

Great Powers: America and the World After Bush

Thomas P.M. Barnett

Putnam (2009)

Reviewed by Paul Musgrave

Thomas P.M. Barnett's 2004 bestseller *The Pentagon's New Map* was a useful and entertaining guide to thinking about geopolitics. Linking the metaphors of the Information Age to the political conflicts of the twenty-first century, *PNM* offered a set of metaphors that he hoped would turn Americans away from a view of international relations that focused on war and tests of strength toward seeing how a broadly liberal and trade-oriented policy could supply the security Americans craved after September 11, 2001. At the very least, it was refreshing in the days to encounter popular writing on foreign policy that eschewed the tribalism of the period.

Although comfortable with the broad outlines of George W. Bush's transformation strategy, Barnett promised a future that did not rely on Hail Mary passes, such as the invasion of Iraq, to finally make the world safe for democracy. Instead, he was honest about what he saw as the long, hard, and intrinsically difficult task of bringing less-developed and unstable countries (the "Gap," in Barnett-speak) into the global economic and political system maintained by the United States and other wealthy countries (the "Core").

Since *PNM*'s publication, he has continued to write in this vein. The most recent book-length product of this effort is *Great Powers: America and the World After Bush*. For readers of *PNM*, there are no profoundly new arguments to be found. Barnett still presents a theory of international relations in which economics matters more than military force; in which the United States is a pivotal state, able to choose its foreign policy more or less unilaterally; and in which U.S. leadership is crucial for achieving a desirable policy outcome. Barnett intends to apply these axioms to the problems of American grand strategy in the post-Bush era.

His views on the Bush administration are unapologetic. Where others have seen disaster, Barnett sees good intentions and poor execution. He still lauds the Bush administration's "real strategic imagination regarding development issues," such as its scuttling of the Kyoto Treaty; equally, he lauds Bush for his "display of audacity and hope" in launching the Iraq war to topple Saddam Hussein, spark a democratic revolution in the Middle East, and draw Islamic terrorists into a conflict away from the American homeland.¹ But he recognizes that the administration created an "untenable long-term burden," largely by never seeking to share the benefits of hegemony with the rest of the world.

Accordingly, Barnett's prescription for the Obama administration and its successors is, largely, do what the Bush administration tried to do, but be smarter about it. In a twenty-

¹ And all of this in the space of two pages, pp. 10-11.

first century twist on Norman Angell's 1911 bestseller *The Great Illusion*, which argued that war had become unprofitable and thus impossible, Barnett argues that war has become so economically disastrous that we must make it impossible. Achieving security for the United States and the rest of the world requires using principally economic measures, since armed force is too blunt to be of use against the complex societal factors that nurture destructive nationalism and foster the development of terrorist networks.

Doing so, Barnett explains, requires American policymakers to draw on the lessons of American history. He contends that the economic infrastructure that developed after the signing of the U.S. constitution created not just wealth, but security for the United States. Thus, the United States should now work to deepen economic linkages around the world while also supporting the long-term movements toward freedom, development, and the rule of law. As Barnett puts it, "We are modern globalization's source code—its DNA. As the world's oldest and most successful multinational economic and political union, we remain the planet's most communicable ideology—its most potent insurgency."²

Achieving that goal will require, among other things, increased defense spending and a willingness to intervene in other countries, which is par for the course for right-of-center foreign-policy writing. But Bennett also urges American policymakers to realize that they have to credibly commit to an open-ended competition for global supremacy. If the rest of the world perceives the rules to be fixed in America's favor, then a backlash is inevitable. That reaction, Bennett warns, could prove far more costly than sustaining a rules-based framework that might result in the United States letting others take first place from time to time.

Barnett's book, however, is both more interesting and more frustrating than such straightforward summaries make it seem. It is at times an unstructured ramble through American history and foreign policy thinking, blending equal parts original insight, informed speculation, and responses to other bestselling authors, such as Fareed Zakaria and Doris Kearns Goodwin. One wishes that the references of *Team of Rivals* had been trimmed either to make room for more original analysis or simply to save trees' lives.

Its greatest failings, however, are stylistic. Unlike *PNM*, which presented and justified a new analytic framework for understanding world affairs, *Great Powers* takes for granted that its audience is well-versed in Barnett's lexicon. Consequently, the reader who has not mastered the Barnett *oeuvre* at times feels adrift. Too many sentences in the book read like this one (an actual quotation, from page 349): "America needs to create a SysAdmin-industrial complex that's just as hungry for preconflict/postdisaster opportunities as our long-standing military-industrial complex is for big war."

The analogies and metaphors that illuminated in *PNM* obscure Barnett's argument in *Great*

² p. 2.

Powers. In part, this may be because Barnett has become a one-man think tank since *PNM* appeared. His web site, www.thomaspmbarnett.com, overflows with his thoughts (the truly initiated not only read his Web log but listen to a 9-hour interview between Barnett and conservative talk-show host Hugh Hewitt, for instance). It is more likely that Barnett's writing has become turgid with jargon because Barnett's way of thinking about strategy is more novel than his recommendations about strategy. It is surely sensible to urge Washington to engage China, deter Russian adventurism, and work to develop poor countries. But it is hardly a revelation.

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