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

Roundtable Review

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A year ago H-Diplo featured a roundtable on Charles Maier’s *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (2006) and included among the commentators Michael Hunt. Maier devoted considerable attention in the first part of his study to analytical comparison of empires across time and space and, then, in the second part, focused on “America’s Turn,” with emphasis on the period from the Cold War into the 21st century. In his review of Maier’s study, Hunt noted that he had a forthcoming book on “American Ascendancy” that would explore the different phases of empire that the United States moved through from continental expansionism through settler colonialism to formal overseas empire in the late 19th century, followed by informal empire from the 20th to the 21st century. Hunt noted that each “imperial thrust” generated a critical reaction which created difficulties in justifying and managing the latest empire.

In *The American Ascendancy*, Maier explores the rise of the United States to dominance, the key elements that shaped the U.S. rise before 1900 in a global context, and with the addition of the modern national state from the 1880s to the 1940s, prepared the U.S. for hegemony. Hunt does not offer a chronological, textbook oriented approach. In the first four chapters he moves from the foundations in the 19th century to a peak of geopolitical dominance by 1968 with the imperial president leading an expanded bureaucracy and commanding deference from the American public and Congress. In the second half of the book, Hunt shifts to examine the most unique features of the U.S. hegemony, the successful effort to build an international regime based on U.S. values and interests in political and economic arenas including consumerism with the U.S. as a model of modernity. Hunt also explores the U.S. relationship with the third world after 1941 where he notes the challenges posed to U.S. dominance and the difficulties faced by U.S. leaders in reconciling their cultural and racial views, their economic interests, and the Cold War competition with their commitment to self-determination. The U.S. is depicted as the “Disoriented Giant” after 1968, faced with challenges at home and abroad, and with U.S. leaders from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan finding themselves limited by external constraints. The end of the Cold War brings a chapter on the “Neoliberal Triumph” with emphasis on advancing the free market economy through globalization and the demise of the post-Cold War euphoria and “end of history” optimism with the arrival of militants, both Islamic challengers and what Hunt calls the “Neoliberals,” led by President George Bush and his advisers.

For a thorough assessment of the relationship of Hunt’s *Ascendancy* with other authors examining the U.S. role in the world, see Stephen G. Rabe’s review in this roundtable.

An interpretive study of this nature raises a number of issues and questions that merit further discussion including

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1.) Has Hunt adequately addressed the most significant elements that shaped the U.S. rise to ascendency by 1914 including the role of contingency which the author is careful to note as well as global forces which provided “constraints and opportunities” for the U.S. rise? The global forces that Hunt emphasizes include the emergence of the U.S. in the North Atlantic world as a European settler society; the necessary adjustment of Americans to the rise of the modern national state; and American involvement in the creation of an economic and social modernity with new technologies. As far as internal developments in the 19th century related to global forces, Hunt develops the importance of English migration and territorial control; conquest of Native Americans and expulsion of European powers; the development of a premier capitalist economy and a sense of nationalism.

2.) Hunt recognizes the important role played by U.S. leaders in the rise to ascendency as well as the challenges faced before and after 1968: “The agents of the state deserve the pride of place that they are traditionally accorded because they set the pace and direction and thus ultimately shaped the nature of U.S. dominance.” (7) Yet not all U.S. Presidents are equally successful in Hunt’s assessment with initiating “Grand Projects” of expansion and managing the consequences of ascendency. Although Hunt is not uncritical of any president and recognizes the enduring importance of those like Woodrow Wilson who had the biggest dreams that were doomed to failure (57-62), the author does seem to prefer Republican managers such as William McKinley who made the most of the opportunities in the Caribbean and Pacific in 1898, the corporatist approach of Republican leaders in the 1920s towards Europe, their retrenchment in Latin American from Wilsonian interventions, and their cautious approach in East Asia: “They found new ways to sustain U.S. dominance in Latin America, while handling Europe and East Asia with a shrewd caution appropriate to regions too important to neglect but too dangerous to embrace. At the same time the policy elite presided over a vital, resilient economy, a maturing consumer model, and a large accumulation of capital that taken together gave the country unrivaled economic and cultural clout.” (113-114) Hunt seems to prefer more cautious managers of the U.S. ascendency who avoid advancing and abandoning impossible objectives such as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s quest on self-determination versus European colonialism (197-198) or who, such as John F. Kennedy, equivocate too much in dealing with independence in Africa. (207-208)

3.) The Cold War which occupies such a central role in the literature on U.S. diplomacy plays a somewhat secondary role in Hunt’s study. In summarizing the end of the Cold War, Hunt suggests that it was a “striking mismatch” since it was “regulated by relative economic power more than anything else. So far ahead was the U.S. economy in both size and sophistication that the Cold War might be summarized as begun by the United States, dominated from the outset by the United States, and won by the United States.” (263) This summary judgment raises fascinating questions of why there was a Cold War, why both sides made such dangerous and expensive efforts with nuclear weapons and massive military establishments, and why it endured as long as it did with massive costs to many participants, particularly in contested Third World countries that could least afford it?
Hunt’s pithy summation also points to the recent emphasis in the literature from different perspectives to the role of ideology in the origins and duration of the Cold War.

4.) One of the most stimulating chapters is “In the American Image, 1941-1968” in which Hunt shifts from the earlier movement from the foundations of ascendancy to 1968 to explore the effort of U.S. leaders to create an international regime based on U.S. values and preferences in many different areas. Hunt moves far beyond the familiar UN and Bretton Woods system and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, free trade and GAAT negotiations to a less familiar emphasis on protecting the individual versus the state in the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials of war leaders to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hunt’s development of the U.S. as a model of modernity with its consumerism backed by Western Europe and Japanese allies with Coca-Cola and Hollywood leading the challenge to the Soviet Union and French traditionalists. This chapter definitely reinforces Odd Arne Westad’s The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times and its emphasis on the Soviet Union and the U.S. offering competing models of modernity.

5.) What does Hunt note as the major challenges to U.S. global dominance by 1968? The Third World challenge is explored in Chapter VI as a reaction against all forms of imperial control, as a challenge to U.S. policy of backing corporate interests and “assuring access to resources critical to an industrial economy,” and a concern about radicals joining the Soviet camp in the Cold War. Hunt also suggests that American leaders intensified the challenge with a “cultural animosity rooted in the American experience as a settler society and reflected in earlier phases of U.S. involvement in Latin American and East Asia…. U.S. policymakers and observers carried strong assumptions about third-world immaturity that inspired doubts that colonial peoples could wisely manage their independence and resources.” Does this cultural perspective have the same degree of significance in examining U.S. attitudes and policy on Fidel Castro in Cuba, the response from Eisenhower to Nixon on new African states, and in Asia with respect to Vietnam, or do Cold War calculations have far more impact in how Washington responded to Castro and the Vietnam conflict?

6.) By 1968 Hunt emphasizes the challenges to U.S. ascendancy as he affirms the prescience of columnist Walter Lippmann’s warning about pursuing containment on a global scale with Vietnam as the leading example of the costs which intensified as the international environment changed with nuclear proliferation, increasing Third World shifts to the left and enhanced relationships with the Soviet Union, China and Castro’s Cuba, generational challenges at home and in Western Europe, and economic problems. In evaluating the response of Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan to these challenges, Hunt is more critical of Carter than either Republican. “With no organizing vision at the outset to pull the pieces of his policy together or supply priorities, Hunt concludes, “Carter was vulnerable to confusion and drift, became lost in details, and could sound no clarion call to win public support in economically troubled times. His reliance on senior advisers with distinctly different points of view compounded his own conceptual
confusion.” (246) Although critical of Richard Nixon for clinging to the Cold War, Hunt does suggest that “as clearly as any leader of the time, Nixon grasped the new challenges to U.S. dominance. His tattered reputation ... should not blind us to his insights and studied attempt to construct a more modest and thus sustainable Cold War policy.” (239) Hunt is less impressed with Ronald Reagan’s lack of understanding of policy issues; however, he notes that Reagan, despite appointing militant Cold Warriors to important positions, remained cautious and limited by political constraints, and shrewd enough to recognize the opportunities offered by Mikhail Gorbachev and to side with Secretary of State George Shultz against the militants.

7.) In Chapter VIII, “The Neoliberal Triumph 1991,” Hunt reverts back to 19th century classical liberal doctrine to capture the perspective of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and their advisers, and he makes a plausible case for emphasizing their similarities under this term as opposed to the more familiar Neo-Conservatism applied to Bush and his militant advisers. Hunt’s chapter corresponds with Tony Smith’s A Pact with the Devil: Washington’s Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise, recently reviewed in an H-Diplo roundtable.² In several chapters Smith traces the shifts in liberal internationalism since Woodrow Wilson and explores the development of neoliberalism and its increasing convergence with neoconservatism with the last difference being a preference for multilateralism versus unilateralism. With neoliberal endorsement of the Bush Doctrine in 2002 and the Iraq war, Smith concludes that the differences had become insignificant. Smith does suggest that President Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney and other White House advisers had their own considerations separate from neoconservatives and neoliberals. However, Smith does emphasize Bush’s incorporation of neoliberal thinking from 2002 through 2006.³ Regardless of terminology, Hunt provides a stimulating assessment of the dimensions of dominance led by an increasing emphasis on a Wilsonian belief in promoting freedom with military force if necessary under the guidance of military and corporate leaders. What Hunt emphasizes is a full flowering of early beliefs and trends in the U.S. ascendancy, cataloged as global policemen, regime manager over the international economy, go-it-alone versus the UN. The pitfalls in this quest included domestic dysfunction in a public resistant to sacrifice, public concerns, and the neoliberal agenda as well as increasing doubts and dislike for U.S. hegemony in Europe, Russia, East Asia, and the Middle East.

8.) So where does Hunt stand on the $64 question of whether or not the U.S. ascendancy is an empire?⁴ In his conclusion Hunt addresses the issue, noting how the U.S. moved from its origins to the 21st century through a number of different stages. Hunt recognizes the presence of imperial activities, rationales, and problems in current Bush policies toward

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³ See Smith, 14-23, 43-44, 190-193.

Afghanistan and Iraq as well as in Latin America, East Asia, and Europe. However, Hunt suggests that empire does not capture the U.S. role with respect to the "unprecedented geographical scope and depth of U.S. influence." (311) What Hunt prefers is hegemon, although he concludes with a warning about the possibility of decline and points to the neoliberal preoccupation with a marketplace vision as the most identifiable threat to acceptance of the U.S. as a legitimate hegemon: "States claiming hegemony have a special obligation of stewardship. The greater their claim, the greater their obligation to promote global prosperity and safety in ways that are in fact effective and perceived as such. By neglecting its responsibilities with regard to these most critical of human problems, the United States runs the risk of losing legitimacy as architect and keeper of global order." (320) What Hunt recommends is a retreat from hegemony to cooperation, an approach that the President Bush may be pressured to follow as militants have retreated from the White House and its branches, and unresolved conflicts persist on the frontiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Participants:

Michael H. Hunt is the Everett H. Emerson Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. After taking his undergraduate degree from Georgetown University, he did his graduate work in the history department at Yale. He took his Ph. D. in 1971. He taught at Yale and Colgate before moving to North Carolina in 1980. Professor Hunt writes and teaches in the general field of international history. His special teaching and research interests are in U.S. foreign relations, the Cold War in Asia, the Vietnam War, and the post-1945 world. His early work, focusing on nineteenth and twentieth century Chinese-American relations, includes two prize-winning books, Frontier Defense and the Open Door (1973) and The Making of a Special Relationship (1983; Chinese translation) as well as a prize-winning article, “Americans in the China Market,” Business History Review 48 (Autumn 1977). His long-term concern with U.S. foreign relations is reflected in several broad interpretive, historiographical, and methodological works, notably Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy (1987); “The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History,” Diplomatic History 16 (Winter 1992); and Crises in U.S. Foreign Policy: An International History Reader (1996). He has also cultivated an interest in modern East Asia, resulting in The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy (1996), based on new sources, and Lyndon Johnson’s War: America’s Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968 (1996), a slim synthesis. His recent interest in contemporary global history has led to The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present (2003) and a companion reader. He has also been collaborating with Steven I. Levine on an account of America’s wars in Asia.

Andrew J. Bacevich is professor of international relations and history at Boston University. A graduate of the U. S. Military Academy, he received his Ph. D. in American Diplomatic History from Princeton University. Dr. Bacevich is the author most recently of The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War (2005). His previous books include American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U. S. Diplomacy (2002)

**Alfred Ecke**s is Ohio Eminent Research Professor in Contemporary History at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. He graduated from Washington and Lee University (BA); the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (MA), and the University of Texas at Austin (Ph.D.). From 1981 to 1990 he was a Commissioner (and Chairman) of the U.S. International Trade Commission. He is currently Executive Vice President of the International Trade and Finance Association and Editor-in-Chief of the *Global Economy Journal,* published by Berkeley Electronic Press. His books include *Opening America’s Market* (North Carolina, 1995) and *Globalization and the American Century* (Cambridge 2003) with Thomas Zeiler. He is currently writing a book on the Contemporary Global Economy since the 1970s to be published in Blackwell’s History of the Contemporary World series.

**Stephen G. Rabe** has completed thirty years of teaching at the University of Texas at Dallas, where he has been named Arts & Humanities Professor. He has taught and lectured in thirteen counties, having served as the Mary Ball Washington Professor of American History at University College, Dublin (1990-91) and the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in American Studies at the University of Helsinki (2005-06). During the summers, he has also directed seminars on modern U.S. history in Argentina and Brazil (2003-06). Rabe’s latest book is *The U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (2005). A previous book, *Eisenhower and Latin America* (1988) won the Bernath Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) for the outstanding book in the field of international relations. SHAFR also named him the Bernath Lecturer in 1989. Rabe serves on the Executive Council of SHAFR. At present, Rabe is working on three books: a history of John F. Kennedy’s foreign policies for Potomac Press; a history on the United States, Latin America, and the Cold War for Oxford University Press; and a textbook on U.S. relations with Latin America for Blackwell Press.

**Thomas Zeiler** is professor of history and chair of the Department of History at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He graduated from Emory University (BA) and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (MA and Ph.D.). His books include *Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II* (2004); *Globalization and the American Century,* co-authored with Alfred E. Eckes, Jr. (2003); *Dean Rusk: Defending the American Mission Abroad* (2000); *Free Trade, Free World: The Advent of GATT* (1999); *American Trade and Power in the 1960s* (1992). He has a forthcoming book on *World War II: A Global History* (2007) and has completed a manuscript on “Global Games: The Spalding World Tour of 1888/1889”. Professor Zeiler is Executive Editor of *Diplomatic History.*