The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained & Wielded Global Dominance

Roundtable Review

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Perhaps I’m just in a sour mood, but what strikes me most about Michael H. Hunt’s new book *The American Ascendancy* is its complete and utter irrelevance.

Let me hasten to emphasize that I find much about the book to admire. In terms of substance, my disagreements hardly rise to the level of quibbles. I happily endorse Hunt’s central thesis. “In each phase of the national history,” he writes, “U. S. leaders matched national ambitions to material resources and made the choices that moved the country forward toward an ever more formidable global position.” (p. 3)

The language may not exactly sizzle, but the point is essentially correct: the United States emerged as a dominant power because it consistently sought power in all its forms, territorial, commercial, political, cultural, and military. The central theme of U. S. foreign policy is expansionism, sometimes cool (when Wall Street lawyers call the shots), sometimes hot (when the Wilsonians are in charge). There have been dissenters, of course, “hostile to empire, averse to war, devoted to domestic priorities”—so three cheers for Mark Twain, Randolph Bourne, and W. A. Williams. Yet as Hunt observes, over time these critics “fell silent or retreated to the margins of political life.” (p. 5) (A careful editor might have changed “retreated” to “were confined.”)

By the mid-point of the twentieth century—the “American Century”—this expansionist project had achieved stunning results, although not because Americans are virtuous or because they enjoy God’s favor (God Himself having been notably silent on that point). The keys to success have been ruthlessness, flexibility, opportunism, and determination combined with an abundance of material and human resources. The cherry atop the cupcake is ideology—America as the exemplar of liberty and later as its chief promoter and protector—which statesmen have employed to justify expansion, discipline the great unwashed, and perhaps salve their own consciences.

Who could disagree with the basic validity of this interpretation? Yet apart perhaps from readers of H-Diplo who cares? In the real world, the viewpoint expressed in *The American Ascendancy* has about as much salience as appeals for chastity. What Hunt is selling, his countrymen aren’t buying.

Let me illustrate the point by noting three judgments offered by Professor Hunt, each one of which is, in my own view, not only indisputably valid, but also hugely important:

1. At the outset of the twentieth century, “Americans began to define themselves in terms of what they consumed rather than as they had formerly, in terms of what they produced. Self-gratification became the new touchstone for the good life, in place of thrift, social virtue, or religious morality.” (pp. 84-85)

2. Responding to the ostensible demands of the Cold War “Congress took a back seat to the person of the president, who commanded general deference as the embodiment of the nation in a semipermanent state of war.” These arrangements remain “a defining feature of U. S. political life.” (p. 140)

3. At the present moment, the exercise of “hegemony may hurt the hegemon,” leading, as it does, to “the privileging of corporate interests harmful to public welfare, a fixation with military power that amounts to a national obsession, an increasingly infantilized and inert public, and the rise of an imperial presidency antithetical to genuine democracy.” (p. 322)

Now if, in the forthcoming national elections, one of the two major candidates were to embrace these propositions and cite them as reasons to overhaul U. S. policy we might have an interesting debate about the country's future. But this is about as likely to happen as a call for tax increases and entitlement cuts.

Any candidate daring to question America’s love affair with conspicuous consumption, connecting the dots between the concentration of power in the executive branch and the perpetual crises in which we find ourselves mired, or finding fault with (or even acknowledging) American global hegemony would be, as they say, toast.

American politics allows little room for such uncomfortable truths. As a consequence, what we get from our politicians are clichés about leadership, promises to strengthen our military and to reinvigorate the “the global war on terrorism,” and, of course, warnings about the ever-present dangers of appeasement and isolationism. (Professor Hunt himself takes several whacks at the hardy perennial of isolationism, alive and well over a half-century after Williams wrote his famous essay exposing the legend. It’s an exercise in futility: the I-word remains the one thing the typical undergraduate “knows” for sure about U. S. foreign policy prior to 1941.)

Professor Hunt’s concluding discussion of what he calls the “Neoliberal Triumph” shows a nice appreciation for the contradictions that have piled up during the course of the American Century and especially since the end of the Cold War—debt, dependence, alienation, a withered definition of citizenship, and a tendency to see war as America’s strong suit. To say that others have made similar points does not make his own rendition
any less worthy. The problem is that no one's listening and they won't listen absent some calamity too awful even to contemplate.

The words of Alfred E. Newman have become the American motto: What, me worry? In a contest that pits Hunt against Newman, the great Alfred E. wins hands down.