

the current period. The book is an invaluable resource on a significant debate that will be of considerable interest to an assorted body of readers. Weller has produced an outstanding

piece of work. His book will remain the definitive account of the “Rushdie Affair” and its implications in the second decade of the new millennium for many years to come.

REVIEW ARTICLE Reviewed by Kılıç Buğra Kanat

That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back

By Thomas L. Friedman *and* Michael Mandelbaum

New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011, 400 pages; ISBN 0374288909.

Zero-Sum Future: American Power in an Age of Anxiety

By Gideon Rachman

New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011, 352 pages; ISBN 1439176620.

The Short American Century: A Postmortem

By Andrew J. Bacevich

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, 296 pages; ISBN 0674064453.

THE SUBJECT of American decline and the new global order has been on the agenda of political scientists and international observers for more than two decades. Even before the end of the Cold War, in 1989 Paul Kennedy in his seminal book on *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* pointed to “imperial overstretch” and the national debt caused by increasing military expenditures as the major causes of the US’s decline in the coming decade.¹ The US victory in the Cold War and the fall of communism in the world somewhat postponed these

concerns and Kennedy’s predictions were overshadowed by the moment of unipolarity in world politics, in which the United States enjoyed unchallengeable military and political dominance. However, starting from the late 1990s, concerns grew about the future of the United States’ dominance in world politics as the Chinese economy’s growth accelerated.

With the political and economic developments in the first few years of new millennium the debate about the US’s decline and its possible consequences on the international order started to be studied more systematically. In its initial phase, the debate on the American decline revolved around the major questions that arose from the US military conundrums in Iraq and Afghanistan and the economic crisis and recession. Later different responds and contributions to this debate created several schools of thought whose approaches in this debate differ fundamentally from one another. These differences ranged from divergence of opinions about the existence of a decline, its diagnosis, the solutions as well as the domestic and global consequences of this decline. In recent years, proponents of each viewpoint have contributed to this debate by publishing important studies supporting their arguments. In the remaining part of this paper, the major works that were written in the last couple of years will be analyzed and discussed.

What Happened to the US?

One of the major parts of the debate on American decline is regarding the diagnosis of the downward spiral that is taking place.

The question “what happened to us?” has become the most common one in this debate. The observers in this field have tried to answer this question by focusing on developments in domestic or foreign policies of the United States since the end of the Cold War to trace the process of decline. For some the cause of the decline was mostly external as result of global transformation and the rise of some other powers in international system, whereas for others the reasons that prepared the ground for the US’s decline was mostly domestic economic and political problems.

For Gideon Rachman, the chief foreign affairs commentator of the *Financial Times*, as for all other scholars, the 1990s were the golden years for US power and influence in the international system. The end of the Cold War with the triumph of the US created a “new world order” in which it had acquired worldwide political supremacy and economic power. The Gulf War and the swift victory of the American-led coalition also ended the Vietnam syndrome, which had damaged US self-confidence since the US withdrawal from Southeast Asia. This created a new era of optimism in which many believed that the liberal democratic order would become the norm for other powers. Fukuyama declared the end of history in 1992, whereas democratic peace theorists believed that the new age would foster an era of peace and prosperity with the spread of democracy and liberalism.² Moreover, increasing transnational political and social interactions and the global spread of ideas on freedom and human rights precipitated by the rise of the internet fostered optimism among many. The 1990s were predominantly years of high expectations, which involved economic interdependence among states and the political transformation of authoritarian regimes. Many, including US scholars and politicians, believed in the possibility of creating a win-win world in these years.³

The US, which was considered omnipotent in the 1990s, had its self-confidence shaken by a series of failures in this era of optimism. The American belief in the democratic transformation of countries and “democratic peace” was shattered by problems in the regime transitions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Around the same time extreme overconfidence in the wisdom of the free market began to crumble with the 2008 economic crisis. In addition, the belief that the internet would bring democracy and prosperity to the third world was challenged after the limitations of the IT revolution were revealed with the burst of the dotcom bubble as well as the increasing sophistication in authoritarian regimes’ ability to censor and control the internet.⁴ While the US and the West were experiencing the downside of globalization and learning that it was no panacea for the global problems or a magic bullet to create economic prosperity and political transformation, the East started to rise with lightning speed. In fact for Rachman, what contributed to the decline of the West was in part its excessive self-confidence during the 1990s and the high expectations for globalization. The US had no plan B as it expected globalization to be the “end of history,” and that the US would be the major driving force of this phenomenon. The rapid transformation of the global economy and politics was something that the US could not foresee. According to Rachman, “the economic crisis that struck the world in 2008 has changed the logic of international relations. It is no longer obvious that globalization benefits all the world’s major powers. It is no longer that the United States faces no serious international rivals. And it is increasingly apparent that the world is facing an array of truly global problems—such as climate change and nuclear proliferation—that are causing rivalry and division between nations.”⁵

In contrast to Rachman’s global perspective, scholars such as Andrew Bacevich have pro-

vided a more inward-looking perspective. They contend that the actors in US policy have contributed greatly to this decline with their counterproductive policies. Andrew Bacevich, the writer of *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*,⁶ brings together different scholars that put forward a more historical approach in his edited volume, *The Short American Century: A Postmortem*. In his own contribution to the volume, "Life at the Dawn of the American Century", Bacevich picked the Henry Luce's article on the "American Century" as the starting point of the American century in world politics and contends that the main reason for the decline was wrong decisions taken in foreign policy, and he underscored the Bush-era policies and the fiscal and human cost of two wars as the main reasons for the US's decline.⁷ For other contributors, such as David Kennedy, it was again Bush-era policies that precipitated the decline. According to him the three keys to the rise of the American century were: "honoring inherited notions of sovereignty, seeking multilateral cooperation where it could while acting unilaterally only in extremis and deploying American power, enormous but finite, to shape a world in which all states not only powerful had a stake." The real decline started when administrations started to depart from these principles and adopt interventionist and unilateralist policies.⁸

Emily Rosenberg and Jeffrey Frieden in this volume approached the question of US decline from a more structuralist perspective and emphasized the self-destructive nature of the US economic structure created after World War II as the main reason for the end of the American century. For Rosenberg, it was mostly the consumerist society that created the most significant problems for the US. Throughout the American century consumerism was one of the most significant references that bonded the society together. "As an empire of the pro-

duction the United States had run trade surpluses and was a capital lender in the world economy" but later when its production capacity started to slow down "as an empire of consumption the United States increasingly ran trade deficits".⁹ In order to feed this appetite American society started to increasingly purchase less expensive imported goods and the US started to become the world's largest debtor. And through this debt American consumerism ended the American century. Another contributor to this volume, Jeffrey Frieden, also pointed to the economic system that the US formed in the post-World War II era as the reason for the US's decline. However for Frieden it was the global economy that created this consequence instead of the domestic economic behaviors of consumers in American society.¹⁰ In fact both Frieden and Rosenberg differ from Kennedy and Bacevich by focusing on the system and structure as the roots of the American decline instead of actors.

In contrast to Rachman and to some contributors with a foreign policy focus in Bacevich's volume, Thomas Friedman, a columnist for the *New York Times*, and Michael Mandelbaum, a professor of international relations at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, have provided a more domestic level of analysis on the debate on the US's decline in their study *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind In the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back*. Friedman and Mandelbaum put forward different reasons for the comparative decline of the US. The first reason they cite was the US's inability to orient with the new international system following the end of the Cold War. Secondly, for them the US has also failed to respond to the most significant crises in its domestic sphere, and in particular fell behind in education, accumulated an unsustainable amount of foreign debt, and reduced its budget for research and development. Moreover it has also

neglected significant global problems that it was expected to lead in as a benign superpower, such as environmental protection and global warming. Instead of finding a solution for these problems, some in the US started to wage a war against science and reject the claims of the scientific community. According to Friedman and Mandelbaum a final reason was the loss of direction after the end of the Cold War. They believed that Americans didn't fully grasp what was happening, so they could not respond appropriately. In the words of Friedman and Mandelbaum, "Over-time we relaxed, underinvested, and lived in the moment, just when we needed to study harder, save more, rebuild our infrastructure, and make our country more open and attractive to foreign talent.... When the West won the Cold War, America lost its rival that had kept us sharp, outwardly focused, and serious about nation building at home—because offering a successful alternative to communism for the whole world to see was crucial to our Cold War strategy".¹¹ In fact, the US's decline was not caused by the rise of China or a result of external actors. Instead the decline came about through ignorance and overconfidence in the US in the post-Cold War environment. Despite some emphasis on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq Friedman and Mandelbaum, unlike Bacevich, did not mention the failure in Iraq or the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan as one of the reasons for decline.

The three books under review here approach the debate on the American decline from different dimensions (Rachman from a global dimension, Bacevich mostly from historical and foreign policy perspectives, and Friedman and Mandelbaum from domestic politics and economics angles). Some, like Friedman and Mandelbaum, can observe the signs of the decline by looking at the situation of infrastructure and the level of education in the United States in comparison to other rising

powers like China. The failure of the Maryland Transportation Authority to fix an escalator for six months demonstrates a structural problem about the handling of business in the US for Friedman and Mandelbaum. However, some others see this when they look at the transformation that is taking place in the globe today. For example, Rachman, points out some external variables that have changed the nature of the world, such as the rise of China and India, and the emergence of groups and social movements that resent the consequences of globalization.

The authors under review also diverge in their projections. For Bacevich, the decline appears irreversible. In the conclusion of his book he states that "to further indulge old illusions of the United States presiding over and directing the course of history will not only impede the ability of Americans to understand the world and themselves but may well pose a positive danger to both".¹² Rachman is no less pessimistic when he states that the era of optimism that started with globalization and the idea of creating a global win-win situation is over. "The economic crash, the rise of China, the weakening of American power, and the emergence of a set of intractable global political problems have changed the logic of international relations".¹³ The new world order is a zero-sum one in which rivalry between different power centers will become the norm once again. For Rachman, in this new world order the US is still the only hope for a peaceful and prosperous world; however, there are many difficulties that it needs to shoulder. Against the pessimistic approach Friedman and Mandelbaum (who are self-proclaimed frustrated optimists) underlined four challenges the US needs to face in order to restore the "American dream". According to them the US needs to find ways to adapt to globalization, to adjust the information technology revolution, to cope with the large and increasing budget def-

icits, and to manage a world of both rising energy consumption and rising climate threats.

Friedman and Mandelbaum also listed five pillars of prosperity the US needs to achieve: providing quality public education, continuous infrastructure modernization (including roads, bridges, ports, airports and wireless networks), keeping the doors of immigration open for both low-skilled but high-aspiring immigrants as well as best minds in the world, supporting scientific research and development, and implementing the necessary regulations on private economic activity that will make the US an attractive place for capital and provide opportunities for entrepreneurs.¹⁴ The most significant prescription they offer is quite unusual compared to the other studies in this field. Although many other studies have identified political paralysis and polarization as major problems, Friedman and Mandelbaum identified the issue as highly salient and argued that a third-party or independent presidential candidate would be the best solution for overcoming these problems. According to these two “frustrated optimists” this hypothetical candidate may restore America’s formula for success and help Americans leave the Democratic and Republican camps and political infighting and focus on the real problems and challenges that America is facing.¹⁵

The approach each book takes to the debate on the American decline provides different readings of the history and the political and economic processes that have led to the decline. The authors’ perspectives for the future are no less controversial. Bacevich asks that the US relinquish the dream of another American century, whereas Rachman and to a certain extent Friedman and Mandelbaum argue for the necessity of US leadership for the future of international system—although Rachman is more pessimist than Friedman and Mandelbaum. A second section of this

debate is taking place regarding the world after the American supremacy. The next part of the review will focus on this challenging and controversial debate and the projections of the international system for the coming decades.

Endnotes

1. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, (New York: Vintage, 1989).
2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
3. Gideon Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future: American Power in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), pp. 93-96.
4. Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future: American Power in an Age of Anxiety*, p. 174.
5. Rachman. *Zero-Sum Future: American Power in an Age of Anxiety*, p. 4.
6. Bacevich’s earlier book that focuses on the causes and the consequences of the decline of American Power.
7. Andrew J. Bacevich, “Life at the Dawn of the American Century”, Andrew J. Bacevich (ed.), *The Short American Century: A Postmortem* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 13.
8. David M. Kennedy, “The Origins and Uses of American Power”, Andrew J. Bacevich (ed.), *The Short American Century: A Postmortem*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 37.
9. Emily S. Rosenberg, “Consuming the American Century”, Andrew J. Bacevich (ed.), *The Short American Century: A Postmortem*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 53.
10. Jeffrey A. Frieden, “From the American Century to Globalization” Andrew J. Bacevich (ed.), *The Short American Century: A Postmortem*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 142.
11. Thomas L. Freedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind In the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), p. 16.
12. Bacevich, “Life at the Dawn of the American Century”, p. 238.
13. Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future: American Power in an Age of Anxiety*. p. 277.
14. Thomas L. Freedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind In the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back*, p. 35.
15. Thomas L. Freedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind In the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back*, p. 334.