

## BOOKS

[*The Post-American World*,  
Fareed Zakaria, W.W. Norton and  
Co., 288 pages]

# Rise of the Rest

By Geoffery Wheatcroft

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, the English were much concerned by the question of national decline. The British Empire had reached its apogee by the end of the 19th century, which was also the end of Queen Victoria's reign. It is sometimes supposed that this, and the inevitable decline on the other side of that peak, can only have been visible in hindsight. In fact, the great bard of empire, Rudyard Kipling, saw ahead very clearly at the time.

In 1897, the year of the Queen-Empress's Diamond Jubilee, he wrote "Recessional" as a warning against imperial hubris. He noted what happens to those "drunk with sight of power" who succumb to "frantic boast and foolish word," lines that Americans could study with profit even now. Two years later, he wrote "The White Man's Burden," whose subtitle is often forgotten: "The United States and the Philippine Islands." Kipling realized, as not all his countrymen did, that the American Republic, which in the generation after the Civil War had already outstripped England from population to steel production—though not yet in foreign trade—would before long enter the world stage.

While he welcomed the arrival of America as a potential Great Power and imperial helpmeet, he wanted Americans to know the great weight of this burden, in words which likewise should have been read out in Congress before the invasion of Iraq:

And when your goal is nearest  
The end for others sought,  
Watch Sloth and heathen Folly  
Bring all your hopes to nought.

When the Americans took on their new role, Kipling warned, they would reap the old reward, "The blame of those ye better / The hate of those ye guard."

As we enter a new century, it is the turn of the Americans—having taken up many burdens, reached their own zenith of power, seen many hopes brought to nought, and duly earned the hate of those they thought they were guarding—to worry about their own imminent decline or what many envisage as such. The 19th century was the European century, the 20th century was the American century, and the 21st century is going to be the Asian century, is it not?

This is the question Fareed Zakaria addresses in his stimulating and well-informed, if sometimes rather breezy, new book *The Post-American World*. Indian by birth, Zakaria came to the United States as a student and stayed to become a journalist. He is now editor of *Newsweek International* and is well equipped to interpret the outside world to an American audience. While addressing his adoptive country, Zakaria's concern is to calm some of their more overwrought fears about national demise: his book "is not about the decline of America but the rise of everyone else."

That rise is astonishing. Last year and the year before, 124 countries grew economically at more than 4 percent annually, an enormous rate by historical standards. Since 1981, people living in absolute poverty—conveniently defined as subsisting on a dollar a day or less—have fallen from 40 percent of the world's population to less than 18 percent. The world's tallest building is in Taipei—though it will soon be topped by another in Dubai—one of the richest men on earth is Mexican, and "even shopping, America's greatest sporting activity, has gone global. Of the top ten malls in the world, only one is in the United States; the world's biggest is in Beijing."

One might ask not why this is happening now but how it has not happened before: why has this huge awakening of China, India, and other Asian countries taken so long? The glib answer is that they were suppressed, exploited, and

held back by evil European imperialism. But Zakaria shows that this—like many such callow explanations—distorts the basic facts of chronology. Those Asian countries were falling behind the West, and to a large extent willfully withdrawing from the world, by the 15th and 16th centuries, when the age of empire had barely begun.

Even early last century, when England was still the global superpower with a vastly greater trade than China's, the Chinese economic product was larger than the British. But then, as Zakaria points out, total "GDP is highly misleading as an indicator, compared with per capita income and economic growth." In the six centuries from 1350 to 1950, per capita product increased almost sixfold in Western Europe, while barely increasing at all in China and India. That needs explaining, and—citing Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "central conservative truth" that culture, not politics, determines the success of a society—Zakaria looks a little gingerly at the oft-made argument that Hindu culture or Confucianism was inimical to progress and modernity.

There is no simple explanation for the Asian economic explosion of the past generation. Mao's abominable tyranny well nigh destroyed China economically. But he thus left it almost a *tabula rasa* for his successors to conduct another experiment, less bloody though far from merely admirable. China today has a political economy that sometimes seems to combine the worst features of communism and capitalism and has certainly had very damaging social, environmental, and cultural consequences.

When I read that China made 200 air conditioners in 1978 and 28 million in 2005, I think of the destruction of Peking—or Beijing if we must—by all accounts a very beautiful city not many years ago but now a hideous wilderness of skyscrapers. The English architect Norman Foster is quoted as saying irritably that, in the time it took for the public to review just one new building at Heathrow, in London, he will have built the entire new airport at Beijing, which is larger than all of Heathrow's terminals

combined. What a terrible nuisance democracy is when it impedes the totalitarian impulse of modern architects from Le Corbusier onward.

But does that mean, as many Americans now apprehend, that China represents a grave or even mortal threat to the West and especially the United States? Zakaria gives good reasons for thinking the threat much exaggerated: American military might is, and will remain for any foreseeable future, enormously greater than that of China or any combination of Asian powers, and there are further inherent strengths enjoyed by the United States, as well as by other former British colonies.

Although he has few illusions about his native country, Zakaria sees that India has real advantages over China. The educational system may be flawed and inadequate; at one time most Indian technology graduates migrated to America. The political culture may be stained by corruption or worse: "Nearly a fifth of the members of the Indian parliament have been accused of crimes, including embezzlement, rape and murder." Yet India still enjoys certain irreducible benefits that China does not, from the English language to limited constitutional government and a free press.

And then, for America, there is also the immense hegemonic "soft power," which is conferred by everything from its universities—far and away the world's best—to popular culture. "If I could control Hollywood I could control the world," Stalin said, which was, like other of the old monster's apothegms ("How many divisions has the Pope?"), a fascinating half-truth. It is quite possible to lap up American culture while being consumed with hatred of the society that produced it, as we regularly learn, but it is still to America's benefit that so many people want to look and sound American.

There are a few slips in *The Post-American World*, not necessarily significant. A letter, for example, responding to the East India Company's new educational policy written in 1823 could scarcely have been addressed "to Britain's prime minister, William Pitt," who died in 1806.

More importantly, Zakaria does not succumb to the materialist fallacy that distorts so much facile American commentary: everyone consumes American culture, therefore the world must be flat and in the end we will all live at peace under benevolent American tutelage. Zakaria sees through that. He examines the new rise of nationalism, as well as other ideologies that have so disconcerted progressive opinion. He quotes Zbigniew Brzezinski on the "global political awakening" that poses a challenge to existing states and especially to the global hierarchy "on top of which America still perches."

If we look back to Victoria's Jubilee and Kipling's "Recessional," we may well agree with Zakaria. He quite rightly says that the wonder is not so much that Great Britain declined but that it lasted so long, a point too rarely made. Quite apart from the sheer improbability of a small island off the shore of northwestern Europe becoming the greatest power on earth, it was extraordinary not that England was so beleaguered in 1940 but that she emerged victorious (as part of a vaster coalition) five years later. Zakaria adds that to understand how the British played a hand that was steadily weaker over time "might help illuminate America's path forward."

Without question, the dominance the United States has enjoyed since 1945 will fade away. It's already happening in manufacturing terms. The still more striking American imperium since 1991—what Zakaria calls "a unique, unipolar world in which the global economy has expanded and accelerated dramatically"—is receding. That does not mean, however, that the West is doomed or that the United States must become an impotent backwater. The future will depend not only on material strength but on political wisdom and moral resolution—and the humility that looks beyond frantic boast and foolish word. ■

*Geoffrey Wheatcroft is a journalist and the author of The Strange Death of Tory England and Yo, Blair!*

*[Who's Your City?: How the Creative Economy Is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life, Richard Florida, Basic Books, 384 pages]*

## In the Valley of the Geeks

By Steve Sailer

IF YOU ARE A NONFICTION writer whose name isn't Barack Obama, you probably aren't going to get rich off serious books. Instead, the two likeliest ways to cash in are by speaking at corporate and government gatherings or by penning a self-help book.

Richard Florida, a professor of something called "Business and Creativity" at the University of Toronto, has made a pile on the lecture circuit flogging to death his one big idea—that cities and companies must put "creative" people first—as detailed in his books *The Rise of the Creative Class*, *Cities and the Creative Class* and *The Flight of the Creative Class*. Notice a pattern here?

As a self-promoter, it doesn't hurt that Florida is a handsome, strapping fellow who looks like Hollywood leading man Aaron Eckhart, the smarmy tobacco lobbyist in "Thank You for Smoking," without the dimple. Florida might not be in *New Yorker* savant Malcolm Gladwell's price range as a convention keynote speaker, but he is said to command a \$35,000 fee.

He is now leveraging his brand by expanding into the self-help genre with *Who's Your City? How the Creative Economy Is Making Where to Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life*. If you can't decide whether to move to Portland or Austin, Florida has the book for you. (As you've no doubt noticed by now, it's hard to write lucidly about Florida's theories because he shares his last name with an important location, which snarls everything up. I will henceforth call him Dr. Vibrant, in honor of one of his favorite words.)