Introduction: Between Past and Prologue

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The past decade and more has witnessed sustained discussions among historians of US foreign relations about the state of their discipline in general and of Cold War history in particular. In books and journals, on web sites and at conferences, leading professionals have interrogated themselves, their resources and tools in order to evaluate their ability to analyse and interpret their subject matter. In light of such evaluations, they have gone on to review their readings of American diplomacy and many aspects of the Cold War. They have even reconsidered what terms should best be used to identify their scholarly work: whether, for example, to substitute ‘foreign relations’ or ‘international history’ for ‘foreign policy’ or ‘diplomatic history’.¹

Such discussions are perhaps not surprising, particularly given the ways in, and the speed with, which US foreign relations have been transformed as the Cold War has waned.² Not surprisingly, either, no clear agreement on the state of the discipline or the overall nature of the Cold War has resulted. In a 1990 roundtable on methodology, for example, Thomas Paterson had spoken of diplomatic history as a ‘highly conflicted yet inviting and fertile intellectual environment’ characterized by a ‘healthy diversity’. In 1995, by contrast, Diplomatic History editor Michael Hogan was describing the field as ‘beleaguered’. Similarly, in a survey written in 1992, Michael Hunt found the scholarly field to be in a state of good health having recently emerged from a ‘long crisis’ stretching back over more than two decades. Three years later, however, Melvyn Leffler was questioning whether any such crisis had ever occurred.³

If, as most practitioners seem to acknowledge, the discipline has been (and perhaps still is) in an era of transition or flux, then explanations are not hard to find. Two in particular stand out. On the one hand, the

¹ D. Carter et al. (eds.), War and Cold War in American Foreign Policy, 1942–62
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collapse of the eastern bloc and the Soviet Union has been accompanied by opening up of previously inaccessible archival resources, not only in Moscow but also in countries as far afield as China and Cuba. At the same time, as John Lewis Gaddis emphasizes in his *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997), it has at last carried Cold War historians beyond the era of their subject matter. For many if not all aspects of Cold War history, such documentary windfalls and perspectival shifts have promised new answers to old questions and prompted new questions without answers, particularly as western archives continue to release materials, whether as result of routine declassification procedures, mandatory reviews or Freedom of Information Act suits. On the other hand, and perhaps more important for those who spoke of a ‘crisis’, diplomatic history has since the 1970s been subjected to (and professionally marginalized by) mounting criticisms from within the academy, including challenges to its alleged epistemological naivete, its preoccupation with (usually white male) elites, its narrow focus on state-to-state relationships, and its overreliance on the archives of a very limited number of countries.4

Insofar as crises or transitions in diplomatic history have been born of academic criticism, however, they are partly self-generated. As Thomas Paterson points out, from at least the 1970s historians of foreign relations have themselves been looking beyond ‘government policy, decision-making, and national power’ to consider many supposedly ‘nonpolitical aspects of the past’ such as culture and gender. They have been drawing on and accommodating concepts, methods and data from a steadily widening intellectual catchment area; investigating the potentials of organization, ‘world-systems’ and dependency theories as well as psychoanalysis, corporatism, and public opinion for the study of foreign relations; drawing on archives in a growing number of countries; and rethinking established terms such as ideology and national security.5 In fact, Leffler argues, it is precisely because diplomatic historians have been engaged (and should be prepared to engage) in such labours that their field is not so much in crisis as set to return from its unwarranted and involuntary quarantine: ‘uniquely positioned to deal with many of the issues that other historians deem central to an understanding of the American experience’. It is, he goes on, so long as diplomatic historians can overcome their ‘tendencies to fragment into topical subspecialities and warring schools of interpretation’.6

To many observers, of course, such proclivities are precisely what for decades has characterized the study of American foreign relations, and in particular the study of the Cold War. The tendency of scholarly