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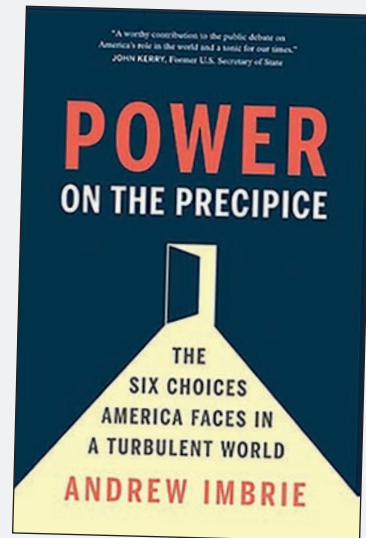
## Power on the Precipice: The Six Choices America Faces in a Turbulent World

By Andrew Imbrie  
Yale University Press, 2020  
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Reviewed by John Campbell

Clearly argued, lucidly written, and well-documented, Andrew Imbrie's *Power on the Precipice* deserves a large audience, not just of foreign affairs specialists but also of those concerned about America's place in the world and how to improve it. Imbrie is ambitious. In 205 printed pages (plus notes), he addresses diplomatic challenges that any Washington administration will face and suggests ways forward. In such a wide-ranging work, area experts will question some of his analysis and conclusions. Nevertheless, Imbrie should be applauded as he seeks to persuade policymakers and voters to think harder about different policy choices and tradeoffs from the optic of the long term rather than the short. Identifying national interests and how to promote them is always a challenge, but especially so in the United States, where the 24-hour news cycle is supreme. Elections every 2 years result in never-ending campaigning, and social media—with all its superficialities—has become a news source of choice for many, if not most.

Since Edward Gibbon's authoritative *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published in the 18th century, in which Gibbon identified the Roman Catholic Church as the Empire's (to him, unattractive) successor, why and how states rise and fall



has been a compelling question not only for politicians and policymakers, but also among many in the general American voting public. Americans now, at least judged by media reportage, share a pervasive sense that their country is in decline, and they are bitterly divided about its causes and consequences. Therefore, Imbrie is tackling a big subject in *Power on the Precipice*—how and why the United States is in decline and what we can do about it. In the rigor of his intellectual approach and the clarity of his prose, Imbrie is following Gibbon. However, unlike other scholars of decline and fall, Imbrie is optimistic. He argues that decline can be managed, even reversed, through the right policy choices, a lesson the ancient Romans—among others—never learned. Using the framework of international relations theory, he addresses the differences between absolute and relative decline and suggests how to minimize the former, best manage the latter, and even revive the once-strong international position of the United States.

Hence his book is not an academic exercise. Its purpose is practical rather than abstract: to serve as a primer on bolstering American leadership at a time when post–World War II international

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arrangements are in disarray and opinion at home is polarized. His stated goal is to provide both a narrative that brings together, in one place, the policy choices and trade-offs facing American leadership and a framework for managing them. His purpose is well served by a writing style free from academic jargon. His book is fully accessible to the American voter as well as academic and foreign policy specialists. His notes are an excellent guide for those who wish to learn more.

Imbrie explicitly draws on his upbringing and his family's experience in the U.S. Foreign Service. Growing up abroad he learned early on to "see ourselves as others see us" and, as former Secretary of State John Kerry advocates, to see others as they see themselves. He draws on his international relations academic background. But perhaps even more influential were his years in the Department of State's Office of Policy and Planning and his work for John Kerry as both a speechwriter and a senior adviser in an out-of-government role. He has an insider's view of the difficult choices and trade-offs that the American political leadership must face. Inevitably, he reflects the values of advocates for a liberal international order; the power of diplomacy is never distant from his narrative nor is his skepticism about the use of force to address issues peripheral to American interests, as in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It is no surprise, therefore, that there are more than echoes of support for the difficult choices made by the Obama administration rather than those made by the George W. Bush and Donald Trump administrations.

Imbrie bundles current policy challenges and dilemmas into "six choices" American leadership faces. Each of the choices is the subject of a separate chapter and together they are the heart of the book. Each chapter concludes with thoughtful lessons learned. The first, "core vs. periphery," is about the need to identify "core" American interests and those that are secondary, and the consequences of failing to do so. He argues that failure to make that

distinction drew the United States into unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq where the issues were peripheral and the costs immense. "Butter vs. guns" addresses the trade-offs between spending on military hardware and broader scientific research and development. Here, he charts the lamentable decline in American scientific and technological innovation. "Allies or autocracy" is a condemnation of the contemporary policy of going alone without allies, and how that choice reduces American power and security. "Persuasion or coercion" makes the case for a diplomatic approach to resolving diplomatic crises. He illustrates his argument effectively by drawing on earlier, successful diplomatic efforts to contain the North Korean nuclear threat. "People power vs. pinstripe rule" explores elite corruption as the driver of insurrection, with extensive reference to contemporary Afghanistan. "Open or closed" is an argument for the reform and preservation of the liberal international order as key to the renewal of the American international position.

Imbrie frames each of these chapters with a vignette about an individual that makes concrete the often-abstract realities he is talking about. So, for example, he introduces us to a young lieutenant who lost both legs in Afghanistan, a consequence of a war that Imbrie argues is peripheral to American interests. The story of a child immigrant from India who is now a civil servant at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (a federal entity largely unknown to the general public) is the point of entry to his discussion of what were once the glories of American innovation and his analysis of its sad decline.

He is also successful in drawing on historical examples of nations that in the past faced some of the same dilemmas as the United States does now. Spain, Hapsburg Austria, and the Ottoman Empire are examples of empires that declined and recovered. Particularly illuminating is how the United Kingdom evolved from the world's preeminent power in the 19th century to managing the shift of its hegemonic

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position to the United States in the 20th century. Throughout his book, Imbrie's use of historical precedents is highly effective in bolstering his arguments and making concrete concepts that would otherwise be abstract. Imbrie also explores the cultural and other bases for the American predilection to look inward, which may be a new concept to some readers. One of his most fascinating chapters looks at the pre-World War II America First isolationist movement that included some who later became American cultural icons, such as Yale president Kingman Brewster, yet also became a platform for the racist Ku Klux Klan and the proto-fascist Fr. Coughlin.

America First was, among other things, an intellectual system. Yet ideas, religion, and ideology do not play a major role in Imbrie's book, which reflects the post-Cold War, post-Afghanistan and Iraq preoccupation of American policymakers in the executive and legislative branches. Nevertheless, welcome in Imbrie's next book would be a discussion of the Spanish Inquisition and Spain's decline; the costs to France resulting from Louis XIV's expulsion of the protestant minority; the role of radical Islam in the popular struggle against corruption in Afghanistan; or the fact that during the hegemonic transition from the United Kingdom to the United States, the two countries shared the same high culture and the elites had often intermarried. Winston Churchill had an American mother; Roosevelt and King George VI were not only both churchgoing sons of teetotal mothers, but they also shared the same brand of protestant Christianity. And their militaries were comrades-in-arms in two world wars and the Cold War. The hegemonic shift and the end of empire post-World War II was palatable in the United Kingdom because nuclear weapons conferred continued great power status while the Commonwealth of Nations was a fig leaf for the loss of empire that was never as important at home as it was abroad. The United Kingdom also benefitted from talented politicians and a highly professional diplomatic service

during a difficult period. Adaptability to new circumstances and the ability to take advantage of new diplomatic opportunities requires a sure-footedness that the current, hollowed-out Department of State that Imbrie describes will be hard pressed to achieve. More broadly, Imbrie's book shows that a hegemonic shift away from the United States will be complicated. Indeed, the very concept of hegemony may no longer be relevant.

Imbrie suggests that the leadership of many states fits a typology of "builders, managers, and neglectors." An implication of his book is that we are in the "neglector" stage as demonstrated by many ill-considered policy choices. We are far from the presidential builder leadership of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt or the manager leadership of Gerald Ford in the aftermath of President Richard Nixon's resignation. However, the good news is that this trajectory is reversible through thoughtful policy choices; the United States is not somehow predestined to actual rather than relative decline. That is a sound basis for Imbrie's optimism about the future of the United States.