John A. Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role*

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For all the talk of Japan in the 1980s or China today overturning American hegemony, it remains the case that no other state on Earth comes close to America in terms of its unparalleled economic and military power, and will not do so for, at least, decades to come. Accounts of how this came to pass tend to focus on America’s reluctant engagement in World War Two and the Cold War, followed decades later by the implosion of the USSR, leaving America as the world’s lone hegemon. In this narrative, the pre-war years are dismissed as a period of isolationism in foreign affairs. This book rejects that narrative. Thompson claims that he developed his approach to American history following his dissatisfaction with accounts of American involvement in Vietnam. The explanations for American involvement fell under two broad umbrellas: for critics, America undertook foreign wars at the behest of capitalists in order to maintain American access to global markets, whilst for supporters of interventionism, security was the overriding concern. For supporters of the security thesis, the world’s descent into two world wars demonstrated the need for America to play the role of global policeman, and if America forsook that role, hostile foreign powers would again rise up to eventually threaten America itself. Thompson later adds a third explanation: belief in America’s unique mission to spread freedom and democracy across the globe.
By examining America’s rise to global power from the end of the nineteenth-century to the 1950s, Thompson provides an alternative account. In brief, it was only at the end of the nineteenth-century that the United States had the economic capability to play a significant global role. However, she only assumed that role in fits and starts because of an inherent sense of caution which was only gradually overcome. The capitalist, security and crusading factors all played a role, but it was really thanks to a shift in the outlook of America’s leaders (the ‘sense of power’ from the book’s title) that America gradually took on the massive global commitments that she retains today. The book contains six chapters alongside the Introduction and Conclusion. Chapter One examines America’s increasing power from the post-Civil War period to 1914; Chapter Two covers America’s first flirtation with global hegemony during World War One and with Woodrow Wilson’s ambitious vision for post-war cooperation from 1914-1920; Chapter Three covers the isolationist reaction from 1920-1938; Chapter Four looks at the 1938-1941 build-up to America’s entry in World War Two; Chapter Five describes America’s full-scale commitment to its global role during that war; and Chapter Six explores America’s first peacetime commitment to its new role of global policeman.

Thompson argues that the spectacular growth in post-Civil War America’s economic power, and military capabilities, should— in realist theory—have resulted in an almost immediate and sustained commitment to a much more interventionist foreign policy. The fact that pre-World War One American interventions were episodic and fitful is seen by Thompson as evidence of the weakness of the realist interpretation. Thompson contends that even in the realists’ worst case scenario, in which a hostile power rises to dominate Europe and Asia, the costs of defending America would still be far lower than America currently spends on maintaining its global position of dominance. However, even if one accepts Thompson’s point that such a hostile power would not attack America (so long as it maintained nuclear deterrent), such a power could still do America severe economic harm using trade sanctions. Thompson suggests that including such economic arguments in a debate over national defence stretches the term beyond its natural scope; but if we agree with Clausewitz that war is a continuation of politics by other means, there is no reason to exclude such major non-war considerations from defence planning. In addition, since
Thompson’s argument in this instance is built entirely on a comparison of the costs under the isolationist and interventionist options, it seems reasonable to include the indirect costs that American could potentially suffer in a non-war standoff against a hostile power.

Thompson also downplays the role of interests, such as finding foreign markets for American goods or keeping European powers out of the Western hemisphere. He is on firmer ground with this criticism of the capitalist explanation for American interventionism. He is right to point out that foreign economic interests were minimal during much of the early period of America’s expansion. And his point that the post-war economic system constructed by America can just as plausibly be viewed as example of economic policies being used to support America’s global role as the reverse, is apt. He could also have strengthened his case further by citing all of the examples of costly American intervention which were never conceivably going to produce offsetting economic returns. Again, this does not mean that economic motives have not occasionally driven American intervention, and Thompson does not paper over pertinent examples.

Thompson spends less time debunking the missionary zeal explanation although, as with the security and economic factors, he does recognize it as a contributing motive. One key piece of evidence for Thompson is that modern polling shows that the public place democracy promotion abroad as less important than security and economy. This may well be true as far as it goes, but it leaves a lot of questions unanswered: does the public attitude match the attitude of the elite running American foreign policy? Do the public favour democracy promotion if it does not cost too much? What if the democracy and security motives converge (as seemed to be the case in Iraq)? And so on.

After dismissing alternative explanations, Thompson argues that all of America’s wars since the nineteenth-century have been “wars of choice.” The reality of America’s vast resources has given her the ability to intervene abroad and helped to shift the mind-set of US leaders—essentially, they intervene because they can. It was “consciousness of America’s new power and the belief that its enhanced international status entitled it to greater prerogatives and brought wider responsibilities” (26) that drove shifts in American foreign policy. Thompson cites a
number of thinkers, including Morgenthau, who argued that the drive to dominate is part of the human psyche. As Thompson relates, even 2,500 years ago, the Athenian historian Thucydides portrayed the Athenians telling the soon to be conquered Melians that “it is a necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can” (V.105). In this regard, the general benevolence of the United States in historical perspective is more striking than its position of hegemony.

Thompson is correct that existing mono-explanations fail to account for America’s role, but then would we expect a single explanation to account for every facet of America’s international role over the past 100-plus years? Or for every actor who influenced that role? Even Vietnam, the war that fuelled Thompson’s initial dissatisfaction with existing analyses, was not as black and white at the time as Thompson suggests. It is easy to see after the event that the fall of Vietnam did not lead to a Communist takeover of Asia, but at the time the ‘domino’ theory, in which it was expected that the fall of South Vietnam would lead to Communists taking over neighbouring states, was still popular in the foreign policy establishment. Even if we accept the flaws that Thompson finds with existing explanations, there is no reason to suggest that each one did not have some influence, on some actors, at some periods. One only needs to go back to George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq to see that different members of the administration focused more or less on different factors in their motives for the invasion: economic (oil), security (WMD) and missionary zeal (the belief that a democratic Iraq would help to spread freedom and democracy to the rest of the Middle East).

A key strength of Thompson’s work is his even-handed and thorough level of detail, which means that he includes evidence which weakens his own case. For example, despite playing down the economic motives of America in this period, he dutifully reports the economic rhetoric of American thinkers and actors at this time, who believed that the American market suffered from a “glut” that could only be eased through opening up foreign markets. This raises the possibility that the perception that America needed to dominate foreign markets might have been real, even if it was the case that the American economy was still only reliant on export earnings to a tiny degree. One problem is that Thompson’s book is ostensibly about a particular period, but the examples he uses to buttress his case are drawn from a much larger span of
time. Some of the comparisons are also oddly jarring. For example, when discussing the pre-World War One difference in public opinion towards foreign investment losses by British and American investors, he plausibly suggests that the explanation may have been the greater share of the economy made up by foreign investments in Britain compared to America; however, the statistical comparison used to show this is a 1910 figure for Britain and a 1973 figure for America.

Thompson’s thesis is more sophisticated than any one of the opposing explanations, and the psychological aspect is valuable. But at the same time, in casting each of those explanations aside he oversimplifies. As has been suggested above, Thompson is excellent at showing that popular explanations for the growth of America’s role cannot account for every particular, but he does not completely refute the possibility that the three explanations might together provide most of the story, providing we accept them as interdependent and inter-related. Despite falling just a little way short of its ambitious explanatory aims, this is a valuable and intriguing work, which will offer fresh perspectives to readers willing to look beyond existing paradigms.

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