

Book Review*

Is the American Century Over

Joseph S. Nye, Jr



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Is the American Century Over?

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Students of International Relations like books that ‘talk big’, such as Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of the World Order*, and Henry Kissinger’s latest book *World Order*. In a similar vein, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., a former Dean and now professor at the Harvard John F. Kennedy School of Government has just published *Is the American Century Over?*

As a small volume, it is one of the best short reads about global geostrategic power shifts. Leading International Relations scholar Joseph Nye, famous for his “soft power” concept, addresses the debate over the posited decline of America, presenting a clear argument that “the American Century is not over”.

He comes to this conclusion by analyzing the prospective challengers: Europe, Japan, Russia, India, Brazil and China. Nye begins the book with a general synopsis to present the concept of the American century. In this chapter, he tries to explain what he means by “the American century,” and traces its origins. As the readers will find, Nye concludes each chapter with a declaration underscoring that the American century is not over. In this sense, the very first chapter ends as follows:

The short answer to our question is that we are not entering a post-American world... The American century is not over, but because of transnational and non-state forces, it is definitely changing in important ways (pp. 14-15).

In chapter 2, Nye discusses the notion “American decline”, exploring America’s historical positions in comparison with other prominent powers over the same periods.

Chapter 3 consolidates the argument that the United States is not in absolute decline, but that the rise of other powers stands uncontested. In this regard, Nye assesses the potential challengers to the United States, finding that they all suffer from structural limitations that will prevent them from becoming hegemonies in the global world order. He submits that while Europe is always

changing, it is unlikely to surpass the United States: *The probability of a united Europe becoming more powerful than the United States and helping to cause the end of the American century is very low.* He adds, *the same can be said for Japan. Three decades ago, many Americans feared being overtaken after Japanese per capita income surpassed that of the United States. Instead, Japan's economy suffered two decades of slow growth and Japan faces severe demographic problems.* Consequently, Nye's view is that Japan is unlikely to become a global challenger to the United States, either economically or militarily.

Within the same chapter, Nye continues these comparisons with an examination of Russia, stating that

in the 1950s, many Americans feared that the Soviet Union would surpass the United States as the world's leading power. However, it did not happen and it seems unlikely that Russia would again possess the resources to present the same sort of balance to American power.

When it comes to India, Nye argues that population alone is not an index of power, unless those human resources are developed. In this sense, *India remains very much an underdeveloped country, with hundreds of millions of illiterate citizens living in poverty.* According to Nye, another competitor is Brazil. However, *Brazil's infrastructure is inadequate, its legal system overburdened, it has a very high murder rate, and serious corruption problems.* On this basis, Nye argues that it is unlikely that Brazil will aspire to compete with the United States as a peer.

Nye alleges that the only potential competitor is China. Among the BRICS, China is by far the largest, with an economy equal to those of all the other countries combined. It has the largest army, the largest military budget, the highest rate of economic growth, and the most Internet users. Yet, he emphasizes that the rise of China globally is a long process that is still some way from signifying the end of the American century.

In the next chapter, Nye compares the United States with Rome, concluding that

American culture has cleavages, but they remain manageable and less dangerous than at times in the past.

Social problems abound, with some getting worse and some better. The society remains open to the outside world and better able than most to renew itself by immigration. The American economy is growing more slowly than in the past, but it remains innovative at using and commercializing technologies because of its entrepreneurial culture, the most mature venture capital industry and the world's top ranking universities. It leads the world in research and development, and is at the forefront of new cyber, nano, bio, and energy technologies... America has many problems and they raise many questions, but they are not creating an absolute decline that gives us a clear answer about when the American century will end.

All in all, the book is well-written and most readers will find it both engaging and insightful. Nye assesses America's place in the world and tries to correct the pessimism about America's future. He brilliantly articulates the issues around the challenges and challengers. Whether or not his assessments are correct is another question. However, Nye argues strongly that American geopolitical superiority or hegemony is still firmly in place and far from declining, and that the biggest threat is not China, India, Japan, Russia or Europe but America itself.