

Robert J. Lieber, Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 180 pp., \$24.99

In his Commencement Address to the Air Force Academy, President Obama rejected the notion of American decline in the world. “The United States,” he declared, “has been, and always will be, the one indispensable nation in world affairs. It’s one of the many examples of why America is exceptional....just like the 20th century, the 21st century will be another great American Century.”¹ The President’s affirmation to cadets might have been inspired by Robert Lieber’s compelling appraisal of the future of American power in the world. His book makes a seminal contribution to the exigent question of our time.

Lieber maintains that the claim of U.S. decline due to domestic and foreign difficulties is exaggerated. The country’s problems are real, he grants, but he believes that the robustness of American society and an historical record of adaptability in overcoming past crises will prevail. His assessment of national power rightly gives primacy to political culture – the values, habits, and customs of a people that shape the kind of polity they are capable of having. Lieber takes his theme from the foremost observer of American national character, Alexis de Tocqueville: “The great privilege of the Americans does not consist in being more enlightened than any other nations, but in being able to repair the faults they may commit.” For Lieber American resilience and ability to adapt and innovate provide cause for optimism. The stakes are high for America and the world. America is the “indispensable” provider of collective global goods. The alternative to American leadership is a far more unstable, dangerous world.²

Despite our current fiscal crisis, the author contends, U.S. material assets – our “wallet” – remain solid for continued global leadership. The nation’s deficit/debt burden is serious, but Lieber offers abundant evidence illustrating a broad foundation of American strength and global competitiveness. Even our perilous dependence on foreign oil imports now appears surmountable with breakthroughs in natural gas and shale oil production, a critical point to which we shall return. As Lieber puts it, “the United States remains the one country in the world that is both big and rich.” Continued U.S. global leadership is not a question of “wallet,” but of political will and policy.

The author argues as well that the country’s political polarization and domestic dissensus are overstated. He reads the data as indicating more polarization among elites than in a pragmatic public. Our history of acrimonious political discourse, beginning with the Founding generation, lends perspective to contemporary partisan rancor. Despite partisan divisions, Lieber sees bipartisan continuity in recent administrations, and he points out that American history is full of massive undertakings (e.g., New Deal, World War II, the Marshall Plan, space exploration).

In Lieber’s view, the “rising rest” in the world does not displace the need for American leadership. Unlike past precedents, no balancing coalition has arisen against U.S. hegemony in

the post-Cold War era. The touted BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) have proven uncooperative in addressing global problems and, coupled with the ebbing of Japanese and European strength, have made the international economy less manageable. The U.S. remains the principal supporter of key international institutions. A rising China is beset with a host of domestic problems that will thwart its superpower ambitions; yet, at the same time, it has become more confrontational toward its Asian neighbors.³ Threats posed by radical Islamism, nuclear proliferation, and a nuclear Iran do not herald a benign new world order. Lieber acknowledges the usefulness, where possible, of burden-sharing with allies and partners. As Churchill said, the only thing worse than having allies is not having them at all. Unlike advocates of “smart power,” however, Lieber insists that in a dangerous world with weak allies and undependable multilateral cooperation the U.S. cannot manage threats by deferring to others and farming out its responsibilities.⁴ America must be able to go it alone. There is no substitute for U.S. engagement and leadership.

What needs to be done to sustain American global leadership? Lieber offers a reasonable list of domestic proposals, chief among them addressing the deficit/debt/entitlement crisis, particularly health care costs. Surprisingly, he has few recommendations for action abroad. Like Robert Kagan, Lieber optimistically believes America’s future is a matter of willpower. “Much remains to be done in domestic as well as foreign policy,” he writes, “but the robustness of American society coupled with its unique capacities for adaptation and adjustment are likely once again to prove decisive.”

Despite a nod to avoiding over-commitment, Lieber does not say whether he thinks our present security posture is sound, or whether any commitments should be curtailed. His expansive foreign policy neglects to set limits and priorities, and he underestimates the harsh reckoning that putting our fiscal house in order will entail. Expiring tax cuts, debt-ceiling renewal, and possible sequestration arrive at the end of 2012, and the partisan brinkmanship of the 112th Congress in raising the debt-ceiling holds slim hope for responsible action ahead. The problem of political polarization is not limited to elites, as Lieber claims. The Pew Research Center reports that the partisan gap in the public has nearly doubled over the last 25 years, suggesting that John Q. Citizen is not the reservoir of moderation and pragmatism portrayed by Lieber. Decline may be a “choice,” as Kagan and Lieber argue, but averting decline also means making hard choices and inflicting pain on voters. No candidate is telling voters that their taxes must increase, while their health care and pension benefits must decrease.⁵

An age of austerity will inevitably impose limits on foreign policy.⁶ In a speech at the Eisenhower Library, then Defense Secretary Robert Gates criticized DOD’s bureaucratic bloat, waste, and unsustainable weapons programs, warning that the post-9/11 defense “gusher has been turned off, and will stay off for a good period of time.” What the future requires, said Gates, is no mystery. It is “the political will and willingness, as Eisenhower possessed, to make hard choices – choices that will displease powerful people both inside the Pentagon and out.”⁷ Similarly, Michael Mandelbaum observes that in an age of austerity the U.S. will have to do less

in the world than it did in the past. We will have to distinguish vital from desirable (expendable) goals. The U.S. must maintain its traditional core commitments to sea control and a presence in Europe/the Gulf/East Asia. Expendable missions include humanitarian interventions and nation-building such as carried out in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸

Establishing limits and priorities informs the Strategic Guidance issued by the Defense Department in January, 2012. In his accompanying letter, President Obama stated the imperative to “put our fiscal house in order here at home and renew our long-term economic strength.”⁹ The Guidance refocuses defense priorities from Europe to the Asia-Pacific and Middle East, and it replaces post-Cold War planning for simultaneously fighting two major regional wars with a one-and-a-half theater strategy (a large-scale operation in one region plus a denial capability in a second region). Significantly, U.S. forces will no longer conduct large-scale, prolonged counterinsurgency operations such as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lieber’s reference to advances in energy production potentially ending America’s dependence on foreign oil warrants attention because of the enormous fiscal and geopolitical implications involved. The driver of this game-changing development is the technology of “fracking” – blasting water, chemicals, and tiny artificial beads at high pressure into tight rock formations making them porous enough to release oil and gas. PFC Energy, a Washington consulting group, predicts that the expansion of oil and gas production from shale rock could make America the world’s leading producer of oil, gas, and biofuels by 2020, surpassing even Russia and Saudi Arabia. PFC forecasts that combined imports of oil and natural gas will fall from 52% of U.S. demand in 2010 to 22% by 2020, even less if Canadian supplies are included. At the same time oil and gas production is booming in Canada, Columbia, and Brazil, alleviating U.S. reliance on an unstable Middle East. Since 2006 OPEC oil exports to the U.S. have fallen 1.8 million barrels/day, while Canada, Brazil, and Columbia supply 3.4 million barrels/day. Six Persian Gulf suppliers provide 22% of U.S. imports, our Western Hemisphere neighbors over 50%. The U.S. itself is producing 1.7 million more barrels of oil per day than in 2005.¹⁰

Lieber makes a persuasive case for the long-term soundness of America’s “wallet,” but if we fail to muster the short-term political will to put our financial house in order, talk of foreign policy “greatness” or U.S. global leadership is moot. The fiscal crisis enveloping the Western world starkly poses the question of the possibility of democratic self-government – are men capable of governing themselves? Will a self-indulgent Western middle class pay for the commodious life it has given itself? Decent, stable, effective self-government is difficult to create, harder still to maintain. Lincoln considered the capacity of men to govern themselves “a problematical proposition.” It remains so today. The answer, Robert Lieber reminds us, lies in the American character.

Notes

1. President Barack Obama, “Remarks at the Air Force Academy Commencement,” Colorado Springs, Colorado, May 23, 2012.
2. See also Michael Mandelbaum, The Frugal Superpower: America’s Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era (New York: Public Affairs, 2010); and Robert Kagan, The World America Made (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).
3. In contrast, Aaron Friedberg exaggerates the Chinese “threat.” See John Coffey, review of A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia, American Diplomacy (Feb., 2012).
4. Joseph Nye’s “smart power” (multilateralism) elevates a truism – the utility of collaboration – to the status of a grand strategy. See John Coffey, review of Joseph S. Nye, Jr., The Future of Power (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), Prism (Summer, 2011).
5. Dan Balz, “Politics Is the Great Divider in United States,” Washington Post, 6/5/12, A2; Fred Hiatt, “Who Has the Spine to Fix the United States’ Finances?” Washington Post, 6/4/12, A17.
6. See “Foreign Policy in an Age of Austerity: A Conversation With Brent Scowcroft,” American Interest (Jan./Feb., 2010), 32-39.
7. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, “Remarks at the Eisenhower Library,” Abilene, KS, 5/8/10.
8. Michael Mandelbaum, “In an Era of Tightening Budgets, Can America Remain a Superpower on the Cheap?” Washington Post, 2/7/11, A19; and “America’s Coming Retrenchment,” Foreign Affairs, 8/9/11.
9. Department of Defense, Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense (Jan., 2012).
10. David Ignatius, “An Economic Boom Ahead?” Washington Post, 5/6/12, A17; Juan Forero, “Center of Gravity in Oil World Shifts to Americas,” Washington Post, 5/26/12, A1.