

Review – Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, APR 25 2019

Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower by Michael Beckley Cornell University Press, 2018

America is a blessed nation. It lives far from trouble, protected by the security buffer of two big oceans and two non-threatening neighbors. It has a large, educated, relatively young population, plenty of natural resources, a gigantic and innovative economy, a stable and relatively effective government, and a powerful, well-equipped, and very experienced military. Its potential rivals for global hegemony – China, Russia, and the European Union – are each chronically limited in some important way. Although many predict its imminent decline, America, according to Michael Beckley in his important new book, seems destined to hold its dominance for a long time. The question then becomes what it does with that dominance.

Beckley’s most significant contribution to the hegemony discussion is that he offers a net assessment of the comparative power positions. That is he seeks to calculate the power of nations after deducting the costs required to maintain that power. There are three main kinds of costs, production, welfare and security. Production costs are those costs incurred generating economic and military power, costs such as natural resource acquisition and troop training. Welfare costs are those needed to support the population, basically the cost of a nation’s social services. And security costs are the costs a nation incurs to maintain internal governance and surviving in its neighborhood.

Much of this short book is a discussion of appropriate measures of power and costs and their comparative application. The methodological issues are many and difficult, but ultimately ignorable because all the measures point in the same direction. Beckley is convincing in his argument that the United States is the most efficient producer of power on the planet. The European Union lacks unity. Russia is a declining power burdened by numerous problems including alcoholism, corruption, and internal dissent. And China, although enjoying an amazing economic expansion, one that has taken tens of millions out of poverty, and assembling the element of a powerful military, is haunted by suppressed urges for democracy and potential regional fragmentation and weighted down by an aging population.

Beckley sees America’s dominance continuing. The basic drivers of economic growth—geography, institutions, and demography—give it persisting advantages. It is not always first in the many relevant international rankings, but invariably high in all of them. Decades of big investments in defense technology and training, give it an unmatched ability to generate and project globally significant military power. There is hardly any balancing against this power, with most countries preferring to free-ride on America’s protection and to live off its economic largess rather than take up the cause of challenger. And Beckley dismisses economic convergence theory as mostly wishful thinking. Important international wealth and military gaps seem to him likely to remain in place.

What then for the Colossus? Beckley favors the United States showing restraint in the use of its great power, doing only a little offshore balancing in the Middle East and being very cautious in its interventions while refraining from any

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efforts to impose democracy on others, the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan. He worries though that without great challenge as occurred in World War II and the Cold War, there will be domestic political decay and a shirking of its role as the manager of global security. Here Beckley seems fearful of national purpose being waylaid by the mob of Trump’s untutored supporters and reaches too willingly for a variety of silly measures to redirect their attention back to America’s supposed international obligations. Perhaps, like their Orange topped leader, they just sense a bad deal and wonder why they must pay in blood and taxes so far off rich allies can live protected from their neighbors.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.