

## America and the World

Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft

Basic Books (2008)

*Reviewed by Paula Louise Olearnik*

*America and the World* is a formidable book. It threads together a discussion of the future of US foreign policy with anecdotes from a lifetime of travel and political experience. The reader is a privileged participant in an unscripted conversation between two former National Security Advisors, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft. Masterfully directed by *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, the book is organized by regional discussions bookended by an evaluation of how we got to our present situation as well as policy prescriptions for the incoming president.

Brzezinski and Scowcroft bring a lifetime of foreign policy experience to bear on the question of the future of America's foreign policy. However, at times it seems the real hero of the book is David Ignatius. His wonderfully provocative questions do not allow either of his interlocutors to get away with pious truisms. Brzezinski and Scowcroft can only be commended for their measured, optimistic and largely bi-partisan stance, but at times their gentle optimism is too much motivated by a desire to avoid difficult questions. Ignatius pushes them out of their role as distinguished statesmen and forces the pair to squarely face the threats to American hegemony. For example, he confronts their optimistic view of US-China relations, reminding them that raw materials are in finite supply and that the Chinese have proven themselves to be ruthless in their trade dealings with Iran and other countries contrary to the wishes of the US. He compels them to provide evidence that China is not on a collision course with the US. Brzezinski fires back that the US is also ruthless and self-interested. He, like Scowcroft, does not indulge in a romanticised vision of the US in the world, but argues that ruthless competition does not necessarily lead to imperial ambitions. On the contrary, both men make the claim that a realistic understanding of our ever globalizing world leads us to understand that rampant imperialism is not compatible with stable economic growth.

The truth revealed in *America and the World* is that both Scowcroft and Brzezinski eschew characterization under one of the 'isms' and if they can be called realists, then they are certainly not of the structural kind. They take very seriously the cultural contexts of the regions in question and realize that blanket solutions are impossible to implement.

This is not to say that both men are in complete agreement all of the time. This is most evident in their discussions of Iraq, Afghanistan and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. They are most sharply divided over how best to carry out America's War on Terror. Brzezinski is convinced that the American military presence is only perpetuating instability and that the troops should be withdrawn as soon as is safely possible. Scowcroft, keeping to the Republican position, argues that a premature withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan would only precipitate a bloody grasping for power between national groups after America's departure from the region.

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Looking beyond challenges for American policy at the regional level, the two men recognize a need to adapt to the post-Cold War era. They discuss a new ‘culture of fear’ and a tendency to towards isolationism, which, they warn, will not serve America well. The paradox of American society is that it is the most globally engaged but also one of the most parochial. Thus, one of the important roles of the next president, according to Brzezinski, will be to educate the American public about new global realities.

In a variety of different contexts Scowcroft and Brzezinski distance themselves from the hawkish neo-con method of conducting foreign policy. They are convinced that America should not be in the business of imposing its values and standards on the rest of the world; whether in the form of democracy or more nebulous concepts such as freedom and dignity. However, one question to which Ignatius only alludes, but which requires further examination is whether authoritarianism can provide peace and prosperity just as well as democracy. Both men realise that the imposition of democracy and liberal Western values is not only culturally insensitive, but in many cases it may even be impossible since the nation in question’s history, culture and religion may be completely antithetical to that required by liberal democracies. However the discussion never attempts to reach a deeper understanding of the limits of democracy. It does not ask what America might be able to learn from the rest of the world.

These shortcomings hint at the books biggest weaknesses, which are apparent in the discussion of the “politics of cultural dignity” in chapter seven. The chapter’s departure from the previous regional discussions is a welcome attempt to engage questions of political theory and the ethical norms underlying international relations. Its shortcoming, however, is it lacks the level of sophistication found in the discussions of international politics. Sounding quasi-Hegelian, Brzezinski argues that you have to have a sense that what you are doing is somehow in tune with the mysterious unravelling of history. Both he and Scowcroft only begin to scratch the surface of an interesting debate about the human condition, sustainability and a more universal form of solidarity.

Moreover given the discussion of cultural dignity, two noticeable absences from the discussion are Africa and Latin America. It is somewhat disconcerting that in a volume entitled *America and the World* there is a complete failure to discuss two of its most populous continents. More worrying is the suspicion that this omission was not due to lack of space, but lack of concern for these two areas of the world.