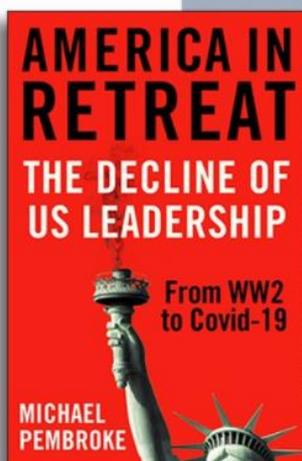


**BOOKS**

# From architect of global order to rogue imperial power

JOE GILL recommends an incisive account of inexorable US decline



NO CARROTS LEFT: USS George Bush roaming the seas and spoiling for a fight *Photo: Nicholas Hall/US Navy/Creative Commons*

## America in Retreat by Michael Pembroke (Oneworld, £20)

IT TOOK newly elected President Joe Biden a little over a month before he authorised military strikes on Syria, allegedly in response to rocket attacks on US forces in Iraq.

A week later, his Vice-President Kamala Harris publicly declared opposition to a recently announced International Criminal Court probe into Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Biden's election was supposed to mark an end to the rogue presidency of Donald Trump who, refusing to accept he lost the election, left office after rallying his supporters to storm the Capitol building on January 6.

But Biden is Mr Continuity, despite all the hype during his inauguration that the grown-ups were returning to the White House.

More than ever, the US under Trump used its power nakedly to bully friends and enemies alike and to rip up international treaties signed by predecessors, such as the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Climate Accord. But it is a profound misreading of history to expect Biden to turn his back on most US imperial behaviour.

Economist Jeffrey Sachs describes US exceptionalism — established 200 years ago with the Monroe Doctrine but actually as old as the first colonial settlement in America — as a “civic religion” which sees US “destiny and duty to expand its power and the influence of its institutions and beliefs until they dominate the world.”

Dwight Eisenhower was the last US president to seriously question the pursuit of military supremacy and intolerance of other ideologies and political systems that have governed US foreign policy since 1945. “We must be careful to ensure that the ‘merchants of death’ do not come to dictate policy,” he warned.

Biden is no Eisenhower— although the latter authorised the overthrow of democratic governments in Iran and Guatemala — and his support for Israeli colonialism is no less unconditional than Trump’s, even if his officials make weak noises about a long-dead two-state solution.

In the wider Middle East, the US finds itself at odds with too many international agreements and institutions to list — from arms control and human rights, to climate and health, exemplified by Trump’s withdrawal from the World Health Organisation just as the Covid pandemic required global co-operation like never before.

Washington’s ever-growing regime of sanctions against countries that defy its will today includes Iran, Venezuela, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, North Korea and Cuba, imposing immense suffering on their peoples while failing to dislodge any of their governments.

As Michael Pembroke outlines in *America in Retreat*, his new book on the “decline of US leadership,” US power is increasingly impotent in the face of global forces that it cannot control, most obviously China’s inexorable economic rise.

Pembroke shows how the tectonic forces of economic integration and trade from China to south and east Asia, Africa and the Middle East are remorselessly replacing the US as the dominant economic world power.

But what the US still boasts is its unmatched military might, at enormous cost to the American people and millions around the world, with 800 military bases spanning all corners of the globe. This is underpinned by the dollar, still used as the world’s favoured reserve currency.

The power that control of the international trading currency confers enables the US to weaponise the global financial system against perceived enemies, while also

building up debt to pay for its trillion-dollar annual military budget. The rest of the world picks up the tab by buying US Treasury bonds.

This system has so far suited the likes of China, which benefits from the US trade deficit, but for how long? Trump tried to reverse America's loss of industrial leadership to China through tariffs on Chinese goods but that policy may have other consequences that accelerate the shift in global power away from Washington.

America's growing use of secondary sanctions to impose its will on countries that wish to trade with US-sanctioned states is one of many abuses of its financial power that is pushing the world toward alternatives. China and Russia are already reducing holdings of US treasuries and many Asian countries are increasingly trading in local currencies.

Pembroke provides a useful historical survey of America's journey from architect of the global order at the end of World War II towards a rogue imperial power that increasingly defies or decouples itself from all legal constraints to its actions. Along the way it has invaded and destabilised dozens of countries, from Iran to Central America, Indochina and Iraq.

Pembroke dedicates his book to the Millennials, perhaps in the unspoken recognition that the old and middle-aged leaders of the US are not yet ready to relinquish the destructive exceptionalism that is the core faith of the US empire.

Perhaps future leaders might return to the warnings of Eisenhower and change course but we shouldn't hold our breath.