



Doting Over America's Decline

The Post-American World, by Fareed Zakaria, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008, 292 pages, hardcover.

If the American news media favors Cassandras, naysayers, and pessimists, then Fareed Zakaria, editor and columnist for *Newsweek* magazine and irrepressible optimist, is something of an anomaly. But the Indian-born Zakaria, who sits on the boards of both the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission, two of America's most elite and elitist organizations that typically operate at cross-purposes to the interests of ordinary Americans, is also an insider's insider. From his vantage point at the pinnacle of the American establishment, this non-practicing Muslim from Bombay enjoys the privileged perspective of the select few who engineer the world we live in behind the scenes.



This is why Zakaria's newest book, *The Post-American World*, is essential reading for anyone seeking a true insider's take on where the United States — and the rest of the world — is being led (and misled). Written in Zakaria's typically transparent, fluid prose, and brimming with Big Ideas, *The Post-American World* serves up a vision of the present and near-future in which America no longer rules the global roost. The present is characterized by what Zakaria calls "the rise of the rest" — the surge into modernity of a host of new powers, from Brazil to India to portions of Sub-Saharan Africa — which is rapidly eating away at America's preeminence. Zakaria points out that a host of superlatives, from the world's tallest building (Dubai) and largest shopping mall (Beijing) to the biggest Ferris wheel (Singapore) and even largest corporation (China), are no longer in the United States. The gap between America and the rest of the world is shrinking rapidly everywhere but in the military sector, exactly as the proponents of globalization have been predicting, enthuses Zakaria. In effect, we are transitioning into a post-American world, in which America no longer enjoys full-spectrum economic, financial, industrial, and cultural dominance over the rest of the world.

Nor, according to Zakaria, is this necessarily a bad thing. For one thing, the rise of the rest does not imply that American vitality is diminishing. The future America of Zakaria's vision is not some enfeebled empire like Rome in its declension or the British Empire in the mid-20th century. Rather, America is destined to prosper far longer than empires past, because of her unparalleled institutions of higher learning, her geographical advantages, and a continued infusion of the best and brightest from all over the world. The British Empire, with whom we are often compared, enjoyed economic supremacy for only a few decades, Zakaria points out, whereas the United States has had the world's largest economy for more than 120 years. Moreover, although Britain's global empire was defended by the mightiest naval force the world had ever seen, her land forces — her armies — were nowhere near as dominant.



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By contrast, the United States military is dominant on land and sea, in the air and even in outer space. Nor does Zakaria see any likelihood that any other power — not a resurgent Russia, not China — will overtake or surpass the United States militarily anytime soon.

While America has seen some industrial capability migrate overseas, Zakaria acknowledges, she is far ahead of the rest of the world in technological innovation, especially in sectors like nanotechnology that are clearly going to be critical industries in coming decades.

As for the crises of our age, Zakaria points out (correctly) that ours is a far less violent, more secure era than any other in recent history. The world we live in may seem uniquely calamitous, but that is only because of the power of modern news media (cable TV and the Internet, especially) to amplify every tragedy as soon as it occurs, anywhere around the world. Terrorism is an ill, to be sure, but the occasional car bomb or hijacking cannot be compared to the deadly wars and pogroms of the 20th century. The war in Iraq is a fiasco, but it pales beside the horrors of Vietnam and Korea (not to mention the world wars).

In short, Zakaria's prognosis for the near and middle-term future is a litany of almost unalloyed optimism: things are great, and getting even better as the rest of the world takes advantage of the cornucopia that globalism proffers.

And yet, and yet. While the British Empire culturally is akin to our own, a more felicitous comparison (trite though it may seem) would be with Rome which, despite significant differences of its own, resembles the United States of America far more both historically and politically. For Rome, like America (and unlike Great Britain), was not a monarchy but a republic — a label the Romans clung to for centuries after the rise of Caesarism.

Like America, Rome enjoyed full-spectrum military and economic dominance, not for a generation or two but for centuries. From the Second Punic War until the supremacy of the Goths and Vandals six centuries later, no foreign naval power posed a serious challenge to Rome. The ways of Rome — her language, engineering, currency, and system of government — became the ways of the Western world. Her decline and fall, while obvious with millennia of hindsight, were by no means apparent to Romans themselves. For Rome's fall was gradual, punctuated by deceptive episodes of renewal (as during the period of the Antonines). The end, when it finally came, was swift, absolute, and devastating, setting back the march of human progress by centuries.

The early indices of Roman decline were not military but economic. In particular, as Rome's moneyed elites succeeded in monopolizing wealth and credit, the Roman middle class was gradually squeezed out of existence. Rome's merchants and independent farmers were turned into landless serfs on the latifundia, the vast land monopolies that Rome's oligarchy accumulated. Personal debt soared, prompting Rome's poor to sell themselves into slavery to escape their obligations. Higher taxes and the debasement of the currency followed, leading to inflation — all of this long before the first Goths and Vandals laid low the Western Empire.

While Zakaria rightfully points to American technological progress and innovative vitality as reasons for hope, he brushes aside America's financial decline and gradual descent into economic oligarchy. Huge numbers of Americans are bankrupt or nearly so, and levels of personal savings have fallen to unexampled lows. More ominously, the American government is in debt to the tune of tens of trillions of dollars (including "off-budget" obligations like Social Security and Medicare).

Zakaria, to the extent that he addresses economic malaise at all, casts the problem mostly in terms of



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consumer or private debt, claiming that alarms over low savings rates and abuse of credit cards are exaggerated in any event. "The whole concept of 'national saving,'" Zakaria opines, "might be outdated. In the new economy, growth comes from 'teams of people creating new goods and services, not from the accumulation of capital,' which was more important in the first half of the twentieth century." In this "new economy," new kinds of assets like education and innovative R&D, while not reflected on traditional balance sheets, help to act as a counterpoise for traditional liabilities like lack of savings and debts.

All of this is fine and good, but it ignores the real problem: America's shaky economy is not a private but a government-based problem. Our multi-trillion dollar national debt was generated in Washington, D.C., not Main Street, USA. It is a consequence of decades of devil-may-care borrowing and spending to fund massive unconstitutional federal programs of every description — while printing more money to pay for it. It is the creation of the Federal Reserve and the U.S. Treasury Department, in cahoots with a compliant Congress that has refused, year after year, to defund the extravagance. Its fruits have been the gradual destruction of the value of the dollar, ever-rising taxes, and a level of public indebtedness that threatens to bankrupt the nation. And of this part of the picture Zakaria says nary a word.

This is hardly surprising, given Zakaria's pedigree within the internationalist establishment. Refreshingly optimistic he may be in comparison with most of the rest of his major-media confreres, but Zakaria, like most of the rest of the movers and shakers in the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission, is a fervent disciple of bigger government, including global government, as *The Post-American World* makes abundantly clear. The rosy future of Zakaria's vision is a world of limitless prosperity and opportunity — presided over by a retooled version of the United Nations-based international system — a vision of kinder, gentler world government for a more nuanced age.

Under Zakaria's *new* New World Order, the United States would submit to the same international rules as everyone else, rather than jeopardize its international moral standard by "freelancing" whenever it serves our purposes. America, Zakaria intones, must stop applying a double standard to its own interests as against those of everybody else, whether in the law on terror, the promulgation of democracy, or the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Otherwise, we will "[appear] to be saying to the rest of the world, 'Do what I say, not what I do.'"

But it turns out the rigid, top-down institutions of "world order" created in the mid-20th century won't be flexible enough to respond to the demands of global governance in the 21st. Invoking a system of "a la carte multilateralism" (a term coined by Richard Haas, a former State Department official), Zakaria calls for less-centralized international government that would more fully involve non-state actors and not necessarily center on the UN per se:

No one institution or organization is always right, no one framework ideal. The UN might work for one problem, NATO for another, the OAS for a third. And for a new issue like climate change, perhaps a new coalition that involves private business and nongovernmental groups would make the most sense. International life is only going to get messier. Being accommodating, flexible, and adaptable is likely to produce better results on the ground than insisting on a pure approach based on the notion that the only way to solve international problems is the way we have solved international problems in the past, in decades when the state was unusually strong. A more organic international system in which problems are addressed through a variety of different structures and solutions can create its own kind of layered stability. It is not as appealing as a more formal structure of peace, rooted in and directed through one or two central organizations



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in New York and Geneva. But it might be a more realistic and durable order.

Zakaria believes that every problem - climate change, trade disputes, environmental issues, disease, poverty, ethnic unrest, and all the rest - no matter how acute, complex, or deep-seated, can be solved by the creative application of government. This is the fundamental premise of *The Post-American World*, indeed, the unspoken article of faith of socialists everywhere. Zakaria, despite his affable persona and undeniable talents, is no different from globalists of the past. And given his stature, it's a fair bet that his views reflect the priorities of the powerful interests he serves.

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