

**By Mark Atwood Lawrence**

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## **THE WORLD**

### **A Brief Introduction**

By Richard Haass

If only Americans knew more about the world.

It's a common refrain among many foreign policy intellectuals, and [Richard Haass](#) joins the chorus in "The World: A Brief Introduction." Young Americans suffer from poor educations, he contends, while older people find it hard to keep up with profound changes that have unfolded since the Cold War order crumbled three decades ago. The consequences of ignorance, Haass warns, are serious: American disengagement from the wider world and poor decision-making at a moment of mounting global dysfunction.

Haass possesses undeniable credentials for his concerns. President of the nonpartisan Council on Foreign Relations since 2003, Haass advised President George H. W. Bush from 1989 to 1993 as a member of the National Security Council and later served as director of the State Department's policy planning staff under the younger President Bush. He has also published numerous books on international statecraft, including, in 2017, "A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order," which expressed alarm about the crumbling of the American-led international system, established after World War II, and the challenges of devising something functional to replace it.

But what precisely do Americans need to know in order to assure the better future Haass hopes for? He proposes to answer this question in a book amounting to International Affairs 101. In two dozen tightly focused chapters covering everything from monetary policy and international law to terrorism and climate change, "The World" aims to promote a minimally necessary level of knowledge that Haass calls "global literacy."

The book eschews any interest in academic theories, which Haass gratuitously dismisses as "too abstract and too far removed from what is happening to be of value to most of us." Instead, he promises a practical

guide to help everyday people understand global forces in which their lives are increasingly enmeshed, even if they do not always know it or like it.

The result is a fair-minded and thorough, if somewhat bloodless, compendium that, by design, contains little likely to surprise informed readers. Condensing so much complexity into a lucid 400 pages is no small accomplishment, but it's easy to wonder whether more colorful prose or probing analysis might have better fulfilled Haass's goal of inspiring interest in his subject.

Haass's restrained approach does not mean that the book lacks big takeaways. Above all, he underscores the growing disarray that has beset the world since the end of the Cold War. He acknowledges positive trends that have played out in the last few decades, including a fall in the proportion of world population living in [extreme poverty](#) from more than one-third 30 years ago to less than one-tenth today. But Haass mostly emphasizes grim developments like declining support for democratic institutions, rapidly growing global inequality and the resurgence of great power rivalries as China and Russia assert themselves. It's hard to argue with his prediction of "accelerating global disorder" in the years ahead.

Another big theme is the widening gap between the desire of governments to guard their sovereign prerogatives and the inescapability of global problems that can be addressed only through shared sacrifice and the empowerment of international institutions. The "[Vegas rule](#)" — what happens in a single nation stays there — "does not apply in today's global world," he quips. Greenhouse gases, economic downturns and extremist ideologies, to name just three examples, respect no borders and defy the best efforts of nations to insulate themselves.

The same goes for epidemic diseases. Haass does not mention the coronavirus, which erupted well after he sent his book off to the publisher, and touches on pandemics only in passing. Still, he provides a helpful frame within which to think about a crisis that simultaneously underscores the need for global cooperation against threats that transcend national borders and encourages nations to barricade themselves against dangers from abroad. If Haass had gone to press a few months later, Covid-19 might well have been Exhibit A for the conflicting trends at the very heart of his analysis.

“The World” proceeds in the style of a reference book. In the first few chapters, Haass takes a historical approach, recounting the broad flow of international relations since 1648, when a peace settlement among the European powers enshrined the notion of sovereign nation-states independent of any higher authority. Marching through modern diplomatic history, Haass demonstrates the potential for beneficial balances of power but more often the dangers of disunity and violence in a world organized in this way. Missing from his analysis is any detailed exploration of the historical roles played by companies, religious movements, activist groups and international organizations in shaping the behavior of nations.

When the book turns to major political, economic and demographic developments in each of the world’s major regions, mostly it tells a tale of woe. Some problems are easy to see: tensions stirred by a rising China, nuclear-tinged hostility between India and Pakistan, civil wars in many parts of Africa. Other problems make fewer headlines, including the erosion of democracy and civil authority in the relatively stable Western Hemisphere and the difficulties of providing education and jobs for rapidly growing populations in Asia and Africa.

Haass next delves into the array of crosscutting global problems. Here, the news is not all bad. Nations have achieved results in combating terrorism and constraining the spread of weapons of mass destruction. In other arenas including the policing of cyberspace and coping with refugees, however, he sees little reason for optimism. As for the environment, he bluntly predicts climate change may be “*the* defining issue of this century.”

Haass makes his only really eyebrow-raising move in the final section of his book, where he considers tools like alliances, international law and institutions like the United Nations that governments might use to impose order on a chaotic world. He deals effectively with these topics, demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of each as an order-making possibility. In a curious departure from the cautiously didactic approach he pursues elsewhere, however, he concludes with a plea for renewed American leadership on the world stage, backed by American military muscle, as the best bet for stability and progress in the years ahead.

He may be right. The American-led world order delivered broad prosperity, geopolitical stability and democratization for more than half a century. Perhaps the United States can reclaim something of its accustomed role, to the benefit of all. But Haass passes too quickly over some of the impediments to realization of such a vision. Does the United States any longer possess either the material strength or international appeal to claim a leadership role?

More important, are most Americans, even if they grasp the complexities of international affairs, willing to support anything like the role played by their country in the second half of the 20th century? To put it differently, would Americans change their ways if they knew more? Haass views education as the path to the renewal he espouses. But it could be that many Americans, weary of draining overseas commitments and anxious to concentrate on problems closer to home, might weigh the costs and benefits of global activism and make a different choice.

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