Reviewed by David Plott

THE PARADOX OF Lee Kuan Yew’s life is that it has been both his great fortune and his ill luck to have been given an exceedingly small canvas on which to practice his political statecraft.

He was fortunate in that the rump city-state of Singapore, formed after an acrimonious breakaway from the Federation of Malaya in 1965 (only two years after it had joined the federation), provided the young Lee with a relatively confined political laboratory in which to shape, with increasing success over the years, his unique brand of nation-building. Like an Ottoman miniature painter, he fleshed out his canvas with minute attention to detail, oblivious perhaps to the fact that the art in which he was engaged as prime minister from 1965 until 1990. In short, Lee had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeeded at home, and he had so demonstrably succeed...
a market economy and the sheer political power that derives from the steady enrichment of a population of 1.3 billion people, and also on the deep cultural roots of a 5,000-year-old civilization. It is virtually inevitable that China will become the world’s No. 1 power, he argues, and that is precisely to what the country aspires. “Their great advantage is not in military influence but in their economic influence ... They have the manpower to do things cheaper in any part of the world economically. Their influence can only grow and grow beyond the capabilities of America.” China’s conquest of East Asia will take place through trade, he argues, with China becoming the top importer and exporter of all East Asian countries over the coming decades. “How can the Americans compete in trade?” he asks.

At the same time, he says China is in no hurry to take the top spot in global affairs, partly because it needs 50 or more years to get its domestic house in order, but also because it doesn’t want to challenge the US at this stage in its development. Germany and Japan made that mistake in the first half of the 20th century, he says. “Rather, its strategy is to grow within this framework, biding its time until it becomes strong enough to successfully redefine this political and economic order.”

Lee’s complex, nuanced, deeply analytical views on world affairs are expressed in blunt, compelling language. Readers of every political stripe who have followed Lee over his long career will find much in this book to praise and much to condemn, in large part because Lee has always been anything but politically correct. He is more upbeat about India’s private sector than its government, arguing it is superior to China’s, because “Indian companies follow interna- tional rules of corporate governance and offer a higher return on equity as against Chinese companies,” adding that “India has transparent and functioning capital markets.”

Although Lee is often scathing about India’s sometimes dysfunctional democracy, at times even suggesting that its democracy is itself a source of the dysfunction, he surprisingly con- cludes that “India’s system of democracy and rule of law gives it a long-term advantage over China, although in the early phases, China has the advantage of faster implementation of its reforms.”

At the same time, in a nod to his conviction that national cultures, habits and history are essential to understanding a country’s behavior, he cautions against explicitly comparing China and India: “Do not talk about India and China in the same breath. They are two different countries.”

On the issue of Islamic extremism and its future, Lee focuses on both economics and theology. “Militant Islam feeds upon the insecurities and alienation that globalization generates among the less successful. And because globalization is largely US-led and driven, militant Islamic identities America and Americans as the threat to Islam.” He warns in particular of the risks of a future victory by a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. “A severely retrograde form of Islam would be seen to have defeated modernity twice: first the Soviet Union, then the United States.”

Lee’s blames Saudi Arabia’s more conservative brand of Islam for being the breeding ground of Islamic extremism, and says moderate Mus- lims around the world are the only force capable of taking on Islamic extremists. “Only Muslims themselves — those with a moderate, more modern approach to life — can fight the fundamentalists for control of the Muslim soul.”

From one subject to another throughout this volume, Lee’s complex, nuanced, deeply analytical views on world affairs are expressed in blunt, compelling language. Readers of every political stripe who have followed Lee over his long career will find much in this book to praise and much to condemn, in large part because Lee has always been anything but politically correct. But in compiling such a rich collection of statements on such a wide range of global issues, Allison and Blackwill have done both scholars and general readers a service by providing a manageable, one-stop shop on Lee’s thinking.

One note of caution for scholars using this volume: While the book’s various chapters read smoothly from beginning to end, the text is actually a disparate accumulation of statements by Lee made at different times and in different contexts. Virtually every paragraph contains an endnote, and only by matching back and forth between the text and the endnotes can one deter- mine precisely when and where Lee said what he did. This is important to know, because other- wise one can easily overlook the fact that Lee’s thinking actually evolved over the years and that each of these statements was made in a particular historical context.

The only other thing that mars this otherwise valuable collection is a fawning tone in many of the introductory remarks, as though Allison and Blackwill weren’t content to let the forcefulness of Lee’s thinking speak for itself. Instead, they apparently felt the need to gush. The opening chapter’s title, “Who Is Lee Kuan Yew?” is fol- lowed, for example, by this subtitle: “A strategist’s strategist, A leader’s leader, A mentor’s mentor.” That could have been taken straight from Singapore’s government-controlled media. Moreover, the chapter itself consists of nothing but quotations from political and business leaders praising Lee. This even includes quotations from publicity blurbs by prominent people for books written by Lee. There are no quotations from critics of Lee, which makes the chapter title a bit disingenuous.

This glowing tone informs even the book’s title. Wouldn’t “Lee Kuan Yew: Insights on China, the United States, and the World” have been enough? I guess not when one is a bit too eager to signal where one stands on a man whose legacy is not yet fully written, but will contain both good and bad — even if more of the former than the latter.

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