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

Roundtable Review

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Author’s Response by Michael H. Hunt, University of North Carolina

I’m grateful for the thoughtful comments on *The American Ascendancy* by four distinguished colleagues and for the initiative by Thomas Maddux that has made this exchange possible. Let me focus on three big issues that the comments got me thinking about.

Andrew Bacevich wastes no time in questioning the foremost objective of *Ascendancy*—to translate academic history into terms accessible to a broader audience. In an understandably “sour mood,” he doubts whether my book and for that matter the diplomatic history enterprise has any relevance to policymaking and political debate today. There is indeed good reason to think academic historians are simply talking to each other and more generally to lament the irrelevance of serious critics—academic or otherwise—when it might have counted in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and above all on the eve of the invasion of Iraq. My impression is that many academic historians foresaw the consequences of the Iraq adventure. They not only spoke out at the time but have sustained their critique in an impressive stream of books and essays. This critical academic reaction stands in stark contrast to the failure of other national institutions to reject or check the faith-based madness gripping U.S. policy. At the very time that Americans needed to think in an informed and careful way about how to proceed in the world, the White House defined and controlled the national conversation aided by well-funded think tanks with strong ideological agendas. A mainstream media would not or could not report knowingly on the Middle East or critically on the presidency. And an ill-informed public seemed perfectly happy to leave major initiatives to presidential discretion and inside the beltway authorities. While this national meltdown may amuse generations hence, those of us who have lived through it have abundant reason for sourness. The true believers have managed to maintain their hold on

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policy, political challengers speak in bland, clichéd terms, and the public expresses nothing more than a vague discontent with this state of affairs.

But a bit of historical perspective gives some ground for hope. The fantasies that have enveloped mainstream political discussions and mainstream media may dissolve with startling speed and when least expected. Think back to cases in our own times. The Cold War consensus quietly eroded in the late 1950s and early 1960s setting the stage for its rapid collapse in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis and in the context of the Vietnam War. In a similar fashion the isolation of China quietly lost appeal, first among academic specialists and then among lower-level policy makers. With the ground thus prepared, Nixon did the politically unthinkable. Almost overnight he convinced the country to accept a pariah as a legitimate power. The end of the Cold War followed a similar scenario. The Soviet Union seemed a permanent fixture and the Cold War a permanent feature on the international scene—until leaders in Moscow and Washington decided otherwise. They exploited generally unrecognized possibilities for change to turn policy on a dime.

Today the ground is again beginning to shift. Politicians and commentators of all stripes are indulging in heart-felt confessions, asking in bewilderment how they could have gone so wrong. That their answers are often shallow and self-protective is probably less important than the fact that they are asking and thus creating an opening for more probing (and more historically informed) evaluations.1 Newspapers and journalist have already made self-criticism of their post-9/11 performance a cottage industry.2 The voters have begun the long slow shift toward a rational calculus that we have seen before in Korea and Vietnam and in relation to the nuclear danger.

If I am right in my sense of cautious optimism, then we might think of diplomatic history not as pointless but as a preserve of rational thought that can prepare the ground for the correction following a major policy mess and a reservoir of fresh insights to facilitate the correction. Like monks in medieval monasteries, we scribble away awaiting a more enlightened time. Rather than despair, perhaps we should reaffirm our role and the importance of the university—our monastery—in this time of general institutional failure. We work in one of the few places in American life not compromised by opportunism and faith-based policy. Perhaps we should also be giving more thought to how universities

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1 Michael Ignatieff’s vacuous self-criticism, “Getting Iraq Wrong,” New York Times Magazine (online edition), 5 August 2007, reflects the studied effort by the political class to minimize the depth of the failure Iraq represents. Ignatieff caricatures academic dissent as largely “ideological” (i.e., right but for the wrong reasons) and draws from Iraq the profound lesson that policy in future should be less gullible and less emotional. The post-mortems in establishment outlets are from a historian’s perspective hardly more incisive. See for example James Dobbins, “Who Lost Iraq? Lessons from a Debacle,” Foreign Affairs 86 (September/October 2007): 61-74; and Stephen Biddle, “Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon,” Foreign Affairs 85 (March/April 2006): 2-14.

might become a more potent voice for reasoned, informed, civil debate on the major issues of the day.\(^3\)

While a synthetic work like *Ascendancy* has a public function, it also has a distinctly personal dimension. It captures a moment in the author’s evolving thinking. Thomas Zeiler’s comments on empire and hegemony zero in on a major conceptual problem with which I have been wrestling. I conceived *Ascendancy* in the late 1990s, influenced by a decade or two of immersion in global history. I had taught a large undergraduate survey on the post-1945 world, helped initiate a global history program in my department, and prepared a text on the post-1945 world.\(^4\) These activities left me more and more intrigued by the impressively multi-layered and arguably unprecedented nature of U.S. dominance at century’s end. How had this situation developed? Midway through my search for an answer, I was ambushed by 9/11. The resulting national upheaval intensified my interest in what I was coming to call hegemony and in how it could be created but also abused and lost.

In developing my argument for the importance of hegemony, I have left myself open to misunderstanding. But I recognized this only after putting the manuscript for *Ascendancy* into production in Spring 2006. I had wanted to suggest that hegemony might be a useful way of thinking about dominance that was analytically distinct from empire. But my intent (not clearly communicated in the book) was not to suggest that hegemony was a better term than empire or to deny empire. Indeed, looking back I see that what I was really doing in *Ascendancy’s* treatment of settler colonialism as well as formal and informal control in the third world was to affirm the importance of an American empire in several guises extending over virtually the entire national history. My belated realization that I had not been explicit on the relation of empire to hegemony prompted a short essay posted earlier this year to History News Network.\(^5\) How the fairly recent U.S. hegemony relates to the far older pattern of empire and how both fit within an evolving conception of American nationalism is an issue that I’m keen to explore further.

Finally, a synthetic work faces the challenge that lies at the heart of the historical discipline—creating a story that is coherent and fresh but also convincingly ground in the evidence. The richness of the diplomatic history field and the license its expansive concerns give to roaming into adjoining fields intensify the challenge for any broadly conceived project. I felt these difficulties most acutely in working out periodization. In tracing the U.S. advance, through its major stages, I finally settled on two distinct pivots and I hinted at a third in the offing. The commentators raise good questions about all three.

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\(^3\) My own thinking on this point is developed in a recent address on “International studies to what end?” delivered at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (available at [http://www.unc.edu/news/archives/oct07/Huntspeech101207.html](http://www.unc.edu/news/archives/oct07/Huntspeech101207.html)).


The first of these pivots involves what Stephen Rabe correctly calls the conventional “rise to great power” between 1898 and 1919. But as I set what I thought was a familiar period in context of global forces, I found myself facing questions that even now remain a bit of a puzzle. Let me note two of the most tangled.

- What were the sources of the astonishing accretion of U.S. economic might over the course of the nineteenth century? The U.S. performance was unlike anything previously seen in human history and surpassed the performance of other, suddenly energized North Atlantic economies. My quest for understanding took me into controversies over slavery as a source of wealth, the importance of foreign capital relative to domestically generated investment, the impact of industrial protectionism, and the creation and application of new technology (to name only the most obvious). The perplexity raised by these issues was then compounded when I turned to the heart of the matter—the relation of the economy to an invigorated turn-of-the-century policy. Did the former figure as a material precondition for the latter, as an inspiration, as a source of real or imagined vulnerability, or as some mix of the three?

- Why the rapid rise between McKinley and Wilson of the American state with a powerful executive at the center? My first impulse, derived from global history, was to think about the U.S. case in comparative terms. The obvious first step was to measure claims on national income made by central governments at the turn of the century. This yardstick for measuring the growth of state capacity proved (as Alfred Eckes notes) a mare’s nest of data that does not always distinguish between revenue going to Washington and state/local governments, that estimates that revenue in different ways, and that struggles to make data from one country comparable to that of other countries at any one moment not to mention over extended periods of time. Beyond the basic data question lurked a variety of other fascinating but no less intractable issues, not least the impulse prompting state leaders to make growing claims on national resources, the importance of new technologies to the increasing effectiveness of state-led national mobilization, the role of a burgeoning state in resolving tensions within notions of national identity, and the changing understanding of the state in relation to formal empire, the rules of warfare, the control of immigration and trade, and other matters made salient by the multiplication of global connections by the late nineteenth century.\(^6\)

The second pivot point—as surprising to Rabe as it was to me—was the 1940s. In The World Transformed published in 2004 I had made an elaborate case for the end of World War II marking the onset of a new age. Three years later driven by the themes that were emerging as central to Ascendancy—the drive toward political and military dominance, the bid for hegemony, and troubled relations with the colonial world—I found myself seeing

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the entire 1940s as a piece. The long mobilization occasioned first by global war and then the early Cold War produced a further expansion of state capacities and a profound rethinking of the American role in the world. Out of these developments emerged the U.S. global hegemony that has characterized the last half century. Readers will be right to ask whether the 1940s really witnessed the emergence of a clear, coherent, consistent notion of hegemony? How does a supposedly enlightened U.S. hegemony square with the less savory pattern of intervention and control that extended after 1945 from countries in Latin America and eastern Asia to countries all around the world? Empire under new names like nation-building, containment, and humanitarian policing was still empire and arguably at odds with the high-minded claims associated with the new American-defined international order.

The third pivot point in my story is the one that may emerge out of strains developing in recent U.S. policy. Having asked about how we got from there (circa 1900) to here (circa 2000), I had to offer a reading of the last several decades whatever the difficulties of detachment and the limits of the sources. My conclusion was that the end of the Cold War was less important than a variety of unsettling trends with origins in the 1940s and 1950s that had by the late 1960s produced debilitating strains in U.S. policy and that are still making mischief today.

Perhaps the most consequential of those trends was a narrowing of the understanding of hegemony to neo-liberal terms. Ideas about free markets and free elections came to exercise a subtle, pervasive grip on thinking about foreign relations. The result was a distinct narrowing of the 1940s vision of hegemony. The Bretton Woods accords are a key element in this argument. Zeiler and Eckes advance the conventional view that Nixon overturned the system established at Bretton Woods by breaking the dollar-gold link. My admittedly minority reading is that Nixon merely made an adjustment that left the institutions and core values represented by Bretton Woods largely in place. The dollar remained the dominant currency; the Bretton Woods institutions survived; and the free market impetus gathered strength (with capital allowed free movement of the sort that John Maynard Keynes had blocked in 1944 in the name of currency stability and state sovereignty). Bretton Woods thus figures not as a transient arrangement but as the herald of neo-liberal dominance over U.S. policy and in turn the global economic system.

How the current tensions at work within U.S. policy resolve themselves is the question of the hour. Those pessimistically inclined may well be right to anticipate not a major shift but more of the same—a degeneration of republican values and deformation of the constitutional order, a sour America frustrated with its own recent performance and future prospects and at odds with the world. On the other hand, global forces may well be driving us willy-nilly toward new ways of thinking about ourselves and our relation to the world. Environmental degradation, the persistence of regional diversity, stubborn nationalist resistance to imperial pretensions, and rising skepticism about a neo-liberal global order that makes comparative advantage, corporate privilege, and constantly rising GDP articles
of faith—these are but some of the pressures that could push U.S. policy to pivot in the near term and perhaps even in directions that give heart to the optimists.