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Empire in Retreat: The Past, Present, and Future of the United States

This ambitious book attempts to recast the wide-ranging narrative of American foreign policy since 1783 as a more or less deliberate and consistent effort to create a semi-global empire. Victor Bulmer-Thomas, a leading British scholar on Latin America and a former director of Chatham House, casts aside more conventional and flattering American self-descriptions built around concepts such as American exceptionalism, reluctant internationalism, leadership by default and empire by invitation.

Much of America’s expanding influence in its first 100 years came through transcontinental territorial acquisition and conquest, while for most of the last 100 years the United States has more typically spread its influence non-territorially, through temporary military interventions, trade treaties, transnational corporations and the signature US-dominated institutions of the liberal international order. But through all the changing names, claims and disguises, an empire it is and has been, Bulmer-Thomas insists, conforming to the classic imperial patterns of the formal empires of Europe’s past. Yet what is and has been an empire will not forever be, since, as the author’s title suggests, he believes that today’s still-powerful American empire is in steady and inevitable retreat.

For the most part, Bulmer-Thomas succeeds in making both his points. But shaping such a long, varied, sometimes tawdry and sometimes inspiring story to fit a single theme requires occasional cherry-picking of the available evidence.
Bulmer-Thomas always assumes offensive or expansive intent as the primary motive of American policy, neglecting to give due weight to other powerful considerations, such as compelling perceptions of real or potential external threats. These perceptions can be no less operative for being inaccurate, exaggerated or misplaced, as they frequently were. Bulmer-Thomas’s arguments are stronger and more convincing in the last 100 pages of the book, where he places greater emphasis on hard economic statistics and less on reading American leaders’ minds to discern their intent.

Turning to the present, the author sees multiplying signs of imperial decline and retreat in America’s diminished international prestige after the twin self-inflicted blows of the Iraq War and the Great Recession that severely discredited the neoliberal ‘Washington consensus’ on economic policy. He also points to growing opposition to America’s expansionist agenda abroad, and sharpened debates at home about the merits and rewards of American exceptionalism and trade-treaty diplomacy.

America’s imminent retreat, Bulmer-Thomas writes, is a normal and inevitable process after what, by historical standards, has been an impressively long run of imperial hegemony. Retreat from empire, he emphasises, need not necessarily mean the decline of the nation-state that underlies it. In fact, he argues, it could be a kind of liberation for the American people, allowing them to live better lives at home, freed from the increasing costs and diminishing returns of policing far-flung clients and dependents.

Much will be determined, Bulmer-Thomas argues, by how the US handles its coming retreat. The signs thus far are not encouraging, with the current predominant response among American policymakers, denial, opening widening gaps between their reflexive, assertive rhetoric and posturing, and the diminishing realities of American power. He finds these gaps particularly wide in traditional American spheres of influence such as Latin America and the Middle East. In East Asia, where Washington at least recognises the challenge of a rising China, American perceptions are less outdated, and the gap consequently narrower.

The Last 100 Days: FDR at War and at Peace
349 pp.

The last 100 days of Franklin Roosevelt’s nearly 4,500-day presidency were almost as consequential as the more famous first 100, at least in the arena of international relations. But while the first 100 days mostly succeeded in calming the nameless fears and reviving the sunken spirits of Depression-stricken
Americans (as well as laying the legislative foundations of the New Deal), many of the last 100 were largely devoted to a failing effort to preserve America’s wartime grand alliance with Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union as a key element in realising Roosevelt’s vision for the post-war world. Had the president achieved what he was aiming for, he might indeed have laid the foundations for a very different United Nations, and a dramatically different American foreign policy, from those that actually emerged during the presidency of Roosevelt’s ill-prepared successor, Harry Truman.

Of course, we can only guess how Roosevelt would have reacted to events that happened after his death, less than two weeks before the San Francisco Conference that transformed the wartime UN military alliance into the peace-time United Nations Organisation, and less than a month before Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies. Nor can we know if Stalin might have behaved differently if faced with the more conciliatory Roosevelt rather than the more confrontational Truman.

It is possible that Roosevelt, faced with the deteriorating European situation and the growing domestic pressures that beset Truman in the late 1940s, might himself have adopted a more Truman-like course. Increasingly severe, and possibly irreconcilable, differences over Poland’s future governance were already evident in Roosevelt’s correspondence with Stalin and Winston Churchill, as Woolner shows. But the author also shows how determined Roosevelt remained to avoid an ultimate break. As he had throughout his political career, Roosevelt trusted in his own powers of persuasion, particularly when he could exercise them in person, as he believed he had at Yalta. He felt sure that if he could keep Stalin on board through a successful launch of the new United Nations, the fate of Poland and other issues dividing the wartime allies could all be worked out there.

Woolner does well to document that for Roosevelt, the chance to redeem Woodrow Wilson’s failure to secure America’s battlefield victory in the First World War with a universal, collective security organisation was a driving dream, one that literally kept him going as his ailing and exhausted body began to give out on him. Roosevelt had witnessed Wilson’s failure from a ringside seat, as a junior cabinet member and then as Democratic nominee for vice president in 1920, running, and badly losing, on a Wilsonian platform.

It was not just a matter of historical vindication. Roosevelt believed that the key to winning domestic political support for his ambitious plans for American international engagement in the post-war world was the redemption of his promise to bring American troops home from Europe within two years after Germany’s defeat. Apportioning spheres of influence between the victorious
‘four policemen’ – the US, the UK, Soviet Russia and Nationalist China – was the key to doing that. Cold War confrontation with Moscow would make a massive American troop withdrawal from Europe all but impossible, as subsequent presidents were to find out.

Woolner, who teaches history at Marist College and is Hyde Park Resident Historian at the Roosevelt Institute, is well suited to guide us through these poignant 100 days. As he notes in his acknowledgements, Roosevelt, who revelled in secrecy and deviousness, is a particularly tough subject to understand. Decades of research have fortified Woolner for the challenge. He gives us an unusually good sense of Roosevelt the human being. We see how three full terms plus 82 days of a fourth physically wore him out and likely hastened his death, as Roosevelt himself was surely aware. His sense of his own indispensability, an occupational hazard of the American presidency, pushed him on and resulted in a poorly planned transition that ultimately contributed to undermining Roosevelt’s vision of the post-war world.

**American Discontent: The Rise of Donald Trump and Decline of the Golden Age**

Donald Trump’s election to the US presidency in 2016 came as an unpleasant shock to most American academics, one not predicted by the news media they mostly read or watched. Most disturbingly for political scientists and sociologists, it did not fit the models of American electoral behaviour they taught and believed in. Not surprisingly, a fair number of these scholars have spent the past couple of years writing books aimed at reconciling their professional world views with what actually happened.

John L. Campbell, who teaches sociology at Dartmouth College and political economy at Copenhagen Business School, has produced one of the more satisfactory of these books. ‘More satisfactory’ should not be read as damning with faint praise – no one has yet come up with a definitive scholarly analysis of what has surely become the central problem in contemporary American politics.

Campbell’s book has many virtues. It is honest, modest, lucidly written, brief, and rightly shuns monocausal theories and explanations. The author’s main thesis is that Trump’s 2016 electoral-college victory had long and deep roots in economic, racial, ideological and party-political changes reaching back at least into the 1970s. Trump came along at just the right moment to ride these changes to a political victory that, in retrospect, should not have been so surprising. The right moment also required the right candidate. Someone less shameless and
less skilled at fanning and exploiting racial fears and cultural resentments might well have fallen short. But to focus only on Trump and his campaign, Campbell notes, is to miss the larger point about the changed dynamics of American politics, which may continue to operate long after Trump’s presidency ends.

Campbell’s first strand of causation is the bleak reversal of economic and social fortunes experienced by most of the American working and middle classes since the early 1970s. After rising during 30 years of post-war prosperity those fortunes fell, in relative and, for many, even in absolute terms during the three lean decades that followed. Campbell invokes by now familiar statistical series showing the downward inflection of real incomes and the upward inflection of social inequality and household debt – statistics that, while familiar, are curiously absent from too many other analyses of the 2016 election, which focus merely on issues of race, gender and cultural identities. Campbell gives these issues great weight, but recognises that we need to look at the interaction of economic and cultural factors to appreciate the true significance of both. Paradoxically, though 2016 saw a modest uptick in the yearly economic numbers, decades of dashed expectations and politicians’ broken promises had eroded expectations, confidence in the future and faith in the political establishment.

Campbell explains that, during the decades of widening inequality, politicians from both major parties began changing their messaging and their policies, shifting from promises of widely shared prosperity and expanding social rights towards neoliberal policies aimed at unleashing and deregulating free markets and providing supply-side incentives to the already successful. Both parties moved to the right, he argues, but the Republicans moved further. Meanwhile, politicians, especially Republican politicians, became increasingly shameless in their promotion of racial and ethnic anxieties and stereotyping, playing on fears among the white majority that its long-term demographic and political preponderance was nearing an end – an end accelerated, Republicans claimed, by the allegedly pro-immigration policies of the Democrats.

The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment

If journalism is the first draft of history, how much time must pass before historians themselves can provide a meaningful second draft? From the evidence of this book, released a year after Barack Obama’s departure from office, more than a year is required. Julian E. Zelizer, a Princeton political historian and CNN analyst, has assembled contributions from some of America’s
most distinguished historians. But, through no fault of the 17 contributors, the collection suffers from a foreshortening of historical perspective, as well as a paucity of the primary-source evidence that later historians will presumably be able to consult.

Still, there is much here of real value. The chapter by Risa Goluboff and Richard Schragger establishing the historical context for Obama’s, and by extension Trump’s, Supreme Court appointments is particularly useful and timely. The authors’ benchmark is what they see as a mid-twentieth-century settlement of previously contested issues, such as the constitutional bases for individual civil liberties, group-based civil rights and the proliferating administrative state born of the Progressive and New Deal eras. They show how this settlement began to be reinterpreted by Republican-appointed judges after 1980, yet remained fundamentally intact through the end of Obama’s presidency.

In another chapter, Peniel E. Joseph writes incisively about the committed efforts by Obama and especially attorney general Eric Holder to reform the inherited problem of the mass incarceration of African Americans, and the disappointingly limited gains the two of them managed to achieve. Joseph also examines the inherent conflicts between Obama’s gradualist pragmatism and the radicalism of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement. Matthew D. Lassiter narrows the focus to the continuing war on drugs and the unresolved conflicts between Obama’s deliberate emphasis on prohibition and punishment, and his simultaneous promotion of treatment and reform. Sarah R. Coleman shows similar contradictions at work within Obama’s approach to another inherited problem, the presence of millions of immigrants who either entered the country illegally or overstayed their permits. Obama understood the across-the-board benefits of bringing the employed and law-abiding majority out of the legal shadow world in which they were required to abide. But he also believed that visibly tough border enforcement and deportations were the most promising way to win congressional support for substantive immigration reform. In the end, Congress was not won over, forcing Obama to rely on his executive authority for selective measures of relief, such as deferring deportation for the ‘dreamers’ who were brought to the US as children. With no substantive reforms enacted by Congress, it took just a stroke of Donald Trump’s pen to eliminate Obama’s relief measures while intensifying his enforcement policies.

In other chapters, Kathryn Olmsted points out essential continuities between Obama’s counter-terrorism strategies and those of George W. Bush, while Jacob Dlamini notes how America’s first African-American president reduced the emphasis his predecessor had placed on African affairs. Obama’s realist foreign policy did not see Africa as particularly important to broader American inter-
est, nor did he feel, and rightly so, that his own African-American origins provided any substantive reason to override that realist view. Finally, Gary Gerstle shows how initial hopes that Obama’s election signalled a post-racial dawn for America were soon overshadowed by the vehement and sustained white-supremacist backlash, set off by the anger many whites seemed to feel at the mere fact of an African American occupying the White House.

**Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America**

The subject of this edited collection could scarcely be more timely. Are American laws, institutions and traditions sufficiently robust to protect the country’s liberal democracy from destruction by the current illiberally intentioned administration, or a future one? The editor, Harvard law professor and former Obama adviser Cass R. Sunstein, has assembled a stellar line-up of leading law professors, economists, psychologists and diplomats to shed light on this prime political topic. But the collection proves disappointingly uneven and much of it notably unilluminating, with too many contributors displaying a regrettable tendency to package their own obvious distaste for Trump and his supporters as rigorous social science.

There are notable exceptions, and the collection contains a number of original and incisive essays. One is free-market economist Tyler Cowen’s historical study of how large state bureaucracies can provide a buffer against fascist takeovers. Another is former George W. Bush Justice Department official Jack Goldsmith’s argument that the American deep state is real, but can paradoxically fortify democracy as well as undermine it. Harvard law professor Noah Feldman rigorously examines the question posed by the book’s title and concludes that ‘it’, which is to say some variant of fascism, probably cannot happen ‘here’, which is to say in the US. Duncan Watts of Microsoft Research and Cornell University argues that the key problem is how American politics encourages people to rely on ‘common sense’ against the often counter-intuitive claims of science, and especially of the social sciences.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking essay in the collection is by Duke economist and political scientist Timur Kuran. He contends that America’s key political divide is no longer between liberals and conservatives, but between those he calls ‘Identitarians’ and those labelled ‘Nativists’. Identitarians tend to define their ideas about politics based on fractionalised sub-identities – gender, race, ethnicity and so on. They are comfortable, to say the least, with the idea of silencing any speech they feel promotes hatred and violence.
Nativists, on the other hand, get their hackles up about globalisation, cultural change and immigrants.

Both groups depend, and thrive, on demonising the other, driving political discourse into self-reinforcing whirlpools of toxic vitriol. Of course, many who care deeply about subgroup identity do not become enforcers of political correctness, while many nativists can be calmly rational in their complaints about the direction in which America is headed. Kuran does not take enough note of those who are not frenzied fanatics and how they might leaven the national political debate. But his categories seem to fit contemporary America much better than the older categories of left and right held over from the economic debates of earlier centuries.

At the end of Sunstein’s 481 pages, his initial question remains: can it happen here? Some days, to listen to Trump or to read his tweets on, say, the media, migrant caravans or the rule of law, is to feel like it already has.