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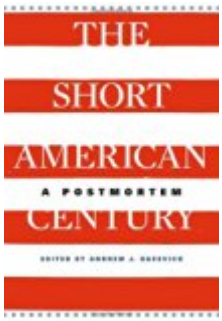

Andrew J. Bacevich, ed.. *The Short American Century: A Postmortem.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. 296 pp. $25.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-06445-4.

Reviewed by Michael Brenes

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Months before the United States' entry into World War II, *Time* magazine editor Henry Luce predicted that the next one hundred years would be an "American Century." Luce posited that in a postwar environment, America must serve the world as cultural exporter, economic provider, and protector of individual liberties. Because of the nation's unique role as "the inheritors of all the great principles of Western civilization--above all Justice, the love of Truth, [and] the ideal of Charity," Americans had no choice but to accept the burden of internationalism (p. 5). Only a Pax Americana could save the world from itself.

With his latest edited volume, ***The Short American Century: A Postmortem***, Boston University historian Andrew Bacevich brings together a distinguished group of scholars to explain why Luce's vision failed to materialize. As the author of a number of trenchant works that have explored the interconnections between American exceptionalism, the national security state, and the resurgence of militarism since the presidency of Ronald Reagan, Bacevich is well suited to this task.[1] In his introduction, Bacevich states that "the utility of Luce's formulation as a description of the contemporary international order or as a guide to future U.S. policy has been exhausted," as he laments the "severe myopia and even blindness" of American foreign policy during the American Century (p. 14). With the decline of the American economy since the 1970s and evidence of imperial overreach in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American Century has evaporated, Bacevich concludes. The historians assembled in the book follow Bacevich in this line of thought, as each provides a stinging critique of Luce's concept of the American Century and the ways it has shaped America's role in the world. The essays in the book individually and collectively deconstruct and demythologize the notion that America was preeminently suited to be a global superpower following World War II. The book also stands as a call for Americans to give up the imperial ghost and embrace military restraint. The authors warn that Americans must accept the limitations of remaking the world in its image or otherwise face

financial ruin. Bacevich poignantly concludes the volume by writing that to maintain "old illusions of the United States presiding over and directing the course of history will not only impede the ability of Americans to understand the world and themselves but may well pose a positive danger to both" (p. 238).

The book begins with a counterfactual argument by prize-winning Stanford historian David Kennedy: what if the United States had fought World War II differently? Kennedy argues that America's reliance on airpower and strategic bombing during World War II convinced policymakers that American military power could "cost relatively little but yielded enormous economic and social benefits as well as military triumph" (p. 31). If what Michael Sherry has termed "technological fanaticism" had not guided American conduct abroad, then the outcome of the war might not have led the county to pursue hegemony without understanding its broader repercussions.[2] Kennedy also shows that Luce's essay existed without a proper context until 1945, as historical contingencies had a significant role to play in the making of the American Century.

T. J. Jackson Lears focuses on the dissenters of the American Century. Lears looks at the intellectual strain of pragmatism in American thought and sees "pragmatic realism" as offering a counterpoint to the high-minded idealism of Luce. These "pragmatic realists" were part of the American political tradition that stood steadfast against those who reflexively aimed to take America to war since the late nineteenth century. One might quibble with whom Lears defines as a pragmatic realist (Lears puts George F. Kennan in the same company as isolationist Republican Robert A. Taft), but he reminds us that the American Century had limits and there was an alternative to heedless interventionism. The limits of the American Century also appear in Nikhil Pal Singh's essay, "The Problem of Color and Democracy." Singh summons themes echoed by Mary Dudziak, Thomas Borstelmann, and Jonathan Rosenberg, who have examined the contradictions and tensions between American foreign relations and American race relations during the Cold War.[3] Singh engagingly moves from W. E. B. Dubois to Martin Luther King, Jr. to Jesse Jackson, showing how these African American activists--as well as many others--were skeptical that democracy could be spread "behind the barrel of American guns." American involvement in the Congo, Vietnam, and other parts of Asia and Africa solidified in the minds of African Americans the enduring "global significance of racial inequality and domination" (p. 73).

Jeffry Frieden and Akira Iriye question the premises of an American Century altogether. Instead, their contributions place America in the Global Century. Iriye looks at the rise of human rights organizations and the transnational movement of peoples, ideas, and cultures, and argues that during "the American Century, the United States became less 'American'" (p. 140). Frieden's essay, which is derived from his exceptional book, ***Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century*** (2006), surveys the history of American influence in the modern global economy in less than twenty pages, no easy feat. The idea that the free market offers a panacea to all our problems, Frieden proposes, is a product of the Cold War. When American policymakers decided that global economic stability was central to U.S. national security, they unwittingly facilitated the rise of neoliberalism by creating an interdependent economic system under Bretton Woods. Once rising oil prices and inflation undermined the system by 1973, countries tried to revive it by turning to the market. Emily Rosenberg also examines the American Century at the macroeconomic level by exploring the rise of a "globalized culture of consumption" (p. 38). Hard power was just one means of extending America's influence as the American empire relied on commodity fetishism to fight communism and reach new markets for American goods.[4] But as mass consumerism ran

rampant in the second half of the twentieth century, it led to the accumulation of "debt and environmental abuse" that currently afflicts the world's population. The irony to Rosenberg is that "the Consumer Century that was once identified with the American Century became its undoing" (pp. 56-58).

The last two essays by Walter LaFeber and Eugene McCarraher offer the greatest breadth to readers. LaFeber traces the last seventy years of American foreign policy, accentuating how the failures during the Cold War were due to the inability, or unwillingness, of policymakers to escape the shortsightedness of the American Century. In the end, the American Century was "an illusion, but an illusion to which many Americans, in their repeated willingness to ignore history, fell prey" (p. 159). McCarraher reaches back to the seventeenth century to prove how the "eschatology of corporate business" served American interests in the global arena (p. 188). Some of McCarraher's historical analogies are a stretch--comparing the Puritans to the conquistadores, for instance--but his central argument about how Americans conflated--and confused--capitalism and religion illuminates how the national security state thrived during the Cold War due to long-standing beliefs about the virtues of business.

Because the book is a sweeping epitaph for the American Century, the contributors are less interested in demonstrating why Luce's concept continues to hold sway in the minds of the American electorate. As several of the authors mention, even President Barack Obama has invoked American exceptionalism in justifying his foreign policy. And for many conservative Republicans, the American Century will never be over. At a time when Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney has revived Cold War rhetoric in order to lure conservative voters to his campaign, this needs further examination.[5] Considering the history of American foreign policy in the past forty years, one wonders what it will take to discredit the American Century. Vietnam was supposed to be the death knell for the American Century, but in the wake of the first Gulf War and the war on terrorism, it reemerged. The American Century, we discovered, was not dead, but on hiatus. An additional weakness of the book is that it is diagnostic rather than prescriptive in resolving the dilemmas and inadequacies of American military power. While historians admittedly do not make the best prognosticators, the reader is left wondering how precisely the United States can detach itself from the international commitments it has made since the Cold War.

These criticisms do not detract from the analytical richness of the book. As a whole, ***The Short American Century*** is a well-conceived, convincing, and important book that stimulatingly highlights the hubris of Luce's American Century and the impact of its legacy on American domestic and international politics. The chapters fit together nicely, and their clarity and depth make the volume an essential read for specialists, undergraduate students, and the general public.

Notes

[1]. Andrew Bacevich, ***The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*** (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), ***Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*** (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), and ***The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[2]. Michael Sherry, ***The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[3]. Mary Dudziak, ***Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Thomas Borstelmann, ***The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Jonathan Rosenberg, ***How Far the Promised Land?: World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War***

to Vietnam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[4]. Karl Marx, ***Capital: Volume 1*** (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 165. See also Victoria de Grazia, ***Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*** (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005).

[5]. "Romney Uses 'Cold War Prism,' Biden Says in Foreign Policy Attack," ***New York Times***, April 26, 2012.