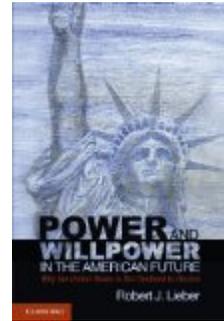


**Robert J. Lieber.** *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. x + 180 pages. \$24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-28127-0.

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## The Benevolent Hegemon Shall (and Must) Endure

“The idea that the United States is in a state of rapid, fundamental decline is now widely proclaimed,” begins Robert Lieber in his new book, *Power and Willpower in the American Future* (p. 1). Cassandras traversing the political spectrum warn that America faces unprecedented peril. While the homeland reels from deficits, partisan gridlock, and an ongoing economic crisis, the picture overseas looks no less grim. In the greater Middle East, two troubled and costly wars have illustrated the limits of U.S. power. Washington’s drones and carrier battle groups have convinced neither Al Qaeda to lay down its arms nor Tehran to abandon its nuclear program. Meanwhile, the Chinese leaders in Beijing, whom President Bill Clinton once derided for standing on the wrong side of history, now preside over history’s greatest market transformation, and they have at their disposal trillions in dollar reserves to break the fall from any potential slowdown. Henry Luce’s *American Century*, it appears, has ended.

Lieber, professor of government and international affairs at Georgetown University, argues otherwise. The “declinists,” he insists, have it wrong. America retains many advantages—its size, resources, competitiveness, demographics, financial markets, military power, science and technology, absorptive capacities, and attractiveness to immigrants—which, according to Lieber, render the talk of decline “exaggerated, hyperbolic, and ahistorical” (p. 2). According to most dimensions by which power is measured, Lieber states, “the margin between America

and [other countries] remains substantial” (p. 52). Lieber does not ignore pressing challenges like China’s rise and the emergence of threats—Islamist radicalism, terrorism, nuclear proliferation—that are less susceptible to traditional uses of American power. At home, fiscal imbalances and divisive politics also threaten America’s future. Yet overcoming these challenges, as Lieber sees it, is simply “a matter of will and willpower, in the sense that successful responses to our problems depend on purposeful concerted action” in addressing them (p. 148).

And address these problems we must. For Lieber’s real purpose in writing *Power and Willpower* is to argue that without American leadership, we would live in “a more dangerous and disorganized world” (p. 4). He thus offers a provocative rebuttal to the declinist conventional wisdom and also to scholars such as Andrew Bacevich, Michael Hunt, and Chalmers Johnson, who have argued that the United States should abandon its quest for hegemony or at least take on a more modest and sustainable role in the world.[1] In arguing that declinists have been too quick in writing the country off, Lieber makes a reasonable and often convincing case. As a contribution to current political debates, however, *Power and Willpower* falls short of proving that the pursuit of hegemony Lieber advocates actually serves the interests of the American people.

In chapters 1 and 2, Lieber argues that despite a relative decline in U.S. power, the country still remains a long

way from being overtaken by peer competitors and retains the strength needed to play a leading international role comparable to the one it has played since the end of World War II. Recent declinist arguments, he notes, “carry an unmistakable echo of the past” (p. 13). The Sputnik launch, two recessions in the 1970s, and Japan’s economic boom all provoked fears of American decline. These warnings proved to be overstated. China, unlike Japan, he concedes, has the potential to become a true superpower rival, but Lieber cautions against assuming this is destined to occur.

China’s rise nevertheless figures prominently in his argument. Lieber believes that America’s lead in per capita GDP—\$49,055 versus \$9,204 for China—gives the country a long-term edge, which is further bolstered by its relative strengths in higher education, innovation, advanced technology, military capacity, and a less-rapidly aging population (pp. 41, 51). With the United States, Lieber points out the country’s strengths. But when examining China, he sees mostly weaknesses. He sounds warnings about export-led growth, environmental degradation, and the real estate bubble. And without democracy, Lieber argues, China “is sooner or later likely to experience major crises” (p. 153).

While Lieber chides those holding pessimistic views about America’s future, he leans heavily on the work of some of China’s harshest critics—Gordon C. Chang, Maochun Yu, and Minxin Pei. A more balanced approach to the Chinese side might challenge some of Lieber’s more downbeat predictions. After all, China during the twentieth century proved even more able than the United States in taking in and absorbing outside influence. Deng Xiaoping’s transition to state-directed capitalism stands out as one of the more striking instances of Chinese adaptability, a trait Lieber implicitly denies by accepting that China’s demographics, export-led growth model, and political system are static.

Another weakness in the book is that Lieber oversells American hegemony by extolling its virtues while downplaying or even ignoring the costs it has imposed on both outsiders and the American people. No doubt, as Lieber argues, the U.S. role in East Asia has helped underpin stability in Japan and South Korea. Yet U.S. bases in both countries have angered locals and fueled long-standing political tensions. Lieber says little about the impact of Washington’s military footprint elsewhere. In Southeast Asia, Central America, and the Middle East, U.S. intervention has caused considerable and needless bloodshed. These military adventures and the firepower required to

sustain them also consume immense treasure. Critics contend that the United States spends more on defense than most of the remaining world combined. But Lieber notes that at 4.9 percent of GDP, U.S. defense spending remains relatively low compared to post-World War II standards (pp. 123-124). He would like to see the figure rise. At the same time, he recommends large cuts in federal spending and entitlement programs. While conceding that Republicans need to accept “measures to increase government revenue as part of tax reform,” he also slams America’s high corporate tax rates, so tax increases presumably won’t be part of those reforms (p. 157). Where, then, will the country find the spare cash needed to preserve America’s military edge and pay for the increases in advanced ships and aircraft that Lieber advocates? He urges simplifying the tax code, trimming regulations, and introducing more competition and cost-cutting incentives into the healthcare system. But he offers scant details on how to carry these plans out. What’s clear is that Lieber’s vision would make life harder for the average American, which begs the question: are the dangers Lieber sees sufficient to warrant the sacrifices on the part of the American people that his vision would require them to make?

Lieber’s account of foreign dangers focuses on China, Iran, terrorism, Islamist radicalism, and nuclear weapons. While proclaiming a “peaceful rise,” the Chinese have grown increasingly confrontational in pressing their disputed maritime claims. Lieber also accuses Beijing of assisting the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs, but cites only a single *Wall Street Journal* article to support his charges. In response to China’s newfound assertiveness in the South and East China seas, Lieber writes that America must back its allies or possibly watch the region fall into disarray as smaller countries scramble to accommodate Beijing—a domino theory for the twenty-first century. But Lieber fails to consider the costs the United States might incur by adopting a hawkish approach toward China’s maritime disputes. During America’s wars in Korea and Vietnam, a far weaker China assisted its communist neighbors in dashing Washington’s dreams of imposing its will on eastern Asia. That today’s China would buckle under American military pressure is highly unlikely, regardless of American willpower. Supporting existing security treaties with Japan and the Philippines is one thing; embroiling the country in Asian boundary disputes in order to contain China is something else entirely. The path Lieber advocates could very well exacerbate the existing disputes.

On Iran Lieber sounds a more strident alarm. He declares that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has beliefs suggesting “an erratic grip on reality,” namely, embracing Holocaust denial and 9/11 conspiracy theory (p. 113). There are thus no assurances, says Lieber, that Ahmadinejad is a value-maximizing rational actor. And such men, he warns, cannot be persuaded by deterrence. Here Lieber echoes his September 29, 2002 *Los Angeles Times* editorial, “Containment Has Run Its Course,” in which he made the case for war on Iraq. Back then he warned that “containment is a risky defense against a man of Hussein’s character.” Citing Saddam’s aggression against his neighbors and his own people, Lieber asked readers, “Is it not wishful thinking to hope that a man with this record can be relied upon to make the rational strategic calculations or exercise the restraint and prudence that advocates of deterrence and containment assume?” His track record on Iraq suggests readers should take Lieber’s appraisal of Ahmadinejad with caution.

Lieber observes that problems stemming from terrorism, Islamist radicalism, and nuclear weapons will not disappear on their own, and he argues that the United States must take the lead in addressing them. Much of his enthusiasm for American leadership stems from his dismissive views on multilateral cooperation and international institutions, especially the United Nations. The UN, he notes, failed to prevent atrocities in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Sudan. And the Iraqis, North Koreans, and Syrians have flouted UN Security Council resolutions. NATO allies, too, have proved unreliable: they spend little on national defense and they required American assistance to sustain their commitment to the recent Libyan intervention.

Lieber’s gloomy account of multilateral cooperation and international institutions sidesteps compelling evidence demonstrating that collaboration often works. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade brought about an extraordinary drop in tariffs, and, along with other collaborative elements of the postwar international economic order, contributed to massive growth in trade and global prosperity. Rehabilitating Japan and Germany, and rebuilding Western Europe after World War II, resulted from collaborative efforts that also enhanced both U.S. security and prestige. Collaboration among America and its allies distinguished the West from the Soviet bloc and helped secure victory in the Cold War. It also helped ensure Allied victory in World War II. In addition, 190 countries have joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and only one—North Korea—has withdrawn. Pyongyang,

of course, lived many years under the shadow of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea. International cooperation has not always proved effective but it has often yielded better results than the brute force Washington employed in Iraq and Vietnam.

This final point brings up the chief flaw in Lieber’s book. *Power and Willpower* is a rallying call to persist along the foreign policy course charted by the George W. Bush administration. Yet that very course—unbridled unilateralism, the pursuit of unquestioned global hegemony, and using preemptive force against overstated threats, all carried out while trimming taxes and regulations—has been one of the main causes of the relative decline in American power and economic strength over the past decade. Lieber spends very little time reflecting on how well the policies he advocated during the Bush years actually advanced U.S. interests.

A concise and provocative book, *Power and Willpower* shows that America still remains, by many measures, the world’s leading power. Despite its growth over the past three decades, China does not yet rank as a true peer competitor. But Lieber’s other message—that America must use its power to maintain global hegemony—will probably win fewer converts. His argument here speaks primarily to those who still support the neoconservative agenda of the early 2000s. These readers will no doubt welcome Lieber’s book. Those, however, who believe that fixing America’s problems at home should take precedence over fixing the Middle East or policing Asian boundary disputes, are less likely to be persuaded. Lieber exaggerates the Iranian threat while understating the efficacy of multilateral cooperation. He fails to consider alternatives to dealing with terrorism besides increased defense spending and a costly global military presence. And finally, he advises a confrontational stance toward China that would embolden Beijing’s more hawkish forces and go a long way toward making the country a new cold war enemy.

#### Note

[1]. Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008); Michael Hunt, *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained and Wielded Global Dominance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), especially 320-324; and Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

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