

# Passion Plus Archives; An Interview with Warren F. Kimball<sup>1</sup>

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After eight books and numerous articles, Professor Warren F. Kimball of Rutgers University is widely recognized as one of the most prominent historians in the field of American foreign policy and diplomacy. His special field of interest has been Franklin D. Roosevelt and the American participation in World War II, and his recent work includes *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1991), "The United States: Democratic Diplomacy," with Lloyd C. Gardner in D. Reynolds, W. F. Kimball & A. O. Chubarian (eds.), *Allies at War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), and *Forged in War: Roosevelt, Churchill and the Second World War* (New York: Wm. Morrow, 1997). Apart from his own research and lecturing, both at Rutgers and abroad as a Senior Fulbright Lecturer, Warren F. Kimball has contributed to the study of American foreign relations in several ways. He has been president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and for six years he chaired the State Department Advisory Committee on Historical Documentation.

In the Spring of 1997, while Professor Kimball was Senior Mellon Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge, he visited Denmark and gave a number of lectures at various universities and institutions. Dale

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Carter suggested an interview for *American Studies in Scandinavia*, and luckily, Professor Kimball was open to persuasion. This resulted in a talk in June that would take us in several different directions: from deliberations on the very nature of American foreign policy and the conditions under which it is being shaped to the present situation and the foreign policy of the Clinton-administration; from Professor Kimball's own research to the opening of Soviet archives and the current historiographic battle over the meaning of the Cold War.

*Throughout a great deal of its history, the United States has enjoyed what C. Vann Woodward has called "free security." Now after the end of the Cold War, is that once again the case, or do you see any potential threats to the national security?*

Well, first of all I would gently disagree with Woodward in the sense that while Americans might have enjoyed so-called "free security," that was not their perception. It usually refers to the nineteenth century ... and in fact, Americans were scared to death of the British during most of that century, and particularly concerned about the Spanish for a reasonable part. However, today threats to security come in various forms, and I think Vann Woodward's formulation related largely to power politics and the threat of military intervention. That is obviously not an immediate threat today, even if some people worry about North Korea, the atomic bomb and the longterm threats from China, but there are other threats related to the economic and social situation which I think are much more important, and sure, there are threats to the American national security in those terms.

*It is a common theme in the writings on American foreign policy to present it as an ongoing conflict between Wilsonian idealism on the one side, and Rooseveltian balance-of-power realism on the other side. Do you see this conflict as a basic tension?*

Well, it is certainly a useful way to teach students about some of the inclinations that Americans have, although I should point out that I don't think it is exclusive to Americans. There is a great deal of idealism and a great deal of so-called realism in European, Asian and anybody's foreign policy. I think

to present those as sort of manichean good and evil, or as extremes, is not terribly useful. As a teaching device it's safer, but it's not useful in analysis. I mean, the notion that Woodrow Wilson was not realistic is sort of silly. If realism is, in the way that most people define it, the application of power to defend the interests of the state ... my goodness, Woodrow Wilson intervened militarily more times than any other president in the history of the nation. So, the dichotomy just doesn't work that well ...

*But isn't it fair to say that American politicians are expected to laminate foreign policy with a coating of moralism in order to generate public support; that there is a propensity in the political culture which makes it somewhat different from the tradition of foreign policy-making in many European countries?*

Yes, I think that is true, except I am not sure that I'm comfortable with the implied pejorative that goes in there about "laminating" it with moralism. Nations have a sense of what's ethical. I don't like the word "moral," because that brings theology into the question, and I don't want to get into a theological argument here, but societies have a sense of what's ethical, and I think most societies try to follow their own ethics. In some cases – and this is true particularly for Europe, although not exclusively – where you have a long tradition for aristocratic control over foreign policy, I think you might be able to argue pretty successfully that the ethical standards applied by the aristocracy, or this residue of the aristocracy, might be quite different from the kind of standards that are expected by the American public of its leaders.

*That leads me to the issue of how foreign policy is shaped in the United States, and by whom. Is it largely the work of an elite?*

Well, the word "elite" requires some definition. Making foreign policy in the United States is done largely by a group of people whose political views and party [preference], Democratic vs. Republican, are less important than their connections with universities and big business ... the powerful elements in the American educational, business and banking communities. I think those people have the greatest influence on American foreign policy as a group. Now, that said, it is not exclusive

power. You can look at lists of various important figures in government, or in various think tanks that are around Washington, and they are not all from the Ivy League, and they are not all reflecting business and banking interests, but I think those interests are the strongest in malting foreign policy. That said, American foreign policy does have to operate within certain parameters, and they are fairly strict parameters, imposed by these elements of culture and public attitudes – domestic constraints.

*Could you argue that the Cold War-paradigm posed fewer domestic constraints on this elite than is the situation today?*

Well, I wouldn't say fewer constraints. In fact, in some ways it posed even greater constraints, since the government was expected to fight the Cold War. The government was expected to confront the Soviet Union and prevent Soviet expansion, so I mean those are pretty strong constraints ... But what you are really saying is that when there is no single enemy ... It is always a little bit more tricky, I guess, to conduct foreign policy when there is less sense of crisis. On the other hand, domestic constraints, I think, diminish in a time of less crisis. Granted, the Congress can have a bit more influence over petty issues when there is no crisis ... On the other hand, the level of public interest in foreign policy diminishes when crises are less, and I am quite convinced that Congress reflects public attitudes, albeit indirectly and imprecisely ...

*But isn't there a paradox here? On the one hand, the public might be even less interested now in foreign policy. On the other hand they might have a larger say, since the foreign policy elite to a greater extent than previously will have to enter the marketplace of ideas and "sell" every proposal in a way that they did not have to during the Cold War?*

Perhaps. It depends on the issue and the circumstances. It looks as if NATO expansion, for example, is probably going to go through, but it also looks as if the desire to keep the costs down is one of the reasons why the Clinton-administration limited it to three countries instead of five, as some of the European countries want. So that is perhaps an example of the fact that you have not so much a paradox, but different influences pulling in different directions...

*It has been argued that American foreign policy has become more impulsive, as the media are moving their attention from one crisis somewhere in the third world to another one elsewhere. Does it make for a more emotionally-driven foreign policy, often triggered by media coverage of various conflicts around the globe?*

I am not sure that it is more emotional than it has ever been. It has always been incredibly emotional, but what you do have now is a different style of media attention because of instant communications. We can bounce from one crisis to another in the space of a heartbeat. In that sense it is much more tricky to conduct foreign policy – in all the nations in the world, not just the United States ... The United States State Department, for goodness sake, in every office I have ever been in has CNN going on 24 hours a day, or whenever there is someone in the office. Because the State Department, I think, lives in constant fear that CNN is going to know something before they do. That's really true, I am not exaggerating. I don't think there is anything wrong with that by the way, I think that's good!

*But do you think it affects priorities in foreign policy?*

Sure, it is going to affect priorities, but priorities were affected by what we would call media attention even before. In fact, maybe better media attention would have made for better foreign policy. American entry into World War I and World War II were highly affected by media attention, but the time-lag was more than it is today. The notion that somehow media and the various things that affect public opinion did not play a role before, I don't think it is correct.

*But I guess you could argue that CNN and other TV-channels have the ability to report events from remote places that would otherwise be outside the American public's attention?*

Well, maybe so. But you know, there was a lot of public sentiment back in the early twentieth century for the United States to intervene during the Armenian-Turkish conflict. When there was a massive pogrom in czarist Russia, there was a good deal of media attention, although nothing came

of these things ... Armenia and pogroms in Russia were certainly third-world issues for the United States at the turn of the century, so we've been involved in such issues before. Sure, you have much more of it beating on you [now]. Maybe so much so that Americans don't pay much attention to it. I saw it argued the other day that the intervention in Somalia was an example of Americans mobilized by the tragedy that was unveiled before them on public television. Where is that cry for mobilization now, the public support for some kind of action to help the refugees down in the Congo? ... I mean, there is no outcry at all. Once you have gone through your quota of starving refugees, you are sort of inoculated and become a bit cynical. In fact, maybe the answer is you realize that we can't, the United States doesn't have the physical capability, regardless of the inclination, to solve these problems. It can't be done.

*Let's turn our attention to the foreign policy of the Clinton-administration. Some have described it as rudderless. Do you share this view?*

No, I would certainly say that about domestic policy without hesitation, but I am not sure "rudderless" is quite the way I would characterize the administration's foreign policy, although I am not sure exactly what a more positive way to do it would be. It seems to me that the Clinton-administration has been trying to react to world situations in a reasonably consistent manner, whether I like it or not. We have taken a pretty clear position for example on NATO enlargement. I don't agree with it, but I think it is a pretty clear position, one that some of the European NATO members are not happy with. We have taken a pretty clear position on trade and relationships with China, and we have taken a pretty clear position, I think, on trying to act as a mediator in the Middle East conflict. So those are the three biggest foreign policy issues that come to mind, and I think in each of those three cases the United States has been pretty consistent.

*You mentioned that you disagree with the NATO enlargement.*

Yes, I simply dislike immensely expanding military alliances. Every time someone tries to reassure me that it is not a military alliance, but kind of a cultural, geographic, political relationship, I am pulled back to reality

when I see public statements by American leaders saying for example that Slovenia is not militarily prepared to join NATO. Well, then obviously we are talking military. I do not see military alliances as the best preservers of peace and the best promoters of good relationships. Personally, I think that NATO should simply have been dissolved once the Soviet Union collapsed. If you want to create political and economic relationships, you should start from a clean slate. Well, I understand why they didn't do it. Chances are you couldn't even get anything started without having to build on the corpse of NATO. There is also an understandable concern on the part of some of the policy-making elements in Europe ... that if we don't expand NATO, the United States will somehow pull out of Europe. But I don't think that it's handled well, and I don't think we should play on the intense, historically justified, but highly emotional fears of Eastern Europe with regard to Russia, and that's what NATO enlargement is doing.

*Would you care to comment on the appointment of Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State. Does it make any difference for the sense of direction in the Clinton-administration, or are the personal characteristics of key diplomatic players of little relevance here?*

No, personalities always play a role in history, even if great forces sometimes overwhelm them. Madeleine Albright gives the appearance of a great deal more decisiveness, although if you knew Warren Christopher privately, I think you would find that he was a very firm man and a very tough cookie, but his public style was quite different from hers. So she gives the appearance of consistency, but as I told you before, I don't think policy has been inconsistent under the Clinton-administration, whether I like it or not. I see no evidence today that Madeleine Albright has made any major changes or contemplates making any major changes. The one good thing that may come out of her appointment is that she seems to be able to negotiate a bit more effectively with Senator Jesse Helms.

*Do you see President Clinton's foreign policy as an attempt to (re)create a bipartisan consensus?*

Sure. Clinton by definition wants to be loved, he doesn't want to fight

with people, he wants admiration, he wants consensus ... Every president would love to have a bipartisan everything so long as the president generally speaking wins most of the arguments ... In a lot of ways American foreign policy operates from a remarkably consistent consensus in the society. The argument over foreign policy is rarely over strategy, it is usually over tactics. I am not at all sure I could point to any issue today where Clinton and the Republicans differ on strategy. I do think I could point to some issues where they disagree on tactics, for example China. The Republicans and the Democrats agree that: 1) We don't want to alienate China and create an enemy. 2) Trade with China is of great value to everybody in the United States. 3) We don't like the human rights violations that China commits, primarily against its own people. 4) We worry steadily about the fact that maybe China has expansionist views in East Asia ... I think both Republicans and Democrats agree, and I can't think of another major element in China policy that they would throw out there, but they do argue over how to achieve the goals.

*I would like now to turn your attention to the craft of writing history, and begin by asking you about your own work. You have published numerous books and articles concerning wartime America and the foreign policy of the Roosevelt-administration, and a couple of months ago your latest book Forged in War: Roosevelt, Churchill and the Second World War was published. Could you tell us about the book and the research it required?*

The book really is the culmination of a research interest that began in the early 1960s when I was a doctoral candidate, and it is without shame or apology a study of foreign policy from the top. It is by no means intended to be the last word, because there is a great deal more to American foreign policy and diplomacy than just the top, but this is an attempt to look at it from the viewpoint of the two leaders, whom I have been studying for over thirty years. An attempt to crawl into their minds and explain their true motivation, I hope, in doing the things that they did. So in some ways the book is a synthesis of thirty-five years of work. That doesn't mean that there isn't some new material in it, there really is, because one of the interesting things I find is that every time I look at some of these important archives, I see things I missed on the earlier trip,



or I suddenly realize that perhaps there is another way to look at a document. So, it has that kind of research in it, and I try my best to make it both archival based and sensitive to the latest secondary work that has been published.

*You have personally been involved in the declassification of American documents from the Cold War era, and the Russians as well have gradually begun to open the Soviet archives for both domestic and foreign researchers. Some of these newly available sources have already made it necessary to rewrite the history of major incidents like the Cuban Missile Crisis. Do you find it likely that the archives still hold major surprises for the historians – surprises that may lead to major reassessments of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War?*

I don't think we will have a major reassessment of American foreign policy, but I think we are probably going to have to reassess Soviet foreign policy pretty significantly, and I have no idea about smaller country foreign policies. For example, *who knows* what the French were really thinking and doing. I don't know where they are in opening their archives. So, I think the opening of archives invariably helps us to understand things better, but let me address this a little more fully. First of all, interpretation is where we end up once the facts are laid out, where we end up in the history of any foreign policy, in the history of international relations. We end up using context and detail to help us to better understand the motivation, the purposes, the factors that created a nation's foreign policy. We can tell what the foreign policy is, you can read the public statements that any foreign ministry makes, but that doesn't explain motivation, it doesn't really lay out long-term goals. We find that only by studying the context, so as the archives open we constantly learn more about context.

Let me give you an example that is going on today in the history of foreign policy, and one that I think is wrongheaded, but it is interesting. There is a new thesis, which is probably captured most strongly by John Gaddis' new book, (*We Now Know: Washington; Council on Foreign Relations, 1997*) although he is certainly not the lone ranger here. It is essentially argued, as a lot of East-Europeans have been arguing for a while, that the Cold War was the creation of Joseph Stalin, period, end of

discussion. Everything else is sort of a function of Stalin's behavior. Now that is the first point. The second point is that the assumption is that Stalin combines all sorts of different motivations – marxist romanticism is one – but that wrapped up with it always is the desire for expansion of the Soviet Union. That is a very interesting assertion for which there is no evidence, because we haven't gotten into the Soviet archives. The assumption in your first question was wrong, we have not gotten into Soviet archives. What has happened is that bits and pieces from Soviet archives have been made available to people, but historians cannot develop the sense of context until they have true access to the archival record, because what I think is important to understand context may not be what you think is important. So I have no faith whatsoever in dramatic new interpretations of American policy, or more important, how the Soviet Union reacted to American policy. I have no faith in recent interpretations of that when someone says these are based upon the latest new findings in Soviet archives, because I know that those findings are dramatically limited.

Another part of the story that might be worth mentioning is that for ten years I headed up the American side of a Soviet-American-, and later Soviet-British-American project on the history of the Second World War. For seven of those years we were told repeatedly by Russian historians (then Soviet historians) that there were no archives that held any records of Stalin-memoranda, or papers presented to Stalin – things that would help us to understand the options that were presented to Stalin and perhaps how he chose them, and perhaps let us understand a little better why he chose them. I mean, does he have world domination in mind or a defensive empire? From 1985 until the early 1990s we were told there were no such records, and then General Volkogonoff came out with his biography of Stalin (*Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* New York: Grove Weidenfeld 1991). Now, whatever you think of that biography, it certainly demonstrated beyond doubt that there were what we generally call presidential archives that have just that kind of information. The one thing I am reasonably confident of is that we have not seen the important materials or anything resembling all the important materials that are available in the Soviet archives, much less French archives and the archives from a half dozen other somewhat smaller nations.

*You have on several occasions engaged yourself in historiographic battles. To mention one example, you once criticized the dominance of post-revisionism, and argued that its view of the Cold War could largely be defined as "orthodoxy plus archives." Is that still how you see it?*

Well, I think I do largely see it that way. I think that there are some books that are imaginative and help us to better understand the Cold War. Melvin Leffler's *A Preponderance of Power* (*check*) is a classical example, but I am disturbed that we now have begun to see the emergence of a thesis that in essence proclaims "the end of Cold War history." That is to say, if we know that the Cold War was caused by Josef Stalin, period, then why bother even going to the archives anymore? It makes no sense, right? History is over. We got the answers, let's get on to other things. And I think that is a curiously anti-intellectual, ahistorical point of view, which in the case of some of the East Europeans, who have suffered through the brutality of Soviet domination, is quite understandable ... But intellectually I find that it is a pretty unsatisfying way to go with history.