

A Conversation with Dr. Josef Joffe:
Separating Rhetorical Decline from Reality

By Melissa Carlson

One of the greatest fears of contemporary America is that the United States is falling behind; other countries are quickly catching up, even surpassing America in its position as a super power, while the United States itself is locked in economic and political stagnation. But is this fear rational? Should the average American be concerned for the fate of their country? When Dr. Josef Joffe spoke at the Marian Minor Cook Athenaeum on October 28th, he answered each of these questions with a resounding no. In his speech *At the Cassandra Crossing*, Dr. Joffe rebutted the increasingly popular and influential theory of American Declinism, which points to the United States as a super power of yesterday stuck on a path of terminal decline. He likewise presented students and faculty with a unique explanation for why the United States has discounted its capabilities, exaggerated its frailties and exemplified the economic and international strength of developing countries. Dr. Joffe is currently a professor of political science at Stanford University as well as a senior fellow at Stanford's Freeman-Spogli Institute for International Studies. Aside from his current interest in the theory of American declinism, Dr. Joffe has focused most of his research on U.S. foreign policy, international security policy, European-American relations, Europe, Germany and the Middle East.

No Set Path

When asked what was the most important piece of advice he could give to aspiring international relations majors, Dr. Joffe emphasized that since there was no true set path for a student interested in a career in international affairs, it is important to choose one, traditional area of focus (like history or economics) and become an expert in that field. When Dr. Joffe said that when he was a college student, there was no such thing as an international relations discipline, but rather a political science major through which you could focus on a specific aspect of international relations, such as international law or economic development. Dr. Joffe contrasted this classical international discipline with the field that we see today. "International Relations," said Dr. Joffe, "has blossomed into so many different things today.

It has become a do-goody field focused on how to improve the world.” Because international relations has evolved from a “know-how” subject to a “how to do” subject, Dr. Joffe recommended to avoid interdisciplinary areas like international relations because it has become so expansive in the material it covers. Dr. Joffe argues that by choosing a traditional field like history or economics, a student will be able to learn one thing well and apply that one thing to many different fields.

When asked how he became interested in Europe specifically, Dr. Joffe laughed and replied that it was almost impossible to study anything else besides international politics and Europe when you grew up in Cold War Berlin as he did. Living in the center of the East-West conflict, on the dividing line of the world, made him continually ask the question “What is going to happen next?” He developed his interest in how Eastern and Western countries relate to each other when he came to America as an exchange student. He described meeting Ken Waltz, one of the greatest and most respected international relations professors in the U.S., and the profound impact that this meeting had on his decision to become a foreign policy academic. Dr. Joffe said that he never followed a set design or pattern to get to where he was in the international relations field; he never read any biographies of great leaders or chose a certain career path because he felt like it was necessary to propel him to a certain position. “You will find that when you probe biographies, you will be more impressed by accidents and coincidences rather than design or intentions. Do not believe that in order to get *there* you have to do *this*.”

A Rhetorical Decline

Dr. Joffe began his analysis of “American Declinism” by explaining his belief that this theory does not trace an actual decline in U.S. economy or social capital, but rather a decline in the United States’ image of itself. “People are saying that the United States is in decline when it is actually not.” Dr. Joffe said. “Declinism is a political rhetoric tool...that helps gain attention.” The rhetoric of decline does not actually have anything to do with decline, but rather the ‘prophetic,’ or ‘savior’ motif. Politicians and political analysts (Dr. Joffe pointed to John Kennedy and Fareed Zacharia as examples) use the rhetoric of

decline in order to convince the American populous that they are “all going to hell in a hand basket,” but that if Americans listen to and support those analysts’ or politicians’ advice, then they will be saved. “When other people talk about decline, they have a purpose,” explained Dr. Joffe, “like the prophet saying that if you do not listen to me and do a, b, c and d, you will go to hell.”

Dr. Joffe likewise pointed out a widespread feeling of triumphalist despair that accompanies this rhetorical declinism, and noted that this triumphalism is often amplified through foreign celebration of the idea of an American decline. Dr. Joffe pointed to Paul Kennedy, a famous 1980s declinist who took a psychic revenge on the United States by predicting that America was managing to gracefully follow Britain’s current decline. Dr. Joffe explained “abroad U.S. decline strikes a very nice cord because allies and adversaries do not like living next to this big government that irks them by being around.” In order to further explain this idea, he compared the United States government to an elephant, an animal that is not dangerous, but still huge. When an elephant starts “throwing its weight around it gets scary.” Many foreigners thus glorify the idea of American decline because it is reassuring.

Dr. Joffe explained that the use of rhetorical declinism tends to follow a distinct pattern that shows that there tends to be an influx, or a wave of declinism at the end of each two-term administration. This pattern of declinism began with the Eisenhower administration, during which Americans were convinced that since “little Mary can’t read and little Johnny can’t do arithmetic,” Russian children were super-human and would eventually overpower the United States. This Sputnik-inspired idea that the Russia would overtake the United States in economics and missile armament set the pattern for the first wave of declinism. The second wave of declinism arrived in the 1960s with the Vietnam War; we can see another wave in the late 1970s when then President Jimmy Carter gave his famous malaise speech that embodied Americans’ loss of faith and confidence in the government’s ability to remedy inflation and rising unemployment. There was yet another wave in the 1980s, but this wave differed from the others in the sense that it was not so much focused on America declining, but on other nations rising. At that point in time there was an enormous paranoia among Americans about Japan, with many believing that Japan would not only over take the United States in the electronic industry and in nuclear weapon development,

but that it was somehow corrupting United States politics. Dr. Joffe pointed out that during each one of these waves, all aspects of American culture (the media, movies, literature) become obsessed with this idea of declinism, spreading and amplifying American's fear of this other evil foreign power that will destroy liberal democracy.

At this point in our conversation, Dr. Joffe began to analyze the current wave of declinism drowning American politics and people in fear: the looming and relentless rise of China. "This idea of America declining while these other countries are surpassing them has to do with comparative rates of change." Dr. Joffe explained. One can better understand this idea of comparative rates of change by looking at the rates of change of the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1950s. Even though the current presidential panel warned Americans that the Soviet economy was exponentially growing twice as fast as the United States economy, in actuality, the idea that the Soviet economy was going to overtake us was based on a linear projection that did not take into account any countervailing forces. This same idea has been used now with the United States and China. Many people make similar declinist conclusions about the United States and China that are based on these linear projections of growth, making the claim that China will outstrip the United States because of its immense rate of economic growth. However, as Dr. Joffe pointed out, the United States is still in a central position with its economy outstripping everyone else's economy, and with a power projection capability the world has never seen. "In the old days Britain was able to maintain a two-navy standard...The current U.S. Navy is as big as the next 17 navies put together. This is still very much an American world."

The major difference in the United States position from the beginning of the pattern of decline to modern times that Dr. Joffe mentioned was the shift in the power polarity of the international world. "During the Cold War we had a bipolar system between the Soviets and the U.S., which turned into a unipolar system in the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and now, in 2010, I would say we have an apolar, or a unimultipolar system." Dr. Joffe no longer places the United States as the hegemonic power in a unipolar system because President Obama "does not speak the language that the presidents before him did." Obama does not mention the idea of America having a special mission, or an

exceptionalism that makes its citizens better than the rest. By wanting to pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama is “showing an uncertain face to the world.”

Obama’s shift towards apolarity has actually increased positive views of the United States since 2004, indicating that the world prefers an America that appears weaker, with its power more contained. In order to better explain this dramatic change in international opinion of the United States, Dr. Joffe returned to his comparison of the United States to an elephant. “ Anti-Americanism was so rampant during the Bush days because Bush...acted like the president of a unipolar power. He threw his weight around. The elephant got restless and trampled the grass, and in turn frightened a lot of people. This fear turned into dislike and hatred. But now America is a different animal – the elephant looks like a pussy cat.” The only region where anti-Americanism increase was the Middle East, which, as Dr. Joffe pointed out, is ironic, because that is where America reached out first and the farthest.

Not a Matter of If, but When

After exploring the flaws in the theory of declinism and how anti-Americanism plays an integral role in the changing tides of declinism, Dr. Joffe began to discuss the differences in cultural assimilation as seen in Europe and the United States. Europe is currently experiencing a steady rise in immigration, creating an influx of foreign culture and religion within their midst. Even though European countries celebrate multiculturalism and act on the belief that this immigrant culture is just as good as theirs, tension is being created between European culture and the culture of foreigners who are unwilling to assimilate. Dr. Joffe argues that by having a foreign people that place their culture and customs over that of the country they are living in, having foreign people who show “cultural or social pathologies like dropping out of school, not finishing vocational training, end up in petty jobs and petty crime,” European governments shift from away multiculturalism. We thus see a trend of European countries enacting policies that tend towards forced assimilation. Germany, for example, has recently required that immigrants speak German in an effort to break the cycle of immigrant children entering their education system and flunking out because their parents never taught them German or had a desire to teach them German. This is a shift in degrees to assimilationism. The issue that Dr. Joffe has with assimilationism is

the fact that because issues of “immigration and non-integration have been kept under wraps for so long, neopopulous right wing parties have sprung up that express an anti-immigrant sentiment and demand them to either assimilate or leave.”

The United States has a different immigration problem from Europe in the sense that it cannot control its borders. Since America itself is an immigrant country, its institutions have been built and organized to adapt to immigrants. Dr. Joffe pointed out that these institutions allow America a “different perspective...America is more successful at integrating, it is a more open place...people can make it here.” Because the United States is a more open society and has a more flexible labor market than most European countries do, assimilation of different cultures into American culture tends to happen a lot faster than it does in Europe. Dr. Joffe discussed the common trend seen in both the United States and Europe of the majority culture looking down on the assimilating culture, and concluded, “in the end, the problem really takes care of itself. It is not a matter of if people will assimilate, but when they will assimilate.”

The Threat of a Few

When asked what he considered the biggest problem facing the international arena to be, Dr. Joffe immediately pointed to terrorism. “Terrorism lends itself easily to rhetoric...never have so few inflicted so much damage and fear on so many with so little.” Dr. Joffe pointed to the immense increase in airport security to show America’s enormous increase in security efforts. Not only does this increase in security efforts take up time, money and resources, but it also “inflicts enormous damage on us...it is beginning to damage our souls.” The United States is a much more fearful country than it was twenty years ago, causing it to make it harder and harder for tourists, students, and scholars to enter in the country. International terrorism is successful because it strikes fear into the hearts and minds of Americans, causing us to strengthen our security apparatus, pushing us closer and closer to a police state. Even though more people die driving each month than they do from terrorist attacks, international terrorism has been turned into this immense threat that consumes our lives. Dr. Joffe compared international terrorism to the immense threat of nuclear war that he experienced as a young adult. “That was a big threat...we no longer have big threats, we just have these small threats, which in some respect

have a worst effect on our society.” It is not the actual, physical damage that terrorist organizations can inflict upon the United States that worries Dr. Joffe (the United States has more to throw at them than terrorist organizations can throw at us), but rather the idea that just a few thousand people have the power to turn America from a friendly, open nation to one with clenched fists.

When asked whether or not he believes that terrorism can be mediated, Dr. Joffe expressed his belief that terrorism will eventually go away. Dr. Joffe made the distinction between national terrorism and international terrorism, stating, “national terrorism tends to easily fade out because it is dependent on generations. International terrorism is a very interesting animal because it keeps renewing itself, like a cancer.” Dr. Joffe does not believe we have accrued enough experience in handling international terrorism, and likewise believes that we can never know if America’s war on terrorism is truly effective, simply because one cannot prove whether or not a certain terrorist act would have been prevented because of the security measures taken. However, Dr. Joffe feels that “International terrorist organizations are taking on too much, taking on the entire western world,” which will prevent them from sustaining themselves in the long term. The idea that international terrorism will not be able to sustain itself, while comforting, does not dissuade Dr. Joffe from believing that international terrorists still have the power to “destroy our soul...to destroy our liberal democracy.”