

On foreign policy, a call to ditch the grim worldview and reawaken idealism

By the dismal standards of 2020, Robert B. Zoellick’s “America in the World: A History of U.S. Diplomacy and Foreign Policy” is a significant achievement. The volume may even be a bit of a shock for anyone who has consumed John Bolton’s “The Room Where It Happened” or other recent memoirs in which national security “adults” place the travails of the Trump administration into historical context. Although he held a string of top foreign policy jobs under both Bushes, was considered a prime candidate for secretary of state had Mitt Romney defeated Barack Obama in 2012 and was among the highest-ranking Republicans to sign a “Never Trump” letter in 2016, Zoellick the character makes only infrequent appearances in the volume. We don’t learn how he felt about his rivals for top jobs, and we might even have to squint to make him out in a single picture in the book’s obligatory photo spread.

This anachronistic modesty doesn’t, however, extend to the book’s aims. Zoellick wants to do more than entertain us with our past national glories. **He seeks to reawaken a pragmatic tradition in U.S. diplomacy: realism leavened with, in his words, “the belief that the United States is an exceptional, ongoing experiment, both at home and in international relations, that should serve a larger purpose.”**

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Zoellick wants to buck the 2020 trend of offering Henry Kissinger, and his insistence on seeing the world as a dark place where leadership is the agile making of dark choices, as the model for our age. His critique is subtle, even anxious — he repeatedly gives the nonagenarian his due, and then some. Still, Zoellick wants to push Kissinger, and George Kennan along with him, ever so slightly aside in favor of a pragmatism that considers American ideals and then asks what is possible — a view he attributes to William James and John Dewey as a “distinctive American philosophy.”

This project allows Zoellick to embrace the effectiveness of leaders as varied as Thomas Jefferson and George H.W. Bush. What it lacks is an effort to wrestle honestly with failure — theirs, his or ours. The places Zoellick ducks offer a road map for the tough terrain that establishment foreign policy thinkers, and not just Republican ones, will have to traverse to find themselves at the helm of successful U.S. diplomacy again.

Strictly speaking, Zoellick’s “History” is not a history at all but a volume of pithily narrated vignettes intended to illustrate his core themes: **the importance of pragmatic leadership that doesn’t lose sight of a few higher principles;** the centrality of the North American continent; **the interrelationship of economics and security; the value of alliances; and the roles of the public and Congress.**

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Zoellick, of course, did not spend those 30 years as a historian. He was U.S. trade representative, deputy secretary of state and president of the World Bank — as well as a lead global adviser at Goldman Sachs and a key voice in Romney’s 2012 White House bid. As such, he had a front-row seat to 9/11 and the diplomatic choices that followed around Iraq, Afghanistan and counterterrorism policy. He provides a judicious summary of how two presidents and their advisers waded, against their better judgment, into Vietnam. One wishes for that kind of critical insight about the forever wars and the choices made in the aftermath of the 2001 and 2008 recessions. Even more, particularly from leaders who cast their lot with the GOP, we are missing an honest assessment of decades of domestic politics that undermined arms control, international law, science, alliances abroad and the fabric of a diverse society at home.

If, as Zoellick writes, “the deepest tradition of U.S. diplomacy has been to advance America’s ideas,” what are we to do with the thorny relationship between those ideas and the lived reality of many people under U.S. rule? After our foes and allies alike have watched U.S. law enforcement kill unarmed Black men and bundle protesters into unmarked vans, some reckoning is surely necessary for pragmatic alliance management, to say nothing of actual commitment to the ideals in question.

Here Zoellick’s retelling of U.S. history comes up disappointingly empty. He disposes of Wilson’s record on race by calling it “a serious step backward” in a footnote, and refers to slavery as a problem for U.S. diplomacy but never as a problem for U.S. principles.

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Jefferson, at least for a time, struggled with the contradictions of his views on race. Some of FDR’s advisers (among them his wife) knew that his stances on Japanese American internment and Jewish refugees, while pragmatic, were deeply wrong. As Travis Adkins and Judd Devermont recently pointed out in Foreign Policy, Cold Warriors both Black and White were painfully aware of the contradictions of their ringing espousal of freedom.

Ducking these hard questions, and others, may be a tradition of U.S. diplomacy that contemporary life — with its need to form diverse coalitions at home and answer to empowered critics domestically and abroad — will no longer allow. Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama, each in his own way, sought to shine the light of U.S. values on some U.S. practices, while retaining a Kissingerian realism toward others. Zoellick makes a strong case that the story of the past can help us make the future better. But in the aftermath of a president who revels in U.S. hypocrisy, as this one does, returning to a polite silence won’t be sufficient on either pragmatic or moral grounds.