

In the Shadows of the American Century - The Rise and Decline of US Global Power.

A Review of Alfred W. McCoy's Book

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Global Research, August 17, 2021

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Reading “In the Shadows of the American Century” is a bit of an up and down ride. The best part of the book for personal interest concerning the author is the Introduction. The author, Alfred McCoy, discusses his personal situation in relation to his family and the environment in which he was raised and the family friends whose lives ended through tragedy. For the majority of the rest of the book he discusses the US empire: briefly its rise and highlights, followed by its “Strategies for Survival”, and ending with the “Dynamics of US Decline”. He ends with “Five Scenarios for the End of the American Century” the weakest part of the book, not so much in that no one can accurately predict the future, but in that he suddenly presents arguments almost contradictory to his discussion of empire previously presented.

Understanding

The three chapters on “Understanding the US Empire” covers a broad range of topics. He examines the strategic ideas behind Halford Mackinder’s “world island” and the idea that whoever controls it, then controls the world. From that, any reader who keeps up with current events can see that the world island, while surrounded by US military power, is not so slowly slipping away from US imperial grasp.

In “America and the Autocrats” McCoy discusses some of the various governments the U.S. has created and supported from Iran through Vietnam and on to Egypt and Afghanistan. He summarizes,

“There was - and is - a fundamental structural flaw in any American entente with such autocrats. Inherent in these unequal alliances is a peculiar dynamic that makes the eventual collapse of American-anointed leaders an almost commonplace occurrence.”

The “Covert Netherworld” is mostly about the CIA and its drug money relationships. He starts by outlining some of the CIA’s interventions and summarizing, “...this recurring reliance on covert interventions transformed secret services from manipulators at the margins of state power into major players in international politics.” He proceeds arguing the obvious, “Illicit Commerce serves as the economic foundation for the covert

netherworld, allowing...a measure of political autonomy....” His summary, based largely on his description of the CIA, the Taliban, and the poppy, “the impending [this was written in 2017] defeat of US intervention in Afghanistan” serves “as an indicator of...Washington’s ability to control the covert elements of global politics but its weakening hold on world power over the long run.”

Survival

McCoy’s first topic for survival of the empire is surveillance. The rise of the U.S. surveillance state has costs abroad – “The trust of its closest allies” – and at home where citizens “forgo any right to privacy, with other rights likely to follow.”

His section on “Torture and the Eclipse of Empires” – (why plural?) – details mostly the story of the Bush era and its arguments for torture. Simply put in the context of empirical decline, the U.S. cannot “simultaneously claim both moral leadership of the international community and the sovereign prerogative to torture at will in defiance of international law.”

The discussion on “The Pentagon’s Wonder Weapons” looks at the development of cyberspace and computer intelligence, mostly within the war on terror, a global excuse for costly high tech gadgets. While indicating that the U.S.’ reliance on high tech gadgetry will lead to operations with “uncertain outcomes” McCoy only mentions China and Russia within the “threat of actual armed conflict.” He does not mention – and maybe this is hindsight criticism of knowledge available in 2017 – the effectiveness of Russia’s electronic defensive postures nor the capabilities of Chinese cyber war capabilities.

Scenarios

Skipping his revisitation of the ‘world island’ as per Brzezinski and the CIA, McCoy ends with “Five Scenarios for the End of the American Century” where his ideas suffer from a touch of the empire’s exceptionalism blinders and some contradictory arguments if considered from what he presented earlier in the work.

While describing the first scenario, “Evolving World Order”, he argues, “Every modern empire has had some source of universal appeal for its foreign subjects....” That is quite an amazing statement considering all that has preceded it in his own presentation. Then he adds “Spain offered Christianity”.....whoa, sure, convert or die Christianity (see the Papal Bull of 1542), and then when you convert you are still less than the white man’s superior abilities. Britain offered “free markets and fair play”....sure, just ask the millions of dead Indians (east and west) and the trillions in value of all the resources harvested from its many colonies – hardly fair play – oh yeah, the Boer War was also fair play, just so you know. The Palestine/Israel situation is never discussed, truly a miss on the argument for fair play. Pardon my sarcasm, but these are truly incomprehensible arguments except for someone who supports empires.

Twice he iterates that the U.S. contributes “democracy, human rights, and the rule of law” in full contradiction to all the evidence he himself presents in the main portion of the book.

Other misses include the statement that Russia is “an economically rickety petro-state with a large military” – certainly the latter is true but Russia is economically well safe-guarded as it has eliminated its dependence on the US\$ and ironically thanks to sanctions, has developed an agricultural surplus and supported other non-petro capacities.

McCoy foresees “the liberal international order” surviving and thriving while NATO and the Davos and Bilderberg “might form a supranational nexus to supersede any nation or empire.” Now that’s a happy thought – a world controlled by the super wealthy and corporate power. Yet how does that account for the loss of global reserve status for the US\$, US financial ruin because of that – or how about the coming climate disasters? In spite of all that he sees “a residual role, mediating international conflicts and monitoring the global commons beyond these human cesspits.” These “cesspits” are his imagined urban warfare centers; and the reasons for U.S. decline are very much U.S. meddling in conflicts and monitoring the global commons!

There is a scenario of economic decline, looking at the situation with Chinese computer processing advances, the poverty of the U.S. educational system, inflation, and the acknowledgement that both China and Russia are working towards ending the US\$ dominance. That leaves the U.S. “only with military domination” for a while, but with the US\$ worthless, all that high tech gadgetry will not be viable financially. What will be left is an “economically rickety petro-[dollar] with a large military” – sound familiar?

Somehow a military scenario is presented without any casualties to either side (versus China) with the full collapse of the U.S. due to electronic and anti-satellite kinetic warfare. Impossible, as hundreds will die as airplanes fall out of the sky at minimum; at maximum, the U.S. would go nuclear – the Samson option if all else fails – and take the world out with themselves.

Finally, he presents a climate disaster scenario, one that is already in process – as really the other options are also all in process.

More importantly, while they are presented as separate scenarios, they are all highly integrated. The military, the economy, the climate – all are intertwined and inseparable, and the future of a U.S. decline also includes declines in the world in general. In short, the U.S. has screwed up big time and has very little room to maneuver in order to help save some portion of humanity – and to be honest, I do not expect them to, do not see their capabilities in order to do so. It is up to the ‘rest of the world’ to do that.

Last word: after all this McCoy argues the U.S. “has brought...viable international institutions, global economic integration, the rule of law, the advance of human rights, the spread of democracy, a period of relative peace, and a decline of disease and world poverty.”

Oh la la! Quel désastre! That last statement could have pages and pages of rebuttal. Just one example: the decline in world poverty is mainly due to China’s successful efforts to almost eliminate poverty for 600 million Chinese. A fuller rebuttal is contained in McCoy’s general arguments “In the Shadows of the American Century,” as well as many other works describing the failures of the U.S. empire.

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