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To lead the world? : not any Longer

Article

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TO LEAD THE WORLD? NOT ANY LONGER

It has become one of the standard truths of the last few years that the Bush years have done enormous damage to U.S. standing in the world. What follows from this, quite logically, is that whoever won the White House in November 2008 would either have to modify the doctrine associated with Bush's name or, more radically, abandon it altogether. How many conferences has one attended, and how many books and articles has one read of late, that speculated at length about the direction US foreign might take once Bush had returned home to Texas? In my case at least, far too many.

It was with some trepidation therefore that I picked up this particular book. I need not have worried. Indeed, the Mel Leffler and Jeff Legro volume—published a little while before the near-landslide of Barack Obama last November—makes a very good stab at thinking through some of the big issues likely to face the U.S. after Bush. The various authors—all American with the one exception of Harvard exile Niall Ferguson—all do a perfectly fine job. From this point of view there is a great deal to recommend in the book. One minor caveat I suppose: because the various contributors and their views are all so well known, there are few surprises contained here. Thus while Steven van Evera informs his readers that the era of great power geopolitical rivalry is over, Bob Kagan (wouldn't you know) says that it ain't. Meanwhile, while my good friend John Ikenberry provides the new policy team with some very sound advice on how to build, or more precisely rebuild, the liberal world order so insouciantly weakened by Bush—a position that Ikenberry has advanced with very great verve before—Ferguson (who like Francis Fukuyama now appears to have washed his hands of the whole Bush episode) informs anybody who cares to listen why America has to completely jettison the Bush doctrine and its three essential truths: pre-emption, unilateralism and democratic promotion. To which we can only respond, amen. But we've heard all this before.

Still, the key question remains—and it is one with which the editors grapple bravely in their two chapters—as to how far the United States can abandon everything that has been done in its name over the past eight years. Here it may be much easier to talk change than practice it. Take the 'war on terror'. Bush may have fought it in an especially counterproductive way. But that hardly means the problem of terrorism will go away now that he has left the White House. Indeed, it is worth noting that even though Barack Obama has promised to close down Guantanamo and to stop torture he has not—thus far—gotten rid of extraordinary rendition. Nor has he said a great deal—thus far—about one of the issues that so angers Moslems around the world: Israel's policies towards the Palestinians. On the contrary, everything up until now points to business as usual. Even in the midst of the near total destruction of Gaza, Obama remained ominously silent. Obama may have proclaimed the need for a new way forward, but whether or not he can translate these fine words into real policies remains to be seen. Indeed, it was Bob Kagan no less who in a recent debate at the LSE warned us "Obama lovers" in Europe not to expect too much from the new boys and girls in Washington. This is not what we wanted to hear of course. But it

does point to something we would all be silly to ignore: that Barack Obama may turn out be something of a disappointment to those of us over here (and over there) who have invested so much in him.

A number of Bush critics and Obama fans (amongst which I would decidedly include myself) may also not want to hear what long ago became obvious to all but the most rabid Bush haters: that in certain areas his administration actually managed to get some things right. This is most obviously the case in terms of U.S. policy towards Asia in general and China in particular. In the case of China this was no mean feat given that Bush came into office carrying a copy of that *Foreign Affairs* article authored by Condoleezza Rice advising the United States to abandon the Clinton strategy of engagement with Beijing and adopt her then-preferred policy of containment. Thank goodness he saw the light (though it took 9/11 for him to smell the coffee). Nor was Bush quite so bad when it came to Europe—in the end. Admittedly, his team continued to get Russia wrong by pushing too hard for full NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine (a policy we are told that Barack Obama will abandon). He and the Republicans were also far too indulgent towards Georgia (with disastrous consequences for that poor country). Still, having looked over the proverbial abyss in 2003, his foreign policy team did begin mending bridges with its main European allies. This did not make Bush himself especially popular on the continent. Nor did his discovery of Europe do much to weaken anti-Americanism. But at the highest level at least it did begin to calm things down a bit, even if normal service was not resumed.

If most of the excellent essays gathered here contain few surprises and even fewer rash predictions, one thing at least did strike me as being distinctly odd: the book's title. Whether or not the decision to call it 'To Lead the World' was taken by the publishers or the editors I know not. But it might have been wise to have added a question-mark! After all, the one thing the U.S. has not been doing very well over the past few years has been to lead. From global warming to international law, from the Doha round to the UN, the United States has quite simply lost the plot over the past decade. This is not to suggest that the U.S. has been on a Kennedy-like descent. Nor is it impossible for the United States to regain the moral high ground and start being 'smart' once again. Still, it is a real issue; one that might have been better reflected in a slightly more tentative title.

Secondly, though Leffler and Legro do a great job in bringing together some really top authors, the volume overall has too much of an insider American ring about it for my liking. To be blunt, there are far too many of the usual suspects in the same room and not enough dissenting—or indeed foreign—voices. This is not to imply that all the authors sing from the same ideological or theoretical hymn-sheet. It is to imply however that the inclusion of one or two 'dissidents' and perhaps the odd non-American (I don't include Ferguson in that category) might have made for a livelier, more angular, read.

Finally, in spite of its many qualities, the volume has in many ways been overtaken by events—not so much by the Obama election but rather by the meltdown in the world economic system that is now taking place before our very eyes. The implications of this, as we are fast learning, are enormous: first for international relations; second for the domestic stability of a host of states around the world; and finally for the United States

itself. The crisis may well leave the still enormously powerful USA in its current number one position. But as analysts as far apart as the Chinese Prime Minister and Vladimir Putin pointed out at the recent Davos get together in Switzerland (where official USA was notable by its absence), the disaster that is upon us was made in America and in the process has done a lot to destroy faith in the American way of doing things. Certainly, if America is to 'lead' then it has quite a lot of explaining to do in the meantime to the millions of people around the world who have followed its economic advice over the past twenty five years—and are now paying a very heavy price.