

Forget freedom. Build the economy.

Michael Fullilove
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GREAT POWERS

America and the World After Bush

By Thomas P.M. Barnett

Putnam. 488 pp. \$29.95

These are salad days for strategists.

To begin with, the challenges facing the United States are formidable: More than 180,000 troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, an awkward rival in Russia, a rising competitor in China, a fractured Middle East peace process, a financial crash and an economy that is cooling down just as the planet is heating up.

Furthermore, the country's most recent strategic doctrine -- a shotgun marriage of freedom and force, attended by the bridesmaids of unilateralism, preemption and regime change -- was tried under George W. Bush and found wanting.

Now Barack Obama sits in the Oval Office with unusually dense connections to the world beyond U.S. shores: He is linked to Africa through his ancestry, to the Middle East through his name, to Asia through his upbringing. He will be on the lookout for new global perspectives.

So this is a good time to be writing about how the United States should comport itself in the world. But expounding a grand strategy is hard. It requires a broad view, a deep understanding of history and a fluent writing style.

Thomas P.M. Barnett, a consultant to the Pentagon and private corporations, certainly has the requisite analytical breadth. He has a magpie's eye for shiny things, citing all the recent big-think books and opining on all manner of topics. His main argument, however, is that states fall into two groups: those that are integrating into the world economy (the "Functioning Core") and those that are not (the "Non-Integrated Gap"). At the core of the Core is the United States, "the source code for today's globalization." To achieve security and prosperity, he argues, the United States should "go slow on the politics (multiparty democracy) while getting our way on the economics (expanding world middle class)." This may involve further interventions, which would require the U.S. military to beef up what Barnett calls its "SysAdmin" capabilities (for post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction, counterinsurgency and the like) rather than its "Leviathan" force (warfighting capacity).

Barnett's breezy pronouncements are not wholly convincing, however. He largely ignores the historical roots of democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy. He remains a supporter of the decision to invade Iraq, stating that "George W. Bush was right to lay a Big Bang on the Middle East's calcified political landscape." His reasoning is that the invasion locked the United States "into real, long-term ownership of strategic security in the Gulf" and transformed Washington's interest in obtaining Mideast oil into a broader "commitment to bodyguard globalization's ongoing transformation of those traditional societies." But the exact opposite is more likely true: The war has had a chilling effect on the United States' use of force and ruined the public's appetite for foreign interventions.

Barnett is overly sanguine about the impossibility of great-power conflict and positively Pollyanna-ish about the prospects for great-power cooperation. He suggests, for example, that the United States should "lock in China as soon as possible as the land-power anchor of an East Asian NATO" so that "we can draw down our military in the region and better employ

them in hotter spots around the world." I wonder how the Chinese feel about this? For that matter, how about Washington's old allies in Asia?

Some of these analytical sins could be forgiven if Barnett were a better stylist. But the book reads like a PowerPoint presentation, featuring self-help gobbledegook, frequent colloquialisms ("Who's your daddy now?") and wearying lists. We learn the "Seven Deadly Sins of Bush-Cheney"; embark on a "Twelve-Step Recovery Program for American Grand Strategy"; and recite "Barnett's 14 Points." Inevitably, the grand coalition that the United States is urged to engineer is dubbed a "team of rivals."

There are some interesting insights in "Great Powers," but this is not grand strategy we can believe in.

Michael Fullilove is director of the global issues program at the Lowy Institute in Australia and a visiting fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution.