

PREDICTING A NEW PARADIGM

In my seven plus years of blogging, I've never done year-end reviews or predictions and I don't intend to start now.

But I do want to point to two pieces taking stock of this moment in history—the AJE piece on the decline of the American empire above (the transcript is here), and Juan Cole's piece declaring the end to US hyperpower.

The AJE piece is generalized and describes a decline in both our economic and military hegemony. And while Cole includes this generalized framework,

The end of the Cold War, which had stretched from 1946 to 1991, had left the political elites of the United States and Western Europe without a bogeyman or security threat on which they could run for office and through which they could funnel resources to the military-industrial complex that largely pays for their political campaigns. With Russia in steep decline in the 1990s and China still run as a small, cautious power, the US emerged as what the French called a Hyperpower, the sole superpower. US hawks were impatient that Bill Clinton seemed not to realize that he had complete freedom of movement for a brief window of time. It was the new US status of hyperpower that allowed the G. W. Bush administration to respond to the September 11 terrorist attacks by launching two major wars and a host of smaller struggles, all against targets in the Muslim world.

As of 2011, the age of the US hyperpower is passing, along with the possibilities for American wars of choice, i.e., wars of aggression.

He situates it, not surprisingly, in the Middle East.

Some years are pivotal and serve to mark off eras of history. 2011 saw the end of American hyperpower, and it announced the end of a decade of US-Muslim conflict that began with 2001. It saw the killing of Usama Bin Laden, the virtual rolling up of al-Qaeda, the repudiation of al-Qaeda's methods by the masses of the Arab world, and the US military withdrawal from Iraq. The upheavals of the Arab Spring and subsequent elections have led to Muslim fundamentalist parties being drawn into parliamentary politics on a Westminster model, rather than remaining sect-like corporate groups outside the body politic.

While I'm not certain that, fifty years from today, 2011—and specifically our withdrawal from Iraq—will mark the end of our hyperpower or empire (we might measure that date from the financial crisis in 2008; there might be some more spectacular loss in the future that will have that symbolism; or it could be something else entirely), I do generally agree that we're at the twilight of the American mode of power that has dominated since the end of World War II.

I think that's why predictions looking forward will be so hard to get right. Partly because there's no telling how Americans—both those who run our domestic and foreign policy, and those average citizens facing a future without the self-importance derived from the country's dominance—will react as this new state of affairs becomes evident. At both levels, we could just get a whole lot more violent.

But also because, as Tom Englehardt says in the AJE piece, I don't think we're seeing a simple matter of imperial succession, as happened when England passed the baton of world hegemon to us.

I don't think it's like the US is going down and you're gonna get a Chinese empire rising. I think you've got a planet in crisis and we're just barely beginning to feel it.

Rather, I think we're going to see a new paradigm, one that not only robs average Americans of the arrogance of being the "best," but also robs many around the world of their traditional means of understanding the world.

So while it may be interesting to think about President Obama dealing with a Republican Senate or President Mitt dealing with Speaker Pelosi, while it may be interesting to predict how many TBTF banks will fail over the next year, even while it may be interesting to start thinking about what Europe will look like after the Euro zone ends, I think all those exercises might be end up showing far too little imagination about what the future holds.

As I've said before, it's fairly clear that 2011—like 1968 and 1989—was a year of great historical importance. But I'm not sure if we can even conceive of just how important it might be or why.