

The Clash With Distant Cultures: Values, Interests, and Force in American Foreign Policy
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Abstract:

"The Clash With Distant Cultures: Values, Interests, and Force in American Foreign Policy" by Richard J. Payne is reviewed.
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Full Text:

Payne, Richard J. The Clash With Distant Cultures: Values, Interests, and Force in American Foreign Policy. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995. 285 pp.

Richard J. Payne's assessment of recent developments in U.S. foreign policy begins with some fresh and relatively innovative promises for examining Washington's diplomacy in a new light, namely through the prism of culture. Payne rejects the "realist" approach in examining the motivating factors in U.S. diplomacy in favor of considering the effects of cultural barriers

and commonalities in determining U.S. decision-making processes.

In focusing on "values, interests and forces" in American foreign policy, Payne attempts to shed light on the fundamental nature of cultural values and how these values impact Washington's alternatives regarding peaceful negotiation as opposed to conflict in settling international disputes. Recent case studies Payne takes up are Iraqi-U.S. relations and Operation Desert Storm, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and Washington's policies in Bosnia. Unfortunately, this particular evaluation of "culture-clash" as an analysis of these three critical contemporary problems suffers in a variety of ways.

First, any attempt to portray a broad cultural and historical backdrop to contemporary foreign policy decisions is fraught with difficulty. In fact, most experts on diplomacy wading into the veritable mine field of cultural influences on foreign affairs assiduously attempt to avoid the pitfalls of accounting for specific recent foreign policy decisions through the lens of broad historical and American values. In fact, Payne's opening chapter summarizes some of the more conventional intellectual studies of the history of American diplomacy and cultural ideals, including those of Loren Baritz, Louis Hartz, and Michael Hunt.

At the outset, Payne very effectively summarizes the domestic cultural roots of U.S. diplomacy, including observations on the force of public opinion, and the roles of American "exceptionalism," religion, ideology, and myth. Payne duefully acknowledges the intertwining of deep and abiding cultural traditions in the shaping of American diplomatic history. In chapter two ("Cultural Roots of Force in American Foreign Policy"), however, the author moves onto more dangerous ground. In exploring the historical antecedents of the United States' culture of violence, Payne ranges from the bloodthirstiness of Imperial Rome to the subtopic of "Sports, Violence, and Foreign Policy" in explaining the traditions and persistence of American violence. It seems that an argument drawing upon the exceptionalism of violence in the United States would fairly gauge the comparative level of violence in other (perhaps "more distant?") cultures. Does the U.S. possess a monopoly on violence? If so, how do we explain the violence of other cultures, from Germany and Russia in the thirties and forties to Cambodia in the seventies? Does ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda represent different, more pardonable forms of violence than the imperialistic depredations of the west? In other words, calling attention to the obviously violent chapters of U.S. history and western civilization does not adequately fathom the complexities of violence and the human condition, and explains even much less about the effects of the domestic roots of violence on the execution of international diplomacy.

In fact, one could argue the opposite point: compared to most other cultures in the twentieth-century world, the U.S. has probably resorted to less violent approaches in settling foreign policy issues or reaching diplomatic objectives. To date, much controversy surrounds the slight empirical evidence connecting American television or movie violence to the perpetration of violence on foreign cultures. While pointing to the prevalence of guns in the United States, Payne doesn't seem perplexed over the fact that Britain (comparably a gunless society) had no qualms in exacting their own form of violence against Argentina in the Falklands War. Nor can we understand why the Argentine victims of British aggression had earlier waged a savage "dirty war" against its own citizens. This does not, of course, condone American violence, but merely reveals the precariousness of singling out unique forms of American violent behavior that in some mystical way transfers to the conduct of Washington's policies which, presumably, is less evident in other state systems.

Payne's treatment of the U.S.-Iraqi War presents an interesting example of the author's myopia on violence. After arguing that Washington moved belligerently against Baghdad while shunning the possibilities for a negotiated settlement, the author mentions Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait as almost an afterthought. The fact that Saddam precipitated the war and adamantly refused both European and North American intercessions for a peaceful settlement draws minimal attention from Payne. Rather, the Gulf War is seen as resulting from U.S. cultural estrangement from Iraq. Payne hedges on the intransigence of the American position by grudgingly admitting that Saddam did not really seek a diplomatic solution to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait after being presented with negotiating options from key members of the European community.

How cultural "distance" affected U.S. diplomacy with Baghdad more onerously than the Muslim Palestinian Arabs Payne does not explain. Pointing to traditional U.S.-Israeli cultural and economic ties doesn't very effectively account for notable recent changes in U.S. policy with the Palestinians. Nineteen-nineties U.S. negotiating positions on issues affecting the Left Bank, new Jewish settlements, and the Golan Heights would seem to refute Payne's thesis on cultural distance and American foreign policy. But the author seems more interested in depicting traditional American-Jewish cultural and economic connections than in assessing notable U.S. diplomatic shifts toward recognizing genuine Palestinian grievances since the Reagan administration. In short, the last decade has witnessed a much more balanced American diplomacy in dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The author displays a similar absence of nuanced interpretation in dealing

with Washington's policies in Bosnia. Little attention is given in this account to the nearly intractable and immensely complex nature of the Bosnian conflict (or, for that matter, the complexities of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute in the previous chapter) as opposed to the conditions prevalent in the Gulf War. Amidst the historic mutual recriminations of the three dominant ethnic groups, Payne again applies the template of "culture clash" that pits U.S. interests against the Muslims. While acknowledging that the U.S. has only marginal economic interests in the region, Payne sees American acquiescence in Bosnia as an example of letting the Muslims suffer at the hands of both Croats and Serbs to whom, presumably, the U.S. senses closer cultural connections. In pressing the central theme of "cultural distance" Payne detects abiding anti-Muslim sentiment which blinds the U.S. to atrocities committed in Bosnia by the "western" ethnicities, Serbs and Croats.

Such an interpretation, of course, fails to account for the relative inaction of the European Community and conveniently overlooks recent pressure applied by Washington to bring Serbian atrocities to account. Through all of this, as the last tortured century of conflict in the Balkans attests, the application of overt force in Bosnia is a "lose-lose" situation for any outside power. A more balanced treatment of U.S. attitudes towards the Bosnian Muslims would also include some mention of Washington's wide range of policy initiatives in the large, varied, and culturally diverse Islamic world community.

It appears simplistic indeed to refer to an American cultural bias in diplomacy subjecting something as amorphous as the "Muslim world" to a second-class citizenship. The fact that cultural affinities promote political discourse (language being the obvious example) and that geopolitical interests in Europe take historic precedence in the U.S. over other regions of the globe, should not obscure the fact that Washington has experienced a range of diplomatic relationships with many diverse Arab and Muslim societies. It would appear that a host of other issues (geographic proximity, economic interests, strategic location, political ideology, etc.) would have a much greater impact on decision making in Washington.

As the above comments testify, Payne makes so much of so-called "cultural differences" that he is forced to squeeze his interpretation into a prearranged model of culture-clash as the sine qua non of American diplomacy. Thus, just as economic determinists view major diplomatic developments in a very narrow light, Payne is compelled to ignore or gloss over many disturbing facts, not to mention contradictions, that get in the way of his central thesis. The following excerpt reflects the manner in which Payne presents his case for culture clash and U.S. diplomacy:

Jeanne Kirkpatrick, America's ambassador to the United Nations during the Reagan administration, emphasized the cultural as well as security ramifications of the Bosnian conflict. The United States, she stressed, is grounded in European civilization. Consequently, threats to a shared civilization would have direct and indirect consequences for its members. She stated: "I do not believe that countries either thrive or survive without the survival of the civilizations of which they are apart." But neither the Europeans nor the Americans considered the Bosnian Muslims full members of Western civilization. George Kenny, who left his position in the State Department in protest over U.S. policy in Bosnia, asserted that for Bush and Baker, "Yugoslavia is far away, something for which if the administration were to take a leading role, the administration risks getting blamed by Congress and the public for not scoring a success." America's cultural emphasis on winning constrained U.S. policymakers' options in Bosnia (p. 173). Emphasis mine.

I have quoted at length from Payne's chapter on Bosnia because the citation reflects the author's habit of taking critical comments out of context as well as beginning a paragraph with one thought while finishing with a quite different emphasis. The statements by Kirkpatrick and Kenny quoted in this passage make no specific references to ethnic or cultural preferences by the United States. Kirkpatrick's comments, made before the House Subcommittee on European Affairs in early 1993, seems to be a fairly innocuous remark concerning the cultural basis of a civilization's survival.

Kenny's observation on what he considers American disinterest in Bosnia (i.e., the political stakes with the American people and Congress should the Bush administration take undue risks in the Balkans) certainly doesn't present an anti-Muslim bias. The closing sentence emphasizes the American insistence on "winning," and says nothing about a cultural predilection against Islamic societies as a part of Washington's policies. More to the point, the highlighted reference to anti-Muslim U.S. sentiment in the middle of this passage inserted by the author is unsupported by the quotations cited.

Payne utilizes this literary sleight-of hand throughout the book. After the reader is presented with some startling revelations concerning the cultural basis (and biases) of U.S. diplomacy in three sensitive regions of the world, the only direct quotes supporting these allegations (specifically, anti-Muslim U.S. sentiments) are cited from the works of journalists and academics. Comments of American officials almost always resemble those by Kenny and Kirkpatrick, often interspersed with Payne's personal observations on American cultural prejudices.

While serious students of American foreign policy can ill afford to overlook the enormous impact of social and cultural differences on the conduct of international diplomacy, such matters are best assessed in view of other important policy initiatives, namely economic priorities, political ideology, and strategic considerations. Moreover, allegations of specific cultural biases which may affect significant foreign-affairs decisions in Washington should be substantiated by more than journalistic commentary, academic hubris, and overgeneralized innuendo. Though Payne effectively traces the cultural roots of American diplomacy in chapter one, his scanty evidence fails to support an overt cultural basis for Washington's use of force or negotiation in executing critical foreign policy decisions in Iraq, Bosnia, and Palestine.

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