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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Seth Offenbach**, Bronx Community College

“It’s the End of the World as We Know it, and I Feel Fine”

Is the United States a nation in decline? Are we at the end of the American Century? Was the American Century a positive thing for the world or is the United States an evil country that nefariously sticks its nose in other people’s business? These are questions which most of us have given some thought to. A large and growing cottage industry of books has been written on this topic. Many of us have debated these ideas in the classroom with undergraduate and graduate students. Conferences have been held on the topic. Into this mess of an issue wades Robert Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, who attempts to reassure Americans that they are a good people, in a good country, and that panic about the end of the American Century is not yet necessary.

The World America Made is a brief and easy-to-read work by Kagan wherein he sports the idea that the United States “played a critical role in making the explosion of democracy possible” (26) and helped to usher in a “golden age” (4) of peace and prosperity over the last half-century. Though this book is a good read and touches on important topics, it is likely to convince few readers. Much as American conservatives are often convinced of their political opinions by watching Fox News, and American liberals are convinced by opinions heard on MSNBC, those who believe that the U.S. is a benevolent hegemonic power will support Kagan’s book; those who don’t, will not enjoy this book.

In *The World America Made*, Kagan argues that those who oppose contemporary American hegemony should be careful what they wish for. Kagan claims that this is because democracy and free trade are not the result of greater Enlightened thinking. After all, the rise of democracy and free market economics “does not just come into being. It is a choice, it is also an imposition” (37). Without American efforts pushing for greater economic and political freedom, there would never have been the greater world order of the past half-century. To

support his arguments Kagan uses macro-level statistics such as the rise in the number of democracies worldwide (as defined by Freedom House) and the rise of worldwide GDP. Of course both statistics have serious flaws—namely that the definition of democracy is rather flimsy and historical GDP statistics are less accurate than those of their contemporary counterparts—but for Kagan’s purposes they help to make his point that the post-World War II period has been one of unprecedented peace and prosperity. For this, Kagan argues, the United States deserves much credit.

To support his claim that America is at the heart of this golden age, Kagan dances around the “potent national myths” (9) that Americans are “reluctant about their role as global leader” (13) and that Americans are committed to promoting the ‘American’ “way of life” (11). In one breath he dismisses this myth by reminding the reader of the United States’ many military forays into other nations and of the many times when the U.S. supported military dictators. However, Kagan also reminds the reader that America’s geographic location, which is far removed from all other large nations except Canada and Mexico, makes it a more beloved great power than the world has ever seen. For those who agree that the United States is the best and most benevolent hegemonic nation in world history, this is a convincing argument. Unfortunately, for those who believe that the United States is too self-centered, and that its military and political actions have led to too many deaths of non-Americans and often non-whites, then it is doubtful that Kagan’s argument will convince.

Kagan’s greatest asset is also his greatest fault. *The World America Made* is a brief monograph that is easy to read in a single day. This makes it fun and it could certainly make a good assignment for an undergraduate course on twentieth century (or twenty-first century) history or international politics—so long as it is paired with another book—but it also means that Kagan fails to offer detailed proof. Instead, he leaves too many terms undefined, including the definition of democracy, and he often writes in broad generalizations. For instance, he refers to the fall of great empires such as the Roman and British empires without offering specifics. He also writes that the U.S. “rarely goes to war alone” (54), without analyzing in detail why it is that other nations often token support to American-led military expeditions (such as the eighty-three nations that helped the U.S. in the invasion or post-invasion of Iraq). While reading *The World America Made*, it appears as though Kagan generalizes because he wants to focus on the greater historical argument and not the details. These generalizations do not make Kagan’s work inaccurate, but too often they make it difficult to accept his premise without question.

Kagan’s *The World America Made* is also a fun read largely because it relies on a counterfactual argument: that the world has been better off with the U.S. as the dominant force. For those who believe that the world would be worse-off if the Soviet Union had won the Cold War, then this makes sense and Kagan’s arguments might seem intuitive. For those who wish the United States—and not the Soviet Union—had dissolved in 1991, Kagan’s argument will not likely be persuasive. As Kagan notes, “It is hard to measure events that don’t happen, to guess what wars might have broken out had the United States not played the role it has played during the past sixty-five years” (50-51). Despite the impossible task of guessing what an alternate-universe would look like, Kagan infers that democracy, human rights, and economic prosperity would all be worse in a world void of American leadership.

Once Kagan has solidified America's role as a benevolent leader, then he uses the second part of the book (there are no chapters, only four parts) to argue that if the United States is in both economic and military decline, then the world is likely to become more violent in the near future. Kagan argues that one of the reasons why there are fewer wars today than there were years ago is because the United States Navy acts as a world police force to help keep the freedom of the seas. With the rise of powers such as China, which has recently demonstrated its disinterest in freedom of the seas, Kagan sees future violence. To this reader, Kagan's argument is logical; however by choosing freedom of the seas as a basic need to ensure world peace, Kagan has stacked the deck in America's favor. Should he have chosen a different prerequisite for world peace, perhaps the United States would have fared poorly. Nonetheless, Kagan makes an interesting argument and one worth considering.

In the final two parts of *The World America Made*, Kagan gets to the heart of the argument: is America in decline? He argues that the U.S. is probably not in decline. He uses macro-level statistics, such as U.S. and world GDP over the last one-hundred years, to support his claim that the nation's current problems are more transient than is sometimes argued. Despite his relative optimism (if one is a proponent of a U.S.-dominant world order), Kagan recognizes that it is often impossible to detect the decline of a great power until it is too late because "Great powers rarely decline suddenly" (103). With this overall view of the United States as a strong and powerful nation, Kagan is happy.

Kagan's thoughtful and accessible work adds to the growing debate about the rise or fall of the United States. *The World America Made* fits nicely into the growing list of popular works on the subject, including Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World*, Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum's *That Used to be Us*, and Andrew Bacevich's *The Short American Century: A Postmortem*.¹ Coupled with another work in the field, *The World America Made* would be a good fit for an undergraduate classroom debate regarding the rise and fall of the American empire. And for those who believe that the United States often gets short-shrift for the positives it has brought to the world, this book will be a good and pleasurable read. The book will not allay the concerns of those who are skeptical of the United States.

Whether the United States continues to remain the dominant force in world politics, culture, and economics is something that will impact the lives of everyone. Although this reviewer tends to agree that the rumors of America's demise are greatly exaggerated, any thoughtful addition to the debate should always be welcome, and Kagan has added his spirited voice to the debate.

Seth Offenbach is the author of "Defending Freedom in Vietnam: A Conservative Dilemma," which will be published in *The Right Side of the Sixties: Reexamining Conservatism's Decade of Transformation* in the summer 2012. He is currently working

¹ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Short American Century: A Postmortem*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Feel Behind in the World it Invented and How We Can Come Back*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World: Release 2.0*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

on his first manuscript, *The Other Side of Vietnam: The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War*. He received his Ph.D. from Stony Brook University and is currently teaching at Bronx Community College. He has also served as List Editor of the H-Diplo listserv since 2009 and Book Review Editor since 2012.

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