For most Americans, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was the most consistent feature of the international political system for nearly a half century. Since its onset, historians have tried to explain how and why the Cold War started and what kept it going. Craig and Logevall’s recent book makes a valuable contribution to this voluminous historiography. While not directly addressing the same issues, Julian Zelizer’s work provides a useful complement to that of Craig and Logevall and strengthens their conclusions.

Until the end of the Cold War in 1991, the writing of Cold War historiography was contemporaneous with the making of Cold War history. Because the past was present, interpretations of the past were more than usually influenced by current events. Cold War historiography has gone through three phases, reflecting changes in the Western and particularly American political context.

The first phase of Cold War historiography, in the 1950s, was dominated by what came to be called the orthodox, or traditionalist perspective. The narrative presented by orthodox historians differed only in richness of detail from the narrative prevailing in the popular culture: the Cold War was the inevitable and necessary defensive response by the United States and its allies to threats posed by an aggressive Soviet Union. This view could accommodate a range of interpretations of Soviet behavior, but whether Soviet policy was seen as ideologically or geopolitically motivated, whether the regime’s goals were limitless (world domination) or more modestly opportunist, the cause of East-West conflict was identified clearly as Soviet expansionism.

As the U.S. foreign policy consensus started cracking under the strains of the Vietnam War, Cold War orthodoxy came under serious challenge in the 1960s and 1970s from a revisionist school of historians. Revisionists assigned a heavy share of responsibility — in some cases preponderant responsibility — to the United States for the onset of the Cold War and for its perpetuation. Rather than strictly defensive, American behavior at the end of World War II was highly ambitious and even aggressive; it reflected U.S. policymakers’ efforts to shape a world congenial to U.S. interests. Most revisionists traced these interests to economic concerns: American leaders sought to construct a global economic order open to trade and investment by U.S. business: a global “open door” for the world’s first truly global power. That objective clashed with Communist autarchy, which closed the door to a substantial portion of the globe. In some revisionist accounts, it was the Soviet Union that reacted defensively to the ambitions of its far more powerful capitalist rival. U.S. demands for self-determination in Eastern Europe threatened the Soviet Union’s desire for friendly regimes in countries that had served as historic invasion routes into Russia. American determination to revive the economies of Russia’s historic enemies, Germany and Japan, exacerbated Soviet suspicions.

By the early 1980s, the debate between orthodox and revisionist historians seemed to
With Joe McCarthy riding his first wave of success, partisan political considerations be moving toward a middle ground on which proponents of both schools could find areas of agreement. The new phase in Cold War historiography came to be called “post-revisionism,” but no consensus has ever crystallized around a “post-revisionist synthesis” proposed by the eminent Cold War historian John Gaddis in 1983. (Gaddis’s “synthesis” was in fact skewed rather heavily toward his own orthodox leanings.) The post-revisionist label has stuck, but it really describes an orientation to research — an openness to different perspectives — rather than a distinctive school of thought.

Craig and Logevall don’t explicitly seek to locate themselves in these historiographic debates. Where do they fit in? The answer to this question changes depending on the period we look at. It is useful to break out two distinct periods of the Cold War: the formative period, roughly 1945 to 1948 or 1949 and 1949 to 1990. The two periods correspond respectively to the questions: what got the Cold War started, and what kept it going? (The breakout into two periods of such different length is justified by the fact that the earlier period was, after all, formative, and has gotten a vastly disproportionate share of historians’ attention.) I would suggest that the authors have given us a post-revisionist view of the formative period and a neo-revisionist view of the rest.

Rather than assign blame for the onset of the Cold War, Craig and Logevall view it as a more or less inevitable clash between America’s drive for leadership of a new global order based on capitalist democracy and a Communist Russia, now militarily dominant in Eastern Europe. Thus, the Soviet Union’s rejection of FDR’s offer of membership in the IMF and World Bank in 1944 was a portent: Stalin would not allow the Soviet economy to become ensnared in an American-woven web of international market relationships that threatened to undermine its socialist nature. Given the Soviet’s determination to maintain a comfort zone of influence in Eastern Europe (which Stalin felt had been acknowledged by both Roosevelt and Churchill), the division of the continent into competing economic and political blocs was inevitable.

The authors do seem to endorse some propositions common to Cold War revisionism. They give a sympathetic account of Walter Lipmann’s early critique of containment, in which the prominent public intellectual lamented the Truman administration’s insensitivity to legitimate Russian security concerns and its unwillingness to fully explore diplomatic solutions to the emerging Cold War. They suggest that the administration’s increasingly hard line in 1946-8 reflected not only geopolitical concerns but domestic partisan politics — anti-Communist toughness was popular, while “appeasement” was not. Craig and Logevall nevertheless conclude that it is “hard to disagree” with the Truman administration’s success in protecting Western Europe. The United States could not be indifferent to the balance of power on that continent — the possibility of Soviet domination, however remote, had to be anticipated — and the American response was a model of multilateralism. I have labeled their treatment of the early Cold War period “post-revisionist” because it significantly reflects revisionist critiques of Truman administration policies while yet arriving at a somewhat positive overall evaluation of those policies.

By 1949-1950, according to Craig and Logevall, the United States had essentially won the Cold War. Containment had been successful: Western Europe was now firmly in the Western camp, as was Japan. The United States and its allies enjoyed a position of strength that might have enabled them to negotiate an “abatement” of their conflict with the Soviets, as Winston Churchill was to suggest on several occasions beginning as early as 1948. Yet the Truman administration, and the Eisenhower administration that followed, treated the Cold War as a continuing mortal struggle. Despite the clear preponderance of power enjoyed by the West throughout the Cold War, “the proverbial Martian, if it had landed in Washington at any time between 1945 and the early 1980s and had tuned in to U.S. political debate, would have concluded that America was in a life-and-death struggle with an implacable, ruthless, and fundamentally evil foe and that it was on the verge of losing this epic struggle — or, at best, that the two titans were evenly matched” (9). Why?

Craig and Logevall endorse George Kennan’s view that, while the Cold War had gotten started for unavoidable geopolitical reasons, it was to be protracted for another 35 years for reasons largely internal to the United States. Throughout the cold war, partisan politics tended to rule out any moves toward accommodation with the Soviet enemy.

To an extent not seen elsewhere in the Western world, crusading anti-communism became intimately bound up with practical politics. Candidates for office learned quickly that opposing radicals and the Soviet Union was the sine qua non of effective campaigning, that there were few votes to be gained and many to be lost by preaching conciliation in East-West relations. The range of acceptable debate narrowed sharply (134 f.).

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The effects of party competition in anti-Communism, moreover, were reinforced by the pervasive influence of the military-industrial complex: powerful, well-organized interests became vested in the promotion of a permanent war mentality that justified higher levels of military spending; there was no comparable structure of organized interest on behalf of peace.

Craig and Logevall's emphasis on the United States' share of responsibility for the continuation of the Cold War, and on the domestic determinants of U.S Cold War policies, would tend to place them in the camp of the revisionist historians. In contrast to the revisionists, however, the authors attribute little importance to U.S. business interests as a driving force in foreign policy, and they explicitly criticize the revisionists for their neglect of partisan politics. I think it appropriate, therefore, to label their argument "neo-revisionist" in its treatment of the Cold War after 1949.

Zelizer's broad thematic objective is to demolish the myth that since the start of the Cold War U.S. foreign policy has been insulated from partisan political conflict; that politics, as Senator Arthur Vandenburg famously put it, "stops at the water's edge." In fact, in Zelizer's account, the golden age of bipartisanship in foreign policy, with Vandenburg as its icon, was a very brief and exceptional interval in American politics. Zelizer shows that it took little time for Republicans to see political opportunity in the emerging tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union after the post World War II dispensation in Europe. Arthur Vandenburg himself charged in February 1946 that the Truman administration was showing insufficient resolution in its growing conflict with the Soviets, and Republicans made anti-communism a major issue in that year's election campaigns. Domestic economic problems combined with national security issues to produce an overwhelming Republican victory at the polls in November. Truman and his advisers read the results as a warning that the administration would have to demonstrate an even firmer stand against communism in anticipation of the 1948 presidential election. Truman accordingly sought and obtained the cooperation of Vandenburg and other key Republicans in fashioning a bipartisan national security consensus required considerable effort on both sides, but it largely held through the 1948 elections. The Republican presidential platform of that year hardly differed from the Democrats' on national security, and Republican nominee Thomas E. Dewey found little to criticize in Truman's foreign policy.

Reading the Zelizer and Craig and Logevall books together, one gets a sense that the Truman administrations's critical policy choices in relation to the Communist world were almost surely overdetermined. Whether they constituted appropriate reactions to Soviet and Chinese aggressiveness, or an overaggressive assertion of America's own global objectives, it is hard to imagine Truman adopting a significantly more conciliatory stance toward the Communist powers than he actually did, given the exigencies of partisan competition in an overheated domestic political arena.

The Republicans clearly won the early rounds of that competition. The Red victory in the Chinese civil war, followed by the frustratingly inconclusive war in Korea, enabled the GOP to brand the Democrats as weak (or worse, traitorous) in the face of the Communist enemy. This line of attack was critical in their re-taking control of Congress in 1950 and the White House in 1952. Zelizer explains how the partisan conflicts over foreign policy during the last three years of the Truman presidency
The result was the constriction of the range of acceptable debate described by Craig and Logevall. The narrowness of the range of acceptable debate may help explain a conundrum that Zelizer does not address: if bipartisanship in U.S. foreign policy is indeed a myth, how is it that the myth has endured for so long? The answer, surely, is that the myth is not entirely without foundation. While Republicans and Democrats have often fought furiously over foreign policy, their real differences have been relatively small, though, of course, in matters of war and peace, relatively small differences can be highly consequential. The over-arching consensus was that the United States was locked in a grim struggle with a ruthless enemy. Given the nature of that struggle, few Democrats were inclined to critically examine the Eisenhower administration’s foreign interventions for which anti-communist rationales, however dubious, were advanced: its overthrow of democratically elected governments in Iran and Guatemala, its undermining of the Geneva accords on Indochina, and its dispatch of marines to Lebanon. There were no principled objections from either side of the Congressional aisle to Kennedy’s promotion of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, and there were only two dissenting votes in all of Congress to the fateful Tonkin Gulf resolution. It would have been unthinkable before Vietnam for Senator Fulbright, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to author a book entitled The Arrogance of Power (1966) whose subject was the United States of America. Through the late 1960s, Congressional Democrats and Republicans voted together on foreign policy issues far more often than they divided along party lines.

It is somewhat paradoxical that the world view of the elite of the world’s only truly global power was conditioned by a domestic political discourse unlike that of any other democracy, one in which warnings of “present dangers, of windows of vulnerability, of imminent doom” (Craig & Logevall) were almost invariably present in foreign policy discussions. A European historian, Jussi Hanhimaki, has described the “American dilemma” in terms of “global visions and parochial politics.” What Jimmy Carter called Americans’ inordinate fear of Communism reflected ways of perceiving the world that were deeply rooted in American historical experience — in short, in American exceptionalism.

As noted, the Cold War consensus started to crack during the Vietnam War. Congressional Democrats rejected Cold War rationales for intervention in Angola in 1975-1976 and in Nicaragua in the 1980s. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the Cold war consensus became irrelevant and a new fluidity emerged in partisan conflicts over foreign policy. Zelizer describes how centrist liberal hawks like Bill Clinton sought to create a more muscular image for the Democratic Party on national security issues, while a reinvigorated libertarian tendency in the GOP looked skeptically upon overseas military involvements. Many traditional conservatives also resisted a Democratic President who sought to employ American power in humanitarian crises in Somalia and the Balkans. Other (neo)conservatives gave their qualified support to Clinton’s liberal interventionism, even if it failed to go as far as they sought.

Still, the end of the Cold War has not changed everything. In a concluding section on “Continuities,” Craig and Logevall emphasize the persistently narrow range of discourse in the United States over national security issues. They cite the reluctance of the opposition party and of the media to question President George W. Bush’s premises for war against Saddam Hussein, the continued impregnability of the military budget and its defenders in the military industrial complex, and the lack of any serious debate in the political mainstream about the scope of America’s global role. Arguably, they overstate a bit. After all, over 40% of Senate Democrats, and a majority of Democrats in the House, voted against President Bush’s request for authorization for war against Iraq in the fall of 2002. Leading Democrats, including Senator Edward Kennedy and former Vice President Al Gore, made forceful, principled arguments against the march to war. The contrast with the establishment’s initial reactions to President Johnson’s escalations in Vietnam is significant. The authors nonetheless are right to remind us of the continuities. The disjunction between American leaders’ perceptions of foreign threats and the perceptions of so many of our allies, evident in George W. Bush’s crusade against Saddam Hussein, was in fact a reprise of a familiar Cold War thematic.