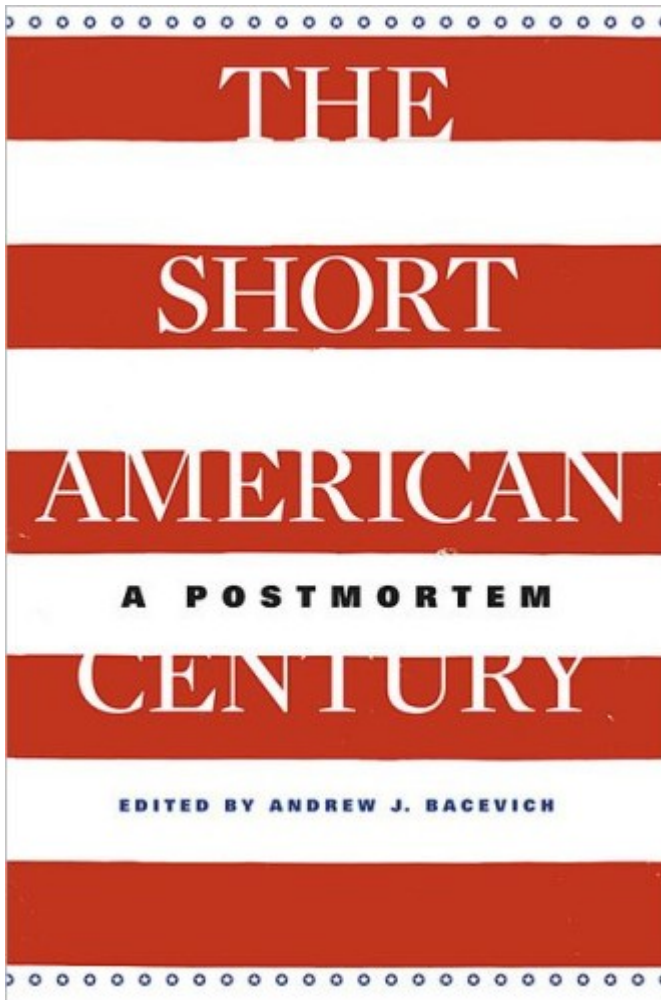


The Short American Century and The World America Made

reviewed by [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

In Review



The Short American Century

Edited by Andrew J. Bacevich
Harvard University Press



ROBERT KAGAN

AUTHOR OF

OF PARADISE AND POWER

The World America Made

By Robert Kagan
Knopf

In February 1941, Henry Luce, the formidable publisher of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune*, published one of the most memorable op-eds in the history of American journalism. The article, titled "The American Century," was aptly inserted in *Life* between a story on women's shoe fashions and another on a celebrity heiress.

Luce's essay appeared nine months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor amid the fierce American debate over intervention in World War II, in which he was among the most vigorous proponents of full-scale participation by the United States. But Luce's long editorial looked well beyond its immediate occasion and forecast what was at the time an audacious vision of his country's future role in the world. Within a decade this vision would be firmly implanted as a lodestone of American

foreign policy, and Luce would be far from alone in trumpeting the arrival of a global American century.

Americans, Luce intoned, had “to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit.”

This was an unabashed call for American global hegemony and informal empire, but because it came wrapped in a full measure of American exceptionalism, Luce could assure his readers that they need not blinker their imperial opportunities and obligations. The United States was not like imperial Rome or Great Britain: peoples throughout the world had “faith in the good intentions as well as in the ultimate intelligence and ultimate strength of the whole American people.” The United States was in a position to be the Good Samaritan to the world. After all, America was the “sanctuary of the ideals of civilization.” The time had come for it “to be the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels.”

Luce’s essay, as Andrew Bacevich says, “became a summons, an aspiration, a claim, a calling, and ultimately the shorthand identifier attached to an entire era.” The phrase, and the ambitions it signifies, have echoed in the speeches of presidents from Truman to Obama, all of whom have signaled that “with America’s arrival at the summit of world power, humankind’s journey toward freedom, destined to culminate in the universal embrace of American values, reaches its decisive phase.”

In *The Short American Century*, Bacevich has assembled a collection of talented scholars—David M. Kennedy, Emily S. Rosenberg, Nikhil Pal Singh, T. J. Jackson Lears, Akira Iriye, Jeffrey A. Frieden, Walter LaFeber and Eugene McCarragher—to assess the yield of the American Century, which most of them contend has come to a premature end. With the exception of Kennedy, who believes that the American Century was going swimmingly until George W. Bush took the helm (and presumably might be revived by new leadership), the contributors join Bacevich in believing that “only by jettisoning the American Century and the illusions to which it gives rise will the self-knowledge and self-understanding that Americans urgently require become a possibility.”

For some of these authors—Rosenberg, Iriye, Frieden—this awareness means simply recognizing that the American Century is over. Iriye and Frieden point to the emergence of transnationalizing practices and a globalized economy, which have decentered the United States, rendering it “just another country—subject to the vagaries of international economic trends in a way that Henry Luce would have found bewildering back in 1941.” Rosenberg suggests that, to a considerable extent, America brought this decentering on itself by aggressively fostering a global regime of mass consumption. The American Century, in which the United States, the world’s preeminent producer, went abroad in search of markets and investments, had by the 1970s become a Consumer Century, in which America stood as a huge deficit and debt-ridden market for the goods of others: the world’s preeminent and most insatiable consumer, weakened by its dependence on foreign production and capital.

For other contributors—Bacevich himself, Singh, Lears, LaFeber and McCarraher—the illusion of the American Century lies less in clinging to an exceptional empire that the United States can no longer sustain than in laying claim to an exceptional empire in the first place. For these critics the American Century—the benevolent hegemony that Luce envisioned—was over from the start.

Their indictment is multifarious. In general, though, it amounts to the contention that the costs of the American pursuit of global hegemony have far outweighed the benefits. LaFeber offers a quick tour of the American quest for global supremacy since World War II, portraying it not as the work of a Good Samaritan and powerhouse of freedom and justice but as an affair of fear, spiraling military spending, ill-fated interventions producing disastrous blowback, a deteriorating economy, secret and illegal covert operations and a radically diminished international reputation.

Seldom a Good Samaritan, the United States, in LaFeber’s view, might be better seen as (in the words of Clinton national security adviser Sandy Berger), “the biggest rogue state in the world.” Singh explores the often tragic “dialectic of color and democracy” that “continues to distort and undermine the development of an ethical relationship to the wider world.” The always corrosive, often witty McCarraher traces the development of an “eschatology of corporate business” that has produced a fusion of “emporium and imperium”—a “consumerist Sparta,” as Chalmers Johnson put it.

The Short American Century is long on savage criticism of the hubris of American “centurions,” but it is short on alternative visions. The exception is Lears’s essay, the brightest gem in the collection. He commends to our attention the sensibility of earlier critics, “pragmatic realists” from William James and Randolph Bourne, to Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Niebuhr, and to George Kennan and William Fulbright—thinkers who often evinced a sensibility at odds with American Century messianism. For these intellectuals, a sane foreign policy “depended on a recognition that power resides in the instant of repose as well as the moment of action, and a realization that nothing more fully reveals a powerful nation’s greatness than its capacity for restraint.” Though these realists—especially Niebuhr—were themselves always true to this sensibility, contemporary advocates of the American Century often cite them at their worst, not their best, which allows “imperial elites to do pretty much what they had planned to do anyway, but with a furrowed brow and humble mien.”

None of the contributors to Bacevich’s volume is sanguine about the prospects of converting the American foreign policy establishment to an anti-imperial, pragmatic realism. McCarragher concludes:

By the standards of Caesar and Mammon, such a deliberate renunciation of the will to mastery is lethal and improvident folly. The patricians and clerics of the corporate state will cling to the fantasy of a global imperium for they have faith in nothing else. Among the many still entranced by the dreams of empire and the hallucination of riches, resistance to the passing of American imperium will be adamant—and possibly violent.

And so, as if on cue, we have the near-simultaneous appearance of a widely celebrated call for a perpetual American Century by a leading foreign policy pundit, Robert Kagan, who might be described as Henry Luce on steroids.

Kagan’s book *The World America Made* (with the title on the book jacket wrapped in a laurel wreath) is an explicit strike against declinists such as Bacevich and his ilk—albeit one that misfires badly. As befits one of the founders of the Project for the New American Century, which forged the ideological underpinnings of George W. Bush’s crusade against evil abroad and at home, Kagan contends that the American Century, built on a foundation of American hegemony, is alive and well and nothing less than “a wonderful world order.” The principal threat to its future well-being lies in just the sort of “preemptive superpower suicide” that the likes of Bacevich,

McCarragher and Lears yearn for.

Kagan's case for an ongoing American Century rests less on convincing argument than on bold assertion—the sort of bluster that Lears discerns throughout this discourse. (Bluster that, as the examples of two recent secretaries of state, Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton, indicate, can come as easily to some American women as to men.)

Two claims, one historical and another predictive, form the backbone of Kagan's brief. The historical claim is that the years since World War II have been an era of unprecedented peace, prosperity and freedom, and that all three are directly attributable to the exceptionally benign hegemony of the United States. Kagan, to his credit, is blunt and forthright, unlike Luce. He has little truck with Good Samaritanship, and he credits American leadership less to national ideals than to raw power—especially military power. The American world order did not just happen, he rightly observes; it was imposed.

Eager to trumpet the blessings of empire, Kagan neglects its costs. Little of the troubling history that LaFeber recounts—indeed, little history at all—appears in Kagan's account of the late 20th century. He contradicts himself, crediting the United States with fostering democracy throughout the world while offering a tough-minded salute to American willingness to transgress liberal norms in Iran, Guatemala, Chile and elsewhere when other people's democracy proved incompatible with policy makers' understanding of American interests. And he is utterly silent about the damage done to liberty and democracy in the United States itself under the aegis of the national security state.

Kagan asserts that “the United States also enjoys a unique and unprecedented ability to gain international respect for its power.” He is apparently oblivious of public opinion polls that suggest quite otherwise—and to his own later (accurate) observation that “during the first three decades after World War II, great portions of the world did not admire the United States.”

He is careful to distinguish between preeminence and absolute omnipotence, and he claims no more than a preponderance of power for America in the past and seeks no more power than that in the future. He presents a substantial list of instances in which the United States was unable to work its will in the world because its power to do so was not unlimited. But here he centers strictly on those instances in which the

U.S. has been unable to resolve difficult situations afflicting others, like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and says little about the afflictions—the depredations of peace, prosperity and freedom—that the U.S. visits on others. His quick run-through of American difficulties in exerting its will “for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit” in the last 60 years omits the Vietnam War.

As for the future, Kagan is out to exorcise the specter of multipolarity—that is, a strategy of eschewing hegemony in favor of working to maintain a rough balance of power among the strongest states in a region or around the world. He contends that a unipolar world dominated by a single hegemon is more likely to produce peace between great powers (here he ignores the role that the nuclear balance of terror played in the cold war peace between the U.S. and the Soviet Union) and that there is no guarantee that free trade and democratization will survive in the absence of the warm glow of overweening American influence.

But the multipolar world that Kagan forecasts is an odd and unlikely one in which rapacious authoritarian powers such as China and Russia threaten everyone else, while a weakened United States stands by helplessly. Missing from this picture is a significant role for other potentially empowered liberal democracies, such as the European Union, India, Japan and Brazil. The centerpiece of Kagan’s multipolar vision is a scenario in which the United States (whose military budget vastly outstrips those of all other nations) abandons the effort to police the world single-handedly and turns other nations’ security over to those nations themselves. Nothing, of course, more thoroughly ruffles the feathers of chicken-hawks such as Kagan, who insist that international security should remain in the hands of a “people from Mars” who outstrip all other liberal democratic peoples in seeing “war as a legitimate, even essential tool of foreign policy.” As one official of the recent Bush administration put it, the “people from Venus” in Western Europe require “adult supervision.”

But do not expect to see any time soon the debate in the halls of power that these radically opposed books invite. Both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney have assured Americans that they will never preside over the slightest dimming of the American Century. And both are agreed on the merits of the wisdom of Kagan, who serves as a foreign policy adviser to Romney and whose work Obama has publicly commended. They, like many Americans, remain captive to what Charles Beard nicely termed the “ornate, glistening masculine words” that Luce favored and Kagan echoes. Nancy boys like Bacevich, LaFeber, Lears and McCarragher will have to try to man up and recognize that, as Kagan says, “sometimes the better idea doesn’t win even when it

is obviously better.”