

# The Distant Horizon

By Paul Kennedy

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*A Splendid Exchange: How Trade Shaped the World*. William J. Bernstein. Atlantic Monthly, 2008, 384-30

Summary: William Bernstein's *A Splendid Exchange*, Strobe Talbott's *The Great Experiment*, and Amy Chua's *Day of Empire* take up the challenge of 'Big History' -- and in the process shed light on the real choices policymakers face.

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Twenty years ago, the distinguished economic historian David Landes wrote an article in *The New Republic* about what he called "Big History." It was a review of William McNeill's extraordinary *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society Since A.D. 1000* and of my own more modest work *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. By the term "Big History," he did not have in mind such multivolume works as Arnold Toynbee's 12-volume *A Study of History*, or Samuel Morison's 15-volume *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, or Joseph Needham's impossible to count how many volumes of *Science and Civilisation in China*. Nor did Landes mean to imply by the use of "big" that this mode of inquiry was superior to that of the history-from-below school that had emerged, spectacularly, in the 1960s. He had no quarrel with accounts of life in Provençal villages, of northern Italian millers, or of trade unionists in Lancashire. He was simply calling readers' attention to a different category or, if you like, a different level of historical writing.

What Landes had in mind were single-volume books whose authors took hold of a vast topic and then wrestled it to the ground, comprehended it, and explained it to readers -- in sum, gave it historical sense. This creative intellectual grappling with big themes described, of course, Landes' own pedagogic journey, a career in which the subjects attempted became bolder and grander: from *Bankers and Pashas: International Finance and Economic Imperialism in Egypt* to *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe From 1750 to the Present* and *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*.

Landes' is a hard act to follow, and most of us historians have been happy to sail, at some distance, in his wake. Three recent books, however, have taken up the challenge of Big History: William Bernstein's *A Splendid Exchange*, Strobe Talbott's *The Great Experiment*, and Amy Chua's *Day of Empire*. All are significant contributions, and one, Chua's, has a chance of becoming a classic. They are ambitious, heavily supported by wide reading and many notes, and willing to take intellectual risks. None resembles anything like a history textbook, and all are better read -- better appreciated and better criticized -- by someone with a good background in world history. Still, that should not deter general readers interested in humankind's larger story. Indeed, such readers should be intrigued by these very different attempts to make sense of the broad sweep of history.

In an age of sound bites and the awful daily vision of human beings chattering into their cell phones as they hustle down the street, it is deeply satisfying that a small number of people still take the time to ponder and make connections between events over centuries. Landes was right: there will always be a place for books such as these, for they fulfill a basic human instinct to impose some order on the past.

## RISE AND FALL

Bernstein's superb history of world trade concentrates heavily on the premodern (that is, pre-steam-engine) age. Bernstein published his impressive *The Birth of Plenty: How the Prosperity of the Modern World Was Created* just a few years ago, and this new study stands squarely on the shoulders of that work -- and then rises to new heights. *A Splendid Exchange* is a work of which Adam Smith and Max Weber would have approved. And it is all

the more interesting because it is written by someone who is deeply knowledgeable about and active in the financial world yet finds the time to write graceful and insightful history with a delicate display of scholarship that conceals a vast erudition. What really marks Bernstein out is his talent in understanding, and then explaining, international commercial linkages.

*A Splendid Exchange* is a history of material goods that, in their relevant centuries, were deemed extremely desirable by societies that did not possess them -- tin, grain, iron, spices, textiles, steam engines, armaments, rubber, oil -- of the merchants and companies that moved those goods to market, and, by extension, of the financial networks that sustained these trades. This is not simply, however, a catalog of material culture; if it were, Bernstein's subtitle about shaping the world would make no sense. The real point, although perhaps Bernstein does not make it strongly enough, is the interaction of commerce and finance with politics and strategy. The cities of Antwerp and Amsterdam around 1600, for example, were not just places where the North Sea herring trade and the English wool trade met up, profitably, with the long-range banking techniques of Lombardy. They, and their environs, were also the locations for the largest shipbuilding industry in the world at that time; for a flourishing armaments trade; and for a lively pamphlet press that had taken advantage of the Gutenberg revolution to disseminate all manner of ideas about free thought, free religion (that is, Protestantism), and the freedom of international trade (as in the writings of the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius). These factors, along with the geography of the region, gave the Low Countries the ability reach out across the oceans and exert political and social power for centuries.

The chronological range of Bernstein's book is staggering, although unevenly spread, spanning from ancient Sumer to the present day. Bernstein juggles this saga of human endeavor (and the massive bibliography of works he has himself consumed) with a deft use of specific examples and anecdotes that illustrate his larger narrative. Take, for example, the lively account of the rise of the lucrative coffee trade, from a single-source commodity grown and harvested in Arabia Felix (today part of Yemen) to a product that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had established a global demand, with consumers residing in places as far afield as Indonesia and the East End of London; a widening plantation base in Africa, Asia, and South America; and some ferociously competitive trading networks. Consider, also, Bernstein's skillfully presented vignettes of important theorists of and pundits on free trade -- Robert Heilbroner's "worldly philosophers." A discussion of the economist David Ricardo, for example, allows Bernstein to insert a clear and simple explanation of the tricky principle of comparative advantage.

Bernstein's fine book ends far too fast. Unlike most other large histories, in which the narrative swells as it moves toward the contemporary world, *A Splendid Exchange* shrinks rapidly from 1900 onward. Bernstein is clearly happiest with his preindustrial merchants and dealers, with silk routes and sugar islands. That is great, but one wishes he had brought such scrutiny in like proportion to the tumultuous past century of international commerce. A few last pages on "the battle of Seattle," about the riots at a meeting of the World Trade Organization in 1999, and on today's red-hot debate over the merits or demerits of globalization is not enough.

Talbott's *The Great Experiment* has a very different teleology -- a good half of it deals with the years after 1945 -- yet is equally interesting and enjoyable to read. This book was, I suspect, a fairly risky enterprise for Talbott, a former deputy secretary of state who now heads the Brookings Institution. Not only does it take him much further back in time than do any of his works on the Soviet Union, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, or the end of the Cold War, but he also ventures to give us an unusual hybrid of a book, partly a sweeping history of what might be termed "the rise of the West," partly a personal account of the transformations that have occurred in international affairs over the past 30 years or so. The danger here is that reviewers will find this tome to be neither fish nor fowl and see it as a rather self-indulgent account of humankind's progress from King Nebuchadnezzar II to life beyond the current Bush presidency -- which indeed it is, since the language ranges from the obvious/historical ("Napoleon Bonaparte understood the power of ideas and violence when they were combined") to the personal/anecdotal ("During one of my trips to New York shortly afterward, Albright and I went out to dinner [Chinese, I recall] and . . ."). Sometimes it reminded me of eighteenth-century books with titles like *A History of All the Worlde With Special Reference to Mine Own Times, and Thoughts Upon the Future*.

Yet *The Great Experiment* is valuable precisely because it offers a current public intellectual and policy practitioner's view of the centuries-old caravan of human progress, with its mixture of disasters and triumphs. Like a spotlight hitting a jagged hillside, it illuminates only the most prominent aspects. But in that selectivity

lies the book's strength, and in its audacious sweep lies its claim to be included in this discussion of Big History. Talbott's spotlight illuminates Cicero's pleadings for a republic rather than an empire and casts a nice light on the contrast between Thomas Hobbes' notion of "perpetual war" and Immanuel Kant's argument for "perpetual peace." The book also has nifty vignettes on Woodrow Wilson's failures and Harry Truman's successes at postwar settlements and an intriguing commentary on Dwight Eisenhower and Dag Hammarskjöld's joint diplomacy to end the 1956 Suez crisis -- Eisenhower out of *raison d'état* concerns, Hammarskjöld out of an abiding wish to establish a universal rule of law. It is also studded with bad guys, with conquerors and mass murderers, many of whom dreamed of establishing their own "world order." But even if these characters may have slowed down, or even temporarily checked, the broader Tennysonian advance toward a parliament of man, they never succeeded in reversing the advance toward global civil society.

The Great Experiment is, all in all, a Whiggish tome in modern guise, and worth a serious read on that score alone. Even if in its final few pages he worries about the twin, unprecedented threats to humankind of nuclear conflagration and catastrophic climate change, Talbott asserts both the possibility and the imperative to head off such dangers and improve the world: "In taking the steps necessary for survival, we will give ourselves the chance of taking global governance to a higher and more promising level." Perhaps, but Talbott is making a heavy investment in the faith that today's leaders and publics possess far greater wisdom than those of the past.

### THE TOLERANT HEGEMON

The biggest of these Big Histories is Chua's Day of Empire. Indeed, it has an almost Toynbeean sweep, although without Toynbee's numbing detail (or his religiose conclusions). Persia, Rome, the Tang dynasty, the Mongols, medieval Spain, the Dutch republic, the Ottomans and the Moguls, the British, the Axis powers, and, finally, the Americans -- they are all here. Moreover, they are all here in equal measure, that is, with virtually the same amount of detail and care and space given to each historical case, so that the book is neither front-heavy (like Bernstein's) nor back-heavy (like Talbott's). And although it does not use many non-English-language sources, the endnotes are a wonderful guide and encouragement to further reading.

The other great strength of Chua's book is that it has a distinctive thesis, a clear argument of the sort that Landes so liked. The thesis is about "the toleration of empires": the most powerful nation at any given moment in history has been more tolerant of other peoples and ethnic and religious minorities than its competitors. The idea, as Chua admits, seems absurd at first reading: Do not great empires (or hyperpowers, her preferred category) achieve their greatness by conquest and ransacking, by eliminating local elites, by the intimidating presence of armies of occupation? Yes, to be sure -- omelettes are made by breaking eggs, and empires are initially established by sheer military force. But Chua's focus is more interesting. How, once established, do empires maintain themselves, generation after generation and, in many cases, for centuries?

The answer is by co-optation, or, to use a nicer word, toleration. Useful subjects (and one has to stress in equal measure "useful" and "subjects") were given a place within the imperial system, and not simply a demeaning, slavish place but one that offered advantage and advancement. The great historians of the late Victorian empire Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher had already identified this phenomenon some four decades ago when they wrote of the role of "collaborators" in that amazing worldwide system. In his later years, Robinson turned his attention to the collaboration between the ruling system and those socioeconomic groups that flourished below, but he never converted it into a fully rounded work or produced a recognizable thesis.

Chua has done just that, with verve and aplomb. And as soon as one gets into the text, the chief argument is convincing: for an empire, co-optation is better than slaughter. The Romans were masters of this stratagem of recognizing native talent and turning it to their advantage. So were the Ottomans -- how long would that hyperpower have lasted, one wonders, without the Jewish and Armenian traders and the Hungarian gun makers? The more inclusive the empire, the stronger it was. It is no coincidence, for example, that the British Empire was at its zenith when a brilliant, eccentric Jew called Benjamin Disraeli was its prime minister and an Indian radical nationalist named Dadabhai Naoroji was elected member of Parliament for Central Finsbury (ironically, Margaret Thatcher's later constituency). By contrast, it was when racial and ethnic intolerance prevailed -- Chua has a chapter titled "The Rise and Fall of the Axis Powers" -- that the hyperpower doomed itself. In 1984, George Orwell projected the horrific vision of a jackbooted conqueror stomping on a victim's face forever. What Chua is saying is that vicious intolerance can never last. A kinder, gentler imperialism, however, can endure for centuries.

The most difficult and most tortuous chapter of this fine book is, inevitably, the last: it is on the present and future of the American hyperpower and its truly weird combination of a global reach and global physical footprint (today the U.S. military has a presence, large or small, in about 100 countries worldwide) and a firm refusal to take formal juridical control of distant lands, as seemed so natural to the Romans, the Ottomans, the Spanish, and the British. This combination is not an unmitigated blessing. If anything, it makes the United States' geopolitical juggling act much more difficult. Since the United States will not execute a policy of "conquer and then tolerate," it has to pursue one consisting solely of diplomatic co-optation, of gentle or rough persuasion, and of building "coalitions of the willing."

Readers will not be surprised that Chua finds the White House's policies over the past seven years to have been depressingly lacking. Whether a new leadership can change course she leaves to the future. What is clear, to her, is that political and religious tolerance and cultural understanding matter a lot. This has interesting implications for the nature of international power and the future of U.S. power. The political scientist Joseph Nye has persuasively argued that the United States' efforts to secure its interests abroad are played out on three different, if interconnected, chessboards: those of military power, economic power, and ideological or cultural "soft power."

It is reasonable to argue that the United States' military power, being so massive, will face few direct challenges in the years ahead, even if it will always find it tricky to handle asymmetric threats from terrorists and other nonstate actors. It is also reasonable to suggest that on the international economic chessboard, the United States has now reentered a multipolar world after an unusual half century of its own preeminence; the European Union, Japan, China, India, and perhaps Russia and Brazil can and will all claim a seat at the high table.

But what of the realm of soft power? In the early to mid-1990s, it was generally assumed that the United States possessed lots of it. Now the conventional belief is that Washington has frittered away that advantage due to its flawed foreign policies of the past seven years. The periodic global opinion polls taken by the Pew Research Center, not to mention the White House's low standing among the American people, would support that contention.

Still, if it is any consolation, the thrust of Chua's book is that the United States' current unpopularity worldwide is reversible -- and that the best way to reverse it might be by taking a page out of the playbook of previous hyperpowers. Those empires learned an important lesson: the need for accommodation, cutting deals, and cultivating allies -- and keeping the steel behind the curtain, for use only in emergencies.