

# Fearing the Loss of Hegemony: The Concept of US Retreat

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Region: [USA](#)

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*“A hegemon is supposed to solve international crises, not cause them.” – Christopher Layne, The American Conservative, May 1, 2010*

Nothing upsets those drunk on imperialist virtue than the fact it might end. Such romances with power do have a use-by-date, going off like old fruit. Eventually, the crippling contradictions will win through in the end. The days of the US empire are numbered – but then again, they always were.

The recent round of spring meetings at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank flutter with suggestions that American economic power is being shaded, be it by the republic’s own dysfunction, or the emergence of other powers like China. “People can’t be too public about these things,” argues Arvind Subramanian, chief economic advisor to the Indian government, “but I would argue this is the single most important issue at these spring meetings.”[1]

This would come as a surprise for some. The various theorists on international theory, many slumming at *The Weekly Standard*, form the praetorian guard of arm chair defenders of American virtue and power. Max Boot, writing a piece for the magazine in October 2001, typified this by arguing that the attacks of the previous month were “a result of insufficient American involvement and ambition; the solution is to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in their implementation.”[2]

The problem is Barack Obama. They see the Obama administration as a regime in retreat, which is the theme of Bret Stephens near fictional work. Indeed, *America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming World Disorder* already gives its readers two issues to stumble over: that there is an “isolationism” to speak of, and that disorder would be a genuine problem.

The first issue. For Stephens, the Obama retreat is reflected by the choice made by the president when he “came to office determined to scale down America’s global commitments for the sake of what he likes to call ‘nation building at home’.”[3] Stephens assiduously ignores the vast, expansive and dangerous robotic reach of American power, typified by remote drone strikes, the backing of proxy regimes and such negotiating endeavours as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. If only the isolationism argument was true.

President Warren Harding, in 1921, is said to have placed the US on the pathway to isolationism with his anti-League of Nations stance, and the winding down of the post-war military machine. “Vast expenditure without proper consideration for results,” he warned, “is the inevitable fruit of war.” Wars, rather than being the efficient earners for a state, were wasteful enterprises. Avoid those security alliances that become, more often than not,

stifling and awkward embraces.

Therein was born the myth of American insularity, one of considered geopolitical withdrawal. Such an assessment would ignore continued US involvement in the international financial system – as indeed, the biggest creditor economy – and its engagement in various international organisations, including, to a limited degree, the League itself. This was Washington without the fangs.

But Stephens, like his colleagues of that most myopic brand of history – the idea of empire – can see no reason for America to retreat from anything. Take, for instance, the adventurism in the Middle East. “There was no strategic or even political requirement to get out of Iraq once we had succeeded in pacifying the country.”

The efforts of such pacification continue to linger in their destructive toll, though armchair militarists get goggle-eyed when it comes to the empirical world. Conservative columnist George Will was left wondering what the missing factor was in the state building process and came to a simple, if impossible conclusion. “Iraq is just three people away from democratic success. Unfortunately, the three are George Washington, James Madison, and John Marshall.”

Then comes the issue of disorder, which takes the contractarian idea that, to achieve order in the international system, deals must be made with hegemon, whether you want to or not. Stability is something gained by bedding the brute across the ocean, and smaller states need to cosy up to bigger ones with tarted up appeal.

This system of perceived order was deemed a matter of virtue rather than good, old fashioned avarice on the part of the great power. “By dampening great-power competition and giving Washington the capacity to shape regional balances of power,” argues Stephen M. Walt, “primacy contributed to a more tranquil international environment.”[4] Tranquillity, however, remains a matter of degree.

Empires do check into the old home, get on the non-solids and eventually die from natural causes. Yet Stephens is cautious to suggest that, while America is in retreat, it “is *not* in decline.” This is in stark contrast to others, like Christopher Lane of the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, who sees the US as “increasingly unable to play the hegemon’s assigned role.”

In any case, a power dedicated to causing more mayhem than policing stability doesn’t deserve any titles in the hegemonic department. The otherwise war loving David Frum had to concede after Obama pushed the US into another conflict in 2011 that, “Three wars is a lot, even for the United States.” In Layne’s final summation, “The epoch of American dominance is drawing to a close, and international politics is entering a period of transition: no longer unipolar but not yet fully multipolar.”[5]

When the curtains will be finally drawn on the act that is American empire is not for anybody to say, though the clock ticks with its usual grinding music. The nature of its power will continue to change, with other powers emerging from the chrysalis. The question will be whether such a process takes place slowly, or whether the empire ages disgracefully.

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## Notes:

[1] [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/18/business/international/at-global-economic-gathering--concerns-that-us-is-ceding-its-leadership-role.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20150418&nl=-todayshadlines&nid=55503776&r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/18/business/international/at-global-economic-gathering--concerns-that-us-is-ceding-its-leadership-role.html?emc=edit_th_20150418&nl=-todayshadlines&nid=55503776&r=2)

[2] <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/000/318qpvmc.asp>

[3] [http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/america-retreat-new-isolationism-and-coming-world--disorder\\_820771.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/america-retreat-new-isolationism-and-coming-world--disorder_820771.html)

[4] <http://nationalinterest.org/article/the-end-the-american-era-6037>

[5] <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/graceful-decline/>

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