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"In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power" (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017) A Review Essay

Abstract

A review of Alfred W. McCoy's *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power* published by Haymarket Books, 2017.

Keywords

In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power, Book Review

For over 40 years, Alfred W. McCoy has been trying to make Americans aware of what their government was doing around the world. Whether it was the CIA flying opium to Bangkok from anti-communist warlords in northern Thailand for processing into heroin, and delivering it to Saigon for distribution, including to US troops fighting in Vietnam (McCoy, 1972); whether it was developing torture tactics and deploying them around the world (McCoy, 2012); or whether it was developing surveillance methods in the Philippines that were later imported into the US for use against American citizens (McCoy, 2009); McCoy has been detailing the conscious development of components of what he now recognizes as the US Empire.

This most recent book—published in September 2017—brings all of these factors together in a unified analysis. This is the stunning latest development of thinking by a truly experienced global researcher/analyst/writer, and his book deserves serious consideration by each person who deems herself/himself a progressive in the United States (and everywhere else) or even just a “concerned citizen.”

Over the past 20 or so years, there has been a quasi-debate within the social sciences as to what was driving global development. I say “quasi” because, to my knowledge, this debate has never been explicitly joined. Yet, two stands have emerged: one side, stimulated by the work of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) and his idea of a capitalist “world system” and, later, William I. Robinson (2004), who argues there was a “global capitalist class,” and others—such as by the collection by Ronald W. Cox (2012)—each which argued and basically argued “development”—in reality, market-driven capitalist development—was driving global economic expansion.

The other side, arguably begun with the work of Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1989) but independently advanced by writers such as William Blum (2000, 2014, 2015), Noam Chomsky (2003), Greg Grandin (2007), Chalmers Johnson (2000, 2010), Naomi Klein (2007), Alfred W. McCoy (2009), Nederveen Pieterse again (2004, 2008), William I. Robinson (1996), Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick (2012) and others, has argued that the US has an Empire, and “development” has occurred as the US has maneuvered to dominate the rest of the planet. (Among the more sophisticated analyses, it really hasn’t been an either/or debate, but rather which is primary and which is secondary at any time, with outcomes varying by situation.)

With his latest book, Alfred W. McCoy has fully developed the claim regarding the US Empire. In it, he argues three things: (1) that the US has an empire, with the United States being the heartland of the US Empire; (2) that this empire, after 70 or so years, is falling apart, deteriorating; and (3) it is in the process of being replaced as the world’s strongest country by China.

First of all, he argues that the claim of empire is resonating. After discussing a number of writers from a range of political perspectives, he points out that, “In short, analysts across the political spectrum had come to agree that *empire* was the most appropriate word to describe America’s current superpower status” (p. 43).

In fact, he points out that “Calling a nation that controls nearly half of the planet’s military forces and much of its wealth an ‘empire’ became nothing more than fitting an analytical frame to appropriate facts.” Further, “a surprising consensus among established scholars of US foreign policy had formed. The question was no longer whether the United States was an empire, but how Washington might best preserve or shed its global domination” (44).

He delineates three stages of the US Empire’s development:

Over the past 120 years, Washington has moved to global power through three distinct phases, each one sparked by wars large and small. Stepping onto that stage for the first time during the Spanish-American War of 1898, America acquired a string of tropical islands stretching for 10,000 miles from the Atlantic to the Western Pacific, which plunged it into the transformative experience of colonial rule. Then, in the decades after World War II, it ascended suddenly to global domination amid the collapse of half-dozen

European empires and the start of the Cold War with a rival global hegemon, the Soviet Union. Most recently, using technologies developed for the war on terror, Washington is making a determined bid to extend its dominion as the world's sole superpower deep into the twenty-first century thorough a fusion of cyberwar, space, warfare, trade pacts, and military alliances (45).

What makes McCoy's analysis all the more important is that he illuminates that the empire overseas has always affected people in the United States, a connection not usually made by most analysts. For example, during the first stage of empire, "Important innovations in governance and environmental management would migrate homeward from the imperial periphery, expanding the capacities of America's fledgling federal government"; from the Philippines, for example, he talks about how "an innovative experiment in police surveillance migrated homeward during World War I to serve as a model for a nascent domestic security apparatus" (47).

However, it was after World War II, during the Cold War, that the US began the actual exercise of world power, with a potent four-tier apparatus that combined military, diplomatic, economic and clandestine aspects. He writes,

Adding a distinct, even novel dimension to US global power was a clandestine fourth tier that entailed global surveillance by the [National Security Agency] and covert operations by the CIA, manipulating elections, promoting coups, and, when needed, mobilizing surrogate armies. Indeed, more than any other attribute, it is this clandestine dimension that distinguishes US global hegemony from earlier empires (emphasis added) (52).

What makes all of this more compelling to this analyst is that McCoy tries to theoretically understand the phenomena of the US Empire. He puts this into the context of historical geopolitics, utilizing the 1904 analysis of the British analyst Halford Mackinder. Mackinder challenged the idea of British ideas of global power—controlling sea lanes—by noting the existence of a vast landmass he called "Euro-Asia," basically seeing Africa, Asia and Europe as one landform, not three separate continents. Mackinder then argued, according to McCoy, that whoever controlled a key area that extended from the Persian Gulf to across Russia into Siberia, would have the key to world power.

During World War II, Adolf Hitler—when he turned east against the Soviet Union—understood this, and sought to develop a global power that was impregnable to British and US power. Fortunately for the world, the Soviet Union—at immense cost of somewhere around 24-27 million lives (US costs in both the Pacific and Atlantic theaters totaled about 400,000 lives)—broke the Nazi onslaught and destroyed the Third Reich.

With the defeat of Germany by the Soviet Union, and especially after the successful Communist seizure of power in China in 1949, the world "island" was controlled by Communist Parties.

However, with control of Western Europe and the North Atlantic area on one end, and control of Japan, Okinawa and the Philippines on the other, the US had developed "a superior geopolitical position to wage the Cold War against China and the Soviet Union" (34). This effort—along with seeing struggles for national liberation anywhere in the world as projects to undermine or destroy ultimate American control, and thus to be defeated—has extended over the past 70 years. Thus, the United States has enjoyed decades

... of unimpeded access to the trade and resources of five continents and thereby building a global dominion of unprecedented wealth and power. The current emerging conflict between Beijing and Washington is thus, in this sense, just the latest round in a centuries-long struggle for control over the Eurasian landmass between maritime and land power—Spain versus the Ottomans, Britain versus Russia, and, more recently, the United States versus the Third Reich and then the Soviet Union (34).

Key to contain and control Russia and especially China has been the US Navy. From bases around the world, the Navy has been able to control global maritime activities, such as the transport of oil from the Middle East.

McCoy thus argues the existence of a US Empire. He explains:

Clearly the word empire is a fraught one in the American political lexicon. So it is necessary to be as precise at the outset: empire is not an epithet but a form of global governance in which a dominant power exercises control over the destiny of others, either through direct territorial rule (colonies) or indirect influence—military, economic and cultural). Empire, bloc, commonwealth, or world order—they all express an expression of power that has persisted for much of the past four thousand years and is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. Many empires have been brutal, some more beneficent, and most a mix of both. But empires are an undeniable, unchanging fact of human history. After counting seventy empires in that history, Harvard historian Niall Ferguson noted wryly, “To those who would still insist on American ‘exceptionalism’, the historian of empires can only retort: as exceptional as all other sixty-nine empires” (40).

But central to controlling the US Empire has been the establishment (first under President Eisenhower) of “a new system of global domination invoking a worldwide network of national leaders—autocrats, aristocrats, and pliable democrats. In effect, the fulcrum for imperial control had moved upward from the countless colonial districts to the national capitals of a hundred new nations.” To maintain this control, “Eisenhower authorized 170 major covert operations in forty-eight nations during his eight-year term.” McCoy sums up, “In effect, clandestine manipulation became Washington’s preferred mode of exercising old-fashioned imperial hegemony in a new world of nominally sovereign nations” (54).

The problem of depending on such “unreliable” people to serve the Empire’s interests is that, sometimes, their interests in staying in power conflict with those of the Empire. When that happens, the Empire has acted to remove, execute or allow execution of such figures when they “get out of control.” [Currently rereading the recently republished *The Pentagon Papers* (2017), and having read about the extensive US involvement in the 1963 coup that overthrew the President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, which directly led to his assassination, this point certainly resonates. I am also remembering the experiences of Saddam Hussein, who went from being the US’s “boy” to one of its greatest enemies in a few short years.]

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US has sought to increase its military power through expanding its operations to space, cyberspace and robotics (56).

Yet the US debacles in Afghanistan and Iraq showed that even the most powerful can generate resistance and, overall, that the US Empire is deteriorating.

In one of history’s lucky accidents, the juxtaposition of two extraordinary events suddenly stripped the architecture of American global power bare for all to see. Between November 2010 and January 2011, WikiLeaks activists splashed snippets from 2,017 purloined US embassy cables, loaded with scurrilous comments about national leaders from Argentina to Zimbabwe, on the front pages of newspapers worldwide. Then, just a few weeks later, the Middle East erupted in pro-democracy protests against the region’s

autocratic leaders, many of whom were close US allies whose foibles had been detailed in those same cables.

Suddenly, it was possible to see the foundations of a world order that rested significantly on national leaders who served Washington as loyal subordinate elites that were, in reality, a motley collection of autocrats, aristocrats, and uniformed thugs. Then, in September 2011, the picture became clearer still when WikiLeaks accidentally released its entire cache of 251,287 confidential cables from 274 US embassies and consulates worldwide. At long last, we could grasp the larger logic of otherwise often inexplicable American foreign policy choices over the past half century (61).

And he argues, “all modern empires have relied on dependable surrogates to translate their global power into local control,” but when these local surrogates start standing up for their interests against the empire, it was “the moment when you know that imperial collapse was in the cards.” He tied things together: “the ‘jasmine revolution’ that spread fitfully, painfully, violently across the Middle East after 2011 may well contribute, in the fullness of time, to the eclipse of American global power” (62).

McCoy concludes his chapter on “‘Our SOBs’—America and the Autocrats” with this thought:

For more than fifty years, this system of global power has served Washington well, allowing it to extend its influence worldwide with surprising efficiency and economy of force. So there can be little question that the weakening of this network of subordinate elites and the ending of ties to a range of loyal allies—and they are indeed ending—is a major blow to American global power (79).

This gets us to the third argument of the book: McCoy argues that China will become the dominant global empire, and he predicts that this will take place by the year 2030.

China’s economic expansion has been phenomenal. As compared to Britain, which increased its share of global gross national product by one percent a decade between 1820-1870; the US, two percent a decade between 1900-1950; and Japan, about 1.5 percent from 1950-1980, China increased by five percent between 2000-2010 and is expected to do it again between 2010-20. To just give one measure: “As China’s exports surged, its foreign exchange reserves soared from \$100 billion in 1996 to \$4 trillion in 2014, many times more than any other nation” (193).

After decades of quiet preparation, Beijing has recently revealed its grand strategy for global power, move by careful move. Its two-step plan is designed to build a transcontinental infrastructure for the economic integration of the three continents that comprise the world island, while mobilizing military forces to surgically slice through Washington’s encircling containment (194).

Focusing on both aspects, McCoy first discusses its economic projects to unite Asia with Europe. He notes that on the new series of rail lines, a cargo in 2014 could now go by rail from Chongqing, China to Duisburg, Germany in just 16 days. (It takes 35 days via ship.) What he didn’t say is that this inland rail network is largely beyond the reach of the US Navy.

He then compares China’s military forces in the South China Sea with those of the US, Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines. He points out that in 2015, China had 73 destroyers/frigates, 58 submarines, one aircraft carrier, and 2,100 aircraft, as compared to a US carrier strike group with nine destroyers, two submarines, one aircraft carrier, and 54 aircraft; as compared to Japan, which has 47 destroyers, 16 submarines, and 353 aircraft; as compared to Vietnam with seven destroyers and 217 aircraft; and compared with the Philippines, with its three destroyers and eight aircraft (201).

He also talks about China’s increasing capabilities in space, which threaten the satellite-based global command and control system of the United States.

While McCoy predicts China will become the dominant world power as early as 2030, that obviously remains to be seen. However, what he's shown is China's accelerating development and well-argued that it needs to be taken as a serious global power, especially in Asia, Africa and Europe.

In short, I argue that McCoy's book is a tour d' force. This is a very detailed, carefully developed argument that deserves serious consideration by all.

That being said—and honestly meant—there are two areas that I think need commenting on, not to undermine McCoy's analysis but as ways to suggest how we take advantage of it and move forward. I will comment on things that are within his parameters that need further development in my opinion, as well as other things that need to be joined with his analysis.

McCoy certainly has the "external" side of his argument about empire well developed, but I think he needs to strengthen the "internal" side of it. He talks about the US having bases in and military control of the North Atlantic and Western Pacific Areas, enabling it to "contain" the Soviet Union, which is correct. But how did this happen? Basically, the US economy emerged unscathed from the destruction and devastation of World War II, and its resources allowed a determined political-economic elite (say, the leaders of the Council of Foreign Relations) to operate both within the collapsing European empires and against the Soviet Union and later China. It was the powerful economic underpinning that allowed the US Empire to expand around the world in the way that it did. I think McCoy needs to develop this part of his argument further.

Tied to that, however, was the rise of the industrial union movement in the United States during the 1930s and early '40s. In the first year after World War II, militant trade unionists cost the economy 116,000,000 days of production through industrial striking as well as launching general strikes in a number of cities around the country, including Oakland, California and Stamford, Connecticut (Preis, 1972). While economically impactful, these strikes were telling the elites that they had to share some of their profits with their workers if they hoped to garner the production they wanted, and eventually, this was shared. For about 25 years—from 1947-1973—this was done: not only was there real economic growth in the US, but labor movement power ensured that it was generally shared equally among the five quintiles (20 percents) of US society (see Scipes, 2009). It is from these struggles that we have the rise of a "working middle class" to join with the traditional middle class to create "the great American middle class."

A number of things changed by the early-1970s. US economic production was being squeezed by the war-ravaged countries' economic revival and the emergence of global corporations from developing countries such as Brazil and South Korea; there was growing opposition to the war in Vietnam and the American social order by people of color, women and younger whites; and increasing turmoil in the factories as workers—many of them Vietnam veterans—rebelled against the alienation and oppression of capitalist production.

These factors combined to challenge the economic domination of large US corporations. Starting in the late 1960s and intensifying as time went on, production once limited to the United States was shifted by corporate managements to developing countries around the US Empire in efforts to overcome these problems and to reassert capitalist hegemony over US workers. While the rationale given for these moves were almost always "economic"—"we have to lower our production costs"—in reality, they had to regain control over the production processes that dissatisfied American industrial workers were threatening.

Encouraged especially by the election of Ronald Reagan to the US presidency in 1980, and continued since then under both Democratic and Republican Administrations, US corporations responded in two ways. They "offshored" labor-intensive production to low costs havens such as Mexico and, increasingly China. However, especially when they recognized the challenge from industrial competitors, US corporations began replacing workers with new technology requiring a smaller workforce in the capital-intensive industries such as steel. The point was to break the power of the US labor movement.

As some of the developing countries developed—South Korea and Brazil, for example—and their material wants and desires increased, US corporations started exporting equipment and production techniques to them, developing their competitive position not only in their respective countries but in the global economy. Strong, determined leadership built on this, and demanded further enhanced technology, further advancing their competitive positions.

China, which came later to allowing US investment into their country, eventually did so. In addition to low wages and a controlled labor force, however, it had the allure of its gigantic market with which to entice foreign investment.

American corporations swarmed to invest in China, slowly at first but with greater and greater alacrity. Thus, instead of major investing in the US market, they shifted to China (see Scipes, 2006). This “solved” three major problems for US capitalists: (1) it helped the attack on the US labor movement, which lost members and organizational capacity when production facilities were closed; (2) it gained access to new and growing markets; and (3) three, it enabled “off shore” producers to export back to the US, instead of producing jobs for US workers, while selling goods at “first world” prices while only costing “third world” wages. What’s not to like?

The problem here is that these processes began “hollowing out” US society. As millions lost jobs—and when they got subsequent jobs, they were almost always at a lower wage rate—the taxes paid previously by these workers got reduced, meaning that taxes had to go up on those workers still employed to pay for the required social services that Americans demanded.

The problem, however, was compounded when various presidential administrations reduced the tax rates for corporations. So, taxes from unemployed workers had to be compensated for, but they had to be compensated from working families as the corporations were reducing their share of the load. Thus, taxes on “ordinary” Americans increased. At the same time, to keep taxes from increasing still further, many services were disbanded or no longer provided that working people needed, thus shifting the burden of social production provision—such as education, health care, etc.—from the collective to the individual family. And with wages being basically stagnant since 1973, and the bottom 60 percent of US society seeing their incomes grow barely one percent a year—with those in the bottom 20 percentile actually losing income—things were getting harder and harder for most Americans (Scipes, 2018, in process).

And with the wealth created in this society, most of it went to the top .01 percent of the population, increasing income inequality.

And with all of this, the requirements for an expanding military meant that the US government has gone increasingly into debt. The US national debt, which was \$.9 trillion in 1981—covering the presidential administrations from George Washington’s to the end of Jimmy Carter’s—has subsequently jumped to over \$20 trillion by the end of Barack Obama’s administration: that is an increase of over \$19 trillion in debt in basically 36 years!

So, while China is accumulating foreign exchange reserves from which to invest in their country and globally, and to advance its interests, the US is writing larger and larger “hot checks” to finance the expansion of the US military for the continuation of the US Empire. It also means that the US is dependent upon investors—including countries like Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and China—for its economic well-being, or to help supposedly ensure that things will not get worse. What could possibly go wrong for the US...?

And money spent for the US military drives up the national debt while not contributing to help ordinary Americans with health care, education, infrastructural improvement, and adapting to climate change, etc.

I think all of this matters for two reasons. One things are getting worse for a large number of Americans and they seem increasingly unwilling to support wars to maintain the empire if/when they threaten many of their children; obviously excepting direct physical attacks on the United States. (They have tolerated the US wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East in general because the burdens are being borne by less than one percent of the population.) And second, this means that countries who feel themselves threatened by the emergence of Chinese power need to count on themselves and their nearby allies for any collective self-defense rather than depend on the US to help them.

The other “internal” factor that needs to be included in McCoy’s analysis, in my opinion, is the activities of activists in the US labor movement. As I showed in a 2010 book, the leadership of the AFL-CIO has long supported the US Empire (Scipes, 2010). However, to do this, they have ignored the increasing problems of American workers and their families in the US (Scipes, 2017). If/when labor activists are able to begin the desperately needed revitalization of US unions, and realize they need the support of workers around the world and then start to address larger issues such as building global labor solidarity to do so, then they are going to have to directly confront the AFL-CIO’s leadership and its support for the US Empire (see Scipes, ed., 2016). This will threaten to undermine a key pillar of domestic support for the empire, further weakening it.

There is another factor that McCoy only mentions, but I argue that it has much more importance than he gives: climate change and environmental devastation. Obviously, this is beyond the parameters of McCoy’s focus, and so I do not criticize him for that. It is, however, something that we need to put in the discussion of not only the US Empire, but the nascent Chinese Empire as well. China’s main approach is by developing economic production and transportation across Asia, Europe and Africa. While I’m glad they are not doing this primarily through their military, nonetheless, China is encouraging major economic growth, which can only come at the expense of the environment. This is another area of research that needs to be furiously developed.

So, how to conclude? I think McCoy’s book is a tour d’ force and deserves wide and serious consideration by all. Perhaps the key issue that he clarifies—and hopefully destroys—is the quaint idea that the US is “just” another country: it is a global empire that has sought world domination since at least 1945. With this larger understanding, Americans now how to choose: do we take care of our own people (and other people of good will), or do we try to dominate the world? As Alfred McCoy makes clear, this choice is currently on the table, and is unavoidable, Donald Trump or no Donald Trump.

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