

***All Measures Short of War:  
The Contest for the Twenty-First Century  
and the Future of American Power***

Thomas J. Wright  
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Reviewer: Andrew Carr

If there is one defining word for the foreign policy of Donald J. Trump thus far, it is 'incompetence'. To many this was also true of his predecessors, Barack Obama and George W. Bush. America is not failing as a global leader because its ideas or values are bad, but because the wrong people are in charge. They are too war-like (Bush), not war-like enough (Obama) or just plain ignorant (Trump). Fix the leader, restore credibility and competence, so this line of thought goes, and all will be okay again.

This assumption is at the heart of Thomas J. Wright's engaging and insightful new book, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power*. If you believe that a more competent America will find its feet again, this is a compelling book. However, if you think the problems are more structural and substantial, then you may come away feeling that even at their best, America's leading strategic minds—of whom Wright is one—are yet to fully grapple with the changing world.

Wright's profile exploded in 2016, as an early and insightful analyst of Donald J. Trump. While most commentators tried to sort through the jumble of contradictions each new public utterance provided, Wright turned to history and dug through the archives to find clear, consistent elements of Trump's nineteenth-century-style world view. In that effort, and this book, Wright showed his skill and care as an analyst. His reading and knowledge is both wide and deep.

*All Measures Short of War* is very much the effort of an intellectual fox. The book is rich with insightful analysis, and original and clear thinking. Exploring US policy across Europe, the Middle East and Asia, Wright time and again clarifies, distinguishes and reveals nuanced portraits of the many challenges facing the US position as 'leader of the free world'.

Wright has two charming attributes as a writer. He is both fair and brief. His pen sketch of the 'convergence myth' of the late 1990s, the idea that the

world was unifying as democratic and liberal, is an honest portrayal of its merits and challenges, with few wasted words. While many authors would have provided full chapters on the Clinton, Bush and Obama years, Wright assumes any reader engaged enough to pick up this book would appreciate being given just enough evidence to justify his claims, instead of masses of history to swim through. Wright makes his argument and gets out, with the full book a slim 228 pages. On both scores he is to be congratulated.

The broad scope of the book has many strengths. There was much I learned that was both new and significant from the chapters on 'Europe's Multiple Crises' and the 'Geopolitics and Contagion in the Middle East'. The Asia chapter has its moments, though unlike the diversity of concerns and issues raised in the other two, the region's dynamics are narrowed to 'China's East Asia Challenge'.

Wright, like many American analysts, is overwhelmingly focused on how the great powers act and think. This leads to a tendency to attribute much of how the world works to these same handful of states. In his telling of 'The Contest for the 21st Century' states and institutions other than the United States, China and Russia seem to have little to no agency.

The United States itself is often presumed to be able to sort and order the world, it just has to be competent enough to return to doing so. In Wright's view, there can be no global liberal order without the United States doing all the work to support it. When war occurs—such as the Korean War in 1950 or Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, he attributes it to US indifference. Meanwhile, whenever there are problems in the world, such as the contentious EU-Turkey refugee negotiations of 2016, inserting the United States would 'undoubtedly' have led to a more effective and legitimate outcome (p. 202). The US public is also presumed to be highly malleable to support a renewed global role, even though the only thread connecting Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump is a repudiation of this position.

Even if competence has been hugely lacking in recent American foreign policy, there is a troubling conflation between core and non-core interests in this book—one common to many other analysts who advocate continued US global leadership. Many of the challenges the United States is facing are difficult precisely because opponents are using proxy contests with the US to determine strength, via issues where the US has low interests, yet high public engagement. Think China in the South China Sea, Russia in Syria and Ukraine, and Iran in Iraq.

Exploiting this distinction—of a United States which has responsibilities for issues in which it has little direct concern—is precisely the pain point for US leadership. While adopting 'Responsible Competition' along the lines Wright advocates could help mitigate the worst of these challenges, their central reason for existing and being difficult will remain.

*All Measures Short of War* therefore ends up some measures short of victory. It is smart, engaging and nuanced. It is wise and light. Yet while such smarts will go a long way, the unwillingness to directly question whether the future of American power really should mirror its past undermines its ultimate value. Still, a useful contribution to the shelf, and a thinker to watch.

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