

# Present at the Re-Creation

## A Neoconservative Moves On

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*The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. Robert Kagan. Knopf, 2008, 128 pp. 19.95

Summary: Robert Kagan's *Return of History* ignores the Iraqi elephant in the room.

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If a neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality, as Irving Kristol once said, what is a neoconservative who gets mugged yet again? A realist.

So, at least, one might conclude from reading Robert Kagan's *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. Over the past two decades, Kagan has emerged as the neoconservative movement's chief foreign policy theorist. The author of numerous opinion pieces and a signatory of manifestoes of the neoconservative organization the Project for the New American Century, he has also written serious books. Notable among them is the 2006 *Dangerous Nation*, the first volume of an ambitious two-part project that recasts the entire history of American statecraft as an affirmation of neoconservative ideals and aspirations. Yet in this latest rumination on international politics, Kagan largely eschews neoconservative theology and instead sounds themes reminiscent of the great American realists Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr. Kagan once professed to believe that "there is something about realism that runs directly counter to the fundamental principles of American society." But now he deploys realist principles to explain the world.

Or at least most of the world. Amid the great outpouring of recent books on U.S. foreign policy, *The Return of History* stands out in one particular respect: it all but ignores the ongoing debacle that is the war in Iraq, a war that neoconservatives such as Kagan so passionately supported in 2003. To be fair, neoconservatives did not concoct the war; it was George W. Bush who chose to invade Iraq, and the chief responsibility for all that has ensued since is his. Yet Kagan was among those lobbying for the war, chiding as "nervous nellys" those people who had the temerity to suggest that overthrowing Saddam Hussein might prove unwise. Now, instead of reflecting, forthrightly and with humility, on all that has gone awry since March 2003, the chief foreign policy theorist of the neoconservative movement has chosen to put the war in his rearview mirror. While American soldiers remain stuck in Iraq, Kagan is moving on to other things.

### DREAMERS

Kagan moves on by looking into the past, primarily concerning himself with what came before Iraq. And he primarily concerns himself with ideas, taking his cue from Kristol, the founding father of neoconservatism, who once observed, "What rules the world is ideas, because ideas define the way reality is perceived." During the decade between the end of the Cold War and the attacks of September 11, 2001, commentators eager to chart the future course of U.S. foreign policy produced a plethora of such ideas -- or "dreams," according to the title of Kagan's book -- including the defective notion that the end of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry heralded a fundamental change in the international order.

But "what reason was there to believe," Kagan asks with evident exasperation, "that after 1989 humankind was suddenly on the cusp of a brand-new order?" According to Kagan, no such thing was ever in the cards. "People and their leaders longed for 'a world transformed,'" he writes, derisively quoting the title of George H. W. Bush's 1998 memoir. "But that was a mirage. The world has not been transformed." Instead, the iron laws of history and politics have remained intact, and "struggles for status and influence in the world have returned as central features of the international scene." Competition among great powers will define the twenty-first century, Kagan asserts, "producing alliances and counteralliances, and the elaborate dances and shifting partnerships, that a nineteenth-century diplomat would recognize instantly." In other words, geopolitics is back.

Kagan does not identify the silly people who deluded themselves and misled everyone else with visions of a world transformed. He contents himself with dismissive allusions to nameless figures who peddled naive illusions of "nation-states growing together or disappearing [a jab at Jessica Tuchman Mathews?], ideological conflicts melting away [a kick to Francis Fukuyama?], cultures intermingling [remember those ubiquitous Benetton ads?], and increasingly free commerce and communications [Bill Clinton borrowing from Thomas Friedman?]."

Kagan's catalog of the ideas that surfaced during the heady days after the Soviet Union's fall is nothing if not selective. To be sure, the big ideas that wowed members of the American policy elite in the 1990s look the worse for wear today. But blaming the likes of Mathews, Fukuyama, and Friedman for the United States' present predicament is like blaming Harriet Beecher Stowe for the American Civil War; it lets the real culprits off the hook. The ideas that have really mattered are those that influenced the National Security Strategy of 2002 and Bush's second inaugural address, which articulated Bush's "freedom agenda" and his doctrine of preventive war, the intellectual bases not only for the invasion of Iraq but also for the global war on terrorism. Of those ideas, which are covered with the neoconservatives' fingerprints, Kagan says strangely little.

Above all, Kagan fails to mention his own contribution to the promotion of fin-de-siècle illusions. Writing in *Present Dangers* with the commentator William Kristol about a decade ago, he was among those who expressed great certainty that with the end of the Cold War, "the world had indeed been transformed" -- and transformed, at that, "in America's image." He and Kristol argued that with the disintegration of the Soviet empire, the United States had achieved a position of preeminence "unmatched since Rome dominated the Mediterranean world" -- an ascendancy, they added, that "undergirded what President George Bush rightly called 'a new world order.'" To sustain this uniquely advantageous position, U.S. policymakers simply needed to shed any lingering reluctance to exercise what Kagan and Kristol called "benevolent global hegemony."

The Kagan of old thus had little patience with realists, who endlessly cited John Quincy Adams' warning against the dangers of going "abroad in search of monsters to destroy." After all, Kagan (and Kristol) maintained, the United States possessed more than sufficient "capacity to contain or destroy many of the world's monsters, most of which [could] be found without much searching." Keen to put that muscle to work, Kagan encouraged in the 2000 book a broad strategy of regime change, "in Baghdad and Belgrade, in Pyongyang and Beijing, and wherever tyrannical governments acquire the military power to threaten their neighbors, our allies and the United States itself."

For Kagan, the marriage of American power with American values after the Cold War rendered geopolitics obsolete. What was imperative was keeping faith in the American mission. Given that "the principles of the Declaration of Independence are not merely the choices of a particular culture but are universal, enduring, 'self-evident' truths," as he and Kristol put it in a 1996 essay for *Foreign Affairs*, taking on monsters became a duty of sorts; shirking that duty, on the other hand, was like succumbing to "a policy of cowardice and dishonor." Mounting a final offensive against the world's last pockets of illiberalism was to "relish the opportunity for national engagement, embrace the possibility of national greatness, and restore a sense of the heroic" -- the heroic having been lost, according to Kagan and Kristol, when the Cold War era ended.

## ROBERT THE REALIST

In *The Return of History*, Kagan offers a decidedly different view. Having once denounced realists as "professional pessimists," he now allows that "the realists had a clearer understanding of the unchanging nature of human beings." The collapse of communism, he now writes, produced "not a transformation but merely a pause in the endless competition of nations and peoples." In a statement to which Morgenthau and Niebuhr would surely have subscribed, he even concedes that "it is not so easy to escape history."

If the old Kagan expressed considerable optimism about the United States' capacity to spread freedom, democracy, and other principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, the new Kagan encloses "universal values" in quotation marks, as if to distance himself from Thomas Jefferson's claims. Kagan dismisses outright the notion that the advance of democracy reflects "merely the unfolding of certain ineluctable processes of economic and political development." In fact, he acknowledges, "We really don't know whether such an evolutionary process, with predictable stages and known causes and effects, even exists." This is a bit like a senior Vatican official expressing skepticism about whether Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Cribbing from the realist tradition, Kagan outlines the contours of the great-power competition he expects will

define the twenty-first century, with China, Europe, India, Japan, Russia, and, of course, the United States as key players. In the process, he engages in considerable oversimplification and more than a little hype. To justify Japan's making the cut, for example, Kagan claims that Tokyo today "displays great power ambitions" and even plays a "global military role." Yet Japan's military spending has actually declined in recent years; the country's top national security priority is not power projection but ballistic missile defense. As a participant in global military affairs, Japan lags well behind Canada.

Kagan views a rising China and a resurgent Russia as potential problems: both are authoritarian states whose ambitions could threaten international stability. In response, he calls for the formation of a "league of democracies," led by the United States and including European states, that would hold "regular meetings and consultations among democratic nations on the issues of the day." (Headline: "Mars and Venus Announce Plans to Marry!") That he now advocates creating a talking society shows how far Kagan has traveled since the days when he was touting the benefits of the United States' global hegemony. It is hard to see what this league would accomplish apart from providing sinecures for large numbers of second-tier government officials and civil servants. In all likelihood, it would be a new NATO without the clout or the cohesion of the old.

How does violent Islamic radicalism figure in this vision of the twenty-first century? For Kagan, the threat turns out not to be so great after all. Refreshingly devoid of inflammatory references to "Islamofascism" or World War IV, *The Return of History* does not foresee a new caliphate seizing control of the Muslim world and attempting to impose sharia on the West. Kagan sees the Islamist cause as doomed to fail. He describes political Islam as a "hopeless dream," believing (correctly, in my view) that "in the struggle between traditionalism and modernity, tradition cannot win." Thus, for Kagan, mounting an all-out global assault against terrorism no longer ranks as a top priority.

Neither does the war in Iraq. In the run-up to the U.S. invasion in 2003, Kagan, writing in *The Washington Post*, described Iraq as "a historical pivot" and events there as destined to "shape the course of Middle Eastern politics, and therefore world politics, both now and for the remainder of this century." After five years of fighting, more than 4,000 U.S. deaths, several hundred billion dollars frittered away, and some 140,000 U.S. troops still on the ground, he no longer seems to think so. *The Return of History* barely mentions Iraq. For Kagan, at least, the longer the war drags on, the less important it becomes. In this, he is like a 1960s hawk writing a book in 1968 who consigns the Vietnam War to a couple of sentences.

## THE EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

There is one central point on which the new Kagan sees eye to eye with the old: the strictures of realism do not apply to the United States. For Kagan, the United States' "sense of a universal mission and belief in the righteousness of its own power" inform its behavior. This, in his view, is a good thing. Out of righteousness comes assertiveness, and, indeed, the United States has "intervened and overthrown sovereign governments dozens of times throughout its history." Kagan characterizes U.S. policy as inherently "expansive, even aggressive," and as deriving its force from a set of deeply internalized core convictions. Chief among them is the belief that securing American freedom and American prosperity requires a world that adheres to American (or "universal," with quotation marks, as Kagan might put it) principles.

Most U.S. citizens and almost all U.S. politicians pretend otherwise, preferring to see themselves as "an inward-looking and insular people, always just a step away from retreating into their fortress." Kagan rightly dismisses this as so much posturing. In effect, he aligns himself with the historiographical tradition founded by Charles Beard and subsequently refined by William Appleman Williams. This is more than slightly ironic, since both Beard (a leading critic of U.S. intervention in World War II) and Williams (the founding father of Cold War revisionism) rejected the heroic narrative of U.S. history to which neoconservatives such as Kagan subscribe. Yet in his recent writings, Kagan joins these revisionists in debunking the myth of U.S. isolationism. He acknowledges the intimate yet flexible relationship between the United States' ideals and its relentless pursuit of more tangible interests, the neat alignment between the imperatives of righteousness and the imperatives of power. When he mocks Americans' pretensions to innocence -- "It is as if the United States somehow arrived at the present pinnacle of global power by accident, that Americans neither desire nor enjoy their role as the world's predominant power" -- Kagan almost seems to be channeling Williams, who over three decades ago said of historians evading the reality of American power, "All have written, willy-nilly or with the kind of a priori certainty that slams the door on truth, that the American Empire just grew like Topsy."

Unfortunately, Kagan diverges from Beard and Williams in one critical respect. Whereas they saw the United States' penchant for expansionism as problematic, he does not. Whether the country's aim was empire, hegemony, or making the world safe for democracy, Beard and Williams believed that expansionism was fundamentally at odds with the long-term interests of the American people. They proposed that rather than looking abroad for solutions to the problems afflicting the United States, Americans learn to live within their means. Beard and Williams acknowledged that this might require substantially changing the fundamental principles governing the American way of life. Yet they believed that transforming the United States was likely to prove an easier task than transforming the world in order to sustain American self-indulgence and profligacy.

Despite his newfound realism, Kagan balks at considering the possibility that the United States and Americans ought to change. He makes no effort to assess whether the Bush administration's recent revival of an expansionist conception of statecraft serves U.S. interests today. Has the doctrine of preventive war enhanced the well-being of the American people? Has the pursuit of President Bush's "freedom agenda" improved the United States' standing in the world? Or have the policies devised in the wake of 9/11 squandered the United States' power and multiplied its problems?

Although there is abundant empirical evidence bearing directly on these questions, Kagan evinces almost no interest in such data. He has little time for contemplating the costs of Bush's aggressive policies in the Middle East, even though, according to some estimates, the price of the Iraq war alone may reach into the trillions of dollars. Key indicators of basic economic health -- such as the size of the national debt, the strength of the dollar, the extent of the trade deficit, and the country's ever-increasing dependence on imported oil -- do not figure in his analysis, even though they all have worsened under President Bush.

For Kagan, the United States remains indispensable. It "is still the keystone to the arch," he writes. "Remove it, and the arch collapses." Here, Kagan the recent convert to realism gives way to Kagan the unrepentant neoconservative, who refuses to acknowledge that the United States' traditional foreign policy of expansionism has long been counterproductive. From the end of the Revolutionary War through the 1950s, expansionism did enhance U.S. power and wealth, and it did make freedom possible for ever larger numbers of Americans. But that correlation came undone in the 1960s. Recent efforts at expansion -- such as President Bush's ill-fated attempt to pacify the Muslim world -- have served only to dissipate U.S. power while weakening the U.S. economy and creating pretexts for the government to curtail individual freedoms at home. Expansionism no longer offers a way out -- and this fact, as much as and perhaps more so than the rise of China or the resurgence of Russia, defines the world that must be reckoned with today. But Kagan, eager to move on, bury the Iraq war, and whitewash the entire post-9/11 era, which he and other neoconservatives have so profoundly misunderstood, cannot or will not acknowledge this new reality.