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Review: Condoleezza Rice's Democracy, Edward Luce's The Retreat of Western Liberalism and Bill Emmott's The Fate of the West

By Doug Saunders
Globe and Mail Update

Doug Saunders looks at three new books that examine the pending collapse of the Western democratic order

Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom

By Condoleezza Rice

Twelve, 496 pages, \$45.50

The Retreat of Western Liberalism

By Edward Luce

Atlantic Monthly Press, 226 pages, \$34.95

The Fate of the West: The Battle to Save the World's Most Successful Political Idea

By Bill Emmott

Economist Books, 272 pages, \$36.50

As book topics go, the pending collapse of the Western democratic order has never ceased to be popular. In the 99 years since Oswald Spengler published *The Decline of the West*, hardly a year has gone by without at least a couple titles foreseeing the demise of the Western world – either right-wing authors predicting it will fall to floods of perceived racial and religious outsiders, abetted by decadent elites, or leftists arguing that those elites and their military-industrial henchmen have brought the inherent contradictions of capitalism to an irreconcilable crisis that can only be resolved with the imposition of a new economic and social order. The West is always already over.

The 2017 crop is different. For one thing, this year's end-of-the-West books are written by those elites themselves – by people from the nerve centres of the Western mainstream, insiders heavily invested in the political project of the past 70 years. For another, these books all identify a specific starting point for the unseating of the postwar order: the Nov. 8, 2016, election of Donald Trump. The "end of the West" narrative has become a lot more plausible and immediate, if not yet fully convincing, with the election of a U.S. president on a platform explicitly opposed to core

Western values and institutions.

Now that one of the greatest threats to democracy, human rights, international co-operation and the open society is coming from within its highest office, the notion of the West as a model to be promoted and exported is harder to sustain. This creates an ugly paradox: To some extent, the rise of Trump, Vladimir Putin and their allies within the liberal-democratic system has proven its harshest critics right. That system does not always produce benign outcomes and is capable of producing catastrophic ones. At the same time, the only plausible way to answer this threat is with an amplification of the very democratic institutions and values that gave rise to it. The anti-venom is a stronger version of the venom itself.

These authors all wrestle with this paradox, none of them more awkwardly than Condoleezza Rice. Her *Democracy* is meant to be a chronicle, sometimes in the first person, of the bumpy and imperfect march of Western institutions and values across Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and the central role of the United States, as a flawed but indispensable example, in promoting and fighting for democracy, rule of law, rights and fundamental freedoms.

This was bound to be a fraught argument from the beginning. As the national security adviser and then secretary of state under U.S. President George W. Bush, Rice was a key player in the assertive democracy-promotion agenda of that administration – but she also played a central and decisive role in its two infamous efforts to democratize anti-Western countries by force, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Like the other two authors, she correctly recognizes "the West" not as a geographic location or a specific culture, but as a set of ideas and institutions that have flourished in countries on every continent. As a post-Cold War democracy hawk, she makes the case that the successful U.S.-assisted rise of democracy across Central and Eastern Europe provides a valuable antecedent – and she writes convincingly, often drawing on her family's experience, that the United States' own very recent and still-incomplete struggle to bring civil rights and full enfranchisement to its people gives the country a more realistic experience with the hazards and flaws of an incomplete democracy: "America has found a stable equilibrium, but the path to it was hard and often violent." Those lessons, in her view, ought to be exported.

"Military power is not a good way to create a democratic opening. I have never believed that and never will," she writes, somewhat surprisingly, then immediately adds: "But that does not mean that America can step back in promoting democratic change by other means. ... There is a moral and a practical case for democracy promotion."

That argument must have sounded better when she wrote this text in 2015, presumably under the assumption that Hillary Clinton or some moderate Republican would be in charge of the United States. Indeed, what was originally meant to have been this book's final chapter carries the now-ironic title "They Will Look to America."

Instead, she has to confront, belatedly, the fact that her entire argument has been undercut by Washington having become very much part of the problem. Astonishingly, this U.S.-centred book about threats to democracy has no index entry for "Trump, Donald." He is mentioned, not by name, in a tartly worded addendum:

"In the United States," she writes, "a new president was elected with absolutely no experience in government of any kind – the first in the country's history. He has made clear what he thinks of America's political elites whatever their ideological stripe." She warns: "We do know that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – populism, nativism, protectionism, and isolationism – served neither democracy nor peace very well the last time around."

So Rice's argument, in its final pages, is turned on its head: The Western world is not going to be saved by America. For the moment, at least, the best that can be hoped is that it will be saved from America. She seems to have realized this, too late to change the book's main text, and ends with a pointed warning to Trump: "The standard-bearers for those who voted to shake up the system need to find the humility to know and accept democracy's paradox: its genius is in its openness to change, but its stability comes through institutions that embody constraint and reject absolute power."

Edward Luce, the well-educated U.S.-based columnist for the Financial Times (and former Bill Clinton-era Washington speechwriter), makes the advent of Trump the starting point and central crisis in *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* and does not mince words about the potential threat. Since 2000, he notes, as many as 25 countries have fallen out of democracy and Western values are losing their hold elsewhere. But one manifestation of this crisis overwhelms the others and threatens to jeopardize the whole project:

"The most mortal threat to the Western idea of progress comes from within," he writes. "Donald Trump, and his counterparts in Europe, did not cause the crisis of democratic liberalism. They are a symptom. ... Many comfort

themselves that Trump's victory was an accident delivered by the dying gasp of America's white majority – and abetted by Putin. History will resume normal business after a brief interruption. How I wish they were right. I fear they are not."

This, he says, is taking place at exactly the wrong moment, when international co-operation is needed the most – not just on climate (which gets short shrift here) or economic solutions, but on the geo-strategic balance of power: "The coming years," he quips, "will put Trump's *The Art of the Deal* against Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. There can be little doubt which approach is wiser."

Luce is somewhat more likely than the other authors to give credence to the claims of Trump's supporters – especially in the sphere of culture, where he seems to believe the right's claims that the European and U.S. centre-left retreated into "identity liberalism" (that is, the politics of equality) at the expense of class politics, or that maybe there is something to all this anti-immigration rhetoric (example: "Europe cannot solve the Middle East by importing it"). He sometimes reveals what sounds a lot like an atavistic fear of the classes who voted for Trump and Brexit: The idea of a universal basic income is fine on its face, he writes, but for the sort of people who'd use it: "I fear it would help bring about a kind of Hunger Games, in which the poor are kept afloat while sating themselves on dog-eat-dog reality entertainment." He ends with a sort of hasty shopping list of reforms, most of which call for a more economically liberal, less state-heavy economy, aimed at making those disenfranchised people feel included in the liberal world we once knew.

Bill Emmott also believes Trump and his anti-Western allies are the fruits of ill-conceived or negligent policies of the past 20 years. But Emmott, who during his 15 years as editor of *The Economist* gave that magazine much of the wry tone and expansively liberal philosophy that defines it today, places the blame almost entirely on the West's corrupt and irresponsible economic system and the otherwise liberal politicians who allowed it to get this bad.

"We have seen how entrenched inequality of income and wealth is creating a new aristocracy that is distorting the political system and subverting equality of rights," he writes in *The Fate of the West*. And he has the knowledge and capacity to back up these claims with proof: His book does not feel like a quick reaction to Trump's victory, but a careful analysis of the factors that led to the rise of populism. He shows convincingly that the United States, despite its rhetoric of recent decades, has become measurably less innovative, more bureaucratic. Britain, too, has become selfishly obsessed with the interests of an already comfortable cohort, at the expense of those outside it.

The Western liberal-democratic system, he concludes, "is under attack for the good reason that it has recently failed to deliver enough of what citizens have come to expect of it, notably fairness, prosperity and security, but with the bad consequence that people and forces that stand for distinctly unWestern ideas, chief among them Donald Trump, have risen to prominence and power – and their ideas could, if allowed to prevail and become entrenched, destroy the West and much of what it has achieved."

This, he agrees with the other two writers, is a setback that is not yet terminal. But to avoid a wider contagion and the loss of progress across much of the world, he recognizes that a large-scale investment is needed: Not in the pursuit of profit or political power, but in the inclusion, the education, the comfort and the basic needs of a large part of the public who are no longer seeing any reward from their participation in the Western world.

Doug Saunders is The Globe's international-affairs columnist. His new book, Maximum Canada: Why 35 Million Canadians Are Not Enough, will be published in September.

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