



## The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies

By Josef Joffe

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**The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies** By Josef Joffe

**A provocative and contrarian work?filled with great lessons from history?that challenges the pervasive notion that America is on the decline.**

Once every decade, it is "decline time" in America. In recent years, it has been the unstoppable rise of China that has spelled "finis America." What the Chinese juggernaut is today, the Soviet Union ("We shall bury you") was in the 1950s. The Vietnam decade of the 1960s was described as America's "collective suicide attempt," while in the 1970s, the United States succumbed to Jimmy Carter's famous "malaise," as the dollar dangerously plummeted. The 1980s unquestionably belonged to a resurgent Japan, the "Rising Sun," whereas in the 1990s, Europe shone forth as an "empire by example." In the naughts, it was "Asia Rising" that became the flavor of the decade. Despite a litany of prognostications, these contenders have all fallen back, one by one.

While it may be catnip for the media to play up America as a has-been, Josef Joffe, a leading German commentator and Stanford University academic, compellingly shows that Declinism is not a cold-eyed diagnosis but a device in the style of the ancient prophets: "Thou shalt perish, unless..." Gloom is a prophecy that must be believed so that it will turn out wrong. Joffe repeatedly demonstrates how the "economic miracles" that propelled the rising tide of challengers flounder against their own limits. Hardly confined to Europe alone, Declinism has also been an especially nifty career builder for American politicians, among them Kennedy, Nixon, and Reagan, who all rode into the White House by hawking "the end is near."

Buttressing his argument with facts, Joffe demonstrates that America's future is sanguine. In contrast to the Carter years, the economic woes of the Obama era look more like a nasty migraine. By historical standards, the U.S. defense burden today is extraordinarily low, hence sustainable over the long haul. Immigration (plus a healthy birth rate) will not only keep the nation younger than China, Japan, Europe, and Russia but will continue to bring in the world's best and

brightest. Indeed, America is the "world's Ph.D. factory" both in science and engineering, while its R&D spending dwarfs the "rising rest." Its uniquely deep and wide capital market encourages innovations and continues to turn dreams into vibrant companies.

Joffe argues that it is only if America "freezes up" by enshrining privilege, closing its doors, and withdrawing from the world that it will succumb to the rigor mortis that has overwhelmed previous empires. Effortlessly mixing keen historical insights with brilliant diplomatic and economic analysis, *The Myth of America's Decline* becomes a remarkable reflection on our nation's standing in the world and an eye-opening account that challenges the pervasive and now tired notion that America is on the decline.

32 illustrations

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*By Josef Joffe*

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Editor of Germany's esteemed weekly *Die Zeit*, Joffe (*Überpower*) builds his latest book around the idea of the U.S. as the world's default power. Joffe rebuts those doomsayers who, over the course of the last half-century, have predicted that American influence was secondary to the Soviet Union, or Japan, and now China. While Joffe's counter-argument that indeed America is not in relative decline is persuasive on the issue of military power, he sidesteps domestic issues such as education, urban deterioration, and racial conflict. Joffe's detailed catalogue of economic and civil weaknesses in the Chinese police state is the book's high point, however, with the author observing that repression has been the Chinese way since the Ming Dynasty. Aggressively capitalistic and resolutely optimistic, Joffe revisits familiar conservative talking points about American vitality, private enterprise, and individual freedom. For readers tired of blame-America-first critics or who want to find out what a smart, influential European thinks of the country's prospects, Joffe's book is a useful place to begin. (Nov.)

Review

*"The Myth of America's Decline* effectively lays to rest the belief that America has lost its preeminence. Joffe's well-documented research confirms an entirely different story: that the United States stands near or at the top of every ranking used to measure a nation's strength and vigor. It is a book that should be of interest to all who may be worried about America's future." (Henry A. Kissinger)

"In lucid and logical style, one of Europe's leading intellectuals skewers the anti-Americanisms of his compatriots while telling the United States how to survive as the only superpower." (Joseph S. Nye Jr., author of *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*)

"Josef Joffe is a brilliant observer of international politics. He is also a keen student and admirer of the United States. He combines these two passions in this remarkable reflection on America's role in the world. It is the best book on the subject in years." (Fareed Zakaria, author of *The Future of Freedom*)

"Joseph Joffe has written a bracing and intelligent reminder that, for all its woes, America remains extraordinarily dynamic, innovative and resilient. Pessimists on the left and right should read it carefully, as should all of us." (Fareed Zakaria, author of *The Post-American World*)

"Joffe's counter-argument that indeed America is not in relative decline is persuasive.... Joffe's detailed catalogue of economic and civil weaknesses in the Chinese police state is the book's high point, however, with the author observing that repression has been the Chinese way since the Ming Dynasty.... For readers tired of blame-America-first critics or who want to find out what a smart, influential European thinks of the country's prospects, Joffe's book is a useful place to begin." (Publishers Weekly)

"A solid...job of refuting the declinism so feared by the right and perhaps welcomed by some even farther to the right and left. Along the way, Joffe cites some little-discussed statistics, such as the fact that China's aging population and the need for a replenished labor pool to support it fall into 'ratios [that] are far worse than any in the West.' So much for China as the rising dominant world power. There is no triumphalism here, for Joffe notes that there are plenty of problems for the United States to overcome, such as 'the breakdown of bipartisanship...intractable deficits and rising debt...[and] social polarization.'" (Kirkus Reviews)

“German intellectual Josef Joffe makes a stirring case against the Fareed Zakaria and Thomas Friedman’s of the world that America is strong and getting stronger.... While acknowledging that anything is possible and America’s best days may yet be behind us, Joffe is adept at explaining the intangible factors that will likely ensure America’s preeminence for ages to come.” (James Kirchick - The Daily Beast)

“Brave and bracing.... Joffe makes a strong case that a mix of Chinese vulnerabilities and American strengths means it is unlikely that China will replace the United States anytime soon as the center of the global system. Yet, as Joffe notes, constant anxiety about the United States’ prospects might be one of the cultural forces responsible for the country’s persistent strength; rather than resting on their laurels, Americans continually and even neurotically poke at their social fabric, looking for tears that need mending.” (Walter Russell Mead - Foreign Affairs)

#### About the Author

Publisher-editor of Die Zeit and the author of Überpower, Josef Joffe was educated at Swarthmore College and Harvard University. A frequent contributor to Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy, he is a founding board member of the American Interest. He is a Fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution and the Freeman-Spogli Institute for International Studies.

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