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978-1-107-01068-0 - Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline

Robert J. Lieber

Excerpt

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Introduction

The idea that the United States is in a state of rapid, fundamental decline is now widely proclaimed. What started as speculation has in recent years become a chorus of voices and is now a pervasive din. Columnists, classical historians, international economists, European allies, Chinese generals, and the wider blogosphere pronounce and repeat the idea. For some, the transformation is welcomed and embraced, for others it is expressed with deep concern, but there can be little doubt that the notion is widely shared.

The description is driven by America's difficulties overseas and at home. The frustrations and costs of long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a continuing campaign against radical Islamist terrorism, the rise of China and of other emerging powers, and the challenges of coping with globalization and growing economic competition suggest that the United States has become overextended and is no longer capable of playing a leading role in world affairs. At home, the collapse of the real estate bubble, followed by financial crisis and a great recession, a lagging recovery, and destructive partisanship in the face of deepening problems of debt and deficit have led to gloomy assessments about America's economy, politics, and society.

The accompanying discourse is almost unrelentingly negative. Among the voices assessing American decline, British author and public intellectual Timothy Garton Ash writes of American (and European)

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“competitive decadence.”¹ Historian Paul Kennedy sees Britain’s imperial decline as foreshadowing that of America and asserts that “the long-term trajectory is roughly the same.”² Political economist Clyde Prestowitz, a longtime critic of free trade policies, writes that “American decline becomes the new conventional wisdom.”³ Fareed Zakaria, a media commentator and public intellectual, asks: “Are America’s Best Days Behind Us?”⁴ And David Brooks, an unusually thoughtful and original *New York Times* columnist, warns of “unsustainable levels of debt, an inability to generate middle-class incomes, a dysfunctional political system, the steady growth of special interest sinecures and the gradual loss of national vitality.”⁵

To argue, as I do in this book, against the idea of American decline might seem a lonely, if not futile, task. After all, the problems are real and serious. Nevertheless, if we take a longer view, the picture looks rather different, and much of the discourse about decline appears exaggerated, hyperbolic, and ahistorical. Why? For two broad reasons. First, because of the deep underlying strengths of the United States. These include not only size, population, demography, and resources, but also the scale and importance of its economy and financial markets, its scientific research and technology, its competitiveness, military power, and absorptive capacity, and its unique attractiveness to talented immigrants. Second, there is the weight of history and of American exceptionalism, or what social scientists like to call path dependency. Throughout its history, the United States has repeatedly faced and eventually overcome daunting challenges and crises, many of which gave rise to weighty and dire predictions. The most dangerous of these experiences have included the Civil War, repeated financial crises during the nineteenth century, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and

¹ Timothy Garton Ash, “Debt Crisis: In Our Competitive Decadence, We Face Eurogeddon and Dollargeddon,” *The Guardian* (London), July 20, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jul/20/us-debt-crisis-european-default>, accessed July 21, 2011.

² Paul Kennedy, “Back to Normalcy,” *The New Republic*, December 21, 2010.

³ Clyde Prestowitz, “New wind blowing: American decline becomes the new conventional wisdom,” *foreignpolicy.com*, June 15, 2011, http://prestowitz.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/15/new_wind_blowing_american_decline_becomes_the_new_conventional_wisdom, accessed July 23, 2011.

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, *TIME*, March 5, 2011.

⁵ David Brooks, “Pundit Under Protest,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2011.

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the geopolitical and ideological threats posed by Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union.

However, isn't the present predicament different, especially in its foreign challenges and underlying economic dimensions, and haven't we delayed too long in responding to it?

In this book I take into account these and other factors such as the scale of globalization, foreign competition, especially from China, and the rising costs of entitlement programs. Nonetheless, in contrasting a recent past of unique American dominance and international primacy with a contemporary era of decline at home and abroad, I argue that pessimists have exaggerated the scale of both past prominence and current peril. As evidence of this tendency toward hyperbole and the volatility of received opinion, note that from the early 1990s through 2004, and in the aftermath of initial American victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, descriptions of unique American dominance and "hyperpower" were ubiquitous. Some of this treatment was admiring, some critical, but almost all of it took U.S. primacy for granted and saw it as long lasting. Nevertheless, within just a few years, the narrative had altered radically. Now America was seen in deep trouble, on both foreign and domestic fronts. Accompanying this shift in conventional wisdom, China is increasingly depicted – often in awed and uncritical terms – as the next great world power.

It is true that the United States has been slow to respond, as it often is, but here too some perspective on the past is useful. Winston Churchill famously remarked that "Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing . . . after they have exhausted all other possibilities." However, the idea can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville, commenting in his 1830s work, *Democracy in America*, that the virtue of Americans lay not in being more enlightened than others, "but in being able to repair the faults they commit." These observations point to a fundamental characteristic of the United States – its unique flexibility and adaptability. And it is this capacity that provides a basis for optimism in assessing America's future. The ability to change and innovate, especially in response to crisis, is unusual for a large country and especially for a great power. In short, history and past experience matter.

To be sure, there can be no certainty about America's ability to overcome current problems, and contingency and human agency come

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into play. Ultimately, elite and popular beliefs, policy choices, and leadership remain critical in shaping outcomes. In this sense, the challenges facing the United States are at least as much ideational as they are material. Here, however, there may be a paradox working in America's favor. It is that the worse the crisis, the greater the sense of urgency and the more likely that policy makers, regardless of their prior inhibitions and beliefs, will find themselves having to respond effectively.

The stakes are immense, and not only for America itself. Since World War II, the United States has been the world's principal provider of collective goods. The leading international institutions of today and much of the existing international order have been a product of American leadership. Evidence from recent decades suggests that the alternative is not that some other institution or major power (the UN, the EU, China, India, Russia, or Japan) will take its place, but that none will. Some have argued that the effects of globalization are leading the world toward greater cooperation and even collective security. This may be a comforting view about the implications or even desirability of American disengagement, but practical experience suggests otherwise. In dealing with failed states, ethnic cleansing, human rights, the environment, trade liberalization, regional conflict, and nuclear proliferation, emerging powers such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) have been largely unhelpful, and others in Europe, Asia, Africa, or Latin America have more often than not lacked the will or capacity to act collectively on common tasks.

For the United States, as I argue here, the maintenance of its leading role matters greatly. The alternative would not only be a more disorderly and dangerous world in which its own economic and national security would be adversely affected, but also regional conflicts and the spread of nuclear weapons would be more likely. In addition, allies and those sharing common values, especially liberal democracy and the market economy, would increasingly be at risk. Ultimately, America's ability to avoid serious decline and the significant international retrenchment that would be a result of severely reduced resources becomes a matter of policy and political will. There is nothing inevitable about decline, and both past experience and national attributes matter greatly. Flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity for course correction provide the United States with a resilience

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that has proved invaluable in the past and is likely to do so in the future.

In the chapters that follow, I develop these arguments and set out the case for a more optimistic understanding of the American future. Chapter 1, “The American Future: Problems of Primacy, Policy, and Purpose,” begins by examining the experience of American primacy as well as the ways in which the country has responded to severe crises and external threats. In understanding these experiences, it is crucial to appreciate the importance of policy choices and leadership. It is also essential to weigh the effects of contemporary factors including the revolution in information technology, socialization and education of younger elites, and whether a sense of shared national identity has been declining. Although there has been modest erosion in America’s overall capabilities, it retains the power and capacity to play a leading world role, hence the ultimate questions about its future are likely to be those of policy and will.

Chapter 2, “Domestic and Global Interactions: Economics, Energy, and American Power,” assesses the impact of economic, financial, and energy issues. Additional perspective about the past is especially useful here, for example in appreciating that during the nineteenth century, the United States experienced and overcame at least five major financial crises. We also tend to forget the gravity of the depression in the 1930s as well as the severity of the recession that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This too triggered gloomy assessments about the American future, and as recently as the late 1980s, it was feared that America was losing ground to a ruthless and formidable Asian competitor, Japan. However, even as dire forecasts were being voiced, that challenge was beginning to ebb. Regardless of its contemporary difficulties and serious problems of debt and deficit, America’s fundamental economic strength, human resources, and science and technology remain unique and should not be underestimated.

Chapter 3, “American Attitudes and Institutions,” delves into the attitudes, policies, and institutions that have shaped America’s world role and determine its ability to lead. Here, public attitudes, domestic doctrines, and the unique characteristics of American exceptionalism as well as the openness of its society come into play. While a wide range

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of outcomes is foreseeable in the coming years, we should be skeptical about pessimistic predictions concerning the American future.

Chapter 4, “Threats to Persistent Primacy and the Rise of Others,” turns from domestic affairs to the international context, in order to assess the impact of foreign threats and the rise of emerging powers. Long-term projections have been unreliable, and the past half-century has seen as many as five waves of declinist predictions. Shifts in the international distribution of power are occurring, and threats from nuclear proliferation and radical Islamist terrorism need to be taken into account. Nonetheless, the long-term record of the United States remains one of remarkable resilience, adaptation, and crisis response. The rise of China presents a unique challenge, and over the long term it could emerge as a great power competitor. However, much of the treatment of China’s rise is uncritical and has overlooked or downplayed an array of internal problems that are likely to affect it. In addition, although collaboration with other countries and institutions can be helpful and even essential in responding to actual or potential threats, there is no true substitute for American engagement and leadership.

Chapter 5, “Stretch or ‘Imperial Overstretch’?” asks whether America is overstretched, a question central to the entire decline debate. The question is reasonable, in view of the human and material costs of two wars as well as likely resource constraints stemming from problems of debt and deficit. Overall, the burdens of America’s world role are substantial, but do not in themselves constitute overstretch. The underlying question is whether American policy elites and the public will continue to support these commitments or decide instead to embark on a course of retrenchment. In this area, too, the ability of America to sustain its international role is less a question of material limits than of judgment and will.

Chapter 6, “Power and Willpower in the American Future,” begins with the question of whether the problems facing America at home and abroad really are different from those it has transcended in the past. I conclude that the difficulties are not intractable. America retains its edge, and its advantages include both material and nonmaterial elements. Much remains to be done in domestic as well as foreign policy, but the robustness of American society, coupled with its unique capacities for adaptation and adjustment, is likely once again to prove decisive.

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I

The American Future*Problems of Primacy, Policy, and Purpose*

“[T]he United States cannot afford another decline like that which has characterized the past decade and a half. . . . [O]nly self-delusion can keep us from admitting our decline to ourselves.”

– Henry A. Kissinger, 1961¹

In these words, one of America’s most distinguished strategic thinkers and policy makers expresses alarm at America’s condition and the perils it faces.² The warning seems timely, yet it was written more than half a century ago as an assessment of the Soviet threat, problems with allies and the developing world, and in frustration with what the author saw as dangerously inadequate policy and strategic choices. Henry Kissinger was by no means alone. He cited George Kennan’s lament about our domestic failings with race, the cities, the education and environment of our young people, and the gap between expert knowledge and popular understanding, even while criticizing Kennan’s focus on those problems to the exclusion of military and diplomatic threats.³

¹ Henry A. Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 1–2.

² An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Summer 2011. The arguments here are foreshadowed in a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, September 4, 2010, and in my article, “Persistent Primacy and the Future of the American Era,” *International Politics* (London), Vol. 46, No. 2/3 (March 2009): 119–139.

³ George F. Kennan, *Russia, the Atom and the West* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 13, cited in Kissinger, p. 9.

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Since World War II, the United States has been the preeminent actor in world affairs. Its status at the end of that conflict, its role in creating postwar international institutions, its leadership in the reconstruction of Europe and Japan, and its dominant status within the Western alliance during the Cold War are well known and beyond dispute. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, America emerged as the lone superpower. Yet some two decades later, its position of both absolute and relative power appears to have deteriorated. Many scholars and strategists point to economic, structural, political, and even military vulnerabilities, and contend that the United States is in serious decline. Meanwhile, the rise of important regional actors, especially Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the BRICSs), as well as others such as Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, and the increasingly prosperous and dynamic countries of East and Southeast Asia, is said to be seriously diminishing U.S. primacy in world affairs.

These depictions are pervasive on the Internet and in the press. A quick Google search for the term “American decline” yields 117 million “hits” in 0.13 seconds.⁴ A columnist for *The New York Times* writes that, “Wherever you choose to look . . . you’ll see a country in sad shape.”⁵ A leading German news magazine headlines, “A Superpower in Decline.”⁶ And from the realm of pop culture, the comic book action hero Superman renounces his U.S. citizenship.⁷

But are such assessments accurate? In a previous book, I argued that the threat from militant Islamism and terrorism, the weakness of international institutions in confronting the most urgent and deadly problems and in sustaining international order, and the absence of effective alternatives made an American grand strategy of superpower engagement a logical adaptation to the realities of the post-9/11 world.⁸ The ability of the United States to maintain its position in global affairs is thus a question of immense importance, not only in terms of national

⁴ Accessed November 22, 2011.

⁵ Bob Herbert, “Hiding From Reality,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2010.

⁶ “A Superpower in Decline: Is the American Dream Over?” *Der Spiegel*, November 1, 2010.

⁷ Laura Hudson, “Superman Renounces U.S. Citizenship in ‘Action Comics’ #900,” *Comics Alliance.com*, April 27, 2011, <http://www.comicsalliance.com/2011/04/27/superman-renounces-us-citizenship/#ixzz1Q8JyCMZK>, accessed June 23, 2011.

⁸ Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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interest, but because the world depends on the United States as its principal provider of public goods.⁹

Central to this question is an understanding of the internal foundations on which American capability ultimately rests. As noted by British strategist Michael Howard a generation ago, these “forgotten dimensions of strategy” include not only the ability to deploy and support the largest and best-equipped military forces, but especially the capacity to preserve the social cohesion without which national power and strategy cannot be sustained.¹⁰ In recent years, most of the analysis and debate about the American future has focused on material factors: economics, technology, human resources, or the rise of peer competitors abroad. However, to the extent that limits to American primacy do exist, they are less likely to be material than ideational in nature, in the sense of elite and popular beliefs, social cohesion, policy choices, and leadership.

Primacy Past and Present

Two propositions are widely asserted by those who see the ebbing of American predominance: first, that America itself as a society, an economy, and a political power is in decline; and second, that its international primacy is eroding as a result of the rise of other countries.

On the domestic front, the effects of a severe financial and economic crisis, an unprecedented national debt and deficit, a yawning balance of trade and payments deficits, and an aging and overloaded infrastructure lead a prominent financial journalist to foresee “the beginning of the end not just of an illusory ‘unipolar moment’ for the US, but of western supremacy in general and of Anglo-American power, in particular.”¹¹ Fareed Zakaria, a widely quoted public intellectual, warns that America has become an “enfeebled” superpower and embellishes his case by observing that the world’s tallest Ferris wheel is now in

⁹ For a compelling statement of this point, see Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World’s Government in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006).

¹⁰ Michael Howard, “The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1979): 977.

¹¹ Martin Wolf, “How the Noughties Were a Hinge of History,” *Financial Times*, December 23, 2009.

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Singapore and the largest casino is in Macao.¹² For good measure he adds: “America’s success has made it sclerotic.”¹³

As for the international arena, many scholars and pundits maintain that serious balancing has already begun. The historian Paul Kennedy, after a hiatus in which he seemed to have set aside his earlier declinist admonitions, has returned to his original theme. Writing at the height of the financial crisis in an article he titled “American Power Is on the Wane,” he insisted that, “[W]hile today’s Russia, China, Latin America, Japan and the Middle East may be suffering setbacks, the biggest loser is understood to be Uncle Sam.”¹⁴ More recently, Kennedy has added that “the United States is slowly and naturally losing its abnormal status in the international system and returning to being one of the most prominent players in the small club of great powers.”¹⁵ A widely cited National Intelligence Council Report, *Global Trends 2025*, foresees domestic constraints and the rise of foreign powers leading to a global, multipolar world.¹⁶ A former president of the Council on Foreign Relations asserts, “The United States is declining as a nation and a world power.”¹⁷ These pundits and others argue that the rise of China, India, and other regional powers, the recovery of Putin’s Russia, and (prior to the Eurozone crisis) the development of the European Union signal a profound shift in global power.¹⁸

What is striking about these conclusions is that until relatively recently, the more commonplace observations concerned America’s extraordinary primacy. Consider the description by Paul Kennedy in

¹² Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of the Rest,” *Newsweek*, May 3, 2008; *The Post American World* (New York: Norton, 2008), pp. 48, 217; and “Enfeebled Superpower: How America Lost Its Grip,” *The Sunday Times* (London), June 22, 2008.

¹³ Fareed Zakaria, “Are America’s Best Days Behind Us?” *TIME*, March 3, 2011.

¹⁴ Paul Kennedy, “American Power is on the Wane,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2009, p. A13. Also see Francis Fukuyama, “The Fall of America, Inc.,” *Newsweek*, October 13, 2008.

¹⁵ Paul Kennedy, “Back to Normalcy,” *The New Republic*, December 21, 2010.

¹⁶ *National Intelligence Council*, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, November 2008).

¹⁷ Leslie H. Gelb, “Necessity, Choice, and Common Sense,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2009): 56.

¹⁸ For example, see Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006): 7–41; T. V. Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005): 46–71; Robert Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” loc. cit.: 7–45; Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power* (New York: Norton, 2005).