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Introduction by **James McAllister**

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**Robert Lieber. *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9781107010680 (hardback, \$90.00); 9780521281270 (paperback, \$24.99).

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Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College

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Is the United States destined to decline in the twenty-first century? This is a seemingly simple question, but one that International Relations theorists seem destined to debate without resolution. How should we measure power? What are the most relevant economic and military indicators of national power? How should we weigh the various components of national power in order to reach an overall assessment of the future balance of power in the international system? Are structural and material indicators reversible or irreversible? Can specific policy decisions, ideas, and strategies substantially reverse or accelerate national decline?

Robert Lieber admirably grapples with all of these questions and many more in his most recent book, *Power and Willpower: Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline*. As the title indicates, Lieber is an optimist about the future of American power in the twenty-first century. Whether he is cautiously optimistic, as he suggests, or wildly optimistic, as some of his critics suggest, remains a matter of debate. On the one hand, Lieber is well aware that the United States now faces daunting problems that are “real and serious” (2). But it is also true that Lieber does not believe that solving any of these problems is beyond the capability of the United States. In his view, both the French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville and the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill were correct in suggesting that the United States has always demonstrated a remarkable capacity for resolving the problems and crises it faces. In fact, Lieber suggests 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” (4).

As Joshua Shiffrin rightly argues in his review, *Power and Willpower* “stands as one of the best works to argue that the fundamentals of the American order are sound.” But it is also true that all of the contributors to this roundtable are skeptical about several aspects of Lieber’s overall argument. Drawing heavily on the work of Paul Kennedy and his own previous arguments about American decline, Christopher Layne suggests that the United States is unlikely to maintain its dominance of the international system. While policy choices are indeed important, Layne suggests that material power realities are far more important than Lieber’s emphasis on willpower. At best, Layne suggests that policy choices can help determine whether the fall of the United States more closely resembles a “graceful decline” or a “precipitous fall.”

Paul MacDonald is the most critical of the contributors to this roundtable. In his view, Lieber’s criticisms of President Barack Obama “create the unfortunate impression that this book’s main purpose is to advocate on behalf of a particular ideological conception of America’s purpose, rather than provide a measured assessment of the shifting nature of America’s power.” Whether this charge is accurate or not, MacDonald is unlikely to be the only scholar raising this issue about Lieber’s analysis. While the author is not explicitly partisan about his own ideological commitments, the lack of any explicit or implicit criticisms of the Bush administration’s record does seem somewhat unusual strange.

Unfortunately, the author did not clarify his stance or contest MacDonald's criticism in his response to the comments on his book.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that *Power and Willpower* is a book that substantially advances the nature of the debate over the future of the United States and the international system in the twenty-first century.

### Participants:

**Robert J. Lieber** is Professor of Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University, where he has previously served as Chair of the Government Department and Interim Chair of Psychology. He is an authority on American foreign policy and U.S. relations with the Middle East and Europe, and he is author or editor of sixteen books on international relations and U.S. foreign policy. He was born and raised in Chicago, received his undergraduate education at the University of Wisconsin and his Ph.D. at Harvard. He has held fellowships from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He has also taught at Harvard, Oxford and the University of California, Davis, and has been Visiting Fellow at the Fondation nationale des sciences politiques in Paris, the Brookings Institution in Washington, and Fudan University in Shanghai.

**James McAllister** is Professor of Political Science at Williams College. He is the author of *No Exit: America and the German Problem* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) and several articles on various aspects of the Vietnam War. He currently serves on the Department of State's Historical Advisory Committee.

**Christopher Layne** is a University Distinguished Professor, Robert M. Gates Chair in National Security, and Professor of International Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. His current book project, *After the Fall: International Politics, U.S. Grand Strategy, and the End of the Pax Americana*, is under contract with Yale University Press. In spring 2014, he will be a Visiting Fellow at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo.

**Paul K. MacDonald** is an Assistant Professor in Political Science at Wellesley College. He has held research positions at the Williams College, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, the Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, and the Center for International Security and Cooperation. He has published articles in *International Security*, *Review of International Studies*, *Security Studies*, *Daedalus*, and the *American Political Science Review*.

**Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin** is a doctoral candidate in the MIT Political Science Department, Affiliate of the MIT Security Studies Program, and Predoctoral Fellow with the Institute for Security and Conflict Studies at the Elliott School. His research focuses on great power politics, the use of force, and the political uses of history. A graduate of Brandeis University, his work has been supported by the Belfer Center, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Scowcroft Institute, the Tobin Project, and others.

During the past four years both internal and external events - the Great Recession and the rise of China ('and the rest') - have changed the tenor of the U.S. foreign policy discourse. Talk of a new American empire and a never-ending unipolar moment has given way to a debate among scholars and foreign policy analysts about whether the United States is in decline.<sup>1</sup> In his new book, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline*, Robert J. Lieber intervenes forcefully in the conversation.

Lieber raises three big questions. First, is the U.S. actually in decline? What does decline mean - how should we define it? What are the key metrics for measuring whether the U.S. is in decline? Second, given that we are talking about *relative* decline - how the United States stacks up against potential rivals - does the rise of China mean that the era of America's unipolar dominance is coming to an end? Third, if the U.S. is in relative decline, what policies should it adopt in response? Here - to borrow the jargon of political science - the issue is one of agency versus structure. Or, in plain English, are there policies the United States can adopt to stave off - or reverse - relative decline, or is decline the result of the essentially unalterable big, impersonal forces of history?

Lieber is too smart to deny that the world is changing, and that the United States faces both domestic and external challenges to the primacy it has enjoyed since 1945 (and that was bolstered by the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991). He concedes that "the United States does face a more competitive world, regional challenges and some attrition of its relative degree of primacy" (27-28). And he acknowledges that the U.S. faces daunting domestic challenges and that "there can be no certainty about America's ability to overcome current problems. . ." (3-4). He claims to recognize that "just because America has previously overcome adversity and retained both its strength and international primacy does not guarantee it will do so now" (14-15), but the thrust of his argument sweeps aside these disclaimers.

In fact, Lieber is absolutely certain that the U.S. can maintain its role as the leading world power. For him, current worries about decline are nothing more than a replay of similar fears that were expressed in the 1970s and 1980s (13). The 'declinists' were wrong then, Lieber says, and they are wrong now. The U.S., Lieber argues has faced and overcome

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<sup>1</sup> Contributions to this debate, include: Stephen G. Brooks, and William C. Wohlforth, *World out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: U.S. Hegemony and International Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to be Us: How America Fell Behind the World It Invented and How it Can Come Back* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2011), Edward Luce, *Time to Start Thinking: America in the Age of Descent* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2012); Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012); Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: PublicAffairs 2010). For an overview of the debate, see Christopher Layne, "The Waning of U.S. Hegemony: Myth or Reality?" *International Security* 34:1 (Summer 2009), 147-172.

serious problems before and “the weight of history and American exceptionalism” (3) mean that the U.S. surmount its current problems and preserve its global primacy (36-39). Lieber’s bottom-line argument is that American decline is ultimately a matter of choice. As he puts it, “there is nothing inevitable about decline,” which means, in his view, that the future limits on American primacy are ideational rather than material (4, 9).

Though vigorously presented, Lieber’s argument fails to persuade for several reasons. To begin with, he frames the issue questionably. Contrary to what he contends, the leading ‘declinists’ never have claimed that the United States is in “a state of rapid fundamental decline” (1). The leading so-called declinists of 1980s - Paul Kennedy, David Calleo, and Robert Gilpin - did *not* predict that the United States was headed for “a rapid, fundamental decline.” On the contrary, they argued that *over time* structural weaknesses in the U.S. economy would cause a gradual withering of America’s relative power. The United States, in other words, would be afflicted by a slow, “termite” decline.<sup>2</sup> Kennedy himself explicitly was looking ahead to the effects this termite decline would have on United States’ world role in the early twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, moreover, the ‘declinists’ analyses were right on the money. The factors they pinpointed as the causes of American decline are the same culprits that are at the center of debate today: too much consumption and not enough savings; persistent trade and current account deficits; chronic federal budget deficits and a skyrocketing national debt; and de-industrialization.

This brings us to a second flaw in Lieber’s argument: he turns a blind eye to the reality of U.S. power decline, which is part of a broader trend in international politics: the shift of economic power away from the Euro-Atlantic core to rising great and regional powers (what economists sometimes refer to as the ‘emerging market’ nations). Among the former are China, India, and Russia. The latter category includes Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea, Brazil and South Africa. In a May 2011 report, the World Bank predicted that six countries - China, India, Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, and South Korea - would account for one-half of the world’s economic growth between 2011 and 2025.<sup>4</sup> In some respects, of course, this emergence of new great powers is less about rise than restoration. In 1700, China and India were the world’s two largest economies, and as late as 1820, China’s economy was bigger than the combined economies of all of Europe. From their perspective - especially Beijing’s - they are merely regaining what they view as their natural, or rightful, place in the hierarchy of great powers. The loss of U.S. economic superiority vis-à-vis a rising China should be a flashing red light.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of “termite decline” was suggested to me by Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 534 (bold italics emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> Motoko Rich, “The World Economic Order, Circa 2025,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2011 James Politi, “World Bank Sees End to Dollar’s Hegemony,” *Financial Times*, May 17, 2011.

The two most important indicators of national power are relative growth rates and shares of world GDP.<sup>5</sup> Employing these metrics, the evidence of America's decline is too stark to be denied. In 2011, China displaced the United States as the world's leading manufacturing nation - a crown the U.S. had held for a century.<sup>6</sup> China is on pace to overtake the U.S. as the world's largest economy. The International Monetary Fund forecasts that China's share of world GDP (15%) will draw nearly even with that of the U.S. (18%) by 2014.<sup>7</sup> This is especially impressive given that China's share of world GDP was only 2% in 1980, and as recently as 1995 was only 6%. While analysts disagree on exactly when China will overtake the U.S., recent projections by leading economic forecasters have advanced the date dramatically over what was being estimated just a few years ago<sup>8</sup> Based on the very reasonable assumption that during the next six years China's annual GDP growth will be 7.75% while the U.S. economy expands at an annual 2.5% rate, the *Economist* magazine projects that China will pass America as the world's Number 1 economy by the end of 2018.<sup>9</sup> More strikingly, the economist Arvin Subramanian of the Peterson Institute for International Economics has calculated that in terms of purchasing power parity, China *already* is the world's largest economy.<sup>10</sup> What could be clearer proof of U.S. relative decline than the fact that China will soon- if indeed it has not already done so - wrest from the United States the title of world's largest economy?

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Marsh, "China Noses Ahead as Top Goods Producer," *Financial Times*, March 13, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Data Base* (April 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Measuring state power is hard. For approaches to measuring state power, see Ashley J. Tellis, Janice L. Bially, Christopher Layne, and Melissa McPherson, *Measuring National Power in the Post-Industrial Age* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000); Gregory F. Treverton and Seth G. Jones, *Measuring National Power* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2005). It is even more difficult to project a state's future power. A good example is the spectacularly wrong widespread belief in the 1970s and 1980s that Japan would overtake the United States as the world's dominant economic power and possibly become a full-fledged superpower. See Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); Herman Kahn, *Emerging Japanese Superstate: Challenge and Response* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970); Clyde V. Prestowitz Jr., *Trading Places: How We Are Giving Our Future to Japan and How to Reclaim It* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). These analysts who argued that Japan would surpass the U.S. missed the important factors that ultimately held Japan back, including: Japan's economic bubble, the political incompetence of Japan's ruling elites, rampant political corruption; and Japan's negative demographic trends. The 'rise of China' school could be wrong for similar reasons. Nevertheless, almost all respected economic forecasters that China will surpass the U.S. in GDP based on market exchange rates sometime around 2020.

<sup>9</sup> This is one year sooner than the *Economist* had predicted in 2010. "Daily Chart: The Dating Game," *The Economist* online, [http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2010/12/save\\_date](http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2010/12/save_date)

<sup>10</sup> Arvind Subramanian, "How We Undervalue China," *Washington Post*, May 1, 2011. On the Peterson Institute for International Economics website, Subramanian explains his methodology in "Is China Already Number One? New GDP Estimates," <http://www.iie.com/realtime/?p=1935>

Lieber dismisses China's ascent with a wave of the hand.<sup>11</sup> Adverting to hyperbolic fears in the 1980s that Japan would overtake the U.S. economically, Lieber admits that China's rise is of a "differently order of magnitude that may not so conveniently be overcome" (40-41). But he is nevertheless certain that the U.S. will fend off China's challenge. Lieber doubts that China's rise can be sustained because of what he views as its political, economic, demographic and environmental problems.<sup>12</sup> More to the point, he believes that America's own strengths - size, population, demography, competitiveness, innovation/research and development, and the importance of the U.S. economy and financial markets - trump China's advantages(2).<sup>13</sup> Here, Lieber succumbs to an all-too-typical American solipsism that holds that China cannot compete in advanced education, technology, and R & D with the U.S. It is a peculiar form of American cultural myopia that holds that China - the nation that invented the compass, gunpowder, and the printing press - cannot compete with the U.S. in innovation. Of course, the United States does still lead China in many indicators of power, but the trend lines show that its lead is shrinking and almost certainly will be erased in the coming decades. China's success challenges the central myths of America's national identity, which are so important to neoconservatives, who just can't stand that the U.S. might be eclipsed by a state whose political and economic model is different from America's. Princeton University professor Aaron Friedberg - a neoconservative foreign policy analyst - has put it bluntly: "For Americans the success of a mainland [Chinese] regime that blends authoritarian rule with market-driven economics is an affront."<sup>14</sup>

In discussing China's rise, Lieber goes astray because he uses the wrong metric to measure China's power. Lieber argues there is no need to fret about the growth of China's overall

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<sup>11</sup> Lieber's analysis of China's power potential vis-a-vis the U.S. builds on Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security*, 36:3 (Winter 2011/12), pp. 41-78. For a compelling riposte to Beckley, see Joshua Shiffrin's contribution in his exchange of correspondence with Beckley: Joshua R. Itztkowitz Shiffrin and Michael Beckley, "Debating China's Rise and U.S. Decline" *International Security*, 37:3 (Winter 2011/13), 172-181.

<sup>12</sup> For the argument that China's great power emergence could be derailed by domestic political instability, ethnic tensions, environmental degradation, or adverse demographic trends, see Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, the U.S. has a lot of weaknesses that Lieber scarcely touches upon: crony capitalism, a polarized and dysfunctional political system; simmering stresses resulting from the changing ethnic and racial composition of the population; severely unequal income distribution; stagnant middle class wages, a failing K - 12 educational system, etc.. See, Friedman and Mandelbaum, *That Used to be Us*; Luce, *Time to Start Thinking*. Even the one bright spot - the fact that the U.S. still has a young and growing population compared to a China that is likely to grow old before it grows rich - no longer seems a slam dunk advantage for the U.S. A December 12, 2012 report by the Census Bureau concluded that because of falling birth rates and declining immigration, the United States is facing a looming demographic squeeze of its own. "Double Bind," *Economist*, 15-21 December, 2012, p. 31; Michael Cooper, "Census Officials, Citing Increased Diversity, Say U.S. Will Be a 'Plurality' Nation," *New York Times*, December 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/13/us/us-will-have-no-ethnic-majority-census-finds.html?ref=todayspaper&r=0>

<sup>14</sup> Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2011), 44

GDP because its *per capita* GDP - which he contends is a “more robust indicator of national power” than overall GDP - is much smaller than America’s. This not the right way to assess China’s economic power. It is its large and still rapidly growing economy - its *overall* GDP - that allows China to sustain double-digit increases in its annual defence spending and to finance an impressive military build-up that in a decade or two will enable Beijing to challenge the U.S. for regional dominance in East Asia.

Finally, Lieber skates by America’s own considerable domestic problems. There are two, closely interconnected -aspects of the United States’ domestic difficulties that merit special attention: the spiraling U.S. national debt and deepening doubts about the dollar’s future role as the international economy’s reserve currency.<sup>15</sup> The causes of the looming U.S. fiscal crisis are complex. A good starting point is the late political scientist Arnold Wolfers’ observation that modern great powers must be *both* national security states and welfare states.<sup>16</sup> States must provide both guns - the military capabilities needed to defend and advance their external interests - and butter - ensuring prosperity and supplying public goods (education, health care, pensions). Since World War II, the United States has pretty much been able to avoid making difficult ‘guns or butter’ decisions precisely because of its hegemonic role in the international economy.

The dollar’s role as the international system’s reserve currency allows the U.S. to live beyond its means in ways that other nations cannot. Simply put, the United States is not Greece because of the dollar’s reserve currency status. As long as others believe that the U.S. will repay its debts, and that uncontrollable inflation will not dilute the dollar’s value, the United States can finance its external ambitions (‘guns’) and domestic social and economic programs (‘butter’) by borrowing money from foreigners. Following the Great Recession, however, it has become increasingly apparent that unless dramatic steps are taken – some combination of reduced federal spending and increased federal revenues – are take to correct the U.S. budget deficit and national debt problems, by the end of this decade there will be serious questions about the United States’ ability to repay its debts and control inflation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> On the future of the dollar and the international financial system, see Philip Coggan, *Paper Promises: Money Debt and the New World Order* (London: Allen Lane, 2011); Barry Eichengreen, *Exorbitant Privilege: The Rise and Fall of the Dollar and the Future of the International Monetary System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jonathan Kirshner and Eric Helleiner, eds., *The Future of the Dollar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); James Rickards, *Currency Wars: The Making of the Next Global Crisis* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Arnold Wolfers, “National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 67:4 (December 1962), 481-502.

<sup>17</sup> In a June, 2011 report, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) warned of the possibility of a “sudden credit event” triggered by foreign investors’ loss of confidence in the United States’ fiscal probity. In such an event, foreign investors would stop purchasing Treasury bonds, which would force the U.S. to borrow at exorbitant rates of interest - which would drive up the national debt even more. “Budget Office Warns About Debt,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2011.

The causes of mounting U.S. indebtedness are many: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Great Recession itself, and - over the long-term - the mounting costs of entitlement programs like Medicare, Social Security, and Medicaid. Most experts agree that America's fiscal trajectory - especially after 2020 - will be unsustainable.<sup>18</sup>

If these estimates are correct, over the next decade the growing U.S. national debt - and the budget deficits that fuel it - could imperil the dollar by undermining foreign investors' confidence in the United States' ability to repay its debts and keep inflation in check. This is important because, for the foreseeable future, the U.S. will depend on capital inflows from abroad to finance both its deficit spending and private consumption, and to maintain the dollar's position as the international economic system's reserve currency. America's geopolitical preeminence hinges on the dollar's reserve currency role. If the dollar loses that status, U.S. hegemony will be - literally - unaffordable, and the United States would have to learn to live within its means.<sup>19</sup> As Jonathan Kirshner observed, *before* the Great Recession kicked-in, the dollar's vulnerability "presents potentially significant and underappreciated restraints upon contemporary American political and military predominance."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Economists regard a 100% debt-to-GDP ratio as critical indicator that a state will default on its financial obligations. The CBO has noted that if the U.S. stays on its current fiscal trajectory, the ratio of U.S. government debt to GDP will be 100% by 2020. Congressional Budget Office, "The Budget and Economic Outlook, Fiscal Years 2010 to 2020" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2010). In an even less sanguine 2011 analysis, the International Monetary Fund forecast that the U.S. will hit the 100% debt -to- GDP ratio in 2016 (IMF 2011). International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook - Tensions from Two-Speed Recovery: Unemployment, Commodities, and Capital Flows* (Washington, D. C.: International Monetary Fund, April 2011). In June 2011 report, the CBO warned that unless the U.S. drastically slashes expenditures - especially on entitlements - and raises taxes, it is headed for a fiscal train wreck that will have significant effects on its economic growth. Barring major corrective steps to control spending and increase revenues, the U.S. debt-to-GDP ratio could exceed 200% by 2035. Stating that the U.S. budget outlook for this decade and beyond is "daunting," CBO Director Doug Elmendorff said, "The CBO's projections in most of the report understate the severity of the long-term budget problem because they do not incorporate the negative effects that accumulating additional federal debt would have on the economy, nor do they include the impact of high tax rates on people's incentives to work and save." Alan Beattie, "Watchdog ftlineVoices Concern on U.S. Debt," *Financial Times*, June 22, 2011; Lori Montgomery, "Congressional Budget Office Warns of Debt Explosion," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> American budget and trade deficits have not been a serious problem heretofore, because U.S. creditors believed that the United States was able to repay its debts. There are signs that this confidence may gradually be eroding. If, whether for economic, or, conceivably, *geopolitical*, reasons others are no longer willing to finance American indebtedness, Washington's choices will be stark: significant dollar devaluation to increase U.S. exports (which will cause inflation, and lower living standards), or raising interest rates sharply to attract foreign capital inflows (which will shrink domestic investment, choke off growth, and worsen America's long-term economic problems). Given the de-industrialization of the U.S. economy over the past three decades, it is questionable whether, even with a dramatically depreciated dollar, the United States could export enough to make a major dent in its foreign debt. Gilpin, *Political Economy of International Relations*, 336.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Kirshner, "Dollar Primacy and American Power: What's at Stake?" *Review of International Political Economy*, 15: 3 (August 2008), 418.

China, which has vast holdings of U.S. government debt (more than \$2 trillion), already has cast a vote of no confidence in the dollar's long term future, which is reflected in its calls to create a new reserve currency to replace the dollar, the renminbi's gradual 'internationalization,' and in the lectures China's leaders regularly deliver telling Washington to get its fiscal house in order. Alarm bells about the dollar's uncertain status now are ringing. In June 2011, the IMF said that unless the U.S. enacts a credible plan to rein-in its annual deficits and accumulating national debt, it could face a sovereign risk crisis in the next several years, and in May 2011 the World Bank declared that the dollar probably will lose its status as the primary reserve currency by 2025.<sup>21</sup> In coming years, the U.S. will have to defend the dollar by reassuring foreign lenders (read: China) both that there will be no runaway inflation and that it can pay its debts. This will require some combination of budget cuts, entitlements reductions, tax increases, and interest-rate hikes. Because exclusive reliance on the last two options could choke-off growth, there will be - indeed, there already is - strong pressure to slash the federal budget in order to hold-down taxes and future interest rates. It will be almost impossible to make meaningful cuts in federal spending without deep reductions in defense expenditures (and entitlements) because that is where the money is.

Here we come to the crux of Lieber's argument. He concedes-(or, more correctly, appears to do so), that the U.S. fiscal crisis is serious and that this fosters "a propensity toward foreign policy retrenchment," but - and it's a big 'but' - American retrenchment is nevertheless "avoidable" and "by no means a certainty" (36). U.S. domestic constraints, Lieber claims, do not "predetermine" the end of American primacy (14-15). Why? Because if U.S. policymakers and citizens have the willpower to make the right decisions, America can redress its problems and maintain its primacy. And for Lieber, the United States *must* do so because a world no longer shaped by American power will be exposed to a parade of horrors. As Lieber sees it, the future of American primacy will be determined by "policy and will" (29). Or, to put it another way, U.S. determination can overcome historical determinism.

Lieber is both correct and wrong. He is correct that in coming years American policymakers and citizens will have crucial choices to make about the U.S. role in the international system, and about how to address the nation's daunting domestic problems. But he is surely wrong to suggest that these choices will not be severely constrained by objective, material reality. Indeed, he betrays ambivalence about the relative importance of material power versus willpower when he writes that "although the material aspects of national power are of fundamental importance, they shape outcomes only in the broadest terms, whereas specific choices by decision makers about policy become crucial" (36). To the extent he is suggesting that willpower prevails in the end over material power, his

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<sup>21</sup> James Politi, "IMF Warns US of Global Debt 'Shock'," *Financial Times*, June 29, 2011. World Bank, *Global Development Horizons 2011 - Multipolarity: The New Global Economy* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2011); Motoko Rich, "The World Economy Order, Circa, 2025," *New York Times*, May 17, 2011; James Politi, "World Bank Sees End to Dollar's Hegemony," *Financial Times*, May 17, 2011.

argument resembles that of the pre-1914 French military theorists who believed that willpower - or as they called it, *élan* - could prevail on the modern battlefield over machine guns and artillery. Lieber's argument that willpower beats material power is simply unhistorical. The ultimate fate of all hegemonic powers - a fate from which American exceptionalism does not offer a 'Get Out of Jail Free card' - is decline and defeat. As Paul Kennedy observed, no great power has ever been able to stay Number One forever.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, decision makers *do* make choices about policy - choices that can be wise or foolish, smart or dumb. Here, the words of Kenneth Waltz come to mind. Speaking of U.S. foreign policy, in a phrase that has stuck clearly in my mind, he used to tell those of us in his Berkeley graduate seminar, "When you're big, strong and powerful you can afford to make the same damn fool mistakes over and over again. But when you are no longer so big, strong and powerful you pay a real price for repeating those mistakes." The United States is fast approaching the point where it simply cannot afford to keep making the "damn fool mistakes." The choices the U.S. will face during the next two decades will be difficult because they will require choosing between bad outcomes and worse ones. Nevertheless, the decisions that are made will matter.

All great powers go through a cycle of rise and decline. But there is a world of difference between a graceful decline that conserves as much of America's power as possible versus a precipitous *fall* - a power collapse that reduces the United States' global influence dramatically. This is a point that Paul Kennedy made in 1987 in his magisterial *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. As he wrote, "The task facing American statesman over the *next decades*. . . is to recognize that broad trends are *under way*, and that there is a need to 'manage' affairs so that the *relative* erosion of the United States' position takes place slowly and smoothly, and is not accelerated by policies which bring merely short-term advantage but longer-term disadvantage."<sup>23</sup> Whatever policies the U.S. chooses to follow in coming years, Americans will have to give up things of both tangible and intangible importance. They will be forced to choose between the notion that has taken root during the past seventy years that U.S. world leadership is indispensable and preserving the social safety net and repairing the domestic economy. In an age of austerity, national resources will be limited and competition for them will be fierce. If the U.S. wants to do more at home, inevitably it will have to do less abroad.

The constellation of world power is changing in two ways, and U.S. grand strategy must change with it. American elites must come to grips with the fact that 'the West' does not enjoy a predestined supremacy in international politics. The Euro-Atlantic world had a long run of global dominance but it is coming to an end. The future will be shaped by the East, not the West, because that is where the power is flowing.<sup>24</sup> The era of the *Pax Americana*

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<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 533.

<sup>23</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 534 (italics emphasis added).

<sup>24</sup> On the inevitability the decline of both the West and of U.S. primacy, see Robert W. Merry, "Spengler's Ominous Prophecy," *National Interest*, No. 123 (January/February 2013), 11-22.

also is winding down. If the U.S. is to manage relative decline effectively, its reality first must be acknowledged. America's problems cannot be solved by taking an ostrich-like view of the world. However, the Exceptionalist notions that are deeply imbedded in U.S. political culture make it difficult for U.S. foreign policy elites to come to grips with decline (the public seems to be ahead of the game here). History, however, has not granted any special exemptions to the United States. The world has changed a great deal since 1945 when the groundwork for U.S. primacy was laid, and again from 1989-91 when the Soviet Union's implosion held forth the promise that the U.S. would be the only great power far into the twenty-first century. Today, only denialists can be oblivious to the changes - external and internal - heralding the end of American primacy. At the end of the day, foreign policies are shaped by the ideas leaders hold about their nation's identity and its place in the world. This is especially true for the U.S. To manage its relative decline effectively, Americans will need to move beyond the myth that the United States is somehow immune from the forces of change that history has unleashed.

With U.S. defense spending currently at such high levels, domestic political pressure to make steep cuts in defense spending is bound to increase. As the Cornell international political economist Jonathan Kirshner puts it, the absolute size of U.S. defense expenditures is "more likely to be decisive in the future when the U.S. is under pressure to make real choices about taxes and spending. When borrowing becomes more difficult, and adjustment more difficult to postpone, choices must be made between raising taxes, cutting non-defense spending, and cutting defense spending."<sup>25</sup> In spring 2011, the Obama administration proposed to cut U.S. defense spending by \$400 billion over eleven years. Over an eleven-year period, the Obama proposal would result in annual cuts averaging about \$37 billion. The U.S. spent nearly \$550 billion on defense in FY 2011, so the proposed Obama cuts would be well under 10% of that amount. But that is a drop in the bucket, and cuts of a much larger magnitude almost certainly will be needed. This will have two consequences. First, as the U.S. spends less on defense, China (and other new great powers) will be able to close the military power gap separating them from the United States. Second, the United States' ability to act as a regional stabilizer and a guardian of the global commons will diminish because the U.S. will be unable to afford to maintain many of its overseas commitments. In this respect, America's fiscal crisis and the dollar's uncertain future is an important driver of American decline. The bottom line here is that contrary to Lieber's argument, material power counts for a lot more than willpower in determining whether the U.S. can remain a hegemon over the next decade or two.

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<sup>25</sup> Kirshner, "Dollar Primacy," p. 431. The August 2011 deal between Congress and the Obama administration to lift the national debt ceiling has put defense spending in the cross-hairs. If the special Congressional committee established by the debt ceiling deal is unable to reach agreement on spending cuts, automatic triggers - which include some \$500 billion in defense cuts over ten years - would go into effect.

Review by Paul K. MacDonald, Wellesley College

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In his provocative and wide ranging new book *Power and Willpower in the American Future*, Robert Lieber makes a straightforward argument: those who predict the inevitable decline of the United States have “exaggerated the scale of both past prominence and current peril” (3). To the extent that limits to American primacy exist, Lieber argues, “they are less likely to be material than ideational in nature” (9). The United States might squander its hegemonic position not due to external circumstances but because of poor policy choices.

“To argue...against the idea of American decline,” Lieber declares, “might seem a lonely, if not futile task” (2). Futile, perhaps, but not lonely. Other prominent skeptics of “declinism” include Joseph Nye, Josef Joffe, Robert Kagan, Walter Russell Mead, John Ikenberry, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth.<sup>1</sup> During the last Presidential campaign, both President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney rejected the proposition that America was doomed to decline.<sup>2</sup> Given Lieber’s reputation as a distinguished scholar of American foreign relations, however, his contribution to this debate is worth taking seriously.

Lieber rests his case on three main points, not all of which are consistent. First, he claims that the material foundations of American hegemony are much stronger than is often assumed. Lieber cites a wealth of statistics, many of which seem to support the declinist position. He notes that the U.S. share of global output has decreased from 26 percent in 1980 to 21.5 percent in 2011 (26). He points out that the U.S. share of world manufacturing dipped from 22.2 percent in 1978 to 17.7 percent in 2008 (41, 46). He acknowledges that the U.S. slipped from first place to fourth place in terms of global competitiveness (46). He cites evidence that oil imports have increased from 35 percent of the total in the mid-1970s to upwards of 60 percent in recent years (52). He acknowledges a Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report that warns that U.S. public debt could reach an unsustainable 90 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2020 (30). Given the data, even Lieber is forced to concede that “the United States predominates by lesser margins” (28) and that financial constraints may “create a *propensity* toward foreign policy retrenchment” (36, emphasis original).

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “The Future of American Power,” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2010); Joseph Joffe, “The Default Power,” *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2009); Robert Kagan, “Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline,” *New Republic* (11 January 2012); Walter Russell Mead, “The Myth of American Decline,” *Wall Street Journal* (9 April 2012); G. John Ikenberry, “The Future of the Liberal World Order,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2011); Stephen Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “Reshaping the World Order,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2009).

<sup>2</sup> During his State of the Union, President Obama declared: “anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn’t know what they’re talking about.” See White House, “Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address” (24 January 2012). A White Paper released by the Romney campaign likewise indicated: “Mitt Romney rejects the philosophy of decline in all of its variants.” Romney for President White Paper, “An American Century: A Strategy to Secure America’s Enduring Interests and Ideals” (7 October 2011).

In general, Lieber's response to these figures is to downplay their significance. "The numbers do matter," he admits, "but they describe only part of a much broader domestic foundation" (46). Here he points to continued American dominance in the other fields such as science, technology, medicine, and higher education. Yet Lieber neglects to mention that indicators of an American lead in many of these areas have also weakened. Over the past decade, the U.S. has experienced a decline in the global share of high technology exports, trademark applications, market capitalizations of its publicly traded companies, and renewable energy production.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, rising powers such as China have gained relative to the United States in terms of patent applications, high technology exports, and information and communication technology service exports.<sup>4</sup> Lieber also makes the familiar argument that aggregate national indicators may be misleading. He asserts that "per capita GDP provides a much more robust indicator of national power" (41). Yet he fails to note that China's GDP per capita has tripled over the past decade, and that the United States' relative advantage in GDP per capita has declined as a result.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, none of these figures tell us anything about the political consequences of long-term economic trends. A reasonable case can be made that the United States' absolute superiority is much more important than its position relative to rising challengers. The rate and depth of relative decline may also vary across different economic categories in politically important ways. In comparable historical terms, America's relative decline is both modest and manageable.<sup>6</sup> Yet Lieber is not particularly interested in parsing conflicting data or assessing the underlying causes of recent economic struggles. Rather he repeatedly claims that the data are ambiguous, that future trends are ultimately unpredictable, and that America has always bounced back. Such wishful thinking may be comforting, but it is a tenuous foundation on which to base American grand strategy.

Second, Lieber claims that the real threat to America's leadership role is not its material position but flagging domestic will. He points to a variety of factors that may challenge the

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. global share of high technology exports (current US\$s) fell from 18.4 percent in 1999 to 8.4 percent in 2009. Share of total trademark applications declined from 12.5 percent in 1999 to 8.8 percent in 2009. Share of market capitalization of listed companies (current US\$s) fell from 49.7 percent in 2011 to 34.7 percent in 2009. Share of electricity production from renewable sources (kWH) fell from 36.7 percent in 1999 to 25.1 percent in 2009. All figures obtained from World Bank, *DataBank*, <http://databank.worldbank.org>.

<sup>4</sup> The ratio of U.S. to China patent applications (residents) declined from 6.5 in 2000 to 0.8 in 2010. The ratio of high technology exports (current \$s) declined from 4.7 in 2000 to 0.36 in 2010. The ratio of information and communication technology service exports (BoP, current US\$s) fell from 13.7 in 2001 to 2 in 2011. *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> The ratio of U.S. to China GDP per capita (PPP current international \$) declined from 13.8 in 2001 to 5.7 in 2011. *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security*, 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 7-44.

ability of the United States to chart a clear and coherent foreign policy. There is the danger posed by “information technology and the new media,” which together create a news cycle where “the immediate drives out the important” (17). There is the threat posed by liberal professors and an “educational milieu” that “tends to devalue history and shared national experience” (18). There is the broader loss of “national community and shared identity” (21). To be fully convincing, Lieber needs to show how these cultural factors correlate with shifts in public will or how they trump long-term geopolitical or economic trends. He demonstrates none of this, and, to extend his argument to its widest possible application, I suspect that America’s foreign policy challenges have more to do with structural shifts than how carefully my students read Thucydides or consult Twitter.

Despite these factors, Lieber maintains that public opinion data “do not indicate public demand for serious retrenchment in foreign and military policy” (63). His reading of the available evidence, however, is unpersuasive. Lieber is correct that two-thirds of respondents in a 2010 Chicago Council of Foreign Affairs poll responded that the U.S. should take an “active part” in world affairs (62). Yet he is missing the forest for the cherry-picked tree. The title of the 2010 Chicago Council’s report was *Constrained Internationalism: Adapting to New Realities*. The study’s authors concluded that American’s attitudes about foreign affairs were becoming “more selective” and that Americans recognized “constraints on their resources and on their power and influence abroad.”<sup>7</sup>

Lieber also contends that relevant polling shows that Americans do not “favor any large-scale repudiation of foreign commitments” (63). Jarringly, the evidence he cites for this conclusion is polling from January 2001 that found that 87 percent of people were either “extremely proud” or “very proud” to be an American (63-64). More recent polls that asked direct policy-relevant questions reveal a much different and more nuanced picture. In December 2009, for example, a Pew Research Center poll found— for the first time in more than forty years of polling – that a plurality (49 percent) of respondents agreed that the United States should “mind its own business internationally” and let others get along on their own.<sup>8</sup> A 2010 study by the University of Maryland likewise found that 64 percent of respondents endorsed reductions in defense spending, supporting an average cut of \$109 billion to the base-line defense budget.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “Constrained Internationalism: Adapting to New Realities,” (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2010): 1, cf. 11-17. The 2012 Chicago Council report confirmed that this preference for selective engagement had “consolidated.” See Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “Foreign Policy in the New Millennium: Results of the 2012 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy,” (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2012): 3, cf. 13-24.

<sup>8</sup> See Pew Research Center, “U.S. Seen as Less Important, China as More Powerful” (3 December 2009).

<sup>9</sup> See Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, Evan Lewis, and Stefan Subias, “Competing Budget Priorities: The Public, The House, the White House,” Program for Public Consultation (College Park: University of Maryland 2011): 5. A follow up study conducted in 2012 found *increased* support for defense cuts. 76 percent of respondents were willing to reduce the defense budget, with an average cut of \$127 billion. See Steven Kull, Matthew Leatherman, and R. Jeffrey Smith, “Consulting the American People on National Defense Spending,” Program for Public Consultation (College Park: University of Maryland 2012): 17.

Much like individual economic indicators, these polls are subject to multiple interpretations. Responses can vary a great deal depending on how questions are phrased. Yet the overall picture is a consistent one – Americans want to maintain some sort of global role, yet one where the U.S. works actively with others and in which ambitious and expensive foreign policy ventures are avoided. It is regrettable that Lieber’s argument is Procrustean, forcing the evidence into an iron bed rather than accommodating challenging facts.

The third main claim that Lieber advances is that the maintenance of the United States’ leading role “matters greatly” (4). The case for continued primacy rests on the notion that the United States faces a series of difficult foreign policy threats. To begin with, “the rise of others and the resultant diffusion of American power” (86) has resulted in “a more diverse and difficult international environment” in which to advance American interests (87). At the same time, “hostile states” and “non-state actors such as al-Qaeda” continue to pose a significant danger (87). Perceptive readers may detect a contradiction here – how can American power be defusing but not in decline? If American power remains so potent, why is American security in such peril? Lieber never resolves these tensions in his own argument.

Similar contradictions permeate Lieber’s description of specific challenges such as the rise of China. On the one hand, he notes that China faces serious domestic constraints on its potential power – including a graying population, a brittle political system, growing corruption, and internal tensions (98-101). On the other hand, he describes China as a revisionist power whose “growing economic might,” “rapidly expanding sea power,” and “confrontational diplomatic posture” pose a danger to the United States and its allies (102). Lieber portrays China simultaneously as a looming threat and a paper tiger, a contradictory image that invites costly strategic miscalculations.

One final note concerns the partisan tone that appears throughout much of this book. On two separate occasions, for example, Lieber quotes President Obama’s statement, “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism or the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism” (24, 154). For Lieber, this is evidence of the President’s willingness to “downplay the relevance or importance of American exceptionalism” (23). Yet he fails to mention that in the same news conference Obama went on to make a strong stand *in favor* of American exceptionalism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the President argued: “I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of laws, in our democratic practices, in our belief of free speech

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<sup>10</sup> Lieber does not cite a complete transcript of the press conference. His source for the quotation in question is a newspaper op-ed by James Kirchick, “Squanderer in Chief,” *Los Angeles Times* (28 April 2009).

and equality, that though imperfect, are exceptional.”<sup>11</sup> Obama also affirmed: “America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world.”<sup>12</sup>

There is nothing wrong with having normative commitments and political sympathies, but at times Lieber risks undercutting his scholarly claims. Twice Lieber repeats the claim that the Affordable Care Act would add to the budget deficit (33, 159). In fact, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office concluded that the law would lower the deficit by about \$124 billion over ten years.<sup>13</sup> Lieber likewise asserts that it was “not until its third year in office did the Obama administration become more assertive in its criticism of China’s economic and foreign policy behavior” (77). This ignores the fact that the Obama administration brought a case against China in the World Trade Organization and slapped a tariff on Chinese tires in its first year, neither of which warmed relations with Beijing.<sup>14</sup> Lieber echoes a claim made by Governor Romney during the Presidential campaign that the U.S. Navy fleet of 285 ships is “the smallest number since World War I” (129).<sup>15</sup> Leaving aside the obvious problems involved with comparing today’s advanced ships with their historical counterparts, the Navy’s own figures show that the active fleet is actually larger today than it was between 2005 and 2008.<sup>16</sup>

Such statements create the unfortunate impression that this book’s main purpose is to advocate on behalf of a particular ideological conception of America’s purpose, rather than provide a measured assessment of the shifting nature of America’s power. Perhaps the

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<sup>11</sup> See “News Conference by President Obama” (4 April 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/news-conference-president-obama-4042009>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* The *Washington Post*’s fact checker gave the uncharitable interpretation of Obama’s “American exceptionalism” comments – and the more general notion that Obama had embarked on an apology tour – “Four Pinocchios.” See Glenn Kessler, “Obama’s ‘Apology Tour,’” *Washington Post* (22 February 2011).

<sup>13</sup> The non-partisan Politifact described the claim that the Affordable Care Act would add to the deficit as “false.” See Politifact, “Mitt Romney says ‘Obamacare’ adds trillions to the deficit,” <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/jun/28/mitt-romney/mitt-romney-says-obamacare-adds-trillions-deficit/>.

<sup>14</sup> For non-partisan overviews of recent U.S.-China economic relations, see Wayne M. Morrison, “China-U.S. Trade Issues,” Congressional Research Service, RL33536 (21 May 2012): 36-37; and Rachel Tang, “The Rise of China’s Auto Industry and Its Impact on the U.S. Motor Vehicle Industry,” Congressional Research Service R40924 (16 November 2009): 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> When Governor Romney made a similar claim during the campaign, the non-partisan Politifact described it as a “pants on fire” falsehood. See Politifact, “Mitt Romney Says U.S. Navy is smallest since 1917, Air Force smallest since 1947,” <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/jan/18/mitt-romney/mitt-romney-says-us-navy-smallest-1917-air-force-s/>.

<sup>16</sup> The lowest number was actually reached in 2007 when the number of active ships was 278. See Naval History and Heritage Command, “U.S. Navy Active Ship Force Levels, 1886-present,” <http://www.history.navy.mil/branches/org9-4.htm>.

charged terms that permeate this debate – such as “American decline” and “American exceptionalism” – encourage the embrace of polemical positions. Yet the stakes involved in developing an accurate sense of both the limits and potential of American power could not be higher. If the U.S. is to manage its relative decline, and to ultimately renew its leadership, scholars must seek to elevate the discussion about American power above the partisan fray.

How do states assess the international distribution of power? What are the respective roles of structure and agency in shaping world politics? And, in any case, why should analysts care about change in the international distribution of power? Although not framed in these terms, Robert Lieber's recent volume directly bears on these perennial questions of International Relations theory.

Lieber is primarily interested in addressing what he views as the central question in the ongoing debate over American decline, namely, "does the scale and nature of challenges abroad together with the weight of problems at home mean that the United States no longer has the capacity to play a leading role in world affairs, or is it the case that domestic perceptions, beliefs, and policy choices are as much or more at issue?" (26). Unsurprisingly (in light of his recent publications<sup>1</sup>), Lieber comes down squarely in the latter camp. For Lieber, not only is the United States not in decline, but it is so much more powerful than potential challengers that maintaining primacy – ensuring it is the "preeminent actor in world affairs" (8) – depends on whether policymakers have the will to do so and resist calls for either retrenchment or reliance on international institutions. At its core, therefore, the volume sets out 1) to challenge the idea "that the United States is in a state of rapid, fundamental decline" (1), 2) to offer "a more optimistic understanding of the American future" (5), and 3) to make the case that responding to ill-founded concerns of U.S. decline will lead to manifest problems for American interests.

Unfortunately, the results raise more questions than they answer. While Lieber demonstrates that the United States retains many features that should allow it to remain the most powerful state in the international system in many ways, he less convincingly shows that the United States can -- or should -- actively work to maintain primacy through its own foreign agenda. This does not undercut the utility of the volume, which stands as one of the best works to argue that the fundamentals of the American order are sound. It does, however, require some caveats to Lieber's arguments and a re-assessment of his evidence to determine the structure of world politics and the role of the United States therein.

Lieber sets out to challenge two propositions which he claims are "widely asserted by those who see the ebbing of American predominance" (9) in world politics. The first is that "America itself as a society, an economy, and a political power is in decline" – in other words, that the United States faces *absolute decline* (9). Second, that U.S. "international primacy is eroding as a result of the rise of other countries" – that is, the United States faces

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<sup>1</sup> Among others, see Robert Lieber, "Staying Power and the American Future: Problems of Primacy, Policy, and Grand Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 4 (August 2011): 509-530; Robert Lieber, "Persistent Primacy and the Future of the American Era," *International Politics* 46, no. 2 (March 2009): 119-139; and Robert Lieber, "Falling Upwards: Declinism, the Box Set," *World Affairs* (Summer 2008), <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/falling-upwards-declinism-box-set>.

*relative decline* that allows other states to better assert themselves and challenge American interests than was previously the case (9).

Lieber's challenge hinges on three arguments. First, he critically evaluates arguments asserting that the U.S. is in absolute decline. Lieber proposes that the United States retains many long-standing absolute economic, demographic, and military advantages irrespective of its current economic, political, and social problems. Over time, and given its successful recovery from past domestic and international crises (2-4, 37-41), the United States should therefore be able to overcome current dislocations. Offering an array of economic, political, and social data, Lieber provides significant evidence that suggestions of American absolute decline are overstated. He thus concludes that whether the United States plays the leading role in world affairs "is less one of [internal] capacity and potential than of policy, persistence, and political will" (58).

Second, Lieber critiques the notion that American primacy is ebbing because of "the rise of other powers" (80). Here, he finds that emerging great powers such as China and India face internal problems that limit their ability to compete with the United States. In this, he draws parallels between today's emerging great powers and prior rising states – such as the USSR in the 1950s or Japan in the 1980s -- whose challenge to American dominance proved ephemeral. While acknowledging that American power is waning in relative terms (167), Lieber concludes that rising states ultimately lack the capacity to pose real and sustained challenges to American predominance.

Third, Lieber clarifies what he sees as the stakes of the decline debate, arguing that the dangers of the U.S. failing to maintain a primacist role are stark and worrisome. He identifies four core risks. First, global public goods might go underprovided and global governance might collapse in the absence of a predominant United States (92-93). Second, rising states such as China might expand their ambitions and threaten U.S. interests (96-98). Third, terrorism and nuclear weapons may proliferate and harm either the United States or its allies (106-109). Last, weak and hapless American allies may be threatened by hostile actors, with resulting risk to those states "sharing common values" with the United States (4; also 87-95).

When combined, these three arguments lead Lieber to a provocative finding: not only *can* the United States maintain primacy in purely material terms, but it *should not* do anything to upset the status quo lest it endanger its own interests (see esp. 169-171). The United States remains the indispensable nation and must work to maintain primacy both because it is the strongest state in the system, and because any alternate arrangement would be highly injurious to U.S. interests.

Lieber's project is a strong counter to a wave of analyses arguing that the United States faces absolute decline, relative decline, or both.<sup>2</sup> Future studies arguing that the United

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent pronouncement, see National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2012).

States is declining will have to take its arguments seriously and clarify the ways in which the United States is losing out in absolute or relative terms. Indeed, one of the volume's core strengths is its willingness to tackle an extreme version of the decline argument. Although only a subset of analysts contend that the United States faces both absolute and relative decline, this approach allows Lieber to challenge different versions of the decline thesis and gives his project greater reach.<sup>3</sup>

Equally important, Lieber joins William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks, along with Michael Beckley, in underlining the substantial absolute advantages enjoyed by the United States.<sup>4</sup> Lieber does existing studies one better by juxtaposing the current decline debate with past concerns surrounding American decline. While he occasionally implies that today's decline concerns are different and (perhaps) more justified than prior episodes (40, 97), it is useful to be reminded that concerns over American decline are a recurring feature of the U.S. foreign policy landscape and thus may need to be taken with a grain of salt. All of this is to the volume's credit.

That said, portions of Lieber's analysis are less compelling than they initially appear. Three aspects of the argument – 1) the link between decline and primacy, 2) the applicability of prior U.S. 'successes' in averting decline to the current debate, and 3) the rationale for maintaining U.S. primacy in the first place – are particularly problematic. Indeed, re-evaluating these claims can lead to the conclusion that United States is declining in relative terms and might do well to change its foreign policy.

First, the overall relationship between American primacy, American power, and the international distribution of power advanced in the volume is open to question. Lieber is

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<sup>3</sup> There are far too many books on U.S. decline to list here. For a sample, see Christopher Layne, "The Waning of U.S. Hegemony – Myth or Reality?: A Review Essay," *International Security* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2009); Stephen M Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2005); Michele A. Flournoy, Vikram J. Singh, and Shawn Brimley, "Making America Grand Again," in *Finding Our Way: Debating American Grand Strategy*, ed. Michele A. Flournoy and Shawn Brimley (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2008); Robert D. Kaplan, "America's Elegant Decline," *The Atlantic*, November 2007; Fareed Zakaria, "The Future of American Power: How America Can Survive the Rise of the Rest," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (June 2008); Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2008); Richard Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (June 2008); Parag Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2008); Robert McCartney, "Is the U.S. in Decline? Probably, but a Rebound is Possible," *Washington Post*, July 4, 2010; Gideon Rachman, "American Decline: This Time It's For Real," *Foreign Policy*, February 2011; Eric S. Edelman, *Understanding America's Contested Primacy* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010); Robert A. Pape, "Empire Falls," *National Interest*, no. 99 (January/February 2009); Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs, 2010); Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to be Us* (New York: Farrar, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks, *World out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2011-2012): 41-78; Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012-2013): 7-51.

explicit in arguing that, because no country is emerging that can challenge the United States across the full range of economic, political, and military capabilities, the United States is not declining in any meaningful sense and therefore the U.S. can pursue a primacist agenda (28, 95). This approach equates “decline” with a power transition – a situation in which one great power equals or surpasses another across many indicators of capability. It further implies that only if a power transition were in the offing would U.S. primacy be under duress and U.S. foreign policy thus need to change course; otherwise, so long as the U.S. retains “significant advantages” in economic, military, and political assets, policymakers will enjoy the wherewithal to pursue a primacist agenda (28). There are good reasons, however, to believe that *relative* decline can occur without a power transition taking place and provide strong, strategic reasons for a state to change its foreign policy agenda.

International Relations theorists often draw a distinction between decline as a power transition, and decline as a relative loss of power in which the ratio of capabilities between two (or more) states narrows.<sup>5</sup> Although Lieber acknowledges that the latter type of decline is occurring, he downplays its implications. This is problematic. Narrowing the power ratio matters because a relative loss of resources from State A to State B limits the range of activities A can take against B when their interests conflict. Even if A dominates B in other domains, A’s ability to obtain the things it cares about in the face of B’s opposition has declined, while B’s relatively greater capabilities allow it to more readily advance its own interests.

It is therefore incomplete to suggest that U.S. primacy is not under stress simply because the U.S. lacks a peer competitor. Given the growing capabilities of China, Brazil, India, and other states (42-45), these states can more readily influence and, if necessary, oppose American policies when their interests dictate. In other words, the relative decline of U.S. power means that the United States can no longer throw its weight around in world affairs and *expect its preferences to dominate the international agenda at low cost* – which is the heart of the idea of U.S. primacy – to the same extent as in the past. Given the readiness with which the U.S. backed the expansion of the G-8 to the G-20 (reflecting the need to respond to the 2008 financial crisis amidst a diffusion of economic power) and the fervor with which the U.S. has worked to maintain the military balance in East Asia as Chinese military power expands, this trend is already influencing U.S. policy.<sup>6</sup> In so many words,

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<sup>5</sup> On decline as a shrinking ratio, see Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 5–6, and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 93–95, 197–209. For a broader development of the point, see Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Correspondence: Debating China’s Rise and U.S. Decline,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012-2013): 172-175.

<sup>6</sup> On the stated logic behind G-8 expansion, see George W. Bush: “Remarks at the Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy,” November 15, 2008, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=84965>, and “The President’s News Conference with Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada in Ottawa, Canada,” February 19, 2009, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85789>.

the relative rise of other great powers constrains the United States' role in world politics and makes it increasingly costly for the United States to pursue a primacist agenda: the U.S. must expend greater resources to obtain the things it cares about when its interests conflict with other states, or not challenge others on these issues in the first place. Even if no power transition occurs, relative decline may therefore make U.S. primacy unsustainable.

A second problem relates to Lieber's use of history. Lieber employs examples from United States history to suggest that the United States can avoid decline today partly because the United States successfully avoided decline in the face of prior domestic (e.g., the Great Depression) and international (e.g., the Cold War) challenges (2-4; 38-40). In doing so, however, Lieber asserts rather than shows that American agency helped the United States avoid decline – especially when faced with other great power challengers – in these prior cases. This omission undercuts the notion that the United States' absolute advantages provide significant insulation against decline because it leaves unevaluated the alternate explanations for the U.S. track record. In particular, an alternative interpretation of the failure of past great power challengers might propose that an exogenous set of circumstances – for instance, Japanese institutional weaknesses bringing about the Japanese economic collapse or Soviet economic mismanagement precipitating the Soviet decline – had more to do with American success than anything related to American “exceptionalism” (2), path dependency, or agency. Yet if it was less American policy than an alternate set of circumstances that forestalled American decline in the past, then arguing that American absolute strengths will help the United States maintain primacy today is confounding and potentially misleading.

Instead, the volume would have been strengthened by a detailed assessment of 1) whether prior decline concerns were, given the events at the time, ill-founded or justified; 2) whether, to the extent the concerns were justified, American policy or some other set of events averted American decline; and 3) whether the conditions that helped the United States avoid decline in the past (e.g., Cold War pressures giving the U.S. a lever to use over its European and Asian allies) are present today. Absent this analysis, it is unclear whether American exceptionalism and path dependency afforded the United States the advantages that Lieber claims took place in the past, and whether these advantages exist today. As a result, the twice-repeated criticism (24, 154) of President Barack Obama for claiming “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism” is somewhat jarring without a clear demonstration that American exceptionalism carried the day in the first place. As it is, history suggests that declining great powers often *do* believe their strength is self-sustaining even as decline manifests, and it is not clear that the American experience should be any different.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Two examples suggest the point. In the late Cold War, Soviet leaders expected that Soviet influence in Eastern Europe could sustain itself despite the relative decline of the Soviet economy and the first signs of Soviet military retrenchment from the region. The hope was that the bonds of Communist ideology would keep the states of Eastern Europe firmly in the Soviet orbit and buttress Soviet power despite worsening Soviet material conditions; see among others, Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2009 edition, 327; Mark Kramer, “The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union (Part 1),” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 191. Roughly a century earlier, British policymakers

Last, the volume is somewhat unconvincing when describing the dangers posed by American decline and lost primacy. At its core, Lieber posits a perfect storm of hostile adversaries and feckless allies to explain why the United States must maintain its dominant international role. However, it is unclear whether the dangers posited are as pernicious *for the United States* as the work suggests. Terrorism, for instance, has most consistently been a problem for countries near the source of the terrorism itself, and the U.S., on the face of it, is far away. Similarly, a rising China might one day threaten American economic and military interests, but it more immediately challenges other, fully capable actors such as Japan located much closer to China. Nuclear proliferation is a profound worry, but even the Iranian nuclear program seems geared more to Israel and other perceived threats in the Persian Gulf than the United States. Meanwhile, shakier global governance may be unpleasant, but it is unlikely to pose the same threat to American interests as past threats such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union – clear and present dangers that pulled the United States into an active role in world politics in the first place. I flag these issues not because the dangers that Lieber notes are unimportant, but because the volume’s framework suggests that other states more directly challenged by these problems have the greatest incentive to address the problems. Lieber’s analysis suggests that, rather than having to resolve these problems at costs to its own time, resources, and political capital, the United States enjoys the opportunity to buckpass to these actors, play a less active role in world affairs, and still see movement on the issues it cares about. Lieber effectively asks readers to equate a host of global and regional problems with American national security, and it is not clear why this should be the case.

To be clear, Lieber argues that the United States cannot buckpass and rely on others to resolve these problems. However, this portion of the thesis relies on a *ceteris paribus* assumption that, by definition, will not hold if the United States alters its global role. Given the U.S. pursuit of primacy in recent decades, it is not surprising that Lieber finds that other states lack the will or capacity to address today’s security problems: they enjoy a profound incentive to free-ride on American largesse and to continue feigning weakness to ensure that the U.S. security blanket continues. Conversely, opponents who have been witness to what has often been capricious American behavior have reason to inflate their hostility and strength in order to deter the United States or compel changes in U.S. policy.

If the American role changes, however, then these conditions are likely to change as well. Thus, states that are threatened by terrorism, increasingly powerful regional actors, and related threats on will tend to develop the means to counter these problems – they will balance once the threat is great enough. Likewise, if U.S. activism abroad is reduced, then actors that seem hostile today may change their tune as security dilemmas abate and may

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hoped that a combination of combination of economic returns from prior investments, alongside greater political and economic coordination within the British Empire, would help Britain compete as the United States, Germany, and other states grew their power; see Aaron Friedberg, *The Weary Titan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). An outstanding question is why great powers believe their strength is self-sustaining even as the material bases of power change over time.

seek a rapprochement with the United States to help *them* deal with security problems in their own backyards. Lieber dismisses both options out of hand, and is particularly critical – drawing on the failed American rapprochement with Iran in 2009-2010 – of the notion that a reduced American role will decrease tensions with hostile states. Part of the problem, however, is that given the last two decades of American foreign policy and overwhelming American capabilities, making a reduced foreign role credible is very difficult. When, however, the United States has credibly altered its foreign policy role – notably in the late 1960s and 1970s – allies contributed more to the common defense in Europe and Asia, while adversaries sought détente and rapprochement.<sup>8</sup>

I am not arguing that the United States can simply adopt a restrained grand strategy on the spur of the moment, but it is worth considering the different paths other actors might take in response to an altered American role rather than assuming that the status quo will continue. At the end of the day, the United States benefits from its primacist role, yet it is entirely possible that the United States will benefit as much or more from an alternative approach.

Ultimately, Lieber postulates a world in which the United States retains the capacity to predominate in world affairs and makes a strong claim that it dare not do otherwise. The framework is provocative, and the research voluminous and well-argued. *Power and Willpower* will stand as one of the core works for analysts interested in framing and engaging in the decline debate. That said, conceptual and empirical ambiguities suggest that some of Lieber's findings are less robust than one would like. On one level, Lieber's own framework and evidence can be used to make a countervailing argument that the United States is declining in relative terms, and that the period in which American primacy was unchallenged is waning. Moreover, and even if primacy is lost, there are good reasons to suspect that the United States will still not find the international environment overly hostile or threatening. Future analysts will therefore be well-served using *Power and Willpower* as a starting point and evaluating some of its more provocative claims. All of this is to the volume's credit. In the final analysis, Lieber's volume is a major contribution to the American decline debate and an important resource for scholars and policymakers alike.

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<sup>8</sup> On allied contributions, see John Duffield, *Power Rules: The Evolution of NATO's Conventional Force Posture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), esp. chap. 6, and Tsuyoshi Kawasaki, "Japan and Two Theories of Military Doctrine Formation: Civilian Policymakers, Policy Preference, and the 1976 National Defense Program Outline," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 67-93. On rapprochement and conflict de-escalation, see Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1985); Richard Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics: A Study of Change and Communication* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Robert S. Ross, "U.S. Relations with China" in *The Golden Age of the U.S., China, Japan Triangle, 1972-1989*, ed. Ezra Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asian Center, 2002), 79-108; Chen Jian, "The Path Toward Sino-American Rapprochement," *German Historical Institute Supplement*, no. 1 (2003): 26-52.

Author's Response by Robert J. Lieber

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I welcome the opportunity to respond to this H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable and will focus my comments on two of the reviews, those of Christopher Layne and Joshua Shiffrin, that reflect a through reading and engagement with the argument of my book. Good scholarship should involve the sifting and winnowing of ideas and serious debate about the ideas and evidence presented. Thus, even while Shiffrin takes issue with me on a number of key points, I appreciate his concluding remark that *Power and Willpower* represents “a major contribution to the American decline debate and an important resource for scholars and policymakers alike.” With that said, I will begin by setting out several key points that I believe deserve emphasis and that constitute a broader response to reviewer critiques. I will then respond to specific points, mostly those in the Layne and Shiffrin essays.

First, readers of the book can note the emphasis on contingency in my assessment of the American future. The point should be evident in the book's subtitle: *Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline*. I deliberately chose the word *destined* in order to set the work apart both from those who would assert either that the American decline is virtually inevitable or, conversely, that the strength and power of the U.S. render it more or less immune to decline.

Second, I seek to incorporate both structure and agency. That is, I argue that the material strengths of the US remain deeper and more robust than often adduced, and to substantiate this argument I provide evidence concerning GDP, energy and natural resources, population, demography, international university rankings, military spending as a percentage of GDP, and other indicators concerning competitiveness, science, and technology. Yet, at the same time, I emphasize that decisions made by policymakers are critical to the American future, and in this sense the challenges faced by this country are as much ideational as material. In plain language, a great deal depends on the choices the United States we makes as a society.

Third, far from providing a kind of triumphalist narrative, several chapters of my book explicitly address problems faced by the U.S. at home and abroad. Chapter Two emphasizes financial and economic perils, especially the issues of deficit and debt as well as the tasks of maintaining competitiveness. Chapter Three focuses on problems of American institutions, not least the dysfunctional degree of political polarization in Congress and the wider political realm. And Chapters Four and Five deal with external challenges including the rise of China and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and the possibilities of 'Imperial Overstretch.'

Fourth, I criticize the hyperbole that has characterized discussions of American power and influence. In essence, even at the height of its predominance, American power never translated directly into always getting the outcomes that policymakers sought. I provide a list of examples including the Korean and Vietnam Wars, De Gaulle's withdrawal of France from the integrated NATO military command, the Arab oil embargo of 1973-74, problems

of allied burden sharing, and the 9/11 attacks. In sum, America has been neither so preeminent nor so weakened as has often been described.

Fifth, I remain cautiously optimistic about the American future. This means both recognition of serious domestic problems and international challenges, but also an emphasis on the underlying human and material strengths the U.S. possesses, the characteristic flexibility and adaptability of the society, and the country's past history of successfully surmounting crises even if only after delaying far too long in doing so.

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Christopher Layne is arguably the leading academic declinist, in the sense that he undertakes to weigh the evidence and literature and make a reasoned case for his interpretation. Nonetheless, I take issue with a number of assertions in his review. To begin, he writes that, "Lieber is *absolutely certain* [italics added] that the U.S. can maintain its role as the leading world power." In a similar vein, he describes me as "certain" that the U.S. will fend off China's challenge. Yet in framing his critique this way, Layne has ignored my emphasis on contingency rather than certainty.

Second, Layne takes me to task for "turning a blind eye to the reality of U.S. power decline." Here too, he over-simplifies. In fact I do note some erosion of America's previously huge margin vis-à-vis possible peer competitors, while nonetheless arguing that that gap remains substantial. Moreover, the size of a country's GDP is not necessarily the most accurate indicator of national power. As Michael Beckley has pointed out, in 1870 China and India possessed the world's largest economies in GDP, yet China was being humiliated by Western powers and Japan, while India had become an outright colony of the UK.<sup>1</sup> In assessing economic power, Layne emphasizes GDP figures based on purchasing power parity (PPP), which show China close to overtaking the U.S. However, in addition to the PPP data, I also provide IMF figures based on market exchange rates. This is the indicator preferred by the IMF for making international comparisons, and as William Wohlforth has noted elsewhere, the IMF warns against using PPP, which is what Layne has done.<sup>2</sup> Using market exchange rates, the overall size of the U.S. economy remains nearly twice that of China. In any case, and so that readers can judge for themselves, I provide the data using both indicators (40-45).

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011-2012): 41-78.

<sup>2</sup> Wohlforth quotes Brian Milner, who argues that "The IMF considers that GDP in PPP terms is not the most appropriate measure for comparing the relative size of countries to the global economy, because PPP price levels are influenced by non-traded services, which are more relevant domestically than globally." Milner, "End is Not Quite Nigh for America," *The Globe and Mail*, April 25, 2011. Also: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/economy/economy-lab/milner-economy/end-is-notquite-nigh-for-america/article1998175/>.

Cited In William C. Wohlforth, "How Not to Evaluate Theories," *International Studies Quarterly*, (2012) 56, 219-222, at 219.

Layne claims that I “skate by” America’s domestic problems, but in Chapters One, Two, and Three, I have written at length not only about the issues of debt, deficit, and rising entitlements, but also socialization, national identity, the financial crisis, and wider problems concerning institutional capacity and public attitudes. As for my concern that a world without active American engagement is likely to be a dangerous and disorderly place, I have admirable company in making that assessment, one shared by a wide range of leading international relations scholars including, e.g., Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, William Wohlforth, Michael Mandelbaum, Robert Kagan, Charles Kupchan, and the late Samuel Huntington.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, as a response to Layne, I do not argue that “willpower beats material power”, but that both are crucial. I.e., both agency and structure matter in determining outcomes.

I appreciate Joshua Shiffrin’s thoughtful reading of my book, his (qualified) praise, and his assessment of my arguments. He introduces a number of caveats which deserve attention. Indeed, he makes a good point in observing that the relative rise of other powers makes it costlier for the U.S. to pursue its agenda, and thus the U.S. must expend greater resources to obtain the things it cares about when its interests conflict with those of others. However, I do think that he overstates the extent to which, at the height of its power, America could obtain the results it sought. Shiffrin writes that “the U.S. can no longer expect its preferences to dominate the international agenda at low cost,” but it is well to recall that even at the peak of its relative standing, U.S. power by no means could be relied on consistently to produce the desired outcomes, let alone at minimal cost.

Elsewhere, Shiffrin takes issue with my references to American exceptionalism. Here, it would have been useful had I elaborated on what I meant by that term. It is not an expression of triumphalism, but rather employed in the spirit of Tocqueville or the late Seymour Martin Lipset in pointing to the unique qualities of the American character. For Lipset, fundamental influences on the American character included the absence of a feudal past, a “nonconformist” religious tradition, and the way in which the American Revolution evolved into a liberalism which was individualist and anti-statist. Americans thus have tended to favor a competitive society with equality of opportunity and effective but weak government.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America’s Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010); Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Knopf, 2012); Charles A. Kupchan, *No One’s World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012-2013): 7-51; Samuel H. Huntington, “Why International Primacy Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993): 68-83.

<sup>4</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, “Still the Exceptional Nation?” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 (Winter 2000): 31-45, at 45.

On the potential consequences of American retrenchment in foreign policy, Shiffrinson finds my work “unconvincing” in describing the dangers posed by such a change and he criticizes me for positing a future of “hostile powers and feckless allies.” Though he disagrees, he does credit me for making the argument that the U.S. cannot buckpass and rely on others to resolve collective action problems. However, he believes that if the American role changes, other states will balance in the face of threats. This is a subject of disagreement among international relations scholars, but as least as far as the European allies are concerned, there are strong reasons for skepticism. Western European states in particular have become increasingly debellized, and along with collapsing defense budgets, the EU’s unwillingness to formally cite Hezbollah as a terrorist group is but the latest indication of fecklessness.

These are relatively modest disagreements, however, and I appreciate Shiffrinson’s description of *Power and Willpower* as a core work for those interested in the decline debate.

As for the review by Paul MacDonald, it is evident that he is unhappy with my book, though it is less evident that he has read it with the same care as the other two reviewers. Indeed, on a number of points his disagreement with them may be almost as great as it is with me. Hence I will note just a couple of examples of why, in my opinion, his review doesn’t do justice to the work. For example, he criticizes the evidence I use concerning public pride in America and the absence of evidence for large-scale repudiation of foreign commitments. He thus writes, “Jarringly, the evidence he [Lieber] cites for this conclusion is polling from January 2001 that found 87 percent of people were either “extremely proud” or “very proud” to be American (63-64).” But MacDonald’s complaint shows a serious misreading of what I wrote. The point was not to use decade-old data but to show the relative consistency of public attitudes over time. Thus I argue the following:

In January 2001, a Gallup Poll found 87 percent saying they were either extremely proud or very proud. A decade later, 75 percent called the United States “the greatest country in the world,” and partisan differences in response to this question were negligible. . . .(63-64)

Other indications of public attitudes include tolerance for military casualties, continuing success in recruitment and performance of the volunteer military, and the ongoing high quality of the armed services officer corps. Together with the presence of lethal foreign threats, especially from terrorism and nuclear proliferation, these responses suggest that a significant degree of domestic cohesion and foreign policy consensus is likely to persist within American society.” (64)

McDonald also seems to overlook the nuance and complexity of the arguments in the book. He writes that “contradictions permeate Lieber’s description of specific challenges such as the rise of China,” adding that “Lieber portrays China simultaneously as a looming threat and a paper tiger.” Yet most readers will likely find it perfectly understandable that I

describe both the challenge China poses as a rising peer competitor *and* China's vulnerabilities that make it far from certain it can sustain the trajectory it has been on for the past three decades.

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In sum, not only the response to China's challenge but also the American future at home and abroad depends on a combination of material and ideational factors. In *Power and Willpower* I set out the considerable underlying strengths of the United States and argue that these are often given insufficient attention. At the same time, much will be determined by policy choices that are yet to be made. I believe I have made the case for cautious optimism about the American future, but the subject necessarily will remain a matter of scholarly and policy debate.

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