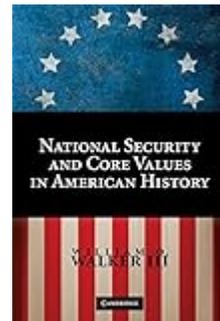


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**William O. Walker.** *National Security and Core Values in American History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xiv + 351 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-51859-8; ISBN 978-0-521-74010-4.



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Writing in the tradition of Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams, William O. Walker III argues that irresistible American expansion has undermined the fulfillment of the promise of democracy at home. From the earliest days of the republic, its political culture taught that the nation's core values were persistently threatened, leading to a simplistic—and increasingly militaristic and expansionist—concept of national security. “America’s march to hegemony,” Walker writes, “compromised the nation’s core values and thus the prospects for a healthy democracy” (p. 292). This misguided use of power culminated in the George W. Bush administration’s manipulation of a war on terror to wage preemptive warfare—sanctioned by a spineless Congress and uncritically supported by the compliant media—with blatant disregard for human rights and self-determination. The world about which Beard warned in 1948 tragically has come to pass: “the country at war at the behest of a powerful executive, unhampered by popular objections and legislative control” (p. 302).

*National Security and Core Values in American History* is an important book. It tackles issues of contemporary significance within a broad historical context, which is built on an extensive secondary literature, as well as select primary documents. Walker covers a

broader sweep of American foreign policy than his predecessors: Beard’s writing focused on the early twentieth century and largely ended with his critique of U.S. entry into World War II; Williams’s seminal work, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, first published in 1959, concentrated on the 1890-1950 period, although his later books traced “open door” imperialism to colonial times. Not only does Walker cover an additional half-century of highly contentious American involvement in world affairs, he also writes much more fully than either Beard or Williams on the earlier period. This depth reflects not only Walker’s building on the substantial scholarship of the last fifty years, but also his determination to examine fully the domestic context of American foreign relations. Besides the inspiration of Beard and Williams, Walker also acknowledges his particular indebtedness to the insights of several scholars of his generation, notably Robert Beisner, in *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists of 1898-1900* (1968); Michael Hunt, in *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (1987); Michael J. Hogan, in *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954* (1998); Odd Arne Westad, in *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (2005); and Joan Hoff, in *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush:*

*Dreams of Perfectibility* (2008).

At the heart of Walker's analysis are the concepts of "core values" and the "security ethos." After chastising other scholars, notably Melvyn Leffler, for writing about the importance of "core values" without adequately defining them, Walker offers a broad definition which traces "core values" to the nation's founding documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—which established the principles of republican governance, inherent rights (freedom of speech, assembly, trial by jury, protection against unreasonable seizures), limited government based on checks and balances and separation of powers, and faith in democracy, even if its practice was limited. Thus, embracing their own "exceptionalism" and confronting what seemed to be an often hostile world, Americans adhered to a "security ethos" which led to a moralistic and uncompromising definition of "national security."

According to Walker, the literature on twentieth-century U.S. foreign relations suffers from a historical disregard for the importance of the previous two centuries in shaping distinctive thought and practice. Thus, the first of his four phases of American national security policy is titled, "Origins of the Security Ethos, 1688-1919." Challenging conventional interpretations of the "national security state" as a post-World War II phenomenon, Walker contends that it took root in the tumultuous last three decades of this period. Influenced by Arthur T. Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson, America came to terms with imperialism, the Great War in Europe, and Bolshevism. Although the language of national security later changed, by the 1890s "the development of unprecedented firepower, the perception of hostile states threatening American vital interests and therefore ... values, and the use of local forces and covert activities for internal security purposes resonated across time" (pp. 52-53). Assumptions of American mission guided strategic thought. The essence of Wilson's "liberal-capitalist internationalism"—the culmination of this formative period—as a response to the threats of imperialism and Bolshevism can be traced to the Thomas Paine's and the other Founding Fathers' expressions of American exceptionalism.

Walker's next two phases—"Internationalism and Containment, 1919-1973" and "Strategic Globalism, 1973-2001"—detail an expanding definition of national security that left the United States at odds with the aspirations of emerging peoples and led to the erosion of core values. Walker's admiration for Charles Beard's icon-

oclasm does not preclude his acknowledging its shortcomings. Walker praises Franklin D. Roosevelt for his recognition of American vulnerability and pursuit of internationalism in the face of resistance from isolationists: "Nazi Germany posed a clear and present danger to the vital interests of the United States and ... Roosevelt's efforts saved the nation from disaster" (p. 295). The Cold War, however, presented a murkier set of security problems. Walker's brief discussion of its origins emphasizes the Soviet Union's security concerns and thus casts the containment policy as an overreaction. He especially criticizes the globalism of containment, fueled by a "political economy constructed on pillars of corporate profit, military power, and fear [which] left limited room for divergent perspectives" (p. 129). Political leaders, none more consistently than Richard Nixon, over his nearly three decades as a major political figure, exploited that "fear" in the name of national security to undermine "core values." Meanwhile, in dealing with "emerging peoples" in the developing world, Americans consistently equated leftist movements with Soviet-directed communism and trusted only those leaders who embraced a militant anticommunism. Driven by the imperative of economic hegemony, a policy characterized by military, political, and economic manipulation, left a sorry record of human rights abuses, unfulfilled objectives, and anti-American resentment. In chronicling this record of failure, Walker suggests that the CIA's role in the 1953 overthrow of Muhammad Musaddiq in Iran, and its support of the anti-Soviet *mujahedin* in Afghanistan in the 1980s, rank among the "three greatest foreign policy blunders in American history" (p. 198). (The third was the war with Spain.) The pursuit of "la ténente" implicitly recognized the limits of American power and exceptionalism, but the ending of the Cold War brought, especially in the policies of the Bush I and Clinton administrations, a renewed militarism and unilateralism. In the vanguard of what was later labeled neoconservatism, the journalists Robert Kagan and William Kristol, among others, insisted that it remained America's duty to lead world.

Walker reserves his most strident criticism for the Bush administration's aggressive policy since 9/11. The fourth phase of his delineation of national security policy is titled simply "The Bush Doctrine." The categorical "you're with us or against us" doctrine, the assertion of the right of preemptive warfare, the treatment of suspected terrorists, and the ill-conceived and disastrously implemented invasion of Iraq raise questions about America's "acceptance of sovereignty, the ideal of self-determination, adherence to international law, in-

definite detention and habeus corpus, and resort to torture in name of securityâ (p. 269). Walker sharply criticizes contemporary journalists and public intellectuals like John Lewis Gaddis, Michael Ignatieff, Thomas Friedman, and Fareed Zakaria for rationalizing assertive nationalism in the name of American exceptionalism and globalism. On other side, he finds the writing of Joan Hoff, Noam Chomsky, and Howard Zinn to speak to the issues that matter.

This impressive tour de force suffers from a few shortcomings. First, the âcore valuesâ at times become interchangeable with the imperatives of capitalism. Admittedly, there is some connection between the two, but the facile shifting of the underlying cause of the âsecurity ethosâ raises questions about whether the political-corporate elite is seen as manipulating public opinion to achieve economic ends. Second, the âsecurity ethosâ needs clearer definition and clarification of the extent to which it may have changed over time. Often it seems that Walker lapses into using the phrase to explain any foreign misadventure. Third, aside from considering World War II a justifiable defense of the nationâs âvital interests,â Walker implies that other uses of American political, economic, and military power were not well-grounded. In particular, it is difficult to discern the extent to which he considers any aspect of the containment policy to have been based on a reasonable calculation of âvital interests.â And this leads to a final point: the unrelenting criticism of the U.S. role in the world raises questions of balance and judgment. Certainly the United

States has been guilty of misjudgment, arrogance, insensitivity, and senseless destruction. And perhaps the negative outcomes outweigh the positive. Yet somehow the values of democracy—as witnessed in the Arab Spring—have spread throughout much of the world, perhaps not only because of Americaâs role, but it seems inappropriate to this reader to deny any credit to the United States. Likewise, the contest between communism and capitalism, which fifty years ago looked quite problematic, ultimately ended to the advantage of the West; again, American policy had something to do with that outcome. Also, the United States has often proved to be more flexible and pragmatic than critics would allow. As one example, ever since India became independent in 1947, the United States considered the survival of democracy in that country to be vital. To be sure, Americans often acted in ways that were insensitive to Indians, and there were several instances of high-minded moralistic criticisms of New Delhi. Yet underlying some misjudgments on both sides was a common Indo-American interest, upon which leaders in Washington quietly built. This helped lead to the close security relationship of the last decade. One does not have to champion exceptionalism to see a theme of considered realism in much of U.S. policy.

These reservations aside, Walkerâs thoughtful and thorough critique of the American quest for security ranks with the best of contemporary calls for reconsideration of the tenets of national security policy. Like Beard and Williams, he deserves a wide reading.

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