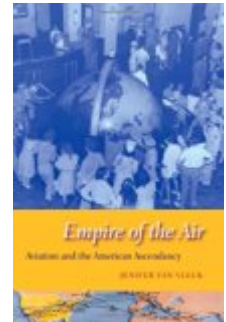


**Jenifer Van Vleck.** *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy.*  
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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The understanding of the roots of aviation and its role in the rise of the United States to global prominence in the twentieth century is enhanced substantially by Jenifer Van Vleck's *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy*. Moving beyond a simple narrative of events, the author ambitiously attempts to weave together the rise of commercial aviation in the imagination of the American public, using Pan American Airways (Pan Am) as the main example, with its opening of the world to American influence, often as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. Van Vleck's use of primary sources is a strength, including the records of Pan Am and the force behind it—Pan Am president Juan Trippe. With a richly elaborated narrative, the roots and uneven growth of aviation in America is traced from the first Wright brothers' flight through the founding of Pan Am and its expansion to Africa and the Pacific, culminating in its decline and demise in the late twentieth century. Traced in parallel with the rising expectations of commercial aviation, the potential, inherent contradictions, and ulti-

mately the limitations of American power are explored in detail.

From the world's first flight in the United States, Van Vleck argues, the airplane was widely viewed as a symbol of national power and greatness, promising to extend the boundaries of the United States without the need to conquer and hold territory. Pan AM aircraft took corporate executives, influential persons, and American economic strength around the world far faster than before, thus accelerating the spread of U.S. popular culture, consumer products, capital, and arms, making few places in the world free from American influence. As U.S. economic and military power grew, the federal government employed the aviation industry as a tool with which to effect the spread of U.S. power around the world and to help market the idea of American ascendancy to the U.S. public.

While parts of this argument are not entirely new, the impressive depth and breadth of research and analysis of the primary record certain-

ly is. So too is the effort to work together the technical details of commercial aviation, and Pan Am in particular, with the imperial and global view afforded from thirty thousand feet that typified the American relationship with the rest of the world. The book is thus an impressive weave of the cultural history of commercial aviation, complete with the imagery and romanticism used to sell aviation to the American people, with the more traditional account of its strategic role in the exercise of American foreign policy. On the one hand, the author argues convincingly that Pan Am depended largely on government support, becoming an instrument of U.S. power, while at the same time opening the world to the elite U.S. air traveler through the “benign activities of trade, travel and tourism” (p. 128). With a well-documented and appealing narrative, the author combines these two threads while at the same time illuminating the inherent contradictions of the American century. In the final chapter, entitled *Empires Rise and Empires Fall*, Van Vleck shows how by the late 1960s a number of challenges posed both by foreign governments and airlines were complicating American dominance in global commercial aviation, something compounded by the difficulties in domestic air travel. The history of American commercial aviation helps us better understand the “why and how” of American power in the twentieth century, and its relative decline in the latter part of that century may also show the limits of that power.

One might rightly question the implied parallel between the rise and fall of commercial aviation and the perceived decline of U.S. power, although the author is careful to avoid carrying that suggestion too far. Moreover, one might also take issue with the centrality of commercial aviation in a world where most elements of U.S. power travel by ship, and thus the freedom of commerce and rise of globalization might owe as much to the strength of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force as to commercial aviation. But the author does not ignore these issues either, and places the argument

firmly within this context. The result is an enjoyable book written with an engaging style, and based on solid primary-source research. It likely will become an essential source for serious scholars of “the American century”

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