

# CURRENT BOOKS

## SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center

### *Is America in Decline?*

**BOUND TO LEAD:** The Changing Nature of American Power. By Joseph S. Nye, Jr. Basic. 307 pp. \$19.95

**AMERICAN POWER:** The Rise and Decline of U.S. Globalism. By John Taft. Harper & Row. 321 pp. \$22.50

**THE SUICIDE OF AN ELITE:** American Internationalists and Vietnam. By Patrick Lloyd Hatcher. Stanford. 429 pp. \$35

The first I heard of American decline was when, some seven years ago, a bright American graduate student came to me in Oxford and proposed writing a thesis on "American decline from a European perspective." I had to tell him that it was not evident to me that America was in decline at all. Europe and Japan might be catching up with it economically, the Third World was as recalcitrant as ever, and American foreign policy was, as usual, in a mess. But if anyone were patently in decline it was the Soviet Union, and the United States remained what it had effectively been ever since 1945: the only superpower combining military, economic, and cultural strength in a fashion no other nation could rival. The young man prudently chose another thesis topic.

A few years later the historian Paul Kennedy was to point out that this happy state of affairs would not necessarily last forever and that the United States should remedy certain weaknesses if it were not one day, like earlier empires, to be one with Nineveh and Tyre. But that day, he said, was not yet, nor was its coming inevitable, so long as the United States recognized its limitations, addressed its latent weaknesses, and learned to manage its strengths.

This all seemed fairly obvious to the sympathetic outsider, but the furor set off

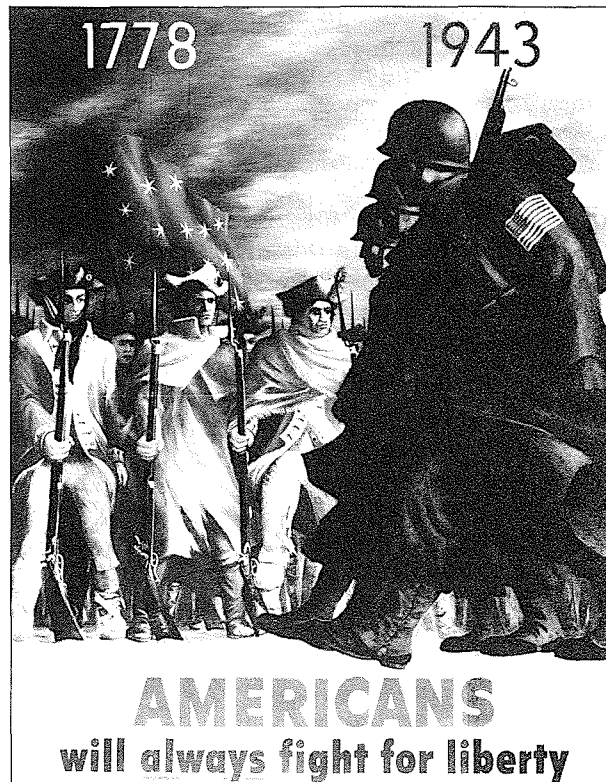
by Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) showed that it was far from obvious within the United States. Angry debate raged between the pessimists, who believed decline to be inevitable, and the indignant optimists, who regarded it as inconceivable. Historians inclined to the first school, political scientists to the second. Both showed their professional biases. As historians saw it, what had happened before was likely to happen again. Political scientists examined indices with little consideration as to how these could be affected by chance and will. All participants, however, whether by their defense of the thesis or the ferocity with which they attacked it, revealed the self-doubt that has tormented American thinkers ever since the Vietnam War.

To this controversy Joseph Nye, a professor of international security at Harvard University, brings a refreshingly brisk approach. He properly distinguishes between "decadence" and "decline," quoting the incomparable Raymond Aron: "Decadence implies value-judgements. . . . Decline simply describes a power relationship." The power relationship between the United States and the rest of the world, Nye admits, has certainly changed since the 1940s, as Europe and the Pacific states have recovered from the effects of World War II. But no one else has overtaken America in general power indices or seems likely to do so. Japan's power is too one-dimensional, that of Europe divided among nation-states unlikely to federate, while the Soviet Union has virtually dropped out of the race and China has not yet entered it. But even when American power was at its peak, Nye reminds us, it did not attain hegemony. The United States could and did constrain the Soviet Union; but it could not shape Europe to American wishes, nor prevent the "loss of China,"

nor inhibit the emergence of a plethora of Third-World states "non-aligned" against the West. Long before the emergence of anything like a rival power, the United States had lost control of the United Nations and found itself isolated in fighting a losing war in Vietnam.

Part of the trouble was that the United States converted so much of its wealth into military resources which bought it little military influence. Not only were nuclear weapons inherently almost unusable, but, as Nye rightly points out, the rise in national self-consciousness throughout the world gradually narrowed the possibilities of successful military intervention to such marginal cases as Grenada and Panama. More effective than nuclear military might is what Nye calls "soft" or "co-optive" power: the ability "to structure a situation so that other nations develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with one's own nation." Economic strength helps here, and even more does cultural compatibility. With the gradual diversifica-

tion of power throughout the world, the declining effectiveness of military force, and the waning of "the Soviet threat," the success of the United States policy, says Nye, will now depend on its capacity for "power conversion," abandoning military pressure for economic and cultural influence. The success of this will in turn depend on internal factors—such as the disjointed American system of government and the introverted attitude of the American people themselves—factors which a long line of observers from Alexis de Tocqueville to John Kennedy has seen as the fundamental weaknesses of the American giant. Nye concludes that the problem is one of "domestic political leadership on power conversion rather than long-term economic decline." Although Nye criticizes *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, his conclusion is much the same as Paul Kennedy's: "Decline is not inevitable, but



A 1943 poster equates power with military strength. In the nuclear age, "soft coercion" is often more effective.

the wrong choices could bring it on."

Nye thus accepts that power is a matter not just of potential but of judgment and will. The other works under review deal with these factors as displayed by the American elite which dominated the conduct of foreign policy from the end of World War II through the catastrophe of Vietnam. The two books complement each other well. John Taft, a writer on U.S. foreign policy, has produced a lively, somewhat sardonic survey focusing on the personalities and backgrounds of the WASP Wilsonian liberals whose ideology, self-confidence, and sense of "obligation as gentlemen to elevate the masses of the world" drove the United States out of isolation into global intervention. Patrick Lloyd Hatcher, a political scientist at the University of California, Berkeley, provides a more sophisticated analysis of their ideas as well as a detailed account of how and

why they finally came to grief in Vietnam. The lesson of both is clear: Good intentions and command of huge economic and military resources are of little use unless directed by an understanding of the complexities of a multi-cultural world.

In Taft's opinion, the first of these Wilsonian epigones with a mission to reform the world was also America's first ambassador to the Soviet Union, William Bullitt, an erratic figure who was followed by staid creatures such as Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, columnist Walter Lippmann, Ambassador Averell Harriman, diplomat David Bruce, Congressman Chester Bowles, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., and Secretaries of State Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles. (Paul Nitze, curiously enough, is not mentioned.) They were high-minded, energetic, financially secure, and as determined to make the world safe for democracy as Woodrow Wilson had been. Their ideals were those of classical 19th-century liberalism: free trade, anti-colonialism, and self-government. Unfortunately, they found themselves confronted by the opposing ideology of communism—Lockeans, as Hatcher puts it, against Leninists. In their creed, anti-communism took the place of anti-colonialism, and, for some of them, of virtually everything else. They reinterpreted the concept of "collective security" to mean allied cohesion behind American leadership. They adopted diplomat George Kennan's concept of "containment" and shared his enthusiasm for covert operations. They embraced with some alacrity concepts of deterrence and limited war.

Vietnam was for them the supreme test. They failed it, and they never recovered their self-confidence. "Having been foolish in their pride," as Taft puts it rather well, "they became foolish in their humility." It was indeed foolish, for on the whole they had done remarkably well. "Surprisingly," as Hatcher remarks rather patronizingly, "given the complex nature of global politics, they were generally successful, especially in managing national security tasks."

Taft hints at a sociological dimension of the problem that is missing from most analyses, even Nye's. These internationalist liberals, he points out, "were the closest thing to an American ruling class since the early 19th century. They did not, however, rule on their home territory. Lacking their own political base, they had the consent of a large Middle American majority that no longer exists." If this is so, there is an interesting analogy with the British case. The ruling classes of Britain began attempting to spread their beliefs and influence throughout the world during the latter part of the 19th century, just as they were beginning to lose their power base at home. They also fell victim to destructive self-doubt and scuttled an empire which they had, on the whole, administered fairly well. Can a nation, whatever its indices of power, pursue a firm and positive foreign policy if it lacks a self-confident elite comparatively independent of domestic pressures? And, in the United States, where is such an elite now to be found?

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## *Inside Casino Capitalism*

**BARBARIANS AT THE GATE:** The Fall of RJR Nabisco. By Bryan Burrough and John Helyar. Harper & Row. 528 pp. \$22.95

In 1898, Adolphus Green, chairman of the National Biscuit Company, found himself faced with the task of choosing a

trademark for his newly formed baking concern. Green was a progressive businessman. He refused to employ child labor, even though it was then a common practice, and he offered his bakery employees the option to buy stock at a discount. Green therefore thought that his