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# Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in a One-Superpower World

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Southern Illinois University  
at Carbondale

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Nixon, Richard. *Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in a One-Superpower World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. 322pp. \$25

For most of us growing up in the Vietnam-Watergate era, Richard Nixon was a highly unpopular figure. Many have strongly mixed feelings about his gradual move into the role of elder statesman, which occurred primarily with the publication of his several well-received books on foreign affairs. Nonetheless, regardless of one's opinion of the former president, *Seize the Moment* is an impressive *tour d'horizon* of the problems and opportunities facing U.S. foreign policy at a time when vision is conspicuous by its absence.

Nixon sets out his framework for thinking about American foreign policy in a strong introductory chapter. His central thesis is that it is not enough that communism has been defeated in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and aggression in the Persian Gulf stopped. Rather, "we must seize the moment to win victory for peace and freedom in the world." A second major theme is the primacy of morality in foreign policy. Nixon cites an exchange with Mao wherein the Chairman asked, "Is peace America's only goal?" To which

Nixon replied, "Our goal is peace but a peace that is more than the absence of war—a peace with justice." Nixon notes the persistent conflict between idealism and realism in American foreign policy and argues that one extreme is impotent, the other immoral. "We should remain dedicated to the ideals of freedom and justice that have served as the beacons of our foreign policy, but be realistic and practical about what it takes to move the world in their direction."

He goes on to discuss three popular myths concerning U.S. foreign policy. First is the myth of the "End of History," that "the march of technology, not armies, and battles of markets, not ideas, would become the central dynamics of history." Nixon has only to counter with the tribal, ethnic, national, and religious violence splattered across the daily headlines, as well as with the continuing vigor of various ideologies such as "socialism with a human face" and radical fundamentalism in the Middle East. He aptly quotes Paul Johnson: "One of the lessons of history is that no civilization can be taken for granted. Its permanency can never be assured. There is always a dark age waiting for you around the corner, if you play your cards badly and you make sufficient mistakes."

The second myth is the irrelevance of military power. Disputing trendy arguments that "military power no longer serves as the key instrument of statecraft or represents the bedrock of foreign policy," that interdependence among large powers makes war

irrelevant, and that the costs of war have become prohibitive, Nixon notes that "economic power contributes only indirectly to a nation's security by generating wealth to channel toward that end." It is no small irony that similar ideas about the diminishing utility of armed force and the likelihood of its use were prevalent in the years before 1914.

The last myth is the "decline of America." Nixon points out that America today dominates militarily, has the strongest scientific and technological base, ranks near the top in per capita income, and has the same twenty-five-percent share of the world GNP that it had before the anomalous post-World War II period. "The United States stands at the apex of its geopolitical power. If its status as the world's only superpower erodes, that will result from choice, not necessity."

In succeeding chapters, Nixon offers specific policy recommendations for dealing with the former Soviet Union, Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, the Muslim world, and the Southern Hemisphere. The concluding chapter, "The Renewal of America," discusses problems at home that bear on America in the world, from nascent isolationism to economic and educational weakness, to the decline of values manifested in serious problems of racism, drugs, and crime.

This is a most worthwhile and stimulating book. In contrast to the ephemeral "New World Order," it presents cogent arguments for a coherent world view. Even more

important in a time of excessive pessimism about America's condition, Nixon offers a hopeful assessment of U.S. potential to influence the world for good in the coming years. In the author's words, "Just as the free world turned to America for leadership to confront the post-World War II Soviet threat, the world as a whole will look to America for leadership to grapple with the post-Cold War problems. For most of the world's people, the twentieth century has been a century of war, repression, and poverty. For the first time in history, there is a real chance to make the next century a century of peace, freedom, and progress. Today, only one nation can provide the leadership to achieve those goals. The United States is privileged to be that nation. Our moment of truth has arrived. We must seize the moment."

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Simon, Jeffrey, ed. *European Security Policy after the Revolutions of 1989*. Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1991. 640pp. (No price given)

This book is a compendium of essays resulting from a conference on "Force Mobilization, the Revolutions of 1989, and European Security" hosted by the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in June 1990. It is intended as a companion piece to *NATO-Warsaw Pact Force*