

## **Follies of Power: America's Unipolar Fantasy**

David P. Calleo

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*Reviewed by Ally Adams-Alwine*

In *Follies of Power*, author David Calleo asserts that senior officials guiding US foreign policy are enamored of a dangerous unipolar fantasy. In this fantasy, America is the world's preeminent superpower, whose strength and sovereignty are needed to bring stability to the international arena. Noting shifts in the global distribution of power such as the rise of China and the enlargement of the European Union (EU), Calleo argues that this world view is misguided and increasingly dysfunctional in what in reality is a plural world order. Continuing to pursue a unipolar vision, he warns, is weakening our ability to respond appropriately to new threats and emerging challenges, and risks alienating friends and enemies alike.

The majority of the text is devoted to a systematic deconstruction of America's unipolar fantasy, in an effort to prove that such a worldview is deeply flawed. Calleo begins by rejecting the assumption of many US officials that the end of the bipolar Cold War system inevitably meant that a unipolar world led by America would follow. That such a conclusion was drawn is seen as evidence of an unwavering belief that American power is limitless and good. Identifying this belief as a source of the hegemonic ambitions and unipolar tendencies in US foreign policy, Calleo analyzes the nature and extent of American power – hard, soft, economic, and moral. Highlighting numerous examples that fiscal mismanagement and unsustainable policies have shaped the perceived sources of US strength, such as our legendary military and a once robust capitalist economy, he finds this power to be falsely inflated along every dimension.

Calleo goes on to explain that America's unipolar fantasy is now actively detrimental to our interests because many countries, especially our allies in Europe, now favor a multilateral approach to international actions. In a masterful overview of Western political thought, Calleo outlines the origins of this divergence. Domestically, most advanced states adopted by the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century constitutional models balancing liberal rights with reasonable security and improved standards of living due to capitalism-fueled growth. However, limiting instability within these systems also required protectionism and neomercantilist policies, producing a "Hobbesian" view of international relations as every country fended for itself. Calleo asserts that in forming the European Union (EU), Europe has bridged this gap between the principles governing states internally and those that govern the state system. In contrast, the US continues to pursue unilateral policies that are incompatible with international stability because it has not moved on from this Hobbesian focus. Maintaining this world view weakens the US, because other countries view it as illegitimate, and because it overstretches our resources. According to Calleo, efforts to expand American power globally through unilateral policies have also led to an extreme concentration of power in the federal government at the expense of the states. While this is not discussed in great detail, the implication is that, in addition to undermining our interests abroad, our unipolar fantasy also threatens our domestic balance of power.

Calleo | *Follies of Power* | Review by Ally Adams-Alwine

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Calleo concludes that a multilateral system is needed to manage the challenges of a plural world and suggests an outline of what the ideal system might look like. He compares the merits of “Old America” and “New Europe” as potential models, and posits that the EU offers more useful lessons because it brings to an interstate system the same constitutionalist theories that have traditionally been used to manage conflict within states; this creates a regional superstructure that reduces conflict by maintaining a collaborative balance of power. Transposing this to a global system, he envisions a framework that blocks hegemony by any one state, with strong institutions that encourage cooperation and mutual appeasement by providing a forum for states constantly to negotiate their roles and responsibilities within the larger system.

Despite designating the EU as the more successful of the world’s two great interstate experiments, Calleo warns that Europe and the US both face challenges which can only be overcome with each other’s help. Specifically, he sees each as a critical force balancing the power of the other both internally and externally, providing a structure which is currently lacking in the global system. Because they are allies who share strong constitutionalist traditions, the US and Europe together can achieve an effective balance through a cooperative relationship. In the past, America stabilized Europe during the postwar era, providing the security needed to cooperate and achieve internal unity. Today, Calleo sees an equally vital role for Europe in balancing the extreme power of the US federal government to create a stable global system. To accomplish this, both sides of the West are advised to look beyond their postwar experiences to embrace a revitalized transatlantic relationship.

While Calleo does a fine job of pinpointing specific flaws in America’s unipolar fantasy, his suggestions on how to overcome this problematic world view lack similar detail and clarity. For example, if Europe and the US have worldviews as divergent as Calleo seems to suggest, it is unclear what would motivate either side to “retune their political imaginations” as they are called upon to do. As Calleo himself points out, America’s past mistakes have not cured us of our unipolar fantasy. The only suggestion offered for why the present may be different is a vague hope that the new administration may create a window of opportunity for a more multilateral world view. Calleo is similarly elusive in explaining his idea that the EU can balance the internal political system in the US, leaving the reader wishing for more concrete details on how this could occur.

*Follies of Power* provides an informative and timely analysis of the forces driving American policies in the international arena. The idea that the world has changed and that the US is long overdue for policy reform is not a new one, and countless other books touch on the forces Calleo discusses here. What sets *Follies of Power* apart is Calleo’s rare ability to combine both breadth and depth of knowledge. While the book itself provides few concrete recommendations, it does provide readers with a uniquely holistic understanding of the international arena, and delineates an invaluable list of lessons to inform future policies.