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

Roundtable Review

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Hunt and the Historians

It is an honor to be asked to comment on one of Professor Michael H. Hunt’s books. As one of the great historians of U.S. foreign relations, Hunt is in a league with luminaries such as Walter LaFeber, Warren Cohen, John Lewis Gaddis, George Herring, Michael Hogan, Thomas G. Paterson and the late William Appleman Williams. My graduate students always read at the beginning of the semester, Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy (1987), Hunt’s path breaking analysis of the intellectual roots of United States (U.S.) foreign policy. Lyndon Johnson’s War (1996) is a constant companion for students who take my course on the American experience in Vietnam. The second chapter of that book, “Ho Chi Minh’s Brocade Bags,” represents a brilliant, concise explanation of the political genius of the Vietnamese leader and why the United States, with its “stark failure of cultural imagination,” would be unlikely to accomplish its goals in Vietnam. Early in his career, Hunt had established his scholarly reputation with studies such as Frontier Defense and the Open Door (1973) and Making of a Special Relationship (1983). In both of these books on U.S.-Chinese relations, Hunt conducted multi-archival research and displayed a keen appreciation and sensitivity to Chinese history and culture.

In The American Ascendancy, much as in Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy, Hunt moves beyond his subfield of U.S.-Asian relations and offers a general interpretation of the U.S. role in the world. As Hunt notes in the introduction, he believes that historians have been left out of the post-Cold War debate over the proper role of the United States in the world. His goal is to offer an “overarching” narrative that outlines the decisions taken and the historical developments that led the United States to its present ascendancy in the world. Much as when he was working on his Ideology book, Hunt writes during a time of perceived crisis in international relations. In the first part of the 1980s, the Ronald Reagan administration’s belligerent rhetoric toward the Soviet Union, its massive military buildup, shocking deficit spending, and unspeakably cruel interventions in Central America alarmed scholars and citizens. In the same year that Ideology appeared, Paul Kennedy published

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10 December 2007
The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers (1987), warning about imperial overreach and the perils of undermining domestic economies with excessive military spending and unwise foreign adventures. In “The Contemporary Dilemma,” the closing chapter of Ideology, Hunt suggested that the nation return to its republican ideals and restrain its impulses to refashion the world in the U.S. image. The greatness of the United States “should be measured against domestic conditions.” Hunt added: “with the glories of empire come its costs.” The American Ascendancy arrives during the time of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, which may prove to be the greatest blunder in the history of U.S. foreign relations. As the compelling documentary film by Charles Ferguson informs us, when it comes to the Iraq fiasco, there appears to be No End in Sight (2007).

Hunt's core theses are straightforward. The basis for the sustained U.S. success in international affairs was wealth, confidence, and leadership. Throughout its history, the United States has enjoyed material wealth and generated critical technological advances, creating a premier economy. Between 1820 and 1913, the United States economy grew at an annual rate of 4 percent, easily surpassing the growth rates of European countries. This wealth helped fuel a powerful sense of nationalism and destiny. Self-confident elites, usually from the cultural milieu of the educated, middle- and upper-income groups in the Northeastern states, reflected this sense of pride and privilege and guided the nation's expansion. As they accumulated national and international power, the guiding elites fashioned a modern, powerful state capable of securing and enhancing U.S. gains in the international arena.

Professor Hunt offers his book for public debate and surely would like to see his book adopted in undergraduate and graduate courses in U.S. history. As such, it might be useful to put American Ascendancy within the context of other authors and books that try to reach a broad audience and offer a synthesis about the U.S. role in the world. On one level, Hunt's topic—how the United States gained and wielded global dominance—is a traditional one. As Alexander DeConde noted over thirty years ago in a pamphlet on the historiography of American diplomatic history that he prepared for the American Historical Association, the “theme of expanding American power in the context of international politics” is a familiar one.² Political scientists suggest that about 20 percent of the U.S. public pays attention to international affairs and only a minuscule percent of the population is actually in a position to affect foreign policy. I suspect that many who are internationally literate first gained their knowledge and interests by taking a course on U.S. diplomatic history (renamed U.S. foreign relations) in college/university. The theme of expanding U.S. power is the narrative motif of virtually every textbook currently used in courses on U.S. foreign relations. Thomas Paterson in the sixth edition of American Foreign Relations (2005) reiterated that “we continue to emphasize the theme of expansionism, explaining its many


manifestations.” The editor of Diplomatic History, Robert D. Schulzinger, opens his U.S. Diplomacy since 1900 with the statement that “American foreign policy since the Spanish-American War of 1898 has sought to ensure U.S. supremacy in the Western Hemisphere while at the same time asserting American influence widely around the globe” (5th ed., 2002). Walter LaFeber notes that the “most obvious theme” of his textbook The American Age (2nd ed., 1994) is “landed and commercial expansion.” I and my classmate and friend, Frank Costigliola of the University of Connecticut, learned our diplomatic history in the 1960s from the good David Millar of Hamilton College, who assigned Thomas Bailey’s A Diplomatic History of the American People (10th ed., 1976). Bailey similarly focused on the growth of U.S. power or, as he dubbed it, “from colonies to colossus.”

The periodization that Hunt offers in the first half of American Ascendancy would also strike most as well within the bounds of familiar interpretations. Textbooks and courses on U.S. foreign relations usually begin with the imperial surge at the end of the nineteenth century. But introductory chapters and lectures tie the burst of activity from 1895 to 1904 (Venezuelan Boundary Crisis to the Panama Canal) to nineteenth-century territorial expansion, rejecting the hoary thesis of Samuel Flagg Bemis that U.S. imperialism was an “aberration” in U.S. history. Alexander DeConde, for example, in his preface to the second volume, Global Power, of A History of American Foreign Policy (3rd ed., 1978) asserts that the seizure of the Philippines “came in another burst of expansionist fervor, an overseas imperialism called the new manifest destiny.” Hunt similarly ties the rise of U.S. imperial power to the nineteenth-century developments, emphasizing the consolidation of settler societies, the sweeping aside of indigenous civilizations, the rise of global capitalism, and the expansion of a state-dominated nationalism. Hunt would affirm Senator Henry Cabot Lodge’s boast that the United States had “a record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequalled by any people in the nineteenth century.”

Chapters three and four, covering the period from 1898 to 1940, of American Ascendancy further affirm established interpretations of U.S. foreign relations. Hunt portrays President William McKinley as a critical figure, an effective president, and an architect of U.S. international power, thereby agreeing with interpretations offered by H. Wayne Morgan, Louis Gould, and R. Hal Williams among others. Unlike McKinley, President Woodrow Wilson sought to dismantle the imperial system and replace it with a U.S.-designed system of democratic, peaceful, commercial states. Wilson, for Hunt, is the prophet of a globally assertive foreign policy, articulating a vision of global integration and prosperity with U.S. leadership. The self-confidence and self-righteousness that informed the Fourteen Points echoed nineteenth-century concepts of manifest destiny. For me, Hunt’s Wilson is the leader analyzed in N. Gordon Levin’s Woodrow Wilson and World Politics (1968). Hunt also draws on prevailing analyses of the interwar period, refuting “the legend of isolationism,”

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3 The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) has a website with course syllabi. See http://www.shafr.org/syllabusinitiative.htm.

as William Appleman Williams characterized it in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959). During the 1920s, foreign-policy elites extended the economic and cultural clout of the United States, offering a model of modernity based on consumerism.

In his three chapters, which are all on the period from 1941 to 1968, Hunt takes a unique approach. Textbooks always separate the war years of 1941 to 1945 into a distinct chapter. Courses on the “United States since 1945” have become commonplace in higher education. Such curricular choices reflect popular views that the United States emerged from World War II as a dominant power in the aftermath of Europe’s self-destruction and that U.S. postwar foreign policy revolved around the momentous confrontation with the Soviet Union. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki often serves as a metaphor to herald the closing of one era and the beginning of a new, perilous age. Hunt insightfully intertwines World War II with the first half of the Cold War, because he believes that the crusades against German Nazism, Italian fascism, Japanese militarism, and Soviet communism accelerated the drive toward a strong state under the leadership of a powerful, “imperial” president. A strong, activist president employing the new military technologies developed during World War II and under the aegis of NSC 68/2 (1950) secured the geopolitical dominance of the United States. But during the period from 1941 to 1968, the United States went beyond establishing its political and military dominion. U.S. citizens had arrived in President Harry Truman’s words, at the “ascendancy of their strength.” U.S. foreign policy leaders redesigned the international system to make it congruent with U.S. values. The Nuremberg war crimes trials, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and the Bretton Woods international economic system all challenged the four-hundred-year-old international system of sovereign states established under the Peace of Westphalia (1648). The Wilsonian visions, consumer capitalism, and U.S. cultural power had been successfully wedded to the awesome military and technological might of the United States.

Starting a new section in 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive and President Lyndon Johnson’s resignation, indicates that Professor Hunt considers the debacle in Vietnam a watershed in the history of U.S. foreign relations. In his previous chapter, “Third-World Challenge,” Hunt argued that the United States had largely beat back the national liberation movements that had erupted in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America in the post-1941 period. In Latin America, my area of scholarly interest, U.S. officials used covert interventions and economic and military aid to undermine leftist and nationalistic movements in Guatemala, Bolivia, Brazil, British Guiana, and the Dominican Republic. The capture and execution of the Argentine/Cuban revolutionary, Ernesto “Ché” Guevara, in the Bolivian countryside in 1967 underscored that triumph. Whereas Cold War fears motivated U.S. interventions, a sense of cultural superiority, as Hunt indicates, also underlay the U.S. approach. Latin Americans, like other Third World people, had “immature” political and economic attitudes and systems and needed to “modernize” with development programs like the Alliance for Progress (1961-69). As Hunt previously indicated in *Lyndon Johnson’s War*, cultural arrogance underlay the U.S. experience in Vietnam, for U.S. officials failed to respect what Ho Chi Minh carried in his brocade bags.
Beyond the obvious strains that the Vietnam debacle put on U.S. society, a variety of other pressures “disoriented” the United States in the period from 1968 to 1991. Declining economic competitiveness brought about by overspending on the military-industrial complex and nuclear weapons and the return of Western Europe and Japan to the global marketplace sapped U.S. economic strength. The U.S. public also became less enamored of the U.S. empire as it witnessed mounting casualties in Vietnam and a stagnant standard of living. Hunt returns to a theme he had first raised in his Ideology book—a striking appreciation for the ideas of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. With their initiatives toward the Soviet Union and China, the duo tried “to construct a more modest and thus sustainable Cold War policy” (239). The Nixon administration’s balance of power approach signaled an accommodation with other powers and perhaps a tacit admission that the U.S. lacked the power or wisdom to transform the world. Restraint did not, however, characterize the Ronald Reagan administration’s rejuvenation of the Cold War. As Hunt sees it, Reagan, with his massive military buildup and confrontational policies, was bound to widen the fissures in U.S. political and economic life that had first appeared in the 1960s. Mikhail Gorbachev saved Reagan from himself. Hunt rejects the boasts of the “euphoria school” of conservative pundits like Francis Fukuyama that Reagan’s strong international stands brought about the “evil empire’s” demise. The mismatch in economic power among the superpowers determined the course and conduct of the Cold War

Professor Hunt’s economic interpretation of the Cold War calls attention to his consistent emphasis on the wealth of the United States in ascertaining the sources of the U.S. approach to the world. Like the famous “revisionist” or “Wisconsin School” of diplomatic historians who emerged in the 1960s—Williams, LaFeber, Lloyd Gardner, Thomas McCormick—Hunt stresses the primacy of domestic social and economic structures in explaining the American ascendancy. Such an approach tends to downplay power relationships among states in explaining sources of foreign policies. Unlike the Wisconsin school, however, Hunt suggests that U.S. expansion came not as a capitalist drive for markets and wealth to alleviate socioeconomic inequalities at home but rather as a consequence of domestic wealth. In a peculiar way, Hunt seems very close to the “Consensus School” of historians, like David M. Potter in People of Plenty (1954), who argued that material abundance shaped the national character and created a unique U.S. society. An intrinsically wealthy nation presumably could accept differences and diversity and pursue a restrained foreign policy. But Hunt is clearly not a member of the Consensus School. Like William Appleman Williams, Hunt suggests that the wealth of the nation provides the United States the opportunity to create a socially just society that would garner international admiration.

A plea for restraint permeates both the final chapter, which is on “neo-liberalism” since 1991, and the conclusion. The gloom that permeates the final chapter in Ideology returns at the end of American Ascendancy. The U.S. debacle in Iraq weighs heavily on the scholarly mind. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century republican thought warned that “crusades conducted in the name of freedom, threatened freedom at home.” Recalling the fates of Athens and Rome, Hunt adds that “history showed that foreign entanglements and
adventures created dangerous concentrations of political power within and undermined the very civic virtues on which the survival of any republic depended” (322-23). The United States has established its global “hegemony.” Hunt beautifully explains why neo-conservative pundits and scholars like Max Boot and Niall Ferguson are misusing the term “empire” when they defend the contemporary American ascendancy. The U.S. model of modernity still reigns supreme. But Hunt sees a U.S. public increasingly weary of the costs and responsibilities of hegemony. The international legitimacy that must accompany hegemony is also being eroded by a U.S. failure to address pressing global concerns like climate change, hunger, and population growth.

In the end, Hunt’s history of the growth of U.S. power is really a call for U.S. citizens to assess the costs both to themselves and others of its contemporary ascendancy. I cannot predict whether this book sparks the public debate about the U.S. role in the world that Hunt desires. As Hunt concedes, both political elites and the U.S. public “know little of the broader world and are largely oblivious to the historical and cultural forces that have shaped it” (315). What I can promise is that American Ascendancy, with its compelling theses and its engagement with other historians, will serve as an excellent capstone reading in my courses on the history of U.S. foreign relations.