

# H-Diplo | ISSF

Roundtable, Volume VI, No. 5 (2014)



A production of H-Diplo with the journals *Security Studies*, *International Security*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and the International Studies Association's Security Studies Section (ISSS).

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF> | <http://www.issforum.org>

H-Diplo/ISSF Editors: **Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse**  
H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable and Web/Production Editor: **George Fujii**

Introduction by **William C. Wohlforth**

---

**Geir Lundestad. *The Rise & Decline of the American “Empire”: Power and its Limits in Comparative Perspective*.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780199646104 (hardcover, \$45.00/£26.00).

Published by H-Diplo/ISSF on **6 January 2014**

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-6-5.pdf>

## Contents

---

Introduction by William C. Wohlforth, Dartmouth College.....	2
Review by Christopher Layne, George H. W. Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A & M University.....	5
Review by James H. Lebovic, George Washington University.....	21
Review by Robert J. Lieber, Georgetown University .....	23
Author's Response by Geir Lundestad, Norwegian Nobel Institute.....	27

**This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License.** To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Introduction by William C. Wohlforth, Dartmouth College

---

Something about the decline of great powers provokes great debates, and this roundtable is no exception. In his latest work, Geir Lundestad deploys the formidable learning he has acquired in a distinguished and prolific career as a diplomatic historian to dissect the current debate on American decline. He considers contemporary concerns in a broad historical context, ultimately reaching a markedly measured assessment: The United States is in relative decline, but it retains unparalleled wellsprings of strength; no power seems likely to supplant its overall position at the top of the international heap any time soon; and the international order that has grown up under its auspices is likely to survive even substantial further relative decline in U.S. material capabilities.

As this exchange shows, Lundestad manages to secure the Goldilocks position: Christopher Layne (arguably the most influential scholarly skeptic about the United States' staying power as global leader) objects that Lundestad is way too bullish on America's position and prospects, while for Robert Lieber (himself the author of a widely discussed recent book on this subject) he's far too bearish. It is not surprising that three thoughtful analysts disagree, for the measurement of decline is such a daunting task. The authors can't seem to converge on three key parameters: *measures* (economic size, wealth, technology, innovation, military capability, quality of institutions, etc.); *referents* (U.S. 'decline' relative to the world, to all great powers, to the key rising power of China, or US + allies compared to these other actors) and *reference point* (U.S. decline compared to 1950, 1980, 1990, 2000?).

Though it can sometimes frustrate readers, this inability to settle on common metrics is hardly fatal to the debate, for much of it extends beyond the scale and nature of American relative decline to encompass the political implications of that decline. James H. Lebovic identifies arguably the central question at issue: "Can the United States continue to exert global leadership if the material underpinnings of the American Empire are fragile?" Here the differences between Lundestad and Layne are even starker, and they deserve careful attention, for they reveal much about each thinker's underlying theory. Lundestad identifies a series of contextual and historical factors that may well serve to enhance the staying power of the global order built up under U.S. auspices. Layne, sticking more closely to important strands of realist theory, sees the overall order as far more fragile and more closely connected to the specific material relationships and interests that underpin it.

And the question of theory is yet another dividing line, with the three political scientists engaging the historian on the merits of the approach of their respective disciplines to causality, explanation, and prediction. As Lundestad notes in his response, this turns out to be a free-for-all, as many of the political scientists are also quite critical of their own discipline's turn toward more mathematical approaches and its growing distance from history. Lebovic's response might be read as a case in point, for it almost seems to suggest that great power rise-and-decline is a subject better left to historians. I particularly appreciated his praise of Lundestad's book as "free of the unnecessary jargon and unfounded theorizing of much of the related international-politics literature." Ouch! The

debate about prediction is important, especially in light of Lundestad's skewering of past forecasting efforts in this area. In his response, Lundestad sticks to his guns on this one, defending his decision to eschew prediction.

A final key line of debate in the pages that follow is Lundestad's use of the concept of 'empire' to organize inquiry about the United States' role in world politics, with Lieber registering especially strong objections. Lundestad has deployed the concept extremely effectively in past works to get at the hierarchical and unequal—even if consensual—relationships that characterize the United States' interactions with smaller allies. For his part, Lieber worries that this might miss crucial differences between U.S. alliances and the less consensual arrangements fashioned by other world powers, such as the Cold-War era Soviet Union. Lundestad clarifies matters in his response.

Lundestad's response helpfully points out important areas of agreement—not only on the matter of America's decline, but also on the need for a symbiosis of political science and history to understand its implications.

### **Participants:**

**Geir Lundestad** was Professor of History at the University of Tromsø from 1974 to 1990. Since 1990 Lundestad has been director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute and secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee. The Committee awards the Nobel Peace Prize. Since 1991 he has also been adjunct professor of international history at the University of Oslo. Lundestad has written numerous books and articles on the Cold War and on transatlantic relations. His most recent book, edited, is *International Relations Since the End of the Cold War. New & Old Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

**William C. Wohlforth** is the Daniel Webster Professor of Government Dartmouth. He received his doctorate from Yale and has taught at Georgetown and Princeton. He is the author or editor of six books and some sixty articles and book chapters on topics ranging from the Cold War and its end to unipolarity and contemporary U.S. grand strategy. Recent publications include "Don't Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment," in the winter 2012/13 issue of *International Security* (with S.G. Brooks and G. J. Ikenberry) and *Status and World Order* (forthcoming in early 2014 on Cambridge University Press), edited with T.V. Paul and Deborah Larson. He is currently writing a book with Stephen Brooks entitled *America Abroad The United States' Global Role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

**Christopher Layne** is University Distinguished Professor and Robert M. Gates Chair in National Security at the George H. W. Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A & M University. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley. Professor Layne is the author of *the Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 2006) and (with Bradley A. Thayer) *American Empire: A Debate* (Routledge, 2006). 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. Additionally, he has contributed extensively to the

debates about international relations theory and American foreign policy in scholarly and policy journals.

**James H. Lebovic** is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at The George Washington University. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Southern California. He has published widely on defense policy, deterrence strategy, military budgets and procurement, democracy and human rights, and international conflict. He is the author of five books including *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: U.S. National Security Policy after 9/11* (Routledge, 2007), *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Johns Hopkins University, 2010), and *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Johns Hopkins University, 2013).

**Robert J. Lieber** (Ph.D. Harvard, BA Wisconsin) is Professor of Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University. He is author or editor of sixteen books on international relations and U.S. foreign policy. His latest book is *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why The United States Is Not Destined To Decline* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Other recent works include *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), and edited volumes including *Foreign Policy* (Ashgate Library of Essays in International Relations, 2008), and *Eagle Rules? Foreign Policy and American Primacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Prentice-Hall and Woodrow Wilson Center, 2002).

During his career, the diplomatic historian Geir Lundestad has earned a well-deserved reputation as one of the most distinguished students both of U.S. foreign policy during the early Cold War years, and of U.S.-European relations from the end of World War II to the present.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Lundestad, based at the Norwegian Nobel Institute, has a long-standing interest in the rise and fall of great powers.<sup>2</sup> In *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire: Power and its Limits in Comparative Perspective*, Lundestad draws upon his cumulative expertise to reflect on the emerging twenty-first-century international system. He grapples with two key questions. First, is the United States experiencing a relative power decline? Second, what are the implications of China's rise?

The issue of American decline, of course, is not new. For American policy elites, however, it is a touchy issue to confront. After all, as Jon Huntsman - the former Republican governor of Utah who served the first Obama administration as U.S. ambassador to China - pithily put it: "Decline is un-American."<sup>3</sup> That it, decline runs against both the deep-seated belief in American exceptionalism, and the cultural optimism that is part of the American narrative. Simply put, on this side of the Atlantic, policy and academic elites believe that history happens to other great powers - and empires - but not to the United States. Others may rise and fall but the U.S., they believe, will be the leading world power for a long time to come. Or, as Lundestad puts it (7), "most Americans despite their recurrent periods of doubt, continue to believe that the U.S. is largely immune to the 'laws of history'" (7).

Lundestad, however, correctly perceives that with respect to relative decline, the United States does not have a 'get out of jail free' card. As he writes, "The United States is undoubtedly in relative decline," (vi) and "it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the

---

<sup>1</sup> Geir Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe Since 1945: From "Empire" by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Geir Lundestad, *"Empire" by Integration: The United States and European Integration, 1945-1997* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Geir Lundestad, *The American "Empire" and Other Studies of U.S. Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Geir Lundestad, *The American Non-Policy towards Eastern Europe, 1943-1947: Universalism in an Area Not of Essential Interest to the United States* (Tromsø, Norway: Universitetsforlaget, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Geir Lundestad, ed., *The Fall of Great Powers: Peace, Stability, and Legitimacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Layne, "The End of Pax Americana: How Western Decline Became Inevitable," <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/04/the-end-of-pax-americana-how-western-decline-became-inevitable/256388/>, 26 April 2012, accessed on 2 January 2014. And former U.S. ambassador to China and one-time GOP presidential candidate Jon Huntsman pronounced decline to be simply "un-American ..." Jeff Robinson, "Huntsman says U.S. Decline is 'Un-American' in First Speech," KCPW, <http://kcpw.org/blog/local-news/2011-06-21/huntsman-says-u-s-decline-is-un-american-in-first-speech/>, 21 June 2011.

American position in the world is certainly relatively weaker today than it was in the first decades after 1945, and also weaker than at the end of the Cold War in the 1990s" (88). The primary factors driving U.S. decline, he argues, are economic and fiscal (6-7, 88, 90-91). These Lundestad says, "are so grave that they are bound to affect its overall role negatively" (88). Yet, if U.S. power has declined from its apogee, he does not believe that there will be any significant short-term impact on American foreign policy, or international politics. He is (skeptical - "at least in a short-term perspective" (6-7)- about arguments that "foresee a dramatic decline, even a collapse, for the United States."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Lundestad believes that in international politics, the U.S. "is still in a league of its own" (6-7). This sanguinity about America's power trajectory is based, in part, on what he sees as the United States' residual strengths: its (purportedly) still overwhelming military power, its alliances, and the fact that since 1945 much of the world has reflexively looked to the U.S. for leadership.<sup>5</sup> Even if America is experiencing relative decline, Lundestad observes, the fact remains that no single power, or combination of powers, is yet able to challenge the United States for the top leadership position in the international system.

---

<sup>4</sup> On this point, Lundestad refers to the argument advanced by the British-born Harvard historian Niall Ferguson that great powers and empires tend to collapse suddenly rather than suffering from prolonged decay; Niall Ferguson, "Complexity and Collapse: Empires on the Edge of Chaos," *Foreign Affairs*, 89:2 (March/April 2010)18-32. Ferguson cites the experience of Britain in the twentieth century as an example, claiming that the loss of empire after World War II was both precipitous and unexpected. This is a fundamentally silly claim... At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, intimations of British decline were widespread among the political elite. One can find innumerable comments from British leaders, and documents in the archives, that back up this point. For example, there is Joseph Chamberlain's observation that on the twentieth century's cusp Britain was a "weary titan staggering under the too vast orb of its fate." [Quoted in Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 229]. This sentiment echoed Lord Salisbury's comment about Britain's late nineteenth century position in the international system: "Whatever happens will be for the worst. Therefore it is to our interest that as little should happen as possible." [Quoted in Andrew Roberts, "Salisbury", *History Today* 49:10 (October 1999), 48].

And during the interwar period, policymakers were acutely aware that Britain's grasp on world power status was hanging by a thread. As Neville Chamberlain noted about Britain in the 1930s, "We are a very rich and a very vulnerable Empire and there are plenty of poor adventurers who are not far away who look on us with hungry eyes." Neville Chamberlain to Mrs. Morton Prince, 16 January 1938, quoted in Keith Feiling, *Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London: Macmillan, 1946), 323. Any Californian who has lived through a major earthquake can discern the flaw in Ferguson's argument. Earthquakes - and great power/imperial collapse - may seem to come suddenly out of the blue. But they do not. Earthquakes are caused by long term geological processes - the grinding of tectonic plates against each other, or accumulated stresses on fault lines. The same is true of great power/imperial collapse, which is the result of the cumulative, long-term effects of geopolitical, economic, internal political, social, and cultural forces. While the final collapse of British power between 1945 and 1960, or the implosion of the 1989-91 Soviet Union, may appear to have been dramatic and unexpected, in fact they were the culmination of historical and political processes long in the making.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Lundestad observes, at least up until now, in much of the world, America's hegemonic - leadership - role has "been taken for granted, for good or bad" (38).

There is a second reason that explains Lundestad's equanimity about the real-world consequences of U.S. decline: in his judgment, there is no rising power that can mount a challenge to America's geopolitical dominance in the foreseeable future. In a chapter on "America's Challengers" he goes through the list of the potential rising powers that various analysts have suggested will challenge U.S. hegemony: India, Russia, the European Union (EU) - and, of course, China. As Lundestad correctly observes, India, Russia, and the EU all have internal weaknesses of various kinds that cast doubt on their ability to contest America's hold on global power. They may become what Lundestad calls "regional great powers" but they cannot hope to match the world-wide scope of American power.<sup>6</sup> If, however, he is broadly correct about Russia, India, and the EU, Lundestad's analysis of China's great power rise bears more detailed scrutiny. After all, China's rise is the flip side of U.S. relative decline.

There is a broad consensus among observers of China's rise, that eventually it will pass the United States in overall GDP. However, there are disagreements about *when* the inflection point will occur, the proper metric for measuring GDP (purchasing power parity [PPP] or market exchange rate [MRE]), and whether aggregate GDP or per capita GDP is the more accurate indicator of China's future geopolitical weight). There is, of course, a vigorous debate about China's rise.<sup>7</sup> Will various internal factors cause China to stall-out on the way to great power status? If China does attain great power status, for what ends will it use its power, and will it chose to embed itself in the current international order, or will it seek to change that order? Lundestad's book addresses most of these issues, but its answers are not fully satisfying.

When it comes to China, Lundestad offers a welcome corrective to the breathless, over-heated tone of many contributions to the debate about the implications of China's rise and the future of Sino-American relations. For all the impressiveness of its rapid ascent to great power status, China is not going to rule the world - at least not anytime soon. While China's rise is real, it doubtless has been somewhat over-hyped. Here, the Great Recession has played a key role in shaping perceptions of the distribution of power in the international system - especially the Sino-American balance. The Great Recession caused many - not least, policymakers in Beijing - to exaggerate, at least for the short run, the extent of China's rise (and of U.S. decline). As Lundestad trenchantly observes, even if objective reality may

---

<sup>6</sup> As Lundestad puts it: "The United States is still the world's only true superpower. All its challengers are really still regional Great Powers, although the size of their respective regions varies considerably" (88)

<sup>7</sup> The literature is voluminous. The best bullish analysis of China's great power prospects is Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin, 2009). Also see, Arvid Subramanian, *Eclipse: Living in the Shadow of China's Economic Dominance* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of International Economics, 2011). For important skeptical treatments of China's rise, see Robert Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press 2012); Susan Shirk, *China - Fragile Superpower: How China's Internal Politics Could Derail its Peaceful Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Gordon Chan, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001); Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure, *International Security*, 36:3 (Winter 2011/12), 41-78.

be different, “perceptions matter, whatever they are based on” (90). This is spot on. As William C. Wohlforth has argued, diplomacy and grand strategy reflect policymakers’ *perceptions* of the balance of power rather the actual distribution of power.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, following the Great Recession, Chinese policymakers were quick to conclude that America’s “unipolar moment” was over and that China was on the upswing while the U.S. was in a downward spiral

Of course, it is not simply a matter of perception. China *is* rising (just as the U.S. is in relative decline). And it is here where Lundestad’s analysis becomes somewhat confounding. While not turning a blind eye to China’s rapid ascent, he does not really buy into the inevitability of China’s overtaking the U.S. economically, or - just as important - mounting anytime soon a serious challenge to the United States’s geopolitical supremacy. His ambivalence about China’s economic trajectory is illustrated in his use of phrases like “if and when” (58) and “even if” (89-90) China surpasses the U.S. in GDP. Explaining his reluctance to embrace the bullish arguments about China’s future economic and geopolitical prospects, Lundestad rehearses the now-familiar arguments about the social, political, demographic, environmental, and other weaknesses that could hold China back.<sup>9</sup> Beyond these domestic constraints, Lundestad argues that external factors will retard China’s ability to emerge as a geopolitical peer competitor of the United States. Analysts would be wise, he says, to hold off on embracing the belief that China will rule the world, because for some time to come “on a per capita basis China would still be a relatively poor country by the standards of Great Powers. Its military strength would probably also continue to lag far behind that of the United States. Its alliance structure would also be much weaker. Or to be more precise, China had virtually no real allies” (85)

There is an underlying tension in Lundestad’s analysis, however. On the one hand, he downplays the significance of China’s rise. On the other hand, he realizes that China’s ascent has important geopolitical implications. Even as he makes the case that it will be a long time before China establishes itself as a true “peer competitor” to the United States, he

---

<sup>8</sup> William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance*; Wohlforth, “The Perception of Power: Russia in the pre-1914 Balance,” *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (April 1987), pp. 353-381.

<sup>9</sup> See, Lieber, *Will and Willpower*; Shirk, *China - Fragile Superpower*; Chan, *The Coming Collapse of China*, Beckley, “China’s Century?” For example, China’s one child policy raises the possibility - not the certainty - that China may grow old before it becomes rich. The impact of environmental degradation is highlighted in a recent report co-authored by experts at MIT, Peking University, Tsinghua University and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which concludes that air pollution in north China (including the Beijing region) reduces life expectancy by 5.5 years. Leslie Hook, “China Smog Cuts 5.5 Years from Life Expectancy,” *Financial Times*, July 8, 2013, 1. Higher education and research are two other areas where China lags. U.S. universities are still the gold standard in higher education and research and China has a long way to go to catch-up. Some also question whether China will ever become sufficiently innovative to compete with the U.S. economically and technologically. Finally, on the economic front, China faces key challenges as it tries ‘re-balance’ its economy away from double digit GDP growth rates powered by exports and fixed investment to a more sustainable growth model based more on domestic consumption and increases in productivity. China also has problems with asset bubbles and a shaky financial sector that is saddled with a large number of questionable loans.

acknowledges (85) that “more and more, China was insisting that its voice be heard and respected, most clearly in East Asia, but also on global issues in general.” Surveying recent events since the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis - including, but not limited to, Beijing’s growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas - Lundestad reaches the gloomy conclusion that because of the increase in China’s economic and military power, “the future did not look too bright” (81). And although he does not use the term, he recognizes that because of the “security dilemma” rivalry between the United States and China is certain to intensify.<sup>10</sup> As he puts it, “The United States was definitely not going to sit still while China improved its position” (81). This burgeoning competition, Lundestad acknowledges raises the proverbial \$64,000 dollar question about Beijing’s intentions (81). Is China a revisionist power, or a ‘responsible stakeholder?’ His answer is equivocal. While acknowledging that China wants to “modify” the current international order, Lundestad believes that in the short term its “emphasis seems likely to be on a peaceful environment for the country’s rise to Great Power status” (82, 83). He notes, however, that there are competing views on what the future holds.

How does Lundestad’s analysis hold up? To start with, he is right about one thing: American power is in relative decline. Only ‘denialists’ now can bury their heads in the sand and maintain otherwise. To be sure, the Great Recession itself is not the *cause* either of American decline or the ongoing shift in global power, both of which are the culmination of decades-long processes driven by the big, impersonal forces of history. However, the Great Recession both has accelerated the causal forces driving these trends, and magnified their impact.

Of course, this is not the first time the subject of U.S. decline has been the topic of debate.<sup>11</sup> In the 1980s Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* triggered an intense - but brief - debate about whether America’s power was in relative decline.<sup>12</sup> In arguing that the United States’ was experiencing the relative decline of its economic power, Kennedy was not alone. Other prominent scholars making this case include Robert Gilpin, David Calleo, James Chace, and Samuel P. Huntington.<sup>13</sup> *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* resonated

---

<sup>10</sup> John Herz, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, 2:2 (January 1950), 157-180; Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, 30:3 (January 1978), 167-214.

<sup>11</sup> Writing in 1988, Samuel P. Huntington argued that the debate about U.S. decline triggered by Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (and other 1980s declinists) was actually the “fifth wave” of declinism experienced by the United States since the early 1950s. Samuel P. Huntington, “The U.S. - Decline or Renewal?” *Foreign Affairs* 67:2 (1988/89), 76-95. Echoing Huntington, James Fallows recently observed that recurring fears of national decline are deeply imbedded in American political and social culture. James Fallows, “How America Can Rise Again” *The Atlantic* (January/February), 38-55.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict, 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); David Calleo, *The Imperious Economy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); James Chace, *Solvency: The Price of Survival* (New York: Random House, 1981); Samuel P. Huntington,

because it dovetailed with popular fears that the U.S. - enervated by the Cold War's costs - was being surpassed economically by Japan (especially) and West Germany. While Kennedy's thesis struck a chord with the public, the U.S. foreign policy elite lashed out at the notion that the U.S. was declining. Two leading establishment scholars, the Harvard professors Huntington and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., went so far as to label Kennedy and the others as "declinists" - a subtle twist of the English language implying that they were advocates of U.S. decline rather than dispassionate analysts of what they regarded as worrisome trends in the United States' great power trajectory.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to the way their argument was portrayed by many of their critics, the 1980s 'declinists' did not claim either that the U.S. already had declined steeply, or that it soon would undergo a rapid, catastrophic decline. Rather they pointed to domestic and economic drivers that were in play and which, *over time*, would cause American economic power to decline relatively and produce a shift in global distribution of power. The 'declinists' contended that the United States was afflicted by a slow - "termite" - decline caused by fundamental structural weaknesses in the American economy that gradually were nibbling at its foundations.<sup>15</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 21<sup>st</sup> century. 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>16</sup> When one goes back and re-reads what the 1980s declinists pinpointed as the causes of American decline, their analyses look prescient because the same culprits 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. Today, their warnings seem eerily prescient.<sup>17</sup>

---

(1988b) "Coping With the Lippmann Gap," *Foreign Affairs - America and the World 1987*, 66:3 (May/June 1988), 453-77.

<sup>14</sup> Huntington, "Decline or Renewal?"; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). Huntington's views on decline were inconsistent. In "Coping with the Lippmann Gap," Huntington explicitly acknowledged that "the relative decline of U.S. power vis-à-vis other countries" was real. Half a year later in "The U.S. - Decline or Renewal," however, Huntington's views were quite different. He attributed the U.S. budget and trade deficits of the 1980s to the Reagan administration's policies, and predicted that these would be brought under control relatively soon.

<sup>15</sup> The concept of "termite decline" was suggested to me by the Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter.

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 534 (bold italics emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Gilpin's 1987 description of America's economic and grand strategic plight could just as easily describe the United States after the Great Recession: "With a decreased rate of economic growth and a low rate of national savings, the United States was living and defending commitments far beyond its means. In order to bring its commitments and power back into balance once again, the United States would one day have to cut back further on its overseas commitments, reduce the American standard of living, or decrease

Another good point Lundestad makes concerns the timing of America's decline and what it will mean for international politics. The trajectory of America's decline is steady but it is not steep. Even when - not if - China equals or surpasses the United States in power, the U.S. will still be the Number 2 great power. Unlike Great Britain, American is not fated to experience a dramatic collapse of its position in the great power pecking order. Like the 'declinists' of the 1980s, Lundestad correctly identifies the major culprit of American decline: chronic balance of payments deficits and federal budget deficits, and an ever-growing national debt. It has now become fashionable to argue that the combination of the federal budget sequester, the - very tepid - economic recovery, and rising tax revenues have stabilized the debt crisis. But this misses the larger point: the debt crisis of the past five years triggered by the Great Recession is not the real threat to U.S. solvency. The real crunch will hit in the early 2020s as the federal government will be compelled to face up to its unfunded obligations - Medicare and Social Security - to the aging Baby Boomer generation.

Given Lundestad's deep interest in the comparative causes of great power and imperial decline, one wishes he had spent more time discussing how fiscal and economic factors are gradually undermining American primacy. In particular, the looming U.S. debt crisis for the early 2020s is important because it threatens to unseat the dollar from its reserve currency role in the international financial system. 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.<sup>18</sup> 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. And this is what the United States has been doing since the early 1980s when it started running a chronic current account deficit. 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<sup>19</sup> As a leading expert on

---

domestic productive investment even more than it already had. In the meantime, American hegemony was threatened by a potentially devastating fiscal crisis." Gilpin, *Political Economy of International Politics*, 347-48.

<sup>18</sup> See, Barry Eichengreen, *The Rise and Fall of the Dollar and the Future of the International Monetary System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> American budget and trade deficits have not been a serious problem heretofore, because U.S. creditors have believed that the United States is able to repay its debts. There are signs that this confidence gradually may 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.

international economic affairs observed just 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>

America's fiscal incontinence calls into question Lundestad's belief that continuing military superiority will enable the U.S. to contain China's rising power. In coming years, the pressure to reduce U.S. military spending is likely to increase.<sup>21</sup> This means that U.S. military dominance in East Asia is will be eroded by two interlinked factors. First, as the post-2020 fiscal crunch hits, the United States will face tough choices between raising taxes, preserving popular social programs like Medicare and Social Security, and cutting spending. As Jonathan Kirshner argues, the sheer absolute size of the Pentagon budget will make it a tempting target for cuts, especially when the choice is framed as one between cutting defense spending or cutting programs like Social Security and Medicare.<sup>22</sup> As U.S. defense spending declines, however, the military capabilities gap between the United States and China will narrow significantly. In this respect, U.S. austerity not only has important economic implications but also geopolitical ones.

Arguably, Lundestad is too optimistic about America's geopolitical staying power. By the same token, he downplays the significance of China's economic growth. That China is poised to displace the U.S. as the world's largest economy has more than economic significance.<sup>23</sup> It is significant geopolitically. The pattern of great power rise is well established. First, China's claims of "peaceful rise" notwithstanding, the emergence of new great powers in the international system invariably has been destabilizing geopolitically. The near-simultaneous emergence of the United States, Germany, and Japan as great

---

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

<sup>21</sup> Here, analysts have failed to acknowledge the watershed nature of the sequester. The sequester demonstrated that for pro-military Republicans in Congress, cutting the federal deficit and keeping a lid on tax increases are now more policy objectives than continued high levels of defence spending.

<sup>22</sup> As 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." Kirshner, "Dollar Primacy," 431. In this regard, the federal budget sequester may be viewed as sort of a preview of coming attractions.

<sup>23</sup> China is still on track to overtake the U.S. in aggregate GDP by the end of this decade. Assuming that over the next six years China's GDP continues to grow at an annual 7.5% rate - which is Beijing's targeted growth rate and the U.S. grows at a 2.5% rate, the Economist magazine projects that China's GDP will overtake the U.S. by 2019 measured by market exchange rate. Even if China's annual growth rate falls below the 7.5% annual growth target, China seems certain to pass the U.S. and become the world's largest economy in the early 1990s. Of course, measured in terms of Purchasing Power Parity, China's overall GDP may *already* be larger than the United States'. "The Dating Game," *Economist*, December 27, 2011. [http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2010/12/save\\_date](http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2010/12/save_date) Last accessed July 21, 2013.

powers in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries triggered two world wars.<sup>24</sup> Second, as rising great powers become wealthier, their political ambitions increase and they convert their newfound economic muscle into military clout.<sup>25</sup> Already, China is engaged in an impressive military buildup. While China has not yet caught up to the United States' sophisticated military technology, it clearly is narrowing the U.S. advantage and by 2030 China is likely to have attained military equality with the U.S. in East Asia.<sup>26</sup> Third, rising powers invariably seek to dominate the regions in which they are situated.<sup>27</sup> To pose a challenge to U.S. preeminence, it is not necessary for China to challenge America's ability to project power globally. It is only necessary for China to acquire the capabilities to dominate its own backyard: Northeast Asia, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea.<sup>28</sup> This means China and the U.S. are on a collision course in East Asia - the region where the United States has been the incumbent hegemon since 1945, and which an increasingly powerful and assertive China, sees as its own backyard.<sup>29</sup> Finally, as they rise, new great powers acquire economic and political interests abroad, and they seek to acquire the power projection capabilities to defend those interests.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise." *International Security*, 17:4 (Spring 1993), 5-51

<sup>25</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Martin Fackler, "China is Seen Nearing U.S.'s Power in Region," *New York Times*, May 1 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/02/world/asia/china\\_likely\\_to\\_challenge\\_us\\_supremacy\\_in\\_east\\_asia\\_report\\_says.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/02/world/asia/china_likely_to_challenge_us_supremacy_in_east_asia_report_says.html). Last accessed July 22, 2013.. Also see Michael Swaine, et al, *China's Military and the U.S.-Japan Alliance in 2030: A Strategic New Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Here Lundestad fails to appreciate the significance of his observation that rather than facing a single power that contests its global preponderance, the U.S. faces challenges from multiple regional great powers. Here there is a strong parallel between the United States in the early twentieth century and Britain from the mid-1890s to the outbreak of World War II. At the turn of the twentieth century, Britain's hegemony started to erode because London lacked the resources to cope with the simultaneous challenges mounted by regional great powers to its interests in Europe, Asia, and North America and also to deal with wars of empire such as the Boer War - not because it was challenged by a single great power globally. In coming years, there is a good chance that an increasingly overstretched U.S. could see its hegemony overthrown by a similar process. On Britain's decline, see Aaron Friedberg, *Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*; C. J. Lowe and M.L. Dockrill, *The Mirage of Power, Volume I: British Foreign Policy, 1902-1914* (London: Routledge, 1972); and Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (New York: William Morrow, 1972).

<sup>29</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History*, 105:690 (April 2006), pp. 160-62; Christopher Layne, "China's Challenge to U.S. Hegemony," *Current History*, 107:705 (January 2008), 13-18.

<sup>30</sup> Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*.

The central feature of international politics in the early twenty-first century is the ongoing power transition between the United States and China. Although Lundestad has a short chapter on “War, Realism, and Power Transitions,” he does not discuss in detail either the causes or the consequences of power transitions.<sup>31</sup> This is disappointing. With his interest and expertise in the comparative study of the rise and fall of great powers, he clearly has a lot to bring to the table here. Does the Sino-American power transition herald a collision in East Asia between a rising China and a declining U.S.? For those who make foreign policy and grand strategy in Beijing and Washington, D.C. - and those who study international politics - this is the crucial question of our time. Lundestad does not give us a clear answer to that question, however. Instead, he positions himself firmly on the fence. He acknowledges that the U.S. is declining - but not that much. He acknowledges that China is rising, and that as it ascends its policy is bound to be driven by ‘revisionist’ aspirations. Yet, he seems confident that America remains powerful enough to contain China and that the *Pax Americana* - the international order constructed by the U.S. after World War II - remains robust and attractive enough to co-opt China. Here, two questions present themselves. First, is Lundestad’s carefully hedged analysis correct? Second, how do we explain what seems to be his equivocation?

As the great American philosopher Yogi Berra observed, making predications is hard - especially about the future. Obviously, there are differing views about American decline, China’s rise, and the future of the Sino-American relationship. Still, there are good reasons to question whether Lundestad’s relatively optimistic answers to these questions are correct. For example, he cautions about betting on China because the U.S. has allies and China does not. This may be a bit misleading. For one thing, America’s traditional allies in Europe really do not contribute much in the way of hard power. When we talk about decline, Europe is at the top of the list. The Eurozone crisis, economic recession, and demographics all suggest that Europe’s ability to influence great power politics is declining. Moreover, as European defence budgets shrink, Europe has less and less hard power to bring to the table. And whatever hard power it may have, Europe is clearly reluctant to use.<sup>32</sup> Given Europe’s meager contributions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. can hardly expect that Europeans would offer any meaningful material support in the event of a future Sino-American war.

---

<sup>31</sup> On the “power transition” and its consequences, see A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War: Evaluations and Extensions of the War Ledger* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1996); William R. Thompson, ed., *Systemic Transitions: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Jack Levy, “Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China,” in Robert Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China’s Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 11-33.

<sup>32</sup> I am not a big fan of the worldview propounded by U.S. neoconservatives. Nevertheless, when it comes to Europe’s role in the transatlantic relationship it is hard to disagree with Robert Kagan’s analysis. Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

Of course, the U.S. does have allies in Asia. But the American economic role in trade and investment in East and Southeast Asia is shrinking at the same time China's role is expanding dramatically. Today, Japan, and the ASEAN states are encouraging the U.S. 'pivot' to Asia because they need America's hard power to counter-balance China. But as these nations continue to become increasingly dependent on China economically, there is a real likelihood that they will be compelled to distance themselves from the U.S. and to 'bandwagon' with China. Switching the focus from formal alliances to networks of influence in the international system, it is not at all obvious that going forward the U.S. will have more support than China. While Beijing is unlikely to make inroads with America's traditional European allies, it has developed strong networks of relations with friendly states in Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

This leads directly to the issue of whether China will be a "responsible stakeholder" that imbeds itself in the extant rules based international order - the *Pax Americana* - or instead will seek to revise that order. This is another question to which Lundestad's answer is equivocal. He argues (81) that China is both a responsible stakeholder in the current international order and simultaneously a revisionist power. But there is a strong case to be made for a definitive answer to this question. It is true, of course, that beginning with China's 'paramount leader' and Chairman of the Central Military Commission leader Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, China has integrated itself in the liberal order to propel its economic growth. That does not mean that it fundamentally accepts the post-1945 liberal order, however. On the contrary, it is converting its wealth into hard power to challenge American geopolitical dominance. As Cambridge University's Stefan Halper observes, "while China's leaders follow a path of progressive engagement with the liberal international order, Beijing's leaders are also leading a formidable assault on this order."<sup>33</sup> A 2007 report by the Center for a New America Security reaches a similar conclusion, noting that, "Rather than seeking to weaken or confront the United States directly, Chinese leaders are pursuing a subtle, multifaceted, long-term grand strategy that aims to derive as many benefits as possible from the existing international system while accumulating the economic wherewithal, military strength, and soft power resources to reinforce China's emerging position as at least a regional great power"<sup>34</sup> And although China is working 'within the system' to transform the post-1945 international order, it also is laying the foundations - through embryonic institutions like the BRICs and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization - for constructing an alternative world order that, over the next twenty years or so, could displace the *Pax Americana*.<sup>35</sup> As Martin Jacques has observed, China is

---

<sup>33</sup> Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How Beijing's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Kurt Campbell and Michele Flournoy, *The Inheritance and the Way Forward*. (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2007), 17.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Jacques has pointed to several other examples of how China is laying the institutional groundwork for a twenty-first-century international order that will displace the *Pax Americana*. China is now exploring with other states in the region the possibility of creating an Asian Monetary Fund, which, should it materialize would significantly diminish the IMF's importance. China's "no strings" foreign aid policy is circumventing the World Bank's "conditionality" policies, and, over time, China could dwarf the World Bank

operating “both within and outside the existing international system while at the same time, in effect, sponsoring a new China-centric international system which will exist alongside the present system and probably slowly begin to usurp it.”<sup>36</sup>

For U.S. scholars and policymakers alike, China’s future - and that of the twenty-first-century international political system - hinges on Beijing’s willingness to accept the rules, institutions, and norms imbedded in the *Pax Americana*. Thus, as G. John Ikenberry puts it, the goal of U.S. policy should be “to make the liberal order so expansive and institutionalized that China will have no choice but to join and operate within it.... America’s goal should be to see that Chinese power is exercised as much as possible within rules and institutions that we have crafted with other liberal states over the last century, and in which we ourselves want to operate, given the more crowded world of the future. America’s position in the global system may decline but the international order it leads can remain the dominating logic of the twenty-first century.”<sup>37</sup> There is a big flaw in this argument, however.

For American scholars and policy makers the notion of a ‘rules-based, institutionalized’ international order has a talismanic quality; rules and institutions are seen as politically neutral, and, *ipso facto*, beneficial for all. Put another way, the proponents of liberal international institutionalism have constructed a geopolitically antiseptic world uncontaminated by clashing national interests. In this world great power competition and conflict are transcended by rules and international institutions. This is not how the *real* world works, however. Great power politics is about *power*. Rules and institutions do not exist in vacuum. Rather, they reflect the distribution of power in the international system. In international politics, who rules makes the rules. As E. H. Carr observed, a rules-based international order “cannot be understood independently of the political foundation on which it rests and the political interests which it serves.”<sup>38</sup> The post-World War II international order is an *American* order that privileges the United States’ interests.<sup>39</sup>

---

as an international lender. Finally, along with India, China torpedoed both the Doha Round of trade liberalization talks and the 2010 Copenhagen summit on global warming. Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, 358-359.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>37</sup> Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 349.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Hallet Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Perennial, 2011), 179.

<sup>39</sup> With respect to the liberal international economic order, Gilpin points out that, “A liberal economic system is not self-sustaining, but it maintained only through the actions - initiatives, bargaining and sanctions - of the dominant power(s).” Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Foreign Direct Investment* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 85.

Even the discourse of 'liberal order' cannot conceal this fact. What the proponents of lock-in really are saying is that China must agree to be a 'responsible stakeholder' - with Washington defining the meaning of 'responsibility' - in an international order that it did not construct and that exists to advance the interests of the United States. In plain English, what they expect is that an increasingly powerful China will continue accepting its role of second fiddle to the United States. Needless to say, as Lundestad somewhat reluctantly concedes (84), for China such an arrangement "is probably not much of a bargain."<sup>40</sup>

Lundestad is moderately hopeful about the future of the Sino-American relationship. In the short term he believes that "China's emphasis seems likely to be on a peaceful environment for the country's rise to Great Power status" (83). Longer term, while acknowledging China will have an increasingly powerful military, he expresses the hope that China's economic interdependence with the global economy will tilt Beijing toward a pacific foreign policy. After all, Lundestad asks "why would the country [China] do anything that could represent a risk to a successful economic model that was producing such good results?" (85). A simple question with a complex answer. But an answer that starts with Thucydides's observation that states are driven by fear, honour and interest. The operation of fear - the security dilemma - is already evident in East Asia as the U.S. and China find themselves in a deepening security competition. With respect to interest, the U.S. and China have sharply different goals in East Asia. The unfolding Sino-American rivalry in the region can be seen as an example of Dodge City Syndrome (in American Western movies, one gunslinger says to the other: "This town ain't big enough for both of us") or as a geopolitical example of Newtonian physics (two hegemony cannot occupy the same region at the same time). From either perspective, the dangers should be obvious: unless the United States accepts China's ascendancy in East (and Southeast) Asia - or China accepts continuing American dominance of its own geopolitical backyard - Washington and Beijing are on a collision course. Finally, for both Washington and Beijing honour - competing claims for status and prestige - is very much present in their relationship. In this respect, the Sino-American relationship is reminiscent of the Anglo-German rivalry in the years preceding World War I.

*The Rise and Decline of the American 'Empire'* is an important book - and a frustrating one. Its importance derives from its author. Lundestad brings to this book his erudition and a lifetime of knowledge and deep thought devoted to U.S. foreign policy, and to the comparative analysis of why great powers rise and fall. This book represents the mature reflections of a distinguished scholar who still is very much on top of his game - as evidenced by some keen insights that are found in this book. Yet, this is a very frustrating book for two reasons. First, although this book is as much about the future of international politics as it is about the past, Lundestad does not want to make predictions - which he

---

<sup>40</sup> Here Lundestad is commenting on G. John Ikenberry's proposal that the U.S. should cut a deal with Beijing "to accommodate a rising China by offering it status and position within the regional order in return for Beijing's acceptance and accommodation of Washington's core interests, which include remaining a dominant security provider within East Asia." Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 356. Lundestad is right to be skeptical. It is easy to see why the U.S. would want to cut such a deal but it is hard to see what's in it for China. American hegemony is waning and China is ascending, and there is zero reason for China to accept this bargain because it aims to displace the U.S. and become *the* hegemon in its own region.

considers speculation (7) - about what lies ahead. Second, Lundestad's is so self-consciously even-handed in his discussion that one is left with the feeling that instead of making an argument (or set of arguments) what he offers instead are a series of carefully crafted 'on the one hand this, but on the other hand that' analyses. Put another way, what is missing from *The Rise and Decline of the American 'Empire'* is a clearly stated thesis and an accompanying causal explanation. Simply put, there is no theory here.

In *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire"* - and elsewhere - Lundestad has made clear his dislike of political science, and of the use of international relations theory to make informed predictions about the future.<sup>41</sup> He has also indicated that in his opinion international-relations scholars trained as political scientists do not know how to do history - or at least, certainly do not know how to do it well.<sup>42</sup> Yet, the gap between diplomatic historians and security studies scholars is much narrower than Lundestad would have us believe. Historians are as no less interested than political scientists in testing propositions analytically, and identifying chains of causation that connect explanatory variables.<sup>43</sup> Leading diplomatic historians - John Lewis Gaddis and Melvyn Leffler are notable examples - use IR theory in their own work while others - Marc Trachtenberg and Walter McDougall, for example - are equally at home teaching both history and international relations. One wishes that instead of engaging in what appears as a broad front attack on political scientists, Lundestad was more discriminating in his choice of targets. Even if we hold political science degrees, security studies scholars regard diplomatic and military historians as our natural allies inside the academy. It would be nice if this were reciprocated.

These days there is much talk among security studies scholars about the 'cult of irrelevance' that permeates the discipline of political science and is manifested in three ways. First, in the discipline of political science, career imperatives are a powerful deterrent to engaging in policy relevant work. Not only are scholars who do such work not rewarded by the discipline's incentive structure, but often they are actually penalized for it.<sup>44</sup> Second, there is what Stephen Van Evera calls the dominance of "methodologism" in political science. Physics envy - the goal of being viewed - as 'real' science has driven the

---

<sup>41</sup> Lundestad, *The Rise and Decline of the American Empire*, 3-5, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Geir Lundestad, "Book Review - American Grand Strategy since 1940: Political Science and History," *Diplomatic History*, 31:4 (September 2007), 783-786.

<sup>43</sup> On this point, see Gordon Craig, "The Historian and the Study of International Relations," *American Historical Review*, 88:1 (February 1988), 9; Edward Ingram, "The Wonderland of the Political Scientist," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Fall 1997), 52; Melvyn P. Leffler, "Presidential Address: New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Spring 1995), 179.

<sup>44</sup> See Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Scholars on the Sidelines," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2009: A15; Stephen Walt, "The Cult of Irrelevance," April 15, 2009. [http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/15/the\\_cult\\_of\\_irrelevance](http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/15/the_cult_of_irrelevance). Last accessed July 22, 2013.

political science discipline to elevate to privileged status methodologies that are perceived as being 'scientific.' As Van Evera notes, methodologism:

[C]omes at the expense of encouraging research on questions of large social importance. It fosters a cult of irrelevance. Scholars focus on topics that allow the use of fashionable methods, instead of topics that matter to folks in the "real world" that lies beyond the happy groves of academe. It promotes method-driven rather than problem-driven agenda setting by scholars. Questions are chosen less for the potential value of the answer than for the polish with which the analysis can be performed.<sup>45</sup>

In short, the emphasis on methodological virtuosity exalts technical proficiency above substantive knowledge of politics and history. U.S. political science departments tend to be dominated by Americanists - a group that is obsessed by methodologism. As a result, in most departments there are strong pressures for methodological conformism, which means formal modeling, rational choice, and quantitative methodologies are privileged, and scholars using qualitative methodologies are penalized.

Finally, the cult of irrelevance threatens to diminish the value of scholarship in international relations. International relations is important because it asks big questions (what causes war and what causes peace) and tackles important real world issues, like the one Lundestad discusses - (the implications of China's rise and America's decline). However, the cult of irrelevance encourages political scientists to avoid these big questions and focus instead on small questions that lend themselves to being answered quantitatively. Unless somehow checked, the cult of irrelevance will produce an ever greater number of works on international relations focusing on smaller and smaller issues that are written (to the extent prose is used at all) in ways that are less and less accessible (and less and less interesting) to most readers. As Stephen Walt observes, this is a perversion of what scholarship in international relations should be about. As he says, those of us in this field are not unreasonably expected "to use of knowledge to address serious issues. For political scientists, that ought to mean using our knowledge to address important matters of concern in the real world and to contribute to the broader public discourse on those topics."<sup>46</sup>

Writing about the sometimes uneasy relationship between theorists and historians, John Lewis Gaddis has written of the tendency of academic disciplines - specifically political science and diplomatic history - "to construct the intellectual equivalent of fortified trenches from which we fire artillery back and forth, dodging shrapnel even as we sink ever

---

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Van Evera, "Director's Statement," *Security Studies Program Annual Report, 2009/2010* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Security Studies Program), 5.  
[http://web.mit.edu/ssp/publications/annual/ssp\\_annual\\_report2010.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/ssp/publications/annual/ssp_annual_report2010.pdf). Last accessed July 22, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Walt, "The Cult of Irrelevance."

more deeply into mutual incomprehension.”<sup>47</sup> In this battle, however, Lundestad is firing on the wrong people - he is shooting at those who should be his allies. To be sure, the state of the political science discipline today gives much cause for complaint. But for diplomatic historians, security studies scholars are not - and should not be treated - as the enemy. Indeed, in methodologism and the cult of irrelevance, diplomatic historians and security studies scholars share a common enemy. Indeed, as Van Evera has suggested, the best hope for both saving security studies (and diplomatic and military history, the study of which is increasingly marginalized within many history departments) - and with it qualitative, historically-informed, policy relevant work about international politics - may be to create a new field that unites security studies with diplomatic and military history.<sup>48</sup> Collaboration among political science and diplomatic and military historians is often very fruitful. One solution might involve creating a new field that studies international relations and security affairs using the methods of both political scientists and historians.” Here is where one wishes that Lundestad would show more interest in building bridges to those security studies scholars who, although trained as political scientists, understand the symbiosis between international relations theory and history.

---

<sup>47</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, “History, Theory, and Common Ground,” *International Security* 22:1 (Summer, 1997), 75.

<sup>48</sup> As Van Evera puts it, “Diplomatic and military historians live uneasily with their non-IR colleagues in some history departments. Synergies between IR/security scholars in political science and diplomatic and military historians are often very fruitful. One solution might involve creating a new field that studies international relations and security affairs using the methods of both political scientists and historians,” [http://web.mit.edu/ssp/publications/annual/ssp\\_annual\\_report2010.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/ssp/publications/annual/ssp_annual_report2010.pdf); 9, footnote 21.

Review by James H. Lebovic, George Washington University

---

In his provocative and ambitious book, Geir Lundestad places the contemporary American global position in broad historical perspective. The American ‘empire’ – which, like empires before it, rose and will fall – is hardly unique, notwithstanding American claims of exceptionalism and the loose structures of U.S. global influence. What is extraordinary about the American empire is the relative power of the predominant state and its global reach. Indeed, Lundestad emphasizes the robustness of the U.S. position throughout his book, which takes scholars to task for prematurely predicting America’s global decline.

To be fair, Lundestad does not take the term ‘empire’ lightly. He understands that, for academics and others, it is a loaded – even derogatory – term. It challenges American ideals – principles of equality, democracy, and independence – that have fueled the American mission and served as an important source of U.S. global power. More so than its polite form, ‘hegemon,’ it suggests dominance and exploitation. For Lundestad, however, the negative connotation of empire rests in part on a misunderstanding of history. Consistent with his definition of empire – an “informal hierarchical structure” (97) – he shows that, in the Chinese, Roman, and British empires, the rules of control were laxer and governance was more decentralized than is typically acknowledged. Indeed, in Western Europe and other parts of the world, the U.S. empire was an “empire by invitation” (119). An important implication of his argument, then, is that the symptoms of decline are more ambiguous than is recognized in the literature on the American decline which focuses, to its detriment, on U.S. wartime adversities and defeat, rebellious allies, and challenges from new or rising adversaries. In actuality, challenges and compromises have been continuous features of the U.S. dominion, as American power was always contested from within and outside the empire. Even at the apex of U.S. military strength, militarily ‘inferior’ states held their own against U.S. forces – the United States found itself mired in a war in Korea with a ‘lesser’ combatant, unable to turn the tide, and then in Vietnam, where the United States eventually had to accept defeat; moreover, U.S. allies plotted their own course, challenged U.S. prerogatives, and left the United States with the tab. In the language of political economy, the United States accepted the costs of providing the collective goods of deterrence, defense, and a stable economic system while U.S. allies enjoyed free-rider benefits.

Lundestad’s presentation is free of the unnecessary jargon and unfounded theorizing of much of the related international-politics literature. The book is refreshingly uncluttered with references to soft-balancing, hard-balancing, and bandwagoning. Indeed, Lundestad implies that contestation was actually a source and reflection of U.S. power inasmuch as it conveyed a U.S. assuredness and deference to others in the interest of achieving common goals. Consequently, Lundestad escapes the intellectual trap of assuming that states will inevitably rise to challenge U.S. power and reading every diplomatic slight and policy debacle as foretelling global positional change. Still, therein lies a weakness in Lundestad’s argument. As a historian, Lundestad eschews the “general causation of social scientists,”

asserting that “reality is too complex to be captured in a single formula” (6). His discomfort in attributing causation to a well-defined set of factors keeps him from offering predictions about a U.S. decline within a given time frame, the rise of any particular power, or the contours of the international system that will replace the current one.

As an unrepentant social scientist, I admit that this causes me some level of discomfort. In my view, Lundestad tries to have it both ways by refusing to generalize and then doing so on the sly. It seems to me that, in drawing on historical regularities and dwelling on *appropriate* definitions of ‘empire,’ he is working with some sense of the requisites of global power: how it is acquired, retained, and lost. By failing to make those assumptions explicit, though, he makes it impossible to assess the nature of his predictions and thereby to judge their prescience and accuracy. Certainly, American technological prowess and innovation, heavy military spending, American ideals, and economic reserves and capital supplies all play a major part in his story. But the question remains, which more than the others? Can the United States continue to exert global leadership if the material underpinnings of the American Empire are fragile? To what extent does international legitimacy – as acquired by deferring to international laws and institutions – substitute for raw strength in garnering international influence? Does the U.S. provision of collective goods mean that the United States will require more, or less, material capabilities to stave off inevitable decline; that is, are U.S. rivals more, or less, likely to seek to challenge the United States for its global role given the replacement costs of leadership that are entailed? Can the United States preserve its global position longer by retreating on some regional fronts or engaging challenges more selectively? Or, will the American empire erode, regardless, largely due to domestic politics within the United States – the “implosion of the imperial center” (169) – and its failure to put its own house in order? Put simply, do empires just rise and then fall? Or do they hang around, in some ambiguous fashion that leads social scientists to wonder if they are actually dead, confined to some purgatory, or recharging or reinventing themselves for rebirth and re-ascendance? What is needed here is a better sense of the nature and role of the factors that contribute to the rise and decline of predominant states, the global goals that inspire their ascendance and facilitate their decline, and the consequences of misalignment between the two.

Lundestad has advanced our understanding of an important subject by developing and applying his conception of empire. He correctly criticizes those who predicted the U.S. decline in prior decades: NATO did not implode with the end of the Cold War and U.S. power was not hamstrung by coalitions of states seeking to counterbalance it (21). Such predictions do serve as a cautionary tale for those who seek to employ theory to forecast political changes and events. My hope though is that others will take insights from his useful and accessible treatise and continue to explore the causal principles that link the present and the past.

Geir Lundestad has provided a readable, wide-ranging account of post-1945 international relations. His treatment encompasses not only the U.S. role as a superpower, but great power relationships more broadly, the rise (and in some cases decline) of regional powers, and the interplay of economics, institutions, and foreign policy.

Among the book's strengths is its informed and often nuanced treatment of America in the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War, and in the post-Cold War era. Lundestad is both a critical and yet often sympathetic observer as he describes an empire-by-invitation. For an American reader, it can be useful albeit a bit disconcerting to see how the United States is perceived by others. To his credit, Lundestad also avoids some of the rhetorical tropes of foreign (and domestic) critics. He notes, for example, that even at the height of its power, the United States has never been omnipotent. Lundestad's observation might seem unexceptionable, but it can serve as a corrective to those who indulge in hyperbole by greatly overstating America's previous power and influence so as to contrast this with a profound reversal and now supposedly ineluctable decline.

Lundestad begins by arguing that, "The United States is undoubtedly in relative decline" (vi), though he nonetheless acknowledges its continuing advantages in per-capita GDP, military strength, the importance of its allies, demography, research and development, universities, and wider cultural appeal. He thus finds that while the U.S. now faces an array of problems, it still retains its prominence as the only global superpower. In contrast, other potential challengers, particularly China, remain only regional powers.

Lundestad also makes the case that conventional definitions of the word 'empire' as formal political control by one state over another do not fit the reality of America's role in the nearly seven decades since 1945, but his own definition of the American role can seem elusive. Expanding on his 1990 book<sup>1</sup>, he follows a 'broader' definition that others have employed, wherein "empire simply means a hierarchical system of relationships with one power clearly being much stronger than any other," and with the stronger power exercising "considerable influence" (92). In essence, he redefines the term 'empire' to encompass the leading role of the U.S. as a result of its economic strength, military power and cultural influence.

Though Lundestad ranges widely, his paradigmatic case concerns the European-American relationship, in which postwar Europe basically needed and welcomed the United States. However his word choices can become problematic. For example reference is made to America's 'rule' (132), when the word 'influence' (used elsewhere in the book) would be more accurate. This looser definition of empire allows Lundestad to describe the U.S.

---

<sup>1</sup> Geir Lundestad, *The American "Empire" and Other Studies of U.S. Foreign Policy in a Comparative perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

sphere of influence as comparable to those of the Soviet and British empires. Here, he writes that, “The American ‘empire’ after the Second World War was in important ways more comprehensive than either the Soviet or even the British Empire” (105). However, a sphere of influence is not the same thing as an empire, and influence is not equivalent to direct control. The problem is starkly evident if we refer to Soviet and U.S. roles in Cold War Europe. One example will suffice: compare the consequences for Hungary, when its leaders sought to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact in 1956 (invasion, tank battle in the streets of Budapest, and the execution of Premier Imre Nagy), with those for France in 1965-66 when Charles De Gaulle took his country out of NATO’s integrated military command (criticism and recrimination.)

Throughout the work, Lundestad usefully references and elaborates upon more than thirty years of his own writing. He also cites and summarizes a wide range of American scholarly literature on hegemony, great power relations, international institutions, decline, and American foreign policy. This becomes both a strength and weakness of the book. On the one hand, it makes the work a useful survey for students and others with limited knowledge of the subject matter. Indeed, large portions of the work, especially the historical overviews, read like a good text book of the kind I could assign for my undergraduate course on U.S.-European relations. On the other hand, the breadth of coverage in a relatively brief book of 193 pages means that topics are sometimes treated in cursory fashion or with a good deal of repetition of ideas and summary phrases. For example there is a brief (five page) chapter on “War, Realism, and Power Transition,” which could usefully have been expanded. In it, Lundestad argues that the “realist case. . . needs considerable modification”, and spends time enumerating core strengths of the United States. However, other than a critique of Niall Ferguson’s 2010 article in *Foreign Affairs* and Ferguson’s prognosis for America, the realist argument does not seem to have been well defined here.

A more specific example can be found in the discussion of China. Within two pages (83-84) the ideas of five different authors (Thomas Christensen, Edward Steinfeld, Aaron Friedberg, John Ikenberry, Henry Kissinger) are cited, summarized and/or commented upon. This perfunctory treatment has its limits and in places leads to conditional conclusions that seem to accommodate opposite views on the same subject. For example, China is “probably the worst in the world” in protecting intellectual property rights (72), but it “generally respected markets, international trade, and many international institutions” (82). From this wording, a reader would have little sense of China’s mercantilist and often predatory international economic behavior. Similarly, there are references to China’s ‘peaceful’ rise and solving of its border problems, with only a passing reference to the increasingly belligerent behavior toward its maritime neighbors. China is described (83) as out-investing the U.S. in clean energy technology, but Lundestad also includes the observation that its “fundamental interest appeared to be in increased energy security”. For good measure we are told that “China limited use of the death penalty somewhat. . .” (83). This last is especially egregious, as China in 2011 (the year the book manuscript was completed) led the world in executions.

Lundestad possesses a breadth of knowledge about his subject matter, but one consequence of his broad treatment is that sentences sometimes read as the conventional wisdom of the European chattering classes. There is much to debate about the policies of the George W. Bush administration after 9/11, but the kind of nuance and sophistication evident elsewhere in the book is much less evident on this subject. Similarly, the author's venture into Middle East policy is unedifying. We are informed at least twice that the key to peace is for the U.S. to force Israel to make the "necessary concessions" (34, 128). Moreover, there are at least two references to the "*Jewish lobby*" (Italics mine; 34, 108). To be sure, Lundestad hastens to inform us in a footnote (34n) that John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's treatment of the subject is "somewhat overstated," and he acknowledges support for Israel from the Christian right as well as a basic sympathy for Israel throughout much of the U.S., but even Mearsheimer and Walt are fastidious enough in their exceedingly questionable book to refer to the Israel rather than Jewish lobby. In an otherwise sophisticated work, the effect is gratuitous.

The point here is not that the discussion of the U.S. and Israel is taboo, but that if Lundestad were going to tackle the subject of American support for Israel, he needed to do so more thoroughly and with better knowledge and substance. Hence, he might have included not just footnotes to the Mearsheimer and Walt book and to the fashionable Peter Beinart, but to more serious and authoritative treatments of the subject such as Dennis Ross's, *The Missing Peace* as well as work by Walter Russell Mead, Michael Kopolow, and Robert C. Lieberman.<sup>2</sup>

At times the author's efforts come at the expense of analytic rigor, as in the treatment of Czechoslovakia. The withholding of postwar aid to the Czech government is cited as an instance of the U.S. failing to support democracies when their policies conflicted with American priorities. However the author himself refers to the pro-Soviet policy initially followed by the coalition government in Prague, and it was the Soviet Union that forced the Czech government to withdraw from discussions about Marshall Plan assistance. Moreover, in noting the February 1948 Communist coup, Lundestad strikes an odd note in placing quotation marks around the "fall" of Czechoslovakia.

Lundestad's book shows the effects of being shaped and written at or near the bottom of the Great Recession, and its assessments reflect those times. For example, even though he does not embrace Nail Ferguson's pessimism, he does quote Ferguson's words that the U.S. could be within two years of a sudden economic or financial collapse. To his credit

---

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), Walter Russell Mead, "The New Israel & the Old: Why Gentile Americans Back the Jewish State," *Foreign Affairs* (July 2008): 28-48; Robert C. Lieberman, "The 'Israel Lobby' and American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 7, Issue 02, June 2009: 235-257; Michael J. Kopolow, "Value Judgment: Why Do Americans Support Israel?" *Security Studies*. Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer 2011): 266-302; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008); Peter Beinart, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment," *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010.

however, even while Lundestad points to serious U.S. problems, he shows keen insight about the country's fundamental underlying strengths.

Toward the end of the work, Lundestad addresses Paul Kennedy's arguments about imperial "overstretch," and he faults Kennedy for largely ignoring the Soviet Union, whose empire imploded within two years of the publication of *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, he takes up the key question of how to define 'overstretch.' Here, he points to the absence of elaboration in Kennedy's book, apart from a reference to military spending of 10 percent of GDP or under certain circumstances even 5%, as a kind of threshold. Lundestad does credit Kennedy for addressing this question in his subsequent writing, which makes the point that rather than military spending per se, a better indicator of overstretch is the mismatch between a country's obligations and its capabilities (133n). Arguably, this definition could be more applicable to the U.S., where the percentage of defense spending as a share of GDP in recent years has not been excessive when compared with recent decades.

Near the end of his book, Lundestad again repeats a key argument, observing that, "there was a discrepancy between America's vast strength and the more limited influence it frequently came to exert even over its allies and friends, not to mention its enemies" (180). This is a valid observation, but it is one that runs directly counter to the argument of the book that -- at least as the author defines the term -- the U.S. can usefully be described as an empire. In all, *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire"* is an ambitious and wide-ranging work, but one that will not convince skeptical readers on this point.

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random, 1987).

**Author's Response by Geir Lundestad, Norwegian Nobel Institute**

---

I am very grateful for the reviews by Christopher Layne, Robert J. Lieber and James H. Lebovic. It is always gratifying when competent people not only read your work, but write informed comments about what you have done. I particularly appreciate Layne's extensive and generous review. Layne is rapidly turning into one of the leading international affairs experts on the rise of China. His most recent work came too late to be included in my book, but I have become increasingly impressed by what he is doing. Although Robert Lieber has written a book of his own on the same topic, he rejects the notion of American decline, I still want to thank him for his comments. With the particular exception of his reference to sentences in my book reading "as the conventional wisdom of the European chattering classes," (whatever that might be) I generally find his comments useful. Lebovic is quite brief in his remarks, but appears in great part to agree with Layne's basic points.

All three of the commentators are social scientists while I am an historian. Some of their criticisms are based on this difference. Yet, they, and particularly Layne, are clearly frustrated with the state of affairs in their own field. Layne thus writes that "Physics envy – the goal of being viewed as real science has driven the political science discipline to elevate to privileged status methodologies that are perceived as being 'scientific.'" (15) The quantifiers are taking over. "Indeed, in methodologism and the cult of irrelevance, diplomatic historians and security studies scholars share a common enemy" (16). I agree entirely with his skepticism towards the quantifiers. Very few human activities can be expressed through mathematical formulas, and certainly not the most complex phenomena in international affairs. Layne wants security studies scholars and historians to be "natural allies inside the academy" (14). The fact that in my work through so many years I have dealt with security studies works to the extent that I actually have is a sign that I find their research interesting and valuable. In no way do I look upon such scholars as enemies.

Yet, my perspective is that of a historian. I try to focus primarily on the past, and what has already happened. The decline of the United States is already a reality. We are all tempted to deal also with the future, but experience tells me that while, hopefully, I have some competence in analyzing the past, my qualifications have, again and again, proved rather limited in predicting the future. In my book I do go into the question of previous predictions about challengers to the United States. Learned historians and social scientists did indeed predict that first the Soviet Union, then Japan, and then the European Union would come to surpass the United States. In addition, we all remember how well we did in predicting the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

Therefore, I am not particularly surprised or shaken when even all three of my honorable commentators criticize me for in fact being an historian. Layne is particularly explicit. He argues that my *The Rise & Decline of the American "Empire"* is a frustrating book on two points. First, "Lundestad does not want to make predictions – which he considers speculation about what lies ahead" (14). Second, "Simply put, there is no theory here" (14). Thus, Layne wants to promote a close relationship between social scientists and historians

while at the same time faulting historians for not offering clear predictions and explicit theory. In other words, he criticizes historians for not being social scientists. Lebovic, who agrees with Layne on both counts, actually ends up concluding that my story about all the wrong predictions does “serve as a cautionary tale for those who seek to employ theory to forecast political changes and events” (2)

In the endless debate about theory and history, I am certainly not against theory. Historians can learn an awful lot from political science theory, but what I have learned more than anything is that no theory explains everything. Virtually everybody will agree with that, but time and again we see that realists use their theory to explain not only the origins of the First and the Second World War, where realism has much to contribute, but they use the very same theory to explain developments in European integration or international cooperation in general, for which realism is clearly much less suitable. The same can, of course, be said about liberalism, constructivism, or any of the other theories available. And, on the prediction side, we all remember Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer’s very explicit predictions about no alliance surviving the disappearance of the threat it was directed against, with the resulting end of NATO, the descent of Europe into traditional rivalry and hostility, the development of nuclear weapons not only by Germany, but also by other European states. For good measure, they added that these developments would not only happen, but at least some of them might also be desirable.

It is of course correct that no scholar is without theory, whether this is explicit or implicit. Yet, as a historian I have the privilege of being eclectic. Realism has much to contribute, but so do other approaches, depending on the specific nature of the question we are analyzing. There is definitely conflict in the world; but there is also a lot of cooperation. It can well be argued that the balance has shifted in favor of cooperation in that we have not had war directly between the leading powers since 1945 (China’s involvement in the Korean War and the India-Pakistan wars are possible borderline cases) and the number of smaller wars has generally declined in recent years. Joseph Nye, who senses scholarly developments better than most, used to entitle his successful textbook *Understanding International Conflicts*. Now, in the eighth edition, the title has changed to *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation*. As Nye and his coauthor David Welch note in the preface, “we often fail to notice that most disagreements in the world are actually handled peacefully.”

While I believe that the United States has generally declined economically since 1945 and especially as a result of the recent Great Recession in 2009, and declined militarily since the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the U.S. is still in a league of its own. China has obviously risen, particularly economically, in terms of its total GDP, and to a lesser extent also militarily. Yet, I conclude “As of today, the United States is still the world’s only true superpower” (39). I agree with Layne that within a few years China is likely to have a GDP larger than that of the U.S. This is clearly an important development, since the U.S. has by far had the largest GDP since the 1870s. But the U.S. will still have a lead in GDP per capita, in military strength, in the strength of its allies. This balanced approach has received much recent support, most impressively from David Shambaugh in his *China Goes Global. The Partial Power*, although I think Shambaugh goes too far in downplaying China’s rise when he writes that China “is nowhere near being in the league of the United States ... and therefore

may better be thought as a middle power and regional power like Australia, Brazil, Britain, France, India, Japan, or Russia.”

Layne does, however, insist that America’s situation is much worse than I give the impression of, not necessarily today, but in the future. Thus, “the debt crisis of the past five years triggered by the Great Recession is not the real threat to U.S. solvency. The real crunch will hit in the early 2020s as the federal government will be compelled to face up to its unfunded obligations ... the aging Baby Boomer generation” (7). Layne even looks into the 2030s. In military technology China “clearly is narrowing the U.S. advantage and by 2030 China is likely to have attained military equality with the U.S. in East Asia.” (9) So, he is describing regional, not global equality. Layne then criticizes my insistence on the importance of America’s allies. The allies might be important today, but, in the future, as they “become increasingly dependent on China economically, there is a real likelihood that they will be compelled to distance themselves from the U.S. and to ‘bandwagon’ with China” (11).

What is most remarkable here is how Layne uses his educated guesses about the future – because that is what they are – to criticize my analysis of the present, although I do have to admit that occasionally I too stray into the prediction business. Layne does not like equivocation; he wants definite answers right now to the most challenging questions about China’s present role and even its future intentions. That is fine. But it is far from obvious that his educated guesses will be correct. Some realists insist that sometime in the future there is likely to be war between the United States and China (10). Yet, obviously nobody can know this for certain. On this point a bit of ‘hedging’ and ‘equivocation’ would indeed seem to be in order. Will there actually be a full power transition from the United States to China? Not all transitions of power lead to war (Britain and the United States); the circumstances between China and the United States are very different from what they were in previous centuries in European history, from where realists draw so many of their examples. In extreme cases superpowers rather suddenly just disappear, as the Soviet Union did.

Robert Lieber has nice things to say about my book. That is highly appreciated, particularly since he has come to very different conclusions in his own recent book. Yet, in his book Lieber somewhat surprisingly states that “Even with a degree of erosion in its relative power compared to a generation ago, no other country possesses comparable capabilities” (167). Here the two of us would seem not to be that far apart. Lieber just does not tend to spell out the first part of the sentence. It is also very obvious that he does not approve of my use of the term ‘empire’ about the United States. He objects that the Soviet Union intervened in Czechoslovakia in 1968 while the United States responded in a very restrained manner when Charles de Gaulle took France out of NATO’s military organization in 1965-66. As I argue in *The Rise & Decline of the American “Empire,”* “Soviet rule was to a large extent imposed; British rule survived as long as it did because it was not opposed. ... American ‘rule’ was frequently invited” (119). My point is that in many geographical areas the U.S. influence still lasted longer, was more geographically widespread, and went deeper than did the British and Soviet empires.

Lieber finds many details in my book objectionable. On one point he is right. I should not have referred to “the Jewish lobby,” but to the Israel lobby. On other points he is simply too quick. Washington did break with the democratic government in Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1946, well before the Marshall Plan in 1947 and the coup in 1948. China has indeed limited use of the death penalty “somewhat” (2), although it is true that the number of executions is still the highest in the world. Both facts can in fact be true at the same time. The most recent numbers indicate that the number of executions per year has gone down to an estimated 3,000 compared to an average of 15,000 a year in the 1990s. Why mentioning the decline in number in one brief sentence should be so “egregious” (2) is still unclear to me.

The social science ideal that theory should be ‘parsimonious’ is a dangerous one. The ultimate test of our studies should always be how well they reflect reality, not how they accord with various social science theories. The world is increasingly complex. It is difficult to fit into one simple formula. In view of our past record, maybe some modesty in making dramatic predictions about the future would also seem to be in order.

**This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License.** To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.