the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville concluded that American democracy, with its institutional fragmentation and increasingly democratized politics, constituted a “decidedly inferior” system for making and carrying out foreign policy. Reflecting similar concerns, the architects of American foreign policy after World War II tried to modify the institutions and processes of national security and foreign policy making. In an effort to make the executive establishment more responsive to the demands of the cold war, the National Security Act of 1947 sought to strengthen the hand of the President. Simultaneously, the notion of “bipartisanship” was developed to mute foreign policy conflict among Democrats and Republicans and was then extended to encompass executive-legislative conflict itself.

Again in the 1970s, as American foreign policy encountered the frustrating limitations of an international system in which military capability was widely diffused and the very nature of power itself seemed transformed, institutional changes assumed prominence. A presidency, now characterized as “imperial” in form, saw its authority undercut by failure in Vietnam and scandal at home. A new congressional assertiveness emerged as reformers in both the House and Senate searched—not always successfully—for ways to increase the foreign policy role of Congress as an institution while at the same time strengthening the influence of the individual legislator in the policy making process.

The relationship of the ruled and the rulers has proved no less difficult. Throughout the postwar decades of cold war activism, retrenchment, *détente*, and then return to Soviet-American tension, the capacity of the American people to recognize their national

interests and the extent to which they would allow policy elites to define those interests have been matters of uncertainty. For their part, most Americans seem to have maintained attitudes of mixed indifference and pragmatism toward things foreign. However, the resulting latitude for foreign policy makers has not been unlimited, and in both the early 1950s and 1970s was curtailed as the costs of Korea and then Vietnam mounted. Indeed, in the latter case, popular disaffection was manifested in a marked decline in the vague “internationalism” characteristic of public opinion during the preceding decades. Thus by the mid-1980s, following the jarring onset of complex political and economic interdependence in the mid- and late 1970s, a far more complicated and less predictable amalgam of attitudes seemed to have taken hold; and with it returned all the old questions about the inherent capacity and incapacity of a democracy for dealing with the world.

This book seeks to define and illuminate the many dimensions of the relationship between foreign policy making and the American political system. Because many dimensions are to be dealt with—e.g. the executive establishment, executive-legislative relations, public opinion, the role of private power—our approach involves many styles and levels of analysis. Where complex and extended institutional relationships and policy making processes are involved, a mix of institutional description and more abstract conceptual frameworks, such as the perspectives and insights of bureaucratic politics, have been used. In other instances, constitutional issues are explored by means of the review and exposition of legal questions and, where necessary, case law. A survey of public opinion necessarily requires attention to poll data—and the problems associated with its use. And where we have found analysis and theory as yet undefined as, for example, in the analysis of private power and foreign policy, we have advanced our own tentative framework.

In addition, we have tried to place our analysis in a context of policy and the development of the foreign and national security policy making institutions and processes during the postwar period. Underlying this approach is our conviction that “officials,” institutions, processes, and the relationship of them to the larger political system reflect as well as shape policy and its demands. Moreover, institutions, processes and the broader political relationships exist in

a legal, organizational, and temporal matrix. The structure and dynamics of policy making processes are therefore constrained by previous political and institutional developments and policy commitments. Accordingly, analysis must incorporate these factors no less fully than it does institutional description and the latest social scientific models and frameworks of analysis.

This second edition has not been dramatically changed from the first edition. Extensive work, however, has gone into its revision. We are indebted to those scholars and students who, over the years, have provided us with helpful commentary and support.

*Foreign Policy Making  
and the American  
Political System*

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# *Chapter 1*

## *Introduction*

A nation's foreign policy encompasses more than its behavior in the world. Since it both proceeds from and purportedly serves the interests of a nation, foreign policy also embraces institutions, policy making processes, and people. For the last 200 years, both foreign and American observers of American government have remarked and worried about the difficulties the American system faces in fashioning a coherent and effective foreign policy. This book is about the American governmental process and the society in which it is embedded. Most important, it is about the relationship between those two and America's foreign policy.

In this introduction we will briefly survey some of the policy making dilemmas that have arisen within the American political system as the result of America's world role since World War II. These policy making problems are rooted in the tension between the demands imposed by the constitutional framework and its evolution, and the development and working of American democracy, on the one hand, and the exigencies of an activist and globalist foreign policy on the other. Finally, we suggest how these problems can serve as the basis for useful levels of analysis for an understanding of foreign policy making in the American political system.

### *THE FOREIGN POLICY CONTEXT*

Since World War II, American policy makers, whatever their partisan identification, have felt that securing American international interests requires an activist foreign policy. They have sometimes strongly disagreed over the most appropriate means to be employed. Nonetheless, since at least 1947, they have acted on the premise that

American security is inextricably tied to the structure and dynamics of world order. They consider American security to be a function of world order and believe that deep and long-term American involvement in the development and maintenance of world order is essential.<sup>1</sup>

For two decades after World War II the pursuit of these interests and the world political context within which American policy was defined and implemented seemed simple. The presence of the Soviet Union, which possessed a similarly globalist view of its interests and also represented the only other power in the international system with even an approximation of American strategic capability, meant that world politics tended toward bipolarity.<sup>2</sup> The possibility of nuclear war compounded the tensions inherent in the Soviet-American ideological confrontation. Moreover, the emergence from colonial domination of scores of new non-Western nations toward the end of the period blurred somewhat the structural simplicity of world politics. Nonetheless, a combination of American strategic and economic superiority contributed to a generally successful pursuit of unambiguous American objectives.

The United States, however, since the late 1960s, has faced a much more complex international system. And while policy makers may still focus on issues relevant to the Soviet-American antagonism, other elements, to a large extent separable from the cold war, have emerged to inhibit bold initiatives. Consequently, the domestic base for a vigorous unilateral foreign policy has become more circumscribed. Moreover, the erosion of the post-World War II domestic consensus and the new complexities of international politics seem likely to remain with us.

Perhaps foremost on any list of restraints now facing United States policy makers is the diffusion of military force. Of course, the Soviet Union and the United States remain superpowers by virtue of their respective arsenals of military power. Yet, by the mid-1980s, at least four other states possessed nuclear arsenals, several others were poised on the edge of acquisition, and perhaps a dozen others were considered likely nuclear candidates. The advent of precision-guided munitions also served to equalize the small and weak with the large and powerful. The challenge of one-shot kill weapons in the hands of a few disciplined troops could put in jeopardy the sophisticated and expensive weaponry of nations. A second inhibition to American

activism was the evolution of Soviet power. In relation to the United States, the Soviets have gone from a primitive nuclear deterrent capability to roughly the position of nuclear and conventional parity. These two conditions—the rise of other centers of power and the succession of the Soviet Union to real equivalence—have meant that the threat and use of force by the United States against the Soviets or one of their close associates has become both less credible and more dangerous than was the case in the days of undisputed American superiority.

But more has changed than the stark and terrifyingly simple bipolar strategic structure of world politics. Indeed, some analysts of world politics maintain that the economic interdependence and relationships that emerged and occupied so much attention during the 1970s are equally significant developments.<sup>3</sup> Thanks in part to American foreign policy, Western Europe and Japan had fully recovered from the effects of World War II by the 1960s and had become centers of economic power competitive with the United States. Moreover, by the early 1970s, world interdependence in energy, finance, commodities, and manufactures was becoming apparent. At first there was the success of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in raising its oil prices to the level of extortion. The consequence of skyrocketing energy prices, commodity prices, interest rates, and inflation was painful evidence of the truth of interdependence. By the mid-1980s, oil prices had started a free fall in price. Commodity prices declined. United States farmers went through a time as hard as the Great Depression. Third World commodity-producing countries could no longer gain enough in exporting metals and foodstuffs to pay the bills they had racked up for importing oil a few years earlier. Many oil-producing countries now are not lending to United States banks but, on the contrary, are borrowing in order to maintain the recently acquired high level of national spending. Many of the money-centered banks that were desperately worried in the 1970s about how to recycle the huge capital flows moving to OPEC are now facing the serious vulnerability of Third World debtors, many of whom will never be able to pay off the principal and have only some chance of keeping up with the service charges on the interests they owe.

These developments in the international economy are an indication that the very structure, dynamics, and nature of power and

influence in world politics have changed.<sup>4</sup> The result has made the world of international finance influence everyday lives more than ever before in history. The Third World and the developed world have become enmeshed by a web of mutual sensitivity to transnational fiscal and monetary concerns. Employment, interest rates, investment, and trade issues no longer stand alone as simply independent domestic bilateral issues. Rather, they are global in both nature and remedy. Nonetheless, some observers are skeptical of these propositions about the radical departure of interdependence from the traditional nature of international politics and they are dubious about the degree to which American power has been circumscribed.<sup>5</sup> They argue that most of the difficulties the United States has experienced in maintaining its former preeminence are more a product of poor leadership combined with an incomprehension of the salience of the traditional components of international politics rather than any basic changes in the structure of the international system.<sup>6</sup>

Whether the web of interdependence in which the United States finds itself in the 1980s constitutes a new world politics or not, the diffusion of military power, the onset of strategic parity, and the salience of political economics make for a more complex world in which the operational meaning of security is not self-evident. The traditional problems of managing military power remain central to American policy makers, but additional new military actors and new world relationships now command an equal amount of their attention. And precisely because the demands of global involvement have become both more complex and intense, the constraints imposed by the American domestic political framework have become more important.

### *THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT OF FOREIGN POLICY MAKING*

In comparison with other political systems the American constitutional framework has proved remarkably stable, resilient, and long-lived. Yet throughout American history, foreign and domestic observers have tended to concur with Alexis de Tocqueville's judgment that in matters pertaining to the conduct of foreign affairs, the

American democracy—indeed, all democracies—constituted a “decidedly inferior” form of government.<sup>7</sup> The concern has been that the constitutional framework and the modalities of democratic politics would combine to produce a policy making milieu and process that, although perfectly appropriate to the needs of American domestic politics, would prove disastrously inappropriate to the demands imposed by international politics. The paradoxical dilemma of American democracy was summarized by a group of American textbook writers in the late 1960s:

... the more civilized and non-violent a democratic nation becomes in its internal institutions and behavior, the more peaceful and frank the outlook and conduct of its people, the more it may find it difficult, as a nation, to survive and prosper in the semi-anarchy of international affairs, in which secrecy, suspicion, and violence always lurk in the background.<sup>8</sup>

There are at least three complex dimensions of this dilemma that warrant elaboration because they are so fundamental to the operation of the American foreign and national security policy making process. They are, first, the constitutional and institutional framework of American government, especially what Madison referred to as the “partial mixture of powers” between Congress and President.<sup>9</sup> Second, there is the foreign and national security policy bureaucracy that developed as a corollary to America’s expanding world role in the post-World War II era. Finally, one must be concerned with the character and role of public opinion and those groups in American society that possess significant foreign affairs weight either in tandem with or independent of the United States government.

### *The Constitutional and Institutional Framework*

The limits and obstacles imposed by the constitutional and institutional framework are perhaps the most frequently lamented characteristics of the foreign and national security policy making processes. In an effort to establish a governmental framework that was stronger than the Articles of Confederation, that is, provided for greater capacity in the national government, but not so strong as to threaten liberty, the framers of the Constitution established the now

familiar fragmented institutional structure of the American national government. Policy making authority and responsibility was to be shared among three branches of government, with the Congress and the Executive assuming the most important roles in the formulation and conduct of foreign affairs.

The men who drafted the Constitution were in no way insensitive to the complexities and dangers of international relations. They understood fully that the quasi-anarchy of world politics in the late eighteenth century required an Executive fully able to respond to security threats and conduct diplomacy with dispatch. But although the Executive was given the authority and responsibility to conduct war and diplomacy, the authority to commence war and commit the nation to significant foreign undertakings was reserved to the Congress. The President was Commander in Chief and responsible for the negotiation of treaties and the day-to-day conduct of diplomacy, but the Congress maintained the Army and Navy, declared war, authorized the undertaking of limited—or in the argot of eighteenth century international law, “imperfect wars”<sup>10</sup>—and had to tender its advice and consent to treaties before they became the law of the land. The system was understood to be complex, even inefficient, but as Madison argued in *Federalist* 48:

Unless these departments be so far connected and blended as to give to each a constitutional control over the others, the degree of separation which the maxim requires, as essential to a free government, can never in practice be duly maintained.<sup>11</sup>

Or as he put it in a later paper:

But the great security against a gradual concentration of the several powers in the same department consists in giving to those who administer each department the necessary constitutional means and personal motives to resist encroachments of the others. The provision for defense must in this, as in all other cases, be made commensurate to the danger of attack. Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.<sup>12</sup>

But the well-being and prosperity of the Republic vis-à-vis the world were ultimately to be secured by Washington’s axiom concerning the content of America’s international relations: “The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our



commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible.”<sup>13</sup> Insofar as this axiom could be followed, the policy making dilemmas and dangers inherent in shared policy making authority could be avoided. In the first place, constitutional authority and responsibility for the regulation of commercial relations among nations was clearly set forth in the Constitution: it belonged to the Congress. Thus foreign relations so defined remained in conformity with the Madisonian assertion that “in republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, inasmuch as the actual conduct of commercial relations was undertaken not by the government but by private individuals, worry about the efficiency of foreign relations was unwarranted.

In sum, Washington and the founding fathers understood full well the problems posed by the institutional structure that they had created. They anticipated the dilemmas and inadequacies of that system in the face of deep political involvement in world affairs. They hoped, however, that America’s geographic isolation, combined with a concentration on what was assumed to be the greatest international asset of the United States, its commercial relations, would save the American system from the agonies of European systems perpetually locked in intimate political relations with their neighbors. The European system led inevitably to conflict, the necessity for military preparedness, the threat and use of military force, and, concomitantly, a political regime in which necessities of executive efficiency predominated at the expense of individual liberty if the national security was to be realized; they were, in short, the very forms of government the Americans had left behind and rebelled against.

These hopes were frustrated from the very outset. Commercial relations required open seas, and the new republic soon discovered that these could be secured only by force, often at considerable distance from American waters. Moreover, the international politics of Napoleonic Europe would not leave North America alone, notwithstanding American assertions of neutrality. War came within the lifetimes of the founding fathers, followed in the early nineteenth century by the acquisition and opening up of the continent itself. And at every turn the question of executive-legislative relations in the conduct of American foreign and military relations became more complex.