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On: 11 September 2014, At: 09:40

Publisher: Routledge

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## Security Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fsst20>

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Published online: 08 Sep 2010.

To cite this article: K. Narizny (2010) The New Debate: International Relations Theory and American Strategic Adjustment in the 1890s, *Security Studies*, 11:1, 151-170, DOI: [10.1080/714005317](https://doi.org/10.1080/714005317)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/714005317>

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# THE NEW DEBATE: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND AMERICAN STRATEGIC ADJUSTMENT IN THE 1890S

KEVIN NARIZNY

Peter Trubowitz, Emily O. Goldman, and Edward Rhodes, eds., *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment: Ideas, Institutions, and Interests* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)

Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

THE END OF the cold war provided an auspicious opportunity for the development of international relations theory. Just as the debate between realists and institutionalists was coming to a head, the global balance of power shifted, allowing scholars to make bold predictions about the rapidly changing international environment. The most contentious issue was the continuing viability of institutions formed during the cold war, particularly NATO, the GATT, and the European Union. Institutionalists expected each of these regimes to flourish, while realists, who assumed that the structure of the international system would devolve into competitive multipolarity, forecast their decline.<sup>1</sup> If this assumption had been correct, the question of institutional longevity would have constituted a critical test of the two theories. Since the

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I would like to thank Aaron Friedberg, Ken Schultz, Deborah Boucoyannis, and Arman Grigorian for their helpful comments and advice.

1. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The United States and International Institutions in Europe After the Cold War," in *After the Cold War: International Institutions and State Strategies in Europe, 1989–1991*, ed. Robert O. Keohane, Joseph S. Nye Jr., and Stanley Hoffman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993): 104–26; John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (summer 1990): 2–56. See also David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

SECURITY STUDIES 11, no. 1 (autumn 2001): 151–70  
Published by Frank Cass, London.

mid-1990s, however, the persistence of American hegemony has forced realists to revise their predictions. They argue that the United States will maintain organizations that advance its interests and preserve its global influence, such as the GATT/WTO and NATO, while second-tier states will develop regional blocs like the EU to balance against American power.<sup>2</sup> In short, realism now produces the same substantive predictions as institutionalism.

Although the unipolarity of the new international order has left the theoretical debate unresolved, it is doubtful that institutionalism ever could have replaced realism, or even offered a comprehensive alternative to it. Institutionalists never claimed to have created a comparably universal theory of international relations; quite to the contrary. In the early 1980s they modestly referred to their perspective as the “modified structural” approach, in reference to its origins in Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism.<sup>3</sup> If NATO, the WTO, and the EU survive the eventual decline of American hegemony, it will not invalidate the core realist assumption that states are unitary actors that seek power and security. Instead, it will prove only that the prospects for multilateral cooperation are not determined entirely by the international distribution of power. At most, institutionalist analyses might force realists to concede their strongest, most parsimonious claims about the value states place on the preservation of their sovereignty, but the theory cannot engender a true paradigm shift in the field. Almost by default, then, realism in its various, analytically weakened forms remains the dominant perspective in security studies.

In recent years, however, a new theory war has been shaping up. As Andrew Moravcsik noted in “A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” many scholars have been working from the premise that domestic preferences, not system-level variables, are the most fundamental determinant of state behavior.<sup>4</sup> Liberalism, as conceived this way, is more of a methodological framework than a coherent theory. It does not accord priority to any particular kind of preferences, so it has no standard set of core assumptions that can be directly compared to those of realism. Thus, there is no real possibility for a substantive debate between realism and a monolithic “liberalism,” at least not in the same

2. Mark Sheetz and Michael Mastanduno, “Debating the Unipolar Moment,” *International Security* 22, no. 3 (winter 1997/98): 168–74; Robert Jervis, “Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate,” *International Security* 24, no. 1 (summer 1999): 42–63; Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (summer 2000): 5–41.

3. Stephen D. Krasner, “Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables,” in *International Regimes*, ed. Stephen D. Krasner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983): 1–21; Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 25–30.

4. Andrew Moravcsik, “A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (autumn 1997): 513–53.

way that realism and institutionalism could be contrasted directly. Instead, realism is confronted with a host of liberal theories, each of which employs a different kind of domestic preference—be it economic interests, mass culture, or bureaucratic procedures—as the independent variable. Given the diversity of these views and the relative stability of the new international system, which has prevented the rise of the sort of high-profile natural experiments that were so abundant at the end of the cold war, one might expect to see scholars talking past each other rather than debating one critical case or set of cases. It is both remarkable and fortuitous, therefore, that some of the most theoretically polarizing works to emerge recently in the study of international security have converged on a single question: why did the United States abandon its traditionally defensive naval strategy and begin to build battleships in the 1890s?

#### STATE-CENTRIC REALISM

THE MAJOR REALIST contribution to this debate, Fareed Zakaria's *From Wealth to Power*, serves as the standard against which liberal theories must be judged, since his "state-centric" perspective represents an elegantly parsimonious refinement of a very traditional view of state behavior.<sup>5</sup> Zakaria begins with the assumption that states seek international power commensurate with their economic wealth, then adds the caveat that the head of state must have sufficient power over society and other governmental actors to be able to enact his or her favored policies. Otherwise, parochial interest groups will divert resources and decision-making authority away from the executive, making it impossible for the latter to pursue the unitary national interest effectively. Applying this perspective to the United States, Zakaria demonstrates that congressional opposition was a serious obstacle to presidents' attempts at expansionism in the period of 1865 to 1889. He then argues that the balance of power between Congress and the executive branch was shifting significantly in favor of the latter between 1877 and 1896. The civil service, foreign service, and military were professionalized and strengthened; President Grover Cleveland asserted the "emergency" power of the president to break strikes without the consent of the affected state's governor; President Rutherford B. Hayes set a precedent for the aggressive use of the veto; congressional influence over executive appointments and dismissals was weakened; and patronage was eliminated. By the 1890s, the executive had finally become powerful enough

5. Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

relative to the legislative branch that it could pursue an expansionist grand strategy, including the construction of a battleship fleet, relatively unfettered. With this analysis Zakaria claims to have solved two puzzles about the case. First, by assuming that executive decisionmakers are innately predisposed to try to increase their state's power internationally, he explains why the United States bothered to expand at all, given that it was quite secure from foreign threats at the end of the century. Second, by focusing on the limits of the executive's power before the 1890s, he shows why there was a long lag between the growth of America's economy and its international expansion.

This interpretation is by no means uncontroversial.<sup>6</sup> One criticism in particular deserves attention here: that the causal link between "the transformation of state structure" and declining congressional opposition to expansionism is quite weak.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is not clear why the institutional changes of the 1880s should have prevented Congress from providing just as much resistance to presidential initiatives in the 1890s as it did in earlier years. In the entire period covered by Zakaria, the Senate's constitutional power over treaty ratification, which was the single most important constraint on the executive's conduct of foreign policy, was neither reinterpreted by the Supreme Court nor amended. The institutional developments cited by Zakaria might have made the executive a more active, competent player in the conduct of international affairs; however, they hardly seem sufficient to explain why legislators decided not to exercise their formal power to vote against the expansionist initiatives of the 1890s. Were they intimidated by the fearsome new powers of the executive branch, or perhaps coerced into compliance by presidents' threats to withhold domestic goods from them? Nowhere does Zakaria explain this leap of reasoning or provide any compelling evidence for it. It seems more likely that the presidents who met with the most resistance from Congress—regardless of when they served—were simply out of touch with the needs of their constituents, rather than realist martyrs to the "national interest." As Sean Lynn-Jones writes, "If congressional opposition to plans for expansion reflected political and policy disagreement more than state structure, then Zakaria's attempt to explain U.S. policy as a consequence of state strength or weakness becomes less persuasive."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, then, it was changing domestic preferences, not the loosening of institutional constraints, that accounted for the outstretch of American power in the 1890s.

6. See David C. Hendrickson's review in *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 4 (July/August 1998): 120; Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Realism and America's Rise: A Review Essay," *International Security* 23, no. 2 (fall 1998): 157–82; Walter McDougall, "American Empire," *New York Times*, 3 May 1998; Aaron L. Friedberg, "Outward Bound," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, 15 May 1998.

7. Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 11.

8. Lynn-Jones, "Realism and America's Rise," 179.

## LIBERAL THEORIES

THE VIEW THAT preferences are the key to understanding this case is laid out in *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment*, a collection of essays edited by Peter Trubowitz, Emily O. Goldman, and Edward Rhodes. The introductory article, written by Trubowitz and Rhodes, does not refer explicitly to the term “liberal theory,” but these scholars make it quite clear that the contributors to the volume are united as much by their attention to domestic politics as by their focus on the American navy. Strategic adjustment, Trubowitz and Rhodes write, is:

a response to an ambiguous international environment, a response that emerges from profound domestic political struggles over the allocation of resources, that is shaped by particular institutional endowments and by the real but constrained adaptive capacity of those institutions, and that reflects a struggle over ideas and meaning that mirrors political tensions within American society.<sup>9</sup>

For the three articles that deal with the building of the battleship navy in the late 1880s and early 1890s, this is where the agreement ends. Trubowitz, developing the “new left” interpretation of American diplomatic history originally proposed by William A. Williams and Walter LaFeber, argues that strategic adjustment is best explained as the product of the competing material interests of different geographical sections of the country.<sup>10</sup> Rhodes, on the other hand, asserts that this shift was the consequence of Americans’ search for national unity in the face of wrenching social changes, an argument that in some ways resembles historian Richard Hofstadter’s account of the causes of the Spanish-American War of 1898.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Mark Shulman points to the critical role played by naval reformers in both popularizing and institutionalizing the idea of strategic adjustment. Since these three authors take positions that directly contradict each other, a side-by-side comparison provides an excellent opportunity to evaluate the broader theoretical question of whether any

9. Peter Trubowitz and Edward Rhodes, “Explaining American Strategic Adjustment,” in *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment: Ideas, Institutions, and Interests*, ed. Peter Trubowitz, Emily O. Goldman, and Edward Rhodes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 22.

10. Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansionism, 1860–1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963); William Appleman Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and the Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Economy* (New York: Random House, 1969). See also Richard F. Biesel, *Sectionalism and American Political Development, 1880–1980* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

11. Richard Hofstadter, “Cuba, the Philippines, and Manifest Destiny,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Richard Hofstadter (New York: Knopf, 1965), 145–87.

particular kind of liberal theory—political-economic, cultural-cognitive, or ideational—is a viable challenger to realism.

#### THE CULTURE OF STRATEGIC ADJUSTMENT

EDWARD RHODES'S analysis is rooted in the idea that individuals have a cognitive need for beliefs that both help them deal with societal stresses and are consistent with their deeply held sense of identity.<sup>12</sup> When these beliefs pertain to political issues, they can have a profound effect on the making of public policy. Viewed in these terms, the United States at the end of the nineteenth century was ripe for upheaval, because a serious disjuncture was growing between some of the most basic political beliefs on which the nation was founded and the immediate problems its citizens faced. Throughout their history, Americans had conceived of their country as a refuge from the ills of the Old World—class conflict, ethnic rivalries, and political repression. By the 1890s, however, this image was coming under severe strain from every possible direction. Industrialization led to the rise of a new urban proletariat, whose conflict of interest with wealthy capitalists threatened to undermine social stability; a new wave of immigration from southern and central Europe made the country less homogeneously Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, creating serious ethnic tensions; and the military occupation of the South after the Civil War left deep scars of resentment in the region.

According to Rhodes, these challenges to the country's unity necessitated new political beliefs: "In the absence of other common institutions—religion, language, freehold agriculture—citizenship became the essential element in social membership. The state thus became central to social identity."<sup>13</sup> Since Americans still viewed centralized government as a threat to their personal liberty, the logical response for policymakers was to strengthen the state only vis-à-vis the outside world, where it could promote American virtues and serve as a symbol of the greatness of the United States. For a number of reasons, a battleship fleet suited this role perfectly. First, the country's existing navy was far too defensively oriented ever to be able to challenge the corrupt European great powers. Instead, it needed top-of-the-line, oceangoing ships in order to exert influence and win respect. Second, the sort of open-seas combat in

12. Edward Rhodes, "Constructing Power: Cultural Transformation and Strategic Adjustment in the 1890s," in Trubowitz, Goldman, and Rhodes, *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment*, 29–78. An earlier version of this essay appeared as Edward Rhodes, "Sea Change: Interest-based vs. Cultural-Cognitive Accounts of Strategic Choice in the 1890s," *Security Studies* 5, no. 4 (summer 1996): 73–124.

13. Rhodes, "Constructing Power," 62–63.

which battleships engaged typified the ideal of warfare as a chivalric duel rather than a life-or-death struggle between whole societies. This reorientation of the cultural connotations of war would help heal Civil War divisions by recasting it as a valorous fight between respected equals, not a bitter struggle over mutually opposed ways of life. Finally, an enlarged navy, unlike a powerful army, could not be used as an agent of repression. Battleships offered all the benefits of European militarism—patriotism, power, and unity—but did not pose any threat to American liberties.

Rhodes's argument is as ambitious as it is insightful, giving us not simply an explanation for strategic change but also a holistic view of the development of the American civic psyche. As is inevitable for a work of such breadth, however, it does beg some questions. In particular, it is not certain that the reconceptualization of the state as outward-looking was really intended, either consciously or subconsciously, to address the cultural-cognitive crises afflicting the country at the time. If Northerners had felt a great need to heal the wounds of the Civil War, they should have tried to curry favor with Southerners, either by making political concessions or by rallying behind issues around which there was a strong, cross-regional consensus. Yet, as Peter Trubowitz demonstrates in his own essay (which I will discuss shortly), Southern legislators were consistently and overwhelmingly opposed to the construction of battleships and other expansionist policies. Northern attempts to make the state the locus of social identity were therefore divisive, not unifying. Whatever marginal benefits there were to using battleships to recast the image of the Civil War as a chivalrous duel must have been far outweighed by the resentment that the new naval program caused among Southerners. Furthermore, the timing of the decision to build battleships needs to be explained, since the Reconstruction ended in 1877, more than a decade before the first battleship was authorized. If the "reintegration of the South into the national polity" was such a critical goal, why did policymakers wait thirteen years after the end of the military occupation of the South—and a full quarter-century after the Civil War—to address it in this way?<sup>14</sup>

The linkage between an outward-looking state and the problems of industrialization is equally tenuous. The upheavals of the late nineteenth century were indeed addressed by a movement that bridged societal divisions and reoriented Americans' beliefs about the role of the state—but that movement was progressivism, not expansionism. Theodore Roosevelt, who took office in 1901, effected domestic changes that had a far greater impact on ordinary

14. *Ibid.*, 61. Battleships did not become an integral part of European navies until the 1870s, but presumably American policymakers could have attempted to create a unifying political culture by other means before then.

Americans' lives than strategic adjustment ever did. He used the power of the executive office to rein in monopolies and trusts, improve working conditions, and protect consumers. These measures failed to win over the South in the election of 1904, but nevertheless helped heal the growing rift between labor and capital, as well as that between rural and urban dwellers. Then, in 1912, Woodrow Wilson kept Southerners in his progressive coalition by emphasizing the rights of the individual over a centralized, paternalistic state—a message that presumably would have fit in well with the antistatist political beliefs of the 1890s.<sup>15</sup> If policy paradigm shifts are the product of cultural-cognitive crises, rather than changes in the relative political power of economic interest groups, then Rhodes must explain why naval reform succeeded in the early 1890s but progressivism did not take hold until a decade later.

#### THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF STRATEGIC IDEAS

IN THE NEXT chapter of *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment*, Mark Shulman examines the sort of process-level variables that are needed to flesh out Rhodes's cultural-cognitive interpretation.<sup>16</sup> He does not, however, find that strategic adjustment in the 1890s was primarily a response to social problems. Instead, he argues that it was produced by the vigorous advocacy of an amorphous group of naval officers and like-minded civilians. They first reformed the navy itself, institutionalizing their ideals by taking control over key positions within its organizational structure. Then, through the use of printed essays, patriotic novels and music, parades, fairs, historical revisionism, media manipulation, and other forms of propaganda and persuasion, they managed to convince the country of the worthiness of their cause. The parliamentary skill of the proponents of navalism was also an important factor, since they were long in the minority in Congress. Only by running a “multi-front, creative political campaign,” did they manage to sway the American public and its elected representatives to their position.<sup>17</sup> In other words, strategic adjustment occurred because battleships were well marketed, not because they served any compelling strategic, economic, or cultural purpose.

15. Richard L. Watson Jr., *The Development of National Power: The United States, 1900–1919* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 156.

16. Mark Shulman, “Institutionalizing a Political Idea: Navalism and the Emergence of American Sea Power,” in Trubowitz, Goldman, and Rhodes, *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment*, 79–101.

17. Shulman, “Institutionalizing a Political Idea,” 95.

Shulman's contribution to the debate is commendable, since he approaches the problem at a level of analysis that is far less abstract and speculative than that of Rhodes, Trubowitz, or Zakaria. Yet, his argument still suffers from a problem that often confronts ideational theories: it does not explain why we should not simply take for granted the spread of ideas. When stripped to its essentials, the case for battleships was both simple and compelling, and did not require either exceptional salesmanship or unusual erudition to support it. If the American government intended to promote and protect commercial expansion in the periphery, then conflicts with the other great powers would become increasingly frequent, and it would be necessary to build a fleet that would be strong enough to stand up to them. The navalists' assertion that full-sized battleships must be a critical component of such a fleet should not have come as a revelation to any informed observer; it took no feat of genius to realize that the biggest U.S. ships, which in 1886 displaced only 4,500 tons, could not defeat European ships that displaced 15,000 tons.<sup>18</sup>

In general, any new policy initiative that receives a modicum of support from the American public is bound to have supporters in the media, Congress, and other institutions. Thus, in most cases, we can assume that advocacy efforts are part of the natural political process, and ignore them in favor of a more fundamental question: what factors made the masses receptive to persuasion? After all, no amount of editorializing and speechmaking could now convince a majority of Americans to support the revival of Reagan-era military spending levels, since there is currently no international threat or domestic impetus—cultural, economic, or otherwise—that could reasonably justify the expense. By the same logic, it seems most likely that the navalists of the 1880s and 1890s were able to build such a high profile not because they managed to engender a sweeping change in public and elite opinion, but because Americans were already in the process of becoming interested in expansionist policies. To understand why this occurred, we must either return to Rhodes's thesis or look elsewhere.

18. Figures from Walter R. Herrick Jr., *The American Naval Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1966), 36. Many scholars have downplayed the independent influence of policy entrepreneurs such as Alfred T. Mahan, who published a major treatise in 1890 on the subject of naval strategy. For example, see Robert Seager II, "Ten Years before Mahan: The Unofficial Case for the New Navy, 1880–1890," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 40, no. 3 (1953): 491–512; Paul S. Holbo, "Economics, Emotion, and Expansion: An Emerging Foreign Policy," in *The Gilded Age*, ed. H. Wayne Morgan, revised edn. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970) 199–221.

## ALTERNATIVES TO CULTURE AND IDEAS

IT IS UNQUESTIONABLE, as Rhodes argues, that there was a transformation in the political culture of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, and that the navy's strategic readjustment fit in with Americans' new conception of their state. Yet, one cannot settle the question simply by accepting this point. Perhaps changes in material interests were driving the adoption of a battleship fleet, and the accompanying evolution of attitudes was either epiphenomenal or unrelated. Commendably, Rhodes confronts this issue head-on by addressing no fewer than ten distinct kinds of alternative explanation—four realist, two bureaucratic, and four political-economic. Unfortunately, his analysis gives two of these perspectives short shrift. One is Trubowitz's political economy theory; I will discuss this shortly. The other, which might be called "commercial realist"—but which, in modified form, is also integral to Trubowitz's argument—is the idea that American manufacturers needed battleships to support their increasing interest in foreign trade in Latin America and Asia in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Unlike Zakaria's state-centric realism, this view does not assume that states automatically seek power in the international system in proportion to their national income, so it does not require a theory of institutional constraints to explain why the United States did not expand before the 1880s.

Rhodes's critique of the commercial realist interpretation has two serious flaws. First, he contradicts mountains of research in asserting that "there was no burst of export activity or interest in exports in the 1880s."<sup>19</sup> While the pioneering work on the subject, Walter LaFeber's *The New Empire*, has rightfully been criticized for exaggerating the extent to which both businesses and politicians were preoccupied with foreign trade in the 1860s and 1870s, one would nevertheless be hard-pressed to find any expert on the era who would deny that Americans' interest in exports did indeed increase in the 1880s, especially during the severe recession of 1884–86.<sup>20</sup> Second, Rhodes mischaracterizes a crucial element of the commercial realist thesis. He writes,

19. Rhodes, "Constructing Power," 44. See also pp. 55–56.

20. One exception is Julius W. Pratt, *The Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964), 233. This book was originally published in 1936, long before LaFeber's research appeared, and does not directly examine the 1880s. Subsequently, even the harshest critics of LaFeber's thesis have not taken as extreme a view as Rhodes. For example, Robert Beisner writes, "This criticism does not mean the economic interpretation should be rejected out of hand, but it must be blended where possible with other views to create a useful synthesis," Robert Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865–1900* (New York: Crowell, 1975), 24. On the growth of export interests in the 1880s, see LaFeber, *The New Empire*, 17–24; Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire*, 22, 50; Edward P. Crapol, *America for Americans: Economic Nationalism and Anglophobia in the Late Nine-*

This...Realist explanation for the strategic adjustment of the 1890s argues that American national economic interests were driving the United States to acquire an overseas empire and that it needed to acquire an imperial-type navy, like those of European powers, which would enable it to control key stretches of ocean between the metropole and colony.<sup>21</sup>

Quite to the contrary, few scholars have argued that Americans believed their growing interest in export necessitated the acquisition of colonies, or that U.S. grand strategy was imperialist between 1877 and 1898.<sup>22</sup> American businesses were competitive enough that all they required was open-door access to undeveloped markets, which would be far less expensive to maintain than an empire. Battleships and naval bases would be necessary not to defend lines of supply between the “metropole and colony,” but rather to threaten other great powers that wanted to annex territories in which American businesses had already established a presence. The Samoan crisis of 1889, in which President Grover Cleveland sent American warships to oppose the German navy’s attempts to seize control of the islands, illustrated the pressing need for the United States to be able to match the fleets of other great powers, even when its only policy goal was to maintain equal commercial opportunities for its citizens.<sup>23</sup> It was surely no coincidence that the first battleship was authorized the very next year.

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*teenth Century* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), esp. chap. 3; Ray Ginger, *The Age of Excess: The United States from 1877 to 1914* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 53–55, 158–59; Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power: The United States from 1877 to 1914* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), 8–9; David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment: American Economic Expansion in the Hemisphere, 1865–1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 23–24; David E. Novack and Matthew Simon, “Commercial Responses to the American Export Invasion, 1871–1914: An Essay in Attitudinal History,” *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History* 3, no. 2 (1966): 121–33; Justus D. Doenecke, *The Presidencies of James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1981), 165–67.

21. Rhodes, “Constructing Power,” 45. See also pp. 55–56.

22. Indeed, few historians consider the United States to have followed an imperialist strategy even after 1898, despite its having acquired the Philippines in the Spanish-American War. See, for example, John Dobson, *Reluctant Expansionism: The Foreign Policy of William McKinley* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1988). A notable exception is May, *Imperial Democracy*.

23. George T. Davis, *A Navy Second to None: The Development of Modern American Naval Policy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), 86. The lessons of the Samoan Crisis were later emphasized in the Venezuela Crisis of 1895, in which Grover Cleveland threatened war against Great Britain.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF STRATEGIC ADJUSTMENT

THE COMMERCIAL realist argument would, therefore, be fairly convincing if it were evident that there had been an objective *national* interest in supporting American exports and foreign investment. That point, however, is far from certain, as Peter Trubowitz argues in his chapter of *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment*.<sup>24</sup> He shows that congressional support for naval expansion varied greatly among the three major geographical sections of the United States. Northeasterners, whose regional economy was more industrialized than that of any other part of the country, had many reasons to support battleships. First, and most importantly, they had been concerned since the mid-1880s about the problem of overproduction. In response, they became increasingly interested in finding new markets for their manufactured goods—in particular, in Latin America and east Asia, since Europe proved hard to crack. According to the commercial realist logic described above, they would need the backing of battleships to ensure that their rights would not be trampled by other great powers. Second, since most naval construction was done in northeastern shipyards, that region had the most to gain from naval spending. Third, federal spending on battleships would help reduce the chronic budgetary surplus, thereby justifying maintaining high tariffs on manufactured goods—which largely benefited northeastern manufacturers. Finally, an expansionist strategy was appealing to Republican party leaders, who tried to build support in the agrarian West by emphasizing the potential for selling grain in Latin American and Asian markets.

Southerners, whose regional economy was highly dependent on the export of cotton and other raw materials to Europe, had little reason to support an offensive naval strategy. Their trade in the North Atlantic was well protected by the British fleet, so battleships served no purpose for them. The construction of a blue-water navy might even increase the potential for diplomatic conflict between the United States and the European great powers, which could lead to a disruption of trading relations. Southerners would therefore be better off with less expansionism, not more. Furthermore, there were domestic distributive implications to strategic adjustment. The federal government's revenue relied heavily on tariffs on manufactured goods, which benefited the industrial north at the expense of the agrarian south. Because naval shipyards and steel mills were located primarily in the North, Southerners would not be compensated by the direct economic benefits of military spending. Interest-

24. Peter Trubowitz, "Geography and Strategy: The Politics of American Naval Expansion," in Trubowitz, Goldman, and Rhodes, *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment*, 105–38.

ingly, the one exception to this point proves the rule: in Alabama, where “one of the nation’s newest and most prolific centers of steel production was located,” Congressional support for battleships was stronger than in any other Southern state.<sup>25</sup>

DECIDING THE DEBATE: NAVAL POLITICS, 1891–95

**R**HODES AGREES with Trubowitz that Southerners were less enthusiastic about naval expansion than Northerners, but proposes a very different explanation:

The failure of preindustrial cultural institutions to provide a satisfactory basis for daily activity, personal individuation, and national cohesion was surely most apparent in the large cities of the industrial North. It is hardly surprising that Southerners, less pressed than Northeasterners by the social turmoil of the 1880s and more skeptical about giving the government greater power, were slower in adopting a new cultural understanding of war that glorified that state.<sup>26</sup>

Oddly, Rhodes still criticizes Trubowitz for his emphasis on regionalism and partisanship. First, Rhodes notes that there existed outliers in both regions and parties. Some southern Democrats, such as Senator Hilary Herbert from Alabama, supported the construction of battleships, while some northeastern Republicans opposed it, such as Senator Eugene Hale from Maine. This argument is not particularly convincing; after all, presumably not every member of Congress with the same cultural background agreed on strategic adjustment, either. Anomalies are to be expected in any theory of preferences; the more important question is whether there were enough anomalies that the theory fails to predict aggregated outcomes.

Second, Rhodes claims that support for navalism did not vary significantly across the two major parties between the critical years of 1891 and 1895. The first battleships were authorized in 1890, when the House of Representatives, Senate, and presidency were all controlled by Republicans. After that point, according to Rhodes, partisan politics had little impact on outcomes:

Democrats regained control of the House in 1891 and of the White House in 1893, yet the program continued unabated. Surely if naval expansion and the construction of a battleship fleet reflected Republican pork barrel, paid for by Democratic regions of the country, the

25. *Ibid.*, 118.

26. Rhodes, “Constructing Power,” 59.

Democratic party in office should be expected to have reversed the expansion policy, not to have vigorously advanced it.<sup>27</sup>

If the battleship program had indeed “continued unabated” in 1891 and 1893, Trubowitz’s argument would clearly be in trouble. Yet, a close examination of the historical record suggests otherwise. In the 1891–92 session, the newly Democratic House of Representatives resisted Republican demands for major naval spending increases, and wound up funding only one new ship, a light cruiser. This outcome represented a “temporary setback” for naval expansion, not a vigorous advance.<sup>28</sup> In the 1892–93 session, the Harrison administration was again disappointed. It requested two battleships and a cruiser, but the half-Democratic Congress authorized the construction of only one battleship, which it did not fund, and a cruiser.<sup>29</sup> The Republicans were only able to obtain what little they got because, as Homer E. Socolofsky and Allan B. Spetter write, “The Senate...prevailed over a reluctant House of Representatives.”<sup>30</sup>

Rhodes’s assertion that the naval program “continued unabated” when Cleveland gained the White House in 1893 is also not supported by the facts. Not a single battleship was funded in the 1893–94 session, in which Democrats controlled all three branches of government. In a chapter entitled “Hiatus: 1893–1894,” naval historian Walter R. Herrick Jr. notes that “Cleveland withheld his endorsement of [Secretary of the Navy] Herbert’s recommendation” to build more battleships, and that “few advances in any aspect of naval development occurred in the first half of Herbert’s term.”<sup>31</sup> To be sure, Cleveland was not opposed in principle to naval reform. Despite his proclivity for strong anti-expansionist rhetoric, he indicated that he would be willing to consider the construction of heavy ships once the budget recovered from the financial panic and

27. *Ibid.*, 58.

28. Mark Russell Shulman, *Navalism and the Emergence of American Sea Power, 1882–1893* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 134–35.

29. The process by which this compromise was reached was tortuous, as Shulman’s analysis reveals. The bill that the Republican Senate sent to the intercameral conference committee was actually less reformist than that of the House, and the conference committee’s bill was more reformist than that which either the House or Senate had originally passed. Shulman does not explain why the Senate initially passed such a defensively minded naval bill, but I suspect it may have been the consequence of Senate rules that accord disproportionate power to minority views. In any case, the general outlines of the episode support the political economy view that the Republican branches of government should have been more interested in battleships than the Democratic House, and that the House should have tried to obstruct reform. See Shulman, “Institutionalizing a Political Idea,” 90–92.

30. Homer E. Socolofsky and Allan B. Spetter, *The Presidency of Benjamin Harrison* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 101. See also Benjamin Franklin Cooling, *Benjamin Franklin Tracy: Father of the Modern American Fighting Navy* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1973), 103, 127–28.

31. Herrick, *The American Naval Revolution*, 160. See also Socolofsky and Spetter, *The Presidency of Benjamin Harrison*, 103.

economic collapse of 1893. This, however, does not mean that a Republican president would have been equally unwilling to continue with battleship construction under the same circumstances. At best, the episode is inconclusive for the cultural-cognitive interpretation.

Not until the 1895–96 session, when Republicans regained the House in a smashing victory against the Democrats—244 to 105—did the naval program resume. At that point, Cleveland changed his position in favor of battleships, even though the budget was still in shortfall. Extraordinary circumstances account for the shift: the country was in the midst of a severe economic depression, and northeastern businesses were more desperate than ever to find new markets abroad, as well as secure federal funds for military spending in their region. Of course, Cleveland still derived most of his electoral support from the South, so he had good reason to take a less pro-naval position than most Republicans. At the same time, however, businesses were also an important part of his coalition.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, he was earlier the governor of industry-dominated New York, and was often accused by Western populists of being a tool of Wall Street. Any Democrat who completely ignored the interests of business would have found it impossible to raise enough money and win enough electoral college votes to prevail in a national election, as William Jennings Bryan discovered in 1896.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Cleveland took a moderate position between the interests of Northerners and Southerners, and subsequently adjusted it according to the political currents of the moment. In 1893 he refused to break the budget on account of battleships, but did not reject them per se; then, in 1895, when businesses became much more strident in demanding a grand strategy that actively supported their interest in export, he embraced battleships.<sup>34</sup>

Rhodes's and Shulman's essays are intuitively appealing, but every critique of the political economy interpretation fails to refute the position that changes in culture and public opinion are epiphenomenal to more fundamental material interests. Does this mean that these factors *are* epiphenomenal? Not necessarily. It might very well be that American expansionism was overdetermined, so that every one of the theories discussed thus far captures at least part of the truth. The political economy explanation, however, seems to be the most consistent. In some instances, cultural and ideational variables paradoxically explain too much

32. Richard E. Welch Jr., *The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 103; R. Hal Williams, *Years of Decision: American Politics in the 1890s* (New York: Wiley, 1978), 55.

33. See Paolo E. Coletta, "The Democratic Party, 1884–1910," in *History of U.S. Political Parties*, vol. 2, *1860–1910: The Gilded Age of Politics*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (New York: Chelsea House, 1973), 1004–17; John B. Wiseman, *The Dilemmas of a Party out of Power: The Democrats, 1904–1912* (New York: Garland, 1988).

34. Herrick, *The American Naval Revolution*, 174.

(for example, why Southerners should have both embraced and opposed naval reform), and at other times do not explain nearly enough (for example, why unity-minded leaders chose naval reform rather than progressivism, or why the public was so receptive to the navalists' persuasion). The problem with Rhodes's and Shulman's arguments is not that they are implausible, but that they are question-begging. It is the resilience to criticism of Trubowitz's argument, not any mortal weakness of Rhodes's or Shulman's work, that tilts the debate over American naval reform in the 1890s in favor of the materialist view.

#### EXPANDING THE POLITICAL ECONOMY ARGUMENT

TRUBOWITZ DEVELOPS the political economy interpretation of American foreign policy further in *Defining the National Interest*, showing conclusively that the inter-regional conflict over strategic adjustment in the 1890s was not an anomaly.<sup>35</sup> In this book, from which his article in *The Politics of Strategic Adjustment* is drawn, he covers two other periods in which the security policy of the United States was dramatically reoriented: the 1930s and the 1980s. In the 1930s, as in the 1890s, the interests of the Northeast were critical. Through the first few decades of the twentieth century, manufacturers became much more competitive internationally, so they came to rely even more heavily on foreign trade. Undeveloped markets took an ever-increasing proportion of American exports, since trade with Europe continued to be dampened by protectionism. This does not mean that northeastern businesses were as indifferent to Europe in the 1930s as in the 1890s, however. First, American capital had funded the continent's recovery after the First World War, so bankers developed an enormous stake in its stability. Second, many American businesses tried to leapfrog tariff barriers by locating their factories there, so direct investment skyrocketed. Consequently, the major urban centers of the Northeast, where most bankers and advanced industries were located, began to take a stronger interest in European markets.

Meanwhile, Southerners' preferences changed very little. The bulk of their exports still went to Europe, so they shared the strategic interests of the newly Europe-oriented cities of the Northeast. Partly for this reason, Democrats were able to make greater electoral inroads in the North than ever before. The two regions and the party were bound together by internationalism, the view that the United States had a critical "national" interest in ensuring peace in Europe. By

35. Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The following analysis focuses on Trubowitz's work on security policy, but he also covers trade legislation.

contrast, Westerners became isolationist in the late 1920s and early 1930s because their foodstuff exports plummeted. Suffering farmers had no interest in building costly battleships; federal funds would be much more fruitfully spent on agricultural aid programs. Westerners found allies in the rural Northeast, which was equally unattached to Europe. Together, these two constituencies were able to form a powerful isolationist voting bloc in Congress. They successfully obtained the passage of neutrality legislation, but were eventually defeated by the Roosevelt-led alliance of Southern and urban Northeastern internationalists.

For his third case, Trubowitz argues that partisan conflicts over the Reagan defense buildup in the 1980s were once again the product of sectional economic differences.<sup>36</sup> In the Northeastern rust belt, heavy industries were troubled by inefficiency and import competition. The party that depended most on this region's support, the Democrats, therefore chose to trade off international goods for domestic ones (in particular, social welfare policies). In the sun belt states of the South and West, by contrast, capital-intensive, high-technology industries were growing rapidly, and exports to the periphery were booming. These two regions also developed an enormous interest in defense spending, since many of their advanced manufacturing sectors, such as aerospace, had direct military applications. As a result, the Republican party, which drew upon the South and West for much of its electoral support, pushed for a more aggressive, higher-spending grand strategy.

These three analyses, when viewed together, make a striking case for treating domestic politics and economic preferences as the fundamental determinants of U.S. strategic behavior. Trubowitz shows that there was no well-defined unitary national interest in the 1890s, the 1930s, or the 1980s; instead, the nation's security policy was determined by the struggle for power among self-interested economic groups. Only when each of the three major regional economies in the United States performs well and depends on the same foreign markets does there arise a broad ideological consensus over foreign policy, such as existed during the 1950s and 1960s—and, one might add, the late 1990s. When this condition does not hold, however, competition between regions inevitably tears down the illusion of objective national interests.

#### REPLACING REALISM?

**T**RUBOWITZ SUCCEEDS admirably in defending his thesis, providing a seminal contribution to international relations scholarship. As it stands, however,

36. *Ibid.*, chap. 4.

*Defining the National Interest* cannot be considered a definitive challenge to realism, either in purely theoretical terms or as an overarching historical interpretation of American foreign policy. The impact of Trubowitz's argument is limited by three factors in particular. First, he devotes very little attention to executive decision-making. Instead, he focuses on Congress, using econometric analysis of roll-call votes to show how levels of support for specific policies varied from state to state. He clearly believes that executive behavior is determined by the logic of his theory, but he does not examine the origins of individual presidents' decisions in sufficient detail to establish this point conclusively.

Though Trubowitz's focus on congressional voting allows him to support his interpretive claims with quantitative rigor, there are important disadvantages to his neglect of the executive. Even in periods of American history in which the executive branch was highly constrained by congressional opposition, it still had the sole power to set the agenda and initiate new policies. Congress's power over foreign relations is almost always exclusively negative, allowing it to do no more than obstruct presidential action. Thus, one might consider Zakaria's analysis of strategic adjustment in the 1890s to be perfectly compatible with that of Trubowitz: the executive, elected by the entire country, attempts to carry out policies that he believes are in the unitary national interest (as per realist assumptions); while legislators, who are elected by local districts, attempt to adjust those policies to suit their parochial constituencies' material needs (as per political economy assumptions).<sup>37</sup> If the political economy perspective is to be considered anything more than a qualifier to state-centric realism, it must explain the specific decisions of executives in terms of their partisan coalitions' interests.

Another shortcoming of *Defining the National Interest* is that Trubowitz does not construct a deductive theory of political behavior. Rather than follow the standard two-stage method of hypothesis formation and empirical testing, he presents his argument as a historical analysis structured around the broad theme of American sectionalism. The resulting narrative is by no means atheoretical, but neither does it provide clear-cut, a priori predictions about how states will behave under any given set of circumstances and constraints. Again, this element of Trubowitz's exposition does not weaken his specific claims, but it nevertheless renders *Defining the National Interest* less satisfying than it might have been. After all, he uses essentially the same explanatory variables for each case—the extent of a region's economic interest in Europe, its stake in markets throughout the rest of the world, and the distributive implications

37. For Zakaria's view on the inherent difference between Congress's and the executive's permeability to societal interests, see *From Wealth to Power*, 40–41.

of military spending—so there seems to be no overwhelming reason why he could not have generated hypotheses that could be applied directly to other countries and time periods.

Finally, Trubowitz's decision to make regions his basic unit of analysis is overly limiting, since it indirectly reinforces the conventional wisdom of American exceptionalism. If he had put generically defined interest groups at the center of his analysis, rather than using the regions in which they cluster, the importance of geography would recede, thereby revealing how easily the political economy perspective could be applied to other cases. In countries with parliaments whose members are elected through proportional representation, parties may not have distinct geographical bases of power, but they may nevertheless represent well-defined economic interests. Even authoritarian regimes are often beholden to a "selectorate" that has specific interests in international affairs.<sup>38</sup> Regionalized political economies are convenient to study, since they allow us to slot amorphous preferences into discrete sections on a map, but their existence is not a precondition for political-economic analysis. Indeed, not even the regions of the United States are truly unitary actors in Trubowitz's study. For example, in his chapter on the 1930s, he emphasizes that the Northeast's geography must be further subdivided into rural and urban, since only the latter had an interest in American involvement in European affairs.

Although realism's flaws are well known, it remains the dominant paradigm in security studies exactly because it has none of these limitations. Only realism has been simple and powerful enough that one can easily apply it to any case and automatically generate clear predictions about executive behavior. Its foundational assumptions may be questionable, but it remains unrivalled as a coherent, universal theory of international relations. If the political economy perspective is to mount a direct challenge to realism, it must be developed and extended according to the three criteria discussed above. As remarkable as Trubowitz's book is, much remains to be done for his approach to engender a paradigm shift in the study of international security.

On the other hand, every indication is that political economy theory is robust enough to meet these challenges. First, because it makes simple assumptions about motives, it can very easily be grounded in deductive microfoundations; second, there is no reason why it cannot be divorced from the political geography of the United States and made comparative; and, finally, as my brief analysis of Cleveland's decisionmaking indicates, it can be used to study executive behavior. Once developed in these ways, it can be used to generate predictions about

38. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); James H. Nolt, "Business Conflict and the Origin of the Pacific War" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1994).

state behavior that are consistently more accurate than any realist theory. Domestic preferences not only determine when states decide to extend their power in the international system, as we can see from the debate over strategic adjustment in the 1890s; they also allow us to predict what sort of strategy will be followed, from the expansionism of Benjamin Harrison to the multilateral internationalism of Woodrow Wilson. Even in times of high international constraint, preferences still play a critical role in determining state behavior, as should be abundantly clear from any study of the political debate over the entry of the United States and Great Britain into each of the two world wars. International variables cannot be ignored, but they should be treated only as constraints on the underlying domestic determinants of foreign policy.<sup>39</sup>

The political economy perspective is by no means perfect. In particular, it has trouble predicting the behavior of executives who are considered by historians to be fundamentally incompetent politicians, such as Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant. Despite businesses' lack of interest in export in the years immediately following the Civil War, both presidents persisted in following their eccentric, expensive interest in imperialism, and therefore encountered stiff, bipartisan resistance to their policies in Congress. Another problem is that some nonmaterial preferences clearly have a systematic influence over strategic decision making. For example, humanitarian impulses have guided foreign policy whenever the costs of intervention are low and the public is well informed about atrocities. From William McKinley's war with Spain to Bill Clinton's peacekeeping mission in Haiti, the complete study of foreign policy requires a more detailed study of preferences than political economy assumptions can offer. Nevertheless, Trubowitz's ambitious and compelling work, as well as that of others developing the same paradigm, testifies to the broad explanatory power of domestic economic interests.<sup>40</sup> Far more than any other kind of preference, they deserve to be considered fundamental to the study of international relations.

39. Kevin Narizny, "The Political Economy of Grand Strategy": (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2001).

40. See, for example, Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of National Security Policy, 1949–1951* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); James H. Nolt, "Business Conflict and the Demise of Imperialism," in *Contested Social Orders and International Politics*, ed. David Skidmore (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997); Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century's Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Erik A. Devereux, "Industrial Structure, Internationalism, and the Collapse of the Cold War Consensus: Business, the Media, and Vietnam," in *Business and the State in International Relations*, ed. Ronald W. Cox (Boulder: Westview, 1996), 9–40; Jeffrey A. Frieden, "The Economics of Intervention: American Overseas Investments and Relations with Underdeveloped Areas, 1890–1950," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (January 1989): 55–80.