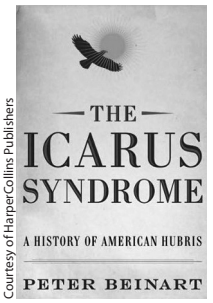

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The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris

by Peter Beinart

Reviewed by Dr. John A. Nagl, LTC (USA Retired)
President of the Center for a New American Security in Washington, DC

"The American Century" is the idea, first formulated by Henry Luce in 1941, that the United States was the most powerful and influential state on the world stage in the 20th century. Theorists of international relations suggest that a hegemon like the United States is necessary for the smooth functioning of the international system, and that the United States supplanted the United Kingdom in filling this role during the Second World War. It arguably continues to do so in this century, even as China rises inexorably to replace America as the world's largest economy in the next few decades.

In *The Icarus Syndrome*, Peter Beinart writes a revisionist history of the American Century, arguing that the intoxicating idea of American power has often led the country to overreach through hubris. The central analogy of the book is the Greek myth of Icarus, who flew too near the sun when escaping from Crete on wings made of wax and feathers; when they melted, he fell into the sea. Beinart applies the lesson of Icarus to explain three American decisions: Woodrow Wilson's pursuit of a League of Nations to abolish war in the wake of the First World War, a result of the "hubris of reason"; the "hubris of toughness" which prompted Lyndon Johnson's decisions to escalate the war in Vietnam; and the "hubris of dominance" that led to President Bush's decision to invade Iraq in March of 2003.

When they advocated for the League of Nations at the close of the First World War, escalated the war in Vietnam, and decided to invade Iraq in 2003, Beinart claims that "Politicians and intellectuals took ideas that had proved successful in certain, limited circumstances and expanded them into grand doctrines, applicable always and everywhere. They took military, economic, and ideological resources that had proved remarkably potent, and imagined that they made America omnipotent." In point of fact, these are hugely disparate cases, and the concept of hubris, powerful as it is, can only with great difficulty be stretched to explain all three; in fact, it is tempting to suggest that Beinart has himself taken an idea that has proved successful in certain, limited circumstances and expanded it into a grand doctrine, applicable always and everywhere.

This book is ultimately about the decision to invade Iraq in 2003—or, rather, about Beinart's own decision to support the invasion of Iraq. He says as much on the first page of *The Icarus Syndrome*, telling the story of a 2006 lunch with Arthur Schlesinger Jr., during which the grand old man of liberal foreign policy asked Beinart "Why did your generation support this war?"

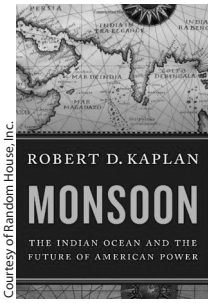
Beinart, who had used his perch at *The New Republic* to accuse critics of a war with Iraq of "abject pacifism," stammered to provide an answer at the lunch, and Schlesinger died not long after. He never got the chance to read Beinart's explanation that, just as Schlesinger had applied the lessons of World War II to advocate for American intervention in Vietnam, so Beinart and his generation applied those of the end of the Cold War, Bosnia and Kosovo, and Desert Storm to the case for invading Iraq in 2003. Beinart explains that "another generation—mine—had seen so much go right that we had difficulty imagining anything going wrong, and so many of us grew more and more emboldened until a war did go hideously wrong."

But Beinart, a talented student of international relations (and, in the spirit of full disclosure, a man to whom my think tank offered a perch at which to finish the writing of this book, although he amicably ended up at another), lets himself off too easy here. While his generation did not experience Vietnam, he certainly studied it at Yale and Oxford; he knew that wars could go horribly wrong, and often do. In fact, Vietnam was the dissertation topic chosen by another student of international relations a generation older than Beinart who played an important role in turning around the catastrophe in Iraq: David Petraeus, a man who strangely appears on only three pages of this nearly five-hundred-page tome. Petraeus, a skeptic of the invasion who famously asked "Tell me how this ends" when the initial operation appeared successful, did the hard work of making something tolerable come out of a war that was, to put it charitably, a dog's breakfast when he took command of the effort in early 2007.

This reviewer is not the first to note that "The Icarus Syndrome" may be a better analogy for the author of the book, who became the editor of the *New Republic* before he was thirty, than it is for the decisionmakers who guided American foreign policy through the American century. Woodrow Wilson's failed advocacy for a League of Nations was just one of the factors leading to American isolationism in the wake of the First World War, which in its turn was but one of the factors leading to the Second; American power, well applied without excessive hubris, prevented a third. Les Gelb and Richard Betts, in the classic book *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, have demonstrated that the decisions to escalate in Vietnam were perfectly valid when they were made, based on the information available. And many books have already been written, with many more certain to follow, that attempt to explain the decision to invade Iraq in 2003; American hubris is but one of the multiple causes for a moment in history that we know for certain will never result in a book subtitled "The System Worked."

The final verdict on the American Century has yet to be written; although the nation's conduct of international relations has been imperfect, it has certainly been distinguished by the exercise of power tempered with idealism to a greater extent than that of any great power in history. If hubris is one of the traits that marks our failures, it cannot explain our many successes; American foreign policy is too large a subject to wrap up neatly with one concept. When the system fails, as it did in the decision to invade Iraq, it has a tendency to

self-correct—and when it does, the credit for the turnaround, as the blame for the initial mistake, must rest not in the gods, but in ourselves.



Courtesy of Random House, Inc.

Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power

by Robert D. Kaplan

New York: Random House, Inc., 2010

384 pages

$28.00

Reviewed by Robert Killebrew, COL (USA Retired), held a variety of planning and operational assignments during his 30-year Army career

"It is my contention that the Greater Indian Ocean, stretching eastward from the Horn of Africa past the Arabian Peninsula, the Iranian plateau, and the Indian Subcontinent, all the way to the Indonesian archipelago and beyond, may comprise a map as iconic to the new century as Europe was to the last one . . ." writes Robert Kaplan in his pathbreaking new book, *Monsoon; the Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power;* "For the sum-total effect of [US] preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan has been to fast-forward the arrival of the Asian Century, not only in the economic terms that we all know about, but in military terms as well."

With *Monsoon* Kaplan returns to his strongest suit—geopolitical primers grounded in first-person travel to the world's grittiest places. *Balkan Ghosts, The Coming Anarchy, The Ends of the Earth, and Soldiers of God*, take readers to places not many of us are liable to go willingly (though his excellent *Empire Wilderness* is revealing regarding the United States). This latest work is about the Indian Ocean and the lands along its rim; the Indian subcontinent to the north, eastern Africa to the west, Australia and Indonesia to the east, and the vast and lonely Southern Ocean to the south. First bound to the West by Portuguese explorers at the end of the fifteenth century, swept by monsoon winds whose predictable course favored sail, great civilizations and seafaring peoples flourished along its rim long before they were "discovered" and exploited by Europeans. As China and India emerge as future powers, the Indian Ocean and its littorals are likewise emerging as the future focal point for great-power struggle over the world's trade routes—the great choke-points are here; Bab el Mandeb, Hormutz, Malacca—and the energy resources of Arabia and Africa.

Struggles for influence and power in the region, though nothing new, take on extra meaning as China builds bases along the ocean rim to secure for itself the energy demanded by its economic boom and growth. Indeed, energy routes are the "silk roads" of the region's future, binding together giant emerging economies and the ageless, tribal cultures and politics of the region, many of which are absorbing the outward veneers of modern life—the motorcycles, cell phones, and AK-47s of the developing world—with little change to the older rthymns of their histories. Hence, the Baluch, fighting for an ancient homeland that spans three countries—India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan—who control the destiny, not of themselves, but of the ocean littoral that hosts Gwadar, potentially