
Reviewed by John McNay (Department of History, Raymond Walters College, University of Cincinnati)  
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**The American World: From Unipolarity to Interdependence**

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One useful test of any good foreign policy analysis is whether the analysis remains relevant even if significant changes occur in the world system? If so, then the analysis has proven itself to be based on essentials and not on simply transient events or current political whim.

Walter C. Clemens Jr.’s work, *America and the World, 1898-2025*, passes this test of relevance despite the fact that it predates the September 11 terrorist attacks. While the ground has changed greatly since then, Clemens has written a valuable evaluation of the past American role in the world and the future prospects for successful policy. A professor of Political Science at Boston University, Clemens is an associate of Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

Threats of terrorism were certainly a consideration in Clemens’s study. “The blend of quantity and quality in U.S. forces was unrivaled,” he writes of contemporary America, “but the country’s vulnerability was increasing. The United States could attack and deter others but had weak or no defenses against the missiles, airplanes, bombs, poison gas sprays, bacteriological agents, or the truck and suitcase bombs of major powers, rogue states, and nonstate terrorists” (p. 176). The United States, of course, remains vulnerable, Tom Ridge notwithstanding.

Given the scope of Clemens’s work, he early on announces his theoretical approaches. This is not, however, the most lucid portion of the study. Not content to have one, two or even three theories driving his argument, Clemens maintains that no less than seven theories of international affairs inform his analysis. Probably of most consequence to the study is what Clemens calls the “convergence” of the theories of mutual gain, complexity, and liberal peace. Just these three, ranging from such varied origins as Immanuel Kant to the Santa Fe Institute, provide a broad sweep of interpretive tools. Fortunately, the theories are not overly intrusive in Clemens’s narrative but are rather used most effectively in drawing together the threads of the argument in the conclusion (p. 14).

In addition to the theoretical background, Clemens’s book is also backed up by surveys of major texts by diplomatic historians as well as opinions from more than 50 “experts” in foreign policy who responded to surveys asking them to list major achievements and failures of American foreign policy. According to Clemens, those who responded ranged from cold war realist George F. Kennan to radical critic Howard Zinn (p. 1).

The fruit of much of this portion of the study is produced in two early baseline chapters in Clemens’s book. Among the chief achievements Clemens notes include America’s support of international organization and collective security as well as promoting global interdependence. For example, Clemens quotes President Clinton that “We must be at the center of every vital global net-
work, as good neighbor and partner. We cannot build our future without helping others to build theirs” (p. 37). The U.S. also garners praise for winning the cold war and controlling conflict as well as working on arms control.

But many of the kudos are relative since the United States has also been responsible for weakening international organization and law, such as the failure to join the League of Nations. And when international agreements established to keep the peace began to falter in the 1930s, Clemens points out, the United States irresponsibly declared its neutrality. While the U.S. led in founding the United Nations, it has also worked to weaken it and Clemens particular points to efforts to keep off the agenda things that might reflect negatively on the U.S., such as the war in Vietnam, and Congressional reluctance to pay its debts to the UN.

While the United States has used force effectively in the twentieth century, Clemens also points out that it often uses force too early or too late. He cites a Brookings Institution study that identified 215 incidents between 1946 and 1976 that analyzed 33 of the cases closely and found that in the “short-run some three-fourths of the outcomes were favorable, but that, three years after the initial show of force, the success rate dropped to less than one-half. Beyond the initial success, American policy failed to achieve goals in nearly two-thirds of the incidents” (p. 64). Clemens argues that the U.S. should not provoke China or the Soviet Union unnecessarily. A theme he repeatedly returns to in the book is the danger he perceives in the expansion of NATO and he particularly faults the Clinton administration on this issue.

Clemens’s discussion of the sources of failures and success in American foreign policy is interesting, particularly when he considers the presidential contribution. Clemens believes that Harry Truman deserves credit as the most effective president in foreign policy during the twentieth century. “His accomplishments were gigantic in the face of complex and unprecedented challenges,” Clemens maintains. He credits Truman and his advisers, including George Marshall, Dean Acheson, and Douglas MacArthur, with learning lessons in the “school of hard knocks” that later helped them during the administration (p. 133).

Clemens’s evaluation of Truman seems to be running counter to a slowly-developing reconsideration of Harry Truman and his administration, led by such more critical new works as Arnold Offner’s Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1949-1953 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) as well as this reviewer’s own study, Acheson and Empire: The British Accent in American Foreign Policy (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001). Yet, based on the criteria he sets for his judgment, Clemens makes a solid argument for his evaluation of Truman’s effectiveness.

Other presidents do not fare nearly so well in Clemens’s judgment. Despite the efforts of the Eisenhower revisionists, Clemens has little regard for him. Ike, Clemens maintains was a cautious military man who allowed the Dulles brothers “wide range for adventures that caused long-term problems.” Bill Clinton, meanwhile, was no more than “CEO for the United States, Inc.” through promotion of free trade. Ronald Reagan signed far reaching accords with Gorbachev but Star Wars created unnecessary problems and Reagan’s “Iran-Contra Affair violated both U.S. and international law.”

Despite the failures and caveats, both domestic and international, Clemens points out that the United States dominates the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century “as no other country had ever towered over the entire globe” (p. 185). Since great power brings with it great responsibility, where is the United States to go from here? Clemens has some concluding suggestions.

In words that are somewhat prophetic, Clemens observes that “Americans are less secure than they think.” Because of that, Clemens argues, “a theory of international relations rooted in an understanding of global interdependence provides a broader framework than realism or idealism for analyzing the past and planning the future.” Clemens argues that this concept of interdependence does not hold that humans are good or bad, as in the old realist/idealist paradigm, but that they can learn to act on “principles of enlightened self-interest” (p. 239).

He encourages United States to work to maximize conditions that encourage peace and prosperity. While this is a vague directive, Clemens is realistic enough to recognize that even non-coercive action by the United States is likely to breed resentment and suspicions in distant parts of the world. “Americans will be damned if they use their power and damned if they do not.... If Washington leads efforts to make a better world, some critics will fault it for bullying, some will chastise them for ignoring the rest of humanity” (p. 231).

Yet, driven by his trio of mutual gain theory, liberal peace theory and complexity theory, Clemens encourages the United States to seek a “soft landing” through consensus creation (p. 234). Unipolarity or hegemony will not last forever and it is in American interests to wel-
come, rather than resist, a world of bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

After the intriguing early chapters, one might have expected a more detailed and specific set of guidelines for the future in the conclusion of Clemens’s work. However, one of the lessons of the book is that the only thing that is really certain is change and Clemens recommends that American policymakers maintain the flexibility and the creativity to adjust to a fluid world. Clemens reminds policymakers that keeping the peace is hard work and there are no easy answers. What is required by the United States in its role as the world’s hegemon is engagement, patience and determination. Clemens’s study should be of interest to policymakers and students of American diplomatic history alike.

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