



Immanuel Wallerstein. *Alternatives: The United States Confronts the World.* Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2004. v + 173 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59451-066-3; \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59451-067-0.



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The Decline of American Power and the End of the World System

In *Alternatives: The United States Confronts the World*, Immanuel Wallerstein argues that the United States is a superpower in decline, dating the beginning of this trend back to the 1970s. The dominance the United States enjoyed immediately following World War II was not to last as other countries began to catch up economically and technologically. Now what is new, Wallerstein explains, is the response coming out of Washington.

From Richard Nixon to Bill Clinton the approach to foreign policy was basically the same, one of “soft” multilateralism. In other words, Washington always did what it wanted to do on the world stage but usually after first obtaining agreement from other nations: “The U.S. is multilateral to the degree that others adopt the U.S. unilateral position” (p. 90). Such orchestrating of coalitions and the development of consensus actually helped maintain American dominance in foreign affairs and it helped maintain what the author has for years referred to as the “world system.”[1] With George W. Bush’s response to September 11 traditional multilateralism has been replaced by “raw” unilateralism, which has unwittingly accelerated the process of America’s decline of power. This

is the thesis of the book and consequently there is a great deal of focus on Bush’s attack on Iraq.

Wallerstein writes, “September 11 simply crystallized a vague sentiment into a pressing concern.” That vague sentiment was essentially a nation’s fear of losing international standing. Hence, there is the fear of Other and the fear that Other is scornful and no longer in awe of the United States. “The American people are afraid of terrorists; they are afraid of Moslems; they are afraid of strangers,” the author continues. “It is the fear that the U.S. is no longer strong as it once was, is no longer as respected as it once was, is no longer appreciated as it once was” (p. 78).

Significantly, such fear is interconnected with domestic worries. “It is the fear that the American standard of living is in danger—a fear of inflation and of deflation, a fear of losing employment, a fear that, as they live longer, they no longer live as well, because the health care for the older part of the population is far weaker than people expect and want.” As if fear is the only thing to fear, Washington has responded with a course of action that largely ignores the underlying problems. “Bush responds to that

fear not by saying there is no problem, but by saying that there is a problem to which he has a remedy—tough, determined action. The Bush administration exudes confidence in itself and this attracts fearful people, enough at least who give their vote to toughness” (p. 78). And such toughness, the implementation of shock, is directed at scapegoats, such as Saddam Hussein, while the decline of the United States accelerates to terminal velocity.

Wallerstein sees Bush’s invasion of Iraq as less about carrying out regime change and more to do with intimidating the allies of the United States, “so that they stop their carping, their criticisms, and fall back into line, as the schoolchildren they are considered to be” (pp. 89-90). In other words, “What Bush sought to demonstrate was that the United States could and would assert its power unilaterally in the world, succeed militarily in doing so, and thereby strengthen its political and economic position in the world” (p. 135).

The author thinks the “shock and awe” plan has failed miserably, putting the nation’s decline of power in an unstoppable fast-forward mode. He believes that now more nations than ever will try to develop weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear arms. Moreover, new alliances are being fashioned to serve as a counterweight against the United States’ unilateralism: France, Germany, and Russia; China and Russia; China, Korea, and Japan; and Latin America. The United States is challenged by a populist resurgence in Latin America, a stronger China, and an unwillingness of Japan, South Korea, and China to take a hard stance against North Korea (pp. 83-84).

Actually, the end of the Cold War began this unraveling of American hegemony. “The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-1991 represented a disaster, from the standpoint of U.S. control over its allies,” Wallerstein explains. “It undid the major justification for U.S. Leadership” (p. 104). This would explain in part why political conservatives have resorted to Cold War rhetoric when addressing the problem of global terrorism. Although the policy of containment has been relegated to the dustbin of history and replaced by the Bush Doctrine of preemption (which is quite in keeping with these postmodern times characterized by a vagueness of boundaries and a vagueness of enemy identification), it has little to do with an abandonment of the Cold War mindset.

Then and now, the thinking out of Washington has been one of American exceptionalism, the United States as savior of the free world. If it could be shown that Washington possesses the capability of containing ter-

rorism the way it had once contained the Soviet Union (contained in that the Kremlin never bombed the United States or Western Europe), probably there could be greater unity between America and its allies. What is new is that there is no equivalent of nuclear deterrence to keep the enemy at bay. Other than waging world war and carrying out a policy of extermination, there is no *military* solution for stopping terrorism in the way that nuclear brinkmanship worked against the Soviet Union.[2] Since the United States has few answers and little power in dealing with terrorism, Washington as command center is devalued by its traditional allies.

Alternatives is divided into three sections: part 1, “Terrorism: The Bush Fiasco” (pp. 1-16); part 2, “Bush Encounters the World: Commentaries, 2001-2004” (pp. 17-142); and part 3, “The Possible and the Desirable” (pp. 143-162). The bulk of this work is comprised of the author’s reconstituted Web blogs (p. vii) that offer a diary-like commentary on the events leading up to Gulf War II and the subsequent quagmire/insurgency. The author is a senior research scholar at Yale University and editor of the Fernand Braudel Center Series. There is probably an unwritten rule that a series editor never publishes his own book in order to avoid the problem of embarrassment afterwards. This work is a fascinating and brisk read, on par with a rousing op-ed piece, but it would hardly have passed muster through the usual vetting process. Web blogs on current events, it seems, are less than ideal material for constructing an academic work because the reflection of events in real time, no matter how insightful the commentator, is inevitably shortsighted.

The strength of this book is that it attempts to explain American post-September 11 foreign policy developments and show the rational, if not necessarily wise, thinking behind the decisions made by Bush and his advisers. On the other hand, a weakness of the overall analysis is the presupposition that the hawks of the Bush administration are always behaving as rational actors. It could be argued, seemingly without much difficulty, that the hawks have been deluded by an ideology that has made them less than rational. An ideology can be based on rational thought, but its adherents can turn that rationality into a faith system that calcifies into a rejection of the world of facts. Unlike Abraham Lincoln who maintained a war cabinet comprised of individuals with diverse viewpoints,[3] George W. Bush seems happily predisposed to seclude himself with people who practice groupthink and have zero tolerance for dissent. Perhaps only a psychoanalyst would be able to uncover the source of why Bush wanted to go to war against Iraq, but Waller-

stein probably offers at least a partial reason.

Many readers will detect in this work an argument that lends support to the view that the United States is experiencing imperial overstretch; however, the author generally rejects the notion of an American imperial order. "A world in political chaos is not an imperial world," he writes. "And we would all do well to absorb this elementary fact into our consciousness" (p. 81). However, many readers will recognize the "political chaos" as the consequence of the unraveling of an imperial world, similar to the colonial uprisings following World War II.

As for the "political chaos" of the Middle East, is there *any* not directly or indirectly related to the legacies of imperialism? The terrorism that has emerged from that part of the world is very much a negative reaction to the imperialistic missions of Great Britain and France and later, following World War II, the United States. For example, what is the origin of the dislike Iran has for the United States if it is not the 1953 CIA coup to reinstall the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlevi to the throne, an action Dwight Eisenhower ordered on behalf of British oil interests?[4]

What exactly are the "alternatives" being discussed in *Alternatives*? The author maintains that the Bush foreign policy has made things where the United States will not be able to return to "soft" multilateralism because the world community is no longer the same. The alternative to American hegemony is multipolarity. This will require the United States to jettison American exceptionalism and "start thinking of itself as one mature country among many, one that has had both greatness and things to repent in its past, as have most others" (p. 148). This approach would require Washington to engage in genuine dialogue with the rest of the world and quit talking down to its allies.

"Multipolarity is a great virtue, not a danger for the United States," Wallerstein insists, adding that a new era of dialogue among the nations (instead of one dominant one telling the rest what to do) would require a change in American outlook akin to "a socio-psychological shift of a major order" (pp. 148, 149). Indeed! This all well and good, but it amounts to idealism mixed with vagueness, prompting one to recall the words at the end of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*: "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

Wallerstein also reflects on the future of global economics, offering a bleak forecast for capitalism. The challenges include the rise of personnel costs, enterprises being forced to internalize their production costs (such

as paying for the disposal of hazardous waste), the rise of taxation necessary for maintaining infrastructure and other services, less government subsidy for businesses, and in short, less capital accumulation (pp. 155-158).

It's the end of the world system as we know it, and Wallerstein feels fine. He notes that it is increasingly difficult to achieve profitability in a capitalist society, yet socialism has proven itself a less than viable solution. What is to be done? He answers that civilization is at a fork in the road in which it can either maintain "the pattern of hierarchal, unequal, and polarizing structures of the present system" (as championed at the World Economic Forum held each year at Davos, Switzerland) or it can opt for a "fundamentally more democratic and more egalitarian" economic system (as championed at the World Social Forum held each year at Porto Alegre, Brazil) (p. 160). The author is on the side of Porto Alegre and he sees the present times as offering a wonderful opportunity for an improved world system, but here, again, is a rich blend of idealism and vagueness.

A different series editor (had he or she opted to publish this work) would have altered the title, perhaps resorting to "Rejecting Alternatives: Bush Confronts the World." The third section of the manuscript should have been scrapped, revised, or expanded. The author was too ambitious to hope to outline the "possible and the desirable" of a post-September 11 world in under twenty pages. *Alternatives* is an academic potboiler, but one with some stimulating ideas and wise insights.

Notes

[1]. For a short explanation and critique of the world systems paradigm, in lieu of Wallerstein's major works, see Thomas J. McCormick, "World Systems," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, eds. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 89-98.

[2]. See Anonymous [Michael Scheuer], *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2004).

[3]. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

[4]. Stephen Kinzer, *All The Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2003).

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