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# The Guru of Conventional Wisdom

## **The Post-American World**

*by Fareed Zakaria*

*W.W. Norton, 2008,*

*304 pages.*

*Reviewed by James Kirchick*

Fareed Zakaria is one of the most influential foreign affairs commentators in the world. Only forty-five years old, he is the editor of *Newsweek International* and hosts a weekly discussion show on CNN in which he interviews major political figures from around the world. With his upper-class Indian pedigree, lilting accent, and sterling academic credentials from Yale and Harvard, Zakaria has quickly earned himself a rare and coveted place among the American elite: that of a bona fide intellectual celebrity. His specialty is the distillation of arcane international relations theory into terms that the general public can easily understand. Zakaria's journalistic success, however, has not satisfied his ambitions, and he apparently hopes to follow in the footsteps of his idol Henry Kissinger by

becoming a foreign-born counselor to American policymakers. "My friends all say I'm going to be secretary of state," he told *New York* magazine in 2003. "But I don't see how that would be much different from the job I have now." Though Zakaria didn't make the short list of candidates to serve in the current administration, he does seem to have caught the attention of President Barack Obama, at least briefly. During the presidential campaign, Obama was photographed carrying a copy of Zakaria's latest book, *The Post-American World*.

"When I talk to people in a foreign country, no matter how strange, they are always, at some level, familiar to me," Zakaria wrote in a 2007 column that examined then-candidate Obama's foreign policy experience in comparison to that of his chief Democratic Party rival, Hillary Clinton. Despite Clinton's globe-trotting as First Lady and impressive tenure in the Senate, including her service on the Armed Services Committee, he came down on the side of Obama. To Zakaria, the fact that Obama was born to a Kenyan father, spent "four

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years growing up in Indonesia,” and was brought up “in the multicultural swirl of Hawaii” endowed the junior senator from Illinois with a comprehension of foreign cultures and peoples that was unique in the history of American presidential candidates.

Zakaria went further than this, however, writing that he instinctively identified with Obama because he saw the same attributes in himself. Despite teaching at “colleges and graduate schools” and accumulating “fancy degrees,” Zakaria believes that his worldview is “distinctive” because he spent so many years as a foreigner trying to become an American citizen. Obama’s rootless childhood, Zakaria wrote, has endowed him with a similar kind of empathy. Backing up his claim for the importance of a transnational mentality and a cosmopolitan childhood, Zakaria half-jokingly concluded, “Trust me on this. As a Ph.D. in international relations, I know what I’m talking about.”

Familiarization with the origins of Zakaria’s beliefs is crucial to any understanding of *The Post-American World*. Its thesis is just the kind of ostensibly provocative idea that makes a “big think” book on international relations a major best seller: According to Zakaria, the United States, owing partly to its own mistakes but

also to factors beyond its control, will eventually be overtaken by other countries and lose its standing as the world’s sole superpower. To drive the point home, Zakaria opens his book with a quote from historian Arnold J. Toynbee, who was an expert on the rise and fall of empires. This is, in fact, not a particularly original idea. Indeed, books and articles predicting or declaring the decline and fall of the American empire seem to appear with startling regularity these days. Nevertheless, a world defined by American power and consumer culture is the only world that most readers know, so a book by a popular commentator that attempts to overturn this comfortable paradigm is bound to turn at least a few heads.

While Zakaria’s thesis certainly has its attractions, what emerges once he gets past the Thomas Friedman-style anecdotes and aphorisms are facts inconveniently at odds with his big idea. The actual statistics on economic performance and education levels Zakaria presents tend to contradict his claims. For example, he notes that as much as 70 percent of the world’s top fifty universities are located in the United States, though it has only 5 percent of the world’s population. The World Economic Forum, moreover, rates the United States as having the most competitive economy in the world, which is unlikely to change any

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time soon, and—because economic competitiveness is more difficult to achieve in sclerotic and corrupt autocracies—such rising authoritarian powers as China will never be able to match it so long as they continue to limit political freedom. And in a book filled with unflattering comparisons of the United States to the British Empire, Zakaria nonetheless notes that “Britain’s unrivaled economic status lasted for a few decades,” while “America’s has lasted more than 130 years.” Indeed, Zakaria ultimately concedes that, in spite of the recent downturn, America remains on track to retain its leading role in the world economy for many years to come.

Nonetheless, Zakaria insists that America has lost its “prestige.” The Iraq War, he claims, represented the “apogee” of America’s now decaying global influence. This calls Zakaria’s reputation as a trendsetter into question, mainly because it demonstrates an easy susceptibility to the herd mentality. In effect, Zakaria is simply repeating the conventional wisdom of elite foreign policy journalists who have accused the Bush administration of single-handedly destroying America’s reputation. In this vein, he dubiously refers to the war against Saddam Hussein’s regime—which he himself supported when it was popular—as “an unprovoked attack on a sovereign country.” Similarly, he repeats the

shibboleth regarding Bush’s “cavalier rejection” of the Kyoto treaty but neglects to mention that Bill Clinton never sent the treaty to the Senate for ratification because the body had already passed a resolution overwhelmingly rejecting it.

More than Zakaria’s self-contradictions and trite rhetoric, however, his apparent indifference to the prospect of American decline gives *The Post-American World* an unsettling tone. He appears to share president Obama’s views on American exceptionalism, which the president articulated in a recent speech. “I believe in American exceptionalism,” Obama said during a press conference in France, “just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” In other words, the world’s oldest constitutional democracy, which successfully defeated totalitarianism twice in the last century and whose leaders have long expressed a sense of providential mission, is not objectively exceptional. It plays some world-historical role only in the minds of its own citizens. Zakaria seems to agree. For example, he finds the State Department’s Annual Human Rights Report “smug” and “out of touch with the world outside,” and he is annoyed that the United States is “the only country in the world to issue annual report cards on every other country’s behavior.”

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This is in spite of the fact that human rights activists often find these “report cards” to be an invaluable resource. Indeed, Zakaria’s troubling outlook on American global leadership is most apparent in his dismissal of the idea that the world is, on the whole, a better place because of it.

As skeptical as Zakaria may be about American exceptionalism, he is even more concerned by his fellow citizens, whom he perceives as provincial, chauvinistic, and “cowering in fear” at the world around them. America, he argues, “has become a nation consumed by anxiety, worried about terrorists and rogue nations, Muslims and Mexicans, foreign companies and free trade, immigrants and international organizations.” This, he claims, is largely the fault of the Republican Party, which has capitalized on this latent nativism in order to win elections.

Insisting that this is a new phenomenon in American history, Zakaria attempts to refute historian Robert Kagan’s contention that American foreign policy has been remarkably consistent over time. Kagan’s work has held that America’s differences with the European Union stem from the simple fact that the United States is a superpower and acts accordingly. Europeans, on the other hand, tend to prefer multilateralism because they

are relatively weak. Europeans opposed to American “unilateralism,” Kagan argues, might think differently if their countries still had global empires. And indeed, Europeans did view the world more assertively when they ran it. Zakaria, however, argues that the Bush administration’s unilateralism represented a fundamental break with American foreign policy traditions. “America was the most powerful country in the world when it proposed the creation of the League of Nations,” he writes, omitting the fact that the Senate promptly rejected joining the league, and he further notes that Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman “chose not to create an American imperium” after World War II, but rather “built an international order of alliances and multilateral institutions and helped get the rest of the world back on its feet.” The problem with Zakaria’s argument is that building multilateral institutions and establishing unchallenged American hegemony are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The architecture of international security established after World War II, such as NATO and other regional bodies, was dominated by the United States. As for the United Nations, it has never played a significant role in any global conflict, nor has any American president sacrificed the United States’ interests or objectives to its diktats.

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This does not seem to fit Zakaria's portrait of it as a laudatory example of America's choosing to cede its power in a gesture of noble self-restraint.

Zakaria's attempts to compare American hegemony to its British predecessor also ring somewhat hollow. Citing the large number of American military bases around the world, he writes, "American tentacles and interests are spread as widely today as were Britain's at the height of its own empire." This contention fails to note that overseas American bases are established with the consent of the host country, which was not at all the case under British imperialism. Zakaria draws a similar type of analogy between Britain's decision to make way for the global rise of the United States and America's stubborn reluctance to welcome new competitors like China. Again, this is more than a bit tendentious. Many British socialists, in fact, did not welcome the rise of the United States, because they feared its capitalist ethos would unduly influence those nations emerging from colonial rule. In the end, however, the reason that the British did not see American power as a threat was that the United States was also a liberal democracy. This is manifestly not the case with the rise of China.

As Zakaria continues in this vein, he eventually descends into what

is little more than a diatribe about America and its negative influence on the world. "Even if Iraq finally works out," he writes, "that will solve only the Iraq problem. *The America problem will remain.* People around the globe worry about living in a world in which one country has so much power." [Emphasis mine.] Indeed, according to Zakaria, the United States "terrif[ies] the rest of the world." And the reason for this is that America lacks "legitimacy" as a global superpower.

While this claim is somewhat undermined by Zakaria's use of Irish rock star Bono as an example of someone who has "legitimacy" due to his "ability to capture the intellectual and moral high ground," it does go a long way toward explaining his position on the most pressing issue in the Middle East: Iran's nuclear program. According to Zakaria, Iran's desire to seek nuclear weaponry is an understandable reaction to ex-president Bush, who "repeatedly made clear that he regards the regime in Tehran as illegitimate, wishes to overthrow it, and funds various groups whose aims are similar." Indeed, in a recent cover story for *Newsweek* entitled "Everything You Think You Know About Iran Is Wrong," Zakaria's credulity toward those "terrified" of America got the better of his judgment. He

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wrote that fears of an Iranian nuclear bomb are overblown, and all the regime wants is a “peaceful civilian program.” His evidence was the fact that “Senior Iranian officials at every level have repeatedly asserted that they do not intend to build nuclear weapons.” While he takes the Iranian regime at its word, in the very next paragraph he writes, “if Tehran’s aim is to expand its regional influence, it doesn’t need a bomb to do so. Simply having a clear ‘breakout’ capacity—the ability to weaponize within a few months—would allow it to operate with much greater latitude and impunity in the Middle East and Central Asia.” In the process of claiming that critics of the Iranian nuclear program are alarmists, Zakaria essentially admits that their fears are justified.

Zakaria spins the proverbial globe in order to show us how America is being upstaged on the international scene. He points to French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s mediating efforts after the war between Russia and Georgia, Turkey’s recent work as a “peace broker” between Israel and Syria, and the 2008 agreement signed by warring Lebanese factions in Doha, Qatar, as evidence of how regional powers “can play major stabilizing roles,” free from the meddling hands of the United States. In none of these cases, however, were the regional actors successful

at “stabilizing” the crisis in question. The breakaway Georgian territories that sparked last year’s war in the Caucasus have since declared their independence, which amounts to their de facto annexation by Russia and all but guarantees another conflict in the future. Turkey’s “Syria” track proved a fruitless effort, as all such attempts will be so long as the Alawite minority needs the conflict with Israel to justify its repressive rule. And whatever the intentions of Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani, his ministrations ultimately gave Hezbollah a blocking minority in the Lebanese cabinet. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that diplomatic leadership by the United States would have resolved any of these disputes. But it does say something about Zakaria’s capacity for wishful thinking on behalf of his theories, as well as his general apathy toward the prospect of a decline in American power.

This forces one to ask if Zakaria actually believes that the world would be better off if Russia and China had greater power and influence. While he seems to prefer thinking of global power politics as a cooperative effort, the truth is that it is often a zero-sum game, and if a liberal democracy does not maintain its hegemony, there is a good chance that authoritarian powers will replace it. Looked at this way,

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there is nothing particularly wrong with a world in which the United States enjoys economic and military supremacy. Considering the alternatives, in fact, one wonders why any person who claims to support economic and political freedom would ever want to change it.

As possible replacements for the American hegemon, Zakaria points to two rising powers that, in the coming decades, will challenge the primacy of the United States in world affairs: China and India. Both nations have well over a billion people, booming economies, and deeply felt nationalist sentiments. Because of China's communist government and history of antagonism toward the West, Zakaria refers that country as the "challenger" in this long-term competition. India, being the world's largest democracy, is the "ally." He claims that the way these countries deal with the challenges of globalization, as well as their own domestic politics, will determine the course of global development and competition over the next century.

That these countries are rising in terms of population, economic productivity, and their ability to project power abroad is undeniable. For Zakaria's thesis to work, however, the United States must either grow at a

slower pace relative to these nations, decline of its own accord, or some combination of both. Zakaria does not subscribe to any of these theories. He admits, in fact, that China "is unlikely to surpass [the United States] on any dimension—military, political, or economic—for decades, let alone have dominance in all areas." One wonders, then, why Zakaria wrote this book in the first place. The idea that the United States might one day be overtaken by another country (or several) is not particularly shocking, mainly because, when it comes to predicting the future, almost any outcome is at least theoretically possible. This is probably why Zakaria remains vague on when, exactly, his post-American world is likely to emerge.

Zakaria's predictions would not be nearly as troubling if he did not appear to be so sanguine about the prospect of China overtaking the United States. He gives little consideration to China's unapologetically amoral foreign policy, such as its support for tyrants from Rangoon to Khartoum, or its fervent nationalism. He does acknowledge that the regime is "oppressive" and "takes a ruthlessly *realpolitik* view of its interests," but he then explains this by writing that the "Chinese see these issues differently, not with a set of

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abstract rights and wrongs but with a sense of the practical that serves as a guiding philosophy.” This kind of moral relativism is more than a little unseemly when it is used to dismiss the Chinese government’s human rights abuses, including its own internal gulag system as well as its part in making genocide possible in Sudan and tyranny in Zimbabwe, to name just a few examples of its baleful influence on foreign affairs. If Zakaria is right that this is indeed the “guiding philosophy” in Beijing, we ought to be more concerned about the rise of China than he is.

Zakaria’s indifference to the type of regime that might replace the United States as a hegemonic power indicates that, in many ways, *The Post-American World* is a natural sequel to his previous book, *The Future of Freedom*, in which he theorized that “liberal” authoritarianism is preferable to “illiberal” democracy as a mode of government for developing nations than what he termed “illiberal” democracy. This claim was coupled with an attack on American democracy, which Zakaria declared was limited by “a simple-minded populism,” in which “leaders bow and scrape before” the masses.

In *The Post-American World*, Zakaria takes this complaint further.

In a section entitled “A Do-Nothing Politics,” Zakaria attacks the inefficiency of the American political system, with its checks and balances, noisy constituencies, and vociferous media personalities. “A set of sensible reforms could be enacted tomorrow to trim wasteful spending and subsidies, increase savings, expand training in science and technology, secure pensions, create a workable immigration process, and achieve significant efficiencies in the use of energy,” he writes, with a confidence that would be understandable from a frustrated technocrat but is more disconcerting coming from a man with a penchant for authoritarian government. Only politics, he implies, is holding up the master plan. Indeed, Zakaria’s real complaint ultimately seems to be with democracy itself. His idea of a model leader is presumably Lee Kuan Yew, extensively praised in *The Future of Freedom*, who ruled Singapore for thirty-one years.

As for how the United States should adapt to this changing world, Zakaria offers no real answers. “The task for today is to construct a new approach for a new era,” he writes, “one that responds to a global system in which power is far more diffuse than ever before and in which everyone feels empowered.” This sounds suspiciously like the

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globalization boilerplate we got used to hearing a decade ago; indeed, terms such as “empowered” are so nebulous that they can mean virtually anything. As for our bright new future in a world where power is “diffused” among regimes whose values are inimical to those of Western

liberal democracies—color me skeptical. But perhaps we should trust Zakaria on this. After all, he’s a Ph.D. in international relations.

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