

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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PAUL KENNEDY'S *THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GREAT POWERS:
ECONOMIC CHANGE AND MILITARY CONFLICT FROM 1500 TO 2000*¹

Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* associates the success or failure of the so-called Great Powers in the international system to their ability to maintain a powerful and technologically relevant military through sustained economic growth. Kennedy chronologically surveys an incredible span of time from roughly 1500 to the close of the twentieth century. In this respect, Kennedy's work is similar in scope to Jacques Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present*, although it is quite different in content and method. Perhaps a better comparison is to be made between *Rise and Fall* and Rene Albrecht-Carrie's *A Diplomatic History of Europe Since the Congress of Vienna*, since both draw heavily from the history of political relationships among the leading nations of Europe. Even so, *Rise and Fall* belongs in its own category as a sweeping Eurocentric interpretation of global geopolitical trends.

Kennedy sets out to cover a lot of material: "This is a book about national and international power in the 'modern'—that is, post-Renaissance—period. It seeks to trace and to explain how the various Great Powers have risen and fallen, relative to each other, over the five centuries since the formation of the 'new monarchies' of western Europe and the beginnings of the transoceanic, global system of states" (xv). Because of this massive quantity of material, the author appears unsure of what he wants to do specifically. He says that "it is not strictly a book

¹New York, NY: Random House, 1987. With Tables, Charts, Maps, Notes, and Index in 677 Pages.

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about military history . . . it is not, at least directly, a work of economic history” (xv). But he does want to convey the “interaction between economics and strategy” in a context of change or how each of the Great Powers have fared “relative to the other leading nations” (xv). Using this method, which causes Kennedy to fluctuate often between description and interpretation (*ad nauseam* for readers who like consistent readability), Kennedy hopes to show the “very clear connection *in the long run* between an individual Great Power’s economic rise and fall and its growth and decline as an important military power (or world empire)” (xxii). Further, he believes that “there is a very strong correlation between the eventual outcome of the *major coalition wars* for European or global mastery, and the amount of productive resources mobilized by each side” (xxiii-xxiv). Finally, he wishes to outline “what the implications of today’s economic and technological trends might be for the current balance of power” (xxiv). In this respect, it seems as if the author wants to make an advisory statement to the world’s leaders in “Washington, Moscow, Tokyo, Peking, and the various European capitals” (540).

Rise and Fall generally argues very little that is new or unrecognized. In fact, it is hard to avoid the judgment that Kennedy’s thesis is so axiomatic as to make his book mundane. Aside from repeated qualifications to his argument (also *ad nauseam*; see xxi-xxii), the author suggests “a causal relationship between the shifts which have occurred over time in the general economic and productive balances and the position occupied by individual Powers in the international system” (xxii). Such “a causal relationship” even cursory students of history would accept as valid. But Kennedy intends to show the connection of this reality to today’s situation. He writes:

The move in trade flows from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and northwestern Europe from the sixteenth century onward, or the redistribution in the shares of world manufacturing output away from western Europe in the decades after 1890, are good examples here. In both cases, the economic shifts heralded the rise of new Great Powers which would one day have a decisive impact upon the military / territorial order. This is why the move in global productive balances toward the “Pacific rim” which has taken place over the past few decades cannot be of interest merely to economists alone (xxii).

This version of broad global shifts most likely would go unchallenged by economists, historians, and politicians. But as the author quickly discovered, the details of this general pattern seemed hidden and rather striking. So much so that, once he realized “there was no study available which told the story of the shifts that occurred in the economic and strategical power balances” and “the story itself had simply suffered from neglect,” he decided to expand his work to explain this critical correlation (xxv).

To his credit, Kennedy shows each Great Power’s economic and technological capability and its military prowess side by side. But, as he knows, it is difficult and probably impossible to show how or why one affects the other. The problem is that other factors such as diplomacy, military leadership, geography, and resources (both human and materiel) influence the rise and fall of nations. As a result, Kennedy’s work contains several weaknesses.

First, the primary model for *Rise and Fall* is poorly defined and too general. Kennedy derives his Eurocentric characterization of “Great Powers” from the diplomatic and political circles of the Powers themselves. He does not define “Great Power” until the end of the book where he quotes from M. Wight’s *Power Politics*: “To be a Great Power—by definition, a state capable of holding its own against any other nation—demands a flourishing economic base” (539).

But what does it mean for a state to “hold its own” against other nations? On this critical point, Kennedy remains rather vague.²

Second, Kennedy’s Great Power model obscures important chronological shifts in each country’s development. Kennedy does emphasize the relative strength of each nation’s status in relation to other Great Powers. But by adhering to one label for all historic periods, he fails to explicate sufficiently the global evolutions that he anxiously wants to portray. His work consequently suffers from an anachronistic use of nineteenth-century language and ideology.³ A less ambiguous model that does not need to be complex and confusing would show each nation’s historic progress and would be helpful. For example, Max Boot divides United States history

²In one succinct paragraph, the *Oxford Dictionary of World History*, ed. Alan Isaacs, et al. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 252, defines the modern Eurocentric Great Power system: “[A] great power [is] a state seen as playing a major role in international politics. A great power possesses economic, diplomatic, and military strength and influence, and its interests extend beyond its own borders. The term is usually associated with the emergence of Austria, Russia, Prussia, France, and Great Britain as great powers in Europe after the Congress of Vienna in 1815; they worked together under a loose agreement known as the Concert of Europe. After World War I, the USA grew in importance, while after World War II, the USA and the Soviet Union, through their industrial strength, global influence, and nuclear capabilities, attained the status of ‘superpowers’, and world events become dominated by bipolarity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the only superpower is the USA, though China’s growing economic and military strength may assure it superpower status in the next few years. The UK and France have declined from their former great power status, although they are still recognized by the United Nations Organization, together with the USA, Russia, and China, as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council with power of veto. The number of great powers at any time is considered a key feature of the international system, important in determining the level and nature of war.”

³Contrast Norman Davies’s description of Europe as “Dynamo: Powerhouse of the World” but only for the years 1815-1914, in *Europe: A History* (reprint edition; London, UK: Pimlico, 1997), 759-896.

into three distinct periods: (1) commercial power (late 1700s to the 1890s); (2) great power (1898-1941); and (3) superpower (1941-present).⁴ This simple model illustrates what Kennedy's model obscures—historic perspective, world integration, and current status. Until the late nineteenth-century, the United States was not a Great Power, but it was a commercial power. Today, the United States is not a Great Power; it is a superpower.⁵ Simplicity probably weakens even Boot's model, but it represents an improvement over Kennedy's.

Third, Kennedy's Great Power perspective causes him to misconstrue the complex nature of other countries and empires, to neglect technological and military improvements that originated outside the European continent, and to overrate or underrate the military adeptness of a country solely on economic factors. Kennedy's Eurocentric viewpoint and his attachment to economic causation are obvious liabilities that lead him to falsify his thesis through various stipulations. For example, the judgment of the Ottoman Empire and the Ming Dynasty as systems that "increasingly suffered from some of the defects of being centralized, despotic, and severely orthodox in [their] attitude[s] toward initiative, dissent, and commerce" (11) betrays over simplification of both Turkish and Oriental worlds. Further, the idea that "an idiot sultan

⁴*The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York, NY: Basic, 2002), xvii-xx.

⁵*The Oxford Companion to United States History*, ed. Paul S. Boyer (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001) contains no entry for "great power" but does discuss the relation of the United States to other nations with relevant historic terminology in a lengthy "Foreign Relations" article (pp. 277-287). The model of "great power" hardly is mentioned, presumably because it is just too vague for any intelligible discussion.

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could paralyze the Ottoman Empire in the way that a pope or Holy Roman emperor could never do for all Europe” (12) is quite untrue. Seldom could the ruling Sultan automatically control all the peoples under his jurisdiction. And certain popes and emperors of “idiot” stature (in the eyes of their opponents) may have accomplished just that (i.e., Ferdinand II, Pius IX). Statements like the above unfortunately reveal the extent of Kennedy’s Eurocentric blinders.⁶

Although beyond the author’s chronological purview, *Rise and Fall* omits post-classical Oriental innovations like the iron stirrup, better methods of breeding horses, and the composite bow which together altered mounted archery tactics. These changes equaled what “some historians have likened to a post-classical version of the tank.”⁷ The important point is that eastern creativity influenced the foundation upon which western military technicians built significant military refinements. Clearly, this is true of gunpowder weapons.

Gunpowder had been known in China since at least the ninth century, [but] it was not until the fifteenth century that gunpowder weapons came into general use. One reason for the delay was the unreliability of propellants. Until the 1420 discovery of the process of “corning” (rolling and dampening) gunpowder, the substance’s extreme volatility made it as much a danger to the user as the intended victim.

. . . Europe excelled in the construction of guns. On the economic level, Europe’s free enterprise and banking systems provided financial incentives and relative freedom to gunsmiths to innovate. The ability of Europeans to cast large church bells ironically converted into an ability to cast guns. . . . Furthermore, the near-constant nature of

⁶Contrast the work of Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York, NY: Norton, 2001).

⁷Michael S. Neiberg, *Warfare in World History*, Themes in World History, edited by Peter N. Stearns (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 26.

European warfare gave princes an incentive to fund research and entrepreneurs a ready market for new weapons systems.⁸

Indeed, *Rise and Fall* credits the European side of this development, but any fair synthesis of global interactions also would acknowledge without prejudice the benefits reaped by westerners from the Orient.

Above all, Kennedy's Eurocentric viewpoint and his general thesis that economic might makes military might cannot explain satisfactorily the militarily disinterested Japanese, the enigmatic Soviets, and especially the technologically backward and economically deprived Vietnamese. A people of mediocre pecuniary power during the 1930s and 1940s, the rabidly militant Japanese easily subdued the countries of the Far East, extended their empire into China, Russia, and Southeast Asia, and rivaled the Allies in the Pacific for three and one-half long years. Ironically, these same Japanese, who now wield considerable economic power as a global financial giant, eschew military power as if it were some sort of plague. As Kennedy notes, the explosion of atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945 left an indelibly negative imprint on the Japanese. Also, for over five decades, Japan has profited from the military presence of the United States in the region. But these facts do little to alter what, according to Kennedy's strict thesis, would be an inexplicable evolution in Japan's global involvement.

Similarly, the Soviet situation does not correspond exactly to Kennedy's general argument. The Soviets hardly operated as a world financial powerhouse at any time from 1922

⁸Ibid., 39.

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until Kennedy's time of writing in 1987 when they were facing financial collapse. But through perseverance, power of numbers in both equipment and personnel, strategic positioning, and sheer nerve through ideology and propaganda, they bested the Nazi juggernaut and held their own against an American and European nuclear threat. Both Nazi Germany and the NATO alliance had a superior economy, more sophisticated technology, and better skills. Plainly, other things contributed to Soviet military success and standoff during the twentieth-century. The Russians of course benefitted from their cooperation with the Allies against Nazi Germany. But they stood alone against the NATO countries during the Cold War. In spite of clear disadvantages, the Soviets proved resilient. To account for this, Kennedy can only resort to more qualification of his thesis.

Maybe the biggest flaw in *Rise and Fall* is its lack of credibility on the Vietnam War. A technologically inferior country with few monetary resources unequivocally bested a technologically superior superpower with enormous economic means *and* potential. Kennedy at least honestly states that the Vietnam War is a "sobering reminder that a vast superiority in military hardware and economic productivity will not always and automatically translate into military *effectiveness*" (405). But Kennedy quibbles when he writes, "That does not undermine the thrust of the present book, which has stressed the importance of economics and technology in large-scale, protracted (and usually coalition) wars between the Great Powers when each combatant has been equally committed to victory. . . . This was *not* a war in which those superiorities could be made properly effective" (405). Once again, Kennedy qualifies his thesis

when the data does not conform. But to do so he has to make some misstatements. For example, he maintains that the United States could not occupy the Ho Chi Minh Trail through neutral Laos, could not intercept Russian supply vessels destined for Haiphong harbor, and could not fight in ways that suited its real military strengths. The truth is that the United States chose not to do these things, although it could be argued that the military fought very much, in certain respects, according to its strengths.⁹ The real test, as Kennedy admits, became the willingness “to sacrifice everything for victory” (406), a cost accepted by the North Vietnamese but not by the American public or its policymakers.

More problematic, though, is Kennedy’s contention that only conflicts between Great Powers can measure the effectiveness of military prowess in the international arena. Conversely, Max Boot’s recent work, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*, shows persuasively how the United States acquired and guarded its international status via prosecution of what might be called “small” or “low intensity” conflicts. Kennedy also does little to show the triangular but volatile alignment of North Vietnam with both China and Russia as a powerful antithesis to America’s military effectiveness. This is all the more surprising, since Kennedy seems intrigued by post-World War II alliance diplomacy and its military consequences. This omission likewise betrays Kennedy’s Eurocentric vantage point.

⁹See Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1999).

To conclude, Kennedy judges Russia as beset by contradictions and the United States as impeded by relative decline on the basis of myths like “the very unstructured, laissez-faire nature of American society” and “the Soviet Union’s difficulties . . . [as] a rigid and *dirigiste* power” (514). As part of his vision for present and future, he heralds the emergence of new global powers from the Far East—China and Japan. The axis assuredly has shifted away from Europe, so to be able to include a European “nation” in world affairs the Great Powers of Britain, France, and Germany now become the Great Power of the European Economic Community that Kennedy seriously analyzes in its collective entity. This shift in paradigm is necessary for Kennedy to protect his thesis. The shift remains relevant historically, but it does not fit well with his anachronistic model of “Great Powers.”

To a large extent, *Rise and Fall* reveals substantial learning and considerable synthesis of economics and military history. Yet the work too often reads like a stodgy reference book on international diplomacy and fiscal policy.¹⁰ Kennedy also has trouble sticking to his main thesis, and this more than anything else makes his argument less credible.

¹⁰A reader in Monterey, California says: “Kennedy’s book is a product of the time in was written. In the mid-80’s the topic of the day, primarily put forth by the more intelligent neo-liberals, was defense spending and its relation to economic growth. More defense spending was supposed to lead to less economic growth. The idea informed many of the chapters in Kennedy’s book.” “Books: The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers” at: www.amazon.com; accessed 26 January 2003.