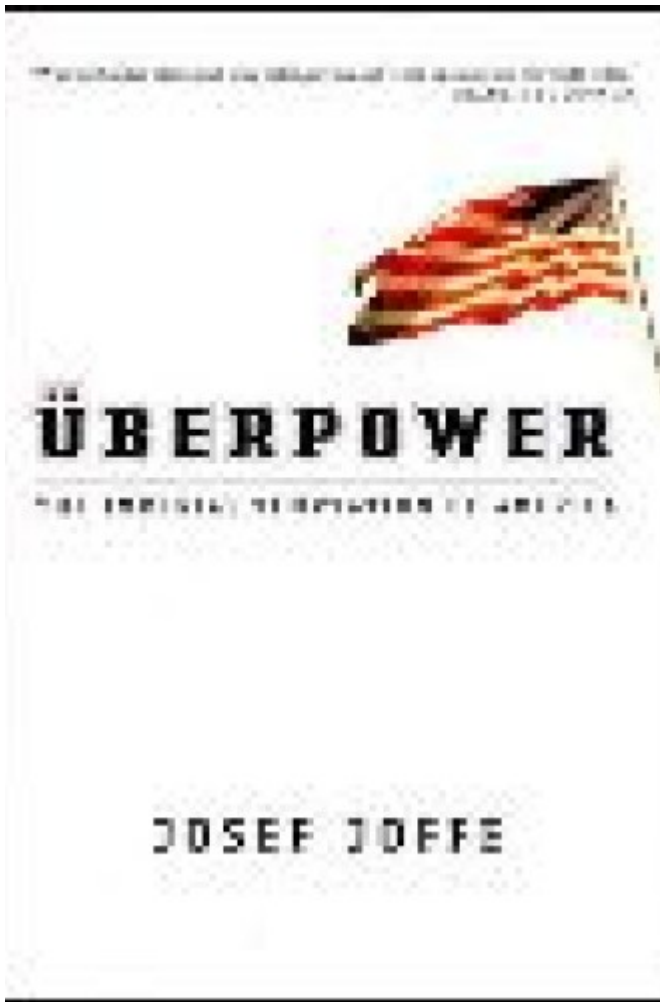


Überpower

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [December 12, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America

Josef Joffe
Norton

Add this book to the spate of recent publications that reflect on the new U.S. dominance in the global economy and the political-military muscle that reinforces

that dominance. Here is a voice of “critical realism” that sounds like an echo of Henry Kissinger—much more realist than critical. The author is a well-credentialed German intellectual who was educated in the U.S., is the publisher and editor of *Die Zeit* and is frequently published in U.S. journals that claim some gravitas. Josef Joffe has studied at Stanford and is a fellow of the Hoover Institution there. Readers who expect a conservative statement will not be disappointed, though Joffe’s is a slightly chastened conservatism.

The U.S. has been an unrivaled superpower since the fall of the Soviet Union, and it holds more power than has ever been possessed by any nation-state. Joffe’s question is a simple one reflecting the dominant line of U.S. foreign policy: How can the U.S. sustain its unrivaled status and be sure that it remains unchallenged by any would-be competitors? Joffe takes the maintenance of that status to be the central goal of policy.

Überpower proceeds in three sections in a breezy, almost journalistic style. The first part (which goes on too long) discusses the arrival of the U.S. at its imperial position and explores the reasons both for anti-Americanism and for advocacy of the U.S. around the world. In this part of the book Joffe condescendingly dismisses criticisms of the U.S. in other parts of the world as unfounded emotionalism. He makes a cunning distinction between criticism of U.S. policy and what he calls “the real thing”: anti-Americanism that is deeper than criticism. Such a distinction, however, misses the point; Joffe refuses to consider why U.S. policy evokes hostility or what might need to be changed about that policy.

Conversely, Joffe relates positive embrace of Americanism to consumer advances, with people everywhere in the world lusting after Starbucks and similar U.S. gifts. He turns a deaf ear to cultural issues and the question of why a local or regional culture might be hostile to global consumerism. Joffe seems to have no serious interest in the issues that lie behind such criticism and hostility.

In the second section of the book Joffe reflects on how the U.S. can sustain its singular presence. Rejecting both “supremacy” and “isolation,” he opts for a strategy of “disaggregation” or making sure would-be rivals do not cooperate together against the U.S. Though the U.S. is competent against any single challenger, it could be under stress if a coalition were to be formed to resist its hegemony.

In a closely argued analysis Joffe appeals to the examples of two classic imperial states. First he considers the British Empire's long-term effort to balance would-be adversaries. Then he turns to Bismarck's Germany, which created a series of treaties that bound other nation-states—not including France—to German interests. Joffe allows that present circumstances are very different, but contends that both of these strategies offer support and suggestions for U.S. policy.

In the third section of the book Joffe extrapolates from these models to suggest U.S. strategies of engagement. He perceives the world in terms of nation-states and apparently has no sense that peoples, movements or cultural forces matter at all. According to Joffe, the world is shaped along two lines. In the old State Department view there is the Berlin-Berkeley Belt, which consists of the developed world of the information age. Clearly this belt offers no potential challenge to U.S. domination. In an advance beyond old thinking, there is now also the Baghdad-Beijing Belt, which is not so easy to manage. In his ideological innocence, Joffe judges that the U.S. will always be “in harm's way”—a passive way of describing the resistance that an aggressive U.S. is sure to encounter as it continues its unrestrained exercise of power.

Joffe deems maintenance of unrivaled No. 1 status to be an unqualified good that does not need any justification. In his view, the U.S., with its military and economic power, simply needs to be shrewd and calculating to maintain its dominance as “the first among nonequals.” The only caveat is that the U.S. should not be stupid about the risks or the strategic possibilities.

The term *über* in the book's title is surely intended to recall aggressive German policy in a way that suggests to Joffe a more self-critical approach to achieving and maintaining dominance; the term *temptation* in the subtitle suggests a danger that, if I read Joffe correctly, he has embraced. Joffe knows about the danger of “über” and wants the process to be well calibrated so that the U.S. is a grand force for stability in the world. It is beyond his horizon to observe that U.S. intrusiveness in the pursuit of oil and domination is an agent of instability in too many places. On this latter reality he makes no comment.

The book ends on a curious note. On the last two pages the author suggests that stability is both the great goal and the great gift of the U.S., but he does not write with enough candor to note that in his usage *stability* concerns an economics of privilege that operates to the disadvantage of much of the world. Joffe suggests that

the U.S. should “provide a public service,” though nothing in the book has prepared us for this notion. He refines the idea with the maxim, “Do good for others in order to do well for yourself,” but offers no hint of what “good for others” might be. Then, as if to top this noble rhetoric, he reminds us that the U.S. was conceived as a “cittie upon a hill.” This flash of religious idealism, especially with the archaic spelling, ill fits a book that is all about scarcely disguised pursuit of empire.

Reading *Überpower* is one way to see in raw form the thinking that propels the policies of unrivaled world dominance. The idealism of the book’s last pages might seduce the pious of an uncritical ilk, but among those who have digested some of the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, Joffe’s closing will carry little weight. His is a shameless innocence of the most dangerous kind.