introduction

FRAMING THE QUESTION

In April 1950 President Harry Truman's advisers told him that Americans had arrived at "the ascendancy of their strength." This memorable phrase, from which this book takes its title, registered long-nurtured national ambitions that had been finally realized, and it foreshadowed the widening exercise of U.S. power that would outlast the Cold War and carry over into the new century. The "fact" of ascendancy is today only too obvious. The United States now occupies a global position of unusual, arguably unprecedented dominance—what is often fashionably described as hegemony or empire.[1]

For many Americans over the last decade or so, this dominance has inspired a sense of triumph and dreams of global influence. It has also given rise to anxiety and soul searching as the country has spun through a dizzying set of changes since the end of the Cold War and especially since September 11, 2001. The most recent of developments—the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the worldwide "war on terrorism"—have ignited a critical reaction abroad and sharp disagreements at home. What is the surest path to U.S. security? How tightly should Washington bind itself to allies and to international institutions and conventions? Do U.S. actions betray the country's own vaunted standards or stain its international reputation? Is U.S. power on the decline or can it significantly reshape the world?

History has occupied a problematic place in the intense, even feverish discussion of these questions. Popular commentators, policymakers, and the broader informed public have made relatively little use of the past to frame the issues of the day even though history offers precisely the kind of steadying insights needed at a time of confusion and disorientation. To the extent that commentators do invoke history, it is perfunctory, dated, or tendentious. While historians of foreign relations, culture, and economy have much to say one way or another about aspects of the U.S. rise to ascendancy, they have done little to construct overarching narratives that trace the steps carrying the United States to its current dominance while also taking into account the dramatic developments over the last decade and a half in the U.S. relationship to the broader world. The sad truth is that their work is largely irrelevant to

the debates playing out within the think tanks, among the pundits, and in the press. Indeed, except for Cold War studies, which command some interest as an immediate and usable past, that work is hardly even known outside the narrow confines of the academy.

How did a weak and insignificant country rise to the first place among nations and manage to remain there—a source of pride to her people, a marvel to some abroad, and a menace to others? Here is the historical puzzle at the heart of the American ascendancy—and the question that this book seeks to answer.

A good starting point is to stand back from the details of the U.S. case and consider in the abstract the qualities that can make a country preeminent. Wealth belongs at the head of the list. Only a dynamic and growing economy can create the material resources essential to realizing great international ambitions. Generation of wealth in turn depends on science and technology driving productivity and on a society attuned to innovation. Next in sequence and importance would be the promotion of national confidence—a faith or sense of mission. Ideas give purpose to people. Without a widely shared vision, no country can mobilize resources—no matter how ample—to a single end and ask citizens to endure sacrifices and potential setbacks to realize those ambitions. No less critical than wealth and purpose would be a strong, modern state. Even under the most favorable conditions, a country without a well-developed institutional apparatus to direct national affairs will go nowhere. With a strong state comes the possibility of spurring economic development, overcoming internal divisions, promoting a shared national sentiment, and securing the homeland against potentially dangerous neighbors. Succeeding in these areas, reaching the top, and then staying there depends in turn on elites serving the state and possessed of good judgment and an understanding of the world. From their ranks emerge under ideal circumstances state leaders with sound instincts and rich experience who know when to advance boldly and when to bide their time prudently and patiently, which battles to fight and which to defer, when conciliation and accommodation may win more than confrontation and violence. A union of wealth, confidence, and leadership provides the basis for sustained international success, which in turn creates a virtuous cycle, reinforcing confidence, confirming national myths, and giving rise to widely accepted policy codes.

By assembling precisely these constituents of national power, American leaders won security for their new nation, then international standing as a major power, and finally uncontested supremacy. This outcome was not predestined—or so at least the historian preoccupied with evidence will conclude.

It is not good enough to explain the U.S. rise to a leading role in the world as an inevitable step in the progress of human history or the unfolding of some divine plan. Seen from a historical perspective, the process was contingent.

The U.S. ascendancy depended in part on multiple pieces coming together in a complex mosaic. No one piece was enough. For example, a vibrant economy or nationalist confidence alone could not have propelled the country so dramatically forward. Success also depended on bringing the pieces together deliberately and in roughly the right order. In each phase of the national history, U.S. leaders matched national ambitions to material resources and made the choices that moved the country toward an ever more formidable global position. The foreshortened perspective of contemporary commentators makes U.S. success look recent and thus rapid, but the extraordinary development of U.S. power did not begin in 1945 with the onset of a policy of Cold War, nor in 1914 as Woodrow Wilson began his fateful encounter with a Europe at war. By the end of the nineteenth century Americans had already behind them a century of making choices that had brought stunning successes. By then they had put in place most of the key elements of American international power. And the missing parts (primarily a strong state) would soon follow. The United States was by the early twentieth century securely on a trajectory leading toward an ever more dominant international position.

This particular exercise in determining what made the United States strong falls short in one critical respect: it omits the world in which Americans achieved their ascendancy. Americans made their own history but within the bounds of the possible—the constraints and opportunities—defined not just by other states but also by global forces. Americans with increasingly broad ambitions and a lengthening reach had to contend with powerful pressures and trends—social, economic, technological, and cultural—that sometimes smoothed their way and at other times made it rocky, even impassable.

Fortunately, a new history is available to help fill out this global context in which Americans sought to realize their dreams and exercise their power. The work of global historians taken together offers an impressively wide angle of vision and an attractively insistent focus on issues usually lost to sight in the media and in public policy debates and even in historical controversies framed along narrowly national lines (as though what Americans wanted and did was all that mattered). In essence, global history highlights the worldwide trends that in part defined the direction and timing of the U.S. path to prominence. Global history also helps us see the ways in which the United States increasingly created and controlled those trends.

To begin with, the United States was at its inception a product of forces

at play within the North Atlantic world. Americans have shared in the wealth and ambition that increasingly defined that world and that separated European peoples from others. The American nation took form as one of the neo-European settler societies that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as modern globalization began to take form. Already then it reflected its British origins in the worldview championed by its dominant classes, its premier political and economic institutions, and its defining social practices. Thereafter—from the early nineteenth century onward—the United States functioned within a network of increasingly intense and wide-ranging global contacts and processes centered on the North Atlantic. Like Europeans, Americans were galvanized by nationalist movements, industrialization driven by fossil fuels and a stream of new technologies, empire building, and global war. These critical features of globalization from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries offered models of development and ways of thinking from which Americans could borrow, sometimes self-consciously. Ever more emphatically, U.S. leaders defined their future as a greater England and as a more and more senior ally of the island nation.

American ascendancy is more than a new chapter—a consequence and extension—in the history of British Empire. Seen in even longer-term perspective, the U.S. ascendancy carries forward a pattern of global dominance secured not just by Britain but also by the other great powers of the North Atlantic over several centuries. By mastering other regions, controlling the international economy, maintaining military superiority, and setting the terms for debate over such fundamentally cultural matters as human rights, gender relations, social justice, and environmental exploitation and protection, Americans have taken up the mantle borne earlier by Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, and Britain.

Americans were products of global forces in a second way. They had to come to terms, however reluctantly, with the rise of the modern national state. In the course of the first half of the twentieth century, a people dedicated to the principles of liberty and suspicious of concentrated political power underwent a conversion. Their mounting sense of nationalism and their view of the broader world either as a stage for crusading or as a source of danger gradually effected that conversion. Between the 1880s and the 1940s a potent governmental apparatus took form in Washington. This institution brought the necessary resources under its control and demonstrated its ability to monitor and respond quickly to events around the world. In the thinking of those who served the burgeoning American state, global ambitions came to occupy a position of orthodoxy, in effect becoming the state ideology. Increasingly,

advocates of more modest national goals—hostile to empire, averse to war, devoted to domestic priorities—fell silent or retreated to the margins of political life.

Some make the claim that the U.S. state, like its counterparts around the world, is declining in the face of global market forces. Mammoth transnational corporations, major banks, and in recent decades transnational organizations such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund seem to some analysts to trump state sovereignty, overwhelm the popular will, and ride roughshod over communities. The long view would argue against putting the modern state, at least in the developed world, on the critical list. States have to the contrary steadily put on mass and muscle in the context of globalization even if their prime concerns have evolved. In the first phase during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they paid increasing attention to policing their borders as waves of newcomers washed across it. They gave protection to their industry and agriculture from foreign competitors, while also intervening against corporations, which grew in size and power as they pursued ever-wider markets. Government bureaucracies set up to regulate private firms and oversee multiplying state functions became an important new feature of the political scene, and state budgets rose to underwrite multiplying domestic as well as international programs.

In the second phase of globalization following World War II, states in the developed world have been more active in promoting and managing globalization. Above all others, the United States and its European associates laid down the rules and decided which agreements and institutions would come to life and which would flourish. Despite the ensuing half century of global change, states in general have remained the focus of loyalty and identity for most people around the world, and the source to which they have looked for education, health care, and other basic services. State budgets have accounted for a steadily larger proportion of national income. Recent central government spending in most developed countries amounts to an impressive 40 to 50 percent of the total annual output of goods and services.[2] To be sure, states disengaged in large measure from direct ownership of economic enterprises and from protectionist policies. But as economic forces reshaped countries, especially those most developed and tightly integrated by trade and investment into worldwide networks of exchange, states responded to greater competition by investing more in education, science and technology, job training, and maintenance of overall social welfare. Like other states in the developed world generally, the United States has maintained its central role in the lives of its citizens by securing allegiance, extracting resources, and offering public

goods while also pursuing its unique, dominant role on the world stage. As self-assigned arbiter—if not master—of what transpires on that stage, the U.S. government gives its military the resources and status commensurate with the global scope of its ambitions.

Over the last two hundred years Americans have been intimately entangled in global developments in a third way—in the creation of an economic and social modernity that has left an ever-deeper imprint on peoples everywhere. The United States has benefited from markets and capital made available by globalization, pioneered a widely imitated system of mass production and consumption, suffered through the swings and disciplines of the international economy, and served as its rescuer and rule maker. Americans have thus been variously the beneficiaries, the victims, and the patrons of that highly dynamic economy. That economy has in turn had a far-reaching and complex cultural impact, altering the outlook and behavior of Americans and other peoples all around the world as they have been drawn into the flow of goods and capital.

Finally, global history reminds us of the critical role technology has played in the astonishing U.S. trajectory. New technologies were a prime source of North Atlantic wealth and power in relation to the rest of the world, an indispensable tool of the emergent nation-state, and the driver behind the relentless modernization of social and economic life. Technology's capacity to dramatically transform in each of these ways carried with it the power to destroy and control as well as create. The North Atlantic world's technological advantage gave it dominion over others. Colonial wars and colonial exploitation that technology made possible imposed death and suffering on an enormous scale. This point reminds us that the state embraced technology above all for military purposes—and thus made the twentieth century the most destructive in human history. Not least among that century's legacies was the nuclear specter still haunting humankind. Fresh technological breakthroughs also set in motion destabilizing social change. In the creative destruction that capitalism has spawned, technology has proven a powerful solvent of communal bonds and thus of a stable sense of individual identity. In all of its roles, technology features prominently in the U.S. story.

Global forces—whether strong or weak, sudden or slow, clear or obscure—play out in relation to humans. Understanding U.S. ascendancy thus in a sense involves more than tracing abstract and bloodless global processes and patterns. It means identifying the particular people who confronted and responded to those forces and making from the decisive moments in their lives a narrative that can both illuminate and instruct. Despite its commitment to democracy, the United States has pursued a role in the world guided dis-

proportionately by elites. They appear in this account primarily in the guise of presidents and their immediate advisers acting as the political and military agents of an increasingly powerful state. Serving as a supporting cast are, on the one hand, commentators and public intellectuals who framed challenges facing the country in ways other influential people found convincing and, on the other, business leaders whose inroads in foreign markets had long-term cultural consequences but also commanded the attention of the state. Often these secondary characters operated in close collaboration with the state authorities, occasionally apart from or in opposition to them.

The agents of the state deserve the pride of place that they are traditionally accorded because they set the pace and direction and thus ultimately shaped the nature of U.S. dominance. They alone could gather the requisite material and moral resources, direct them in a concerted way, and create popular, political legitimacy for their undertakings. Their choices across three generations in effect defined the path Americans traveled toward ascendancy. William McKinley and Woodrow Wilson combined to set the agenda. The interwar Republicans cautiously explored ways of using what had by then become extraordinary, even unprecedented national resources to realize that agenda, while the third generation, dominated by the Democrats Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, set about the task with a boldness that marks the mid-century as the dawn of U.S. dominance. To their successors over the balance of the century—from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush—fell the challenge of coping with the consequences of that dominance.

This claim to the state's leading role in the American ascendancy carries two major caveats. First, those leading the state could not simply will ascendancy into existence. State activity depended on a variety of prerequisites, perhaps foremost a society whose flexibility was perfectly adapted to economic development under conditions prevailing during the nineteenth century. Second, those directing the state apparatus had constantly to take into account global forces in a wide variety of forms, first by recognizing them and then by somehow exploiting, riding, mastering, defusing, or redirecting them. The formidable challenge facing state leaders is apparent for example in the post–World War II hunger worldwide for reconstruction and prosperity and in the third-world demands for decolonization and liberation. Readers will have to judge for themselves the explanatory value of emphasizing the state in a global history context and thereby integrating the national with the global. Privileging the state in turn elevates the prominence of the individuals who commanded it and thus raises afresh the tension—ideally fruitful—between structural interpretations with their emphasis on constraints and voluntaris-

tic interpretations with their stress on contingency. Structures create preconditions and set limits; individuals have to decide what to do within those limits.

The focus here on tracing ascendancy over the long haul and in a global context is intended to be historically descriptive, not politically triumphalist, and to lay the basis for a more searching appraisal of success and failure. Misreading or mishandling global forces could bring disaster, as Lyndon Johnson discovered with regard to both Vietnam and the flight from the dollar. On the other hand, success—for example, in reconstructing the international economy and pushing it toward U.S. norms—could strengthen American dominance, with its attendant material and psychological rewards. Invariably failure and even sometimes success spelled trouble for ordinary Americans in the form of higher taxes, overseas military service, social tensions, or political repression. But American ascendancy often extracted a far higher cost from people abroad and especially from those in third-world states that dared to flout U.S. preferences.

This account draws on the themes sketched out above to answer the question of why the United States gained its ascendancy and with what consequences. In essence the story to be developed here is about the accumulation and exercise of formidable national power within a dynamic global context. The story begins with settler colonialism, rising economic productivity, and wispy notions generated by the minds of nationalists (chapter 1). It continues with the early twentieth-century demonstration of diplomatic and military prowess in which the rise of the American state figured centrally (chapter 2). By the 1920s the United States had achieved economic preeminence and a far-reaching economic and cultural presence, which together created new opportunities for U.S. leaders (chapter 3). These early twentieth-century developments figure as prologue to a time of remarkable exertions and accomplishments spanning three decades at midcentury, treated in three topically arranged chapters. The first (chapter 4) deals with the confrontations with the German and Soviet states that would establish overall U.S. preeminence beyond question. That time of sustained ideological construction, military testing, technological innovation, and institution building unfolded alongside the American attempt to give shape to the postwar international economic and cultural order and to master a restive third world (chapters 5 and 6). The achievement of ascendancy had untoward domestic and global consequences that left U.S. policymakers in the 1970s and 1980s hobbled and Americans questioning the costs and perils of their newly won dominance (chapter 7). The story ends with the campaign to organize and stabilize U.S. dominance

around a neoliberal faith in the virtues of the free market, democracy, and individualism (chapter 8). The conclusion reflects on the current debates over hegemony and empire and offers an appraisal of U.S. ascendancy with an eye to the future.

Telling what is an extraordinary story of U.S. involvement in the world is critical to sorting out the empire-hegemony debate. But more practically, as the conclusion suggests, that story offers fresh ways of framing the pressing problems currently facing the United States. In order to ultimately address these matters, we need to begin at the beginning—with an examination of the ways that the U.S. ascendancy, established in the course of the twentieth century, depended heavily on the achievements of an earlier age.