Frédéric Charillon and Célia Belin (eds.), Les États-Unis dans le monde (The United States in the World)  

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Charillon and Belin have assembled a fine collection of essays about the United States as it transitions from the Obama to the Trump administration. These ten pieces cover a wide range of issues, including American immigrant culture, the security challenges it faces, and whether Obama had a strategic doctrine. Taken together, they provide a very useful and often insightful overview of the country’s history and how its domestic and foreign policies intersect and inform each other. They also provide a uniquely French and French-Canadian take on the proper role of the U.S. in today’s world.

The volume is organized into three sections: “Domestic Factors”, “International Factors”, and “American Foreign Policy and Strategy”. Each section has three original essays. The resulting work has a much greater emphasis on American domestic politics than is typical for a study of the U.S. role in the world, but the opening section provides some useful background that gives greater depth to subsequent chapters. The essays appear to have been written independently and there are no cross-references or debates between authors, which is unfortunate since several chapters address similar topics in different ways. In particular, David and Rapin on the one hand and Béliveau on the other ask whether the Obama administration had a doctrine. While all agree that Obama was mostly a pragmatist and was governed by a sort of humanistic realism, they disagree on whether he followed a doctrine per se. The former argue that he did not, and that he was prone to approaching new problems reactively on a case-by-case basis. Béliveau, on the other hand, supports the dual doctrine view of Daniel Drezner, arguing that Obama pivoted from time to time between “multilateral retrenchment” – seen particularly in his “leading from behind” approach, and “counter-punch” – viz. responding periodically to serious threats with force. What none of the authors address is a sort of “contingent doctrine” in which Obama embraced an overarching aim of intervening for the good of both the U.S. and the planet, guided by weighing up which took precedence depending on the seriousness of the threat.

Another example of possible debate are the chapters by Gagnon and Cloutier-Roy on the one hand and Greene on the other. The former authors adopt a fairly conventional behaviourist approach to breaking down American public opinion and voting blocs, while Greene deploys Levinas’ concept of “alterity” to discuss the
many ways the Obama presidency addressed how the country should perceive and interact with the “Other” – both at home and abroad. While the first piece shows why politics in America can be polarised due to deep fissures in the body politic, Greene tries to weave a more profound and abstract story of fractured identity and ambivalent engagement with various groups abroad. She stresses that where these intersect – with respect to U.S. relations with Mexico and Cuba, for example – Obama took a more sophisticated approach than his predecessors – largely informed by his own “otherness”.

Another pairing that could have invited a lively debate were the chapters by Pézard and Galbert. Pézard deals with the growing threat represented by Putin’s Russia and an ever-growing China (Bueb and Geffrault also provide a rather frightening portrayal of US economic decline in the face of Chinese dynamism). Galbert provides a mostly historical review of American alliances since World War II. But while Pézard focuses on the threat without much discussion of the American response, Galbert argues that American security strategy has been mostly bungled by the Obama administration. He laments the efforts to reset relations with Russia and China – particular with respect to how these initiatives were carried out, and points out that Eastern European countries are feeling far more insecure than in the 1990s.

When the chapters by Bueb and Geffrault, Pézard, Galbert, David and Rapin and Béliveau are taken together, they reveal a profound ambivalence about the proper role of the United States in the world. On the one hand, concerns are repeatedly expressed about the decline of the U.S. – economically and militarily – while at the same time praise is offered for its willingness to delegate leadership – especially to Europeans. Fears are expressed about Russia and China supplanting the U.S., while American dominance is taken as inevitable. As a result, the book is as much a window into European expectations as it is an analysis of American foreign policy.

Two other essays deserve special attention. The piece by Quessard – based in large part on a recent book – provides considerable original research into the “soft power” initiatives of the Clinton State Department. Quessard discusses the deliberate use of social media, public diplomacy and other new techniques – and show their relative success in re-branding US foreign policy (the Nobel Peace Prize for Obama should have received more attention, perhaps). She also discusses the administration’s human rights initiatives – particularly those involving the abuse of women and girls. Taken together, the programmes were effective and significant in helping to keep the U.S. an attractive country and a draw to others. Again – a debate with Greene on alterity would have been very interesting. On the other hand, the dark and rather unfair description of US economic policy presented by Bueb and Geffrault seems out of place, in that it distorts what has been a widely praised eight years of economic renewal – one that continues into the Trump administration. The critique of US economic policy is contrasted with an overly optimistic view of Chinese economic growth, which already is beginning to plateau and struggle.

Taken as an ensemble, the book is a very useful way to break into the study of American foreign policy, although at times it is not entirely clear what the overarching theme and purpose were meant to be. Some of this certainly stems from the timing of the book’s release (October 2016). One detects a certain anxiety about the possibility of a Trump presidency (Hillary Clinton’s candidacy is scarcely mentioned). But it is mostly anxiety mixed with very tentative advice. Had the book appeared in mid-2016 the essays could have been more clearly aimed at a post-mortem of the Obama
administration. Had it appeared in mid-2017, it could have been a handbook for the new Trump White House (or perhaps a guide for how to cope with it).

In general, the authors' advice to the incoming Trump administration includes strengthening US leadership in the world, sustaining the global economy, and opening its political system. In other words, the opposite of what is taking place. They say little about the implications of ignoring their advice or what Europe might do about it. But one can infer that they would predict that current US policies will alienate allies and embolden adversaries. In particular, they would see nothing in Trump’s approach that will inhibit Russian adventurism or curtail China’s move toward hegemony. Moreover, withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade talks, along with efforts to limit immigration from the Middle East and repeated public denigration of NATO, would be seen as especially short-sighted. They would also condemn the increasingly divisive and polarising rhetoric of the administration and its lack of interest in reaching out to groups that did not vote for Trump in November 2016. And they would be correct. While it is unlikely that the current US President will ask for a copy of this fine book, the world would be better off if he did.