

Continuity, not Change

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ROBERT KAGAN, *Dangerous Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 544 pp.

It is generally accepted today that George W. Bush's foreign policy—especially his doctrine of preemptive war and his emphasis on the promotion of democracy—represents a radical break with the American past. According to the conventional narrative, U.S. foreign policy was originally based on the principle of non-intervention; the American Founders are often invoked in support of the claim that the default position of U.S. foreign policy is isolationism. Who has not heard the argument that Washington's Farewell Address counsels opposition to foreign attachments, and that the Monroe Doctrine represents a ratification of this "isolationist" principle?

But, the narrative continues, while isolationism and non-intervention prevailed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, circumstances required the United States to abandon this posture at the beginning of the twentieth century. But even then, America did so only reluctantly, as a response to threats to vital national interests. Thus, with the exception of the failed effort by Woodrow Wilson to base U.S. foreign policy on idealistic principles and George W. Bush's quixotic effort to impose democracy on the Middle

East, the United States has normally adhered to the principles of foreign policy "realism," a theory based on the idea that the driving force in international politics is national security, which can be ensured only by the possession of sufficient power relative to other states.

A number of authors have recently demonstrated the falseness of this conventional wisdom. In *The Savage Wars of Peace*, Max Boot explains that Americans have hardly been isolationist when it comes to the use of military power. In *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*, John Lewis Gaddis demonstrates that the statesmen of the Early Republic, usually portrayed as concerned with avoiding foreign entanglements, in fact were more than willing to engage in preventive war to defeat a threat before it became imminent. And in his indispensable *A Special Providence*, Walter Russell Mead identifies four American "schools of foreign policy," some more interventionist than others, which have vied for dominance as the United States has confronted the challenges of the international system.

And now, in his remarkable new book, *Dangerous Nation*, Robert Kagan drives a final stake through the heart of the "pervasive myth of America as isolationist and passive until provoked." Kagan goes beyond Boot, Gaddis, and Mead, linking U.S.



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foreign policy to American political culture and, perhaps more importantly, to the principles of the American founding. He demonstrates the degree to which American foreign policy has been driven not only by interests, in the narrow realist sense, but also by a belief on the part of Americans and their leaders that the principles upon which the republic was founded were right and true. An implication of Kagan's argument in *Dangerous Nation* is that there is a lineal progression from the Declaration of Independence to President Bush's attempt to midwife the creation of an Iraqi democracy.

Kagan, like Mead, argues that U.S. foreign policy cannot be understood in terms of the two dominant schools of international relations theory: realism and liberalism. The former stresses the importance of power and military security in international affairs and is most concerned about maintaining stability and a peaceful balance of power. The latter contends that the goals of actors within the international political system transcend power and security to include peace and prosperity. Kagan, however, outlines a third way—one that melds power and principle. America's westward expansion and rise to global power, he explains, have been inextricably linked to the idea that liberal democracy is the best form of government, not only for the United States but also for the world at large.

Kagan likewise demolishes the conventional narrative that portrays the legacy of the American Revolution as anti-imperialist. Indeed, Kagan shows that much of the problem between the colonists and Britain can be traced to the fact that the former had imperial designs of their own that the latter constantly thwarted, as

for instance, in the case of the Proclamation of 1763 that attempted to curb trans-Appalachian settlement. Of course, in the eyes of the Americans, the empire they envisioned was not to be based on conquest, but instead, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, an "empire of liberty."

Perhaps the most interesting part of *Dangerous Nation*, however, is its treatment of the antebellum period, when the debate over slavery became the central issue in American politics. As Kagan shows, this debate affected foreign policy as well. On the one hand, advocates of slavery favored expansion and the creation of a vast slave-holding empire into Mexico and the Caribbean. On the other, anti-slavery Americans were not opposed to expansion on principle, but their support for the growth of the United States was tempered by their fear that American expansion would mean the expansion of slavery. "Mexico will poison us," lamented one anti-slavery opponent of the Mexican War.

During this period, it was difficult for the United States to portray itself as the defender of universal human rights. The reason was well articulated by Abraham Lincoln in his 1854 speech condemning the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, which had effectively blocked the expansion of slavery into most of the territories carved out of the Louisiana Purchase.

I hate [slavery] because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst

ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty—criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self-interest.

But with the triumph of the North in the War of the Rebellion, the logic of liberty that Lincoln discerned in the Declaration of Independence could be extended to foreign policy as well.

For instance, the stated desire of the United States to free Cuba from a despotic Spain, which helped to bring about the Spanish-American War, can be traced to another speech by Lincoln that illustrates the logic of liberty. In his speech on the Dred Scott Decision of 1857, he said, “I think the authors of [the Declaration of Independence] intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say that all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal—equal in ‘certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”

He also argued that the Founders

did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all men were then actually enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for a free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly

attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.

Cannot the logic of this argument be applied to the liberation of Iraq?

Some have suggested that Kagan has set up a straw man; that he overstates the extent to which contemporary Americans imagine U.S. history to be thoroughly isolationist. But consider this statement from the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy, an organization created to oppose the alleged “imperial” foreign policy of the Bush administration: “the American people have not embraced the idea of an American empire, and they are unlikely to do so. Since rebelling against the British Empire, Americans have resisted the imperial impulse, guided by the Founders’ frequent warnings that republic and empire are incompatible.”

Now, reasonable people can disagree with the Bush Doctrine. But while everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, they are not entitled to make up their own facts. Kagan shows that the Founders and the statesmen of the Early Republic were not isolationist, and that the U.S. national interest long has been concerned with more than simple security—it has always had both a commercial and an ideological component.

Kagan reminds us why despots and tyrants in particular have considered the United States to be a “dangerous nation.” Before the American founding, all regimes were based on the principle of interest—the interest of the stronger. Inequality, whether between master and slave or between aristocrat and commoner, was simply part of the accepted order. But the

United States was founded on different principles—justice and equality. No longer would it be the foundation of political government that some men were born “with saddles on their backs” to be ridden by others born “booted and spurred.” In other words, no one had the right to rule over another without the latter’s consent. While the United States has not always lived up to its own principles, it has nonetheless created the standard of justice in both domestic and international affairs.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Robert Kagan for making this point so clearly.



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