BOOK REVIEW

Schake, Kori. *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. 389 pages.
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Reviewed by Joseph Aieta, III

The central argument of this work is developed around the theory that only once historically has a reigning hegemon (in this case, Britain) peacefully handed over rank/control to its successor (the United States). The author suggests that usually such change was effected by violence. Her tack, which blends some theory with much practice, is from the slant of international relations. The book consists of twelve chapters with 84 pages of endnotes to which the reader had best pay close heed as these include explanatory commentary as well as sources. There is an index which is too brief to be particularly useful.

Schake gives her first chapter the evocative title “Opening Salvo.” Herein she discusses the notion of hegemony and suggests that despite commonalities of culture and overlapping interests, all did not proceed easily between the principals. Points of difference and potential discord unsurprisingly began with the War of Independence and persisted up through World War II, though for purposes of the story that she is presenting she sees 1775 as too early and the 1870s as too late. She then goes on to lay out her plan for the remainder of the book, commencing with the Monroe Doctrine and weaving her way to the end of World War II. She states that Britain and America were unable to blend policies as smoothly and purposively as they might have done after 1945, primarily due to major differences over colonialism. She begins to lay out her understanding of the “special relationship,” which she hints was interpreted rather differently by the two nations. The chapter closes with the contention that, once in power, America changed the rules of the game regarding hegemony. The question became “would the US recognize that whichever state succeeded it as hegemon was unlikely to do the same thing?”

The second chapter is devoted to “Theory and Practice,” though she immediately states that her book is not one of international theory but rather explores state

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choices during a time of hegemonic transition. She puts forth the notion that the hegemon can enforce its will on other states with a resulting enforcement of specific behavior. In developing her argument, she makes passing reference to William Appleman Williams. Greater reference to him, and mention of Gabriel Kolko and Thomas Paterson, all of whom took revisionist perspectives to American foreign relations, and perhaps a bit less lauding of Kevin Phillips who is neither a historian or international relations expert, but instead a political pundit would have been appreciated. For the most part, this chapter offers an overview of literature in the field, i.e., historiography. She ends this section with a claim that the US as hegemon pushed for its domestic principles to be adopted systematically, an approach that significantly lessened any incentive for a “special relationship” with Britain.

The next two chapters deal with the Monroe Doctrine and with President Polk’s efforts at limiting the scope of the Doctrine. In terms of issuance of the Doctrine, Schake might have strengthened her commentary by being more forceful in her analysis of why the new American approach appeared to work, i.e., Britain more or less accepted American aims and purposes in the New World thereby setting up the possibility of becoming the enforcer of this approach in light of the weakness of the US in 1823. As to Polk’s modifying of the Doctrine, especially in the Oregon territory, she correctly notes that most sectors of British society expressed opposition to America’s unbridled lust for more land. Still, the American president seemed to reduce the Doctrine somewhat as applying to those areas in which the country intended to settle.

In the fifth chapter, perhaps her strongest, the author ruminates as to why Britain stayed out of the American Civil War. She explains clearly and succinctly why traditional explanations for eschewing British involvement are unconvincing. She then proceeds to present more recent interpretations. Her assessment of this theme spills over into the ensuing chapter and becomes expansive in that it explores how the two nations dealt with explosive political, social and economic changes. She comments that the unalienable rights referred to in the Declaration of Independence were far from self-evident to many who poured into the mid-west and beyond in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the same period in Britain, two concerns became paramount: how far to go with democracy (i.e., copy America or follow one’s own path?) and, with control over the Suez Canal, what to do with Egypt. Much more on the latter question would have strengthened her presentation.

Chapters 7 and 8 treat Latin American matters in Venezuela, then in the Caribbean and the Philippines. American actions in these regions provoked the British reaction that the US was becoming too big for its breeches. Still, feelings dominated, actions lacked. Further, for the first time, the turn of the twentieth

century witnessed Americans warming greatly to the idea of Anglo-America. She argues that this coming together can be seen as unique in hegemonic transition.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 examine World War I, Washington Naval Treaties, and World War II. Schake contends that as a result of the Spanish–American War American power had shown itself to have overtaken British strength, circumstances which Britons saw as less threatening than might otherwise have been the case because they understood the two nations to be converging in terms of interests. She is correct in assessing that America’s participation in World War I augured a change in the world order. She might have offered some acknowledgment of the emergence of the USSR as having import on the world stage for the period from c. 1920–1990.

American naval designs from were to develop a fleet that would put an end to British rule of the seas, a plan that certainly did not sound like it was aimed to preserve and strengthen the “special relationship.” From their perspective, Britain came to be less than enthralled with the French inflicting of opprobrium on the defeated Germany. As to the World War II, distrust of Britain by the US was ramped up as America was unenthusiastic about British Pacific assistance lest Britain expect to re-establish its colonies, a concern not without merit as long as Churchill was prime minister.

Schake’s concluding chapter introduces China as perhaps the next nation to challenge for hegemony. She argues that the Chinese economy is based only on cheap manufacturing while that of the US is innovative. This notion is referenced in Francis Fukuyama’s work *The End of History*. She claims that upwards of 150,000 Chinese students study in America each year. From a Fukuyaman perspective, this situation offers China a path to becoming part of the American order. She concludes that Chinese ideology will not appeal to America.

Schake might have included more sources on empire. She might also have tracked down primary sources directly rather than relying on secondary sources for primary quotes. This work might be useful for undergraduates, but certainly not for readers of *ASQ*.