

HUBERT VÉDRINE ANALYZES FAREED ZAKARIA'S LATEST BOOK, THE POST-AMERICAN WORLD

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While a great many international analyses are conventional, biased, and repetitive – such as the oft-cited notion that the West struggles to break free from its navel-gazing, myopia, and phobias – the brilliant editor of Newsweek International, Fareed Zakaria, manages to cut to the heart of the matter by directly addressing the rise of emerging powers and actors, its consequences for the West, and possible responses. We are certainly not yet in “the post-American world,” which is also the title of his work, but the West has already lost its monopoly on history, if not on the influence and power that Europeans then Americans have held onto since the 16th Century. The West is now faced with an urgent need to reflect on policies effective for managing this tectonic shift. Without a new approach it risks becoming beholden to the influence of fear, something already seen with the Bush Administration’s simplistic politics of force, which was destined for failure. During the past few years, the great conservative (Kissinger) and neo-conservative (Fukuyama, Kagan) thinkers have caught onto this new state of world affairs. Kissinger reminded us, as Fukuyama rediscovered, that nation-states have not become irreplaceable nor has the economic supplanted the strategic. Kagan abandoned neo-conservative daydreaming in favor of a tough, but classic, reading of the history that once again awaits us. Zakaria, who supported the war in Iraq, delves into possible reactions to the “rise of the rest,” which is the “ironic consequence of sixty years of American action” to open and Americanize the world. He tackles the threats posed by Islam and “rogue states,” but brings them back to accurate proportions by taking them seriously yet also remaining level-headed. His analysis of economic, financial, and technological forces in motion – the exponential free movement of capital, technological innovations, and the collapse of transportation costs – is fundamentally optimistic and liberal. Yet, always well-grounded in reality, Zakaria does also worry about waste and the destruction of resources; about the strength and resurgence of nationalism throughout the world, as well as its disconcerting effect on Americans who believe that they act always for the good of humanity. Zakaria notes the strength of protesting political forces throughout the world, namely the rise of BRICM (the famous BRIC plus “M” for Mexico). He provokes readers by daring to take seriously, even to anticipate, the hypothesis of a “non-Western world,” or one that is not exclusively Western. Should it materialize, this world would re-emerge for the first time in over half of a millennium; five centuries after the Emperor of China put an end to Admiral Zheng He’s distant maritime voyages. Nevertheless, Zakaria does not believe a “non-Western world” would be anti-American, but rather “post-American.” When faced with the question of whether the world can be modern without also being Western, he responds with great nuance. According to Zakaria, Western modernism has so deeply transformed the world that the end of the Western monopoly on power does not also herald the end of Western-style modernism. So if the United States were surpassed one day, this result would have been precipitated by its own success. Conscious of the fact that history – and competition – is pursued between great countries and nations, Fareed Zakaria devotes two interesting and well-developed chapters to an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of two cases in particular: the “challenger” (China) and the “ally” (India). He goes on to assess the relations of the eagle (U.S.) with the dragon and the cow (others like Martine Bulard routinely symbolize India by an elephant). It is not surprising that Fareed Zakaria, who is Indian-born, characterizes India as the most pro-American country on earth, one with whom the U.S. could potentially find great harmony and alliance. Still, Zakaria recognizes that India will not become a global power immediately and, in the case of competition between India and China, China would be the winner in both the short- and long-term. Regarding China, Zakaria rightly notes that its policies toward the rest of the world are rather open; possibly interactive; and dependent upon Chinese actions, on the reactions of others, and on the systematic combination of the two. His clear and lucid analyses create a delightful contrast with the heavy Manichaeism and ideological simple-mindedness of the outgoing American administration and its usual globalist jargon. Above all else, the originality and the main strength of Fareed Zakaria resides in his two final chapters, “American Power” and “American Purpose,” in which he extensively elaborates possible responses to the rapidly shifting global dynamic. In the face of new challenges and reevaluation of American might, Zakaria proposes that the United States adopt a radically different politics than that of Great Britain at the end of the 19th Century. After the Boer War, Britain did everything to preserve its global political pre-eminence, helped along by America’s patience and isolationism. Britain succeeded for a while, but did not ultimately know to halt its inexorable economic decline. The wonder for Zakaria is not that the British Empire went into decline after economically dominating the world (for a short time in fact, only about two decades), but that it was able to maintain its leading global influence as long as it did after the decline. He notes Churchill’s presence at Yalta as an example of this, since the summit was in reality an American-Soviet meeting more than it was a meeting of the Big Three. But the Britain of yesteryear it is not today’s United States. Despite its own weaknesses (debt, etc.) and its engagement in Iraq, the American economy (unlike Britain’s at the turn of the 20th Century) remains prodigiously powerful and creative, especially in future technologies like nanotechnology and biotechnology. The U.S. also disposes of a secret weapon, at least vis-à-vis Europe – that is, thanks to immigration and to its dynamic demography, the war in Iraq will not be America’s Boer War. According to the author, what is not working in the U.S. right now is centered on its politics. Beyond an imperative need to strengthen access to its schools and fortify its academic infrastructures, the U.S. must also look to the world beyond its borders and learn foreign languages and cultures. Zakaria euphemistically laments the fact that “Americans have never developed the ability to move into other peoples’ worlds.” It is now time to do this. In the face of this new world in which all countries are either entering or returning to the global game, American politics has lost its edge and become highly dysfunctional for the fourth time since 1945. Zakaria cites the end of the 1950s, the start of the 1970s, and the mid-1980s as the three other instances. Despite its great strengths, Zakaria criticizes the American political process for becoming marked by “do-nothing politics” and for having lost its nuance for complex problem solving. Zakaria illustrates the troubling American political climate with his formula to explain Bush’s foreign policy, which is as simple as the policy itself: “Unipolarity + 9/11 + Afghanistan = Unilateralism and Iraq.” Americans must necessarily leave their cocoons and embrace a new politics. But which would be a better alternative? Zakaria insists the approach must be the contrary of the politics selected decades ago by Great Britain, and different from George Bush’s approach today that has actually coalesced rather than dissolved opposition. A better approach would be to look to Bismarck, who knew at the end of the 19th Century to transform a recently unified Germany into Europe’s honest broker and mediator, the “hub” of the European system. At this stage, America’s goal should be the same on a global scale – to have relations with other countries that are stronger than the ones they each have amongst themselves, to be “the chairman of the board of the international system.” “Be Bismarck, not Britain,” he summarizes. This idea has been in circulation as early as 1991, when James Baker, the Secretary of State for the first President Bush, described a “hub and spoke system” in which each country must pass through the United States to reach its destination. I spoke myself of a bicycle wheel in which the United States was the hub and all other countries were the spokes. According to Zakaria, the U.S. possesses an immense advantage in garnering global support to repaint itself in this role – almost every country in the world still prefers the U.S.’s global leadership to the hegemony of a nearby regional giant. For example, Asian nations do not want a Chinese hegemony, etc. Clearly, the “hub and spoke” notion supposes that the U.S. would also begin to carry itself less like a dominating superpower by taking greater interest in consulting others, in cooperating, and in reinforcing their coalition-building capacity. A reading of *The Post-American World* permits the reader to understand how and why Zakaria radically contradicts the worldview, methods, and objectives of the outgoing Bush Administration. But we must not delay action any further because the cause is well-heard, and the future is both near and demanding. Consequently, Fareed Zakaria offers the next American administration some tips for acting in the coming world, but Europeans would do well to carefully consider them, too.

1. Choose. To have a policy towards China and Russia that is clearer and more functional than the current U.S. policy towards Iran, for example, it will be important to choose between regime change and political change.
2. Like Roosevelt, build large mechanisms and institutions, and develop rules, without letting America lock itself into a narrow vision of its own interests.
3. Pursue and promote an ad hoc world order, or à la carte multilateralism. Zakaria foresees that in order to truly encourage this type of system, America will have to negotiate and make compromises with others.
4. Consider how new subversive political forces, which are difficult to defeat using classic techniques, have increasingly harnessed asymmetry as a resource, and deduce smarter policies from this awareness. On the domestic front, the U.S. needs to reassure and utilize American Muslims instead of suspecting and discouraging them.
5. Legitimacy. Recall that legitimacy provides power, and not the inverse. Also, legitimacy depends closely on how each people sees its own history.
6. Finally, and mostly, free itself from fear. Zakaria states ironically, “America has become a nation eroded by anxiety, by fear of terrorists and rogue states, Muslims, Mexicans, foreign companies, free trade, immigrants, international organizations.” Paradoxically, “the most powerful nation in the history of the world feels under siege by forces beyond its control.” Otherwise, Zakaria highlights that President Bush is not the only president to have employed the rhetoric of fear. In 1933, Franklin Roosevelt famously stated: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” It is noteworthy that an American would make these reflections, but it is not an accident that Zakaria, an Indian Muslim who became American, remained acutely aware of the existence, and differences, of the rest of the world, much like Barack Obama would undoubtedly be. Zakaria is, again, recognizant of the extraordinary welcome he received from American society upon arriving in 1982, and he reminds us that this very ability to welcome is a powerful antidote to the bad American politics that sometimes taken the low road. Of course, America’s focus will always be to preserve its vital national interests and leadership. But the key is to do so intelligently in a so-called Bismarcko-Rooseveltian manner, while wielding what Professor Joseph Nye calls “smart power.” But, ultimately, who would be surprised by such a change of course? Certainly some Europeans might rue that “Europe” as such could be missing from this overall reconsideration of method. Should they be left out, however, Europeans would have nobody but themselves to blame. If America moves in this new direction after the next election, if it becomes realist again and ambitious for the world, then the eight passing years will have been the last spasm of a hyperpower that sought to dominate without integrating itself or compromising, of a hyperpower wedded to an obsolete course of action. Europeans, with their recklessly hazy and sterile worldview, and others, even in France, who were seduced by Bush’s Manichaeism and neo-conservatism, would do well to draw inspiration from Zakaria’s keen reflections so that they do not miss the boat in 2009.



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