

The Advocate

Juliana Geran Pilon

JOSEF JOFFE, *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 2006), 271 pp., \$24.95. Hardcover.

It is big news when a scion of the European media, the publisher-editor of Germany's influential *Die Zeit* newspaper, defends American preeminence. Josef Joffe's *Überpower* stands in stark contrast to the self-flagellation so prevalent among assorted homegrown pundits. The book heralds America's new role as a unique superpower, declaring it an unqualified blessing for the whole world: "By default and self-definition, it is the United States that will have to look out for order beyond borders," writes Joffe. For, unlike previous would-be hegemony, who were mainly bent on conquest, "the United States, self-righteous and assertive as it may be, does not seek to amass real estate." Briefly put, "if the United States is an empire, it is a liberal one—a power that seeks not to grab but to co-opt."

At last, a welcome vote of confidence from the continent whose anti-Americanism has been reaching pathological proportions of late. How refreshing to hear a European say bluntly: "unlike Europe or Japan, No. 1 cannot huddle under the strategic umbrella of another nation. Nor can it live by the postmodern ways of Europe, which faces no strategic chal-

lenge as far as the eye can see. (Neither would Europe be so postmodern if it had to guarantee its own safety.)" *Touché*, as they say *la bas*.

Having emigrated to Germany from Lithuania as a child, Joffe grew up in postwar Berlin, when Westerns and Grace Kelly movies were competing favorably with European productions, and the American Forces Network was luring listeners by broadcasting forbidden rock 'n' roll twice daily. American consumerism was still a thing of the future. "The only true American piece of apparel," reports Joffe, "was a pair of Levi's, prized all the more for being the real thing as opposed to the cheap German knockoffs."

It probably would have happened anyway, but having a recognizably Jewish name on the sexiest democratic garment on the face of the earth was bound to result in a convergence of anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism. And so it did. Joffe outlines the pattern of thinking: "Above all, the United States seeks domination over the rest of the world—which is also the theme of the anti-Jewish *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, recently revived throughout the Arab world, as well as in Japan, among other countries."

To be sure, "anti-isms" of every stripe tell far more about the society that breeds them than they do about the target or victim. Joffe reminds us: "Societies in crisis, as illustrated



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by the torturous encounters with modernity between 1789 and 1945, tend to succumb to anti-ism, whether of the American or Jewish kind." Not to mention both. And alas, they are indeed succumbing, with increasing virulence, as even relatively wealthy Western Europe struggles with stagnant or declining productivity, high unemployment, and low birth rates among native populations, coupled with rapid growth among immigrants, especially Muslims, whom these societies seem unable to absorb with anything even vaguely resembling the efficacy of the American melting pot.

Joffe's discussion of anti-Semitism is key to his thesis, which may be summarized as a defense of modernity against those who attack, with passion that defies all reason, the powerful but manifestly benevolent U.S. behemoth, which is mercifully both willing and able to underwrite world security and prosperity. Unlike previous empires, "the genius of American diplomacy in the golden age was building an order that would advance American interests by serving those of others." The United States, writes Joffe, generously guarantees the security of its allies and clients in the Middle East, from Israel to Saudi Arabia. It does the same in the Pacific, by "subtly balancing" China and Japan. Moreover, "by acting as [the] security lender of... last resort in Europe, America eliminates security competition on a continent that has seen history's worst wars." Indeed, just to twist the knife, he adds a specific example close to home: "after years of hand-wringing on the part of the EU, it was the United States that organized a posse against Serbia."

Which brings us to U.S. militarism. Here again, Joffe parts company with the handwringers and unequivocally stands up for Uncle

Sam: "When violence wracks the Belgrade-Baghdad-Beijing Belt, or when revisionists like Iraq, Iran, or North Korea reach for nuclear weapons, most will be only too happy to call on the Great Organizer. Who else has the will and the wherewithal to do what others cannot achieve on their own?" The rhetorical question indicts all who condemn America without a viable alternative against global annihilation.

This is not to deny that America's "fabulous assets"—economic, military, and cultural—carry their own liability, since "the long shadow of its power instills fear, resentment, and hatred." Addressing these emotions requires effective global communication, for which the United States seems remarkably ill-suited. As surveys amply indicate, the U.S. has not been able to do a very good job of persuading the world of its benign intent.

Not that Joffe is uncritical of American foreign policy, let alone public diplomacy. It is precisely because of his avowed sympathy for the United States that he deplors its mistakes. His assessment of the second Iraq War is a remarkable blend of admiration, compassion, and incredulity. While he commends the United States for having "performed brilliantly in Iraq," he cannot deny that "it has yet to find a swift answer to the 'asymmetric warfare' exploited by Terror International and its Sunni allies." That asymmetry involves not only disparate military tactics but time itself, which ticks quite differently in the West and East—a truism recognized astutely by the late historian of statecraft Adda Bozeman. Joffe's verdict is that, "from a coldly strategic perspective, the intervention in Iraq was a war against the wrong foe at the wrong time. America had targeted the lesser evil."

It was no trivial gamble. Joffe estimates that the price of America's mistake was nothing short of "exorbitant." It involved the loss of legitimacy abroad as well as loss of trust at home, where the electorate became predictably restless as the war dragged on, as could have been anticipated.

But if Joffe accomplishes anything in his book, it is to make a solid case for America's positive contribution to the international community and the consistency of its good intentions. In this regard, he is very much in the minority among policy experts. Why is that, exactly? The answer to that question is far too complex for any one book to tackle. *Überpower* has done a magnificent job of starting the dialogue, and for that reason alone it is indispensable reading. But it will take much soul-searching and painstaking research to figure out why the United States is failing so miserably in presenting its case fairly and truthfully to the world community.



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