Nixon’s 1970s

Ryan Irwin
University at Albany, State University of New York, rirwin@albany.edu

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For much of the first two decades after World War II, the Cold War shaped the contours of world affairs. American consumerism merged with Keynesian planning in the West, powering a durable yet militarized economic recovery that linked North America with Europe and Japan, while the Soviet Union—locked in an awkward diplomatic marriage to communist China—gravitated toward a sturdy homeostasis based on domestic austerity, defense spending, and geopolitical opportunism. The resulting arrangement was a portrait of paradox. Cast as ideological antipodes on the world stage, Washington and Moscow stumbled into an expensive arms race and a vicious set of proxy conflicts, even as they reinforced comparable norms about geopolitical bipolarity, state-led economic development, and cultural homogeneity.

As readers of H-1960s know well, this status quo ended during the 1960s. Precipitated by decolonization abroad and demographic change at home—to say nothing of the rights revolution and America’s controversial war in Vietnam—activists, academics, and politicians everywhere began removing the “lens” of the early Cold War. By the end of the decade, political, social, and cultural assumptions once cast in static, universal terms had given way to novel arguments about dependency, racism, and imperialism. “Like balls of yarn, stable lines of postwar geopolitics came undone as people pulled at them from multiple directions,” historian Jeremi Suri explains (p. 67). The resulting upheavals not only reset the trajectory of world politics, but also established an infinitely more complex global system based on geopolitical plurality, economic decentralization, and cultural contestation.

Nixon in the World provides a series of snapshots of the post-1960s world. The book is a study of high diplomacy and grand strategy, framed by a simple question: how did the U.S. government respond to the challenges of this uncertain era? With a combination of hard-nosed realpolitik and strident amorality, editors Fredrick Logevall and Andrew Preston argue. “Rather than unrealistically demonizing its adversaries,” the United States embraced the notion “that in an increasingly globalized world it could no longer seal off its rivals” (p. 8). Communist countries, like the Soviet Union and China, dismissed once as existential threats to the United States, reemerged as viable political partners, while Germany, France, and Japan—integral parts of Washington’s postwar alliance during the first two decades of the Cold War—found themselves recast as mere pawns on the chessboard of global affairs. “Conservative in its aims” yet “revolutionary in its methods,” the resulting approach transformed the rules of foreign affairs, revitalizing America’s strategy of containment while softening the logic and implications of the superpower contest (p. 7). The goal, in short, was to refresh U.S. power in an age of relative decline.

Nixon in the World’s individual chapters catalogue the administration’s successes and failures in implement-
The 1970s in Perspective

None of which is to question directly the importance of Nixon in the World. The book deserves to be read widely. A historical consensus is emerging about the 1970s. Dismissed once as an anomaly in the twentieth century, the tumultuous decade is reemerging as one of the seminal pivot-points of the modern era—equal in importance only to the 1890s and 1930s. [1] Nixon in the World tells a story of U.S. foreign policy during this age of upheaval, and it does so with analytical precision and interpretive balance. To future volumes will fall the daunting task of uncovering new questions, and recasting America’s story in an international framework.

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