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America in Retreat by Michael Pembroke review – grisly history of a bully-boy nation

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Mon 18 Jan 2021 18.00 AEDT

After the riot at the Capitol on 6 January, embarrassed American politicians lined up to declare: “This is not who we are.” Having read Michael Pembroke’s account of the country’s international thuggery in the last 70 years I’m inclined to reply: “Sorry, no, this is what you always were – loutish, lawless and violent by default.” Pembroke, an Australian jurist and an avowed conservative, quotes a Trump adviser who unforgettably sums up the arrogance of Washington policymakers. “We’re America, bitch,” snarls this unidentified apparatchik; lesser nations can just suck it up.

The British, wanting to look aristocratically nonchalant, claimed they acquired their empire in a fit of absent-mindedness. Americans hid their scheming behind sanctimonious cant about freedom and human rights: they dreamed up the United

Nations but have consistently flouted its principles, no longer even pay it their annual dues and carry on regardless with their godly mission to Americanise the rest of the world, by force if necessary. During the Cold war, the Pentagon invoked a spurious communist menace to justify its exorbitant budget, amassing deluxe weaponry that existed mainly for show. There was no military need to atomise Hiroshima and Nagasaki, since the Japanese were edging towards surrender; the bombs were dropped, as one of President Truman’s cronies suggested, because the apocalyptic display would “make Russia more manageable in Europe”.

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Resistance to communism excused American ventures whose actual purpose was to lubricate commerce. A coup was engineered in Iran in 1953 to protect the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company; the CIA hired uncommitted local people to pose as Bolshevik agitators and, when the shouting stopped, American companies snapped up the oil assets. In 1954 in Guatemala, a democratic government was overthrown because its labour reforms impeded the United Fruit Company’s shipments of bananas. This time, the CIA wrote sermons for priests,

who obligingly decried communism as Satan’s work. Today, the ideological label remains, used as an inanely automatic slur. Warming up the mob on 6 January, Donald Trump Jr referred to the new senators from Georgia – a Jewish investigative journalist and a black pastor with a doctorate in theology – as “commie bastards”; [Ashli Babbitt](#), who got herself killed while battering the doors of the House of Representatives, had previously tweeted that coronavirus curfews were “commie bullshit”.

Truman confused diplomacy with pugilism: he boasted of having given the Soviet foreign minister Molotov a “straight one-two to the jaw” and dismissed liberal critics as “parlour pinks and soprano-voiced men”. But as Pembroke argues, America’s bully-boy tactics have only served to invigorate the country’s foes. The consequences of the disastrous 1953 coup in Iran “are still playing out today”, while the heavy-handed deployment of Nato troops in eastern Europe “explains, at least in part, Russia’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014”. Undeterred by Trump’s sanctions, China is building a monorail in Mecca, cement factories in Iraq and a new industrial zone in Suez, laying fibre optic cables in Afghanistan, equipping African ports with defences against piracy, establishing windfarms in Brazil, renovating the Portuguese electricity grid and buying up English football teams. The west has enjoyed global dominance for the past two centuries, but China was richer and more culturally advanced for millennia before that, and it soon will be so again. Pembroke proves his point by tabulating “Chinese inventions and discoveries in the centuries before Christ”, a list that extends from acupuncture and

ball bearings to spindle wheels and vinegar. America's bluster, he concludes, covers its quaking fear of decline.

In his novel *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene mocks a CIA agent in Saigon as an innocent abroad and blames the damage done by this wide-eyed simpleton on muddle, not malice. That judgment was surely too kind. One of Pembroke's spiciest quotes comes from Mike Pompeo, fondly reminiscing at a Texas college about his time as Trump's CIA director. "We lied, we cheated, we stole," he chuckles. "It reminds you of the glory of the American experiment." Yet the same smug, plump Pompeo, looking back at his achievements as secretary of state, smarmed in a recent tweet that "being the greatest country on Earth is not just about our incredible economy and our strong military; it's about the values we project out into the world. I believe in America, and American goodness." At least Trump never bothers about projecting values, because all that matters to him is projecting his image and monetising his self-love. That perhaps makes him the epitome of American evil: the devil annihilates every value that doesn't feed the greedy ego.

Current events have added a startling and acidly ironic epilogue to Pembroke's narrative. The storming of the Capitol was Trump's Bay of Pigs, his My Lai, his Iranian hostage crisis and his Benghazi, all compressed into a few ugly hours. True to his "America first" agenda, in declaring war he dispensed with foreign enemies and instead dispatched his followers - the devoted deplorables whom he sneers at as "low-class" - to trash the citadel of his own government. Twisting Pembroke's thesis askew, this was not a retreat but a self-defeating, self-defaming rout. Trump, we can now see, is America's revenge on itself.

• *America in Retreat: The Decline of US Leadership from WW2 to Covid-19* by Michael Pembroke is published by Oneworld (£20). To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply

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