Follies of Power

The election of Barack Obama notwithstanding, the political imagination of America’s elites remains deeply attracted to a unipolar view of world politics. In this way of looking at the world, peace and prosperity in the global system require a reigning superpower. Great Britain is imagined to have played this role in the nineteenth century and the United States to have inherited it in the twentieth. America’s interest and duty are thought to lie in fulfilling this fate that history has thrust upon us. The vision persists but is more and more false. In reality, today’s disposition of international power and wealth is increasingly plural. Our unipolar vision grows progressively dysfunctional as much of the world fears and resists it. Chapter 1 spells out these themes. Chapters 2 and 3 look at the disastrous consequences of the unipolar vision at work – in the Middle East and in Europe. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 assess the nature and limits of American power – soft, military, economic, and moral. Chapter 7 discusses the problems of order and coexistence in a plural world. It speculates on the possible contributions of “Old America” and “New Europe” as models for organizing the future. America’s own constitutional equilibrium, David P. Calleo argues, increasingly requires friendly balancing from Europe. To face their responsibilities to the world and to each other, both sides of the West will need to liberate their imaginations from thralldom to past triumphs.

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Follies of Power

America’s Unipolar Fantasy

DAVID P. CALLEO

Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
The Johns Hopkins University
For my beloved Yale ghosts:

Lewis Perry Curtis
Joseph Toy Curtiss
Eugene V. Rostow
Frederick Watkins

Teaching that grows more vivid with the years.
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