In October, 2013, a group of academicians and security institute representatives met in Washington, D.C. at the Dangerous World Conference. The intent was to determine whether the world in which the United States exists is indeed all that dangerous. Their deliberations produced a consensus that can be described as the “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” approach to American national security. Sixteen of the attendees took the next step and codified their presentations at the conference into article form. A Dangerous World? subsequently emerged as a book-length manuscript.

The reader has only to read the title to understand the book’s thesis. The presence of the question mark at the end of the title conveys their conclusion that the dangers of the twenty-first century have been oversold. The intent of the book is to pierce the veil—to unmask the charlatans who are scaring us for their own personal or institutional gain. The subtitle, “Threat Perception and U.S. National Security,” conveys a similar conclusion—that the putative dangers of the twenty-first century are more perception than substance.

It is unreasonable to expect a book that is a compendium of conference presentations to present the reader with a well-crafted national security theory. Yet, throughout the sixteen articles there are several unifying themes. First, the majority of articles conclude that the security delusions that pervade the twenty-first century are propagated by a core group of villains. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is the poster child of a military establishment intent on frightening taxpayers into funding new and exotic weaponry as well as burgeoning military programs. Next up are those academicians and politicians who cling to the outmoded idea of pervasive, world-wide threats. One article criticizes paranoid talk show host Glenn Beck for manufacturing unfounded threats. Cold War Warriors as well as unipolar, and bipolar thinking are passe. Equally noxious are those who believe the United States is exceptional. Promoters of this delusion believe the United States has a special obligation to build a global, hegemonic state capable of keeping peace throughout the world.

Second, most articles in the book celebrate pluralism and condemn “rational-comprehensive” thinking. In this vein, Benjamin Friedman speaks for the majority of his peers by condemning leaders who use sweeping generalizations about national security to gain followers. In his words: “The theory elaborated here sees leaders’ tendency to purposely mislead the public as the main cause of national errors about threat. The theory comes from pluralism, not the rational-comprehensive model.” National security analysts in this pluralist tradition believe they live in a complex, disjointed world where no single set of dynamics or rules apply. Any attempt to impose a world-wide scheme of analysis or world-wide set of values is flawed and dishonest. Flowing from this pluralist premise is the ethic of tolerance.
Joshua Shifrinson explains to us what should be the cash value of an ethic of tolerance: “...the United States should reduce its political and military presence abroad to devolve responsibility for maintaining the commons to regional actors sharing American interests.” This point of view believes that working with regional partners such as India would not only afford the United States the luxury of smaller military budgets, but it would produce more global stability: each regional set of state actors content to operate in their own sphere of influence.

However, none of the authors who counsel this pluralist ethic provide a good answer to the most pressing national security question of our time: What do we do when a state or a rogue group denounces the constraints of tolerance, embraces absolutism, and uses terror, aided by lethal technology to advance its particular ends?

The dynamics of publishing being what they are, tolerant readers might conclude that the bulk of the thinking behind this book occurred late in 2013 and early 2014. And, the indulgent reader might even concede that the authors simply could not have foreseen the national security meltdown that occurred in late 2014. However, such indulgence is misplaced. There were a cacophony of national security threats prior to 2014 that the authors of this book willfully ignore.

For example, despite new advances in nuclear technology and the legitimate fears associated with suitcase bombs and dirty bombs, Stephanie Rugolo assures us: “Furthermore, it is unlikely that terrorists will be able to obtain nuclear weapons.” In the same vein, Francis Gavin declares: “But any notion that terrorist groups will come up with nuclear weapons, even if they wanted to and tried hard, looks extremely unlikely.”

Beyond terrorism, the new threat of Chinese and Russian expansion was evident far in advance of 2014. Yet, regarding the Russian threat, Lyle Goldstein counsels restraint:

Hawks in Washington will undoubtedly attribute the Kremlin’s aggressive behavior to an alleged failure of leadership and a general lack of toughness by the Obama administration. But a more sophisticated analysis of the Ukraine situation reveals that American power and influence are finite, and there is little opportunity to affect that complex situation positively.

Regarding the China threat, Goldstein attempts to deflect our attention by declaring that a multitude of interests are “poised to profit” from the myth that China is a significant threat perhaps even greater than Russia. Not to worry: “China has not resorted to any significant use of force in more than three decades, it has no foreign bases, and it remains rather weak (compared with U.S. forces) in the domains of power projection and nuclear war fighting.”

As every college professor knows, controversy sells books and it keeps sleepy students awake in class. Rather than condemn this book as unserious, the more balanced observation is that this book embraces an iconoclastic counter argument. It provides a useful foil against which more reasoned analysts can array and display their skills. The book is deliberately provocative.. In better times, such an approach would be entertaining. But, in the current grim national security environment, this approach seems strangely out of place—diverting our attention away from some very serious security problems throughout the world. Because this book is anachronistic, it is not likely that the “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” approach will be given serious consideration. IAJ