Online Event

“A Book Talk on America in the World”

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FEATURING:
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Good afternoon, everybody. This is John Hamre at CSIS, and I’m delighted to welcome you today for what will be an extraordinary discussion. We’ve always talked about how America’s an exceptional country and had unique blessings. Well, one of those unique blessings and qualities is the way that America seems to generate unique intellects and policy leaders at the crucial time when we need them. And today we’re going to listen to one of those people – that’s Bob Zoellick.

He’s been a remarkable leader in many ways; a public servant through much of his professional career. And recently has championed trying to bring America to a better understanding of its role in the world. We’re exceptionally grateful that Bob would give us the opportunity to share with us the insights he has of his latest book. And to make all of that come alive, Mike Green who heads our Asia program and is kind of a key leader in our foreign policy establishment at CSIS is going to engage a discussion with Bob about this book. I’m really plea for all of you to listen carefully because we’re at a time when we need strategic direction and guidance and we’re going to hear that this afternoon.

Mike, let me turn it to you, so that you can get this started.

Thank you very much, John. And thank you, everyone, for joining us for what I am sure is going to be a wide-ranging, deeply insightful, and very historical examination of the roots of American foreign policy with Bob Zoellick. I had the great pleasure and enormous satisfaction, and sometimes trepidation, of working with and for Bob at various points in the George W. Bush administration on Japan trade, North Korea, and China policy. And he has, in this book, “America and the World,” pulled off a real coup. Congratulations, Bob. It’s a wonderful book. It is, as you’ll explain in a moment, a collection of vignettes – 16 vignettes of important figures in American diplomacy throughout history, beginning Thomas Jefferson and ending with a focus on George Herbert Walker Bush and Jim Baker, for whom Bob worked.

And each vignette is a fascinating portrait of an American figure in history with angles you haven’t heard of before. But in particular, their insight and their legacy – whether it’s trade, or technology policy, financial policy, and foreign affairs with Alexander Hamilton, and multilateralism with Charles Evan Hughes, international law with Elihu Root – so it’s a collection of vignettes of people, or parables, and it adds up to a toolkit of American foreign policy. I also found it really pleasurable reading. It was my beach reading this summer on the Cacapon River in West Virginia, not the French Rivera, but a real pleasure to read.

So, Bob, thank you. Let me start by asking you why you wrote this book. I mean, I was trying to think of another secretary or deputy secretary of state who left office and wrote a deeply scholarly book like this. And the only one I could come up with was Henry Kissinger. And you reference his book on diplomacy. So, this was not what your, you know, deputy secretary of state usually does when they’re done – a deeply scholarly book. So, a huge investment of time and effort. So, let’s start by hearing, you know, why did you write it? What did you want to achieve? What were you trying to impact?

Well, first let me thank John for that exceptionally generous introduction and, Mike, for you taking the time to interview me today on the book. As I hope everyone in the audience knows, and if you look at my book, you’ll certainly discover it, Mike’s book about the American grand strategy towards East Asia, “By More Than Providence,” is truly a wonderful set of resources and stories. We were comparing notes, and I found heavy reliance on it.

But to go to your question about why I did this, it actually references Henry Kissinger’s
“Diplomacy,” which you mentioned, which – you know, which came out, oh, about 25 years ago. But when I read it, I greatly enjoyed his use of history to talk about diplomacy and foreign policy. But I always reflected that he seemed to use and rely more on a European experience. So I’ve been playing with ideas about how one could approach this from the American experience and some of the ideas that have contributed to American diplomacy. And the approach, as you mentioned, that I thought would make it more appealing for people who like biographies would be to focus on individuals, and then particular episodes where I then try to highlight how people dealt with problems in very practical ways.

So many people with this event would know there’s a lot of books with international relations theories and intellectual concepts, but it didn’t quite match my experience, or my sense of reading of how people actually dealt with these issues. And I suppose another purpose I had is that having studied diplomatic history long ago and recognizing it’s a field that’s somewhat faded at the university level – sometimes for important reasons, where people wanted to draw in other perspectives, other actors in the international system – but I had sense that it left a bit of a hole. There were people that didn't kind of pull back and synthesize. Fred Logevall, who's going to have a great book coming out, a biography on JFK, wrote a piece about why did we stop teaching political history. So, I wanted to return to that a bit. And like you, Mike, I recognized that a lot of the work – when people do study this, they tend to focus on the post-World War II period. And there’s a lot of rich material in the first 150 years, including – and this may be an insight important for Americans going forward, how we deal with an environment where we don’t have overwhelming dominance.

So, I noticed former Secretary of Defense Mattis recently said: Boy, you know, how different it was as the Secretary of Defense you realize didn't have total domain dominance. Well, as you know, in much of American history we didn’t have total dominance. Sometimes we were actually quite weak. So how do you make policy under those conditions?

Michael Green: You know, before I wrote my book, because I was trained as a political scientist, I went to see Walter McDougall, and Warren Cohen, and some of the big names in diplomatic history, basically to get their blessing to practice history as a political scientist and they all were very encouraging. And they said: You know, we’re at a point where perhaps practitioners have to start writing more of the diplomatic history, because people trained in diplomatic history are increasingly pressured to think about smaller case studies and not tie together the big themes, like you did.

Robert Zoellick: You mentioned that some of our most important statecraft and some of these figures were managing American foreign policy at a time of weakness. And one of your vignettes is about one of my favorite figures in American diplomatic history, Secretary of State Seward, who had grand visions for America's role in Asia and the world, but then had to hold the republic together in the Civil War. So, I thought it would be helpful and maybe wet people’s whistle a bit to get into this book, to hear you give us your take on Seward and maybe one or two others. But let’s start with Seward.

So, people may not know Seward was a very successful governor and senator before the Civil War. He broke with the Whig Party, was one of the founders of the Republican Party, was much better known that Abraham Lincoln and in some ways probably lost out to Lincoln because Seward had more of an antislavery position than Lincoln did. But he and Lincoln formed this incredible partnership. And like you, I found the Civil War part quite interesting because, you know, our shelves sort of collapse under the weight of books about generals and battles and social effects and slavery, but rarely do people write about the foreign policy of the Civil War. And yet, if one thinks about it, if Britain or France had intervened on the side of the
Confederacy, the whole result of history could have been changed.

So, it starts out, they have a challenge, which is the outgoing Buchanan administration doesn't do much, sort of almost accepts secession. And so the image abroad is that the Southern states will create their own nation. So Seward and Lincoln have to create a sense that, no, that won't be accepted, there will be a cost paid if you recognize them, but combine threat with restraint, always a challenge in diplomacy, sort of, and sort of avoid going over the line – as Lincoln said, one war at a time. And so, part of that story is the question of, you know, how do you avoid – there was a crisis in 1861 that could have exploded.

You know, Sir Michael Howard, who is a famous British military historian, introduced me to an idea I put in a footnote here about how the world of thinking about humanitarian intervention – what if the Europeans had thought about a humanitarian intervention to end the bloodletting in the Civil War? And then there's the interesting issue of the Emancipation Proclamation and how that sort of builds an Anglo-American attitude. But at first the British reject it because they – and this is where international history is important – what they would call the Indian mutiny of 1857, the idea of servile insurrection doesn't seem so positive, but Lincoln and Seward work the middle classes, the working classes in Britain.

But the part that you talk about and is in your book, and which I also really wanted to draw out, was that we tend to know that early Americans in the – in the early part of the 19th century looked upon the union as almost a mystical concept, but it was always held back by slavery. So, after slavery was extirpated by the Civil War, then the question for Seward was: Can this concept of union instruct us in international relations? And this is a point that's been lost by I think most historians, but you can – you can see the strands of its thinking. Seward is one of the first people to talk about a North American union, but not through aggression. He actually avoided the first Mexican War and, frankly, avoids the incursion that Grant and Sheridan wanted to have with the French in Mexico. But it's the notion of how you – whether it's confederation, whether it's cooperation, how do you draw countries together in a cooperative mode? And keep in mind they're always trying to avoid the alliance system that they associated with Europe.

And for Seward, not surprisingly of interest to me, he believes commerce will be a magnet, and that the North American space can become a magnet in the international context. He combines it, of course, with the notion of peaceful expansion. He's not an imperialist in the sense of wanting to control territories, but he does want to control some of the border areas. So, Alaska, as you know, was partly a way to reach out to Asia. He had a vision that our trade with Asia would exceed our trade with Alaska. He almost got British Columbia, and that's a fascinating little story. He acquires what's called Brooks Island, which today we know as Midway Island, which plays a role in World War II. He wanted to get the Sandwich Islands – Hawaii – but is unable to do that. But he gets a trade agreement that eventually leads to their integration and acquisition by the United States. He buys the Virgin Islands because of the history or the importance to the Caribbean. Congress doesn't go along, but eventually in 1917 we acquire it. And related to today, he wants to buy Greenland and Iceland as well. And so, one of the wonderful aspects is trying to – he's doing all this, recall, while you're having the impeachment of Johnson, President Johnson, so it's quite a record.

He also, for people who know Asia, has what is generally known as the first equal treaty with China, the Burlingame Treaty, which he negotiates with a former American minister to China, who's now working for the Qing dynasty. And on the racial issues, he's quite advanced for his age; he talks about the notion that the mingling of races is always what advances civilization. So, he has a concept, as you discuss in your book and I also bring out, which I think is...
important in affecting the future of American foreign policy, frankly, up till today.

Michael Green: You know, he’s also a really interesting figure because he was very aware of his own place in history, not in an egotistical sense but in who came before him. He wrote a biography of John Quincy Adams, and he saw himself as continuing these traditions. And what’s so intriguing for policymakers, who may not even be history buffs, when you read about someone like Seward, you see what he’s doing and you think, my God, that’s NAFTA, that’s the USMCA – in the 1860s.

Robert Zoellick: Yes.

Michael Green: Ultimately, he couldn’t do it because of the Civil War, because of the impeachment of President Johnson. Another figure like that who you admire and I admire as well, who has not done as well in history, is Charles Evan Hughes, who led the Washington Naval Treaty negotiations in Washington, D.C. in 1922; the first and a very consequential multilateral diplomatic piece of statecraft by an American secretary of state – unprecedented, really, for the United States.

I think he’s fallen out of the history books in some ways because the postwar realists discredited everything done in the ‘20s and ‘30s because of World War II. But his lesson is quite relevant today as we’re trying to reengage in multilateral institutions and maybe he’d be another briefing yet for us to get a flavor of the book from.

Robert Zoellick: Yeah. No, I definitely share that view. And again, to put him in context, he’s a very – he’s a successful governor of New York. He’s an associate justice of the Supreme Court. He almost wins the 1916 presidential election against Woodrow Wilson. He loses the state of California by, as I recall, about 3,800 votes. And there’s a story of if he had done something different in his campaign to unite his party, he would have succeeded. And he later becomes an extremely well-respected chief justice of the Supreme Court.

But in 1921, recall the Senate has just denied Wilson the Paris Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations. So, they start out quite in a hole. So, one of the senators of his own party says, you know, frankly, it doesn’t matter who is Secretary of State, the Senate’s going to run everything anyway.

So, one of – I think the Washington Naval Conference is a wonderful example of what I describe as he becomes the antidote to Woodrow Wilson and the failure of the Versailles Treaty. And remember again, these individuals are working in an environment where we weren’t going to have alliances. We weren’t going to have the League of Nations, but they also had an internationalist vision. And that’s one of the reasons I think these ideas are important today.

So, he picks up on the possibilities and a lot of my story is about the pragmatic problem-solving. He picks up on what is sort of a very strong public disappointment after World War I and after the war to end all wars looked like it was going to turn out as successful as people wanted. There’s a rejection to the naval arms building which people had associated with going into the war. There’s sort of a budget-cutting aspect. There’s unresolved issues because we’re not part of the League of Nations, including many sort of in the East Asia context.

So, what I try to draw together with his story is the connection of arms control with regional security. And it’s important to see the two together and it’s important to see arms control as a process, which you also have to continue to reassess and sometimes reinforce and redirect.
There's a wonderful story, which I don't have time here, but if one reads the book, about how he builds momentum, how he takes the public attitude and makes the negotiation work. He's quite skilled as a negotiator; also his relationship with the president and others. And I think your book was the source of the recognition that one has to be aware of the adjustments that come after this process; so, for example, changes in technology. They’re regulating battleships, but aircraft carriers and submarines become the technologies of the future.

You were the one that found that Admiral Nimitz, who's the commander in the Pacific, does his War College thesis at the Naval War College on, well, how do we project power if we don't have the bases, which were precluded. And the Marines, of course, start to develop expeditionary capacity. So, this is a recognition of the process.

One other historical part, and this is where working across regions is interesting. I think it was a point that the late Professor Earnest May made. You can look at the Washington Naval context in the context, also, of the Lausanne Treaty dealing with the Ottoman Empire and Locarno dealing with Eastern Europe, and frankly an accord – sort of at least a Polish-Soviet relationship, as a series of regional stabilizing agreements that are kind of a fragile interlock, but they all depend ultimately on the role the U.S. will play and of course the world economy.

Now, the other reason that I find this story interesting is – as I was mentioning to John Hamre, is that if you think about North Korea today, I don't believe you can just look at the nuclear arms issue without looking at the security issue. And there’s a couple places in my book where I bring in including in the mediation of the Russo-Japanese War, how to look at Northeast Asian security as sort of an interconnection of Russia, China, Japan, the United States, obviously Korea. And I believe you’d have to consider the nuclear arms accord in a broader context there, and indeed over the past year I wrote a piece to The Wall Street Journal just written on that.

And I would apply the same thing to Iran. So, if you think about just the nuclear arms accord, I think one of the weaknesses of the Obama accord was it didn’t take into account, at least explicitly, how people were also concerned about Iranian behavior, Iranian missiles. And perhaps, you know, even for a new Biden administration, if they want to retrieve that accord, building on the most recent arrangement with the UAE and others you could – that’s, I think, the sounder way to try to approach those topics.

And in that sense, I think you’re right. Hughes also falls aside because, as you know better than anyone, Japanese policy changes. And one of the intriguing aspects of the ’20s in Japan was there was a movement to engage economically as opposed to military power, which of course Japan recovers after World War II.

Michael Green:

You know, the lesson from Hughes, which you just captured very well, is not that multilateralism is the end in itself or the purpose of statecraft; it is a tool of statecraft. And when you look at what he did in that context, it’s remarkable, actually. The failure was not Hughes; the failure was to keep an open economy, keep free trade, build the Navy up, maintain deterrence. And that’s relevant today in the Iran case, as you say, and with North Korea.

Robert Zoellick:

Well, one other point is that, you know, he – it’s also – this is where I try to get into the practice of diplomacy. Part of Wilson’s problem was he doesn’t engage the Senate as he is negotiating. And the delegation that Hughes puts together takes the leading Democrat and leading Republican from Foreign Relations and, in fact, the majority leaders. That took a risk
with his delegation, but when it came time to go back to the Senate, he got all those treaties through relatively easily.

Michael Green:

Yeah, when I was a Ph.D. student in the ‘90s, I met someone you may have met – although he’s not in your book, I think – named Claude Buss, who was a veteran Asia hand. And he was a student at George Washington University in 1922, and he told me that as a grad student in Washington in 1922 you could buy tickets and go watch the negotiations of the Washington Naval Treaty in Constitution Hall. And he had these remarkable stories.

My friend Will Inboden at UT Austin, a great historian-practitioner, always points out that you’re not allowed to take one example in history and use it in policy. You can’t say no more Munichs, no more Vietnams – that’s not allowed. But you can combine lessons, you can think about contingency, you can think about time.

And so, I wanted to ask you about one of the biggest foreign policy challenges we face today, which is China. And if you could create a kind of fantasy football team among the various diplomatic leaders you wrote about, you know, who would you include? Who would you call on? I think John Hay, of course, with the Open Door; Alfred Thayer Mahan with maritime strategy. But would you – would you want to hear from Reagan? Reagan, as you describe, in the Westminster speech was transformational in his thinking about competition with the Soviet Union. Harry Truman you quote saying that, actually, the strategy of containment is to create conditions in which we and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion, which is not a bad formulation for China policy today. So you know, who – if you could call on some of these figures you’ve studied and bring them around the Situation Room or the eighth-floor Department of State Conference Room, in that great Williamsburg G7 summit table, and get their counsel, who would you want around the table to deal with this China problem we have today?

Robert Zoellick:

Well, you know, part of the strength – as you said, the story from Will and my approach to this is you’d like to take pieces of different people, right?

So, I start – you know, Hamilton is always a real strength in terms of his sense of the role of economics in strategy, but also, he combines it with quite a security concept. I mean, he sees America’s role in the Atlantic world, the Pacific – or the Mississippi River Valley.

John Quincy Adams with American realism, which as – I think James Traub used it in his biography – it is important to understand that while we often associate John Quincy Adams with the notion of focusing simply on democracy in America, or at least the small-R republicanism in America, he – you know, he had a sense of values, but he believed that the rest of the world wasn’t quite ready for republicanism and democracy. And I think it’s an important concept that he believed that the right of people to determine their futures was not the same as the capacity. So how do you try to sort of draw those elements together?

Teddy Roosevelt – you know, the chapter that I have on Teddy Roosevelt focuses on an aspect that’s a little different than most people. Most people associate him with power – San Juan Hill, the Great White Fleet. I show how he becomes a very effective mediator in sort of a world of balance of power. As you mention, I think Reagan – my chapter with Reagan focuses on his power of oratory, but also his negotiating ability, and how he has an optimism about the future. And I suppose Bush 41 is sort of a master of being an alliance leader. So, sort of I would take sort of that combination together, and that would be a pretty strong team. And, of course, with our friend Seward.
Michael Zoellick: And would you invite Alfred Thayer Mahan? We're very Mahanian right now. Our strategy, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, the Quad; I like it. I'm kind of a maritime thinker. But it's Mahan's moment right now. Would you include him, or –

Robert Zoellick: Yes, I definitely – and I draw on your book on this. I think sort of Mahan's Pacific strategy and the notion about, you know, the power sort of conflicts in the Western Pacific I think he used the terms would be debated and debatable. It's not always – it's not so clear as it would be in a North American context. And he was careful about trying to extend American power to that perimeter without necessarily getting involved in land wars in Asia. And as you note, he was actually a very strong free trader. He has this wonderful quote about, you know, protectionism is like ironclads – good for defense, but not very good for offense. So, I would definitely include him in the process. And also, I think a key aspect of your work and my work is to try to understand the role of alliances and partnerships, which would be very valuable today in dealing with China.

Michael Green: So I just want to let people who are watching our discussion know that you can send questions in, and I'm getting them by Google Docs and chat function, and we’ll turn to those in just a moment. So please, please ask questions if you have them. We have a few interesting ones already in the queue.

You touched briefly just now on values and John Quincy Adams' view that the rest of the world wasn’t quite ready for republicanism, even though he valued it highly. In your different vignettes you look at Reagan, who – for whom values and democracy were central, but you also have a lot of praise for Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's development of realpolitik, really a Metternichian – almost un-American in some ways – cold, hard power calculation. Where do you come down on that today? What should the next administration, whoever it is, be thinking about the role of American values, of democracy in how we shape a world order and protect our interests?

Robert Zoellick: Well, one of the themes of my book is that American policy has had the challenge of integrating these different ideas and experience. And so, I think to understand the Nixon and Kissinger period, one has to recall, as I think in Haldeman's memoirs, that Vietnam was a presence every day. And so they were trying to dig America out of a very deep hole, and one of the things I respected about Nixon's view of history was that he had this comment that great nations need to have bold ambitions to remain great and I think that is also part of the American story.

As I conclude, I think there's a lot of lessons to be drawn from his experience with Kissinger, but they're missing this element of the support of American values – what I'll call the American realism of John Quincy Adams, which was not quite the same as sort of their realpolitik.

I think the starting point, Mike, would be, you know, the example we set at home is always critically important, because, going back to the Seward's notion, we want to become a magnet of attraction. We want people to want to be part of the United States. And then building on this notion from John Quincy Adams, I think it's important to try to help with the capacity and the conditions that will foster democracy. So you saw this across the East Asian context. I taught in Hong Kong in 1980. My Chinese students were very excited about the Deng Xiaoping reforms and they said, oh, democracy only exists in Japan in some unusual form. Well, then, watch what happens with South Korea. Watch what happens with Taiwan; you
know, what happens with different Southeast Asian countries. But I don’t think this view that it’ll happen automatically underappreciates what I learned from the development space about you need institutions, you need rule of law. And that’s also why I’m particularly troubled when the United States seems to sort of undermine those aspects.

And then there’s the interesting aspect of how you use your policies to signal support for freedom as an aspiration. Reagan didn’t use freedom as a way to insult the Russian people. Quite to the contrary, he wanted to convert them, and he wanted to bring them in. And so today, for example, with Hong Kong, rather than cut off ties, I would actually take the approach, working with Britain, Australia, and others, and say, fine, let people from Hong Kong come to the United States. That shows the difference between the two societies. And I certainly wouldn’t cut off students. And frankly, I’m a little worried we’re at kind of the edge of what could be hostility to Chinese Americans. If you have friends that are Asian American, you kind of see this today. So I think part of what I try to draw out of traditions of American diplomacy is how you combine the economic, the North American context, the alliance relations, with political support and a larger purpose.

Michael Green: You know, your reference to Asian Americans is really important. The FBI reports that hate crimes against Asian Americans are up over 30 percent since COVID-19. And we’re just starting to get ready for classes again at Georgetown, meeting new students. And in the current national moment since the killing of George Floyd, the broad national embrace of Black Lives Matter, students are really interested, I mean genuinely interested, in understanding how race affected American foreign policy and international relations more broadly. And you touch on it in a bunch of places in the book. It’s not a major theme, but it’s in there. And it’s a vulnerability for us. Do you think – you mentioned Seward. I mean, race – slavery was an existential threat to our own republic. And just look at Russian interference today. What are they targeting? Racial divisions in this country. So maybe – you know, I gather you sent the manuscript off before the protests, but it is in there quite a bit. And I wonder if you could sort of synthesize your thinking about how race and the search for social justice here at home has affected our role in the world.

Robert Zoellick: It’s interesting. I did write this before these recent events. But it was in the back of my mind as I was dealing with these topics. And one way I opened that is, I think, a story that most people would not know about, but in 1784 – so this is before the Constitution is created but after we have the peace and we’ve got these new western lands – Thomas Jefferson is in charge of a committee to decide how do we approach these territories. And he does something that we assume today but was revolutionary at the times. As opposed to create colonies or sort of control military spaces, they say we’ll create co-equal states. And, in fact, his first model was to have more new states than we had existing states. But there’s one little vignette, which is that in the proposal that his committee comes up with, it would have banned slavery in any of those areas, so whether in the South or the North. It fails by one vote, by one vote from the delegate of New Jersey. And, you know, this later is incorporated in the sort of the Northwest Ordinance. But you’ve got to wonder about, you know, how history would have changed with that.

But to go on to the Jefferson experience, that chapter is primarily about the Louisiana Purchase. And I don’t think that we ever would have been able to make the purchase if Napoleon had failed in Haiti. And so one of the little stories there is – and there’s sort of a debate among historians where I don’t think that the U.S. was willing to give formal support to Haiti because it was a slave revolution. But there seemed, in the wonderful form of transnational relations in the United States, informal support.
The next one is Henry Clay has the vision of American republics. So he wants to take the
Monroe Doctrine, which says what we don’t want others, or Europeans, to do. And he wants
to say, well, what are we going to do? And there’s this wonderful story about the Panama
Congress in 1825, which gets caught up in domestic politics. But part of the resistance was
racial because of Haiti and also Latin America at the time. So my own view is our sort of
racism holds the United States back at that period.

I mentioned the case of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, which was
interesting, because, of course, when we – part of the British attitudes are formed by Harriet
Beecher Stowe’s book. I point out about “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” how this has much bigger sales
in Britain than it does in the United States, and eventually were able to take the anti-slavery
cause and make it sort of part of the diplomacy.

We talked about the case of Seward. But then to come back to the Asia context, this
Burlingame Treaty that you and I write about actually has – invites Chinese to come to
education and treats Chinese in an equal way. And poor Teddy Roosevelt has to deal with the
anti-Japanese and Chinese movements. And you can quite tell he’s embarrassed by it. I mean,
he says, look, we have to treat them the way they’re going to treat us. And, in fact, I think they
lead to one of the first boycotts of the Chinese to sort of American boatmen in China. And
certainly, our attitude towards Mexico, I think, becomes a negative. And one of the reasons
that I think NAFTA and the Reagan and the Clinton and Bush approach is so important is
we’re trying to transform that attitude, including in our own country, towards Hispanic
Americans.

I think – I don't get into this in-depth, but I think during the Cold War, the civil-rights
movement benefits because Kennedy was embarrassed about what’s happening in the United
States during the 1960s. And I like to see this as not a fatal flaw but sort of an ongoing
challenge. And I discovered something that quite intrigued me. You mentioned I have a
chapter on Elihu Root, which I connect to international law. But he makes two comments that
are really relevant today. He explains that when he was a young man growing up – so this was
sort of before the Civil War – he said he and his friends used to consider the Declaration of
Independence to be bunko; you know, so these words. And then he said, but look at how it
helps transform the country, of course, with the Civil War. And he makes some reference in
his later years to the unfinished word of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments. So, these are
the Reconstruction amendments. There’s a recent good sort of book out by Eric Foner about
how these were, in a sense, twisted by the Supreme Court of the days and had to sort of be
reawakened. So – and as you say, today we now have this issue with Asian and Chinese
Americans. So, it’s an interesting theme that your students are bringing up. And I hope,
through this book and others, one can see that ultimately if America falls short, we hurt
ourselves, we limit ourselves. And our greatest strength is to continue to overcome it.
Chinese Communist Party's power.

So, these occur in other societies. Ours is open for everybody to see. But I think it’s ultimately the way you come to terms with this. As a student of history, I would suggest sort of my – the pragmatic spirit that I’m trying to encourage is that history can offer insights on how to do better, as opposed to timeless obstacles. Which perhaps those who take a more intellectual bent might sort of say, well, these are conventions that you can never change, and they’re sort of dogmas and intellectual principles. And I like to think that there’s a possibility to use history to think about how to do better, but also recognize you’re going to achieve imperfect results in a far from perfect world.

Michael Green: So, there’s a question for you that flows from that quite well, because in none of your 16 vignettes does an Alexander Hamilton, or an Elihu Root, or a Theodore Roosevelt try to go back to the way it was and they’re always building something new. And Alexander Ferguson, who I understand worked for you at one point, had a question. Which is: Could a Biden administration restore U.S. foreign policy? And it raises the question, is U.S. foreign policy ever restored? What would a Biden administration be able to do? What should it do, broadly speaking?

Robert Zoellick: I think you always have to look ahead. I think, in fact, this is going to be a challenge because the agenda – if Vice President Biden wins, the agenda for his team is going to look pretty overwhelming. But in the same spirit in which I try to connect the domestic with the international, I’d start with the reality that if Biden’s elected, he’s going to have a huge domestic agenda. He’s got a pandemic and frayed health care system. He’s got inclusive economic growth. He’s got racism issues. He’s got immigration issues. He’s got environment and climate issues. And, as you know as a once-practicing official, there’s only so much you can run through the system, particularly Congress, at once. And again, if you look back at the Carter, the Clinton, the Obama administrations, they don’t do so well after their first two years because they have to decide what – where are they going to get the wins?

Well, if you add on top of that the international agenda, even though I think Biden enjoys foreign policy, he likes to network, he’s probably going to be best deployed working with Congress, where he probably could be the most effective president since LBJ, depending on the electoral context. And so, my suggestion is actually to leverage your foreign policy off your domestic policy. So, I focus a lot in the book on North America. If you do something on immigration with DREAMers, let’s connect it back to restoring some relations with Mexico because, frankly, there’s trouble ahead there under the current administration and the pandemic. If we do something with pandemic, well, let’s try to see how we can use that to strengthen our international position, like President Bush 43 did with HIV/AIDS. If you do something – in sub-Saharan Africa. If you do something on climate change, don’t just rejoin the Paris Accord, but try to connect it with an agenda for climate for developing countries with – (inaudible) – carbon in Africa, or avoiding deforestation in parts of the world.

So I could go through these – and, in fact, I’m writing a little piece for – that might be in Foreign Affairs in September online, where I’m trying to say this might be a more logical way to take the agenda and connect it with your relations. And then the key – the next key is – this is a pretty good agenda to work with our allies on. There’s a lot of common ground here, but then I wouldn’t stop with that. I then take this to say: how do we together look at the future of free societies and how do we deal with China? There’s some other issues you’re going to have to deal with, like regional security, hegemons, and weapons of mass destruction, and others.
But I think part of the challenge – in a way, it’s like Charles Evans Hughes. How do you take the circumstances and sort of reform them, building on some of the experience, but perhaps setting a new agenda? But we’ll see.

Michael Green: Turning lemons into lemonade.

The next question actually flows from that quite well. Arnold Vela, who’s a retired FSO – Foreign Service officer – asks about TPP. Are the channels still open? Could the next administration build the momentum to get into what is now CPTPP? But it begs the question, is that one of the areas where maybe the administration looks for something a little more digestible? Maybe a digital trade agreement, or something that’s more achievable? So what would you give – in the spirit of pragmatism, and maybe inspired by Cordell Hull, or Alexander Hamilton, or Charles Evan Hughes, how would you advise the next administration to think about CPTPP and trade rulemaking in Asia?

Robert Zoellick: Well, I wish they would be more on offense on trade. And I – at a recent session of the Aspen Strategy Group, I heard two leading Democratic former officials, perhaps future officials, say: Well, maybe they could draw on the USMCA changes to support this. I wish them well. I think the reality is the trade promotion authority actually will expire next year. I still have the scars from the efforts I had to sort of extend in the two Bush administrations. I’m not sure that will be the first legislative priority. And, frankly, while we think the MCA with Mexico allowed us to bring votes, there are a lot of provisions in there that I’m not sure the Asian countries would like so much. And, you know, setting wage rates for auto industries, and so on and so forth is not going to –

Michael Green: And Article 32 –

Robert Zoellick: Pardon?

Michael Green: The China clause in it.

Robert Zoellick: Well, I’m thinking more about the fact that the auto sector basically you’re setting wage rates and rules of origin. And frankly, we undermine investment in Mexico because they used to work their investment law into these provisions. But so, I suspect that, you know, a lot of this comes back to the initiative. A lot of it will depend on who is appointed as trade representative, and whether they figure they can build a new political coalition on this. I think the next best would be to try to focus on topics on sectors, such as digital, and try to resolve some of the disputes. But just to give you one other sort of creative thought: If we did do something with the U.K., which one would expect should be less of a problem for labor unions, I would do it as a North America. I’d do it as the three North Americans together, and help build a broader strategic concept for the North Atlantic and North American.

Michael Green: A question for you from Michael J. Kim at the Asia Institute about staffing, basically –

Robert Zoellick: About what?

Robert Zoellick: About staffing, about the people who do foreign policy. You know, as a professor at a school of
public affairs, I’m quite encouraged by and inspired by the younger people who are going into federal service, or the Foreign Service, CIA, and think tanks, and NGOs, but at the senior levels of government, there’s just incredible turnover, including in the Foreign Service, and it’s hard to get people in now – the ethics barriers, and so forth. And so, is this impairing our ability to do statecraft? Are we going to be able to attract the best and brightest people? Or do you think it’s something we’ll sort out?

Robert Zoellick: Well, I’m not close to see sort of what’s come apart over the past sort of three and a half years. Traditionally the opportunity to make a difference for America has drawn people into career service – whether it’s intelligence, defense, foreign service, domestic – that as you know are incredible talents and willing to sacrifice a great deal. They do need a sense of motivation. And, you know, without getting into a long story, I’m afraid sort of the attack on institutions has probably weakened that, but I think it’s something you can rebuild.

I think that also – going back to my own experience with Baker, which I talk about a little bit in the book – you know, it’s not that those institutions should be independent of the White House. So, Baker creates some ruffles when he came to the State Department and said: Look, I’m the White House’s man at the State Department, not the State Department’s man at the White House. But I think people recognize those are golden years in terms of getting things done, as we worked with the career service as well as with the president and the White House and he was a much more powerful secretary of state.

So, in a way – one of the reasons I wrote this book was because I was a little worried from my contact with some of the younger people that worked for me, people really didn’t have a sense of this history and how things were done. And so I’m hoping, frankly, to try to draw some attention to this in some university audiences because, again, with the fading of diplomatic history people will do little bits and pieces, but I’m not sure they’ve seen something across the range that allows them to synthesize the ideas with a practical sense of how you get things done.

Michael Green: Yeah. You know, there used to – some of the people I focus on in my book were early political scientists in the 19-teens and -20s, who were sent out as political appointees – ambassadors in China and so forth. And in those years, in the teens and ’20s, and ’30s, basically before the war, political science was applied history. And now, history and political science are almost unrecognizable to each other sometimes. But I feel like there’s a demand signal from students, from the public more broadly, to get history back into this, and apply history. And your book definitely does that.

I have another question actually on education; an anonymous question. And the question is basically: How do you – it’s related to what you just said – but how do you teach this, not to people going into the Foreign Service, but to the public more broadly? How would you take a book like yours – it’s an interesting question from someone, probably an educator – and how would you take the lessons, maybe in a civics or history class, for high school, public high school in Ohio, or Florida, or Maryland, or wherever? Is there a – it sounds pretty exciting to me, and I’m not asking you to write another book, maybe a movie – but how do we get this out beyond the foreign policy audiences?

Robert Zoellick: Well, it goes back to the basic concept I had for the book was around stories and I think people always enjoy stories. And so one of the reasons why I always found it sad when younger people said, oh, they didn’t like history, was that obviously it was taught in some way that ignored stories, because stories about people are, you know, from when you’re a young kid, that’s sort of what interests you. It’s sort of – and so I think I would try to bring it alive
with people. Just over the weekend I wrote a piece for the Dallas Morning News about trade and foreign policy and I drew from this sort of historical experience.

I think – and in a sense, understanding the civics of America I think are very important, and whether – you know, however that can be taught. I think at the larger level, if you look at things like the Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys, there’s a general understanding of America and the world about alliance, and trade relations, and others. And so, there is a responsibility for the president, and the senior people. You go back and you look at the story of the turn towards alliances in ’47 to ’49. And, you know, there was this incredible poll in late 1945, right after sort of the defeat of Japan, that said: What priority should international relations have in American policy? Seven percent said international relations and the next year it moves up to 14, okay?

Well, and if you go back and you look at that period people worried about reconversion, and depression, so on and so forth. And when Marshall and Truman and others sort of rebuild support, they’re out there giving speeches. They’re out there explaining this. Part of the story about Kissinger is how he tries to do this in sort of a different way, but I’m not sure that his explanations quite sort of connected, even though he tried. But this is also where the Congress comes in. So, one of the themes I also draw on is the importance of public support, members of Congress. I draw Vandenburg in that ’47 to ’49 period because I think in some ways, he’s an underappreciated figure of how he works with the Congress.

And just like the story with Charles Evans Hughes, or the explanation with Baker, Elihu Root, these people are quite skilled at bringing along members of Congress. And whether it’s John McCain, or Richard Lugar, or Sam Nunn, or Howard Baker, these also become people sort of – that shape the public debate. So, one of the questions will be, you know, which of those members of Congress might rise to this role? And on a positive side, I think the fact that a lot of members of Congress of both parties now have had intelligence or military service can augur well.

Michael Green: Maybe Dan Sullivan, Senator from Alaska who used to work for you, and is a good –

Robert Zoellick: Well, and you know, I exchanged a note with Mike Gallagher from Wisconsin, but he’s – I think he’s a Georgetown Ph.D. as well as a Marine officer, yeah.

Michael Green: Good guy. Good guy. No, I think that the Chicago Council polls are really, really encouraging. Not perfect, but the internationalism I think is deep rooted. When I was doing my book, I had time at the University of Hawaii. And I pulled out the big, thick Gallup polls from 1920-1945 to look up one poll. And I wasted two days – wasted – I spent two days reading it cover to cover. It was just fascinating. And you look at where Americans are today, and there’s a deep – I don’t know if deep is the right word – there’s a broad sense that we have a mission in the world. The question is how deep is it?

Robert Zoellick: Well, and also, Mike, if you take my answer to your question – I think it was Alex Ferguson’s question about, you know, I think people with pandemics, and climate change, and immigration understand America’s connectivity to the world.

Michael Green: So we have seven minutes left. We can probably fit another question or two. People can go to the link for questions on the event page. Somebody listening right now, a grad student somewhere – Georgetown, Columbia, whatever – may write the next big book on American foreign policy and vignettes in 10, 20, 30 years and it would not be surprising if you were in
there. And in particular, your responsible stakeholder speech on China in July of 2005, which I got to peek at before you gave it.

And it was interesting, I remember thinking: Boy, this is a pretty hardline speech. And then you gave it, and the response was: This is not a hardline speech. It was – it's so interesting how these speeches are interpreted in the moment, a year later, ten years later. And you spent a lot of time doing that with Reagan's Westminster speech on democracy, and how the interpretation changed over time. And I know you've written on this recently, but how would you think historians will look at your question of whether China can be a responsible stakeholder? And is that still a useful operating question for dealing with China?

Robert Zoellick: Well, for those – for people that have a current interest, as Mike alluded to, I wrote a piece in The National Interest in March and April of this year, where I tried to return to the theme and explain where I thought it stood. But I think the bigger answer to your question is historians reflect the times in which they write. So, I had come across a book you might have known I think in the early '80s by Jerald Combs about sort of American diplomacy, which he looks at how historiography changes depending on the epoch. So, I think how that speech will be seen will depend a little bit on our relations with China, which by the way I think are kind of in freefall now and quite a dangerous state.

But I have also observed that scholars make their reputations by challenging the conventional wisdom. So I hope at some point some scholar goes back and reads the speech as opposed to take it the way it’s been discussed because, as you know, the purpose of the speech was to say, well, by 2005 we had been working to integrate China into the system and that had been accomplished – WTO, IMF, World Bank, U.N., ozone depletion treaties, but I was arguing we needed to get China to do more. We needed it to assume responsibilities as a stakeholder in the system that benefitted it. And I think that when you go back and look at the speech, as I did actually recently when I wrote this article, I have some warnings to say, look, this will happen, you'll lose U.S. support and I also close with the sort of argument about sort of liberty.

The bigger question will be, did cooperation fail? And I think this is quite dangerous today because there's a new conventional wisdom that says, well, we tried – and some people say we were stupid to try; some people say we tried but it all failed. This National Interest article will give a pretty good explanation from proliferation to economics to environment to give sort of the counterargument about that. And I think that makes another observation, which is there's no holidays from diplomacy. You know, yes, we accomplished those things, but there – I do believe there are some changes with Xi Jinping and we needed to continue to adapt.

But I would go back to the agenda we have discussed. If you want to deal with biological security in the future, if you want to deal with economics in the world, if you want to deal with environmental topics, if you want to deal with proliferation issues, how are you going to do so without China? And so, the question is, you know, can you establish a working relationship on some issues while following the Mahanian sort of security strategy with your allies in the region, and while still representing America's views about the aspirations of freedom? I think one could do that. I hate to say this, but in some ways a starting point today is America acting like a responsible stakeholder. I'm not sure some people in the world would feel we've met that test.

Michael Green: Interesting question from someone about energy. I was about to say something that's very different today, but of course in earlier periods in our history it was true as well. The U.S. is, you know, a net exporter of energy now. And the question is, how does that change American statecraft?
Robert Zoellick: Well, I think it has had a change on our attitude towards Gulf security. Now, of course, energy prices are a global price, so if there’s a disruption – as there have been in the Gulf and other issues – it’s going to affect the global price. But I do think some of the sort of aspects of America’s dependence have been shifted because of the technological revolution in energy. And that’s, by the way, a good reminder, whether it’s arms control or other issues, the importance of science and technology. So, we haven’t discussed I put in a chapter here about a man named Vannevar Bush, and I wanted to emphasize that in addition to geopolitics and economics the role of innovation in science and technology becomes sort of very important. And I think energy’s part of that.

I think today, now, it will also focus very much on the climate issue. So you know, can we come up with an effective strategy, particularly if Biden’s elected, that puts the U.S. in a leadership role but also encouraging the productivity of our economy? And back on the practical side, you know, I remind people, people often look upon Bush 41 as simply the president who ended the Cold War and the Gulf War. The only climate change treaty that ever was ratified by the U.S. Senate was done under the Bush administration. Actually, I led the negotiations. And it’s created the platform for people to understand this for how science and environment sort of policy would go forward, and the Paris Agreement for example builds on the national action plans that are called for in that treaty. So, in some ways it draws these themes together – some of these issues return, whether technology, science, or policy.

Michael Green: You know, the vignettes you portrayed are not all – in fact, I think probably only about half are State Department senior officials: Vannevar Bush on technology; Alexander Hamilton, first secretary of the treasury; and of course, Vandenberg in the Congress. So, this is a good place to end because the lesson here is statecraft/diplomacy is not just done at the State Department. And these lessons, as you would know from your time at USTR and maybe even the World Bank, are lessons that congressional staffers and members of Congress, people who work in NASA or Homeland Security, people who work in foundations and NGOs, they’re all part of this. And I could see a future book like this including people from the International Republican Institute or the Asia Foundation or the Rockefeller Foundation or the Chamber of Commerce or AmCham Shanghai. It’s an ecosystem of American diplomacy – and you capture that – even in early periods of our history.

So definite must-read for Foreign Service officers current, past, present, and future, but a really important book for anyone interested in the world because the title, of course, is not “America and the World” – and I’m sure you thought about this – it’s “America in the World.” And that’s where we are. So, congratulations, Bob. It’s a wonderful read. I’ll look forward to the movie. And any final thoughts before we close?

Robert Zoellick: Well, just on your last point, as you mentioned, one of the reasons I bring out trade from the start is that, remember, the new United States is born in a world of imperialism and of a colonial mercantilist system, and the idea was to open the world for private actors. And you, as a student of East Asia, would know this best of all: It’s not only commerce, it’s missionaries, it’s what they bring for hospitals and education, it’s the founding of Tsinghua University based on some of the reparations of the Boxer Rebellion, and whether it’s engineers and railroad officers. So I try to draw in what scholars would call the transnational themes, but it’s also part of America’s strengths if we create the frameworks for the innovation in the private sector that I think will give us the advantage over time with our ongoing ability to reinvent ourselves.
Bob Zoellick, thank you. The book is “America in the World.” Great stories, great biographies, and great insights.

Thank you, Mike.

Great having you. Thank you all. Thanks, everyone, for joining us.

Thank you.