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'The Case for Goliath,' by Michael Mandelbaum

American World Order

Review by MARTIN WALKER

MICHAEL MANDELBAUM has taken all the fun out of an ostensibly flippanant but fundamentally serious diplomatic parlor game. Usually played late at night when the Americans have gone home to prepare for their puritanically early start to the day, the Europeans, Latin Americans and Asians take a second glass of Cognac and imagine how awful the world could be if someone else were to take the place of the United States as the global hegemon.

Eastern Europeans tell sad anecdotes about living under Russian dominance. Western Europeans shudder at the thought of Germans running the benign and virtual empire that the United States has maintained and expanded for the past 60 years. (And they murmur that within the European Union the French are already being difficult enough.) The Latin Americans have their hands full with the arrogance of next-door neighbors like Brazil without wanting to see it become even more dominant. The idea of a Chinese hegemony sends shivers down the backs of all, particularly the Japanese and Indians; somebody usually mentions the mournful example of Tibet. The Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis react equally unhappily to the idea of India as superpower. As the diplomats prattle on, meanwhile, the British smile wryly and say they have been there, done that and are extremely glad to have lost the T-shirt.

Mandelbaum, the Christian A. Herter professor of American foreign policy at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, pulls aside the curtain of diplomatic civility to expose the crude and obvious reality that everyone prefers to ignore, at least in public. He explains coolly and clearly the various ways in which the United States now functions as a global government, offering the planet the services of physical security, commercial regulation, financial stability and legal recourse that are normally provided by national governments to their citizens. Non-Americans naturally do not like to admit this, even as they enjoy the results, and American leaders do not like to spell it out, least of all to the voters who pay for it. But the evidence is clear. The network of military alliances (like NATO) and trade pacts (like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and international organizations (like the United Nations and World Bank and Group of 8) that the United States was mainly responsible for bringing to life has become an American-led global management system. It is familiar, inclusive and fairly unobtrusive. Its institutions provide a reasonable role for lesser powers, which is why the NATO alliance of consent survived and expanded while the wretched conscripts of the Warsaw Pact rebelled.

Above all, this system has been a remarkable and seductive economic success. Having built the tripartite trading structure of the modern world (North America, Western Europe and Japan) to enrich its citizens and allies and sustain the cold war, the generous Americans have expanded it to include the Asian tigers and Eastern Europeans. Now 1.3 billion Chinese and 1.1 billion Indians are clambering up the food chain to prosperity. They deal in dollars, raise money in the New York and London financial markets, generate big trade surpluses with the United States and then send their brighter and most ambitious children to American graduate and business schools, where they are exposed to the creeping osmosis of the Western value system. This is a magnificently benign loop, and will continue to be so once those American-trained graduates figure out how the biosphere is going to handle tens of millions of Asians living the American lifestyle, with their own cars and air conditioning and fast food.

This international system, an improved and democratized version of the clunky British model that brought us the 19th-century wave of globalization, is designed to operate to American comfort and profit, while securing compliance by sharing security and prosperity with others. But it is no longer doing so quite as reliably as it once did. Trade imbalances and the Bush administration's fiscal policies are putting it in jeopardy. Mandelbaum says the American pattern of energy consumption is "the worst 21st-century international offense of the United States." He adds that "the greatest threat to the American role as the world's government comes not from the discontent it generates in other countries, or from the assaults of terrorists, but from the huge bill for social spending that the American public will have to pay in the 21st century, a responsibility that has the potential to transform American politics in other ways unfavorable to the continuation of that role."

Moreover, traditional beneficiaries of the American system increasingly complain that the United States is no longer running it well. The first sign of the British system's global utility was its suppression of piracy in the 18th century and of the slave trade in the 19th. Even with the world's largest and most technologically advanced navy, the United States is no longer effectively policing the world's seas. Piracy is rife in the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and around the Strait of Malacca, and America's stewardship is failing in important areas like climate change and drug trafficking. The global governor has some fairly basic global responsibilities, which include enforcing the rules that everyone has to obey, Americans included. That is why the rest of the world is angry at the Bush administration's rejection of the International Criminal Court, and its use of the aid weapon to punish small countries that refuse to grant Americans a waiver from the court's provisions.

Mandelbaum does not dwell overlong on the grisly intervention in Iraq, but he is confident that while the world grumbles, it will tolerate Goliath's occasional misadventures, so long as it retains a broader respect for the United States as the indispensable stabilizing power. America survived the ignominy of the 1960's, when Vietnam and Selma and Watts combined to discredit its international image and it became fashionable to talk of a moral equivalence between the United States and the Soviet Union. The country is undergoing a similar travail today, made the more offensive

and glaring in foreign eyes by the Bush administration's clumsy abuse of power. The White House has crudely dispensed with the founding fathers' "decent respect for the opinions of mankind" to tell the inhabitants of the rest of the world that they are either with Washington or against it.

Nonetheless, as Mandelbaum argues, there is no credible alternative to the American role as linchpin and guarantor of the global system. Nobody else has the political will, the military and economic clout and the ability to generate sufficient international consent. Rising regional powers like China, Brazil and the European Union may be jostling to win some more room to maneuver, and the global crowd may be grouching more fiercely about the performance of the American Goliath, but as Mandelbaum shows, the most serious threats are being generated at home. This is what worries the players of the late-night parlor games, because however long the American-led system may last, they would most fervently agree with Mandelbaum's three closing predictions: "They will not pay for it; they will continue to criticize it; and they will miss it when it is gone."

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