

Victor Bulmer-Thomas. *Empire in Retreat: The Past, Present, and Future of the United States.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-03-00-21000-2. Pp. xx, 458. Hardcover, \$32.50.

Victor Bulmer-Thomas's *Empire in Retreat* is a work on the so-called imperial history of the USA. It is a sweeping review of America's 250-year pursuit of security and advantage in the international arena. His thesis is that despite its foundational claims to freedom, justice, and distancing itself from 'Old World' monarchies, America aggressively embarked on its own imperial journey. Critically, it notes that the birth of America was in the Age of Empires, and if it was going to compete, indeed survive, America would need an 'empire' of its own. Though not necessarily an empire of territory, it would nonetheless seek an advantage over other powers in order to assure its security and prosperity. Unfortunately, the Bulmer-Thomas uses this as a basis for a narrative of aggression and manipulation and never compares his thesis against other models of international relations, for example, realism, balance of power, or other security competitions. To him, America, regardless of its pronouncements of political and ideological enlightenment, was acting just as one of the Old War powers. The author is very selective of his examples and skips over vast portions of history to support his thesis. It is a prime example that narrative is not analysis.

As an 'imperial' chronicler, Bulmer-Thomas thoroughly details decisions and motivations over the past 250 years, but provides very little feedback from the plethora of actors in America's 'imperialist' pursuits. A weakness of the book is its decidedly one-sided view, focusing on US inputs into the global system while not exploring—except for a minimum of detail—desires and decisions of other actors in the same global system.

The book's three sections are organised in very broad, chronological periods. The first covers territorial expansion of the post-Revolution America and its entry into global affairs. Next is America at the start of the twentieth century through its so-called unipolar moment. The author finally concludes with a third section, 'Empire in Retreat', which covers, roughly, the post-Cold War era. The periodisation is not absolute, and the author uses the three sections to introduce different ideas supporting his topic, albeit in the manner described. It skips an in-

depth exploration of the complicated decision-making of actors and greatly minimises the role of other states in the system. The book broadly categorises these other actors as victims and powerless in the face of U.S. objectives, greatly betraying a full accounting of true history.

The first section of the book benefits from a balanced explanation of why did a young USA embark on such a determined expansion to the opposite coast? The book begins chronologically from early America as it expands from the original thirteen colonies to the Louisiana Purchase and the various conflicts (Mexican-American War, U.S.-Spanish War) and numerous purchases and agreements which brought America to its current geographic disposition. Opportunism and, perhaps, the first manifestations of Old-World imperialism were evident in these actions. Clearly evident is Bulmer-Thomas's deep scholarship on events in the Western Hemisphere as detailed and clearly explained in the first and portions of the second section of the book. Left unmentioned is the desire to preclude the new country from having to contend within a geopolitical balance of power. Such an exploration would give balance to, and acknowledge the fact that even in the new country, competition is at the heart of security decisions.

In the second portion of the book, examining the US's the semi-global empire, Bulmer-Thomas's one-sided narrative continues. He notes that American territorial expansion had concluded and the US embarked on a strategy to control its semi-global empire through institutions. Such a claim itself is testament that imperialism, in its traditional form, is not what was happening. Rather, consolidation of American control in the Western Hemisphere, the attempt at the League of Nations and, following the Second World War, the United Nations, not to mention such constructs as the GATT/WTO and others, was the focus of America's control. The book fails to consider that after the Second World War, the US was in a unique position to influence the construction of the post-war order. After two global conflicts, no one was ready to allow the world to suffer another devastating conflagration. In this light, perceived imperialism was really an attempt to preserve peace. While the US could seize on the opportunity to construct an order that no doubt benefited the Americans, for sixty years hence it has likely contributed to the absence of great power conflict.

That being said, the touted American hegemony for much of the Cold War did not guarantee harmony with the American interests. One

only has to remember the 1956 Middle East crisis as one of many instances where allies of the US ran afoul of American intent. Later, NATO members were disappointed the US did not respond more quickly to the Balkan Crisis of the mid-1990s. Both examples are evidence that the idea of a US 'empire', even a semi-global one, did not equate to control and other nations looked to the United States for leadership. In reality, the international security environment is much more complicated, obscure and at times, unpredictable than what the author's narrative claims.

The final section examines the retreat of American Empire. Like the rest of the book, the author seizes on aspects of the post-Cold War era facts and skips whole segments of history to create his narrative. The author notes in the introduction that the book is not about American domestic affairs, yet a sizeable portion delves deeply into the subject of anti-imperialism and isolationism. It contributes significantly to understanding, in total, of all the forces influencing the decisions that have affected US foreign policy, and communicates, most importantly, in a country of any size, there will be disagreement about the direction and priorities of the government. It is unfortunate that this critical section attempting to lend some balance to his arguments is so abbreviated.

Bulmer-Thomas reinforces the section with several observations of today's world which are likely the most accurate. He devotes significant coverage to the state of the post-Cold War US economy and attempts to explain its relative weakening in three empirical metrics. Like many economic analyses, the review may be opposed by different economists' perspectives and the economic condition in the US is not unlike what faces other advanced economies today. Finally, it is buttressed by a review of a hyper-partisan Congress and the lack of critical journalism (as opposed to its current entertainment value). It is also in this section that he adds some of the most vexing, almost conspiratorial notions of US actions (for instance the state role of Cyber Command and DARPA). Combined with the popular notion of exhaustion with US wars in the Middle East, economic stagnation, undue risk exposure as the world's hegemon, not to mention perceived unfairness, a retreating empire is understandable.

The author returns to a more balanced view of strategic affairs in the epilogue, one that is more conventional. He revisits the premise that the early United States is a trading nation and was looking for

commercial advantages and wished to secure its role in a world of empires, acknowledging a degree of competition with European states and empires. He acknowledges the willingness of Americans, following the massive destruction of the Second World War, to create a more stable and prosperous world. Most notably, the author states that it will not be easy for any country to take America's place – an acknowledgment to the leadership role the USA has played.

The greatest limitation of the book is the critical, one-sided perspective. Striking somewhat cynical tones at times, the author paints a picture of an aggressive and manipulative US seeking hegemony over those global actors it can influence. What the book misses is the number of actors it could *not* influence. This fact that must be kept in mind while reading the book. From the book's perspective, America's 250-year campaign was an attempt at manipulation of weaker actors in the international system. The book does not consider that America's actions could be considered from another vantage point: that of a global security competition. For instance, he describes NATO as an imperial tool of the US and that it leveraged an inflated Soviet threat in order to maintain the alliance. He never describes what Western European countries really felt about that threat.

Empire in Retreat will serve as a useful starting point to explore any one of the number of areas in the three sections. More research is required to fully unearth the totality of forces at work in any given subject or period of time. The book covers an expansive timeframe, and it's difficult to provide counter points all the theories proffered within. This work will no doubt take its place as a contribution to the current cannon of literature on the changing international order, and the popular debate surrounding the demise of the American unipolar era. It is sweeping, but narrowly focused. It is highly useful to describe the history of American foreign policy as one of 'empire' and not a critique of US endeavours to secure global peace and prosperity. A reader may become disenchanted with its occasional snarky and cynical comments which diminish the seriousness of the topic. It should be read, carefully, with an eye towards its one-sidedness and lack of critical analysis.

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