

Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World* (W.W. Norton, 2008)

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The first sentence of Fareed Zakaria's best seller states, "This is a book not about the decline of America but rather about the rise of everyone else." As editor of Newsweek International, Zakaria consistently offers reasoned and novel insights. His book met my high expectations. It is a quick read, yet a "must-read" for anyone contemplating how the United States can best position itself for maximum influence in a changing world.

Economic theory tells us that free international movement of goods, services, labor, and capital is the "great equalizer." The United States preached this gospel after World War II and has led the creation of this international framework. The system has delivered as promised. The share of world population living on a dollar a day or less will drop from 40 to 12 percent between 1980 and 2015. Eighty percent of the world's population now lives in countries with a decreasing poverty rate. Although there are separate chapters on India and China, Zakaria's theme is that economic growth now is a worldwide phenomena not limited to these two giants or to Asia at large. He reports that more than 30 countries encompassing two-thirds of Africa had annual GDP growth exceeding four percent in recent years.

The book ends with two chapters on the United States. True to his word that this is not a book about America's decline, most of the second-to-last chapter examines America's greatest strengths. Our most fundamental strengths in his view include the following:

- (1) An enormous economy making it possible to address almost any military or civilian initiative with a small fraction of the GDP;
- (2) A comparative advantage on both the front and back ends of the product cycle where most of the value added is created (i.e., idea creation and innovation; marketing and distribution, sales and service);
- (3) World leadership in higher education and a public education system emphasizing independence, access, and critical thinking rather than conformity, selectivity, and memorization;
- (4) Demographic vibrancy in contrast to most major countries that are increasingly saddled with stagnant and aging populations.
- (5) An assimilative culture (despite backlash throughout history) that enables strategically important talent and energy from abroad to be infused in the economy and society.

Zakaria's analysis is much richer than my summary and worth reading. He debunks several widely reported and held beliefs.

In comparing and contrasting our situation with Britain's descent, he notes that Britain's empire came to an end because good politics could not undo bad economics. He views our Achilles heel as being a political system inept enough to put strong economic fundamentals at risk. In the final chapter, Zakaria proposes six strategies to maximize U.S. leverage in this changing world:

- (1) *Prioritize and choose.* We have a huge economic base, but we do not have unlimited resources.
- (2) *Focus on broad utilitarian rules rather than narrow interests.* Where narrow interests are overriding, dispense with moralizing so as not to preach one thing and practice another.
- (3) *Engage with all the great powers.* Develop better relations with all of them than they have with each other.
- (4) *Nurture and support diverse nongovernmental, transnational, multilateral institutions.* These institutions are more apt to resolve conflict based on shared principles and less likely to foment nationalism.
- (5) *Think asymmetrically.* Not all our antagonists are nation states. Not all our institutions and players are governmental.
- (6) *Restore legitimacy.* It is not just good public relations; it is a core element of power.