This is a very perceptive study of the roots of American foreign policy. Notice the book’s title is not “Does America Misunderstand the World?”; it is a forgone conclusion that the majority of Americans and consequently our politicians misunderstand foreigners’ perceptions of Americans and American foreign policy. Former veteran CIA agent and academic Paul R. Pillar focuses on “American exceptionalism” and its resultant effect on Americans’ perceptions of foreigners and their unique circumstances.

This book contributes to the genre of foreign relations as both a correction and an explanation. Pillar admits its message is “unavoidably downbeat” (x), however it is not consciously anti-American but instead seeks to enhance accurate perception through the virtues of knowing oneself and consequently knowing others more correctly.

The literature of American foreign policy and intelligence studies is replete with examples of “intelligence failures.” In this perceptive volume on perception itself, Pillar demonstrates that American foreign policy decisions are not made based on the advice of the Intelligence Community typically but are the products of Americans’ gross misperceptions of foreigners and their interests. Americans’ heuristics, shaped by beneficial geography since the nation’s inception and an unparalleled record of success culminating in the status as the world’s lone superpower, drive Americans to view the world not as it is but through a prism of distortion. Pillar believes this misperception, based on a belief in American exceptionalism and a monolithic view of the rest of the world, has led to such foreign policy “blunders” as the Iraq War. Following Pillar’s 2014 book Intelligence and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, 9/11, and Misguided Reform, this book serves as a correction to misplaced blame.

Because the United States was insulated from foreign conflicts and seemingly permanent border disputes by virtue of its position between two oceans and because it rapidly evolved into not only a land of prosperity but also the world’s lone superpower, Americans project their experience on foreigners without questioning the vast differences in circumstances. Americans believe themselves to be exceptional and their national interests benign and have no conception of foreign rejection of these concepts.

Pillar convincingly argues this thesis as well as the necessary (from the intelligence analyst’s point of view) argument that American foreign policy is not
rooted in sound intelligence work, but rather in the preconceptions of ideology of American decision makers. Foreign policy has historically been chaotic because it has typically been subordinated to domestic politics.

Americans are typically guilty of gross oversimplification of foreign countries and global dynamics generally. Pillar demonstrates this claim with the example of the George W. Bush Administration’s monolithic view of terrorists and nations which did not support his worldview. It is a “for us or against us” attitude that led to the “blunder” that was the Iraq War.

This monograph’s sole weakness lies in Pillar’s argument and overall tone in his unequivocal rejection of neoconservative ideology and politicians over other foreign policy influences, foreign or domestic. Pillar unequivocally condemns present-day American neoconservatism as an insidious force which harnesses the misperception resulting from American national experience and projects its ideology as an unnecessarily confrontational crusade to universally apply what it considers “American values.” Hindsight may condemn recent American military action as a “glaring and still recent blunder” (163), yet neither the American invasions of Afghanistan or Iraq would have happened without the 9/11 attacks—motivated by Osama bin Laden’s own ideological and provincial desire to rid the Middle East of American influence by initiating a holy war.

Furthermore, he excoriates neoconservatives for their “pathological loathing of Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama” (174), but I did not find a corresponding condemnation of Democrats and their media sycophants for their vitriol against President George W. Bush, particularly in his second term. Pillar even sides with the Hillary Clinton camp on the Benghazi hearings, which he terms “exploitation” (174), not a search for the truth after a campaign of lies and stonewalling. This type of bias mars, for me anyway, a very perceptive book (on perception).

Although this book was released in May 2016 and therefore before the presidential election, it is even timelier due to the seismic shift in foreign policy expected with the transition from the idealist Obama Administration to the populist Trump’s. Pillar opines the need for a “dialogue” in the United States as a path toward a better understanding of the interaction between the United States and the rest of the world rather than the partisan rancor which more often worsens American misperception. In his conclusion, Pillar holds out hope for American leaders who will actually lead—not simply follow the misguided commonly held assumptions of the herd. Based on his own evidence however, this would require a seismic shift in the dominant American perception of the world.

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