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**To Lead or Not to Lead:  
America's Role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Fareed Zakaria argues in *The Post-American World* that the hegemony of power that the United States of America has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War is coming to an end. Zakaria is an Indian-American journalist with extensive international experience; he is well-situated to examine the relationship of America with the rest of the world. His journalistic background comes through in the title of the book, which was somewhat misnamed and appears calculated to increase sales, not represent the book. Although the title is titillating—even controversial—Zakaria's argument is fairly consistent with mainstream contemporary thinking on foreign affairs. Basically, *The Post-American World* echoes many of the same opinions expressed by Thomas Friedman in his best-seller, *The World is Flat*. According to both men, the economic success of China and India, among others, is changing the dynamics of global power. Instead of a single superpower orchestrating world affairs, international politics will feature a contest between myriad powerful nations. This diversity of power does not necessarily indicate a decline in the "American empire," however. Ultimately it will be in the hands of the American people and their leadership to determine if the United States accepts and adjusts to thrive in the new environment, or resists and fails in the face of an unavoidable future.

The rise of China and India, along with the creation of the European Union, will dramatically alter international relations in the coming years. From one perspective, the success of these powers is an American success story. During the Cold War it was not at all clear that these populations would embrace capitalism and democracy. China and Eastern Europe were communist, and India under Nehru was certainly left-leaning. Today all three regions comprise an important part of the global marketplace that American leaders worked so hard to establish. And although China is still nominally communist today, this reveals their political and not economic framework. The new era of international relations will be shaped by the strengths and weaknesses that each of these regions possess. In terms of population size, education, infrastructure, and political system, each situation is unique. The important thing for Americans to remember is that this new era is not a threat, but an opportunity. For decades American leaders tried to defeat an economic and political rival, the Soviet Union. Now that communism has been dead for a generation, these regions have thrived. Instead of fearing their success, the United States must recognize that this is exactly what it was fighting for, a global commitment to capitalism and mutual growth through competition.

The rise of China is the biggest development on the world stage today. To demonstrate the impact of China, Zakaria cites some statistics that almost defy plausibility. For example, “China has grown over 9 percent a year for almost thirty years, the fastest rate for a major economy in recorded history.”<sup>1</sup> What this rate of growth means is that “[t]he size of the economy has doubled every eight years for three decades. In 1978, the country made 200 air conditioners a year; in 2005, it made 48 million.”<sup>2</sup> China’s phenomenal economic success is made possible by its large population size. With four times as many people as the United States, the “twenty fastest-growing cities in the world are all in China.”<sup>3</sup>

With these statistics it is clear that China will be a major factor in the new era of international relations, what Zakaria has called the “post-American world.” What is less clear, however, are the problems behind the numbers. Their meteoric rise is possible in part because they started so low. Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution decimated the country’s agriculture and economy. Despite its undeniable recent success, China’s GDP is still twenty-five times lower than that of the U.S. In addition, China is terribly polluted due its dependence on coal for its energy supply and lack of environmental ethic. The pollution is beginning to pose problems, such as a severe loss of potable water. Lastly, human rights issues both domestically and internationally (occupation of Tibet and support of Sudan’s leadership) complicate China’s reputation. For all these reasons, China has been careful to accept its growing power quietly. Chinese leaders changed their slogan from “peaceful rise” to “peaceful development” because they did not want to threaten existing powers with confrontational imagery.<sup>4</sup> China is aware that its lack of democracy and large population size can be threatening, and is taking steps to preclude a conflict of powerful nations. The United States must reciprocate these actions and not fall prey to fear of competition and difference.

India is another Asian country whose burgeoning economy is set to transform the world stage. And, because of its democracy and religious population, India is seen more as an ally than a threat. The legacy from the British occupation plays a large role in this Western acceptance of India; the English established a political and economic framework that is both successful and comprehensible to Europeans and Americans. In addition, because India has a more youthful population than China, it is set to have a larger population and greater comparative advantage in labor in the near future. Perhaps the ability to offer cheaper labor will offset the disproportionate growth in the Indian economy. Up to this point, India’s upper class has benefitted from the

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<sup>1</sup> Zakaria, Fareed. *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2008), 89

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 89

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 90

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

boom in technological outsourcing and telecommunications, but the poor are not convinced the gain is broad enough for the control as a whole. Zakaria dismisses critics of India's policies as bitter radicals; however, there are valid concerns about his trickle-down theory of economics. In any case, India is poised along with China to usher in a new era of Asian influence in global affairs.

The European Union is only given brief attention in *The Post-American World* and that is unfortunate because after the Iraq War damaged the United States' credibility as a responsible superpower, the E.U has emerged as powerful entity in international affairs. Established in 1993 by the Treaty of Maastricht, the European Union has unified a diverse group of countries into a patchwork alliance through such measures as a common currency, the euro, and passport privileges. With half of the world's foreign investment, a stable and strong currency, and a \$30 billion trade surplus, some countries are now looking to the E.U as a stabilizing force both politically and economically. Although the dollar has been the accepted currency for foreign reserves in banks around the world, the Euro is increasingly being supplemented due to Europe's responsible image. The presidency of George W. Bush has accelerated this trend; foreign investors are now aware that single election can drastically alter a country's performance and that is not good for stable markets. The E.U, which features dozens of countries, is more balanced in this regard and one rogue election is not likely to alter the entire European economic stability. The primary limitation for continued European success in the coming years is its aging population. Due to low birth rates and resistance to immigration, Europe is losing its ability to replenish the economy with young, active workers and thinkers. Regardless of this limitation, the E.U will definitely have a seat at the table in future discussions of global importance.

The emergence of China, India, and the E.U has changed the dynamics of the international community; however, what has made their success into a possible threat to American prosperity is not their competition with the U.S, but rather the failure of the George W. Bush administration. In the new era of diverse powers, aggressive unilateral action by the United States is not appropriate leadership. The Iraq War has been almost a complete disaster for American foreign affairs. American ally French president Sarkozy went so far as to tell Condoleezza Rice that the U.S is "one of the most unpopular countries in the world."<sup>5</sup> This sentiment is the result of Bush's policies and not unjustified anti-Americanism. In fact, a tremendous opportunity for global leadership was lost during the Bush administration.

After the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, practically the whole world was united in support of the United States. Unfortunately, instead of capitalizing on the unprecedented goodwill, the president set a course to reverse that support into almost universal disapproval. Bush's go-it-alone Iraq strategy was regarded as arrogant and irresponsible by the global community. His

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 228

insensitivity to foreign opinion was further demonstrated with the appointments of Paul Wolfowitz and John Bolton, two men who were disliked abroad, to critical international posts. By labeling major European powers “Old Europe,” Secretary of Defense alienated important allies in a time of war. The combination of all these instances of poor diplomacy resulted in a significant drop in America’s international image. Zakaria presents an insightful metaphor comparing the Iraq war and its consequences to the Boer War and its role in the downfall of the British Empire. There are indeed many similarities and the U.S could plausibly be started on the path to decline. Fortunately for the U.S, however, the election of Barack Obama provides fresh hope for responsible leadership and the utilization of the many assets that the United States has to thrive in the new era.

If the Boer War is the appropriate metaphor for Bush and the Iraq War, perhaps the Great Depression and president Franklin Roosevelt are the appropriate metaphor for Barack Obama and the current circumstances. And, like the situation confronting FDR, the best approach to handling the new era is to not allow “fear itself” to determine policy. It is important that the new administration recognizes economics are not zero-sum, and they welcome the new large national economies as allies and not adversaries; it is possible for everybody to prosper when the aggregate GDP keeps increasing. A legitimate concern for the future of America is that previous success does not hinder adjusting to new realities. The Qing Empire refused to change, believing that it had the recipe for success. Oil-rich countries don’t develop diverse economies because they are too attached to what is working at the moment. The United States must recognize that its leadership of the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not necessarily lead to leadership of the 21<sup>st</sup>, and that it will take confidence and ingenuity to succeed. The new president seems to be aware of all this. His messages of “hope” and “change” hit exactly the right notes during the campaign. Obama’s presidency specifically, and America’s democratic process in general, provide the first major advantage to continued American prosperity.

Barack Obama represents the power and flexibility of the American political system. This is not to say that he is definitely going to succeed—it’s too early to tell—but his presidency demonstrates the ability of the people to make changes in leadership when policies are not succeeding. In a changing world, that ability to adapt will be vitally important. And this flexibility is not a singular event on the presidential level; both the House and Senate became Democratic during Bush’s second term in office. Early in his term Obama has demonstrated that his approach to foreign policy will rely heavily on the public diplomacy that was lacking during the past administration. He has begun discussions on the removal of the ignominious Guantanamo prison in Cuba, and he has assured the world that unilateral aggression is over by beginning a dialogue with Iran. International citizens expressed their approval of the new president with massive crowds of supporters during his trip overseas. By not being afraid to compromise and participate in global politics, Obama has regained international political

leadership for America. At home, a diverse population of Americans shares the global enthusiasm for the United States' new direction.

Immigration is another major asset for the United States. The youth, desire, and diversity of the immigrant population in America will fuel the innovation and hard work necessary to succeed in the new era. Without the immigrants—who are an advantage that are unfortunately seen as a disadvantage by many—the United States would be facing the same problem of an aging population that Europe faces. The immigrants' desire to “make a better life for themselves” is somewhat of a cliché. But so is the stereotype of the “lazy” South American. They are a diverse population full of people both with and without professional ambition. There is enough ambition among American immigrants, however, to both perform exhausting manual labor and succeed in great numbers at the highest levels of education and business. Because immigrants come from across the globe they bring a wide array of perspectives, a critical asset for innovation. American diversity can negate the historical trend for empires to become rigid in their thinking. The challenge for the country is to maintain an environment that is conducive to immigration. This means a strong economy, yes, but also a welcoming society. As other countries begin to succeed and provide alternative locations for living and making money, the United States must be careful not to create a hostile environment for foreigners through aggressive wars abroad and discriminating policies at home. The United States prides itself as the “melting pot,” but history has also shown that groups of immigrants have had a hard time gaining acceptance here in the past. The new era of competitive global powers will require that America treats the people who choose to immigrate here as the asset that they are.

Education in America can either be a great strength, or a liability. Public schools in America are lauded for their ability to teach children “how to think.” In place of preparation for exams, students are allowed to challenge the material and think critically about what they are learning. The ability to think critically will be vital in the new era, but standardized tests show that American students are falling behind in key areas such as math and geography. Many critics deride the United States for its poor scoring on these tests. Zakaria notes that these poor scores are more a result of inequality than quality. According to him, “students in the top fifth of American schools rank among with the world's best.”<sup>6</sup> This argument is ultimately unconvincing. With more jobs being outsourced overseas the standard response has been that Americans will simply do the upper level work. However, it will take an educated general populace to occupy that niche. Further, in order for a democracy to thrive, it is necessary to have informed voters. Clearly a transformation in public education is necessary. Fortunately, American universities are still the best in the world. That the best students and the best facilities are to be found in the United States is without debate. The challenge for higher education in America lies with its unique demographic; almost half of the students are from foreign countries.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 192

If these students leave the United States after graduation, the country would suffer from a very serious “brain drain.” This problem is connected closely with the need to retain immigrant workers. A welcoming society and thriving economy are the way to maintain these assets.

The American economy is its greatest asset in the new era. It is easy to get blinded by the glare of the incredible growth of China, but the reality is that the United States is still the undisputed leader in the global economy. By a long shot. In 2007 the U.S accounted for an incredible 26% of the global GDP. That figure has remained constant for the better part of a century. The U.S dominates the aspects of business which profit most in the current market and also the high-tech industries of the future. It is not a decline in the American economy that has people talking about the “post-American” world. The difference is the increasing prosperity of other countries, most notably China and India. As the leader of the economy, the United States is in a great position to capitalize on its advantages to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—if the political leadership can adjust to changing realities.