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The Post American World

Description

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Fareed Zakaria’s *The Post American World*

Review by Jeffrey Barlow


Fareed Zakaria’s recent work, *The Post-American World*, is clearly destined to be an influential one, as shown by its widespread reviews. This is probably because it come at a time when American's are at last prepared to understand that they are in the grips of major change, some aspects of which are far from positive ones, such as a declining dollar and rising oil prices, and a prolonged war. Zakaria is also a familiar and respected media figure. He is an editor of Newsweek's International Edition, and a prolific writer on economic issues. In addition he has an hourly TV interview program on CNN. [1]

Zakaria has what has in the past been a tough argument for Americans to swallow. He believes that the U.S. is clearly in an inevitable relative decline in terms of its power, influence and wealth. This decline is not caused by a Spenglerian [2] "Decline of the West," but by the "Rise of the Rest," most notably by the rapid progress of China and of India.

"Three Forces" have contributed to this decline, according to Zakaria, "Politics, Economics, and Technology." [3] At Interface we are primarily interested in the last of these, of course, as it is fairly described as the impact of the Internet.

Works comparing Asia and the West are by no means new, nor was Spengler the first to warn of inevitable decline. As early as the 17th century, European Jesuits living in China were writing appreciations of Chinese society. Sometimes these were honest attempts to understand a highly developed non-European society. More often than not, however, such analysts used Asia as a tool with which to criticize their own culture, perhaps for its materialism, or its lack of stability and order.
This trope of the failing West and the admirable East has continued to be a staple of East-West comparisons then, for more than five hundred years. A recent approach has been a cautionary one by which intellectuals measure America in particular against an Asian culture---most recently China or India---and find it either gratifyingly successful or give warning of its imminent decline and fall.

An example of the cautionary school was Paul Kennedy's 1987 work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. While Kennedy was mostly concerned about internal factors explaining the decline of great empires, particularly expensive military overextension, he directly applied his arguments to the United States. His position while widely discussed and ultimately influential was also roundly pilloried both by offended American conservatives and by critical academics. [4]

Kennedy's work, among other factors, evoked a sort of intellectual riposte from conservatives such as David M. Landes. [5] Landes wrote a very well received work, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why Some Are So Rich and Some Are So Poor*, published a decade later. Landes' theme was a familiar one of late 20th century market (and American) triumphalism.

According to Landes, the West, and particularly the United States, simply had a superior culture, particularly in its Judaeo-Christian roots, which prized private property and thus encouraged individual initiative. Asians, however, were too often in the grips of strong states which prevented markets and individuals from working their magic. By this time, a decade after Kennedy had written and during which the United States had arguably ascended rather than declined, Landes, like so many others, was able to pretty much ignore Kennedy as a typical academic alarmist. The decade from Landes' publication in 1998 to 2008, however, has seen a great many changes. The spectacular continuing "rise" of China and the rapid recent decline of the American economy and other economies closely linked to it, such as England's, has brought a new perspective to the discussions.
National Public Radio recently reviewed a number of books making quite a different argument than did Landes, by three authors holding from different perspectives a position much closer to Kennedy than to Landes. [6] Zakaria, then, is suddenly well within a very broad emerging analysis. Zakaria, however, is almost soothing in his approach to what in the past has been viewed as an alarmist if not downright terrifying perspective. In part this is, I think, because Zakaria, despite his Indian birth and his eminence in the media, seems, well, to be one of us. He too is paying much more for his gasoline, and probably flying less and enjoying it less, as well. And his position nicely takes the moral sting out of even relative decline; it is not our fault.

The problem is not that we have changed; we have, in fact, been highly successful. Much of the world wants what we want, and intends to get it in much the same way as we did: though reliance on capitalist market forces. "We" won, then. So why does it seem so much like a loss to us? And what caused it?

Zakaria easily answers this latter question; we leave the former one to each of our readers to ruminate for him- or her self. According to Zakaria: "Since the 1980s, these three forces--politics, economics, and technology----have pushed in the same direction to produce a more open, connected, exacting international environment." [7]

In this review we choose to focus upon one of these forces, obviously upon the impact of technology. But Zakaria gives a wonderful treatment of both politics and economics as well, giving just enough comparative information and historical background to make the reader ultimately comfortable with his conclusions.

The relationship between technology and the "Rise of the Rest" is easily summarized. It is a result of near-instantaneous communications, which makes it possible for capital and labor, those familiar factors of the productive processes, to rapidly seek environments in which return upon them can be maximized. Arbitrage, the movement of money, and
outsourcing of both labor and factories, then, have enabled others to meet and surpass American standards.

The results of these changes, however, are not simple nor always negative for the United States nor positive for others. Zakaria's contacts and wide understanding of politics and economics lets him move easily from his analysis of causes to a very thorough analysis of the broad consequences.

It seems to us that of all the works we have reviewed in Interface touching upon this element of our contemporary world, from Landes to Greenspan, Zakaria's is the most thoughtful and readable one, fully deserving its current widespread notice.

[2] Oswald Spengler was, of course, an earlier critic of Western progress who argued in 1918 that weaknesses in Western philosophy inevitably doomed it to fail to progress and compete. There is a sense in which Fareed and Spengler might be said to agree in that Spengler believed that all great societies would inevitably be superceded by newer more vigorous ones. See a useful but incomplete Wikipedia discussion at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Decline_of_the_West.
