

**Hal Brands.** *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016. 480 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-0272-3.



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From the outset, Hal Brands is explicit that his latest book, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, is not solely a study of the end of the Cold War (p. 3). Indeed, it is much more than that and serves as an important contribution to both contemporary history and strategic thought. In terms of contemporary history, it challenges many pervasive notions about the lead-up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly shifts in the 1970s and the role of President Jimmy Carter. Ultimately the book concludes that the American unipolar moment resulted from a combination of structural forces that evolved over time and a concerted US strategic vision that adapted to these changes and seized opportunities when they arose.

Brands traces the roots of the unipolar moment back to the 1970s, challenging some misperceptions in the process. Carter gets little credit for America's rise in the two decades after his presidency; however, Brands argues, the seismic shifts of the 1980s had their roots in the 1970s and many of Carter's policies. Economically, world trade tripled during the decade and Washington

came to terms with the new currency markets and global oil shocks. It was Carter who initiated many of the policies typically associated with Ronald Reagan: an increase in military spending, support to anti-communist forces, democracy-promotion, and the championing of human rights as both a security and moral imperative. In addition to shifts in US strategy during this decade, there were also structural forces at work. The Soviet economy began its slow decline from the high of 1970, and the leadership in Moscow was too stagnant and slow to respond to these shifts in any fashion that could maintain the country's trajectory and competition with the United States.

Whereas the 1970s are typically portrayed as the era of decline, the 1980s were an era of resurgence and growth. Brands certainly does not dispute this notion, but rightly portrays the decade as a complex one. Whereas gains were made vis-à-vis the Soviets, these advances were counterbalanced by instability and losses in the Middle East. A remarkable feature of the 1980s that Brands captures is Reagan's *personal* leadership. He de-

fied many of his advisors in his support of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), but he also had a vision for how the US economy could outspend the Soviets. Democracy-promotion was not merely a moral tool but also a security one. Like Carter, Reagan's personal vision interacted with domestic forces, namely, pressure from Congress, and the changing global order to facilitate a trend of US growth. These efforts and structural shifts culminated in the conclusion of the decade with the unipolar moment.

Perhaps the most important word in the book's title is not the most obvious one: "moment." For according to Brands it was a relatively brief time, 1989-92, when America was able to exercise its power in a truly unipolar fashion. Unipolarity is portrayed as the presence of a sole superpower with "an extraordinarily favorable configuration of power and influence in the international arena, and whose values, preferences, and overall global leadership seemed as privileged as ever before" (p. 274). During its unipolar moment, the United States used this "favorable configuration" to militarily defeat Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, diplomatically build a coalition rooted in a UN Security Council Resolution, and reap the economic benefits of a world order it helped shape. While Brands offers some analysis as to how the unipolar moment collapsed, this was a part of the story that felt somewhat incomplete, despite the book's title. Cumulatively, however, the book's scope and narrative are impressive.

*Making the Unipolar Moment* offers at least four important contributions: one historical, one theoretical, and two contemporary. One of the book's greatest strengths is its geographic balance. Examinations of this time period, the 1970s and 1980s, in the Third World are typically portrayed through the lens of the Cold War rivalry. Brands moves well beyond this to emphasize internal factors at play, such as domestic pro-democracy movements and economic swings, and how these

interacted with structural forces. It was not solely America's strategic vision nor Soviet-inspired competition that brought about many of the seismic shifts in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

The handling of the late Cold War in Latin America is particularly impressive and insightful. These regional analyses also contribute to the book's main argument, for example with the case of Chile, where the "coordinated, multifaceted U.S. campaign was not *primarily* responsible for [Augusto] Pinochet's defeat in the plebiscite in October 1988, or for Chile's return to democracy more broadly. But insofar as Washington *could* influence Chilean affairs, U.S. policy had real impact" (p. 149). The influence of the United States in many of these regions was decidedly limited and secondary to domestic and structural factors.

Turning to the book's theoretical contribution, one of the book's themes deals with the structure-agency debate, though Brands refers to this as a balance between structure and strategy. The book's conclusion rests largely in the middle of the debate: "the emergence of the unipolar era reflected synergistic interaction between structure, on the one hand, and deliberate and proactive strategy on the other" (p. 5). As demonstrated in the example of Chile, however, when the United States could exert influence, it seized these opportunities in the pursuit of its strategic vision.

Finally, Brands highlights at least two themes that would be of use in contemporary strategic thinking. First, strategic decision making is often disorganized by nature and the key players are forced to acknowledge their own ignorance and be flexible. In hindsight, Carter's strategies may have seemed organized and targeted, but in actuality they were forced to manage numerous short-term crises more often than consciously implement a long-term vision. This principle was particularly important for the George H. W. Bush administration, which had to maintain flexibility in adapting to a rapidly changing world. Strategy is a

process of long-term vision allowing for trial and error.

Second, Brands makes a case for the role of soft power in the making of the unipolar moment, which is seemingly missing from many contemporary debates about US leadership and influence abroad. Indeed, two defining features of America's unipolar moment were its alliance structure and ideological prowess; these have not gone away, though perhaps they were weakened over the course of the 2000s. As recent events in Europe have demonstrated, there remains a strong appetite for American leadership and coalition building.

*Making the Unipolar Moment* leaves the reader with the sense that the world order will not return to unipolarity anytime soon; it has become much too complex and American leadership now comes with baggage. As Brands states up front, the book is not meant to be solely about the end of the Cold War, nor is it meant to be an assessment of America's current strategic predicaments. Brands's conclusion is measured: unipolarity is neither something to be desired nor sought, but rather a state of the world that emerged through a combination of structural forces and US vision, the latter heavily influenced by personal leaders.

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