

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Cox, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2022, 204 pp.

With an unprecedented position in the history of international relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States and its power preoccupied pundits and historians alike. In the last 30 years, they tried to analyse the sources of American power, its limits, and even its possible decline. The multiple crises that put American hegemony to the test after the Cold War created an ongoing debate between those with a declinist position, who foresee the inevitability demise of American power, and those with an optimistic view, who continue to believe in the dominance of U.S. global leadership.

In his latest book, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, Michael Cox traces America's actions and behaviour in the international arena from the end of the Cold War to the dawn of Joe Biden's presidency. Emeritus Professor of International Relations Michael Cox spent his entire academic career writing about the most pressing issues facing the world scene, from the relations between the superpowers during the final years of the Cold War to U.S. foreign policy and the Troubles from Northern Ireland. Cox is the author and editor of several books, including *Superpowers at the Crossroads* (1990); *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War: superpower without a mission* (1995); *A Farewell to Arms: from long*

war to long peace in Northern Ireland (2000); *Soft power and US foreign policy: theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives* (2009). In the *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, Cox proceeded with his tradition of studying the current foreign policy challenges and put together a collection of essays that explore American foreign policy as it is searching for purpose in increasingly uncertain times.

Trying to explain why, despite the United States' great power, successive presidents since Bill Clinton have found the world so difficult to manage, Michael Cox examines the major turning points from the post-Cold War history that questioned the invincibility of American power. Divided into five parts, the book analyses how presidents such as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden addressed the many challenges that emerged during their presidential tenures.

Concisely, the author investigates the critical junctures that had an impact on the United States' position in the world: America's unipolar moment after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008, the emergence of revisionist powers like China and Russia and their "axis of convenience," the crisis of globalization and the rise of populism. Using various sources to assess the strategies and miscalculations that the U.S. leaders made, Cox underlines the role of the individual in foreign policy decision-making, the ideological thinking of every U.S. President making a difference in how American power was projected around the world.

Beginning the historical narrative with the Wilsonian liberal Bill Clinton, the author places the reader into the post-communist era when the U.S. had to rethink its grand strategy. Elected President at a moment of both triumph and

uncertainty for America and the world, Bill Clinton acknowledged that his mission was to renew the U.S. leadership. In a more globalized world, Washington needed a policy that would lead to international stability and global prosperity. Therefore, he started to expand the U.S. economy in world trade, promote democracy, and facilitate a Western-style transition in post-communist Russia. However, as Michael Cox shows in his book, Clinton's strategies raised some problems. His "geo-economics" caused a trade deficit and an uncritical attitude towards globalization. The democracy promotion revealed the limits of U.S. influence and collided with other American interests, and his approach toward Russia failed to secure a liberal democracy there.

Despite these missteps, America had never felt so secure. However, this sense of security faded away with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Bringing the concepts of empire and imperialism to his analysis, Cox argues why the U.S. is an empire and how President George W. Bush adopted an imperialist doctrine after 9/11. The "war on terror" transformed America into a more assertive power, with a propensity to take unilateral action when it considers necessary.

In 2008, Washington struggled with a reputational crisis and a financial crash. Debates about a possible post-American world began to show up as a power distribution unfolded on the international scene. The rise of China began to challenge American global leadership increasingly. Assuming office in this context, Barack Obama put forward a strategy of engagement with both allies and adversaries. He understood that American power was limited and could no longer act as the "world's policeman." Instead, the U.S. had to rely on "smart power" to reassert its global influence. His internationalist view yielded several achievements during his administration, including the New START Treaty, the

Iran nuclear agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Paris Climate Agreement. Nevertheless, his setbacks in Libya and Syria, the weakening of the transatlantic partnership, and the resurgence of an aggressive Russia after he sought to reset the relations between Washington and Moscow left a mixed legacy.

Trying to discover what brought Donald Trump to the White House, Michael Cox reviews the wave of populism that swept Europe and the U.S. in 2016 and the narratives behind this concept. He suggests that “populism was and is very much an expression in the West of a sense of powerlessness of ordinary citizens and the Western leaders”¹. Promising to restore control to the people and to make “America great again,” Donald Trump won the presidential elections and triggered a “political earthquake” worldwide. By exploiting the many divisions in American society and creating a sense of chaos, Trump accelerated the academic and policy debates about the U.S. decline.

The book's last part also shows President Joe Biden's first foreign policy decisions after he took office. Biden re-engaged with global organizations and allies, willing to show that the U.S. is prepared to lead again. Although the apparent return to liberal internationalism was a relief for America's traditional allies after the more isolationist turn during the Trump administration, the continuing domestic deep divide put U.S. power in danger.

More of an optimist regarding the future of the U.S. position in the world, Michael Cox argues in his book that for all the crises that faced the American power in the last decades, Washington remained the only titan on the international scene because of its economic, military, and diplomatic advantages.

¹ Michael Cox, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2022, p. 133

Nonetheless, the profound polarization within the U.S. could imperil its grand strategy.

Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden is a valuable contribution to U.S. foreign policy studies. Highlighting the intersection between domestic and foreign policy and how American power evolved with every presidential administration, Michael Cox provides the readers with a balanced assessment of the United States' role in the world.

Ștefania-Teodora Cocor