

Joffe, Josef: *Überpower. The Imperial Temptation of America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2007. ISBN: 978-0-393-33014-4; 272 S.

Rezension von: Markus Hünemörder, Amerika-Institut, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Josef Joffe, German journalist, co-publisher of the weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT, and foreign policy lecturer at Johns Hopkins and elsewhere, offers a sweeping analysis of current U.S. relations with the world in general and Europe in particular. *Überpower* reads more like a collection of essays than a stringent narrative with a single overarching thesis, but one point is clear from the beginning: American power in the early 21st century is unprecedented, and this preponderance of power is unlikely to diminish anytime soon. What this means to the US and the rest of the world is the main concern of the book.

Chapters one and two, „A World Undone“ and „A Giant Unbound“ reminds readers of just how sweeping the changes wrought by the end of the Cold War were – not a bad idea at a time when students enter college who were born after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Joffe also points out that it was Democrats as well as Republicans who shaped America’s status as the sole remaining superpower. Casting America as „the indispensable nation“ was not a neo-conservative conspiracy: the Clinton administration, too, acted unilaterally when it needed and used military means with the intent to promote peace and democracy. Joffe argues that the United States’ vast power generates its own logic: America, as the most powerful nation in the world, will strive to preserve that status. Other nations, even friends and allies, will always distrust that power and seek to prevent its use against their interests; some may even try to challenge U.S. supremacy in the long term. The question then is how the United States wields its power, what it does to stay at the top, and especially how it deals with friendly nations disturbed by the American behemoth. Despite all recent troubles – and Joffe concedes that especially the Iraq war caused many problems – he insists that by and large American power has been a positive force in the world.

„The Rise of Anti-Americanism“ and „The Rise of Americanism“ are the titles of chapters three and four, respectively. As expected, Joffe sees and attacks a rise of Anti-Americanism in both Euro-

pe and the Islamic world. While he takes care to distinguish between political criticism and Anti-Americanism, his impatience with European Anti-American rhetoric is obvious. Joffe also makes some interesting observations on a process that is often called Americanization: he concludes that the pervasiveness of American popular culture and economic presence made a qualitative and quantitative leap in the 1980s, to the point where it has become ubiquitous in many parts of the world. Somewhat surprisingly, to Joffe this results in the „curse of ‘soft power’. In the affairs of nations, too much hard power ends up breeding not submission, but counterpower, be it by armament or by alliance. Likewise, great ‘soft power’ does not bend hearts but twists minds in resentment and rage“. (p. 107)

„A Giant’s Grand Strategy: Models from History“ (chapter 5) represents Joffe’s attempt to draw lessons from the successes and failures of two historical semi-hegemonic powers: post-Napoleonic Great Britain and Bismarck’s Germany. Britain, of course, followed its famous balance of power strategy to prevent the rise of a competitor strong enough to become a threat; Germany, in turn, sought to form stronger bonds with other powers than they had among themselves, in order to prevent an anti-German coalition. In chapter 6, „A Giant’s Perch“ Joffe points out why the US will remain „first among nonequals“ for the foreseeable future: no one in the Western world (what Joffe calls the „Berlin-Berkeley Belt“) or the non-Western world (the „Baghdad-Beijing Belt“) has the potential to seriously challenge the US economically or militarily anytime soon: not the European Union, not the People’s Republic of China, and certainly not any number of „rogue states“ or terrorist organizations, however threatening they might seem.

Despite (or precisely because of) this perspective of long-term hegemony, in his conclusion „A Giant’s Task,“ Joffe advocates that the US follow an improved mixture of balancing between and bonding with other nations. Basically, Joffe advocates that America should base its long-term strategy on the successes of the post-World War II era, when the United States played the role of the Great Organizer. It provided its allies with security, open markets, and financial liquidity, especially by helping build and committing itself to international institutions from the UN via NATO to the World Bank. Now, even though there is no serious rival

to American power anymore, the US should continue to invest in international institutions and continue to act as the „security lender of last resort.“ The reason „consists of two words: ‘national interest.’ ... It is in the nation’s own best interest not to squander what it amassed in the golden age of American diplomacy. Its largesse is self-serving because it gives the lesser players a powerful reason to bond with the United States and to accord at least grudging acceptance to its towering position. ... As guardian of international security, the United States buys security for itself. Stability is its own reward because it prevents worse: arms races, nuclear proliferation, conflicts that spread.“ (p. 238ff.)

One might be tempted to put Joffe in the same corner as Robert Kagan. Like many analysts of the so-called „realist“ school, Joffe thinks almost exclusively in terms of economic and military power, of nation states making rational decisions based on their objective national interest. Culture and soft power play a negligible role in his analysis. The continents of South America and Africa do not seem to exist. Joffe is concerned with conflicts between states at a time when most wars are civil wars and the most devastating conflicts take place within states. He also deemphasizes the role of individual administrations, instead basing his analysis on the sheer power differential between the U.S. and the rest of the world. However, would the world really look the same if the U.S. presidential election of 2000 had gone the other way? If anything, the administration of George W. Bush seems proof that individual politicians do matter, for better or for worse.

However, Joffe’s contribution to the debate about American strategy has great value. His analysis of American-European relations is sharp-eyed and nuanced in a way that a Robert Kagan or Francis Fukuyama could never provide. His advocacy of a renewed American investment in and commitment to international institutions is almost (Franklin D.) Rooseveltian in nature. Also, Joffe has no use for panicmongering: his calm, reasoned assessment of the strategic challenge China poses or the threat international terrorism represents to the U.S. is highly refreshing and should be required reading (not only) in Washington D.C.

Speaking of required reading: Perhaps the best place for *Überpower* is in the classroom, because Joffe’s writing is so convincing that it is fairly difficult to get a counter-argument in edgewise. Put

this book in front of a typical class of university students who are vaguely to passionately critical of American „imperialism,“ then ask them to dispute Joffe’s theses. After a period of silence you should, hopefully, have a lively debate on your hands.

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