

Rising Star

A review by Andy Ross

Rising Tides: Facing the challenges of a new era

By Liam Fox (Heron Books, 374 pages)

LIAM FOX is a former UK secretary of state for defence who has also worked as a medical doctor. His talents are considerable and *Rising Tides* is a pleasure to read. However, as his first book, it also raises a few questions that readers may wish to consider.

First, what is it about? The main theme is globalisation and its impact on a wide range of defence and security issues. This extends into the foreign policy challenges that will confront all Western nations in the coming years. Dr Fox discusses national rivalries and fundamentalism in what he calls the world of Islam, terrorism from the original assassins through the postwar German rebels to the 9/11 martyrs, tensions and crises stemming from increasingly globalised trade and finance, natural resource constraints such as the impending worldwide shortage of drinking water, and new challenges such as robotic warfare and internet crime. These topics are discussed as potential sources of disruption to the smooth and peaceful flow of our future lives, and Dr Fox wisely abstains from theorising too freely about them.

As a reader, I felt as if I had spent hours in Dr Fox's company, say at a dinner party, as he held forth with great enthusiasm about these issues, largely to illustrate the range of his concerns and to convey the excitement he felt in contemplating them all. This is fun, of course, and would certainly make a great

night out, so much so that only a churlish reader would seek to dismiss the narrative as glossing over a series of deeper and more philosophical issues.

Understandably enough, Dr Fox chooses not to emphasise the role of major new insights and capabilities in science and technology in the unfolding of his narrative. This is a pragmatic concession, for although these novelties may well have a bigger impact on our future lives than the political dramas he expounds upon, they may equally fail to materialize as dismally as the space travel dreams of former decades. Hard politics has killed many a fine utopian dream.

Second, what exactly does Dr Fox wish to say? The role of fundamentalist religion in the modern world is a complex issue, where blow-by-blow accounts of political intrigues over the years in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and so on seem not quite to hit the nail on the head. The facts on the ground, as the foreign policy mavens say, are important, but more important, it may seem, is the deeper dynamic of the monotheist faiths in an age of science and technology, where financial integration and information processing ramify ever more deeply into our global reality. Here Dr Fox seems content to float above the deeper currents of theology without asking whether a new monster lies lurking in the abyss. The recent resurgence of Islam may not be a furious sideshow in the otherwise smooth growth of global

capitalism but a direct response to it, in a longer story that led through Christianity and Communism to the new world of Google and Facebook. In this new world, human beings are quickly developing a collective identity in a global hive mind devoted to the husbandry of the planet, apparently in preparation for a forthcoming fusion of the previously separate worlds of technology and biology, or at least so the dreamers among us would have us believe. But Dr Fox is a man of action, and both theology and futurology are beyond his ministerial remit.

This is not the place for me to do more than gesture at the monster in the abyss, of course, but that quest has been my concern in a couple of books I have written in recent years, after finding a slew of authors, many in the New Atheist camp, who had similar ambitions. In a Western world often thrown on the defensive by such events as 9/11, the rise of China, rising commodity prices, and the recent financial crisis, we need a big picture to help us interpret events and react to them intelligently, with considered steps that may help to keep us alive and kicking in the new world. Dr Fox is unwilling to sketch such an overarching vision in *Rising Tides*, so readers with an ambition to slay monsters will find that his message has too soft a focus to ignite a burning cause that might set the world aflame.

My third question stems directly from this lack of a big vision and concerns any policy recommendations for Britain and the wider world that might flow from the study. Most readers will likely sense that the intended message is simply that these are complex issues and that here, at least in summary form, is the salient information we should regard as most relevant to any future policy initiatives we undertake. At this level, the book succeeds brilliantly. Dr Fox liberally quotes a series of distinguished colleagues

with whom he has enjoyed fruitful exchanges over the years, including former British prime minister Tony Blair, former US defence secretary Bob Gates, former British prime minister Sir John Major, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, former British cabinet minister Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and crown prince Salman of Bahrain, all of which reassures the reader that Dr Fox is not out on a limb with such perspectives as he offers. Some readers may find his vague endorsement of their various contributions somewhat anodyne, but most of us will find this more congenial than a call to arms for a new crusade.

The reason for this gentlemanly absence of policy bullet points is easy to see. Dr Fox does not wish to restrict his options in any future governmental activities he might be drawn into, and nothing would do so more readily than a published recitation of action items that soon became hostage to the slings and arrows of capricious fate. By aligning himself with the global opinion leaders he quotes and refusing to go beyond the common denominator of the stances their words conjure up, he enables himself to go with the flow, to surf the rapids more freely in any future crises that may emerge further down the river. A senior minister is wise to keep his options open in a world that will almost certainly spring a few big surprises within the years of his prospective governmental career, but this caution inevitably makes for duller reading. The enthusiasm evident in the text of *Rising Tides* may stem more from Dr Fox's personal charisma than from any clear view he may have attained of shining goals to stir the blood.

My fourth and final question concerns the group of readers that Dr Fox mainly wishes to address. His core target group is the set of policy "wonks" who populate the capitals of

the Western world, and for many of them this book will doubtless be a treasured source of inspiration, though some may feel let down by the aforementioned fuzziness in its aim. However, Dr Fox clearly wants to interest a much wider group of readers than the mavens by including what career civil servants will recognise as comprehensive background briefings in his narrative. He admits that much of this background was filled in with the help of online searches, but this is no shame. Our author puts chunks of factual bedrock, suitably pulverized, into the potholes to support the rhetorical tarmac for his readers. He even adds quotations from the Old Testament, which may reassure Christian fundamentalists more than it dismays his secular colleagues. Policy wonks will wish to speed with glazed eyes over some of this stuff, but most readers will welcome the richer tone the facts bring and feel the safer for the firm foundation. Other readers may tire of the former minister's easy solidarity with quoted colleagues and yearn for a more passionate statement of the headline issues, but readers with specialist knowledge of this or that theme in the book will surely see the need for the occasional drilldowns that buttress its narrative.

Again, my own experience underlines this issue, since in my books on global themes I struggled with the problem of what background stuff to put in and what to leave out. This is a problem for any author on a big new topic, and Dr Fox has solved it as well as one can reasonably expect. Indeed the result is a fine effort, but the problem of who exactly should read such a book nowadays,

in an age of 24/7 online news, remains for all of us. Nevertheless, even lay readers will enjoy the authoritative tone of this book.

In sum, Dr Fox's first book displays impressive panache, albeit with a few flaws that may disturb the sensibilities of more pedantic readers. Toward the end of the story, Dr Fox says he dictated much of the text and let software transcribe it. As a busy and practical man, he doubtless had better things to do than correct loose grammar or delete chatty rhetoric, but his book would have presented a more refined appearance if he had hired a good editor to do that for him, and it would surely benefit from the addition of an index in a later edition.

We could in charity forgive such haste in composition, but we should not forgive any haste in the conception of the book. It pleases me to say that on this issue we can rest easy. Although some of the underlying ideas can seem vague and potentially in conflict, both with each other, as in the unresolved tension between religious autonomy and material progress, and with facts as yet unknown, such as the relative merits for developing nations of the new Chinese model versus the tried and tested ideas of democracy and capitalism, such fuzziness is par for the course.

In conclusion, Dr Fox presents an overall composition that melds seamlessly with those of the best minds of his generation. On the evidence presented in this book, he would make an eminently capable foreign secretary in a future Conservative government.

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