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**BODY:**

THE IDEAS THAT CONQUERED

THE WORLD

Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets

In the Twenty-first Century

By Michael Mandelbaum

PublicAffairs. 496 pp. \$ 30

Michael Mandelbaum's new book displays that cute arrogance that so endears American foreign policy to the rest of the world. "The ideas that conquered the world"? Turns out the "world" is defined by the "foreign policy elite" to exclude the "unimportant" places and to include only the "core" regions, i.e., North America, Western Europe and Japan. According to Mandelbaum, the "gradient" of culture "slopes downward from the core to the periphery." Among these culturally superior core nations, we have now known 10 years of the conquering triad of "peace, democracy, and free markets" since the end of the Cold War.

Ten years seems a little early to be celebrating the Pax Americana, especially since we would have to ignore a few little pesky wars like the ones involving Iraq, the Balkans, and Afghanistan. And to whom exactly are the "core" nations so important? To the billions out there on the "periphery," who Mandelbaum says are imitators rather than innovators, despite their having their own millennia-old fecund civilizations, such as those of China, India and the Islamic world? To those in crisis-ridden Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America?

Frankly, I wonder whether they wake up every morning asking what the American foreign policy elite is up to.

Many of the 5 billion people outside the core would also be surprised to learn that, when Mandelbaum does glance in their direction, he sees "consensus on the political, economic, and international conditions best suited for them to be happy." This consensus is of course the liberal triad -- peace, democracy and free markets -- to which he alleges there is no surviving competitor. Do Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan (the self-anointed "father of all Turkmen") and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe think there is no competitor to free markets and democracy? With India and Pakistan on the brink of war, with giants China and Russia still moving in self-contradictory directions, and with the liberal triad not even registering a pulse in the Middle East, just what planet is Mandelbaum discussing?

But let's say we overlook that childish tendency of us Americans to take our homeland to be the whole world. Mandelbaum does have some useful things to say. The liberal theory of history under which nations are progressing toward the magical triad does seem to work for North America, Western Europe and Japan (permit me also to include my friends in Australia and New Zealand). It is a noticeable moment in history that these nations do have peace, democracy and free markets, after centuries of repression and internecine bloodshed. Mandelbaum tells that story well. The chapters on the achievement of common security under NATO and on nuclear nonproliferation are good. And he does take time out from the liberal theory of history to give some trenchant analysis of current threats, such as an excellent discussion of what he calls the most dangerous place on the planet, the strait between China and Taiwan.

Still, the book has weaknesses. Generalizations come at you thick and fast, with little supporting evidence, some vague, some obvious, some wrong -- such as the claim that external payments deficits were always eliminated by recessions during the gold standard era. The author has a weakness for patronizing metaphors, such as how Western support for the market furnished the training wheels for the inexperienced Russians riding the bicycle of democracy. Well-known history is belabored -- did anyone not know that the United States backed China against Japan during World War II, then switched sides after 1949?

Another problem is that the definitions of the holy trinity of peace, democracy and free markets are never really spelled out. Do free markets just mean free prices set by supply and demand? That was satisfied by Russia after 1992, but pesky little details like contract enforcement (and I don't mean enforcement through mafiosi) and definition of property rights were lacking.

The central thesis of the book seems to be that peace, democracy and markets will continue to conquer the world. The evidence for this thesis unfortunately excludes the "ghastliest regions of the planet," which the author deems unimportant except to the unfortunate multitudes who happen to live in those regions. To be fair, the book was no doubt largely written before Sept. 11, when we discovered that unimportant people can do horrifically important things. Perhaps Mandelbaum could add some other virtues to the triad, like compassion for those left behind. And there is one other virtue that all writers about the Triumph of the West could especially use: humility. \*

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