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Review Essay

American “Declinism”: A Review of Recent Literature

Michael Daniels

Is America in decline, yet again? Recent literature suggests some negative trends - an erosion of power, legitimacy and authority that bodes ill for the future of American primacy. However, this perspective is not new. At least three other American declinist periods have arisen since the 1950s, and others still earlier in US history. Some pundits say this time is different: America cannot fix what ails it, and there is no stemming the “rise of the rest,” especially China. Others disagree, and contend there are no current ills that cannot be cured. Some claims are overstated, some appear to be repackaged from previous warnings, and others are simply repeating popular conceptions within political, policy, media, and social circles.

It is a challenge to select only a few voices from this crowded field to frame the issue, define its scope, and determine its merits. The five books reviewed below were chosen because they were authored by respected and/or experienced hands and are recent additions to this debate. They were also selected for their unique perspectives. These books, in sum, provide the reader a full appreciation of the current debate, and are complementary. They do not necessarily offer definitive answers, but no single book published to date completely addresses this complicated domestic and international debate.

The Upside of Down: Why the Rise of the Rest is Good for the West

The first book is *The Upside of Down: Why the Rise of the Rest is Good for the West*, by Charles Kenny. Kenny is an economist, and currently a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development. As the subtitle of his book indicates, America and the West may be in decline, but the rest of the world is trending upward, which should be a reason for celebration. Kenny provides a unique argument amongst declinists. He sees global advances in public health, education, and economic opportunity providing opportunities for growth and stability. His main argument is the United States and the West must better understand this current trend, stop fighting it, and find sensible ways to embrace this new world economic order.

Kenny faults many of the policy prescriptions proposed by declinists. He views

Books Reviewed:

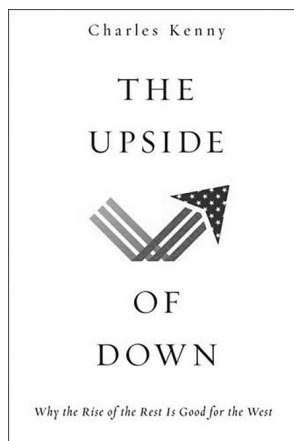
The Upside of Down: Why the Rise of the Rest is Good for the West
By Charles Kenny

Time to Start Thinking: America in the Age of Descent
By Edward Luce

The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half-Century of False Prophecies
By Josef Joffe

The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat
By Vali Nasr

Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order
By Richard N. Haass



Charles Kenny, *The Upside of Down: Why the Rise of the Rest is Good for the West* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). 256 pages. \$26.99

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their pessimism as unnecessary and myopic; US leadership cannot reverse this global trend. In this view, he veers away from mainstream thinking as expressed by those like Charles Krauthammer, who declares “decline is not a condition. Decline is a choice.” Kenny says we need to accept and prepare for this new world order rather than building an ineffectual bulwark against the inevitable tide of change. He sees increases in global health and prosperity creating a more resilient and stable planet. This reduction in tension and instability provides a more level platform on which to trade and interact, which also decreases the amount of resources America has to invest while “securing the world.”

As an economist, most of Kenny’s points concern the benefits of an interconnected world in an era of globalization. In his estimation, since economics is not a zero-sum game there can be no losers, only winners, as all benefit from the rise of others. These new opportunities do exist, but Kenny seems to overstate, and oversimplify, this economic trend. The rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS—and others in the developing world) generally has a positive impact on regional, and international, trading partners. This economic ink-spot model has some validity, but it is incomplete in its description of the global environment. Kenny only briefly addresses the increases in nationalist tensions, especially in South and East Asia. He claims the risk of global misunderstanding and violence will be reduced through these economic linkages, and “the potential for clashing civilizations is distinctly on the decline.” This “McDonald’s theory” of international order and conflict is a little thin; economic interdependence only goes so far, as the world is starting to observe.

Time to Start Thinking: America in the Age of Descent



Edward Luce, *Time to Start Thinking: America in the Age of Descent* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2012). 320 pages. \$26.00

Kenny’s glossy reassurances may be uplifting, but they are neither pragmatic nor substantive. Edward Luce’s *Time to Start Thinking* offers a much darker outlook. Luce, an experienced and respected journalist—most recently as the Washington bureau chief for the *Financial Times*. Kenny’s optimistic description of the current state of affairs is worlds away from that described by Luce, as evidenced by this book’s subtitle of “America and the Spectre of Decline.” Luce is not an optimist; nor is he a doomsayer. However, his book paints a stark picture of “anti-Democracy” in America.

Luce’s description of what ails America is very detailed and thorough, and his list of interviewees is equally expansive and impressive. As such he provides both a width and depth to his argument and main thesis, that America has lost its essential pragmatism but retained its exceptionalist tendencies. Exceptionalism has always been a sword that cuts two ways. Luce’s contention is that creed now trumps both substance and action, resulting in a sclerosis from which the United States

may not recover. It is a dark work. One reviewer, Jonathan Rauch, wrote it could have been titled “Time to Start Drinking.”

Luce has structured his book around the main challenges facing America: an education system in decline, a “hollowing out” of the middle class, a decrease in investment in research and development and decline in innovation, an oversized and ineffective bureaucracy, and the poisoning of politics by increases in partisanship and the influence of money and special interests in a never-ending election cycle. Again, there are very few, if any, positive takeaways from this book. Luce sees America as increasingly divided between camps of cynics and hypocrites, with the majority of Americans in the middle, quite apathetic.

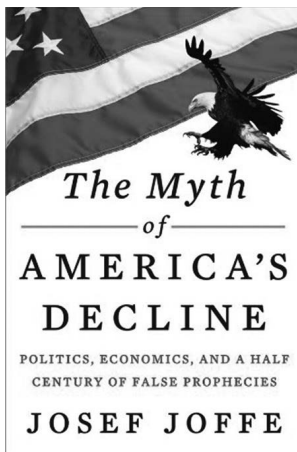
Like Kenny, Luce does not believe the “rise of the rest” is a threat, but rather a trend to be celebrated for its likely and potential positive impact around the world. His critique is reserved for the increasingly dysfunctional US political, social, and economic infrastructures. Luce claims previous critics got it wrong: America’s resilience and exceptionalism overcame past challenges. He believes, regardless of what may happen to a rising China, European Union, or other state actors, America has lost its ability to shape its destiny, perhaps permanently.

Luce contends US leaders and policymakers lack the ability and will to pursue policies required to turn the country around. He says most of these reforms are viewed as too wide-ranging, serious, and extreme to be politically viable. He sees the rise of political risk aversion as one reason for inaction, with the concomitant rise of the “tyranny of the minority” as another factor. He expends a great deal of invective on the Tea Party movement, less for its ideology and more for the corrosive impact it has had on the political process. These trends have eroded the resilience and “suppleness” of US government, and as such he cannot envisage any coalescence short of another major shock or black swan that forces action. Even then, as he points out, both Presidents Bush and Obama “wasted” their opportunities for serious, enduring reforms when presented their “unifying” moments (9-11 and the financial meltdown).

Luce’s conclusion is America’s challenges are not unique, either viewed through the lens of history or in the challenges faced by contemporary western nations. However, he believes this time is different, and America cannot simply wish away the problem, expecting unforeseen events will somehow change the dynamic and stem this negative trend. The reader gets the impression Luce wants America to succeed, but cannot see how its leaders can overcome the increasing friction to accomplish anything of substance. This view stands in marked contrast to the writing of Josef Joffe.

The Myth of America’s Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies

Joffe is the German publisher-editor of *Der Zeit*, a Hoover Institution fellow and a Stanford educator. He has been a long-time supporter of the “idea” that is America. In many respects his enthusiasm and positive American outlook make him a modern day Alexis de Tocqueville. Joffe’s latest book is *The Myth of America’s Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies*. The author’s thesis is “declinism markets



Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013). 352 pages. \$26.95

a self-defeating prophecy,” and declinists purposefully sound the alarm. Why? Joffe provides a number of post-World War II examples wherein politicians claim the “sky is falling” only so they can be seen to save the day, once elected (or re-elected). This interpretation is hard to refute given the facts he presents.

However, it is a thin argument, particularly in light of the many issues facing the United States. On this point, Joffe claims, unlike previous empires, no outside power will be the downfall of America; that task can only be accomplished by America. He argues against the simplistic linear interpretations of history many declinist commentators appear to offer. He saves particular invective for Paul Kennedy, whose book *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* is described as a doom-saying prophecy,

which is hardly the popular view.

The great critique of this line of argument, and of the book in general, is it explains away or neglects a fuller discussion of America’s current challenges. The details of these woes are missing, and all Edward Luce describes seems dismissed or ignored in Joffe’s work. Any reader who tackles these books in tandem will wonder if the authors are talking about the same country; their views are that different. It is as though Joffe has written the book to reassure US leaders, as well as key allies and partners. Joffe sees no cause for alarm; the United States will weather this down period, as it has all others.

Joffe still views the United States as the world’s “Überpower” (the title of his previous book), and as no state is capable of assuming the mantle it is a role the United States cannot shirk. America’s global influence, legitimacy, and credibility may have eroded, but just as important is the lack of will (or ability) to act. Again, Joffe fails to address US domestic challenges in depth. As such, he misses the critical correlation and friction between domestic and international policy. America cannot be the global leader he envisions with its fractious and issue-laden domestic situation. This is the author’s greatest omission and it weakens his argument that China will never overtake the United States. As Joffe himself wrote, “only America can do in America.” According to Luce and others, the United States appears to be well down that path.

The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat

The last two books, written by foreign policy experts, also focus on the United States’ role as world leader, and discuss decline relative to others, not necessary to America alone. Vali Nasr, currently the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and formerly a senior advisor to Richard Holbrooke, has written *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*. This work contrasts *Foreign Policy Begins at Home* by Richard Haass, president of the Council

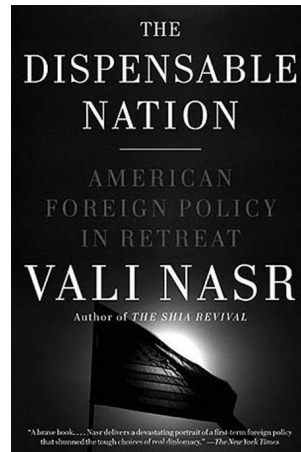
on Foreign Relations. Both authors refute current claims of decline, but each offers a different interpretation—Nasr focuses on US leadership and foreign policy choices, while Haass looks at foreign policy influences through a domestic lens.

Vali Nasr's book is highly critical of the foreign policy decisions of the Obama administration. His view is informed by his disillusion with the political process after his experience as an advisor in the US Special Representative on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nasr contends President Obama too often fell in line with the "destructive" policies of his predecessor, and pursued options of political expediency over sound foreign policy. His criticisms are at times harsh, perhaps reflecting a naive belief in the power of diplomacy when backed by hard power. The memoir-aspect of this book is illuminating, but it fails to link with and support Nasr's policy prescriptions for China and the Middle East. His descriptions of endless turf battles, and what appears to be unvarnished praise for Ambassador Holbrooke further serve to detract from his overall argument.

Nasr supports aggressive involvement in the Afghanistan and Pakistan region, the Middle East (especially in Iran and Syria), and with China. Nasr would have the United States engage more in these regions, and believes Washington has not reached out enough. Again, the author neglects to consider domestic political realities and challenges, believing international credibility trumps domestic will. President Obama's pragmatism falls short in Nasr's liberal internationalist worldview, which is one reason for his title choice (though he inaccurately attributes the original "indispensable nation" quote to President Clinton, rather than Secretary Albright).

In the end Nasr's book is wanting. His critiques and foreign policy recommendations are either too aggressive and off the mark (as with China), politically untenable (as with Iran), or not in the vital interests of the United States (as with the remainder of the Middle East). Nasr's book is still a worthy addition to the foreign policy debate given its breadth and the author's experience, but must be read with some skepticism. His greatest contribution may be in developing a case for future Afghanistan and Pakistan policies. Lastly, his concern that America is now seen internationally as "dispensable" is off the mark. While President Obama's pragmatism can be characterized at times as over cautious, the administration has had to prioritize domestic over international policy. Nasr does not understand, or recognize, the political aspects of US leadership.

One author who does recognize this dynamic is Richard Haass, as evidenced by his recent book *Foreign Policy Begins at Home*. He admits the title seems a bit strange coming from a longtime foreign policy hand. Haass' view of US global leadership in the current environment is more constrained than that proposed by Nasr. Haass terms his



By Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2013). 320 pages. \$28.95



Richard Haass, *Foreign Policy Begins at Home* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). 224 pages. \$15.99

approach “restoration,” as in getting the domestic house in order and being more discriminate in international forays. Haass also differs with Nasr on where the United States should prioritize its international efforts. Haass’ position nests with that of the current administration in terms of an increased focus on this Asia-Pacific and less emphasis given to the Middle East.

The book is short, and the author freely admits he did not write it to suggest possible policy options. Haass does not believe America is in decline, but he thinks it is performing suboptimally. His emphasis is on “rebuilding at home and refocusing abroad,” characteristic of the pragmatism demonstrated by the current administration. He provides some detail on how to improve the economy and domestic climate,

with an emphasis on domestic spending reforms to reduce the national debt. Haass also modestly outlines requirements for energy security, economic growth, educational opportunity, and sustainable immigration policies. His domestic recommendations are sound, but too general and cautious to be of great value for readers wanting more substance.

Haass recognizes the United States does not currently face an existential threat, and this presents a unique opportunity to refocus at home. However, he is concerned about those who would carry that effort too far, and chart a more isolationist course. His concerns are warranted given current debate and rhetoric. Haass’ greatest contribution is his emphasis on the need to prioritize US interests abroad. His recommendations are sound, not surprisingly, given the depth and breadth of his experience. Haass does not see “wars of necessity” on the horizon, and strongly encourages avoiding further “wars of choice.” He believes the United States will weather this period after a brief respite, but only if it takes this moment in history to get its domestic house in order.

In conclusion, these five very different books describe America’s place in the world at a time when there are great challenges at home and abroad. Together they represent a comprehensive view of the current debate regarding the phenomenon of decline, and its causes and impacts in both foreign and domestic policy. The future may not be as dark as described by Edward Luce, nor as bright as characterized by Josef Joffe. Decline may be a choice or a state of mind, and may or may not apply to the United States currently. Most contemporary writers agree the United States must act, regardless of its relative or actual decline. The world is in transition, and the United States must prepare itself to provide stability, opportunity, and leadership.