

Culture & Society

Jaded Optimists

The Young Guns of Foreign Policy

John Hallett Norris

There are two central truisms regarding the foreign policy profession in the United States.

One: The post-World War II crop of diplomats—Dean Acheson, George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Averell Harriman, and others—represented a golden age when men of honor and wisdom guided the United States with a steady hand and remarkable vision as they held the Soviets in check and molded modern institutions ranging from NATO to the World Bank.

Two: Things have pretty much gone to hell in a hand-basket ever since, with the foreign policy field increasingly dominated by partisans, ideologues, and the shortsighted, as a once-proud profession has been reduced to little more than a special interest lobby bent on personal indulgence.

Yearning for the elitism of the forties, fifties, and early sixties has become fashionable. Yet, as extensive conversations with young American foreign policy professionals reveal, much of the current conventional wisdom regarding the next generation of foreign policymakers is remarkably wrongheaded.

The “New” Elitists? The adulation of the generation of post-World War II foreign policymakers expressed by today’s pundits borders on an embarrassing crush. Walter Isaacson

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and Evan Thomas, in *The Wise Men*, describe Dean Acheson, Averell Harriman, Charles Bohlen, and Robert Lovett as men who forged a common belief both “in America’s sacred destiny—and their own.” The authors portray foreign policy giants gliding between a patrician world of high finance and Georgetown foreign policy salons, their shared values “nurtured in prep schools, at college clubs, in the boardrooms of Wall Street, and at dinner parties in Washington.”²

Fareed Zakaria argues in his most recent book that the Anglo-American elite “embodied certain values—fair play, decency, liberty, and a Protestant sense of mission—that helped set the standards for society.”³ John Judis enthuses about

I.M. Destler, Les Gelb, and Tony Lake bemoaned that U.S. foreign policy had become “far more partisan and ideological,” with experts “spending more time, energy, and passion in fighting ourselves than we have in trying, as a nation, to understand and deal with a rapidly changing world.”⁷

Each of the aforementioned authors offer token caveats that they think it is unrealistic to go back to the “good old days.” Nonetheless, the sense of nostalgia is overwhelming. Zakaria insists that “what we need in politics today is not more democracy but less,”⁸ while Lake and Gelb noted with sadness that, “just as war had become too important to be left to the generals, foreign policy was now

To some, establishment elites represented an almost Athenian ideal.

an elite that developed policies “based on fact and knowledge,” as “they nourished public trust in government by defending and explaining complex decisions that the ordinary voter did not have time to study.”⁴

Given the view that establishment elites represented an almost Athenian ideal, it is no surprise that the “new” elitists find much to dislike in the current environment. Zakaria denounces an “unwieldy system, unable to govern or command the respect of the people,” and driven by a “simple-minded populism.”⁵ Judis laments an age during which decisions to use force are often motivated by “transient political pressures and passing diplomatic fancies.”⁶

Upon closer inspection, the “new” elitists are expressing well-worn ideas. In their 1984 book, *Our Own Worst Enemy*,

too important to be left to the diplomats.”⁹ All the more striking, then, that one of the original *Wise Men*, George Kennan, felt that even in 1938 the public had too much say in public affairs, suggesting the establishment of a “benevolent despotism”—a benevolence that he felt should include denying the vote to women, blacks, and immigrants, with the country governed by an “enlightened elite” to be “selected on the basis of individual fitness for authority.”¹⁰

Not Your Father’s Oldsmobile.

The subtext of the new elitist arguments is that America would be better served if the ladder could be pulled back up and a small cadre of great foreign policy thinkers could steer the ship of state. These authors neglect to mention that it was an insular and Groton-educated elite

(Mac Bundy graduated *summa cum laude* at age sixteen) that led us into Vietnam without understanding the situation on the ground. It was also the same foreign policy elite that engineered the Bay of Pigs, “lost” China to the Communists, and sat on its hands during the 1956 Hungarian uprising.

The notion of a handful of barons controlling U.S. foreign policy runs directly counter to both common sense and important trends. Today’s young foreign policy practitioners are far more diverse than in the past, and they are likely to hail from upper middle class families in Cherry Hill, New Jersey (birthplace of the strip mall), or Vidalia, Georgia (known more for its onion festival than its internationalism) than the elite estates of New England. One young Foreign Service Officer from Redwood City, California joked that many people mistakenly think he works for the U.S. Forest Service.

In contrast to their predecessors, most of these young professionals possessed considerable international exposure *before* selecting their careers. In the past, many internationalists received their initial exposure to the world while in the employ of Uncle Sam, shaping their opinion of the world upon arriving at their first military or diplomatic post. This new cohort has gone out into the world—backpacking through Central America, studying abroad in Europe, attending parliamentary exchange groups—and then made a conscious decision that it wanted to work in international affairs. This new generation has a fundamentally different view of America’s place in the world: one that is less overtly nationalistic and more accepting of the overlapping layers of interaction that now define relations among modern states.

America’s young foreign policy professionals have come of age at a time when the United States’s role as the lone super power has been unquestioned. They have lived their entire adult lives in general peacetime; few question the need for the United States to be broadly engaged in the world. America’s social, economic, political, and military influence is seen as part of a broad international superstructure. This new generation is smart, reflexively ironic, curiously insecure, and, like most Americans, far less willing to work for any company or institution for a lifetime. They are also defined by both remarkable strengths and a lingering unease with assuming leadership that could prove to be an Achilles heel.

After the Fall. The end of the Cold War opened up an unprecedented floodgate of confusion and opportunity for young internationalists, and offered a missed chance to revolutionize how the United States organizes its foreign policy. Here the generation gap is profound. Consider the story of Martina Vandenberg, thirty-four, a researcher at Human Rights Watch: “In 1991, I was studying command and control of Soviet nuclear weapons and the politicization of the Soviet military under Gorbachev. Suddenly I went from being a political scientist to being a historian—literally overnight.”¹¹

While in Russia during 1990, Vandenberg met a woman who had been raped by a neighbor. Angered that the Russian police had told the woman to “go home and sleep it off,” Vandenberg became determined to start a rape crisis center in Moscow.¹² Only twenty-two at the time, she received a “bevy of rejection letters” from international foundations when she spelled out her proposal.¹³ Her

vision deferred, she took a temporary job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture working out of the U.S. embassy monitoring the distribution of 100,000 tons of dairy products, an effort that led one diplomat to dub her the “butter lady.”¹⁴

As Vandenberg put it, “by day I was the butter lady, but by night a group of radical feminists would come to my house and we would plot and plan and talk.”¹⁵ After a year and a half the rape crisis center got off the ground and is still running today. Vandenberg recognizes that the end of the Cold War “allowed me and the others to create organizations from nothing—something that would have been totally impossible, completely unheard of, just eight months before.”¹⁶

While young people in the field were presented with a bonanza, many greybeards lamented the collapse of policy structures that disappeared along with the calculus of containment. John Hillen, thirty-six, a former army captain and veteran of the first Gulf War, comments on the end of the Cold War, “it would be an understatement to say that this was close to home for me, because I was literally patrolling the inter-German border the night the wall went down. My unit had responsibility for 196 kilometers of iron curtain that disappeared on November 9, 1989.”¹⁷

In Hillen’s view, the fundamental re-altering of the landscape presented new choices and persistent ambiguity. Gone was the traditional pathway for career progression, specializing in Cold War issues such as strategic military affairs or nuclear doctrine. Topics traditionally at the bottom of the pecking order—development, peacekeeping, public health, and women’s issues—quickly gained new prominence in the “eat what you can kill” environment facing foreign policy intel-

lectuals.¹⁸ Hillen argues, “with no central organizing proposition about the way the world should work and what America’s role in it should be, the public lost interest. The threat was gone.”¹⁹

The Lost 1990s. During much of the 1990s, national leaders of both parties shamefully neglected foreign policy. The leading lights of U.S. foreign policy appeared mystified as how to sell U.S. foreign affairs to the general public in the absence of the Soviet menace, and were slow to see the entrepreneurial prospects readily apparent to those like Vandenberg and Hillen. The Gingrich revolution brought to Washington a group of Congressmen who wore their disdain for events beyond our shores as a badge of populist honor. Military and humanitarian debacles in Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia fed a sense that the foreign policy establishment was not only in disarray, but also badly out of touch. Due to budget constraints, the Foreign Service exam was not even offered in 1995.

All of this shows the danger of having small elites in charge of foreign policy. The elders of the foreign policy community failed to convince America that it needed to support foreign affairs—despite the fact that there was a larger natural constituency for foreign policy than ever before: More than 20 million American jobs are now linked to international investment, tourism, and trade; More than 700 American municipalities are in Sister City programs; and U.S. states maintain more than 160 offices overseas to help promote trade and tourism. Millions of Americans now follow events in countries across the world on the Internet.

The idea that a small elite of foreign policy experts can handle the vast and

increasingly decentralized portfolio of America's interactions with the world is laughable. Yet, because many foreign policy leaders were appalled by the prospects of leaving the cozy confines of the Council on Foreign Relations and explaining their work (and its worth) to the public, the foreign policy community as a whole did an atrocious job defending itself. With all the ammunition it needed to build a broad constituency outside the Beltway for positive international engagement, most foreign policy leaders could only invoke Robert Kaplan-esque warnings of plague and civil war—the closest specter they could marshal to the “clearer than the truth” rationales of the Cold War.

The irony is obvious. At a time when the world is becoming more inter-connected than ever before, and the term “globalization” is thrown around with mind-numbing regularity, the wealthiest and most powerful nation on Earth failed to reach out to its own citizens with a vested interest in events beyond our shores.

A Chill at Foggy Bottom. While the increasingly egalitarian nature of the foreign policy field may rankle some, it is a healthy development. With increasing opportunities in the foreign policy arena, traditional bastions such as the Foreign Service have had to do something that they rarely had to do in the past: compete for talent. While budgets and morale have bounced under Secretary of State Colin Powell, the Foreign Service is no longer the first choice of many of the best and brightest. Derek Chollet, thirty-two, a Senate staffer, comments, “For people interested in international affairs there are just more things that you can do in the

world, in addition to being a Foreign Service officer, that can satisfy those interests and, in some ways, even satisfy them better.”²⁰

The lack of enthusiasm for stamping visas is so common as to be almost emblematic among these young professionals. With thousands of NGOs now working around the globe, there are many opportunities—albeit often low-paying ones—for people to get their boots dirty and take on responsibility at an early age. There is comparatively limited appeal in sitting in a heavily fortified U.S. embassy amid vintage 1960s furnishings reviewing visa applications and writing heavily-edited cables.

While the Foreign Service has recently made strides toward reform, this transformation has been slow. The time from taking the initial Foreign Service exam to being offered a job can stretch well past a year, and the private sector pays better. Foreign Service officers are expected to commit to three-year rotations, a long timeframe for a generation weaned on frequent job changes and remarkable workplace flexibility. Moreover, Foreign Service careers are daunting for working couples.

Rob Chase, thirty-five, spent his teens in Morocco where his father ran the U.S. foreign aid program. Chase is now a professor of international economics at Johns Hopkins, and he sees foreign policy as a domain where “the ethos of a mandarin class” has traditionally prevailed, and where people were drawn to the work because it felt “more valuable, more exciting, and more honorable.”²¹ While Chase finds many of his students driven by a similar desire to blend duty and globetrotting, what was once a small mandarin class has expanded immensely. The sense of “being in an inner circle of

people who are the ones that set foreign policy, that exclusive clubbishness, is dissipating.”²² Chase contends, “it is a very *laissez faire* attitude—you’ve got the government as one actor, and you’ve got business as another, and you’ve got the NGO community as a third, and the press as a fourth. You have lots of actors in each of these estates and none of them has paramount sovereignty.”²³

Chase argues, “if you believe in the marketplace of ideas you don’t need the Star Chamber, you don’t need the people guiding the policy from either the State Department, or the National Security Council, or academia. If you believe that the marketplace of ideas is going to allow things to move toward improving the situation, let it.”²⁴ While this “let a thousand flowers bloom” approach may not necessarily create a more coherent U.S. foreign policy, it does allow a broader set of actors to influence how policy is set—a shift from the insularity that helped foster some of America’s more notable foreign policy blunders.

Operating absent the lodestar of the Cold War can at times be muddy business. Yet, among this newer generation, there is little desire for a bumper sticker foreign policy; the concept of a single operating principle feels outdated and dangerous to many of these young professionals. They see the world as complex and America’s interactions with it multitudinous. Simple, straightforward schemes that encompass something as vast as the national interest, covering everything from economics, security, the environment, public health, immigration, law enforcement, and beyond, carry a whiff of alchemy. This younger generation cannot imagine all foreign policy designs flowing from a single wellspring in a world where almost every American

activity abroad is embedded within an interlocking, and sometimes competing, series of institutions, interests, and strategic considerations.

Taking on the World? The contentious post-9/11 environment has opened up important political fissures among these young professionals. Jennifer Windsor, thirty-eight, the Executive Director of Freedom House, a non-partisan NGO specializing in democracy promotion, notes, “we have seen a more polarized political foreign policy debate re-emerge after 9/11.”²⁵ She argues, “one of the main divisions is between those who have involved themselves in and defined themselves by the Cold War struggle, and those that have come afterwards. Some people are using some of the same rhetoric from the Cold War and applying it to the war against terrorism.”²⁶

Those serving in the administration, particularly Republican political appointees, argue that America is now pulling together behind a greater sense of national purpose. This is not just politics; the sentiment is underpinned by a genuine desire to defend the national interest. They continue to be hopeful that the country will remain steadfast in support of the president’s foreign policy vision.

Many of those outside of government feel the administration has gone astray. Independent and Democratic young foreign policy professionals sharply question whether America’s position is strengthened by an approach they view as often unilateral and arrogant. They would prefer to see a more complex matrix of resources and tools used to advance U.S. interests. Anthony Richter, thirty-nine, the Director of the Central Eurasia Project at the Open Society Institute, maintains that the “securitiza-

tion of foreign policy flows back not only into government, but really into military and intelligence, for setting the policies and priorities of how we interact with the world is very striking. The intellectual, the political, the financial momentum is with the Pentagon and with the intelligence community."²⁷ He argues that in a dangerous development the military has become "a defining discourse for dealing with the world."²⁸

The splits among this cohort over foreign policy during this tumultuous period are natural, but striking, given that many of these young professionals are normally tepid partisans. Because they do not enjoy the remarkable financial and political connections that were the trademark of the traditional establishment, many of these individuals have instead been quite adept at finding patrons rather than ideology. Knowing it was the best way to punch their tickets, they worked in offices on the Hill or as trusted special

that the post-Cold War generation "has not yet raised leaders capable of evoking a commitment to a consistent and long-range foreign policy."²⁹ British historian Niall Ferguson has similarly labeled America "an empire in denial," whose natural anti-imperialism has blinded it to its own sweeping responsibilities.³⁰

Given their slim record of military experience, few of America's young foreign policy professionals have been tested in life and death situations. This has left some in the military to complain that the new generation of diplomats simply does not understand. Indeed, one young foreign policy scholar confided, "I may be an aberration, but it is sort of incredible if you think about it. I sit here and pontificate about what the U.S. should or should not do with regard to military force all the time, and yet I don't know shit about the military."³¹ In contrast, Georgetown professor Daniel Byman, thirty-four, argues that the lack of mili-

Among this newer generation, little desire exists for a bumper sticker foreign policy.

assistants to senior policymakers and traded off these connections. Before 9/11, many viewed the differences between the parties largely as Coke and Pepsi. In areas like trade or China policy, there seemed to be little difference between administrations for a generation notoriously averse to joining bowling leagues or political parties.

Leadership in an Un-Heroic Age. Perhaps the more important question is whether this generation has the force of personality to exercise leadership. Henry Kissinger has complained

tary experience during the Clinton administration often left the Pentagon with a free hand: "Most people thought 'the military is being ignored, they are being disrespected.' The result was that no one could question the military, because who knew enough?"³²

Asking young U.S. foreign policy leaders about their heroes is fascinating. Almost to a person, they struggle to name contemporary American political figures they view heroically. For those between twenty-five and forty, no administration has been without blanket media coverage that has glaringly exposed the flaws of

public figures. Many insist that we live in a time in which there is “too much information” to have heroes. The very notion of heroism seems almost quaint to a generation steeped in relativism.

Given their daily exposure to the world, it is small wonder these internationalists are jaded. (As the comedienne Lily Tomlin demurred, “No matter how cynical I get, I just can’t keep up.”) Lillian Rice, twenty-seven, who practices international law in New York City, notes that there is “a greater sense of irony about everything” among her contemporaries. She feels that while the new environment has provided ample opportunity, it has also been corrosive in that “there is no right answer to almost anything.”³³ Taught to look at the world through a lens of skepticism, these professionals are “always looking for the frayed edge, or the bad story. You are always undercutting your own words and everybody else’s. Probably sadly, it makes it impossible to wholeheartedly admire pretty much anyone.”³⁴ The greatest challenge for this generation of foreign policy specialists may be its inability to think in terms of black and white, right and wrong.

There is still hope. Having seen the end of the Cold War, many of these professionals remain optimistic—often more than they are willing to admit—and believe that the United States has a unique opportunity to lead. Lorelei Kelly, thirty-five, runs a bipartisan foreign policy study group on Capitol Hill, and lived in West Berlin just before the Wall fell. She often spoke with counterparts in the East German underground, and Kelly’s feelings about her own freedoms changed dramatically because of her experience dealing with people who “were never going to make it in line for an apartment or a car. They lived in the

bombed out remnants of 1948. All of a sudden it made sense to me that I was living in a completely different universe than these people. To even have a choice at all was a fantastic endowment.”³⁵ This is an endowment that Kelly and many young foreign policy professionals are eager to share: “I remember, over time, people’s impression of the United States was that it was not a place on a map but an idea called America, and people are still in love with this idea. And for some reason I feel like we need to live up to it.”³⁶

Ultimately, the idea of returning to a foreign policy elite is badly out of kilter with our own ideals. For all those who would propose a new age of elitism, one need only to thumb again through the pages of *The Best and the Brightest* to be reminded why Vietnam devastated the foreign policy establishment:

They had manipulated the public, the Congress, and the press from the start, told half truths about why we were going in, how deeply we were going in, how much we were spending, and how long we were in for. When their predictions turned out to be hopelessly inaccurate, and when the public and the Congress, annoyed at being manipulated, soured on the war, then the architects had been aggrieved. They had turned on those very symbols of the democratic society they had once manipulated, criticizing them for their lack of fiber, stamina, and lack of belief.³⁷

Maybe the lesson both then, and now, is that U.S. foreign policy need only be explained in terms as clear as the truth.

Author’s Note: The author interviewed forty U.S. foreign policy experts between the ages of twenty-five and forty in preparing this article.

NOTES

- 1 Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1986).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 3 Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 236.
- 4 John Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), 31.
- 5 Zakaria, 240.
- 6 Judis, xi.
- 7 I.M. Destler, Leslie Gelb, and Anthony Lake, *Our Own Worst Enemy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 13.
- 8 Zakaria, 248.
- 9 Destler, et al., 248.
- 10 Isaacson and Thomas, 171–173.
- 11 Martina Vandenberg, interviewed by John Norris, Washington, D.C., 29 March 2002.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 29 March 2002.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 29 March 2002.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 29 March 2002.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 29 March 2002.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 29 March 2002.
- 17 John Hillen, interviewed by John Norris, telephone interview, New York, 26 April 2002.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 26 April 2002.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 26 April 2002.
- 20 Derek Chollet, interviewed by John Norris, Washington, D.C., 13 December 2001.
- 21 Rob Chase, interviewed by John Norris, Washington, D.C., 25 March 2002.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 25 March 2002.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 25 March 2002.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 25 March 2002.
- 25 Jennifer Windsor, correspondence with author, Washington, D.C., 20 April 2003.
- 26 Windsor, 20 April 2003.
- 27 Anthony Richter, interviewed by John Norris, Washington, D.C., 14 March 2002.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 14 March 2002.
- 29 Henry Kissinger, *Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001),
- 30 See, for example, Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).
- 31 This quote remains anonymous in order to protect the identity of the source.
- 32 Daniel Byman, interviewed by John Norris, Arlington, VA, 11 January 2002.
- 33 Lillian Rice, interviewed by John Norris, Washington, D.C., 25 January 2002.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 25 January 2002.
- 35 Lorelei Kelly, interviewed by John Norris, Washington, D.C., 12 December 2001.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 12 December 2001.
- 37 David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 665–656.