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Response to Book Review (To Lead the World: American Strategy after the Bush Doctrine

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Response by Melvyn P. Leffler, University of Virginia, and Jeffrey W. Legro, University of Virginia

We want to thank the commentators for their thoughtful and constructive remarks on our book. We think they highlight some of the key attributes of the volume and raise key issues for further reflection.

In order for readers of H-Diplo to understand the comments, we want to reiterate here what we stated in the introduction to the book. We tried to bring together some of the nation's most renowned scholars and public intellectuals from all sides of the political spectrum to focus on what should be done after the Bush administration left office. Although many of the contributors shared a view that recent foreign policy had been either disappointing or a disaster, their task was not to dwell on the past, but to focus on the future. We asked each of them to author a basic national security paper in which they identified key threats, defined overriding goals, assigned priorities to objectives, examined the tradeoffs between "interests" and values, and addressed the challenges of mobilizing domestic support for preferred policies, designing effective tactics, and re-configuring multinational institutions.

Although Mick Cox mentions that the volume has too much of an "insider" ring to it, we wonder whether Samantha Power, Charlie Maier, Jim Kurth, or David Kennedy would consider themselves Washington "insiders," although some of their views might have more resonance now that Barack Obama is in the White House (and indeed Samantha Power had been an adviser to him for a period of time). Be that as it may, our point here is that we self-consciously chose contributors who we thought would offer divergent answers to the challenging set of questions we posed. We hoped that their views in dialogue with one another would illuminate key challenges for U.S. strategy. They did not disappoint.

As we edited the book, one matter really surprised us. Although some commentators might rightly question whether the United States could lead, an interesting, indeed compelling, conclusion was that the United States should lead. Whether authors' political sensibilities were on the right or the left, they almost uniformly believed that the United States had to exert some form of leadership role; hence the title of the book. Moreover, and equally surprising given all the criticism of the United States in recent years, we found that there is both domestic and international support for U.S. leadership. In many respects the demand for U.S. leadership has only increased with the onset of the current economic crisis. Mick Cox is right about the damage inflicted on the world by U.S. mismanagement and insouciance over the last few years, and the adverse consequences such actions have had on the attractiveness of the U.S. model, yet nonetheless, money and investment, in relative terms, have headed to the United States.

The agreement on leadership, however, did not mean there was consensus on many critical matters. The contributors disputed the goals and strategies of leadership, and we agree with Henry Nau that such debate is critical to thoughtful assessment and sound decisions. In our conclusion, we highlight the areas of disagreement as well as agreement. And the

discord over threat perception, priorities, capabilities, and institutions illuminates why the actual tasks of policymaking are so daunting. When some of the smartest and most knowledgeable observers disagree on so many fundamental matters and when they lay out their ideas with so much lucidity, one can readily understand why there is confusion and sometimes paralysis in decision-making circles. If anything, we hope readers will take away from the volume a renewed appreciation of the dilemmas faced by officials and a greater tolerance and openness for views other than their own.

It is fair to inquire, as Bill Walker thoughtfully does, whether the United States should lead, and can lead. Indeed, given the formidable constraints and its eroding capabilities, perhaps the United States should lead only selectively (assuming we can agree on what 'selective' entails). But if the United States does not lead, who will, and toward what ends? And what will be the consequences of a possible absence of leadership? As one reflects on such matters in the midst of the present financial meltdown, we cannot help but recall the widespread consensus that one of the overriding problems of the years between World War I and World War II was the absence of a benevolent hegemon. Charles Kindleberger pointed this out long ago, and the absence of leadership in those years had profound economic as well as geopolitical repercussions.

Yes, let's think more deeply about whether the world needs a hegemon, about what constitutes "benevolence," and how "preponderance" should be exercised. We think the essays in our volume can lead to a healthy debate about these matters and many more such issues, matters that have become more, rather than less, pressing in the months since the book was published.

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