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From *Pax Romana* to *Pax Americana*? The history and future of the new American Empire

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Abstract This review paper focuses on the most recent cycle in the debate about the history and future of the ‘New American Empire,’ both in relation to the rise and fall of the Roman Empire specifically, and against the wider backdrop of the extensive debate about the US position in the changing global order more generally. It argues that much of the literature, including some of the books under review, rest on a misreading of history (Roman or otherwise) and a flawed grasp of the fate of the American ascendancy in relation to the contemporary crisis of the nation-state system and the far from unexpected boom–bust cycles of ‘genuinely existing’ liberal capitalism (globalization) in the twenty-first century. The washout on Wall Street in the latter part of 2008 could only come as a surprise to those who have not been paying attention to the vicissitudes of ‘genuinely existing’ liberal capitalism over the past 30 years or more. The paper argues that the American ascendancy, contrary to much of the contemporary prognostication, remains in its prime and *Pax Americana* will only begin a downward spiral when it has been successfully challenged and displaced by an equally powerful and systemic alternative. In the meantime, the New American Empire, especially under new leadership, looks set to continue and even flourish.

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Introduction

In 1991, George Bush, president of the United States from 1989 to 1993, sought to capture the significance of the changes in international relations brought on by the demise of the Soviet Union by proclaiming the dawn of a ‘New World Order.’ But, while, the end of the Cold War was attended by a great deal of US-style liberal triumphalism, the idea of a ‘New World Order’



failed to capture the *zeitgeist* of the era. It was quickly countered by critics in some quarters with the notion of a New World Disorder (Jowitt, 1993). More broadly the notion of a 'New World Order' remained in the shadow of the popular, but now more or less defunct, notion of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992; Kagan, 2008). In fact, as the 1990s advanced a growing number of commentators and policy-makers, both critical and sympathetic to the new unipolar world centered on US power and the global expansion of 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism, increasingly portrayed Washington's unrivalled position in the global order as the dawn of a new imperial era: a 'New American Empire.'¹

This review paper focuses on the latest round, if in fact it is possible to identify distinct rounds, in the burgeoning debate about the history and future of US power, both in relation to the rise and fall of the Roman Empire specifically, and against the wider backdrop of the extensive debate about the US position in the changing global order more generally.² It argues that much of the literature, including some of the books under review, rest on a misreading of history (Roman or otherwise) and a flawed grasp of the fate of the American ascendancy in relation to the contemporary crisis of the nation-state system and the far from unexpected boom–bust cycles of 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism (globalization) in the twenty-first century. The washout on Wall Street in the latter part of 2008 could only come as a surprise to those who have not been paying attention to the vicissitudes of 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism over the past 30 years or more. As the curtain comes down on 8 years of often disastrous foreign policy, including what appeared to be a distinct lack of a grand strategy, imperial or otherwise, on the part of the administration of George W. Bush (2001–2008) and the transition to a new presidency, and for many a new era, gets underway under Barack Obama, we need to remember that it is never a question of if there will be a crisis, the latter is built into 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism, the question is where and when, and how bad, for whom and for how long?

The Decline and Fall of Empires and the Descent of the West

Proponents of the rise of New American Empire had considerable influence within public debates about the meaning and uses of US power as the twenty-first century dawned. Niall Ferguson wrote two books encouraging Washington to take up the imperial mantle previously worn by the British at the same time as he expressed doubts that the United States had the 'will' to do so. He contrasted the US position in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, to the British Empire of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Ferguson, 2003, 2004). Bernard Porter, meanwhile, compared Britain's Empire to America's

'Superempire' (Porter, 2006). Others have looked back much further, casting their discussion of the contemporary American Ascendancy directly or indirectly in the context of the history of rise and fall of empires over millennia (Maier, 2006; Darwin, 2007; Etemad, 2007; Münkler, 2007). However, for many observers, it was, or is, obligatory to reach back to the Roman Empire to frame our understanding of contemporary US power (James, 2006).

For example, one analyst writing about *American Power and World Order* invoked the 'decline of the Roman Empire,' with particular reference to Edward Gibbon (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), who attributed the *Pax Romana's* eventual demise to 'immoderate greatness.' Certainly the pursuit of 'immoderate greatness' (a formulation that is sufficiently vague to be used in a variety of contexts) could lead to the decline and fall of the contemporary American Ascendancy.³ In a more specific effort to set the inexorable character of US decline in the context of the passing of the Roman Empire over a millennium ago, Kevin Phillips argues that from Imperial Rome to *Pax Britannica*, every 'world-dominating power has been brought down' by similar 'problems.' For Phillips, a combination of imperial over-stretch, fundamentalist religious politics, declining resources and a dramatically rising debt are the keys to the passing of empires from ancient Rome to contemporary Washington. These problems, in his view are the defining characteristics of contemporary US foreign policy as the US entered the latter part of the second half of the administration of George W. Bush (Phillips, 2006). Implicit in this argument is that a change in leadership, as it is currently taking place in Washington, could lead to a more effective US grand strategy and allow the current *Pax Americana* to avoid the fate of *Pax Romana* centuries before.

Cullen Murphy certainly believes that the decline and fall of the American Empire is far from inevitable. He notes that 'Americans have been casting eyes back to ancient Rome since before the Revolution. Today, though, the focus is not mainly on the Roman Republic (as it was two centuries ago, when America was itself emerging as a republic) but as much or more on the empire that took the republic's place. The focus is also as much on the decline and fall of Rome as on its rise and zenith.' Ultimately, Murphy's answer to his own question ('Are we Rome?') is a qualified 'we just might be' insofar as '(i) (n important ways' the United States is 'clearly making some of the same mistakes.' In his view, however, it is easy enough to liberate the United States from the shadow of the decline and fall of Rome. For home, the decline of America has an 'antidote,' and that 'antidote is being American' (Murphy, 2007, pp. 6–7, 206). Meanwhile, less optimistic than Cullen, but also less prone to plunder Roman history for the requisite metaphor, some observers view the ostensible decline in US power in the early twenty-first century as primarily



a result of the recent unilateral and ineffective leadership of George W. Bush and his advisers (Falk, 2004; Cohen, 2005). For others, such as Michael Mann, writing around the start of the 'short war' in Iraq, and before it became part of the 'Long War,' the United States was 'an incoherent Empire whose overconfident, hyperactive militarism' would 'soon destroy it.' He argued that the 'new American imperialism' was 'becoming the new American militarism' and the latter is 'not sufficient for Empire.' He concluded that '(t)hose who live by the sword ...' The reader is left to fill the blank, not a particularly demanding request (Mann, 2003, pp. 15–16; Berger and Borer, 2007, pp. 197–215).

Niall Ferguson's most recent contribution to the rise and fall of empires and the future of the United States in particular also remains focused on the modern era and is a much more substantial work of history than his earlier forays into the history of the British Empire and his efforts to compare it to the New American Empire. Without anticipating the specifics of the current economic crisis, he emphasizes on the destabilizing character of economic growth and change. *The War of the World: Twentieth Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* is a truly impressive work of history and far more substantial than his earlier books on the British and American Empires. At one level it is a 'deep' history of the Second World War that seeks to put that conflict in the wider context of the history of the entire twentieth century, Ferguson details the contours and horrors of violence and instability that underpinned the transition from a world made up primarily of colonial empires in the early twentieth century to a world made up primarily (on paper) of sovereign nation-states at the end of the twentieth century (Ferguson, 2006). For Ferguson, the key to the violence and instability of the twentieth century is to be found in the ongoing dynamics of 'ethnic conflict,' 'economic volatility' and 'empires in decline.' He further emphasizes that the interaction of these phenomenon in the twentieth century involved the continued spread of 'theories of racial difference.' For example, in 1938 (the same year the British had ostensibly achieved 'peace in our time' with Hitler) Anthony Eden, in the same year that Hitler was about begin building his racialized imperial order in Europe, could confidently call for Europeans to 'effectively assert white-race authority in the Far East' (Prashad, 2007). This was something that would become completely unacceptable at the international level within a decade: in large part due to Hitler's frenetic drive to push the imperial project to its ultimate conclusion, inflicting on Europe a racialized social order that was already losing purchase in the soon to be former colonies of the imperial states that won the Second World War (Mazower, 1998, 2008).

The spread of the nation-state system, as Ferguson makes clear, involved 'the political fragmentation of 'borderland' regions of ethnically mixed settlement'; 'the frequency and amplitude of changes in the rate of economic

growth, prices, interest rates and employment, with all the associated social stresses and strains.’ This was set against the backdrop of the dramatic ‘decomposition of the multinational European Empires that had dominated the world at the beginning of the century.’ At the same time, Ferguson emphasizes that ‘the decline and fall of an empire’ has often ‘caused more bloodshed than its rise.’ Furthermore, for Ferguson, the passing of colonialism and ‘the descent of the West’ has been ‘the most important development of the twentieth century.’ He concludes that at no point since 1945 has the United States’ ‘unspoken empire’ been as ‘powerful’ as its European predecessors (Ferguson, 2006, pp. 176, 184–186). Despite the dubious veracity of this statement, whether speaking of the European Empires collectively or individually, *The War of the World* provides a powerful account of the violence and instability that attended the decline of empires and the universalization of the nation-state system. His analysis captures the depth and scale of the contemporary crisis of the nation-state system. However, even if the profound limitations and even failure of the nation-state system are increasingly apparent and the world order of ‘genuinely existing liberalism’ with all its attendant shortcomings and encrustation is in crisis there are no systemic challenges to a global order that remains centered on the United States and to see the United States specifically, and the ‘West’ (a dubious notion) as being in descent involves overlooking the things that sets US power apart from its predecessors (something that will be outlined below) (Ikenberry, 2006; Kennedy, 2006, pp. 23–25).

For an even more Spenglerian misreading of World War II and its aftermath see *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World*, by Patrick J. Buchanan (2008). While one of Buchanan’s more substantial books, it is a prisoner of his unbending conviction that the amplification and vicissitudes of US power, since the 1970s, if not earlier are signs of failure. The most charitable thing that can be said about Buchanan is that he is Chauvinist-in-Chief. In what is often, not so carefully parsed language, in a number of books, on television and in the print media, he conjures repeatedly with the nostalgic hope that the United States can return to a lost golden age, where immigrants and others knew their place and the United States major ally, Great Britain still carried the ‘Whiteman’s Burden’ and brought civilization to the murkier corners of the globe.

Empires of Conquest, Empires of Trust and Empires in Ruins

There are some writers who counter that the position of the contemporary United States is actually akin to the high period of Roman imperialism, rather



than its later decline. Thomas Madden, a historian specializing in the Roman period, argues that despite the profound differences between ancient Rome and contemporary America, 'in some very important respects the dynamics that led the Romans toward hegemony seem also to be at work in the growth of American power today.' For Madden, the crucial similarity is the construction by both the Romans and the Americans of an 'exceedingly rare' form of empire, which he characterizes as an 'Empire of Trust.' He rejects the popular image of the Romans 'as lords of a brutal Empire of Conquest, built by marching legions.' He argues that the Romans 'acquired their empire slowly and with great reluctance.' According to Madden, 'Americans are (also) acting in an ad hoc fashion, doing what they think best for themselves and their allies and finding themselves pulled reluctantly into an empire' (Madden, 2008, pp. xii–xiii, 5–6).

We have been here before. The veritable founder of the study of the British Empire, J. R. Seeley, writing in the 1880s, argued that 'nothing' the English had ever done had been done 'so unintentionally, so accidentally, as the conquest of India' (Seeley, 1884, pp. 143, 179, 212–213; Wormell, 1980). The lack, apparently, of a master plan for empire hanging on the wall in the Whitehouse seems to be enough to indicate that contemporary US expansion has no historic connection with earlier aspirations to achieve an 'empire of liberty,' Manifest Destiny and lead the 'Free World' to victory over the Soviet Union specifically, and state-socialism more generally. For Madden, however, the United States, as in the case of the Romans, 'is building that historical rarity, an Empire of Trust.' Rome and Washington, he argues, 'achieved unprecedented levels of power because they steadfastly used that power for their own defense and their allies and – this is crucial – because they did not want it in the first place.' This might come as a surprise to the inhabitants of Gaul and the Britons, not to mention the Egyptians. Madden is adamant that both states were 'pulled' down the path towards a 'protected world of peace and security' and 'both came close' to achieve that goal. Meanwhile, Madden is on firmer ground when he emphasizes that 'the fall of Rome was caused by internal politics as well as external factors that were unique to Rome' and have no bearing on the past or future direction of America. He concludes that Americans are still in the process of building their 'Empire of Trust' (Madden, 2008, pp. 195, 196, 291). Although his idea that there is a link between *Pax Romana* and *Pax Americana* are in keeping with much of the literature on the subject, his notion of Romans and Americans as accidental imperialists creating Empires of Trust in comparison to other imperial powers appears to be rather self-serving. Madden may be right when he argues that the United States is not even at the zenith of its power as the first decade of the twenty-first century comes to a close.

Meanwhile, James O'Donnell, another historian specializing in Roman history, runs contrary to Madden taking an approach in which the inexorable decline of Rome is invoked as a lesson for the United States. *The Ruin of the Roman Empire: A New History* is primarily a history of the long decline and fall of the Roman Empire overlaid by a superficial and decidedly unsuccessful attempt to connect the history of Rome's decline to the contemporary position of the United States. On the book's dust jacket, the publisher confidently asserts that O'Donnell's tale of 'Rome's end foreshadows our own crises' and 'offers hints' about 'how to navigate them – if we will heed this story.' In fact, one of the first things that James O'Donnell does, and does well and in some detail, is to contradict his publisher's ham-fisted and somewhat desperate promotional effort, and make clear that the lived experience – the everyday reality if you will – of the ancient Romans and of modern Americans, regardless of their station in life, are utterly different. This point actually has profound implications for the drawing of lessons by not only O'Donnell, but also the entire corpus of literature that invokes Rome to celebrate or lament America's path in the world. What O'Donnell makes clear is that the suggestion that similarities in the histories of the two imperial projects can readily be discerned is dubious at best. First of all he notes that in ancient Rome 'people took ill more often, lingered longer in sickness, were crippled for life by trivial accidents, aged rapidly and died young.' Meanwhile, 'Ancient cities stank' and those people who 'bathed to remove some of their own odor' generally doused themselves in pungent ointment that compounded rather than alleviated the smell. More importantly, 'the privileged rich' were in a distinct minority, slavery was widespread, as was the abuse of slaves. The rural poor could generally expect little from their landlords, while the urban poor 'had no social safety net and were free to starve unimpeded.' He also emphasizes that 'the social gradation of wealth and standing were sharp' and was reflected in both high levels of abuse of, and insecurity among, the general population (O'Donnell, 2008, pp. 35–36).

In the wake of a thorough overview of Rome's decline and fall, O'Donnell actually draws only the most anodyne, if not obtuse, lessons in relation to the contemporary era. He cautions that '(o)ld errors are easy to reenact – as fading empires bereft of self awareness, struggle again to use their old power to preserve themselves, and in so doing risk weakening beyond repair.' He cautions that '(t)oday, as in the sixth century, a calm sense for the long view, the broad view, and a pragmatic preference for the better rather than the best can have a hard time overcoming the noisy anxiety of those who would transform – that is, ruin – what they do not understand.' In conclusion, '(c)ivilization is a thing of the calm, the patient, the pragmatic, and the wise and we can rest 'assured that' if this path is taken it will triumph' (O'Donnell, 2008, pp. 393–394, 355–356, 362–363). Allusions to, or comparisons with,



earlier empires, such as the Roman Empire, may provide a certain poetic grandeur, or a polemical sharpness to contemporary debates about the US-centered global order. But, the past is not the future. The differences between the international system in the twenty-first century and earlier more explicitly imperial and colonial eras far outweigh the similarities. *The Ruin of the Roman Empire*, as a whole actually demonstrates this, even though the author feels obliged to try and draw some lessons for today, after having already made clear the gulf that separates the rise and fall of the Roman Empire from the history of the American Ascendancy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Ascent of America Again or a Post-American World

By contrast, Michael Hunt argues that ‘the real problem’ with invoking ‘empire as a label’ for US power is that although it is ‘appropriate for ancient Rome’ it ‘fails to fully capture the impressive reach of the United States in its post-1945 ascendancy.’ American power is reinforced by the ‘US model of modernity that has spawned dreams of abundance and opportunity around the globe.’ At the same time, ‘(n)ot only have Americans insistently claimed that their values were universal and their leadership in defending and advancing them indispensable but also and more to the point those claims have often been embraced internationally as appropriate or at least acquiesced in as the most attractive of the available options’ (Hunt, 2007, pp. 311–312). Hunt makes it clear about the qualitative as well as quantitative differences that set US power apart from earlier Great Powers. He points out, that ‘US hegemony is hard to understand and discuss, not to mention manage, because it is everywhere.’ At the same time, from his perspective, ‘embedded in a world that they have helped form, Americans find it is easy to take as predestined what is in fact created and to assume eternal what is in fact perishable.’ For Hunt, however, the American Ascendancy could in fact deepen in the future if the United States was to pursue ‘a more cosmopolitan understanding of other cultures, a more sophisticated grasp of US limits, a genuinely democratic electoral system responsive to popular preferences and a better informed electorate.’ At the same time, he sees this as a difficult, but not impossible outcome depending in the first instance on a move away from ‘a course defined by narrow self-interest and pursued by brute force’ (a clear reference to the 8 years administration of George W. Bush) (Hunt, 2007, pp. 314–315, 324).

In his massive tome, that despite being almost 1000 pages long can still be characterized as an engaging read, George C. Herring, concurs with Hunt by concluding that Washington ‘must lead by example and especially by listening to other peoples and nations.’ In this way the United States can continue to ‘ensure its security and well-being’ in the future. This is reinforced by his

effective dispelling of the idea that the United States, from its inception, was ever actually 'isolationist': the confusion, in his view, lies in the tendency to equate US unilateralism with isolationism. As he makes clear, Washington often avoided or sought to avoid entanglements in Europe and elsewhere at various points, but from the 1776 onwards it embarked on an expansionary course in commercial, naval, military and human terms, initially in the Americas and then into the Pacific and Asia under the banner of everything from Manifest Destiny to the Open Door Policy (Herring, 2008, pp. 406–407, 482, 502–506, 525–526, 765, 964, 966).

According to some observers, we are not so much in an era of American Ascendancy as a 'post-American world.' From this perspective, and somewhat similar to the view taken by Hunt and Herring, Fareed Zakaria has argued (in both a short book entitled *The Post-American World* and in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*) that the global order is changing dramatically, but the United States is not in decline insofar as the overall dynamics of the shift remain centered on the United States. The main thesis of the book, which was set out in *Foreign Affairs* in mid-2008, is that '(t)he rest that are rising are embracing markets, democratic government (of some form or another) and greater openness and transparency.' Although, it might be a world order in 'which the United States takes up less space,' it is also 'one in which American ideas and ideals are overwhelmingly dominant.' At the same time, like Hunt and Herring, he cautions that the United States itself has to come to grips with the particular character of its global power and face the fact that the 'post-American world is a reality' a 'fact' that it needs to celebrate and embrace (Jentleson and Weber, 2008, pp. 42–49; Zakaria, 2008a, pp. 40, 43; 2008b).

The Reincarnation and Revision of the New World Order

Zakaria's argument parallels the literature that emphasizes that the post 1945 liberal order (which has, of course, gone through important permutations) established a constellation of new or revitalizing international organizations and relationships that were both anchored, and to a considerable degree, devised by Washington. One of the best examples of this approach is a book entitled *A New World Order* by Ann-Marie Slaughter. She took George Bush's formulation as the title of her book and then proceeded to turn the term and the president on their respective heads. She argued that: global governance via 'government networks is good public policy for the world and good national foreign policy for the United States' and its allies. She argues that at the present juncture 'government networks, promote convergence, compliance with international agreements and improved cooperation among nations on a wide range of regulatory and judicial issues.' In this context a



global framework erected on the basis of extant 'horizontal and vertical government networks' could facilitate the creation of 'a genuine global rule of law.' In her view this could be done 'without centralized global institutions' while still regulating, encouraging, or constraining 'government officials of every type in every nation'. Slaughter's vision is of a 'future' in which 'disaggregated government institutions' are the 'actual bearers of a measure of sovereignty' at the same time as they are subordinated to 'specific legal obligations' (Slaughter, 2004, pp. 261–262).

She goes on to argue that for this New World Order to be 'truly effective' it 'would be a world order in which human hope and despair, crime and charity, ideas and ideals are transmitted around the globe through networks of people and organizations.' At the same time, it would continue to be the preserve of 'governments to represent and regulate their people. Harnessing that capacity, and strengthening it, is the best hope for a new world order' (Slaughter, 2004, pp. 270–271). Slaughter, in effect reflects the main tendency implicit in the deepening of 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism and a realistic (from the point of view of the ruler-makers response to the crisis of the nation-state system). That is the system of sovereign nation-states is not broken beyond repair and is certainly not a part of the problem: a certain amount of tinkering, state building and the like is required to address the particularly problematic failing or failed states, but the overall direction of 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism under US leadership is sound.

In fact, although Slaughter and more recently Zakaria, along with other writers, have identified a key difference in relation to the substance and character of the New American Empire compared to all earlier Great Powers and their empire-building efforts, they have, in this reviewer's view, still failed to fully grasp the essence of what makes US power so distinctive in relation to the changing global order. And although, I would certainly argue that US power is going to be the crucial variable in the changing global order for the foreseeable future, these writers have failed to appreciate the scale of the shortcomings that were built into the system of sovereign nation-states as it was universalized after 1945, shortcomings that have been compounded by the shift to 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism (globalization) from the 1970s onwards. The rise and power of the United States, especially after 1945, can only be understood when it is firmly linked to the universalization and ongoing efforts to consolidate the nation-state system against the backdrop of the victory of 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism, a victory that is actually drawing attention with increasing clarity to the shortcomings of the system of sovereign nation-states. At the same time, the present financial crisis is important and may get worse before it gets better, but we are not about to see the United States dislodged from its perch as the sole superpower.

The New American Empire and the Changing Global Order

It may seem perverse to argue at this point, given the current crisis of 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism, a function of its built-in boom–bust cycles, that US power is destined to continue and even become stronger in the coming years. It may seem particularly perverse to do so when many observers increasingly acknowledge that we are also in the midst of a crisis of the nation-state and/or of the nation-state system as a whole (even if this is not the formulation which is used). For example, the 'Failed States Index' published by the Fund for Peace and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has now been coming out for 4 years (Boas and Jennings, 2007, pp. 475–485; Hameiri, 2007, pp. 122–149; Kraxberger, 2007, pp. 1055–1076; Failed States Index 2008, 2008; *The Economist*, 2008, pp. 46–47). The future of US power, of the New American Empire if you prefer, although challenged on many fronts, has built and continues to build on foundations of a hitherto unparalleled scale. At this juncture and for the foreseeable future there are no systemic challenges on the horizon to 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism and the system of sovereign nation-states, for which the United States is the anchor.

To grasp this argument, it needs to be borne in mind that in terms of global order and the world economy the rules changed dramatically after 1945, at the very moment that the United States was catapulted to super-power status. Its only major rival being the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which in retrospect, seriously mauled by the Second World War, was only a super-power in military terms. It lacked the diplomatic, political and cultural power (the 'soft power'), along with the economic power that the US possessed in abundance. Nor was Moscow's role in writing the rules of the post-1945 order of great significance. The USSR, like every other polity large and small, was a 'rule-taker' rather than a 'rule-maker' after the Second World War. Before the Second World War, as Charles Tilly has made clear, 'war made the state and the state made war.' In particular, the financial imperatives of war making in Europe over an extended period of time led to heightened levels of economic extraction, mobilization and repression, and where successful resulted in the formation of strong states and latterly 'nation-states' (Tilly, 1975, 1992, p. 12; Porter, 1994, pp. 192–193, 240–241). What is apparent now, if it was not clear at the time was that the establishment of the United Nations and decolonization after 1945 had profound implications for US power and global order. In relation to the period before 1945, has suggested above strong national states emerged over an extended historical period. This meant that for warfare to lay the groundwork for strong national states in the post-1945 era they needed to already possess 'at least some of degree of the political and national coherence that was created as a consequence of war in modern



Europe' over centuries. But, more importantly in the post-1945 era, war is now carried out 'in a state system that has already been created rather than acting to create that system' (Taylor and Botea, 2008, pp. 28–29). The juridical sovereignty provided by the United Nations, and to a considerable degree underwritten by the United States and its key allies, does not actually create modern nation-states and if it did we would not be looking out, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, on a world with an increasing number of weak, collapsing or failed states.

Meanwhile, ever since President Richard M. Nixon (1969–1974) took the US off the gold standard, cut loose US-based banks and began to chip away at fixed exchange rates, the global order has been moving towards 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism within the framework of the system of sovereign nation-states. No serious systemic challenger to the dominance of economic and political liberalism (although on the ground they have lots of warts) is in the offing, and has not been since the collapse of the USSR. Nowhere has liberalization of trade, deregulation of financial markets, privatization and standardization been complete, but by the 1970s 'state-socialism' and full-blown social democracy were starting to beat a retreat. When an economic crisis hits there is intervention by the state (which many people confuse with some kind of restoration of social democracy). However, every time, state intervention is generally short term, even though it may involve hefty bail outs and even nationalizing parts of the private sector and generally propping up the financial system, whether it is the 1994 Mexican crisis, the 1997–1998 Asian crisis or the washout on Wall Street in 2008. The state also intervenes in various ways on behalf of the people who have been left behind, as a result of job loss, default on mortgages or seeing what few savings they have invested disappear as stock markets yo-yo. But, this is all crisis response, not a systemic alternative to 'genuinely existing' liberal capitalism which now dominates the globe. Even states that are more committed to state intervention and public ownership (China in relation to some of its bigger State-owned enterprises and fixed exchange rates) are still rule-takers rather than rule-makers. If the crisis was not on Wall Street, in fact, the short-term bail outs would come with even more conditions aimed at greater liberalization. But no political leader in the United States can afford to reverse course in some systemic sense. Both the financial economic intervention by the state and the social intervention is short term and at best medium term. And once the worst is over for most people 'who count,' the United States and other states will back off, divest their stakes in any companies or firms they might have actually bought into, privatizing anything that might have nationalized, and although some social intervention might remain in place its primary goal will be, as it has been for decades, to take the sting out of globalization for ordinary people. If anything the next stage may well involve the strengthening of regional

political frameworks. But this will occur within the wider ambit of ‘genuinely existing’ economic liberalism. History only moves forwards not backwards and people forget how much things have changed. Even violent-criminal neo-traditionalists, such as Al-Qaeda, want to keep their cell phones, AK 47s and Toyota pickups at the same time as they dream of restoring their version of the traditional caliphate in their part of the world: an alternative that remains in the realm of fantasy rather than serious speculation about future global and regional political arrangements.

The way beyond the current crisis of the nation-state system (which reflects the success of the United States, or the ‘West,’ rather than its decline) lies in a careful understanding of the specific histories and political economies of the nations –that were never nations. These are those ‘nation-states’ that are all characterized by a history of failure in terms of the formation of a strong sense of national identity linked to a process of state formation and state building that has delivered infrastructure and public goods within a clearly defined and controlled territory. At this point of time, the pursuit of development and security can only be successful when we move beyond the current enthusiasm for state building along formal territorial lines embodied by the current conception of sovereign nation-states. This has, of course, been articulated in simplistic terms for many years by proponents of economic regionalization and globalization (Ohmae, 1996). Contrary to the view that regionalization and globalization (along liberal economic lines) are more or less a panacea for the crisis of the nation-state, the crisis is actually a symptom of the uneven character of regionalization and globalization. Furthermore, there is a need to avoid ignoring identity generally or national identity more specifically, but to acknowledge that in many instances identities remain stronger at the sub-national level, while new institutions could be bolstered by notions of more regional, or even global ideas about citizenship and rights and obligations (Paupp, 2007; Yunker, 2007; Talbott, 2008). To this end there also needs to be more attention paid to both the political economy of violence and the social and cultural dynamics of globalization (Shankar, 2006).⁴ Far more than any of the books under review here it seems to realize, there is a profound need to rethink national sovereignty and establish frameworks for the protection of rights and the delivery of basic needs that moves sovereignty both downwards and upwards. This needs to be done in ways that are neither ad hoc, nor piecemeal. Furthermore, it needs to be done in ways that acknowledge the local content of identity and citizenship, but set much higher standards at the regional and global level for the protection of those rights and for the receipt of obligations associated with citizenship. There is more than ever a need to formulate approaches to security and development that take ‘common humanity’ far more seriously than the current nation-state system and ‘genuinely existing’ liberal capitalism are capable of. We need to



understand that the ‘crisis’ of the nation-state system and vagaries of ‘genuinely existing’ liberal capitalism are not reminiscent of the decline and fall of Rome, or signs of the decline of the West. The American ascendancy remains in its prime and *Pax Americana* will only begin its downward spiral when it has been successfully challenged and displaced by an equally powerful and systemic alternative. In the meantime, the New American Empire or the American Ascendancy, especially under new leadership, looks set to continue and even flourish, particularly if it is recognized that boom-bust economic cycles are part of ‘genuinely existing’ liberal capitalism and in the medium term serve to amplify rather than constrain the global framework of US power.

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Notes

- 1 For example, the widespread acceptance that there is something that can be called an American Empire in the post-Cold War era is apparent in an edited book by James J. Hentz. In the introduction, Hentz argued that the book as a whole represented an attempt to come to grips with the ‘American obligation of empire’ (Cox, 2004; Hentz, 2004, p. 9; see also O’Rourke, 2004; Gardner and Young, 2005; Berman, 2006; Thayer and Layne, 2006; Calhoun *et al.*, 2007; Scott, 2007).
- 2 The late 1960s, arguably was characterized by a burgeoning debate about whether the US was in decline as was the late Cold War era. The Declinist-in-Chief in the late 1980s was, of course, Paul Kennedy (Kennedy, 1987; Black, 2008).
- 3 Of course, the debate over the decline and fall of the Roman Empire itself has been a subject of study and debate among historians since Gibbon’s time, if not before. In recent years, new archaeological evidence and close reading of the extant sources has resulted in a re-evaluation of the idea that Roman decline was a result of internal decay and decadence, or ‘immoderate



greatness' and imperial overstretch. If nothing else, the complexities of the debate about the fall of the Roman Empire – a lengthy process now being attributed to a conjuncture of crucial political and military errors of judgment rather than collapse from within or overthrow from without – highlights the problems associated with too close a reliance on drawing lessons or analogies from the Roman experience to understand the history and contemporary trajectory of the American Ascendancy (Gibbon, 1994, pp. 156–157; Heather, 2007, pp. 14–15, 31–32).

4 The literature on globalization is immense. For a good synthesis see Shankar (2006).

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