


Book Review: Why America Misunderstands The World: National Experience and the Roots of Misperception by Paul R. Pillar

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Pillar, Paul R. *Why America Misunderstands The World: National Experience and the Roots of Misperception*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xii + 212 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Paul R. Pillar, a foreign policy and international relations scholar with experience working at the Central Intelligence Agency, sets forth to illustrate how the United States' particular history and geographic situation have created a perfect a storm for the American public to misunderstand the motivations and experiences of people in other countries. It is the United States' uniqueness or exceptionalism that insulates Americans from the realities of other countries. The American public's beliefs and perceptions influence foreign policy, in part because our leaders are part of the American public and therefore subject to some of the same biases, but also because elected officials are hesitant to break with traditional views and risk alienating their constituents by pursuing courses of actions that may make more sense from a geopolitical perspective but go against the grain of American exceptionalism. In fact, Pillar asks the reader to adopt a more neutral interpretation of "exceptionalism," to focus on the ways in which the United States' development as a country is, in some ways, unique but not *ipso facto* better.

By placing the United States in a historical and geographical context, Pillar is able to examine how both have influenced the development of a shared ethos that limits the public's ability to grasp why not every nation is driven towards adopting a liberal democracy, much less why other peoples are firmly attached to their own systems of governing. This short-sightedness has resulted in major failures of public policy, including the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Due to the fact that the United States is cushioned between two vast oceans, we have not often faced aggression on our home turf. Beginning with the genocide of the American Indian peoples, Pillar outlines how the United States has been able to easily (relatively speaking) defeat any opposition to Manifest Destiny on a continent rich with resources. Americans like to picture themselves as only sallying off to war for righteous reasons, a view reinforced by the atrocities of World War II. Every war since then has been framed in terms of demonized enemies who want nothing less than the destruction of the American way of life, whether that threat is from communism and the USSR during the Cold War or from Islamicist terrorism in the form of Saddam Hussein or ISIS. Pillar also traces the ways that American religiosity plays a role in the ideological blinders that perpetuate bad policies.

This book is imminently approachable, written in a style that is clear and unassuming. Pillar's approach to examining the cultural tenets that form the foundation of the United States' interactions with other global actors offers a novel perspective on foreign policy complications. By taking a step back from individual actors or government entities towards entire societies, he recalls the anthropologist Ruth Benedict's treatment of Japan in *The Chrysanthemum and the*

Sword, although in her case the point was to understand another country holistically in relation to the United States, as opposed to his approach to turning the lens inward.

One glaring issue Pillar fails to discuss in his depiction of how history shaped the American experience is that of slavery. Surely that peculiar institution and its profound effects on the psyche and economy of the nascent United States still echo today in how we act on the global stage. He also briefly discusses the massacre of the American Indian peoples as if it was only history and the people no longer exist. His paltry treatment of race assumes that everyone benefits more or less equally from American exceptionalism, ignoring that marginalized groups have long been disenchanted with U.S. foreign policy. While it is true that the people with power have benefitted most directly from America's unique history, the American experience is by no means monolithic. As marginalized groups gain more representation, perhaps their experiences can act as a corrective to long held beliefs, which Pillar concludes may be too deeply entrenched to be rectified.

Despite these lacunae, this insightful book will be of use to any student of international relations and foreign policy, particularly at the introductory level. In fact, its clarity and conciseness makes it accessible to a wider, public audience who would do well to educate themselves on the foreign policies that are entwined in their lives.

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