*2034* mixes enough plausibility with suspense to deliver a chilling play-by-play of the fall of the United States' global hegemony at the hands of an ascendant and technically savvy China. Written by author Elliot Ackerman and retired US admiral James Stavridis, the novel offers intrigue and action, but it bears a warning for today's political leaders. *2034* posits that American hubris will spell disaster for the United States. The American 21st Century is not a foregone conclusion - in fact, the authors frame that dream as an uphill climb against hostile forces. Chronically stressed-out characters and numerous dramatic tropes dot the landscape of this tightly written account of a hypothetical World War III. Even with a bit of glossing over the particularities of a global conflict and the state of the world in 13 years, *2034* plunges readers into a nightmare scenario for the United States. Its attempts to pull them out of that pessimism are less successful.

The plot sees America besieged by rivals. A Chinese cyberattack neutralizes the US naval squadron in the South China Sea, and Iran takes a hotshot F-35 pilot hostage. This leads to a series of escalations, and soon several US cities are reduced to radioactive craters as American nuclear counterattacks devastate Chinese cities. Russia takes advantage of the chaos and invades Poland, which is an obligatory event for a political thriller. The brief conflict comes at a great cost. India emerges as a peacemaker in Asia. The United States is humbled, no longer the number one power on the world stage. The American Century comes crashing down.

The central message of *2034* is that the United States will lose its way in a changing world if its leaders do not act with vision to avoid disaster and maintain global relevance. There are many allusions to the United States as a declining empire, with characters pointing out parallels between it and an overextended British Empire in the middle of the 20th century. Ackerman and Stavridis emphasize the threat posed by Chinese cyberwarfare and the need for leadership to prepare for a coordinated attack. The authors juxtapose China's cool and calculating actions against the ineptitude of a United States in decline.

Though *2034* paints a pessimistic picture for the United States, the authors keep faith in the American spirit to persevere. They rely on tropes to make the novel more entertaining and to offer some hope for those disheartened by America's prospects. Almost every other character quotes Lincoln, and American pop culture is heavily referenced by characters of all nationalities, paying respect to the immense cultural legacy of the United States. They show an admiration of a unique American ingenuity, and a reliance on "the old ways." For example, the

hotshot pilot is idealized for his knowledge of flying jets without fancy autopilot features, hearkening back to his great-grandfather who fought the Japanese as an Air Force pilot in World War II. When his ship is crippled on a bombing run of Shanghai, he sacrifices himself to complete his mission in a scene somewhere between the infamous "ride the bomb" scene in *Dr. Strangelove* and the scene in *Independence Day* where Will Smith punches an alien. There are many callbacks to a time of American greatness, and the novel never fully shuts the door on the possibility that its greatness can be found again.

There are technical shortcomings in the story that detract from the gripping atmosphere of global conflict. For one, very little is explained about the specifics of the cybertechnology that disables almost all American military capabilities at the novel's outset. The advanced cybertechnology is just a plot device to start the chain of escalations that make the novel move forward. Furthermore, the story also suffers from a limited scope. The main character of 2034 seems to be the US Navy, and most of the meaningful tactical operations in World War III are conducted by or against the Navy, with scant mention of any other branches. This bias is easy to track, given Admiral Stavridis' long career with the Navy and deep familiarity with naval warfare and capabilities.

This novel could offer a more nuanced look at world events without relying on a few major characters to propel the story. It would also have been refreshing to see the perspective of non-military or government actors, such as doctors, businesspeople, or journalists. This reframing would help give the destruction of World War III more impact. Without hearing a single story from a citizen of the ruined cities of San Diego or Shanghai, Ackerman and the admiral diminished their total destruction to an almost academic portrayal of a war game strategy. Outside of a purely military perspective, it would have been interesting to see the geopolitical predictions of Ackerman and Stavridis fleshed out more. The authors fail to explore the fallout that would surely follow Russia's invasion of a NATO member, as well as the sudden rise of India as an "economic powerhouse" capable of rivaling China. The least realistic part of *2034* is the cessation of nuclear conflict once the nuclear line has been crossed. With Shanghai blown sky-high, it's almost impossible to see the Chinese government not retaliate against Los Angeles, New York, or any and all other remaining US metro areas. According to the authors, it would seem that there is no realistic way to control a nuclear exchange, except apparently by a stern talking-to from India.

Despite its shortcomings in scope and worldbuilding, *2034* delivers a solid character drama that peers into the future just over the horizon and imagines what a long-feared clash of the world's great powers would look like. The implications for the United States are sobering. Stavridis and Ackerman sound the alarm

that the United States needs to find its way again, take threats seriously, and perhaps invest more in the Navy if it does not want to become another fallen global hegemon, or worse, a nuclear wasteland.

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