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

Roundtable Review

Reviewed Works:

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Andrew Bacevich, Alfred E. Eckes, Stephen G. Rabe, Thomas Zeiler


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Neoconservatism, the George W. Bush administration, and the Iraq War (and related war on terrorism) have really ticked off the scholarly community, historians prominently among them. The dissent runs from a mere shaking of one’s head in sorrow and disgust to censure in class, demonstrations, and print. Michael Hunt, one of diplomatic history’s most eminent and insightful scholars, is among the critics. That is clear from the first paragraph on this superb book’s dust jacket, which promises analysis over triumphalism, to the conclusion that discusses the challenges that lie ahead in foreign policy, the pitfalls of neoconservatism (and its umbrella concept, neoliberalism), and the need for America to retreat wisely and prudently from its hegemonic global position.

This latter plea is fundamental to Hunt’s work, which is a careful history of how the United States rose to the pinnacle of world domination since its founding. His perceptive, elegantly written history of the past 200 or so years (with an emphasis on the post-Pearl Harbor era, covered in five of the eight chapters) explains the emergence of a country bolstered by a powerful economy, expansionist ideology, solid leadership, strong government institutions, and fortuitous timing—namely, the general decline of Europe as the center of hegemonic power. Yet Hunt—who has taken on large topics before (his Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy of 20 years ago is nothing short of a classic of diplomatic history)—is no whining protester regarding the rise of the American empire (a term he rejects as simplistic) and current conundrums in the U.S. war on terrorism. He seeks not to jump on the bandwagon of Bush-bashing (though he is clearly in the opposition’s camp, aligned against the so-called “militants” who back the recent imperial project), nor does he sensationalize the profound problems facing the United States in the world by throwing around the “empire” moniker in a nod to contemporary fashion. Hunt plugs into our fascination with American power and its abuses, but his arguments are complex and his evidence is solid.

Contrast his reasoned, deeply grounded interpretive study to, say, some of the latest headline-grabbers in bookstores today, such as John Perkins, The Secret History of the American Empire: Economic Hit Men, Jackals, and the Truth about Global Corruption (New York, 2007), which follows his lurid Confessions of an Economic Hit Man (New York, 2005).
from two years before. This book is somewhat of a recycling of William A. Williams, whose open door thesis remains valid in some quarters. Both Perkins and Hunt want to reform U.S. foreign policy and imperialistic behavior. Both see fundamental problems blocking the way to reform, and both advocate an overhaul in vision, ideas, and policies to effect change. Perkins detects conspiracies everywhere, however, led by the most devious corporate robber barons, while Hunt draws on his comprehensive knowledge of the literature, hegemonic theory, and decades of prize-winning scholarship to mold a nuanced argument that leaves the reader believing that we face some daunting challenges which we just might not be able to overcome. He is a critic, without the ideological smugness of either the right or left.

One of the strengths of his book is the global setting of America’s rise to power, as well as a model of ascendency that refers to technology, commerce, and security, as well as state-building, individuals, leadership, and sweeping, innovative conceptions. Hunt’s adoption of the “settler society” as a framework that explains the roots of nineteenth century expansion is illuminating, although he does pay more attention to global trends and the international arena in the period of America’s rise than he does when he lands in the twentieth century. This is logical, as European influences were, of course, of a commanding nature which had faded in their ability to shape the American nation after the First World War. Still, the book loses some of its international context when it deals with more recent times.

It is difficult, and a bit unfair, to criticize a book of such magnificent scope and, essentially, such learning, particularly because any author with the ambitious agenda of answering the fundamental question about how the United States arrived at its world standing will never fully satisfy all of us nitpickers. Hunt, however, comes very close to meeting all objections, in my opinion; this is the finest analysis of the history of American power in the field. That is not meant to slight many other excellent studies, but Hunt has gone farther than anyone in breadth, scope, and balanced tone. Just one of many insightful passages makes the case: the section on consumerism (and Americanization) as a source of U.S. strength during the Cold War (pp. 175-186) is a wonder of delicately shaded scrutiny that investigates cultural icons in music, fashion, and soft drinks, while also showing that foreigners both adopted, and co-opted, American products of abundance. In the end, the United States arrived on distant shores with its military or, in a more long-lasting way, with its stuff that the rest of the world enjoyed as much as Americans did. Hunt argues convincingly that the butter of consumerism—and trade, finance, and aid that carried it abroad—paved the way for U.S. hegemony more than guns, despite the current messy affair in Iraq.

Still, like any large-think book, this one left me with questions, and most notably, some nagging doubts regarding the details. For instance, is there a president who truly performs well? Hunt certainly appreciates the hardships facing leaders, but in placing the American ascendency in a big model that depends on trends and large frameworks (economics, politics, etc.), the White House often seems like a place where mistakes are made. Woodrow Wilson had a good idea with his Fourteen Points, but they ultimately failed, no matter how farsighted he was, in large part due to his political bungling. Anyway, Hunt
claims that he enhanced the possibilities of the American empire by developing an interventionist ideology and state institutions in line with American responsibilities, though we can surely debate Wilson’s imperial motives. According to the author, Franklin Roosevelt was necessarily cautious in the face of isolationism, but then he turned cynical in letting the Russians fight the war in Europe until they had turned back Nazism, and made things easier for conquest in the West by the tremendous surge across the Atlantic and into Germany by the United States. That is not entirely accurate or fair to FDR, especially when considering the political resistance he experienced at home to involvement in the war. Jimmy Carter’s human rights policy was a welcome change from cold realism and neglect of the Third World, but Hunt argues that he was inept—true, but Carter was also a refreshing break with the past. Hunt views Bill Clinton and his successor as pursuers of a globalization mantra that might prove as destructive to U.S. interests as beneficial, but the benefits might be emphasized a bit more. Finally, Harry Truman had much on his plate in the early Cold War, but certainly, he planned to use any advantage to prosecute that conflict and protect U.S. security as he defined it. Thus, his decision in 1950 to develop the hydrogen bomb might have been morally repellant (like his order to drop the atomic bombs in 1945), but this did not represent a “slavish devotion to exploiting new technologies . . .” (135), as Hunt writes. This seems rather simplistic. Just as possible, the H-bomb decision might also have revealed a calculated policy based on assessments (and misjudgments) of Sino-Soviet intentions, fear, and budgetary considerations. Hunt is not ungenerous to the presidents, but he does make implications that appear rather harsh at times.

A bigger question than presidential portraits relates to the nature of a hegemon. Hunt explores American foreign policy-making as it reacted to events abroad, perceptions of threats, or opportunities to exploit advantages. But he addresses much less substantially the home turf, and especially the effects of domestic support, neglect of foreign policy by the populace, and the influence of electoral politics on elites. And on one occasion, that of the 1930s road to war, he seems to turn from policy and shove aside international events and security issues for an inordinate focus on consumer issues. A closer look at three eras reveals an occasional lapse in balanced treatment of the foreign and domestic, as well as the need for some interpretative tweaking.

In his treatment of Wilsonianism, for instance, Hunt seems to bypass the fact that, despite Wilson’s look ahead to the postwar peace, the country was at war. To accuse the Americans of seeking empire, no matter how beneficent, ignores the fact that state-building occurred as a means to prosecute the war. An effective and powerful presidency did not mean imperial pretensions held sway. Hunt shrewdly explains how Wilson preached with his Fourteen Points to a small elite, about 20% of the population, but he then implies that the President was a crusader who wished to assert American power, as well as his own, as “he imagined the entire world his stage” (62). But this hardly squares with the author’s astute analysis of the appeal of self-determination, a Wilsonian trademark. Wilson may have been petty, but he also reacted (as Hunt rightly goes on to note) to a horrible war, dysfunctional European politics, and the Russian Bolshevik challenge. He also encountered
political rivals as petty as he was. Some slight adjustment in tone is in order, especially through an emphasis on World War I.

The Great Depression period was a critical time for America and the world, but does a concern with the development of a consumer society really capture the essence of the decade in terms of diplomacy? Obviously, Hunt seeks to illustrate long-term trends. Also, as noted above, Hunt is right that FDR was wary in foreign policy, which a rather controlled approach to lowering barriers to commerce, under the plodding Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934, represented. But when the reader steps back and assesses Hunt's treatment of the decade, it appears as if he is trying too hard to make the case for expansion and empire, and less so for the trying security crises that Roosevelt encountered. In addition, I wish Hunt emphasized even more than he did FDR's unwillingness to push the isolationists too far. This would have placed the issues in a firmer context of domestic, as well as international, constraints.

Finally, Hunt does a good job on Nixon-Kissinger realism but he actually seems to punt on perhaps one of the most transformative events of the past thirty years: the so-called second “Nixon Shock,” in which the President slammed shut the gold window, thereby stopping the convertibility of dollars into gold held by foreigners and setting the capitalist powers on the road to floating exchange rates. Hunt admits that the move, among others in the foreign economic policy arsenal, shifted “the burden of managing the international economy” partly to the shoulders of European and Japanese allies (244). But he does not go on to conclude (in order to keep with his hegemonic ascendancy theme) either that the dollar (and, hence, the United States) remained predominant over the global economy or that allies deserved to be told to share the burden of American payments for their security. Instead, we are left with an ambiguous statement that postwar economic institutions were left in place (though the Nixon Shock really heralded the end of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates) and that nations remained committed to “an open international economic system” (244), which does not sound too bad. It surely does not sound like hegemony or the exercise of imperial power on the part of the Americans.

The book then focuses us on very recent history, and the recent scholarly obsession with notions of empire. Actually, Hunt has little patience with the concept of empire, viewing it today as a way for neoliberals to excuse aggressive American policies that harm others, and the U.S. position in the world as well. He even dismisses the long-held approach of the Wisconsin School’s informal empire, preferring the concept of “hegemony,” a term more in vogue in the 1980s in academe (empire’s trendiness is of more recent vintage). Hegemony theory portrays the United States as a much more powerful and dominating global force than does imperial ideology, but in this, I fear that Hunt is overreacting to events of the past decade or so, and certainly the post-9/11 era of mistaken foreign and military policies on the part of the neo-cons in the Bush administration. He shucks off history—the strength of the book—and turns presentist. But first off, who is to say how historians will revise their views of the Bush administration (as they have of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Reagan)? No matter how much it stretches our imagination, Bush II might undergo a scholarly revision
in two decades that improves his reputation. Second, to be sure, as Hunt writes, “[t]he fingerprints of the United States are everywhere,” (313), but he also makes a case that America was already the hegemon during and just after the Second World War. Perhaps, but then there is Charles de Gaulle, the Vietnam War, and, of course, the inability to resolve the peace in Iraq over the past four years. All undercut U.S. hegemonic power.

Hegemony is a weighty term, but it might serve us better not to quest for terminology at all, and merely explain the history as a general accretion of power on the part of the United States. Leave it at that, for using it opens Hunt up to inconsistency. For instance, America might have followed an imperial course, except in periods such as the 1870s and 1930s, when it did not. It could have been a hegemon for the past half century, save for the 1970s, when it ran out of gasoline, impotently watched as radical Islam took its diplomats hostage in Iran, and shuttled throughout the Middle East as a largely ineffective salesman for Israeli-Arab peace, except for the case of Egypt. Thus, the label does not apply across the board. Labels may or may not stick in our vocabulary; much better is history written with the talents of an author like Hunt, who largely provides us with analysis that is timeless.

While readers will readily discern Hunt’s frustration with present events (and I wonder if his editor, rather than he, wanted to issue assessments of contemporary issues and judge the future as well), they should also acknowledge that this book is a marvel of research (the annotated bibliography itself is worth the price) and just plain thoughtfulness. This book has so much to offer that my criticisms pale in significance to its overwhelming excellence. Michael Hunt has produced a study that both traditionalists and new diplomatic historians—as well as the public, including politicians—should read, and read again. On my third time through, I picked up ever more golden nuggets of insights. My fourth reading should yield similar results. Students of American history will, I expect, look to this book as a standard of sweeping interpretation and information that surpasses all before it.

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