



The Next American Century?

Author(s): Paul Kennedy

Source: *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 52-58

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209611>

Accessed: 20-07-2016 17:04 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press, Sage Publications, Inc. are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *World Policy Journal*

REFLECTIONS

Paul Kennedy is professor of history and director of International Security Studies at Yale University. He is the author of many works, including The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers and Preparing for the Twenty-First Century.

The Next American Century?

Paul Kennedy

The American Century. These three words surely constitute one of the best-known expressions of modern international history. The phrase was first coined by the highly successful American publisher, Henry Luce, as the title for an article he wrote in a February 1941 edition of his own LIFE magazine. Composed months before Hitler attacked the Soviet Union and Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, it was an amazingly confident prescription for the era to come. "American experience," exulted Luce in his article, "is the key to the future.... America must be the elder brother of nations in the brotherhood of man." Given Congress's desire to avoid war, the still-minuscule American army, and the massive ambitions of other, heavily armed, Great Powers, this was a risky vision to advance.

Yet how much more unlikely must the idea have seemed to foreign observers if it had been advocated 40 years earlier, at the beginning of the century Luce claimed as the "American" century? Around 1900, it is true, several of the more traditional powers (France, Spain, the Hapsburg Empire) seemed to be fading, and the idea was being advanced that the twentieth century would be dominated by four great empires—the British, the Russian, the American, and the German—that would compete against each other. This Darwinian view of a future struggle among the "Big Four" certainly influenced Admiral von Tirpitz as he strove to create the High Seas Fleet, galvanized British imperialists like Joseph Chamberlain to push for reforms of their own empire, and motivated all sorts of Russian expansionist

visions. True, turn-of-the-century Americans also spoke of their country's "manifest destiny"; but the point is that the race to dominate the global scene during the next 100 years was a wide open one to most strategic experts. Only a few prescient figures outside the United States—such as the British prime minister William Gladstone, and perhaps even Wilhelm II himself, who in 1896 had called for the nations of Europe to unite against a future American economic and political domination—sensed that Washington would one day come to be the center of world affairs.

An Amazing Country

What did they, and the more numerous U.S. nationalists themselves, see in this amazing country that caused them to assume an ever greater American world influence? The first factor, surely, was sheer economic power. One did not have to be a Marxist to recognize that America's material assets—abundant land, vast mineral resources, bounding industrial production, immense railway and road networks, bustling harbors, multimillionaires galore—translated into political and strategic significance as well. By the eve of the First World War, the national product of the United States was already equal to that of *all the other Great Powers combined*, a statistic that would have amazed (and disturbed) Bismarck or Palmerston.

But there were other, less quantifiable signs that suggested a country on the rise. There was an energy among the people, whether corporate robber barons or frontier

farmers, that contrasted sharply with the staid habits of the Old World. There was a sense that no limits existed to potential future growth, a confidence imbued by the vastness of the country itself compared with crowded little states like England, Italy, the Netherlands. And this broad picture of upward mobility in turn drew millions of new immigrants eager to make their own fortunes to the United States each year, thus boosting the collective national wealth.

There were, of course, many negative aspects to this bustling, rambunctious American society that appalled more traditional foreign observers. Its political affairs, especially at election times, seemed extremely corrupt even by European standards; it was widely assumed that every vote in Congress could be purchased. Its popular culture repelled European aesthetes and intellectuals, as it does to this day. Its raw social energies suggested a lack of control, excess, instability. It was probably comforting to these observers that the United States also seemed of little import in world affairs after its brief war with Spain in 1898. It rejoiced in its isolationism from Europe, its executive branch was weak, and, although it possessed a considerable navy, its army was minor. America was eccentric (in both senses of the word) but harmless. This was a common misperception of the day.

As it turned out, those who instinctively felt that America's great energies would sooner or later have an impact on the global balances—one thinks here also of Sir Edward Grey or of the young Winston Churchill, both of whom described the United States as being "a vast industrial machine"—got it right. When the European powers went to war in August 1914, most experts looked forward to a swift and decisive outcome; but the very fact that each side consisted of an extensive coalition of states, with huge productive and personnel resources, meant that the conflict would not end quickly. As the costs of the war rapidly mounted, both alliances looked for new

members, courting Turkey, Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Japan.

Yet, as the British historian A. J. P. Taylor pointed out years ago, the *only* country that had the power to change the global balances was that puzzling transatlantic nation, the United States. Already by 1915 its financial influence was marked, and in the climactic year of 1918 its military forces were ending the stalemate on the Western Front. Moreover, leaders and publics across the world had to grapple with the immense ideological impact of the American presence; Woodrow Wilson's calls for national self-determination, a peace without victory, freedom of the seas, and a new international order resonated everywhere from Danzig to Dehli, altering the political discourse forever.

An Erratic Path to Primacy

But if the United States was destined to be the next world hegemon, its path to primacy was both erratic and half-hearted. After 1919, America was an extremely reluctant superpower. By all sorts of measures, Congress voted for isolationism and neutrality. The League of Nations, Wilson's proudest creation, was abandoned. The army, massively augmented in 1917–18, was just as massively slashed. There were proposals made to abolish the Marine Corps, and some even wondered about preserving the State Department. The secret office that deciphered foreign codes was closed down. Economically, the nation opted for policies of almost complete self-centeredness, and the share of its national product derived from foreign trade became smaller than ever. Yet, paradoxically, the impact of American commercial and financial policies abroad was more important than ever before, as was to be seen in the international ripple of calamities that followed the 1919 Wall Street crash and the virtual elimination of open international trade that was provoked by the 1930 Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act. The world desperately needed a "lender of last resort,"

and only America had the resources to play that role; but it chose not to do so. During the 1930s, therefore, it no longer occupied its natural place at the center of the world stage but, like its equally puzzling Soviet equivalent, stood in the wings as the weakened Western democracies were faced with the rise of fascist dictatorships.

It is difficult to know how long this curious situation would have lasted—for President Roosevelt and his advisors alone could not have brought America out of its isolationism—had it not been for the repeated and growing aggressions of Adolf Hitler and the Japanese military leadership. Much as the isolationist lobby resisted it, the United States was being forced to confront the threats in Europe and the Pacific, and to formulate a strategy to deal with those threats. With France and the smaller European states destroyed, the Soviet Union invaded, and Britain besieged, America was compelled once again to occupy the center of the world stage. This was the meaning behind Henry Luce's 1941 call to his countrymen to step forward into the American Century.

And, indeed, America's time had come. Only the United States had the reserve industrial capacities to outbuild the fascist states and supply both its own troops and those of its bankrupt allies through the unique system of lend-lease. As the war unfolded, the more that potential was realized. For every merchant ship sunk by German U-boats, America was building another three. For every Allied aircraft shot down over Europe or the South Pacific, America was building another five. In 1944 alone, it assembled the staggering total of 96,000 aircraft and launched an aircraft carrier every few weeks. When the operations of the German and Japanese air forces were suspended because of lack of fuel, the United States had the spare capacity to fly Christmas packages to its soldiers everywhere in the world. Nothing was impossible. If it would take billions of dollars to construct the new and

untried atomic bomb, those monies would be forthcoming.

The Elder Brother

By 1945, then, Luce's purposes had been accomplished in many parts of the world. Like it or not, America was the "elder brother" everywhere from Brazil to Australia to the Mediterranean. Amid the national bankruptcy and exhaustion of most other countries, it alone was healthy and strong, it alone could pour out monies for postwar reconstruction. It had by now largely replaced the British Empire as the greatest maritime, trading, and financial nation, as the new hegemon. It had been the chief artificer of the new international architecture, so it was not surprising that the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank; the International Monetary Fund) were located in Washington, not London, and that the United Nations Organization was set up in New York, not Geneva, thus reflecting this new reality. Its armed forces were massive, and it had a monopoly on the atomic bomb.

How much of America's global reach would have been trimmed back by Congress and the public had foreign affairs been stable after 1945, it is hard to say; there were many withdrawals from overseas army and air bases, and a drastic reduction in military personnel. And there were many Americans who wanted to return to the old, pre-war days. But all such calculations were upset by the sudden deterioration of relations with the Soviet Union and the onset of the Cold War. Appealing to the "lessons learned" from the years of appeasement and isolationism, American leaders swiftly reversed course and, as in the Truman Doctrine, pledged support to all democracies who asked for it. Military assurances were handed out with a liberality that would have astounded the Founding Fathers—to Greece and Turkey, to other NATO allies, to Japan, to Australia, to the rest of the Americas. U.S. bomber squadrons returned to their former British air bases; American

troops returned to their barracks in the Rhineland and Bavaria. It was not long before the words “Pax Americana” were a commonplace. And, in fact, American power vis-à-vis the other nations of the globe was possibly more pronounced than at any time since that of Imperial Rome vis-à-vis its neighbors.

While the Cold War stimulated American engagement in the world, curiously enough it also disguised its unique position. The existence of the Soviet Union, with its vast conventional forces and (a little later) its nuclear arsenal, possessing its own array of allies in Eastern Europe and in the developing world, and brandishing its own competing ideology, combined to suggest that this was a bipolar system, a world of two superpowers. By the late 1960s, Khrushchev was promising to overtake the United States and bury capitalism in the process. Then there were other negatives. Many developing countries disliked both alliance blocs. There was considerable anti-Americanism in Europe, and at the United Nations. The Vietnam War caused not only convulsions at home but bitter criticism of America abroad. The ending of the Bretton Woods system in 1971 pointed to growing economic weaknesses. The Watergate scandal weakened the U.S. presidency. The American failure in Iran was a humiliation. The rise of Japan, and of East Asia in general, led to criticisms of U.S. industrial techniques and a fear of being overtaken. All this suggested not an American century but an America in relative decline.

Forecasters of Doom

There was much truth in such negatives, but the forecasters of doom missed a number of important points. The first was that America’s archrival, the Soviet Union, was exhibiting even greater economic weaknesses, although many Cold War advocates refused for years to admit this. Russia, to use the author Paul Dibbs’s term, was “the incomplete superpower”—and not just in-

complete but steadily losing ground and unraveling. As the Soviet Union weakened, it lost its hold over Eastern Europe and then over its own non-Russian states within the union. This dealt a virtual deathblow to the international appeal of communism and, by extension, to the popularity of socialist planning and policies.

The second factor was the remarkable capacity of American industry to “re-tool” itself from the early 1980s onward, and thus regain a great deal of its earlier leadership in manufacturing and production. This renewal of the industrial spirit was usually accompanied by brutal measures—downsizing the workforce; destroying, or at least weakening, the trade unions; creating millions of uninsured, part-time jobs; relocating production to cheap-labor sites in the developing world. No European country, except Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, felt it could do the same, the others being constrained by their postwar “social contracts.” Even today there is strong resistance to American-style capitalism. But such critics can hardly deny that the end result of the American industrial renewal was that the U.S. economic machine became much more competitive and the envy of many a foreign businessman.

Furthermore, the bold new technologies of the 1970s and 1980s played to American strengths. Computers, communications systems, new software applications, and the coming of the Internet together constituted a “knowledge revolution” that could only have emerged from a decentralized economy and society, yet also benefited such a society much more than it could a sclerotic Soviet Union or a bureaucratically encumbered Europe and Japan. The knowledge revolution produced a feedback loop, giving an advantage to the people (like Bill Gates) who had created it in the first place. And this was not merely of commercial benefit, for the U.S. armed forces also profited greatly from adopting these new technologies to enhance their combat effectiveness, making the American military unequaled

in many operational and strategic aspects of warfare.

A Culture That Knew No Limits

And while European intellectuals might sneer at the crassness and greed and uncaring nature of Ronald Reagan's America, tens of millions of people from other societies—in Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, East Asia—were all panting to get to the United States, where they hoped to achieve a better life for their families. With millions of additional immigrants being admitted in each decade, there was reinforced the sense of a special American culture that knew no limits.

Moreover, U.S. politicians, from Reagan to Clinton, deliberately pushed for further economic transformations, seeking to reduce government spending (and public expectations of what government could provide its citizens), slashing taxes, and eliminating all forms of exchange controls on currencies and capital. This liberalization of capital, which was also pursued eagerly by the British, but more slowly and reluctantly by other countries, meant that a vast amount of venture capital was now circling the globe, looking for investment opportunities, rewarding countries and regions that followed American *laissez-faire* practices, and punishing those who tried to resist, whether it be Mitterrand's France or Suharto's Indonesia.

Since the communications revolution of the past two decades was chiefly U.S.-based, this also led to the export, intentionally and unintentionally, of American culture. This did not simply mean the spreading of American free-market rules in the businessplace, or American dress styles, or American hotels (so that the Hilton in Singapore looks no different from the Hilton in Dallas). It also included the perhaps even more important spreading of American youth culture—MTV, casual dress, blue jeans, Hard Rock Cafes, Hollywood movies, and the rest. None of this had much intellectual content; it was crass and noisy, offering immediate gratifica-

tion—but to the young people of the world it was immensely attractive because of its liberating messages. It was also insidious, and evaded the attempts of Muslim ayatollahs, Soviet commissars, and French education ministries to prevent penetration of these “dangerous” American habits.

Yet while Hollywood films and American youth culture might be intellectually low, there were other strands to the U.S. resurgence of the past two decades that pointed to the increasing concentration of the world's scholarly, scientific, and technological skills within the boundaries of this single nation. It is home to the great science laboratories, developed by Bell Labs and IBM or by the rising biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries. It has come to dominate the world's computer software industry. It possesses incredible intellectual assets in its great research universities, with which the higher education systems of other countries nowadays simply cannot compete. The annual roll call of Nobel science prize-winners provides a regular witness to this dominance. Young scholars from Scotland and Cambodia, India and Brazil, flock to study in America. German pharmaceutical companies have moved their research laboratories across the Atlantic, while their boards of directors conduct company business in the English language.

Thus, in virtually all dimensions of power, whether it be the “soft power” of youth culture or the “hard power” of military hardware, in all areas from finance to scholarship, the United States seems at present in a relatively more favorable position in the world than at any time since the 1940s. Partly this is due to the exploitation and recovery of its own inherent strengths, but this is also surely caused by the serious weaknesses of its competitors. The Soviet Union has broken up, and Russia can hardly feed or govern itself. The Japanese banking system is dangerously close to a meltdown. China is grappling with the problems that affect all of Asia. And Europe, while inching

toward monetary unity, is a long way from unitary political coherence and effectiveness. With the other major units of power in disarray, the United States at the end of this decade may be closer than ever to Henry Luce's dream of the coming of the American Century.

America's Prospects

What, then, could be said of America's prospects for the century to come? Will its relative position improve still further? There are certain indications that it could do so: the globalization of U.S. commercial standards continues apace, American culture continues to extend its reach, and democratization is spreading into newer regions of the planet. While domestic patriots look forward to the "Americanization" of everything, foreign nationalists from Canada to Malaysia are appalled. Nonetheless, a large number of people clearly do anticipate an increase of the American position in the world.

Other trends, however, point in the opposite direction. The more Americanization and globalization that occurs, the greater the likelihood of a backlash, as we are now witnessing in Russia and Indonesia, and in many other places where the inhabitants feel that they have been left vulnerable to the creative gales of international capitalism.

Second, while it is difficult to forecast the condition of, say, Europe or China in 25 years' time, both of them have the potential to equal or exceed the United States, at least in economic power. Moreover, while it was relatively easy for the U.S. government to unite its people, and its allies, against the common Cold War foe, it is much harder to unite them now when threats to American interests seem much more diffuse and much more complicated. Finally, America's own troubled domestic scene, and the inwardness of its own special cultural wars, suggests that it may have more difficulty in producing leaders who can focus on international issues than it had during the Cold

War. All or any of the above could diminish America's global lead.

The question arises whether it is wise to measure "power" and "influence" in the future simply from the perspective of nation-states like America and Russia, or conglomerate-states like the European Union. The decentralization of knowledge is working to the advantage of individuals and companies, but not to that of nations themselves. World finance is "unhinged," in free float, and it is difficult to think of how it can be controlled. Many observers think that the large multinational corporations, with their ability to shift resources from one part of our planet to another, are really the sovereign players on the world stage. Global drug traffickers and international terrorists also pose new and difficult threats to traditional state powers. So how much "influence" can really be defined as American, or non-American?

More than that, as the end of the century approaches, it is difficult not to hear many parts of the structure of international affairs creaking and groaning under the newer pressures for change. Many experts think we are approaching real thresholds—in the environmental damage we have inflicted on our planet, in the continuing enormous increases in human population, in the uncontrollable volatility of our financial system—and that major societies will simply collapse under these strains.

Will the United States, with or without allies, be able to handle these newer challenges, especially in an age of divided government in Washington? It is not clear that it can, which may mean that we have to think differently about the twenty-first century than we have thought about our present century.

Undoubtedly, the United States of America has had more influence upon our world over the past 100 years than any other country, and to that extent this century may be termed, in shorthand, "America's," even more than the sixteenth century seemed to

be Spain's, the eighteenth France's, and the nineteenth Britain's. There is equally little doubt that the United States will enter the twenty-first century as the world's number-one power. But whether it will continue to be so into and through the next century is open to question. For the pace of the technological, financial, demographic, and environmental changes that affect our planet

in the present age are so profound that it would be rash to claim that the next century, too, must be America's. By choosing intelligent policies, it is possible that the United States could stay at the top for many years to come. Yet it is wise to recall Voltaire's question: "If Rome and Carthage fell, which Power is then immortal?" His answer was "None." ●