Historical Dictionary of U.S. Diplomacy During the Cold War

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Reviewing a historical dictionary is often a rather thankless task. Typically compiled from brief essays contributed by a variety of scholars they often lack a coherent perspective, leaving the reviewer to offer vague generalisations regarding the overall quality of the entries or selection of topics. Thankfully the *Historical Dictionary of US Diplomacy during the Cold War* avoids such pitfalls, and a painful review process, sole-authored as it is by the Brunel University scholar Martin Folly. The dictionary aims to provide a comprehensive reference guide to U.S. diplomacy during a half-century of almost continual global engagement, no easy task for a single scholar, and the author deserves much praise for what is a detailed overview of many aspects of American foreign relations. The bulk of the book is made up of a series of concise, accurate explanations and definitions, covering the first crumbling of the Second World War grand alliance to Reagan's mix of aggression and flexibility that marked American diplomacy during the final years of the Cold War, via the birth of containment, the spread of Cold War competition to the developing world, the relaxation in superpower tensions during the détente of the 1970s, and many other key touchstones a diplomatic historian would expect to find. Detailed yet pithy, I can, despite one or two minor concerns which I shall address later in this review, strongly recommend this as a reference text for scholars of all levels.

A brief summary of the dictionary's structure and content makes apparent its utility as a reference volume. More than four pages of useful acronyms, a detailed ten-page chronology of major events, and a 50-page narrative introduction appear before the dictionary itself even begins. Of additional value, particularly for those relatively new to the topic or indeed teaching it for the first time, is the historiographical essay and impressively broad bibliography that follows the main dictionary entries. Major debates in the field are summarised concisely, and key works regarding major topics highlighted and contextualised with skill.

The lengthy introduction provides a sweeping narrative of the Cold War from a U.S.-focused perspective, demonstrating the author's ability to condense vast amounts of information into brief summaries while admirably striving to offer a rough approximation of scholarly consensus on the major issues. As becomes clear during the discussion of early Soviet-American tensions, the author adopts a position that could loosely be described as being of the post-revisionist school, describing the Cold War simply as 'a superpower rivalry, in which neither power was entirely dominant in its own sphere, and with limits to the ability of

either power to dominate the affairs of other states'; a broad characterisation that I feel most historians would acknowledge as sensible in a work of this nature. Somewhat less satisfactory is the definition of Cold War diplomacy as 'aspects of U.S. diplomacy that directly connect to the Cold War, while acknowledging that at its height, the Cold War encompassed almost every aspect of diplomatic activity to a greater or lesser extent (p. 1). This tension, between a narrow and an all-encompassing conception of Cold War diplomacy, is one that is never fully resolved, and is an issue I will return to later in the review. Nonetheless, the introduction provides a coherent overview of key aspects of U.S. diplomacy between 1945 and 1991, reflecting a periodization that is, to me at least, eminently sensible, and taking a relatively traditional narrative approach that traces presidential administrations, key advisers, and periods of heightened and lessened tensions. While historians with deep and detailed knowledge of particular historical issues may take exception to some of the succinct summaries (I found the characterisation of Lyndon Johnson a little simplistic for instance) there is little truly controversial here, and it provides an excellent overview for those unfamiliar with a complex and turbulent period.

Regarding the entries themselves, it is only fair to begin with the many positives. The book is particularly strong on what we might consider the more 'traditional' aspects of diplomacy. Hence masses of acts, treaties, and organisations are summarised and contextualised clearly and effectively, while the dozens of accurate and densely detailed thumbnail sketches of key diplomats and advisors demonstrate the enduring value of a historical dictionary to researchers even in the age of Wikipedia. There are also multiple entries that reflect the author's gift for synthesising masses of information into manageable micro-essays, with the piece on the Cuban Missile Crisis an excellent example. An entry of just over two pages begins by providing context for the Soviet decision to go ahead with the missile placements, Fidel Castro's motivations for welcoming them, and the domestic pressures that shaped John F. Kennedy's Cuban policies. We are then provided with a narrative of the crisis itself, an effective summary of differing interpretations of Kennedy's performance in resolving it, and a reflection on the long term significance of the Cold War's potentially most dangerous confrontation (p. 123). Similarly impressive are the entries on relations with major allies such as France or Germany, which succeed in summarising and analysing decades of diplomatic interaction in brief but illuminating essays.

A work of this nature, providing dozens of brief summaries of particular acts or congressional amendments, is never likely to be consistently gripping reading and the author should be commended for making the more substantial entries engaging and insightful. The lengthier pieces, such as those mentioned previously, are crisply narrated, with astute analysis scattered throughout and an impressive lightness of touch. Furthermore, occasional treats such as a relatively lengthy narrative piece on the 'Space Race' can also be found tucked away between more conventional entries, in this particular instance SEATO and Stalin. Certainly for a reviewer, these fluid and absorbing short essays are a welcome change of pace and emphasis from the more limited entries that dominate, correctly, many of the other pages.

While of course unable to fact-check every detail of the book, to this reviewer at least the vast majority of entries in the *Historical Dictionary of US Diplomacy during the Cold War* seem precise and well judged. However, given its role as a reference volume it would be remiss not to note that there are a few errors that appear to have slipped past author and editor alike. In most cases these are minor, such as a reference to the 'American First Committee' (p. 78), but one that stood out as more concerning was the mention of John F. Kennedy's assassination as having taken place on '23 November 1961' (p. 211). Whilst problematic, it is worth emphasising again that these occurrences are very much the exception rather than the rule in a book containing a wealth of information and analysis. Indeed, the majority of the dictionary entries raised little protest from me in terms of their characterisations of events or actors, and those that did tended to be a reflection of weaknesses in the broader literature. For instance, as in the introduction Lyndon Johnson features heavily throughout the dictionary in regards to the Vietnam War, but little in relation to other areas of his foreign policy. However, this is hardly limited to this volume alone. While the historiographical essay makes reference to recent works that seek to redress this imbalance such as H. W. Brands' *The Wages of Globalism*, the historiography of Johnson's foreign policy remains largely dominated by a single conflict and is reflected as such in the dictionary entries. If forced to disagree with any of the characterisations, I did

find the assessment of Reagan's Cold War diplomacy, both in the introduction and the entries, a little overly positive; too swift to emphasise his management of the end of the Cold War over his dangerous and costly errors. Nonetheless, this is more a case of personal interpretation rather than a challenge to any of the information that the author presents.

This largely positive assessment of the dictionary entries brings me to the main concern that I would like to raise, which is regarding the definition of what constitutes 'diplomacy' and what criteria determine which issues, events, or people receive dedicated coverage. Of course there are restrictions on how much can be addressed in a single volume, and while I do not wish to simply list all the subjects that I believe should have been present, there are several issues that could have been covered in slightly greater depth. Also, by not providing a clearer definition of what constitutes 'U.S. diplomacy during the Cold War' in the introduction, I do feel that the author has left this issue open to challenge.

Regarding the selection of topics, one area that felt somewhat under-served, both in the introduction and the main body of the dictionary, was how U.S. diplomacy functioned in the developing world. While the introduction acknowledges this as an issue that grew in importance from the 1950s onwards (p. 19), the selection of topics covered seemed somewhat haphazard. Perhaps due to having worked on U.S.-Latin American relations myself I was a little more sensitive to that area in particular, but it still seemed slightly odd that neither Brazil or Chile (or indeed Salvador Allende or Augustus Pinochet) received their own entry. Given the importance of developments in these nations in terms of U.S. diplomacy in the Americas during the 1960s, 1970s and beyond, their absence was notable, particularly when an entry was dedicated to Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, a brutal and repressive dictator but hardly central to U.S. diplomatic efforts to the same extent. Again with full acknowledgement of the limitations of a single volume dictionary, the importance of the non-aligned movement in attempting to establish an alternative international path to the two superpowers and the associated diplomatic challenges for the United States that this created also feature very little. While the landmark conference at Bandung is referenced, neither the movement itself nor major figures associated with it who proved a continual diplomatic headache for the United States such as Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt receive an entry.

The wider point that this raises is in relation to what falls within the definition of Cold War diplomacy. As reflected in the slight coverage of the non-aligned movement, the approach that dominates the dictionary is a relatively traditional one of high politics, influential diplomats and great power relations. This is not in itself a bad thing necessarily, these remain the building blocks of most studies of foreign relations after all, but I do worry slightly that anyone picking up the volume would not get a sense of the great thematic and methodological developments that have affected the field of U.S. diplomatic history in the past couple of decades.⁽¹⁾ While issues such as the influence of race, gender and religion on foreign policy may be difficult to work into a study such as this, there could have been some more focus on a greater variety of drivers of diplomatic efforts during the Cold War. An obvious example to my mind at least would be modernisation theory, widely acknowledged as helping to shape U.S. engagement with and Cold War policy in the developing world in the 1960s, not least in Latin America and Vietnam, yet barely mentioned in this dictionary. Other historians may feel the same way regarding the relatively limited coverage received by human rights concerns as driver of diplomatic policy in the 1970s and beyond. Also, other aspects of international engagement beyond more traditional mechanisms, and I am thinking here of what might be termed 'public' or 'cultural' diplomacy, receive brief mentions via entries on the U.S. Information Agency or Radio Free Europe, but are not really treated as important aspects of American diplomatic efforts.

All of the above is not to call for an entirely different volume, and indeed, many of my concerns would have been allayed by a clearer statement of the boundaries within which the study was operating. Within those boundaries, as a reference volume addressing more traditional elements of American Cold War diplomacy, this is a hugely useful work and a remarkable achievement for a single-authored volume. It is certainly a book that I will be returning to repeatedly for precise and detailed explanations of crucial elements of American diplomacy in the Cold War era.

Notes

1. An effusive summary of such developments can be found in Thomas Zeiler, 'The diplomatic history bandwagon: a state of the field', *Journal of American History*, 95, 4 (March 2009), 1053–73.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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