



William O. Walker. *The Rise and Decline of the American Century.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 306 pp. \$46.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-2613-2.

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In February 1941 media mogul and publicist Henry R. Luce published an essay on the pages of his own *Life Magazine*, titled “The American Century.” Starting the piece with the assertion that “We Americans are unhappy,” Luce’s long (nearly 5,500 words) essay sought to bring his compatriots to embrace full American participation in World War II in order to realize the “opportunity of leadership” in world affairs once the war was won.[1] Luce encouraged Americans to “exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit,” assuming as a matter of course that these purposes would include serving as a “Good Samaritan of the entire world.”[2] Concocting his own particular vision of American exceptionalism, Luce assured his readers that both virtue and bounty awaited Americans, if only they would dare to seize the moment.

William O. Walker III’s book *The Rise and Decline of the American Century* provides a bold and expansive treatment of American foreign relations in the post-World War II period (1945-74), examined through Walker’s reading of Luce’s 1941 essay. Devising his interpretation of the ideas encapsulated in the term “American Century,” Walker seeks to provide an analysis of US conduct in world affairs that would “revise how we think about US foreign relations from the final

months of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency through Nixon’s resignation” (p. x). Wishing to diverge from histories that position the Cold War in the center of their analysis, Walker suggests that fighting the Cold War was a central means to a larger end: an “integral aspect of the Lucian project” (p. x). Walker claims that the American Century was neither “shibboleth” (p. x) nor “façade” (p. 13), arguing that it was actually, for a limited time, a reality: “those who wanted to give it life did bring the American Century into being and then undertook to nurture it for two decades” (p. x). The tensions between discourse and policy, vision and implementation, culture and power define this study.

The book identifies a shift between two eras: its first part (chapters 1-4), titled “The Rise of the American Century,” stretches from 1945 to the end of the Dwight Eisenhower administration when according to Walker, “Luce’s project had reached its zenith” (p. 120). The shorter, second part (chapters 5-7) addresses “The Decline of the American Century,” stretching from President John F. Kennedy’s inauguration to the disgraceful end of Richard Nixon’s presidency. Walker argues that throughout this era American policymakers were not interested merely in containing the Soviets, but in spreading the gospel that American hegemony was good for the world and good for

America. Through that telling the Marshall Plan, for example, was not just an aspect of “cold-war security policy” but rather “emblematic of the highest aspirations of those who were forging an American century” (p. 10). Americans, Walker seeks to show, pursued an “ideological struggle” to “change the world” (p. 11)—a struggle that cannot be reduced to the Cold War paradigm. When America’s ability and will to lead diminished, writes Walker, the relevance of the Lucian project receded.

The recurring reference to the term “American Century” in the titles of books published nearly eighty years after Luce’s essay is a testament to Luce’s knack for igniting readers’ imagination. But while many existing works use Luce’s piece as a brief jumping-off point to a variety of questions regarding the United States and the world, *The Rise and Decline of the American Century* represents an effort to use Walker’s interpretation of Luce’s article as the main lens through which to make sense of US foreign relations through time. [3] The five broad themes Walker employs to examine the American Century’s trajectory include “the making of grand strategy, relations with allies and client states, political economy,” “nation-building,” and “credibility” (p. 10). Throughout, Walker argues, American policymakers saw it as their mission to propagate “a real affinity for America, its values, culture, and institutions” (p. 11). Mobilizing a variety of primary sources mostly from a wide range of digital archives, the Foreign Relations of the United States series, some research at the Kennedy Library and the Lyndon Johnson Library, and selected secondary sources on US foreign relations around the world, Walker’s treatment compares policymaking decisions to these principles that he deduces as the essence of the American Century idea.

Walker suggests the aim of his book is “nearly as ambitious as that of those who forged the American Century” (p. x), and readers will indeed be struck by the sheer geographic expanse of

Walker’s treatment, a canvas so broad Walker appropriately envisions it as a “triptych” in the book’s introduction (p. ix). Walker takes his readers on a globe-trotting journey from American plans for Germany’s economic recovery in 1945 through the CIA’s designs for the overthrow of Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán in 1954, Eisenhower’s frustration with Arab nationalism in 1959, US backing for counterinsurgency in Congo in 1964, and the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam. Walker’s ability to weave together instances of American involvement in various historical processes across three decades throughout the world is impressive, not least as it provides a compelling and informative narrative introduction to US foreign relations in the 1950s and 1960s.

While Walker dedicates attention to diplomatic and military aspects of American hegemony, the clearest measurements of American dominance in this telling are economic (“growth was the truest mark of success,” p. 2). More than anything else, the arch Walker presents can be traced largely around the changing fortunes of what he defines as “containment capitalism,” which prioritized “currency convertibility, relatively free trade, and the promise of growth and development to stave off Communist inroads in Western Europe” (p. 34). The establishment of multilateral organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in the mid-1940s, and the pursuit of bilateral trade, aid, private investment, accumulation of resources, and increased defense spending, helped to extend American hegemony through the 1950s. Walker identifies the gold crisis of 1968 as the watershed moment after which economic hegemony unraveled, before “containment capitalism dissipated” under Nixon (p. 191).

At the same time, as Walker’s introduction rightfully shows, Luce did not simply advocate American power and influence: he sought to con-

vince his American readership that American power was patently benign and beneficent and that by helping the world Americans would also be helping their own country. Luce's message, as Walker notes, went beyond merely recommending American hegemony in trade and security, but advocated the pursuit of an "ideological struggle" (p. 11). Luce flattered American readers by suggesting the world awaited their leadership. His formula assured that furthering America's interests in trade and in national security and spreading American ideals would benevolently help "our world of 2,000,000,000." [4] His words came to inspire, galvanize, and embolden Americans to see American hegemony as patently moral.

As an investigation of the role a publicist's manifesto played in US foreign relations, the book raises some important matters for further discussion. Walker seeks to counter Walter LaFeber's claim that the American Century worked as a "façade that effectively camouflaged what lay beneath it," arguing instead that "the forging of an American Century succeeded, if only for a time" (p. 13). [5] Walker shows that American policies indeed empowered some of its allies (most clearly Japan and West Germany) and that extensive American investment in certain client states ironically contributed to the decline of American hegemony once its client states gained a surer footing. This, he clarifies, was not unadulterated benevolence, as it stemmed from an American recognition that "our own security depends on part on her [Japan's] economic strength" (p. 82). Either way, American leadership helped rebuild these states from the ashes of World War II, even if it did so in large part due to the broader Cold War strategy to contain the spread of communism.

And yet, it is not entirely clear why Walker seeks to refute the notion that the "American Century" was a façade, considering that in other instances within the book he dedicates critical attention to the self-serving distance between statements of American ethical commitments and ac-

tual policymaking. Walker is no apologist of American power. If describing Venezuela leader Rómulo Betancourt as one "whose politics were more progressive than Washington found desirable" (p. 104) or quoting Secretary of Treasury George Humphrey stating in 1954 that "we should ... stop talking so much about democracy, and make it clear that we are quite willing to support dictatorships of the right if their policies are pro-American" (p. 90), Walker has a keen eye for the gap between American stated ideals and practiced policy. Indeed, he points out the irony in the fact that congressional studies depicted oppressive regimes supported by the US as a "showcase for liberal development" (p. 90). Even if Walker would reject historian John W. Dower's assertion that "the 'American Century' catchphrase is hyperbole, the slogan never more than a myth, a fantasy, a delusion," the book's attention to how ready American policymakers were to describe support for dictatorships in benevolent terms demonstrates the "American Century" catchphrase served *also* as a façade, even if not *only* as a façade. [6]

What other functions did the "American Century" catchphrase serve? What role did Luce's essay play in international affairs? The tension between power and its representation stands at the center of this question. In her recent article on the concept of nation branding, historian Jessica Gienow-Hecht points to the ways "the nation has developed into a brand product, making its claim to legitimacy by means of imagery, ideas, and sound." [7] Luce's American Century essay was one such claim for the legitimacy of American hegemony. On balance, Walker's treatment seems to attend more to American hegemony itself than to the efforts to establish the public legitimacy of this hegemony. The book's introduction convincingly argues that "to achieve hegemony, policymakers had to alter how heads of state, high-level government officials, average citizens, and young people understood and lived in what Washington saw as a dangerous world" (p. 11). The book cer-

tainly shows us that policymakers cared about the perception of their policies abroad—Henry Kissinger’s comments on “prestige” and “credibility” as demonstrations of American “steadiness” is a prime example of that (p. 201). At points (for example pp. 84-88) Walker also provides fascinating insights into how various “nation-building” efforts (ranging from the State Department promoting Coca-Cola to the Korean school system adopting US-friendly messages) shaped foreign views of the United States.

Nevertheless, for a study conceptualized around what Walker convincingly shows was an often deceptive and illusory moralistic and ideologically charged formula, the book does not consistently examine the processes through which Americans and non-Americans conceived, repeated, propagated, or consumed messages regarding the moralistic and ideological aspects of US foreign policy.[8] Changing views of American hegemony in intellectual or cultural circles, for example, or attempts to deal with the contradictions between American discursive commitment to democracy and institutional racism at home, receive little attention.[9] The cast is made up almost entirely of policymakers and does not expand to examine how Luce’s ideas contributed to and morphed in the broader arena that scholar Christina Klein defines as “middlebrow” culture, in the three decades that follow its 1941 publication.[10] Seeing as ideas printed on the glossy pages of a 1941 magazine stand at the center of this study, closer engagement with reportage and commentary, as well as with competing perceptions and representations of American power through time, seems pertinent.

At times it appears Walker gives Luce, who was undoubtedly a successful publicist, an oversized role in the affairs of state. Walker argues that “Luce described the structure of his American Century in general terms to avoid partisan bickering while officials and the public warmed to the idea” (p. 7), but Luce, after all, was not a poli-

cymaker, and it is just as likely (on the evidence presented) that he did not have specific blueprints for the postwar order. Walker’s understanding of the far-reaching influence Luce’s essay had on generations of policymakers in various contexts is not entirely convincing. For example, passing claims that in the mid-1950s “[Eisenhower] instinctively knew what Luce had articulated in 1941: propagating an American Century demanded strong leadership” (pp. 75-76) or that Eisenhower “knew, as Luce implied in his 1941 essay, that problems with leadership would negatively impact the American Century” (p. 79), overextend Luce’s shadow in ways that seem a bit forced, as it is hard to imagine Eisenhower choosing to act weakly or hoping for problems with leadership.

Altogether *The Rise and Decline of the American Century* is an engaging study of changing American approaches to the challenge of achieving and maintaining superiority in the global arena. Even if the book’s methodology and source base do not always carry the full weight of its arguments, it is a well-written and detailed treatment that will interest and inform students of US hegemony in the twentieth-century world.

Notes

[1]. Henry R. Luce, “The American Century,” *Life*, February 17, 1941; reprinted in *Diplomatic History* 23 (Spring 1999): 159–71.

[2]. *Ibid.*

[3]. See for example: Andrew Bacevich, ed., *The Short American Century: A Postmortem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2012; Laurence R. Moore and Maurizio Vaudagna, eds., *The American Century in Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Jeremy Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). Alan Brinkley’s detailed biography of Luce informs most recent treatments of the essayist’s place in American history. See Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Hen-*

ry Luce and his *American Century* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

[4]. Luce, "The American Century."

[5]. For Walter Lafeber's argument see: Walter LaFeber, "Illusions of American Century," in *The Short American Century*, 158-86, 161.

[6]. John W. Dower, *The Violent American Century: War & Terror since World War II* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

[7]. Walter LaFeber, "Illusions of American Century," in *The Short American Century*, ed. Andrew Bacevich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 158-86; 159.

[8]. Walker shows awareness to the relevance of propaganda to the topic by citing the title of Laura Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). Other relevant works include Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Nick Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Kenneth Alan Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008).

[9]. One example concerns the difficulties of portraying the Jim Crow United States as a moral leader to the world. See May Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[10]. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

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