



# A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945

By Kenton Clymer

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In 2012, Barack Obama became the first U.S. president ever to visit Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. This official state visit marked a new period in the long and sinuous diplomatic relationship between the United States and Burma/Myanmar, which Kenton Clymer examines in *A Delicate Relationship*. From the challenges of decolonization and heightened nationalist activities that emerged in the wake of World War II to the Cold War concern with domino states to the rise of human rights policy in the 1980s and beyond, Clymer demonstrates how Burma/Myanmar has fit into the broad patterns of U.S. foreign policy and yet has never been fully integrated into diplomatic efforts in the region of Southeast Asia.

When Burma, a British colony since the nineteenth century, achieved independence in 1948, the United States feared that the country might be the first Southeast Asian nation to fall to the communists, and it embarked on a series of efforts to prevent this. In 1962, General Ne Win, who toppled the government in a coup d'état, established an authoritarian socialist military junta that severely limited diplomatic contact and led to a period in which the primary American diplomatic concern became Burma's increasing opium production. Ne Win's rule ended (at least officially) in 1988, when the Burmese people revolted against the oppressive military government. Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as the charismatic leader of the opposition and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Amid these great changes in policy and outlook, Burma/Myanmar remained fiercely nonaligned and, under Ne Win, isolationist. The limited diplomatic exchange that resulted meant that the state was often a frustrating puzzle to U.S. officials.

Clymer explores attitudes toward Burma (later Myanmar), from anxious anticommunism during the Cold War to interventions to stop drug trafficking to debates in Congress, the White House, and the Department of State over how to respond to the emergence of the opposition movement in the late 1980s. The junta's brutality, its refusal to relinquish power, and its imprisonment of opposition leaders resulted in public and Congressional pressure to try to change the regime. Indeed, Aung San Suu Kyi's rise to prominence fueled the new

foreign policy debate that was focused on human rights, and in that climate Burma/Myanmar held particularly large symbolic importance for U.S. policy makers. Congressional and public opinion favored sanctions, while U.S. presidents and their administrations were more cautious. Clymer's account concludes with President Obama's visits in 2012 and 2014, and visits to the United States by Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein, which marked the establishment of a new, warmer relationship with a relatively open Myanmar.

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- Sales Rank: #1959852 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-11-20
- Released on: 2015-11-20

- Format: Kindle eBook



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Clymer has trawled deeply in the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, among the old monsoon-scented boxes from the Rangoon/Yangon embassy, among former presidents' papers, and in archives in Australia and Britain. His footnotes alone are a gold mine for scholars. He must have chosen many boxes to search, and he must have been selective in the sources he included, but I can see little ground for a protest that x is missing or that y should have been treated. He also held background conversations with important informants. It is important to recall how troubled and static the American-Myanmar relationship has been at times since 1948, restricted by the scarcity of Americans who had knowledge of and interest in the country, and restricted by the stone wall built up by various military governments. This important book provides an excellent account of this delicate relationship, using both confidential sources (including in the Myanmar National Archives) and Clymer's on-the-ground sensitivity. There appears to be no book with a historic sweep comparable to Clymer's. Clymer's fine book is not simply an archive-in-our-hands. It offers evidence and insight into one of the world's incongruous relationships. As the radius of the new Myanmar's influence grows and its peoples search for a more inclusive economy and more just society, Clymer's work will be the basis of a renewed understanding of this delicate relationship, enabling others to build upon it."<sup>2</sup>Robert Anderson, H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews

*"A Delicate Relationship* is an important book in which the very good historian Kenton Clymer provides a sweeping and detailed history of US-Burmese relations since World War II. For half a century no one has attempted this critical historical task, and Clymer succeeds where others have hesitated."<sup>3</sup>David I. Steinberg, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Asian Studies, Georgetown University, author of *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*

"The United States and Burma have known each other since before World War II. However, Burma was not an important country for the United States and not well-known among the American public. Only in 1988 when popular democracy uprising in Burma was brutally crushed down by the military, the U.S. policymakers have started to pay little attention on this unfortunate country. Gradually, today Burma is one of the foreign policy priorities of the U.S. administration, well-known place among the Americans, and one of the countries that schools of international relations in the United States must study. I thank Kenton Clymer for systematically gathering the seventy-year-long history of the relations between the United States and Burma. This book will be a great contribution for students and teachers in international relations and U.S. policymakers."<sup>4</sup>Aung Din, democracy and human rights activist and former cofounder of the U.S. Campaign for Burma

*"A Delicate Relationship* is an excellent book that will long remain the definitive account of U.S.–Burmese

relations during the post-World War II era. Kenton Clymer's use of Burmese, British, and Australian sources along with his extensive use of U.S. archival and published documents gives his account real breadth and authority. Clymer writes crisply and fluidly about military and economic assistance, U.S. fears of communist inroads, the complex and contentious issue of KMT troops in Burma, the narcotics problem, and the recent thaw in relations."?Robert J. McMahon, Ralph D. Mershon Distinguished Professor of History, The Ohio State University, author of *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II*

#### About the Author

Kenton Clymer is Distinguished Research Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. He is the author of several books, including *Troubled Relations: The United States and Cambodia since 1870*, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines, 1898-1916: An Inquiry into the American Colonial Mentality*, and *Quest for Freedom: The United States and India's Independence*.

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