Naval War College Review

Volume 74
Number 4 *Autumn 2021*

Article 17

2021

The American Way of Empire: How America Won a World—but Lost Her Way

Jeffrey P. Rogg

James Kurth

1916), aboard each of which U.S. citizens died. Each ship was attacked prior to America's entry into the war, and each attack initiated diplomatic fervor and furor from President Woodrow Wilson and the United States. Each attack was avoidable, did little to further Germany's war aims, and significantly damaged the country's international reputation and image. Yet it was not these three ships that Wilson referenced in his 2 April 1917 war message to Congress; rather, it was the sinking of three U.S. merchant ships—SS *Vigilancia* (16 March 1917), SS *City of Memphis* (17 March 1917), and the tanker SS *Illinois* (18 March 1917)—that became the tipping point for America's entry into the war.

As mentioned, the text is interspersed with numerous photographs and charts that supplement the content. Readers will find the book to be an enjoyable and engaging work. The several appendices, whose contents include photographs of decoded German documents from Room 40 within the directorate of intelligence of the British Admiralty, enhance the work by providing a glimpse of the tedious yet significant work of intercepting and decrypting German naval and diplomatic traffic, including the Zimmermann telegram, to which the author devotes several pages. The book's title is somewhat misleading, in that out of five sections only one is devoted to the U-boat assault on the United States. A more detailed index would benefit readers. Some readers will wish for more details on specific boats or incidents, but Koerver states that he is writing for a general audience (p. vii). Thus the work should be read by those who seek to gain a broader understanding of the First World War at sea and the importance of U-boats in that conflict.

TIMOTHY J. DEMY

The American Way of Empire: How America Won a World—but Lost Her Way, by James Kurth. Washington, DC: Washington Books, 2019. 464 pages. $30.

In the second year of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian people reproached Pericles for bringing invasion, plague, and ruin upon them. Pericles warned his fellow citizens that Athens possessed an empire and that, while it might have been wrong to take it, it would be unsafe to let it go. Persuaded, the Athenians persisted with policies that made them even more enemies, including among erstwhile allies, ultimately leading to the dissolution of their empire. In *The American Way of Empire,* James Kurth draws on but departs from Pericles as he offers his own warning: that America no longer possesses an empire, and—to those still seeking to preserve this fallen empire—it would be unsafe *not* to let it go.

Kurth, a professor emeritus of political science at Swarthmore College, is a luminary of U.S. foreign policy. A PhD from Harvard who studied under Samuel P. Huntington, to whom he dedicates the book, Kurth is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Kurth has authored over 120 articles, and he revised some of them to serve as chapters in the book's five substantive parts, which are titled "Hegemony," "Ideology," "Strategy," "Insurgency," and "Political Economy." This composition allows the reader to absorb the book in chapters or parts or as a whole. That the chapters derive from articles originally published as early as the 1990s yet address current crises so deftly reflects Kurth's prescience and the book's timeliness.

With compellingly creative analysis, Kurth reveals the causes of the American empire's remarkable rise and abrupt fall. After the Second World War, the United States cemented three hegemonic alliance systems as part of the "American way of empire." However, that empire made trade-offs that became time bombs. For example, the United States opened its market to its East Asian allies to keep them out of China's orbit, but in doing so it hollowed out the core of American industry. Because of these imperial policies, the American empire has fractured regionally in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America—and functionally in its military, economic, political, and ideological dimensions. In the power vacuums created by the demise of the American empire, states such as China, Russia, and Iran now seek their own spheres of influence. According to Kurth, it did not need to end this way.

Kurth attributes the precipitous decline of the American empire to the deliberate decisions of its elites. He brings together American intellectual history, political economy, culture, and even religion to explain how this empire lost its way. For instance, he describes how the Marshall Plan originally joined the Midwest's industry, with its conservative nationalist tradition, and the Northeast's finance, with its liberal international tradition, to form a grand domestic alliance to promote international free trade as a pillar of empire. However, over time, an insidious alliance of ideas and interests coalesced among American elites who, like Pericles and the Athenian elites before them, insisted on defending and extending the empire to the point of collapse.

America's elites ultimately succumbed to the tragic flaw of hubris, in the aftermath of the Cold War. Thoroughly convinced that "American ideas [were] universal ideas," they led the United States on the most ambitious and disastrous imperial project yet, seeking "to reinvent the nations of the globe in [the U.S.] image" (p. 262). American elites ignored not only the sensibilities and struggles of their fellow citizens—who today distrust their leaders, just as the Athenians once doubted Pericles—but also the interests of other states and the value systems of other cultures. They also disregarded the exigencies of international relations. Faced with the end of the American empire, they must come to terms with the enduring lesson of history: that "power and realities almost always confound ideology and visions" (p. xviii).

The United States can aspire only to shape, not to dominate, the twenty-first century. America must abandon any illusion that it can remake the world in its image, particularly given that it has lost its image of itself. In fact, Kurth quips, if the United States has any hope of steering a course toward peace and prosperity, "America will have to become more American than it has been in recent years" by returning to the values of the American Creed and the virtues of the American republic (p. 394).

The American Way of Empire gives the reader much to ponder, without being ponderous. Kurth entertains and educates in equal measure, delighting the reader with many witticisms and turns of phrase, often turning common wisdom on its head in the process. In a discerning inversion of the well-worn American conception of containment during the Cold War, Kurth wryly observes that "in actuality, the most important containment going on had been that by the Soviet Union of the

United States" (p. 23). Herein lies an admonition for the policy makers and national-security professionals who should read *The American Way of Empire:* too often America sets forth to change the world, without realizing that just as often the world changes it.

JEFFREY P. ROGG

Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy, by Robert Vitalis. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2020. 224 pages. $24.

Energy analysts often gripe that everyone who drives a car or owns a lightbulb thinks this provides sufficient training to claim expertise in energy markets. In his new book, contrarian University of Pennsylvania political scientist Robert Vitalis takes to task mainstream experts who equate oil with power. At times breezily polemical, this concise but richly researched foray is a valuable contribution to the prolific "geopolitics of energy" literature in fashion today.

The incisive commentary begins with the title: the word *oilcraft* is a play on *witchcraft,* not *statecraft* or *tradecraft;* it is explicitly pejorative, not complimentary. Laying his cynical cards on the table from the outset, Vitalis is unrelenting in his critique of the "modern-day form of magical realism" (p. 6) that presumes that oil is the "lifeblood or weapon or prize" (p. 23), constituting an axiomatic truth that consequently requires a special relationship with Persian Gulf nations, military commitments around the world, and strategic deal making with unsavory regimes. He derides as a pernicious myth the "need once to control and now secure access, stabilize prices, or prevent hostile powers from holding the world economy hostage" (p. 122). Vitalis names names and spares none, reserving his most incendiary ammunition not for policy makers, as one might expect, but for his fellow academics.

The analytical core of the book comprises detailed surveys of energy-security discussions in the 1920s and 1970s. In the earlier period, policy makers panicked about Britain's expansive control of global oil supplies, which prompted the rise, within the burgeoning field of international relations, of the so-called Columbia School, which dismissed great-power competition as an unnecessary and counterproductive geopolitical framework for consideration. The lessons of these debates, Vitalis argues, were long forgotten by the time resource scarcity again seized the nation's consciousness. This later period, beginning around 1973, is broadly misunderstood. For instance, it was a group of Arab countries that imposed the infamous oil embargo, not the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries; the upward pressure on oil prices—driven by a complex host of reasons, including turbulent international financial conditions—predated the Yom Kippur War, and therefore was not caused by it, as is sometimes portrayed. One of the most interesting points Vitalis makes is that the resulting higher oil prices fueled greater development of oil resources in the United States (e.g., in Alaska and the offshore Gulf of Mexico).

Other episodes make brief cameos, recast in a petroleum-tinted light: the so-called Tanker War between Iran and Iraq, Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, the development of the Carter Doctrine, the deployment of U.S. Marines to Lebanon, and the slew of