The past,” William Faulkner famously remarked, “is never dead. It’s not even the past.” Nevertheless, historians and policymakers are often at odds: on the one hand, emphasizing the limits of policy-relevant research and, on the other, portraying the present as far different from the past, placing change before continuity. Recently, though, many diplomatic historians have written with conviction and insight about the roles the United States currently plays in international affairs.

Lloyd Gardner draws on over forty years of experience to explain the current U.S. position in the Middle East in The Long Road to Baghdad. The Rutgers professor and former president of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations is an original member of the “Wisconsin” or “revisionist” school of diplomatic history, which since the 1960s has drawn attention to the relationship between U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth century with that of the previous era of imperialism.

In The Long Road, Gardner puts forth a stimulating argument based on the use of a broad array of primary sources. Beginning with the Vietnam War, on which he has written several books, Gardner emphasizes similarities in the language and motive of the Cold Warriors of the 1960s and 1970s and
neonconservatives who have made decisive foreign policies after the Cold War. Gardner’s nonlinear narrative accentuates the close relationship between the past and present, and the smooth prose makes The Long Road a pleasure to read.

The road begins with the modernization theory of Walter Whitman Rostow, the national security adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and its use to defend the wars in Vietnam. The path continues with an analysis of the legacy of Vietnam in the thinking of Zbigniew Brzezinski. As the national security adviser to President Carter, Brzezinski’s 1979 “arc of crisis” reaction to the increased Soviet military presence in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, Gardner believes, set the tone for future policy. Gardner connects Rostow and Brzezinski to more recent theorists and policymakers, stating that these strategists utilized the “idea of progress—the agent theory of international relations” to bring American power to bear in the objective of developing and improving other countries.

The tone of this exceptionalist goal of nation-building undertook a drastic change in 1979. The fall of the Shah and the loss of his U.S.-funded modern military portended a potentially disastrous ebb of influence in the Middle East, at the same time as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan heightened the sense of crisis. American officials pursued new options, first identifying Saudi Arabia as Iran’s replacement. However, after a decade of grooming, the monarchy rebuffed the increased American presence. In 1991 the search for a strategic Middle Eastern base turned to a new candidate. The current Iraq war “was not about Saddam Hussein,” Gardner concludes, “it was about the American objective of establishing a new Middle East”.

A principal objective of The Long Road is to “pull the history of America’s quest for influence and, indeed, dominance in the Middle East out of the Cold War framework, and to examine thereby different continuities at work in policy formulation and decision”. To do this, Gardner links decisions made during the Cold War to the post-Cold War concern for regional security, exposing an important continuity in policy formulation. By selecting the Carter Doctrine, the first Gulf War, and the current war as the principle markers of the narrative, The Long Road successfully moves beyond the habitual study of the Cold War.

The explicit disengagement from the “Cold War framework” has distinct advantages. Historians and policymakers will benefit from the intellectual connection drawn between Rostow’s modernization ideology, Brzezinski’s aggressive defense of national security, and the neoconservative policies of
the post-Cold War era. Furthermore, Gardner meticulously details the successive U.S. courting of oil-producing allies from the 1970s to the present, commencing with the Shah of Iran, moving on to the special relationship with Saudi Arabia, and concluding with the invasion of Iraq. To cite just one example, his brief analysis of the Shah’s early goals for nuclear energy and oil conservation is especially insightful, given the current debate over Iranian nuclear power.

At times, however, purging the Cold War paradigm militates against the facts. Describing the “intellectual and moral poverty” of U.S. Cold War strategy, Gardner explains it as a rationale for policy assessments that would have been made regardless. Although it is true that a narrow focus on Cold War factors omits other important influences in U.S. policymaking, Gardner is also a scholar who came of age during the Cold War and understands its centrality in recent international history. The rejection of that centrality obscures as much as it reveals.

This is unfortunate because Cold War politics did provide a central motivation for U.S. policies in the Carter administration. The Carter Doctrine, although correctly identified by Gardner as driven largely by concerns of regional security, cannot be understood apart from the very real fact of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Melvyn Leffler, another prominent historian who has commented recently on current policy, has written that during the Cold War, “The fears that haunted Soviet and American leaders”—in this case, the fear of encirclement that drove the Soviet invasion and the fear of losing Middle Eastern oil that led to U.S. policy—“did not stem from accurate assessments of actual intentions but from deeply embedded ideological axioms about motives and aims.”

Gardner agrees, but he is more critical of what he calls Brzezinski’s “sky-is-falling” attitude. Still, one wonders what would have happened if the Russian incursions in Ethiopia and Afghanistan had occurred at a safer distance from oil fields and oil shipping lanes, or if the Iranian air force had not been lost to the Ayatollah. New archival research in Russia unambiguously demonstrates that Brzezinski and Carter misread the international situation in 1979. Likewise, as Gardner notes, they demonstrated a lack of prescience regarding the threat of jihadist movements, an error repeated by future administrations. But, while the administration still merits excoriation for crying wolf, the interpretation of their miscalculations must take into greater consideration the deep-seated ideological and geopolitical grounding of the Cold War.
In rejecting the Cold War context, Gardner sets a praiseworthy example by choosing a road less traveled. Whether they agree or disagree, scholars undoubtedly will benefit from his decision, which not only serves as a powerful criticism of Cold War paranoia but also provides an opportunity to understand how the nation faced new challenges in an era of international affairs with fewer tested solutions. From this perspective, the 1970s, rather than serving primarily as an interlude of détente in a four-decade Cold War, is a decade in which the international order began to break down and in which new forces altered international relations in lasting ways. These changes required substantial reappraisals, which in turn are central to understanding the current state of affairs in U.S. foreign relations.

Arguably the greatest benefit of Gardner’s novel approach is that it invites additional new analyses. This impetus towards a more multifaceted international history derives from the changing nature of international affairs in the 1970s. Most importantly, superpower détente’s movement away from the nuclear brink allowed policymakers to focus attention on other international problems. In this way, changes in the Cold War gave the United States flexibility in diplomatic maneuvers that had not existed previously. At the same time, many of the dimensions of today’s complex foreign relations—such as the increased concern of policymakers over the interrelated subjects of energy security and the state of the global marketplace—find clear antecedents in the 1970s.

The Long Road points towards these and other important historical factors that help explain today’s imbroglio. In a certain sense, many of these factors lie closer to Gardner’s revisionist roots than the argument he puts forth. Although he states that oil resources in the region formed part of a greater strategic objective, the preservation of continued access to petroleum reserves undoubtedly stood at the forefront of policymakers’ decisions. Indeed, The Long Road assumes the continued significance of securing access to raw materials necessary for the well-being of the national economy.

Even if rarely explicitly stated, this revisionist belief underscores the entire text. Gardner emphasizes events that occurred during the last two years of the Carter administration: the war in the Horn of Africa; the Iranian Revolution; the takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca; and the invasion of Afghanistan. As he argues, the response to these events is crucial for understanding today’s policies. This response was conditioned by the new sense of energy insecurity in industrial nations after the Tehran and Tripoli agreements between the oil-producing states and oil companies in 1971 and the Arab oil embargo of 1973. Brzezinski, who served as a policy planner
under Rostow, directed the Trilateral Commission during the long energy crisis of the 1970s and much of the strategic thought that informed his decisions as National Security Adviser took into account the movement of wealth and power to oil-producing states after the four-fold increase in oil prices between October 1973 and January 1974.

The energy crisis brought into sharp relief an enduring international debate regarding the treatment of many Third World countries as sources of raw materials. This debate, which ran along a North-South axis that was not contiguous with the East-West one of the Cold War, only complements Gardner’s emphasis on nation-building and the prevalent belief that developing countries were unqualified to manage their resources. This problem, evident during the Cold War and after, stemmed from deep-set imperial roots.

*The Long Road to Baghdad* is a compelling examination of the origins of the Iraq war. As the war continues to dampen U.S. foreign relations, Gardner offers an analysis that merits commendation for its innovative perspective. His astute analysis also reminds the reader that as time passes, scholars will gain a more detached hindsight, allowing an even more precise understanding of the complex situations in which policymakers worked. As new records become available, Gardner’s main lesson is that historians should continue to reappraise the roads that lie behind. According to this veteran revisionist, the time for the continued revision is ripe. 