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The End of the American Era

by Stephen M. Walt



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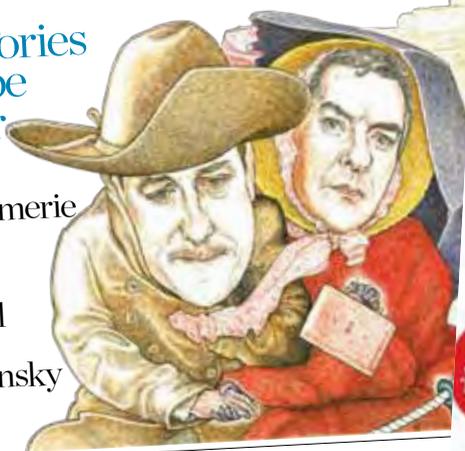
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The End of the American Era

By Stephen M. Walt

The United States has been the dominant world power since 1945, and U.S. leaders have long sought to preserve that privileged position. They understood, as did most Americans, that primacy brought important benefits. It made other states less likely to threaten America or its vital interests directly. By dampening great-power competition and giving Washington the capacity to shape regional balances of power, primacy contributed to a more tranquil international environment. That tranquility fostered global prosperity; investors and traders operate with greater confidence when there is less danger of war. Primacy also gave the United States the ability to work for positive ends: promoting human rights and slowing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. It may be lonely at the top, but Americans have found the view compelling.

When a state stands alone at the pinnacle of power, however, there is nowhere to go but down. And so Americans have repeatedly worried about the possibility of decline—even when the prospect was remote. Back in 1950, National Security Council Report 68 warned that Soviet acquisition of atomic weapons heralded an irreversible shift in geopolitical momentum in Moscow's favor. A few years later, Sputnik's launch led many to fear that Soviet

premier Nikita S. Khrushchev's pledge to "bury" Western capitalism might just come true. President John F. Kennedy reportedly believed the USSR would eventually be wealthier than the United States, and Richard Nixon famously opined that America was becoming a "pitiful, helpless giant." Over the next decade or so, defeat in Indochina and persistent economic problems led prominent academics to produce books with titles like *America as an Ordinary Country* and *After Hegemony*.¹ Far-fetched concerns about Soviet dominance helped propel Ronald Reagan to the presidency and were used to justify a major military buildup in the early 1980s. The fear of imminent decline, it seems, has been with us ever since the United States reached the zenith of global power.

Debates about decline took on new life with the publication of Paul Kennedy's best-selling *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, which famously argued that America was in danger of "imperial overstretch." Kennedy believed Great Britain returned to the unseemly ranks of mediocrity because it spent too much money defending far-flung interests and fighting costly wars, and he warned that the United States was headed

¹ See Richard Rosecrance, ed., *America as an Ordinary Country: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976); and Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

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down a similar path. Joseph Nye challenged Kennedy's pessimism in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, which sold fewer copies but offered a more accurate near-term forecast. Nye emphasized America's unusual strengths, arguing it was destined to be the leading world power for many years to come.

Since then, a host of books and articles—from Charles Krauthammer's "The Unipolar Moment," G. John Ikenberry's *Liberal Leviathan* and Niall Ferguson's *Colossus* to Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World* (to name but a few)—have debated how long American dominance could possibly last. Even Osama bin Laden eventually got in on the act, proclaiming the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan fatal blows to American power and a vindication of al-Qaeda's campaign of terror.

Yet for all the ink that has been spilled on the durability of American primacy, the protagonists have mostly asked the wrong question. The issue has never been whether the United States was about to imitate Britain's fall from the ranks of the great powers or suffer some other form of catastrophic decline. The real question was always whether what one might term the "American Era" was nearing its end. Specifically, might the United States remain the strongest global power but be unable to exercise the same influence it once enjoyed? If that is the case—and I believe it is—then Washington must devise a grand strategy that acknowledges this new reality but still uses America's enduring assets to advance the national interest.

The American Era began immediately after World War II. Europe may have been the center of international politics for over three centuries, but two destructive world wars decimated these great powers. The State Department's Policy Planning Staff declared in 1947 that "preponderant power must be the object of U.S. policy," and its willingness to openly acknowledge this goal speaks volumes about the imbalance of power in America's favor. International-relations scholars commonly speak of this moment as a transition from a multipolar to a bipolar world, but Cold War bipolarity was decidedly lopsided from the start.

In 1945, for example, the U.S. econo-



my produced roughly half of gross world product, and the United States was a major creditor nation with a positive trade balance. It had the world's largest navy and air force, an industrial base second to none, sole possession of atomic weapons and a globe-circling array of military bases. By supporting decolonization and backing European reconstruction through the Marshall Plan, Washington also enjoyed considerable

goodwill in most of the developed and developing world.

Most importantly, the United States was in a remarkably favorable geopolitical position. There were no other great powers in the Western Hemisphere, so Americans did not have to worry about foreign invasion. Our Soviet rival had a much smaller and less efficient economy. Its military might, concentrated on ground forces, never approached the global reach of U.S. power-projection capabilities. The other major power centers were all located on or near the Eurasian landmass—close to the Soviet Union and far from the United States—which made even former rivals like Germany and Japan eager for U.S. protection from the Russian bear. Thus, as the Cold War proceeded, the United States amassed a strong and loyal set of allies while the USSR led an alliance of comparatively weak and reluctant partners. In short, even before the Soviet Union collapsed, America's overall position was about as favorable as any great power's in modern history.

What did the United States do with these impressive advantages? In the decades after World War II, it created and led a political, security and economic order in virtually every part of the globe, except for the sphere that was directly controlled by the Soviet Union and its Communist clients. Not only did the United States bring most of the world into institutions that were largely made in America (the UN, the World Bank, the IMF, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), for decades it retained the dominant influence in these arrangements.

In Europe, the Marshall Plan revitalized local economies, covert U.S. intervention helped ensure that Communist parties did not gain power, and NATO secured the peace and deterred Soviet military pressure. The position of supreme allied commander was always reserved for a U.S. officer, and no significant European security initiative took

place without American support and approval. (The main exception, which supports the general point, was the ill-fated Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt during the Suez crisis of 1956, an adventure that collapsed in the face of strong U.S. opposition.) The United States built an equally durable security order in Asia through bilateral treaties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and several others, and it incorporated each of these countries into an increasingly liberal world economy. In the Middle East, Washington helped establish and defend Israel but also forged close security ties with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the shah of Iran and several smaller Gulf states. America continued to exercise a position of hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, using various tools to oust leftist governments in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Chile and Nicaragua. In Africa, not seen as a vital arena, America did just enough to ensure that its modest interests there were protected.

To be sure, the United States did not exert total control over events in the various regional orders it created. It could not prevent the revolution in Cuba in 1959 or Iran in 1979, it failed to keep France from leaving NATO's integrated military command structure in 1966, and it did not stop Israel, India, North Korea and Pakistan from acquiring nuclear weapons. But the United States retained enormous influence in each of these regions, especially on major issues.

Furthermore, although the U.S. position was sometimes challenged—the loss in Vietnam being the most obvious example—America's overall standing was never in danger. The U.S. alliance system in Asia held firm despite defeat in Indochina, and during the 1970s, Beijing formed a tacit partnership with Washington. Moreover, China eventually abandoned Marxism-Leninism as a governing ideology, forswore world revolution and voluntarily entered the structure

Instead of trying to be the “indispensable nation” nearly everywhere, the United States will need to figure out how to be the decisive power in the places that matter.

of institutions that the United States had previously created. Similarly, Tehran became an adversary once the clerical regime took over, but America’s overall position in the Middle East was not shaken. Oil continued to flow out of the Persian Gulf, Israel became increasingly secure and prosperous, and key Soviet allies like Egypt eventually abandoned Moscow and sided with the United States. Despite occasional setbacks, the essential features of the American Era remained firmly in place.

Needless to say, it is highly unusual for a country with only 5 percent of the world’s population to be able to organize favorable political, economic and security orders in almost every corner of the globe and to sustain them for decades. Yet that is in fact what the United States did from 1945 to 1990. And it did so while enjoying a half century of economic growth that was nearly unmatched in modern history.

And then the Soviet empire collapsed, leaving the United States as the sole superpower in a unipolar world. According to former national-security adviser Brent Scowcroft, the United States found itself “standing alone at the height of power. It was, it is, an unparalleled situation in history, one which presents us with the rarest opportunity to shape the world.” And so it tried, bringing most of the Warsaw Pact into NATO and encouraging the spread of market economies and democratic institutions throughout the former Communist world. It was a triumphal moment—the apogee of the American Era—but the celebratory fireworks blinded us to the trends and pitfalls that brought that era to an end.

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of new power centers in several key regions. The most obvious example is China, whose explosive economic growth is undoubtedly the most significant geopolitical development in decades. The United States has been the world’s largest economy since roughly 1900, but China is likely to overtake America in total economic output no later than 2025. Beijing’s military budget is rising by roughly 10 percent per year, and it is likely to convert even more of its wealth into military assets in the future. If China is like all previous great powers—including the United States—its definition of “vital” interests will grow as its power increases—and it will try to use its growing muscle to protect an expanding sphere of influence. Given its dependence on raw-material imports (especially energy) and export-led growth, prudent Chinese leaders will want to make sure that no one is in a position to deny them access to the resources and markets on which their future prosperity and political stability depend.

This situation will encourage Beijing to challenge the current U.S. role in Asia. Such ambitions should not be hard for Americans to understand, given that the United States has sought to exclude outside powers from its own neighborhood ever since the Monroe Doctrine. By a similar logic, China is bound to feel uneasy if Washington maintains a network of Asian alliances and a sizable military presence in East Asia and the Indian Ocean. Over time, Beijing will try to convince other Asian states to abandon ties with America,

and Washington will almost certainly resist these efforts. An intense security competition will follow.

The security arrangements that defined the American Era are also being undermined by the rise of several key regional powers, most notably India, Turkey and Brazil. Each of these states has achieved impressive economic growth over the past decade, and each has become more willing to chart its own course independent of



Washington's wishes. None of them are on the verge of becoming true global powers—Brazil's GDP is still less than one-sixth that of the United States, and India and Turkey's economies are even smaller—but each has become increasingly influential within its own region. This gradual diffusion of power is also seen in the recent expansion of the G-8 into the so-called G-20, a tacit recognition that the global institutions created after

World War II are increasingly obsolete and in need of reform.

Each of these new regional powers is a democracy, which means that its leaders pay close attention to public opinion. As a result, the United States can no longer rely on cozy relations with privileged elites or military juntas. When only 10–15 percent of Turkish citizens have a “favorable” view of America, it becomes easier to understand why Ankara refused to let Washington use its territory to attack Iraq in 2003 and why Turkey has curtailed its previously close ties with Israel despite repeated U.S. efforts to heal the rift. Anti-Americanism is less prevalent in Brazil and India, but their democratically elected leaders are hardly deferential to Washington either.

The rise of new powers is bringing the short-lived “unipolar moment” to an end, and the result will be either a bipolar Sino-American rivalry or a multipolar system containing several unequal great powers. The United States is likely to remain the strongest, but its overall lead has shrunk—and it is shrinking further still.

Of course, the twin debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan only served to accelerate the waning of American dominance and underscore the limits of U.S. power. The Iraq War alone will carry a price tag of more than \$3 trillion once all the costs are counted, and the end result is likely to be an unstable quasi democracy that is openly hostile to Israel and at least partly aligned with Iran. Indeed, Tehran has been the main beneficiary of this ill-conceived adventure, which is surely not what the Bush administration had in mind when it dragged the country to war.

The long Afghan campaign is even more likely to end badly, even if U.S. leaders eventually try to spin it as some sort of victory. The Obama administration finally got Osama bin Laden, but the long and costly attempt to eliminate the Taliban and

build a Western-style state in Afghanistan has failed. At this point, the only interesting question is whether the United States will get out quickly or get out slowly. In either scenario, Kabul's fate will ultimately be determined by the Afghans once the United States and its dwindling set of allies leave. And if failure in Afghanistan weren't enough, U.S. involvement in Central Asia has undermined relations with nuclear-armed Pakistan and reinforced virulent anti-Americanism in that troubled country. If victory is defined as achieving your main objectives and ending a war with your security and prosperity enhanced, then both of these conflicts must be counted as expensive defeats.

But the Iraq and Afghan wars were not simply costly self-inflicted wounds; they were also eloquent demonstrations of the limits of military power. There was never much doubt that the United States could topple relatively weak and/or unpopular governments—as it has in Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq and, most recently, Libya—but the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan showed that unmatched power-projection capabilities were of little use in constructing effective political orders once the offending leadership was removed. In places where local identities remain strong and foreign interference is not welcome for long, even a global superpower like the United States has trouble obtaining desirable political results.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the greater Middle East, which has been the main focus of U.S. strategy since the USSR broke apart. Not only did the Arab Spring catch Washington by surprise, but the U.S. response further revealed its diminished capacity to shape events in its favor. After briefly trying to shore up the Mubarak regime, the Obama administration realigned itself with the forces challenging the existing regional order. The president gave a typically elo-

quent speech endorsing change, but nobody in the region paid much attention. Indeed, with the partial exception of Libya, U.S. influence over the entire process has been modest at best. Obama was unable to stop Saudi Arabia from sending troops to Bahrain—where Riyadh helped to quell demands for reform—or to convince Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad to step down. U.S. leverage in the post-Mubarak political process in Egypt and the simmering conflict in Yemen is equally ephemeral.

One gets a vivid sense of America's altered circumstances by comparing the U.S. response to the Arab Spring to its actions in the early years of the Cold War. In 1948, the Marshall Plan allocated roughly \$13 billion in direct grants to restarting Europe's economy, an amount equal to approximately 5 percent of total U.S. GDP. The equivalent amount today would be some \$700 billion, and there is no way that Washington could devote even a tenth of that amount to helping Egypt, Tunisia, Libya or others. Nor does one need to go all the way back to 1948. The United States forgave \$7 billion of Egypt's foreign debt after the 1991 Gulf War; in 2011, all it could offer Cairo's new government was \$1 billion worth of loan guarantees (not actual loans) and \$1 billion in debt forgiveness.

America's declining influence is also revealed by its repeated failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. It has been nearly twenty years since the signing of the Oslo accords in September 1993, and the United States has had a monopoly on the "peace process" ever since that hopeful day. Yet its efforts have been a complete failure, proving beyond doubt that Washington is incapable of acting as an effective and evenhanded mediator. Obama's call for "two states for two peoples" in his address to the Arab world in June 2009 produced a brief moment of renewed hope, but his steady retreat in the face of Israeli intransigence

and domestic political pressure drove U.S. credibility to new lows.

Taken together, these events herald a sharp decline in America's ability to shape the global order. And the recent series of economic setbacks will place even more significant limits on America's ability to maintain an ambitious international role. The Bush administration inherited a rare budget surplus in 2001 but proceeded to cut federal taxes significantly and fight two costly wars. The predictable result was a soaring budget deficit and a rapid increase in federal debt, problems compounded by the financial crisis of 2007–09. The latter disaster required a massive federal bailout of the financial industry and a major stimulus package, leading to a short-term budget shortfall in 2009 of some \$1.6 *trillion* (roughly 13 percent of GDP). The United States has been in the economic doldrums ever since, and there is scant hope of a rapid return to vigorous growth. These factors help explain Standard & Poor's U.S. government credit-rating downgrade in August amid new fears of a "double-dip" recession.

The Congressional Budget Office projects persistent U.S. budget deficits for the next twenty-five years—even under its optimistic "baseline" scenario—and it warns of plausible alternatives in which total federal debt would exceed 100 percent of GDP by 2023 and 190 percent of GDP by 2035. State and local governments are hurting too, which means less money for roads, bridges, schools, law enforcement and the other collective goods that help maintain a healthy society.

The financial meltdown also undermined an important element of America's "soft power," namely, its reputation for competence and probity in economic policy. In the 1990s, a seemingly robust economy gave U.S. officials bragging rights and made the "Washington Consensus" on economic policy seem like the only game in town.

Thomas Friedman (and other popular writers) argued that the rest of the world needed to adopt U.S.-style "DOScapital 6.0" or fall by the wayside. Yet it is now clear that the U.S. financial system was itself deeply corrupt and that much of its economic growth was an illusory bubble. Other states have reason to disregard Washington's advice and to pursue economic strategies of their own making. The days when America could drive the international economic agenda are over, which helps explain why it has been seventeen years since the Uruguay Round, the last successful multilateral trade negotiation.

The bottom line is clear and unavoidable: the United States simply won't have the resources to devote to international affairs that it had in the past. When the president of the staunchly internationalist Council on Foreign Relations is penning articles decrying "American Profligacy" and calling for retrenchment, you know that America's global role is in flux. Nor can the United States expect its traditional allies to pick up the slack voluntarily, given that economic conditions are even worse in Europe and Japan.

The era when the United States could create and lead a political, economic and security order in virtually every part of the world is coming to an end. Which raises the obvious question: What should we do about it?

The twilight of the American Era arrived sooner than it should have because U.S. leaders made a number of costly mistakes. But past errors need not lead to a further erosion of America's position if we learn the right lessons and make timely adjustments.

Above all, Washington needs to set clear priorities and to adopt a hardheaded and unsentimental approach to preserving our most important interests. When U.S. primacy was at its peak, American leaders could indulge altruistic whims. They didn't

The biggest challenge the United States faces today is not a looming great-power rival; it is the triple whammy of accumulated debt, eroding infrastructure and a sluggish economy.

have to think clearly about strategy because there was an enormous margin for error; things were likely to work out even if Washington made lots of mistakes. But when budgets are tight, problems have multiplied and other powers are less deferential, it's important to invest U.S. power wisely. As former secretary of defense Robert Gates put it: "We need to be honest with the president, with the Congress, with the American people . . . a smaller military, no matter how superb, will be able to go fewer places and be able to do fewer things." The chief lesson, he emphasized, was the need for "conscious choices" about our missions and means. Instead of trying to be the "indispensable nation" nearly everywhere, the United States will need to figure out how to be the decisive power in the places that matter.

For starters, we should remember what the U.S. military is good for and what it is good at doing. American forces are very good at preventing major conventional aggression, or reversing it when it happens. We successfully deterred Soviet ambitions throughout the long Cold War, and we easily reversed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991. The U.S. naval and air presence in Asia still has similar stabilizing effects, and the value of this pacifying role should not be underestimated.

By contrast, the U.S. military is *not* good at running other countries, particularly in cultures that are radically different from our own, where history has left them acutely hostile to foreign interference, and when there are deep ethnic divisions and few democratic traditions. The United States

can still topple minor-league dictators, but it has no great aptitude for creating stable and effective political orders afterward.

It follows that the United States should eschew its present fascination with nation building and counterinsurgency and return to a grand strategy that some (myself included) have labeled offshore balancing.² Offshore balancing seeks to maintain benevolent hegemony in the Western Hemisphere and to maintain a balance of power among the strong states of Eurasia and of the oil-rich Persian Gulf. At present, these are the only areas that are worth sending U.S. soldiers to fight and die in.

Instead of seeking to dominate these regions directly, however, our first recourse should be to have local allies uphold the balance of power, out of their own self-interest. Rather than letting them free ride on us, we should free ride on them as much as we can, intervening with ground and air forces only when a single power threatens to dominate some critical region. For an offshore balancer, the greatest success lies in getting somebody else to handle some pesky problem, not in eagerly shouldering that burden oneself.

To be more specific: offshore balancing would call for removing virtually all

² On "offshore balancing," see Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001); and Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), chap. 5.

U.S. troops from Europe, while remaining formally committed to NATO. Europe is wealthy, secure, democratic and peaceful, and it faces no security problems that it cannot handle on its own. (The combined defense spending of NATO's European members is roughly five times greater than Russia's, which is the only conceivable conventional military threat the Continent might face.) Forcing NATO's European members to take the lead in the recent Libyan war was a good first step, because the United States will never get its continental allies to bear more of the burden if it insists on doing most of the work itself. Indeed, by playing hard to get on occasion, Washington would encourage others to do more to win our support, instead of resenting or rebelling against the self-appointed "indispensable nation."

In the decades ahead, the United States should shift its main strategic attention to Asia, both because its economic importance is rising rapidly and because China is the only potential peer competitor that we face. The bad news is that China could become a more formidable rival than the Soviet Union ever was: its economy is likely to be larger than ours (a situation the United States has not faced since the nineteenth century); and, unlike the old, largely autarkic Soviet Union, modern China depends on overseas trade and resources and will be more inclined to project power abroad.

The good news is that China's rising status is already ringing alarm bells in Asia. The more Beijing throws its weight around, the more other Asian states will be looking to us for help. Given the distances involved and the familiar dilemmas of collective action, however, leading a balancing coalition in Asia will be far more difficult than it was in Cold War Europe. U.S. officials will have to walk a fine line between doing too much (which would allow allies to free ride) and doing too little (which might lead some states to hedge toward China).

To succeed, Washington will have to keep air and naval forces deployed in the region, pay close attention to the evolving military and political environment there, and devote more time and effort to managing a large and potentially fractious coalition of Asian partners.

Perhaps most importantly, offshore balancing prescribes a very different approach to the greater Middle East. And prior to 1991, in fact, that's exactly what we did. The United States had a strategic interest in the oil there and a moral commitment to defending Israel, but until 1968 it mostly passed the buck to London. After Britain withdrew, Washington relied on regional allies such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel to counter Soviet clients like Egypt and Syria. When the shah fell, the United States created the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) but did not deploy it to the region; instead, it kept the RDJTF over the horizon until it was needed. Washington backed Iraq against Iran during the 1980s, and the U.S. Navy escorted oil tankers during the Iran-Iraq War, but it deployed U.S. ground and air forces only when the balance of power broke down completely, as it did when Iraq seized Kuwait. This strategy was not perfect, perhaps, but it preserved key U.S. interests at minimal cost for over four decades.

Unfortunately, the United States abandoned offshore balancing after 1991. It first tried "dual containment," in effect confronting two states—Iran and Iraq—that also hated each other, instead of using each to check the other as it had in the past. This strategy—undertaken, as the National Iranian American Council's Trita Parsi and Brookings' Kenneth Pollack suggest, in good part to reassure Israel—forced the United States to keep thousands of troops in Saudi Arabia, sparking Osama bin Laden's ire and helping fuel the rise of al-Qaeda. The Bush administration compounded this error after 9/11 by adopting the even

more foolish strategy of “regional transformation.” Together with the “special relationship” with Israel, these ill-conceived approaches deepened anti-Americanism in the Middle East and gave states like Iran more reason to consider acquiring a nuclear deterrent. It is no great mystery why

is it destined to become just one of several equals in a future multipolar world. To the contrary, the United States still has the world’s strongest military, and the U.S. economy remains diverse and technologically advanced. China’s economy may soon be larger in absolute terms, but its per capita



Obama’s eloquent speeches did nothing to restore America’s image in the region; people there want new U.S. policies, not just more empty rhetoric.

One can only imagine how much policy makers in Beijing have enjoyed watching the United States bog itself down in these costly quagmires. Fortunately, there is an obvious solution: return to offshore balancing. The United States should get out of Iraq and Afghanistan as quickly as possible, treat Israel like a normal country instead of backing it unconditionally, and rely on local Middle Eastern, European and Asian allies to maintain the peace—with our help when necessary.

Don’t get me wrong. The United States is not finished as a major power. Nor

income will be far smaller, which means its government will have less surplus to devote to expanding its reach (including of the military variety). American expenditures on higher education and industrial research and development still dwarf those of other countries, the dollar remains the world’s reserve currency and many states continue to clamor for U.S. protection.

Furthermore, long-term projections of U.S. latent power are reassuring. Populations in Russia, Japan and most European countries are declining and aging, which will limit their economic potential in the decades ahead. China’s median age is also rising rapidly (an unintended consequence of the one-child policy), and this will be a powerful drag on its economic vitality. By contrast, U.S. population growth is high

compared with the rest of the developed world, and U.S. median age will be lower than any of the other serious players.

Indeed, in some ways America's strategic position is actually more favorable than it used to be, which is why its bloated military budget is something of a mystery. In 1986, for example, the United States and its allies controlled about 49 percent of global military expenditures while our various adversaries combined for some 42 percent. Today, the United States and its allies are responsible for nearly 70 percent of military spending; all our adversaries put together total less than 15 percent. Barring additional self-inflicted wounds, the United States is not going to fall from the ranks of the great powers at any point in the next few decades. Whether the future world is unipolar, bipolar or multipolar, Washington is going to be one of those poles—and almost certainly the strongest of them.

And so, the biggest challenge the United States faces today is not a looming great-power rival; it is the triple whammy of accumulated debt, eroding infrastructure and a sluggish economy. The only way to have the world's most capable military forces both now and into the future is to have the world's most advanced economy, and

that means having better schools, the best universities, a scientific establishment that is second to none, and a national infrastructure that enhances productivity and dazzles those who visit from abroad. These things all cost money, of course, but they would do far more to safeguard our long-term security than spending a lot of blood and treasure determining who should run Afghanistan, Kosovo, South Sudan, Libya, Yemen or any number of other strategic backwaters.

The twilight of the American Era is not an occasion to mourn or a time to cast blame. The period when the United States could manage the politics, economics and security arrangements for nearly the entire globe was never destined to endure forever, and its passing need not herald a new age of rising threats and economic hardship *if* we make intelligent adjustments.

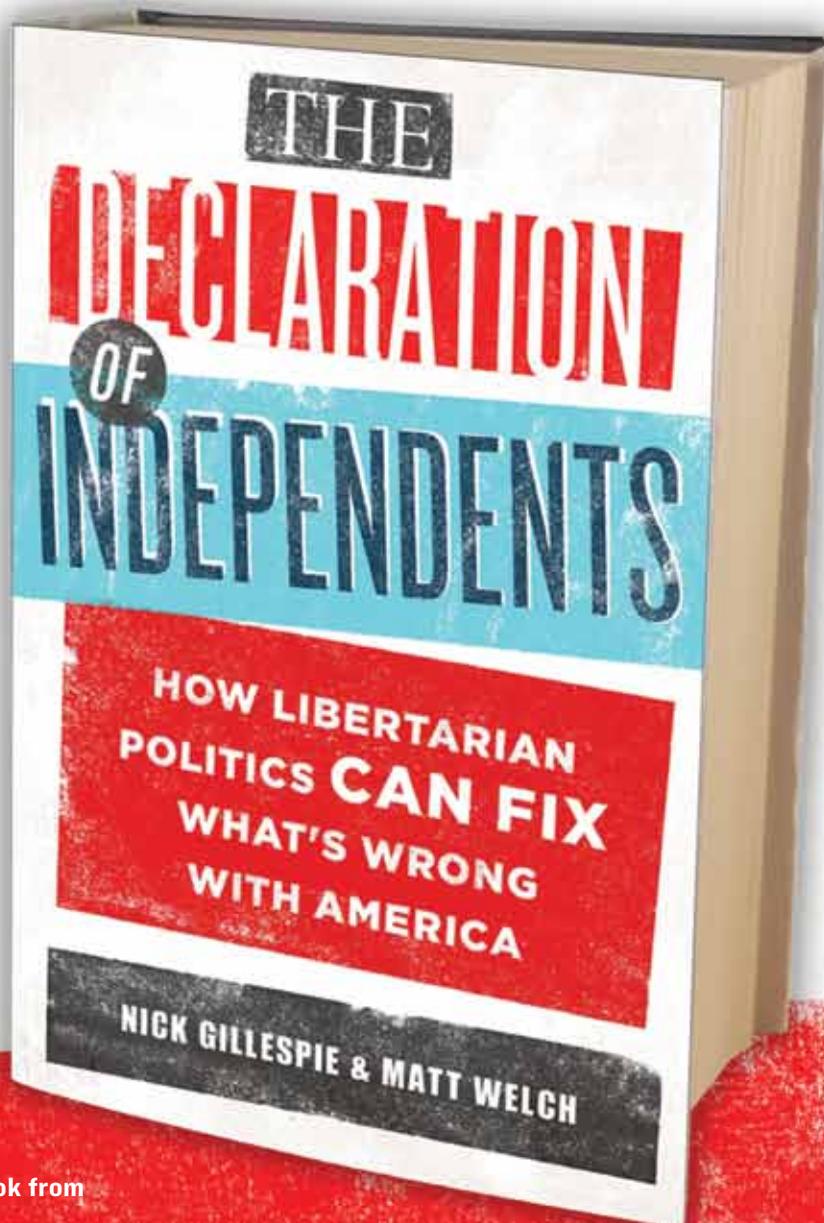
Instead of looking backward with nostalgia, Americans should see the end of the American Era as an opportunity to rebalance our international burdens and focus on our domestic imperatives. Instead of building new Bagrams in faraway places of little consequence, it is time to devote more attention to that "shining city on a hill" of which our leaders often speak, but which still remains to be built. □

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We Bow to the God Bipartisanship

By Leslie H. Gelb

Upon his departure as secretary of defense, none other than Washington's latest living legend Robert Gates cautioned those he was leaving behind to cherish and nurture bipartisanship. "When we have been successful in national security and foreign affairs, it has been because there has been bipartisan support." To drive the point home, he added: "No major international problem can be solved on one president's watch. And so, unless it has bipartisan support, unless it can be extended over a period of time, the risks of failure [are] high."

Contrary to Gates's Holy Grail sentiments and to most homilies to bipartisanship, Dean Acheson tagged the practice a "magnificent fraud." As President Truman's secretary of state and thus one of its earliest practitioners, he knew of what he spoke. In a 1971 interview at the Truman Library, Acheson offered a taste of his usual rough-and-tumble candor:

The question, who is it bad for, and who is it good for, is what you ought to put your mind on. . . . No, I wouldn't be too serious about bipartisanship. It's a great myth that ought to be fostered. And don't bring too damn much

Leslie H. Gelb is president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, a former senior official in the State and Defense Departments, and a former *New York Times* columnist. He is also a member of *The National Interest's* Advisory Council.

scholarship to bear on it. You'll prove it out of existence if you're not careful.

The intent here is not to slaughter the sacred cow, but to reduce its high-flying levitation, thereby giving its Washington worshippers a better view of when bipartisanship might be useful and harmful—and to whom. Presidents seek bipartisanship to tamp down domestic critics and to convince foreign leaders that they cannot outlast or undermine presidential policies—as happened with Hanoi during the Vietnam War, Moscow during arms-control talks of the Cold War and the Taliban in the current war in Afghanistan. But in these and many other cases, bipartisan backing at home has too often been purchased at the price of good policy abroad.

When worrying too much about bipartisanship, presidents also would do well to reflect on their vast powers to make foreign policy, powers to act as they think best—even in the face of serious political attacks. My concern is that Gates and many others have so inflated bipartisanship's centrality that it has become a distraction from, and detriment to, making good policy. And if it is greater political support presidents are seeking, they'd find it better in the results of smart thinking than in compromised positions. Good policy enhances the chances of success abroad, which in the end is good politics as well.

The distance from Gates to Acheson is not small: Gates holds that two-party to-

getherness is essential to successful foreign policy. Acheson saw it as a useful political tool for presidents, presumably to curb domestic opposition and add some weight to U.S. foreign policy—but did not want key decision makers to be teary eyed and reverent about it. Three national-security advisers interviewed for this article—Brent Scowcroft for Presidents Ford and George H. W. Bush, Sandy Berger for President Clinton and Stephen Hadley for President George W. Bush—fall somewhere in between, though closer to the latter. Whatever their differences, all agree that a review of bipartisanship—its meaning, practice and value—is long overdue.

Indeed, the story and study of bipartisanship best reveal why Acheson's cynicism is preferable to Gates's worship. And most begin the narrative with Truman, Acheson and George Marshall. More or less, this trio maneuvered Senator Arthur Vandenberg, then chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, into being their cat's-paw in a Republican-controlled Senate. They needed the very influential Michigan senator to cajole more than a dozen of his fellow conservatives to vote for Truman's highly controversial Cold War initiatives: the Marshall Plan, NATO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations and the like. With the brilliance and effectiveness of these initiatives, cries for bipartisanship became a Washington staple. The idea grew so agreeable that few policy hands carefully examined exactly what bipartisanship meant or searched for its telling derivations.

The roots of bipartisanship go back to the well-worn trope that "politics stops at the water's edge." Vandenberg is often credited as its author, but it seems that the first utterer of this biblical phrase was Daniel



Webster, as a member of the House during the War of 1812. "Even our party divisions, acrimonious as they are, cease at the water's edge," said the great orator. He was either hallucinating or wishing upon a star, for even in his day, political divisions abounded over international affairs. As for Vandenberg, he actually preferred the term "unpartisan," similar to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's secretary of state Cordell Hull's "nonpartisan." FDR himself and, later, President Dwight Eisenhower's secretary of state John Foster Dulles used today's favored term, "bipartisanship." Whoever first framed the incantation and whatever its exact origins, the propagators all had the same idea in mind: while squabbles at home represent democracy at work and are fine, unity abroad is necessary.

Ignoring Acheson's injunction to leave the subject well enough alone for fear of debunking "the myth," scholars plunged in and proved with data that the practice of bipartisanship has been greatly ex-

Brent Scowcroft put it best: “Our policies are too often constructed to deal with domestic politics rather than the realities of world politics.”

aggerated. Indeed, according to political scientists James McCormick and Eugene Wittkopf, bipartisanship—defined stringently yet commonly as majorities of each party supporting the president—has been absent for most of the post-WWII period. Amazingly, they found that since 1947, only Eisenhower met the standard in both houses of Congress for most of his foreign-policy positions. Even after 9/11, George W. Bush achieved only a modest spike in cross-aisle largesse.

Bipartisanship has been in short supply, and partisanship has been the norm. Since 1947, every president won far more support from members of his own party in both congressional bodies than from the opposition; in fact, on average 20 percent more in each chamber on foreign-policy issues. The reality has been that on many key congressional votes dealing with foreign policy and national security, Congress has split along party lines. In other words, the reality is that politics rarely stopped at the water’s edge.

Despite the absence of bipartisanship since World War II, presidents have generally survived the political deluge and followed their desired foreign-policy paths. That’s because they have the bulk of the political and bureaucratic guns—the State and Defense Departments’ expertise, the intelligence agencies’ claim on facts and so on. By comparison, congressional staffs are puny. Add to this, when push comes to shove, Congress’s traditional deference to the president as commander in chief plus key Supreme Court decisions favoring executive authority in foreign policy. Indeed, it’s only in trade negotiations and foreign aid that Congress

comes close to holding its own. On aid and trade, legislators have fought hard and well, and above all, here their local political interests cannot be ignored.

Let us take it case by case. In the face of constant Republican barrages, Truman’s Cold War initiatives proved successful in establishing containment, deterrence and a worldwide ring of alliances. True, his detractors among both Republicans and conservative Democrats prevented him from engaging the Chinese Communists, but he steadfastly avoided their insistence on unleashing a war against them. As for Eisenhower, he settled for a highly unpopular stalemate on the Korean Peninsula while conservatives clamored for a nuclear attack. Nor did he bend to incessant pressures from hawks in both parties to vastly expand military spending and confront Moscow.

John F. Kennedy looked like a hawk, albeit a befuddled one, to Democrats as well as Republicans. Early on he botched the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and an initial meeting with his Soviet counterpart. In short order, however, he faced down a Soviet threat in Berlin and Cuba, initiated arms-control talks with the dreaded Soviet regime, began a huge military buildup and crept into a war in Indochina. Kennedy was able to do all this his way, even though his victory in 1960 was a squeaker over Richard Nixon—and despite widespread skepticism about his experience and executive maturity.

For Lyndon Johnson, foreign policy began and ended with Vietnam. Congressional leaders raised their doubts about the war publicly, and mobs raged outside the White

House and Pentagon, but he persisted in escalating the bombing of North Vietnam and raising troop levels in the South (all the way up to 550,000). No president before him had ever confronted more open and violent opposition on a foreign-policy issue—and still he basically kept to his course, good or bad. It was to get worse for Richard Nixon.

Indeed, what Johnson sowed in the Vietnam War—exploding doubts and fears about grossly excessive, unchecked and dangerous White House power on foreign affairs—Presidents Nixon, Carter and Reagan were to reap. Suffice it to say, however, they too called most shots.

George H. W. Bush staunchly followed his own path despite constant fire from both parties. He and his team essentially got Mikhail Gorbachev to dismantle the Soviet empire. Though conservatives lambasted him for “being taken in” by the Soviet leader, Bush persisted and succeeded. In order to keep following a traditional realist course on China, Bush the elder also successfully vetoed bills to tighten sanctions on the Beijing regime after the Tiananmen Square massacre. He got the necessary majorities to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, though significant numbers of Democratic senators dissented. Besides, his aides made clear that he would go to war with Iraq with or without a congressional resolution, citing his power as commander in chief. Above all, he ended the Cold War without a shot fired; all the while conservatives screamed “sellout!”

Though William Jefferson Clinton had no foreign-policy experience, and though White House powers over national security seemed to wane with the demise of the Great Russian Bear, the former Arkansas governor did his foreign-policy thing—when he was interested in it. For him, domestic issues came first. Still, as Bosnia’s bloody civil war escalated, he sent in troops and aircraft, despite bipartisan complaints

and Republican control of the House. After he promised to extract the troops in a year, he kept them there.

George W. Bush, also bereft of foreign-policy credentials and confronted by Democratic majorities in Congress, possessed something perhaps more empowering than the Soviet enemy—the terrorism threat set in motion by 9/11. Everyone applauded his attack on Afghanistan, al-Qaeda’s safe haven, and many bought into his fear-mongering about Saddam Hussein. As opposition to the Iraq War grew steadily in the public and in Congress, he nonetheless persisted in escalating the number of U.S. forces. As Stephen Hadley told me, “In theory, it would have been easy for Congress to block the surge with a combination of deadline setting, revising readiness requirements and defunding the war effort.” None of that happened. Further, Bush doubled the intelligence and baseline defense budgets almost without a legislative peep.

Barack Obama, besieged by a declining economy and two major land wars, has largely shaped his own path abroad. He has bobbed and weaved as he sees fit with Iran and North Korea and intervened in Libya against public opinion. Only regarding the long war in Afghanistan did he first bend to criticism from the right by increasing force levels from twenty-one thousand to one hundred thousand, and then to the left by announcing cuts to seventy thousand in 2012.

This recital of presidential power is not meant to suggest that their policies ranged free of serious domestic attack or proved generally effective abroad. What the record shows is this: with or without bipartisan backing, the White House usually preserves its desired policy core. To do their business overseas, they did not need bipartisanship.

Tellingly, since WWII, only three presidents—Nixon, Carter and Reagan—

suffered outright defeats by Congress on major issues. More telling still, they were defeated by bipartisan majorities. Yet even in defeat on particular issues, the presidents all found ways to follow their desired paths. Bipartisanship, one way or the other, was not decisive in the end.

When Nixon took office, Congress had not rejected any president's main foreign-policy initiative since FDR's initial failure to revise the Neutrality Acts in 1939. With the Watergate scandal aborning and the Vietnam War doubling in costs and casualties over the Johnson years, significant majorities in Congress handcuffed Nixon two ways on Vietnam: by banning air operations over Indochina and by prohibiting arms shipments to South Vietnam. On top of this, Congress passed the War Powers Act over Nixon's veto in 1973. The Senate override vote was bipartisan, and the House vote was disproportionately Democratic.

Before Jimmy Carter even completed his oath of office, the foreign-policy community went for his jugular. They judged him to be naive and incompetent. High gas prices and the failed attempt to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran only made matters worse. Carter suffered a flat-out defeat with the Senate's failure to even vote on, let alone approve, his SALT II treaty with the USSR.

Congressional majorities as well as many foreign-policy experts cringed at Reagan's provocative rhetoric regarding Moscow. Accordingly, congressional majorities tied his hands on nuclear-weapons systems and on the arms-control negotiating process. In 1985, the Senate voted seventy-eight to twenty and the House passed legislation to undercut Reagan's plans to deploy one hundred new MX missiles, presumably a big bargaining chip in arms talks with Moscow. Congress also feared war in Central America. A Democratic-controlled Congress passed the Boland amendments, sharply curtailing aid to fight left-wing in-

surgencies and governments in Nicaragua. The first Boland vote in 1982 passed the House 411-0 and was later approved by the Senate.

To beat presidents in up-or-down votes requires a perfect storm of botched policy making and bad politics. In most instances, White House opponents cannot prevail without a full barrage: the weakening of the president's overall popularity; the apparent failure (and the presumed dangers) of his policies in human and financial cost; and, perhaps most critically, the resistance from overwhelming numbers of the party in control of Congress—plus a healthy chunk of the other side. Two-party backing is not necessary for the president to make and conduct foreign policy; it is often essential to defeat it.

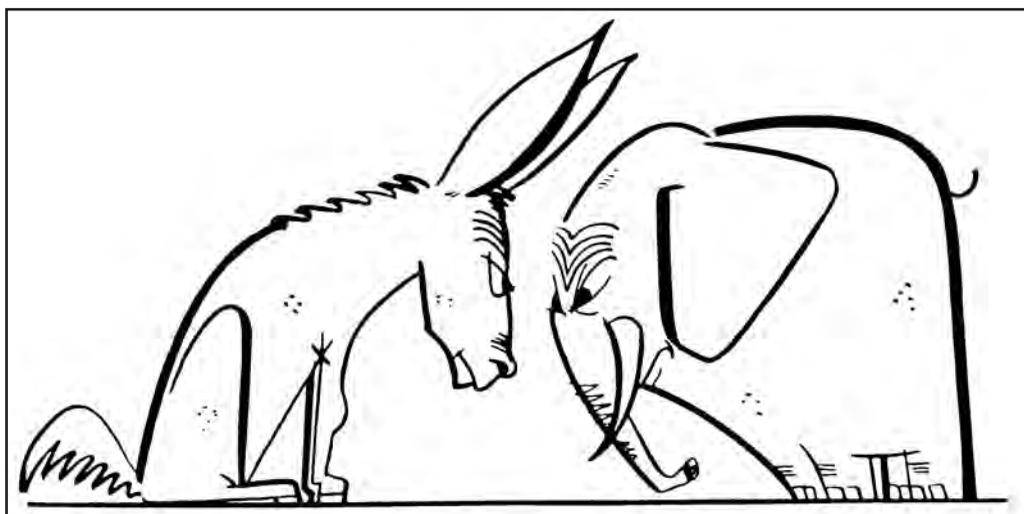
Remarkably, even these outright defeats were not utterly debilitating. All Nixon's tribulations notwithstanding, he essentially fought and concluded the Vietnam War as he secretly expected. Although besieged by Congress, he was able to reverse Cold War history, pursuing a détente policy with the USSR that greatly displeased his own party. Equally impressive, he reopened ties with China, the devil of devils in American politics.

Weakened as Carter was, he still carried out a controversial human-rights policy, openly criticizing the shah of Iran and jeopardizing Soviet arms talks; cut U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, Guatemala and Argentina; won passage of the Panama Canal Treaty (approved by two-thirds of the Senate despite public disapproval); and sold fighter planes to Saudi Arabia and Egypt in 1978 (despite the resistance of the Israeli lobby). After being battered in Congress, Reagan still had the strength to reverse course and pursue the most wide-ranging arms-control agreements with Gorbachev, against the will of leaders in his own administration and his own party.

This history should quiet passions for bipartisanship or, at least, pressures to pay a high price for it. But it doesn't. Presidents, their advisers and foreign-policy experts all get uneasy about disunity at home. It's not easy to shake the belief that enemies successfully use America's internal splits to their advantage. Those at war with a divided America outwait us; those negotiating with Washington play one side of the aisle against the other. As Sandy Berger put it to me, "A lack of bipartisanship gives for-

ocratic divide, but because the American people increasingly conclude that the war is too costly, too long and no longer vital to U.S. interests.

The real and consequential problems arise when leaders believe they must have bipartisan help and tailor their positions to facades of unity. So it is that the Obama administration, not untypically, is pursuing policies with respect to North Korea, Iran, the Arab Spring, Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and the Afghan war, to name a few exam-



foreign governments an opportunity to drive a wedge between our political parties."

Yet the advantages gained by foreigners are mostly at the margins. Whether it be China, Pakistan or Iran, all have failed to significantly alter the presidentially desired course because of internal disunity. China gains advantages in certain negotiations less because of domestic splits and more because of its newfound power. Even the Soviets' gaming of American politics rarely allowed them to get the better of us during arms talks. In the Afghan war, the Taliban gain leverage not because of a Republican-Dem-

ples, where it has little faith its efforts will succeed. To go for a more decisive course would risk heated domestic opposition.

As with other administrations, it's nearly impossible to document the importance of politics in making such decisions because the myth reigns that security must reside well above politics—untouchable. Not surprisingly, leaders rarely leave a written record of how they integrate policy with politics, however legitimate and necessary that integration may be. It's not discussed at White House meetings, even though there isn't a White House session where it's out

of mind. Consequently, these key political calculations are made without discussion, for good and ill. Without this data, it is no surprise that the acclaim for bipartisanship has not been carefully examined.

Even Acheson, cynic that he was, didn't want to abandon bipartisanship, arguing it "is ideal for the Executive because you cannot run this damn country under the Constitution any other way." By this, he apparently meant that without it, the congressional rabble would get totally out of hand. Thus, even the cynic, in his own way, contributed to suffocating a hard look at the subject.

Presidents have to closely examine what they gain and lose by making political compromises on policy for political backing. Obama quiets complaints at home by denying Iran the right to have a uranium-enrichment facility under international inspection. But that condition makes negotiations with Tehran impossible. Obama avoids criticism from human-rights camps by joining the effort to overthrow Colonel Muammar Qaddafi of Libya. But does he do so at the expense of a very uncertain and possibly dangerous future? He appeases conservatives by minimizing defense cuts. But what price is paid for the U.S. economy, the bedrock of power? Brent

Scowcroft put it best: "Our policies are too often constructed to deal with domestic politics rather than the realities of world politics."

Congress can also lose from excessive pursuit of bipartisanship. Sure, legislators gain leverage in the process, but it can weaken political resolve to challenge presidents openly and hard. This is especially the case in early stages of key policy debates when presidential thinking is most in need of hard scrutiny. Legislators know full well that presidents use "unity" to stifle or quiet tough questions. Indeed, both sides tend to use bipartisanship as a political hammer. By bowing to this Holy Grail, Congress shortchanges itself, the American people and the president as well.

The foreign-policy community should look again at the costs and benefits of bipartisanship. A strong case can be made that a winning U.S. foreign policy turns not so much on politics and political parties but on other factors: the strength and vibrancy of the economy (declining seriously), the credibility of our military capability (still strong for deterrence and punishment), and how well policy corresponds to realities on the ground and applicable U.S. power.

Step one in the quest for better policy is to stop drinking the bipartisan Kool-Aid. □

The Roots of Government Failure

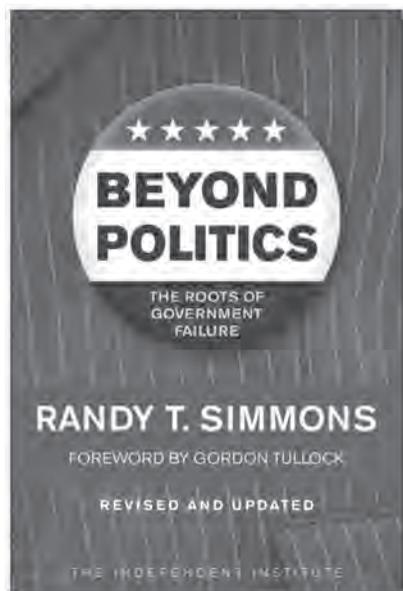
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Night Thoughts on Europe

By *Walter Laqueur*

In 1849, the year of the “spring of nations,” a peace congress took place in Paris. The main address given by Victor Hugo, the most famous author of the time, announced that

A day will come when you, France—you, Russia—you, Italy—you, England—you, Germany—all of you, nations of the Continent, will, without losing your distinctive qualities and your glorious individuality, be blended into a superior unity, and constitute an European fraternity. . . . A day will come when bullets and bombshells will be replaced by votes, by the universal suffrage of nations, by the venerable arbitration of a great Sovereign Senate, which will be to Europe what the Parliament is to England, what the Diet is to Germany, what the Legislative Assembly is to France.

One hundred sixty years have passed since this noble vision was enounced; a European parliament of sorts has come into being, but not exactly a European brotherhood, and one suspects that Victor Hugo would still not be too happy with the present state of the Continent.

My memories of Europe go back to a childhood in Weimar Germany and growing up in the Nazi Third Reich. I left the country shortly before the outbreak of the

Walter Laqueur is the author of the forthcoming *After the Fall: The End of the European Dream and the Decline of a Continent*, an assessment of the European crisis (Thomas Dunne Books, 2012).

Second World War. I have returned for many short visits and some long stays since, been to most European countries and made the Continent one of my fields of study. My children went to school on both sides of the Atlantic. European culture has been the formative influence in my life (that of the past admittedly more than the present). Thus I had the good fortune to benefit from a variety of global perspectives. When I look out of our windows in Washington, DC, I can see the raccoons and squirrels in the trees of Rock Creek Park; when I look out of our apartment in Highgate, London, I see the squirrels of Waterlow Park and, in winter when the leaves are down, the grave of Karl Marx.

Having seen Europe and the Europeans in good times and bad, the day may have come for a summing-up. I learned long ago that a crisis is merely the period between two others, but the present one is considerably deeper and could be fateful. Five years ago, in a book entitled *The Last Days of Europe*, I referred to the passing of a Europe I had known. The reception was skeptical in part; the views I expressed were unfashionable, and the book certainly came too early. According to a wide consensus, the twenty-first century belonged to the Continent, the civilian superpower that would be envied and emulated by all others.

Europe, and especially the European Union, was not doing badly at all. Had it not progressed to a common currency? The reviewer in the *Economist* (my bible among

the weeklies) blamed my book for “unduly apocalyptic conclusions.” And now I see that a recent editorial in the same magazine about the very same issue is headlined “staring into the abyss.”

But I was not staring into the abyss at the time, and I am not now; I was merely considering the possibility of Europe turning into a museum or cultural theme park for well-to-do tourists from East Asia. Not a heroic or deeply tragic future, but not my idea of an apocalypse either. Certainly, at the time I was dealing more with the long-term challenges facing the Continent, such as the demographic trends. More recently, as a result of the global recession and especially the European debt crisis, the immediate dangers resonate. This is only natural, for the collapse of banks, the instituting of austerity budgets and rising unemployment are clear and present dangers. Long-term threats can be pushed aside; there is always a chance that they may not happen. Five years on—no more than a minute in history—can also seem like an eternity.

Pondering the future of Europe, one is reminded of Frenchman Raymond Aron’s *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, published in the 1970s, and the debate it triggered. Despite his native pessimism, Aron did not believe that decadent Europe would fall victim to the superior ideological attraction of Communism and the economic, military and political power of the Soviet Union.

With all his sympathy for liberal Europe, Aron was aware of the process of decadence (or decline, to use a more value-free term), which set in with the First World War and accelerated with the Second. The reasons are known: the devastation from the conflicts, the great bloodletting and the deeply destructive ideologies they bore. By the 1950s and ’70s, Europe had largely recovered in the material sense; it was bet-

ter off than ever. But it had not recovered its self-confidence. True, there was much talk about common European values, but in reality consumerism and materialism (not of the philosophical variety) as a way of life were certainly more important factors.

And yet, students of history know all too well that the subject of decline has to be approached with caution, and there have been many false prophecies. There have been incidents not only of survival but also of recovery of countries, continents and civilizations that had been given up as lost causes. When western Rome fell, it was generally assumed that the eastern part of the Roman Empire was also doomed, but Byzantium survived for another thousand years. After the defeat by the Prussians in 1871, the general view in France was that *Finis Galliae* had arrived—that in view of the shrinking population, general defeatism, the lack of patriotism and self-respect, as well as social evils such as alcoholism and what was then called “eroticism,” France was finished, never to rise again. And yet, within thirty years the situation radically changed: decadence became unfashionable, it was largely replaced by militarism and even chauvinism; the Eiffel Tower was built; sport was discovered and became popular; and France was itself again. More recently, it took Germany a mere fifteen years after its defeat in World War I to reemerge as the strongest and most feared country in Europe.

The European Dream thus arrived: a postnationalist model of peace, prosperity, social justice and ecological virtue. It is certainly encouraging to know that the homicide rate in Europe is one-quarter that of the United States, that the literacy rate and the life span are higher. A revolution took place in Europe during the last sixty years that most Americans simply did not notice. It achieved a new balance between individual property rights and the common

It would be unfair to conclude that Europe has become lazy, but it certainly has become inward looking and lethargic, lacking curiosity and enterprise.

good, between government regulation and the free market, between liberty and equality—which America with its naive belief in the all-curative power of the free market had never achieved. The excesses of consumer capitalism had been tempered. It had pioneered a new approach to a humanitarian foreign policy. At long last it had come to live in peace with itself and the rest of the world. Europe was healthy and sustainable; it was stress-free in contrast to feverish, unbalanced America. The future seemed to belong to the European model. It would be emulated all over the world, a shining beacon to all mankind.

On a depressing morning with the only news in the media about Ireland on the brink of collapse, Britain facing years of austerity, Greece in despair, Portugal beyond despair, Italy and Spain in grave danger, “chronically weak demand,” “debilitating cycles,” “collision course in Europe,” “killing the Euro,” “pernicious consequences” and “towards the precipice”—it now sounds much like the end of days.

It is easy, far too easy, to ridicule now the illusions of yesteryear. The postwar generation of European elites aimed to create more democratic societies. They wanted to reduce the extremes of wealth and poverty and provide essential social services in a way that prewar government had not. They wanted to do all this not just because they believed that it was morally right but also because they saw social equity as a way to temper the anger and frustrations that had led ultimately to war. For several decades many European societies more or less

achieved these aims. Europe was quiet and civilized, no sounds of war.

It simply is not true that the present crisis is entirely the fault of John Maynard Keynes and the Social Democrats. Keynes has been dead for a long time, and no major European country (save Spain) has been ruled by Social Democrats for years. And yet, at a certain period the European idea began to lose steam. It was based on the assumption of permanent economic growth, and it did not take into account the problem of aging European societies. Once growth stalled and people lived longer, the base of the scheme eroded. Basic mistakes were made in other respects as well, such as the accumulation of debts and the belief that an economic-financial union could be established in the absence of a political one.

Europe needed to be based on a feeling of European identity and common values. But it began, after all, as an iron, steel and coal union. True, Jean Monnet, the father of the European Union, later said that he would put the emphasis on culture rather than the economy if he had to start all over again. But he did begin with the economy, and this approach was probably not without reason.

European integration was so difficult not because it had to overcome what some called the artificial concept of nation-statehood (nation-statehood had developed over the centuries; perhaps the world and Europe would have been better off without it, but it was certainly not artificial) but because the community of communities was artificial. All investigations have shown that people feel an attachment to the place and the country in which they were born (90

percent), but much less so to a wider institution involving a different way of life or a different language. According to a 1996 *Eurobarometer* survey, only 51 percent of Europeans “felt European,” and this figure seems not to have increased since. Various attempts have been made to strengthen the feeling of a common cultural heritage, including a European anthem and a European flag, so far to little effect. Some common cultural events have been slightly more successful, including the Eurovision Song Contests (which also generated a considerable amount of ill will as the result of political maneuvering) and the Vienna New Year’s Eve Johann Strauss concerto (but this was also enjoyed by many millions in China and Japan).

It would be unfair to conclude that Europe has become lazy, but it certainly has become inward looking and lethargic, lacking curiosity and enterprise. There is nothing wrong with the desire to enjoy life, but it is disconcerting if this is accompanied by a dearth of interest in the future.

Sometimes in history profound changes have come with the rise of a new generation, the eternal lucky chance of mankind, to echo Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. But young generations have also produced great mischief on the Continent, such as the victories of Fascism and Communism

which, initially at least, were movements of the youth.

If there will be a rejuvenation of Europe, it will come to a considerable extent from young people with non-European backgrounds. But with notable exceptions, Europe has not been able to attract the best of them, and there is no need to re-

capitulate in detail the great problems that have arisen in the integration of so many of the new immigrants. In any case, the youth cohort will shrink in Europe in the decades to come. The Continent is aging as a result of low fertility and rising life expectancy. This means not only increasing pressure on the European health services and pension schemes but also, quite likely, a decline in the standard of living. At the same time, paradoxically, massive youth unemployment is likely to persist, and

the young will have to shoulder the burden of the massive debts accumulated in the past. A far smaller cohort of young people will have to work for the well-being of a far larger group of the old.

Hence generational conflict will be the new norm. Youth revolts were not infrequent in nineteenth-century Europe, but they were mainly political not social in character. More recently, rebellions of the young have taken place in France, Britain, Spain and Greece. Will national (or Euro-



pean) solidarity be strong enough to withstand these pressures in the coming years?

There is an almost unlimited number of possibilities for the failure of the European Union, but it would appear that the decisive issues are not the technical decisions that will be taken concerning the economy and the finances of the Continent but the deeper political and psychological factors—nationalism or postnationalism, whether dynamism or exhaustion will prove stronger. There are trends that can be predicted with a certain degree of probability, but there are also the imponderabilia which cannot be measured or weighted, let alone predicted, because they can be subject to sudden change. And it seems that the imponderabilia will be more decisive.

Many Europeans complain about a lack of democracy and they fear, rightly perhaps, that a Europe dominated by Brussels will be even less democratic. Few complain about a lack of leadership even though this is certainly as much needed if not more. For Europe has been drifting, and it is not even clear in what direction.

How much democracy can there be in the world of tomorrow? The system of the old Polish parliament with its liberum veto, in which the negative vote of one sufficed to bring any initiative to a halt, certainly will not work. The last Treaty of Lisbon (2009) brought some movement in this respect, but in practice it has not changed that much. Germany and France got together to streamline the EU, make the decision process quicker and more efficient, and impose stricter regulations and controls. But it did not help much, and there has not been full agreement between the two. Other countries did not like the attempts to remodel the EU in the image of France and Germany, however badly they needed help. But they, of course, had no alternative either.

Perhaps Robert Cooper is right. He has been advising EU foreign policy on and off for a long time. In his view Europe is postmodern, believing in peaceful interdependence and modern cooperation, whereas the policy of other states is rooted (at best) in ideas of traditional zones of influence and balance of power. But how will the postmodern survive in a world in which all too often chaos prevails, not the laws of the International Criminal Court but the laws of Hobbes? The postmodernists will have to act according to two sets of rules: one between “civilized” nations and another (“the rougher methods of an earlier era”) when dealing with the ruffians who have not yet reached the advanced stage of postmodernism. This may sound sensible, but it is impractical. “Liberal imperialism” is an unnecessarily provocative term, not a realistic policy for sending a few thousand people for a limited time to a faraway country with the order not to shoot.

Cooper’s theses, not surprisingly, have irritated those willing to forgive clerical fascism, dictatorship, even genocide, provided they happen outside Europe and the United States. But the real weakness of this policy is elsewhere—it embodies not only discrimination but also a determination that seems to be absent on the Continent these days. Europe as a forceful player would be most welcome, but how does one become a forceful player? Does Europe in its apathy want it? As Schopenhauer put it, to wish is easy but to wish to wish (*wollen wollen*) is next to impossible. In a recent book entitled *Un monde sans Europe?* (2011), Pierre Hassner writes that Europe should be a factor of equilibrium, of coordination and conciliation because it is strong enough to influence others and to defend itself but not to conquer and dominate: “Europe needs the world, the world needs Europe.” Noble words, true words—who could not agree with such sentiments? But does the world

The Europe I have known is in the process of disappearing. In its place will be something in between a regional power and a valuable museum.

share these sentiments, does Europe have the inner strength, the ambition to fulfill this mission?

The Asian political philosophers and statesmen were probably right when they told the Europeans that their more authoritarian model of governance will be more suitable to confront the tasks of the years to come. Europe, as they see it, is a spent force, essentially a customs union that never seriously intended to become a global power. They find it strange that Europe seems not to be aware of its modest role in world affairs and has not come to terms with it. Whether there will be one Europe, or a *Europe des patries* (in Charles de Gaulle's phrase), or no united Europe at all, it will hardly be more democratic than at present. It will be increasingly difficult in the struggle for survival to maintain the present level of democratic freedoms.

There never was a European superstate, not even the blueprint for one. True, there are common interests, but could not Latin America serve as a model? The countries of Latin America live in peace with each other and cooperate to a certain extent; they have established a common market of sorts (Mercosur), providing free transit of goods, and a customs union. Two hundred years ago, Venezuelan Simón Bolívar had more ambitious plans for unifying the region, but his vision collided with Latin American realities and was not to happen, though these countries had much more in common than Europe (even, with the exception of Brazil, a common language). There have been of late some attempts to establish a closer political framework, but

it seems doubtful whether substantial progress will be made.

The prospects for European prosperity are far worse. Poor in raw materials and energy resources, Europe will find it difficult to maintain its standard of living and social achievements unless united. Unlike Latin America, its geopolitical location makes it more exposed to political pressures from its energy suppliers. Unless economic governance is strengthened, there will be recurrent crises, the imbalances between the countries will increase, and there will be a return to economic nationalism and protectionism. Unless there is a common energy policy, Europe will find it difficult to compete in world markets. Unless there is a common defense policy, Europe will count for even less in world affairs.

At present, the majority seems to be undecided what way to choose. They are reluctant to make a clean break with the EU but equally reluctant to move forward toward a superstate. Some feel that they may fare better facing the years to come alone; small, it used to be said, is beautiful. Small-town life in the past had its great charms. The everyday as depicted in the paintings of Carl Spitzweg, the German romantic painter, was certainly more pleasant than life among the satanic mills of England.

Perhaps the common ties and values and the mutual trust are not strong enough to serve as the basis for a real union. Perhaps with each country fending for itself they will do as well as with forces combined.

And if they do not do as well, this could be compensated for by greater happiness. It is not certain that even a united Europe

would have the vigor and political will to play a truly important role in international politics. And there is always the chance that the coming storms will bypass a Europe taking a low profile. Keeping a low profile seems to come easier these days than generating political will—and certainly appears to be less risky.

The Europe I have known is in the process of disappearing. In its place will be something in between a regional power and indeed a valuable museum. For the time being I tend to agree, despite everything, with Alfred, Lord Tennyson: “Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.”

There is much that is admirable in Europe’s past and even in its present, weakened state. But I am no longer certain to what extent Tennyson’s sentiments are shared by a majority of Europeans, to what degree there still is firm belief in a European identity, a European model and European values—and above all the will to defend them. Instead there is the comforting thought that other parts of the world seem to be in decline too. The present crisis is not primarily a financial-debt crisis but a crisis of lack of will, inertia, tiredness and self-doubt, and, however often “European values” are invoked, a crisis of lack of self-confidence, a weak ego in psychoanalytical terms.



Europe’s status in the world was predominant for a few centuries just as that of other powers earlier on; this has come to an end. All recorded history is the story of rise and decline. Unlike university professors, superpowers have no tenure. At the dawn of the modern age Giambattista Vico in his famous and influential *Scienza Nuova* argued that history moves in recurrent cycles—the divine, the heroic and the human (an imperfect translation of *l’eta degli uomini*). Europe is post-heroic. We are seeing it turn human. □

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The No-Growth Trap

By Benjamin M. Friedman

Well before the summer's horrific shootings in Norway, many citizens of the Western democracies had the sense that the social fabric was fraying in unexpected places. The Danes restricted immigration in violation of the European Union's Schengen Agreement. The lower house of the Dutch parliament voted—by nearly four to one—to outlaw ritual Muslim butchers (and, along the way, kosher butchers too). The French banned burkas in the streets. The Swiss banned minarets. In America, we are fighting over whether to build a wall between Texas and Mexico and litigating how far individual states can go in enforcing their own laws that bar undocumented immigrants and deny public benefits to those here legally. Most recently, a swath of cities across Britain exploded in racial violence and riots.

But the tensions on display across so much of the Western world are hardly limited to questions of immigration or race or religion. A dismissively antagonistic, often outright nasty, tone of public debate has become the new norm, in some countries accompanied by outright political paralysis. According to the latest opinion surveys, most Americans were appalled at the U.S. government's inability to resolve the debt-limit crisis with at least some semblance

of order, even if not civility. In Japan, the debate over Tokyo's response to the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and what to do about the resulting loss of nuclear-generating capacity, led to a no-confidence vote that the then prime minister Naoto Kan survived only by promising to resign—on a timetable that, within hours of the vote, spawned yet further acrimonious argument over just when he was supposed to depart (eventually the finance minister took the helm). The prize for the most fundamental stalemate goes to Belgium, where antagonism between the French- and Flemish-speaking parties has prevented the formation of a government for over a year. An end to this ugly process is now in sight, but for a while even normally phlegmatic observers were wondering whether the two regions could continue as a single country.

What has received less attention is the underlying economic cause of these troubling tensions: they are all-too-predictable manifestations of the discontent that sets in whenever most of a nation's citizens suffer a period of protracted stagnation in their living standards, and lose too their optimism that the material progress they used to enjoy will resume anytime soon. A pervasive economic stagnation has now set in across almost all the world's advanced economies. Here in America, the family right in the middle of the country's income distribution earned \$64,200 (in today's dollars) at the beginning of the last decade. Seven years later, the median fam-

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ily's income was \$64,500—less than half a percent greater, not per annum but cumulatively over those seven years. With the 2007–09 financial crisis, the recession that followed and the sluggish recovery since then, by 2010 the median family income fell to just \$60,400, *down* 6 percent from the previous peak and lower than in any year since 1997. The Census Bureau has not yet released data on median income for 2011, but with the continuing weak economy it is unlikely there has been any significant uptick. The majority of American families have now gone nearly a decade and a half with no improvement.

Many countries in Europe have suffered parallel experiences. In Britain as in the United States, the 1990s saw fairly robust income growth, but stagnation set in after 2001. In Italy, the median income remained largely flat through the 1990s and the 2000s until the financial crisis hit. In the Netherlands, both the 1990s and the aughts—up to 2007—saw stagnant median incomes (apparently separated by a large one-year gain in 2001 that may have been an illusion created by a change in statistical procedures). After 2007, the crisis and ensuing economic downturn depressed incomes everywhere. Japan has suffered even worse stagnation: median income fell by 3 percent in the 1990s overall, and then yet another 5 percent between 2000 and 2007. By 2009, median income in Japan was down nearly 18 percent from the mid-1990s peak and back at a level the Japanese last saw in the early 1980s.

Anti-immigrant agitation, racial and religious

prejudice, rancorous public discourse, political stalemate and paralysis, eroding generosity toward the disadvantaged—all are the predictable pathologies that ensue from stagnating incomes and living standards. In America, the agricultural depression of the 1880s and early 1890s led to violent labor unrest (most dramatically, the Homestead and Pullman strikes), a wave of religious bigotry, and the rise of Jim Crow (and not just in the South). The rocky economic period that followed World War I, even before the onset of the Great Depression, led to the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan (again, not just in the South), the end of America's early attempts to provide government assistance to women and children in poverty, and immigration laws both more restrictive and more discriminatory than anything the United States had seen before, or has seen since. The protracted stagnation from the early 1970s to the early 1990s led to widespread resistance to desegregation in schooling and affirmative action in the workplace, renewed anti-immigrant outcry



(California voters approved Proposition 187, but the courts threw it out), and, as Bill Clinton put it, the movement “to end welfare as we know it.” The experience of other Western democracies is replete with similar episodes. This latest round of such pathologies simply reminds us that even those societies whose citizens talk the best game of having advanced beyond caring about further gains in material living standards—the Dutch, the Swiss, even the Scandinavians—are no less subject to this familiar frustration than their more transparently materialistic American cousins.

But what if this time the political stalemate we now see also blocks policies that would restore the growth of incomes and living standards? Then the economy, and the society more broadly, would find itself in a trap: absence of growth leading to political paralysis, political paralysis leading to absence of steps to restart growth, absence of growth . . .

Of course, it is possible that some timely and convenient external force could come along to cut the circle. Seven decades later, for example, economists still debate how long it would have taken America to recover from the Great Depression had it not been for World War II. As late as 1940, with the United States still not at war but producing warships and guns and other matériel to send to Britain and our other future allies, nearly 15 percent of the labor force remained unemployed. It was not until 1942, the first year of full mobilization following Pearl Harbor, that unemployment finally dipped below 10 percent. And not until 1943, with 9 million men and women in uniform and the country’s new defense industries operating far beyond normal capacity, did unemployment fall back to the pre-Depression level of 3 percent.

But at present it is hard to see where such a helpful *deus ex machina*, or even an inter-

nally generated spur to America’s economic growth, would originate. The United States is already engaged in two wars. Most of the economies that regularly buy American exports in large volume—Canada, Mexico, Japan, Britain, in effect all of them but China—are in straits similar to ours. Home building, a traditional leading sector in U.S. postrecession recoveries, remains suffocated by the overhang of too many houses built in the years of rising prices, too many of which are now empty or facing foreclosure. Most consumers who have continued to pay their mortgages see both their home equity and their stock portfolios back where they were a decade ago. Many state and local governments are facing their own budget crises, and most are laying off more employees than they are hiring. Only the corporate sector is flush with cash, but most firms see little incentive to build facilities or expand their workforces, at least not in the United States.

The particular focus of today’s nexus between stagnant incomes and paralyzed policy making is the federal-budget debate. The current budget imbalance is enormous. According to the latest projections for the fiscal year that ended on September 30, 2011, the U.S. government spent \$3.6 trillion but took in only \$2.3 trillion. The difference, nearly \$1.3 trillion, represents 8.5 percent of U.S. national income, well above the Reagan-era peak of 6 percent and nearly as great as the post-World War II record of 10 percent just two years ago at the bottom of the “Great Recession.” A significant part of this imbalance reflects the decline in tax revenues and the increase in cyclically variable spending (unemployment benefits, for example) that occur whenever a business downturn depresses incomes and profits and puts people out of work. But not only is the budget deficit today out of proportion to prior experience; in the absence of significant policy changes, it is unlikely to

What if this time the political stalemate we now see also blocks policies that would restore the growth of incomes and living standards?

abate even as the economy gradually returns to full employment.

The ugly process that culminated in a last-minute agreement on August 1—really more an agreement to disagree—was not randomly focused. The U.S. government's taxing and spending policies are sharply at variance with one another, not just for the moment but over a longer time frame as well. And now that the Federal Reserve System has mostly exhausted its arsenal of tools for stimulating the economy through monetary means (including, to the central bank's credit under the circumstances, some actions that have stretched the meaning of "monetary"), it is primarily through what the government does in its taxing and spending that public policy is likely to have the greatest impact on the economy's growth prospects, for good or ill, for some years to come.

The August 1 agreement calls for nearly \$1 trillion of cuts in government spending over the coming ten years, but almost none of this saving (only \$21 billion) is to take effect before 2013, and the remainder is scheduled to build slowly. The twelve-member congressional panel that the agreement created is to report by December, specifying a further \$1.5 trillion in combined spending cuts and tax increases over this period. And if Congress rejects the panel's proposal, then—at least according to the provisions of the agreement as enacted—additional cuts (but no tax increases) of this magnitude will take place in a mechanical way. Most recently, President Obama has advanced a set of proposals that would preempt the congressional panel's actions,

but they appear to have little prospect of passage. Either way, the potential for further depressing an economy that is already weak, or at least retarding a precarious expansion that may well not display much vigor in any case, is clear.

But continuing on the current trajectory is not an acceptable option either. Former vice president Dick Cheney to the contrary, budget deficits do matter. Although government spending in excess of revenues is helpful when people are out of work and business is underproducing—additional spending, by the government or by recipients of tax cuts or government benefits, creates needed demand for many products—continued deficits once the economy regains full employment do harm. The borrowing that the government needs to do to fund its shortfall absorbs the savings that in a fully employed economy would otherwise go into investments in new factories, new equipment, new office buildings, new research and new houses. Firms seeking to invest, therefore, either do less, in which case the economy's productivity suffers, or invest anyway but finance it by borrowing from abroad. Either way, the economy's ability to provide jobs with rising wages, and therefore an improvement over time in Americans' average standard of living, is impaired.

The more fundamental issue, however, is not simply a generic budget imbalance. There is a reason this problem has become so politically intractable. Although participants in today's debate rarely acknowledge it—indeed, much of the discussion seems deliberately couched in abstract budget lan-

guage in order to avoid mentioning the subject—the issue at stake is the livelihood and care of America’s retired elderly.

By now most Americans are aware that the largest parts of the federal govern-



ment’s spending go to defense and “entitlements.” In the fiscal year that just ended, defense and entitlement programs together accounted for 81 percent of all government spending apart from interest payments on the national debt. The budget for defense (including for this purpose veterans’ and military-retirement benefits) was \$829 billion. All nonmilitary entitlements combined added up to nearly \$1.9 trillion. Most Americans also have their own views on the value of a larger versus smaller defense establishment. With the U.S. military now scheduled to withdraw at least in part from both Iraq and Afghanistan over the coming few years, some reduction in defense spending is already in the government’s planning. Leon Panetta, President Obama’s new defense secretary, has publicly argued that significant further cuts would harm U.S. national security, and most Republicans in Congress are sympathetic to this point of view. It is easy to understand why the debate over what to do about the government’s outsized deficit and rising

debt has therefore centered on entitlements.

But simply referring to “entitlements” is an obfuscation—and one that prevents the public discussion from addressing what is really at issue. The U.S. government has

many entitlement programs—ranging from food stamps to foster care to farm supports to retirement benefits for the government’s own civilian employees—but two of these programs together account for nearly two-thirds of the total entitlements budget: Social Security (last year \$726 billion) and Medicare (\$555 billion). Adding in more than \$80 billion of Medicaid spending that pays for nursing-home stays by patients aged sixty-five or older brings the share of the entitlements budget now

devoted to the support and care of America’s elderly population to nearly 72 percent.

Worse yet, for three familiar reasons this share will rise over time. Most importantly, the post–World War II baby-boom generation has now begun to become eligible for Social Security and Medicare. This process will continue for another decade and a half. Second, like the populations of other high-income countries, Americans are living longer. The life expectancy for a sixty-five-year-old American man is now another seven-teen years; for an American woman, another twenty. Third, ongoing improvements in medical technology turn out, on average, to be cost increasing. While some innovations, like laparoscopic surgery and antidepressant medications, save money compared to prior forms of treatment, most new drugs, internal scanning devices and other such improvements deliver better-quality care and even save lives, but do so at significant added cost. The combined result of these three ongoing forces is that, under Social Security’s and Medicare’s current configura-

tions, the share of the entitlements budget that provides income and medical care for America's elderly population will rise from today's 72 percent to 77 percent ten years from now.

None of this is news. But the fact that we have known about these forces for decades yet have done little to address them shows how fundamental are the economic and moral choices at issue. It is now nearly thirty years since the 1983 Greenspan Commission restructured the financing of Social Security to put that program on a firmer footing for what then seemed the foreseeable future. It is no criticism to observe that a change in policy adequately addressed a major national problem for "only" two generations. But those two generations have now largely passed by, and the country has taken no further significant action. Now the question of income support for the retired elderly is on the table again. The issue of medical care for this population is on the table too, right where it has always been. Today's acerbic political rhetoric notwithstanding, the impediment is not Washington infighting or the search for partisan advantage or the lack of public understanding—although each of those amplifiers is present, and each does make the challenge more daunting. The real point is that this problem is hard to begin with.

In the past the American political system has had a pretty good record of coming to grips with major challenges, if not right away then at least in more or less adequate time. Investment in what the early Federalists and Whigs called "internal improvements" (at first on canals and turnpikes, later on railroads) to open up the new country's interior for economic development; expansion across a huge continent (inspired by the ideology of Manifest Destiny); regulating, on a national scale, an increasingly nationwide economy; con-

structing a new monetary system to escape the systematic instability of an international gold standard combined with note-issuing banks; alleviating the human misery created by the Great Depression and at the same time arresting the cumulative economic collapse even if not effectively restoring full employment; full-scale military mobilization in response to the Japanese attack on America and Germany's seizure of most of Europe; mobilization of a different kind to meet the military as well as scientific threat of the Cold War; programs sufficient to make the retired elderly the segment of the U.S. population with the lowest incidence of poverty when it previously had the highest; and the rescue of the nation's banking system from what would surely have been collapse on a scale not seen since the Great Depression: in every case the debate was intense, usually partisan, often acrimonious and sometimes bitterly personal. But in every case the country made its way to a satisfactory resolution and then moved on. Only once in the nation's history—the mid-nineteenth-century slavery crisis—did the American political apparatus fail to deliver a solution to a challenge of national scope and first-magnitude importance.

A parallel lesson from this lengthy experience, however, is that this country's unusual system of governance imposes a need for accommodation and agreement, or at least willingness not to let disagreement stop the government's basic machinery, well beyond what parliamentary systems require. The familiar "checks and balances" built into the Constitution of the United States preclude the president—or, for that matter, the Congress—from acting in the way most democracies' prime ministers, backed by their parliamentary majorities, can and regularly do. The U.S. president's proposals mean nothing without a majority vote of both houses of Congress, a vote the chief executive has no guarantee of

getting. Congressional votes, unless they reach a two-thirds majority in each house separately, likewise mean nothing without the president's approval. The opportunity for stalemate is endemic.

In principle, the Senate could effectively nullify a presidential election by refusing to approve an incoming president's nominees for any or even all of the three thousand or so cabinet- and subcabinet-level appointments that any new chief executive needs to make in order to staff his or her administration. In principle, either house of Congress could halt any or all government functions simply by not appropriating the requisite funds. The Constitution does not specify a route out of this kind of impasse. The framers apparently expected the country's elected officials to negotiate their way. Not so this time around—or at least not yet.

What makes the current impasse over the federal budget seem intractable is not just the fundamental nature of the question of how and at what level to care for the nation's retired elderly but also the political setting, created by prolonged economic stagnation for so many of America's citizens, in which it is playing out. In his repeated public remarks, President Obama has highlighted the unwillingness of many congressional Republicans to embrace a spending-cuts/tax-increase compromise along the lines that he and House Speaker John Boehner were pursuing early in the summer. To Mr. Obama's apparent surprise and frustration, many of those most adamantly opposed to such a compromise have seen their constituents—at least the most active and vocal ones—enthusiastically endorse their entrenched stance.

Wholly apart from the merits of these groups' views in this particular debate, the unwillingness to entertain compromise with one's political opponents on the central issues of the day is a phenomenon all too familiar in times when participants

in a democratic society lose the sense that that society is delivering any material improvement in their lives. The followers of William Jennings Bryan during America's populist era, the Klan members of the 1920s (at its peak the Ku Klux Klan was the country's largest private organization, claiming as members one out of every six eligible Americans), and the volunteers in the "militias" that proliferated across many parts of America during the 1980s and early 1990s all had little interest in political compromise. Each group was born of a deep sense of exclusion from the country's political process and, once having earned a place at the table, displayed little familiarity with and even less enthusiasm for long-established ways of working matters out. In each case the perception, instead, was that the established way of running the country was what had produced the outcomes that they found so objectionable in the first place, whether falling farm prices or the influx of non-Protestant immigrants or what they perceived as excessive taxes and burdensome regulation. (Other seemingly novel aspects of today's political landscape, such as the opposition of many libertarians and Tea Party supporters to having a central bank, or the view, expressed by many citizens who now carry copies of the Constitution with them to political meetings, that two hundred years of Supreme Court jurisprudence is irrelevant because any citizen who reads the document is fully capable of knowing what it means, are likewise characteristic of prior periods of ascendancy of new groups to political prominence, not just in America but elsewhere as well.)

What enabled America's political machinery to move beyond such hurdles was, more often than not, the return of rising living standards. The agricultural depression that incubated the late-nineteenth-century populist movement gave way in the mid-1890s to two decades of vigorous—al-

beit irregular—economic expansion. The stagnation of middle-class incomes initially triggered by the OPEC cartel's oil-price increase finally ended in the early 1990s, and incomes then rose sharply throughout the balance of that decade. The story of the 1920s and 1930s is more complicated, in that a new political mood began to emerge well in advance of any significant recovery from the outright depression that had followed four earlier post-World War I

lies will block a resolution of the budget impasse—which is to say, it will preclude a satisfactory response to the demographic problem that has been looming since the baby-boom generation began to arrive nearly seventy years ago. If so, the resulting inaction (or action such as it will be) will surely impede any prospects for the U.S. economy to return to a trajectory of sustained growth shared broadly throughout the workforce. Until the bulk of America's



citizens begin to see an improvement in their economic prospects, the political basis for addressing these challenges will remain weak if not perverse.

Hence the “no-growth trap” that we now face. Recognizing a threat is not the same as overcoming it. Nor will merely being straightforward about the economic and moral issues that the support of our retired elderly

downturns. The most likely explanation is that after 1929 the depression was not only so severe but also so sufficiently widespread that Americans had a sense of everyone's going down together—a condition certainly not shared in the most recent financial crisis, nor in the more general stagnation of incomes and living standards that set in more than a decade ago.

The present threat, therefore, is that the continued absence of economic improvement for the majority of America's fami-

lies will block a resolution of the budget impasse—which is to say, it will preclude a satisfactory response to the demographic problem that has been looming since the baby-boom generation began to arrive nearly seventy years ago. If so, the resulting inaction (or action such as it will be) will surely impede any prospects for the U.S. economy to return to a trajectory of sustained growth shared broadly throughout the workforce. Until the bulk of America's

population entails—important as that political honesty would be—answer the question of what we should do. But if we fail, as a nation, to overcome our current stalemate, and the rising acrimony that comes with it, we will be headed for a long period of not only economic stagnation but moral decline as well. □

This essay grew out of conversations with John Olcay. But responsibility for any errors or controversy lies with me.

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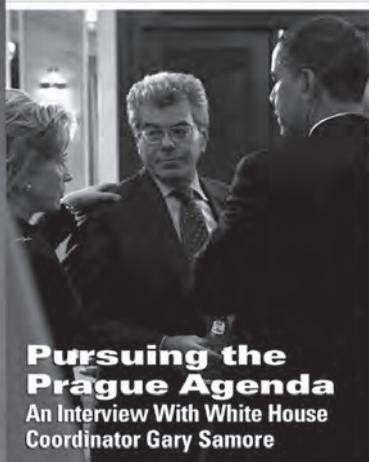
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Chinese Nationalism and Its Discontents

By Robert S. Ross

At no time since the end of the Cold War have U.S.-China relations been worse. Yes, in the past there have been periodic confrontations over Taiwan, and tensions over the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the Chinese fighter-jet collision with an American reconnaissance plane over the South China Sea. But the current downturn reflects a potential long-term trend with the likelihood of protracted strategic conflict. Equally troubling, this raising of tensions is not only unnecessary but also potentially costly to the United States.

Beginning in early 2009, China committed a series of diplomatic blunders that ultimately elicited a near-universal condemnation of Chinese diplomacy. The list is long:

The March 2009 Chinese naval harassment of the U.S. Navy reconnaissance ship *Impeccable* operating in China's exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea;

Beijing's heavy-handed resistance to negotiation at the December 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, causing diplomatic friction between China and Europe and between China and the United States;

Its hard-line response to the January 2010 U.S.

decision to sell arms to Taiwan, which included a threat to impose sanctions on U.S. companies that have defense cooperation with Taipei;

Mismanagement of North Korea's sinking of the South Korean naval ship *Cheonan* in March 2010, followed by widespread South Korean anger toward China;

Strident Chinese diplomatic protests against U.S.-South Korean naval exercises in international waters in the Yellow Sea;

Excessive hostility to the Japanese detention, in September 2010, of the captain of a Chinese fishing boat for operating in Japanese-claimed waters and for steering his ship into a Japanese coast-guard vessel;

The Chinese government's clumsy campaign to compel Google to cease service of its search engine on the mainland;

Its December 2010 harsh and persistent opposition to Liu Xiaobo's selection as the Nobel Peace Prize recipient;

Increasingly forceful assertion of its disputed economic and territorial claims in the South China Sea, eliciting apprehension throughout Southeast Asia.

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In contrast to three decades of a successful peaceful-rise strategy that enabled Beijing to develop cooperative interactions with nearly every country in the world, within two years

China had managed to sour relations with virtually every Asian country and every advanced industrial nation.

The source of all this strident Chinese diplomacy is not its emergence as a regional great power with corresponding confidence in its new capabilities. Rather, China's new diplomacy reflects the regime's spiraling domestic confidence and its increasing dependence on nationalism for domestic stability. Washington has misread the state of affairs, exaggerating Chinese capabilities and fundamentally misinterpreting the source of all the aggressive Chinese diplomacy.

The truth is China is neither particularly militarily strong nor particularly domestically stable. Beijing's combative diplomacy was not spurred by American economic weakness in the wake of the recession, and it was far from an indicator of growing Chinese confidence. On the contrary, in recent years Beijing has not deployed and operationalized significant new advanced naval capabilities, and its domestic economic environment is worse today than at any time since the onset of the post-Mao economic reforms in 1978.

Beyond its coastal waters, China's naval capability remains dependent on its advanced diesel submarines, which were first deployed in the mid-1990s. By 2000, China's submarine force had already begun to pose a formidable challenge to U.S. naval operations in the western Pacific Ocean. But since then it has not deployed any additional naval capabilities that pose consequential new challenges to the U.S. Navy or to America's defense of its security partners. China still cannot independently manufacture advanced military aircraft, and it has yet to deploy a single Chinese-designed advanced aircraft. The J-15 and J-20 fighter planes are still in development. It has finally launched its first aircraft carrier, but it does not have aircraft for the carrier. Its

antipiracy naval operations off the coast of Somalia are basic. Its protection of its claims in the South China Sea depends on coast-guard ships. China is developing potentially effective advanced-technology maritime access-denial capabilities, including an improved missile capability, but none of it has yet been adequately tested, much less deployed. Its antiship ballistic-missile program is not operational. China's space program is making great progress, but the People's Liberation Army (PLA) hasn't developed the capacity to significantly challenge U.S. space-based communication capabilities or hasn't built its own space-based war-fighting capability. The PLA is developing drones and air-based radar systems, but again these and other such defense projects remain relatively primitive or experimental. China will continue to modernize its military capabilities, and it will eventually deploy advanced systems that may challenge U.S. security and regional stability, but Beijing's new diplomacy cannot be explained by thirty years of defense spending and military modernization.

Nor does the strident diplomacy reflect Chinese economic confidence. At the height of the global financial crisis, the Chinese economy continued to grow at approximately 10 percent per year. But beneath this facade of prosperity, China's economy was weakening significantly. In October 2008, as the global recession deepened, Chinese leaders unleashed a massive but dysfunctional stimulus program. Not only did it fail to resolve most of the deep-seated problems in the system, it also managed to foster many new ones. Despite the stimulus, unemployment in China remains high in rural areas and among urban college graduates. In 2010, Premier Wen Jiabao estimated that there were 200 million unemployed Chinese. Moreover, during the past two years, inequality—by international standards—has become extremely high. As a result of the

stimulus, inflation has soared, affecting the price of food, housing and transportation. By last year, China's property bubble had significantly worsened, the condition of national banks had deteriorated more than at any time in the past ten years and local government debt had skyrocketed. Economic growth has increasingly relied on government-stimulated investment, not on consumption—which fuels even-greater inflation. More worrying still, the state-owned sector is expanding at the expense of the private sector, thus undermining innovation while politicizing economic policy making.

These are all protracted problems which together suggest that social instability in China will grow and that the Chinese Communist Party's economic-based legitimacy will significantly erode.

Beijing's problems are only exacerbated by the fact that the tools of Chinese repression are deteriorating. In the past five years, the number of spontaneous small- and large-scale demonstrations has mushroomed. More recently, the Internet has undermined the government's ability to control information—and to minimize nationwide hostility toward the party. It has become an effective device for people to communicate their ire over unemployment and inflation, as well as over political and economic corruption, police brutality, criminal cover-ups, environmental degradation and property seizures. In addition, peer-to-peer microblogging (via Twitter and its Chinese equivalents) can facilitate large-scale, independent and impromptu mass protests. China made its first arrest for a microblog post back in

September 2010 during the rallies against Japan's detention of the Chinese fisherman. Economic instability and the erosion of the Communist Party's control over society are



occurring simultaneously. This domestic weakness has forced the government to rely more and more on nationalism for regime legitimacy—and it explains Beijing's diplomatic blundering.

As the Chinese people witness their relative position in the world increasing (particularly in light of the decline of Japan), the United States is seen as the obstacle to China's international acceptance as a great power, so that Washington is gradually replacing Tokyo as the focus of nationalist resentment. With its influence waning, the party is now more vulnerable to growing strident nationalist opposition. Since January 2010, on the web and in newspapers, nationalists have demanded Chinese international assertiveness before the government can even consider a policy, putting Chinese leaders on the defensive. Indeed, in recent years nationalism has become more widespread in urban areas, infecting not just the military and disaffected youth but also workers, intellectuals, civilian leaders and

businesspeople. Moreover, Internet communication technologies enable Chinese nationalists to interact with each other and can facilitate popular protests against Chinese foreign policy, thus magnifying the importance of nationalism and the danger it poses to regime stability. China's insecure rulers, preoccupied with domestic stability, are thus compelled to pay evermore attention to nationalist triumphalism as they formulate foreign policy.

For the first time since the death of Mao Tse-tung, Chinese leaders have had to choose between using nationalism and strident diplomacy to accommodate their domestic audience and using China's peaceful-rise strategy to accommodate the international community. Until recently, China opted for the latter. But since 2009 the party's effort to appease China's nationalists has resulted in a bumbling foreign policy that has aroused global animosity and undermined China's security.

This nationalist diplomacy bred considerable anxiety among America's allies in East Asia. Did Washington have the will to sustain its strategic presence and balance China's rise? A robust U.S. diplomatic response was in order. But the United States went too far, challenging China's security on its continental periphery, creating the potential for protracted great-power security conflict and heightened regional instability.

Following the North Korean sinking of the South Korean naval ship *Cheonan* in March 2010 and China's failure to publicly condemn Pyongyang for the attack, the United States developed a series of effective initiatives in maritime East Asia designed to reaffirm its resolve to contend with the rise of China. Many of these initiatives were necessary and constructive. In late June, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, three U.S. nuclear-powered submarines surfaced simultaneously in Asian ports. In July

2010, during former secretary of defense Robert Gates's visit to Jakarta, the United States agreed to expand military cooperation with Indonesia. In November, during Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to New Zealand, the United States agreed to reestablish full military cooperation with the Pacific island nation, despite New Zealand's ban on visits by nuclear-powered ships to its ports. The United States expanded military relations with the Philippines and strengthened its commitment to the protection of Japan. During Sino-Japanese tension over the fishing-boat-captain incident, Hillary Clinton stated that the U.S.-Japan defense treaty covered military contingencies involving the disputed Senkaku Islands administered by Japan but also claimed by China. Subsequent to the release of the captain, Washington and Tokyo carried out their largest-ever joint naval exercise. Here then was a strong America reassuring its allies—this may have encroached on China's grand ambitions, but it was an expected and appropriate response.

But then there was the overly assertive Washington that launched, in Hillary Clinton's formulation, its "forward-deployed diplomacy." It was a volte-face of years of American policy, and it was seen as a growing—and very different sort of—challenge by Beijing.

During the George W. Bush administration, the United States reduced its troops in South Korea by 40 percent, removed its forces deployed between the demilitarized zone and Seoul, dramatically reduced the size of the annual U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises and stated in the Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Review that in 2012 the United States would transfer to Seoul operational command (OPCOM) of South Korean forces. These steps, regardless of the administration's intentions, created a China that was more secure on its periphery.

Beginning in early 2009, China committed a series of diplomatic blunders that ultimately elicited a near-universal condemnation of Chinese diplomacy.

Now, the Obama administration has reversed course. The transfer of OPCOM to South Korea has been deferred for at least three years. Throughout 2010 the United States conducted a series of high-profile, large-scale military exercises with Seoul, including maritime drills in waters west of South Korea. Later in the year, the United States and South Korea signed the new “Guidelines for U.S.-ROK Defense Cooperation,” which called for enhanced combined exercises and interoperability between the two armed forces. These developments all suggested a determined U.S. interest in re-establishing a significant conventional military presence on the peninsula.

The U.S. security initiative with South Korea has eroded Beijing’s confidence over its strategic relationship with Seoul; China is now increasingly dependent on North Korea as its only reliable ally on the peninsula, and it has become more resistant to Korean unification for fear that it could lead to an expanded U.S. military presence closer to China’s border. Chinese leaders now place ever-greater value on stability in North Korea. Rather than use its economic leverage on Pyongyang in cooperation with U.S. nonproliferation objectives, Beijing has increased its support of North Korean economic and political stability.

And in July 2010, as a U.S.-South Korean naval exercise took place in the Yellow Sea, Hillary Clinton launched a new U.S. strategic initiative for Southeast Asia at an Asian regional-security meeting in Hanoi. After Washington held extensive consultations and planning with all of the claimants of the Spratly Islands except China,

Secretary Clinton announced America’s support for a “collaborative diplomatic process” to resolve the dispute. The move constituted a sharp rebuke to Beijing, which has long claimed sovereignty over the territory, and suggested U.S. intervention in support of the other claimants, which have advocated multilateral negotiations. In addition, the United States had previously expressed support for stability in the South China Sea, but only in Washington, DC, at the assistant-secretary level, and never through prior discussion with any of the involved nations.

The administration’s forward-deployed diplomacy also includes strategic cooperation with Vietnam. For over twenty years Washington parried Vietnamese overtures, understanding that Indochina is not a vital interest. Yet, in August, after Clinton’s support in Hanoi for Vietnamese resistance to Chinese maritime claims, the U.S. Navy, including the aircraft carrier *USS George Washington*, held a joint training exercise with the Vietnamese navy for the first time. In October, Secretary Gates visited Hanoi, where he proclaimed the potential for expanded U.S.-Vietnamese defense cooperation and his hope that Vietnam would continue to participate in military exercises with the United States. Later that month, Clinton returned to Hanoi and declared U.S. interest in developing a “strategic partnership” with Vietnam and in cooperating with the country on “maritime security.” She then visited Phnom Penh and urged Cambodia to establish greater foreign-policy independence from China. In addition, for the first time the United States expressed

support for the Indochinese countries' efforts to constrain Chinese use of the headwaters of the Mekong River.

Beijing is now intent on punishing Vietnam for its hubris in cooperating with the United States. It wants to compel Hanoi to accommodate Chinese power. In 2011 it escalated the frequency and scale of its armed harassment of Vietnamese fishing ships operating in disputed waters, causing increased bilateral tension and damage to the Vietnamese fishing industry. China also stepped up its naval harassment of Philippine economic activities in disputed waters. But in response, the United States has only reinforced its commitment to the Southeast Asian countries. In July 2011 it held another military exercise with Vietnam. Then it again sent an aircraft carrier to visit the country, and the Pentagon reached its first military agreement with the Vietnamese military. The Pentagon is also assisting the Philippines' maritime intelligence capabilities in the South China Sea. China's dep-

uty foreign minister Cui Tiankai recently warned that some Southeast Asian countries were "playing with fire" and expressed his "hope that the fire will not be drawn to the United States."

Washington is thus engaged in an increasingly polarized conflict in Southeast Asia. But more important, independent of the course of the South China Sea maritime disputes, U.S. collaboration with Vietnam's effort to use America to oppose China is not only costly but also foolish. Vietnam's common land border with China, its maritime vulnerability to the Chinese navy and its economic dependency on Beijing ensure that the United States will not be able to develop meaningful defense cooperation with Vietnam. But having engaged China in this regional diplomatic tussle, any U.S. effort to disengage from the island conflict by encouraging moderation on the part of its Southeast Asian partners would risk being viewed as a strategic retreat.

The Obama administration's greater security cooperation with countries on the mainland's perimeter is a disproportionate reaction to Chinese nationalism. It is not reflective of any recent improvements in Chinese naval capabilities that could challenge U.S. maritime dominance. Nor does it reflect an increased strategic importance of the Korean Peninsula or Indochina for U.S. security. Since 1997, the United States deployed increasing quantities of its most advanced weaponry to East Asia and consolidated security cooperation with its maritime security partners, all the while maintaining significant U.S.-China cooperation. That was a productive policy.

But now Chinese leaders are re-evaluating U.S. intentions. They have concluded that the United



States is developing a forward-leaning policy of encirclement and containment. Regardless of Washington's intent, recent American actions have provided ample evidence to support China's claims.

Beijing's nationalist diplomacy is dangerous. America's ill-conceived response makes it even more so. China is militarily vulnerable to the United States, and the regime is vulnerable to internal instability. At this point, Washington is embroiled in territorial disputes over worthless islands in the South China Sea and is expanding its strategic presence on China's periphery. And in an era when Chinese cooperation is increasingly important, Washington is needlessly challenging Chinese security.

Just as America expects China to restrain its security partners in the Middle East and Asia from exacerbating conflict with the

United States, America has the responsibility to rein in its security partners as well.

The balance of power in East Asia is a vital national-security interest, and the United States must reassure its strategic partners that it will provide for their security, despite the rise of China. The United States military must continue to focus its weapons acquisitions and deployments on maintaining U.S. security in the region. The task at hand for American policy is to realize these objectives while maintaining U.S.-China cooperation. Chinese nationalism will continue to challenge U.S. foreign policy for a long time to come. This will require the administration to acknowledge both America's maritime superiority and China's domestic and international vulnerabilities, and thus exercise confident restraint and resist overreaction to Beijing's insecure leadership. □

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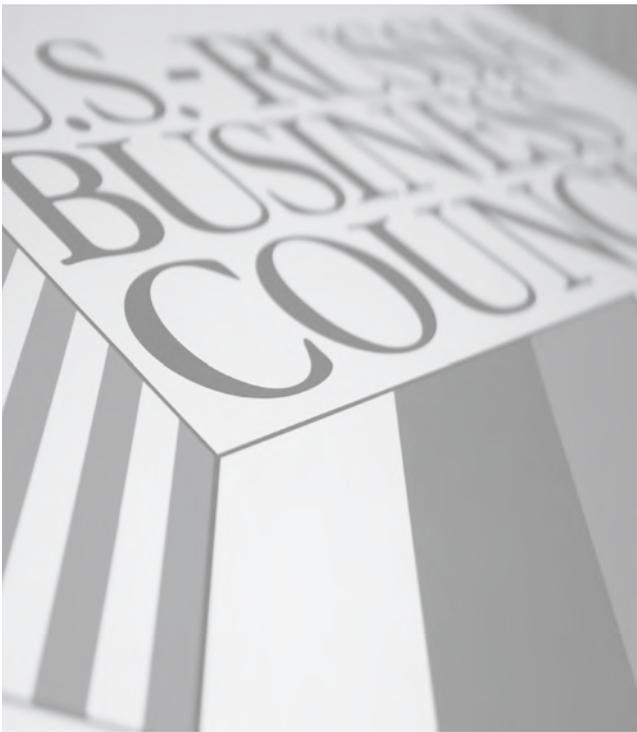
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Reviews & Essays

Pinker the Prophet

By Robert Jervis

Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking Adult, 2011), 832 pp., \$40.00.

With the United States fighting two wars, countries from Tunisia to Syria either in or on the brink of intrastate conflicts, bloodshed continuing in Sudan and reports that suicide bombers might foil airport security by planting explosives within their bodies, it is hard to be cheerful. But Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker tells us that we should be, that we are living in the least violent era ever. What's more, he makes a case that will be hard to refute. The trends are not subtle—many of the changes involve an order of magnitude or more. Even when his explanations do not fully convince, they are serious and well-grounded.

Pinker's scope is enormous, ranging in time from prehistory to today and covering wars (both international and civil), crime, torture, abuse of women and children, and even cruelty to animals. This breadth is central because violence in all of these domains has declined sharply. Students of any one of these areas are familiar with a narrow slice of the data, but few have stepped back to look at the whole picture. In fact, many

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scholars and much of the educated public simply deny the good news. But prehistoric graves and records from twentieth-century hunter-gatherers reveal death rates due to warfare five to ten times that of modern Europe, and the homicide rate in Western Europe from 1300 to today has dropped by a factor of between ten and fifty. When we read that after conquering a city the ancient Greeks killed all the men and sold the women and children into slavery, we tend to let the phrases pass over us as we move on to admire Greek poetry, plays and civilization. But this kind of slaughter was central to the Greek way of life.

Implicit throughout and explicit at the very end is Pinker's passionate belief that contemporary attacks on the Enlightenment and modernity are fundamentally misguided. Critics often argue that material and technical progress has been achieved without—or even at the cost of—moral improvement and human development. Quite the contrary, he argues; we are enormously better than our ancestors in how we treat one another and in our ability to work together to build better lives.

To make such bold and far-reaching claims, one must draw on an equally vast array of sources. And so Pinker does. The bibliography runs to over thirty pages set in small type, covering studies from anthropology, archaeology, biology, history, political science, psychology and sociology. With this range comes the obvious danger of superficiality. Has he understood all this material? Has he selected only those sources that support his claims? Does he know the limits of the studies he draws on? I cannot answer

these questions in all the fields, but in the areas I do know—international relations and some psychology—his knowledge holds up very well. With the typical insider’s distrust of interlopers, I was ready to catch him stacking the deck or twisting arguments and evidence about war. While he does miss some nuances, these are not of major consequence. It is true that despite the enormous toll of World Wars I and II, not only have there been relatively few massive bloody conflicts since then (and an unprecedented period of peace among the major powers), but the trends going back many centuries reveal a decline in

the frequency of war, albeit not a steady one. The record on intrastate conflicts is muddier because definitions vary and histories are incomplete, but most studies reveal a decline there as well. In the aftermath of the Cold War, civil wars broke out in many areas, and some still rage (most obviously in Congo), but, contrary to expectations, this wave has subsided. In parallel, Pinker marshals multiple sources using different

methodologies to show that however much we may fear crime, throughout the world the danger is enormously less than it was centuries ago. When we turn to torture, domestic violence against women, abuse of

children and cruelty to animals, the progress over the past two millennia is obvious. Here what is particularly interesting is not only the decline in the incidence of these behaviors but also that until recently they were the norm in both the sense of being expected and of being approved.

In all these diverse areas, then, I think Pinker’s argument holds up. Or, to put it more cautiously, the burden is now on those who believe

that violence has not declined to establish their case. (Whether our era sees new and more subtle forms of violence is a different question and I think would have to involve the stretching of this concept.) We often scorn “mere” description, but here it is central. The fact—if it is accepted as a fact—that violence has declined so much in so many forms changes the way we understand our era and the sweep of human history. It



shows how much our behavior has changed and that even if biology is destiny, destiny does not yield constant patterns. It also puts in perspective our current ills and shows that notions of civilization and progress are not mere stories that we tell ourselves to justify our lives.

So why has all this good news generally gone unrecognized, and why do many people believe that our age is unprecedented in its bloodiness? One reason Pinker notes is the tendency to whitewash history. Myths of a better time in the past and portrayals of our current era as degraded are common among social critics on both the left and right to goad us into shame—and action. Our understanding of the massive slaughter and oppression levied by the dominance of the Western world over less modern civilizations has magnified this propensity, and stressing how much violence there was in earlier times, and in some contemporary non-Western societies, seems to stereotype Others as barbarians. Ironically, the liberal worldview that Pinker credits with so much of our progress involves a sensitivity to our current and previous sins that encourages viewing distant societies such as the American Indians not only more favorably than we did until recently but also more favorably than is warranted.

Related to this, the somewhat cynical spirit of our age makes us suspicious of claims about progress in human behavior, especially because the plethora of such claims by Western thinkers like Herbert Spencer and even Max Weber in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries failed to

foresee the cataclysms that were to come and appeared to justify the dominance of racism and sexism around the world. It is all too easy for any of us to imagine how we could be ridiculed, generations from now, for our naïveté and unwitting complicity in a new malign order.

The recent past too seems to make a mockery of Pinker's argument. Just to mention the names of Hitler, Stalin and Mao is to make us cringe at the thought of progress. Although the world has seen nothing so horrific since then, readers of this journal will be familiar with the wars between Iran and Iraq and between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and any day's newspaper reveals numerous incidents of bloodshed. Since they are happening now, they are very vivid, which makes it hard to maintain a sense of proportion. Reading about the latest school massacre or serial killer grabs our attention more than the drab long-run statistics. Even if we are aware of the terrors of the distant past, we do not feel them in our gut.

The wars of the twentieth century and the domestic mayhem caused by those tyrannical leaders will lead many to ask how previous eras could conceivably have witnessed as many casualties at the hands of oppressors or at the point of a gun. Well, they didn't. But Pinker argues that what is important for understanding social processes is not the absolute number of deaths but their proportion of the world's population, which has greatly increased over time. To some, this will seem like a sleight of hand. In what way do tens of millions of deaths in wars and attempts to remake

The fact—if it is accepted as a fact—that violence has declined so much in so many forms changes the way we understand our era and the sweep of human history.

societies become less significant because of the rise of world population, including in continents far distant from these atrocities? Morally, they do not. But if one wants to use body counts as a way to understand the extent of violence in the world, proportions and ratios are a better measure than absolute numbers.

Is it also appropriate to point to the lack of a war between the United States and the USSR as evidence of growing peacefulness? The Cold War of course saw American troops fighting in Korea and Vietnam, not to mention numerous smaller proxy wars. These were not large enough to move the needle on Pinker's scale, but a nuclear war would have been. Pinker briefly notes many of the arguments for why this did not occur, but to the extent that peace was maintained by the fear of total annihilation, one can certainly question how we should enter this period into our balance sheet. If we think that we were playing Russian roulette, then the fact that we were lucky does not count quite so strongly for our living in a less violent time.

An awareness that massive war could still break out today similarly inhibits our sense of progress. Without a true rival state to the United States, the specter of world-destroying conflict has disappeared, but even optimists agree that there is at least some chance of a Sino-American war, and the danger of a nuclear exchange between other hostile pairs, most obviously India and Pakistan—but also Israel and a nuclear-armed Iran—cannot be dismissed. These perils remind us that progress always comes with costs: no splitting of the atom, no nuclear holocaust.

And this makes us resist Pinker's analysis.

Most broadly, we see less progress than we should because we are prone to what can be called the conservation of fears. If through effort or good fortune the problem we worry most about disappears, all the others move up a notch. Terrorist incidents were frequent during the Cold War, and although they did not kill as many people as did 9/11, they were a significant concern for citizens and policy makers. But no one suggested that this was a menace of sufficient magnitude to merit making it the pivot of American foreign policy, let alone the center of societal concerns. We are now so worried about terrorism because our security environment is otherwise so benign. The fact that we no longer have to live under the shadow of instantaneous destruction has much less impact on our psyches and sense of how dangerous our world is than logic would suggest.

Pinker wants to do more than document the decline of violence; he wants to explain it. And that explanation comes in two forms: a "Civilizing Process" that reduced violence, especially within states, and a "Humanitarian Revolution" that extended rights not only to different races, but also to women and children. (The two processes have some overlap, and growing humanitarianism probably would have been impossible without the earlier evolution away from barbarism and toward gentility, but they nevertheless remain distinct.)

Civility, for Pinker, was promoted to a great extent by the rise of the state in early modern Europe. It is a Hobbesian notion

that statistics from nonstate societies confirm: without law supported by sufficient power, both self-defense and self-aggrandizement produce a violent world. The data are quite clear that the development of a state structure is associated with a sharp decline in homicides. Here and elsewhere, Pinker is quick to note that correlation

a vital concern today: How do we devise it so that the government is strong enough to maintain order and guarantee rights without being so strong and independent as to be a menace to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

The second major civilizing impulse is the development of commerce. A fun-



does not necessarily mean causation, but both logic and chronology indicate a significant role for state power in quelling violence.

Still, as Aesop noted in his fable of King Log and King Stork (one of the few sources that Pinker does not cite), a strong government can kill, and a decline in homicide can be more than compensated for by an increase in state-sponsored killing. Pinker acknowledges this, but I do not think fully takes on board the central problem of government that has preoccupied so many thinkers, that underpinned the American Constitution and that remains

damental intellectual breakthrough was the understanding that economic activities were not zero-sum and that uncoerced trade was mutually beneficial. Trade also provided potential income streams for states and flourished when ruling parties could provide internal order. Thus while Columbia scholar Charles Tilly was correct to say that “war made the state, and the state made war,” one too could say this about commerce.

To these well-known elements Pinker adds the insights of the historical sociologist Norbert Elias who showed how the development of royal courts led to forms of

civilization that we now take for granted—table manners (including not brandishing knives that all too easily could be used to stab food, as well as one’s neighbor), not spitting, along with defecating and copulating only in private. Much of the evolution of etiquette and manners made social interactions more predictable and reinforced self-control and the need to delay gratifications, practices that made sense when being hot-blooded was likely to reduce rather than increase wealth, standing and security.

How convincing is this? The obvious objection is that it amounts to explaining history with history; that it describes more than it enlightens. Pinker acknowledges that these mechanisms are all deeply intertwined and that proof is impossible. In dealing with such large and complex phenomena, plausibility may be all that we can hope for, and Pinker’s argument and evidence do meet this test. And his willingness to include anomalies in his explanation is admirable. But it is his desire to do so that also provides grounds for skepticism. Pinker argues that the uptick in domestic violence in the West, and especially in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, can be explained by a temporary “decivilizing process.” The increase in homicides and crime was caused, he argues, by a decrease in respect for authority, a rise in self-indulgence, a scorn for self-discipline and other “bourgeois values,” and a renunciation of the belief that societies are held together by a willingness to respect others. The fact that those of us who participated—even marginally—in these activities remember

the condescending diatribes of our elders along these same lines does not mean that Pinker is incorrect. But his case would be stronger if he could show that the marchers and protesters and anti-Vietnam War brigades were the ones responsible for the increased violence. It is also hard to rule out the possibility that both the social turmoil and the rise in crime were brought about by third factors, most obviously the dislocation and diversion of resources caused by the war and the heightened sense on the part of many young and educated people that Western social institutions had failed to live up to the Enlightenment values on which they were founded. Indeed, the 1960s and ’70s witnessed a great expansion of rights and the reinvigoration of social inquiry that Pinker sees as an engine of progress. And while Pinker attributes the subsequent decline in crime to a return to the earlier norms, the drastic increase in the incarceration rate (which many consider to be uncivilized) may have had something to do with it.

What Pinker calls the “Humanitarian Revolution” involved a recasting of normal and appropriate human behavior. Part of our historical and biological heritage, we now see torture, slavery, and sanctioned violence against women, children and others who were powerless in society, and often against those who held different political and religious beliefs, as repugnant. The world became not only safer but also more humane.

The cause, Pinker tells us, was the growth of literacy, writing and publishing. “Read-

ing is a technology for perspective-taking. When someone else's thoughts are in your head, you are observing the world from that person's vantage point," which leads to at least a degree of empathy. Furthermore, exposure to a wider range of people, thoughts and events "is the first step toward asking whether [current practices] could be done in some other way." Fiction as well as nonfiction can serve this purpose, and the mid- and late-eighteenth century witnessed an explosion of novels. With the Enlightenment, more and more ideas were exchanged through letters and discussions in increasingly cosmopolitan cities. Such exchanges are crucial, according to Pinker, and lest I be accused of caricaturing his claim for how they lead to progress, let me give an extended quotation:

When a large enough community of free, rational agents confers on how a society should run its affairs, steered by logical consistency and feedback from the world, their consensus will veer in certain directions. Just as we don't have to explain why molecular biologists discovered that DNA has four bases . . . we may not have to explain why enlightened thinkers would eventually argue against African slavery, cruel punishments, despotic monarchs, and the execution of witches and heretics. With enough scrutiny by disinterested, rational, and informed thinkers, these practices cannot be justified indefinitely.

The later and parallel rights revolutions over the past thirty years (greater rights for racial minorities, gays, women, children and even animals) were similarly rooted in "technolo-

gies that made ideas and people increasingly mobile. . . . [and led to] a debunking of ignorance and superstition. . . . [and] an increase in invitations to adopt the viewpoints of people unlike oneself."

It is the free flow of ideas, unrestrained by dogmas, that is doing the work for Pinker. Nevertheless, much as this idea is appealing to academics and intellectuals, skepticism is in order. We have come to see slavery as a violation of our values and sense of what it means to be human, but one does not have to be a Marxist to doubt that this was the inevitable consequence of free inquiry (it certainly was not in the United States). Pinker displays a great faith—although he would dislike that word—in the ability of social science (he does not like current trends in the humanities) to lead us toward not only a better understanding of the human condition but also the betterment of it. I love reading and doing social science, but think we should be wary about overclaiming. Empathy, for Pinker's account, may lead naturally (but not inevitably) to at least a degree of do-unto-others-as-you-would-have-them-do-unto-you behavior. But Pinker realizes that one can see the world through someone else's eyes and still want to harm him, and also appreciates that research on the effects and, even more, the causes of empathy and sympathy are necessarily limited because of the difficulty in constructing appropriate experiments, without which it is hard to move beyond correlation. Since kindergarten, most Americans have been taught to be empathetic, and human-subjects boards would likely object to manipulations that

would try to make them less so. And even good knowledge can be put to bad ends. It is not necessarily true that all good things go together; more knowledge might lead us in directions that Pinker and I would deplore. For example, we could learn that capital punishment does indeed deter murder or that genetic endowments help explain why there are so few women in the ranks of top mathematicians. Pinker does realize that knowledge is not the same as enlightenment—no country was more educated than Nazi Germany—but does not consider whether an open society might democratically decide to close off certain avenues of thought.

So dogma, the antithesis of open inquiry, is Pinker's *bête noire*, embodied above all in religion, which he associates with intolerance and superstition. There is no doubt that religion has often contributed to evil, and as a nonbeliever myself I have trouble empathizing with those who think they can understand the will of God. But we should give the Devil his due: many anti-war and human-rights movements have deep religious

roots, and much of the energy behind campaigns that Pinker and I applaud comes from people who feel a higher calling to help their fellow human beings. (Pinker's one paragraph addressing this only scratches the surface of the question.)

Pinker is on firmer ground on other crucial points related to knowledge. The first is that the reduction of violence and the expansion of humane treatment of people has been spurred by the conscious decision to design incentives and institutions to these ends. The growth of commerce and state power may have lowered homicide rates, but only as an unintended by-product; with the Enlightenment, people began to consciously develop arrangements to reduce violence and protect not only their rights

but those of at least some others as well. Here intelligent design works. The circle of empathy can be deliberately increased by measures like liberal education, and the framers of the American Constitution were not alone in seeing that they had to—and could—build institutions that would limit their own power. This is of signal importance.

At its core, this is about self-aware-



ness—an understanding of human nature that can allow us to rein in our inner demons and give our better angels the upper hand. Self-control, so central to the humanizing trends Pinker documents, can be strengthened. If empathy is developed partly through novels, parents can urge their children to read them and school curricula can be developed appropriately. Perspective-taking can be encouraged by foreign travel. Although we should not expect too much from these efforts (indeed they may produce contempt and hostility) and Pinker does not advocate extreme social engineering, he does say that societies function best when they are built on the realization that we are all prone to violence and abuse.

Pinker also points to the role of understanding in overcoming the particularly pernicious psychological bias that he calls the “Moralization Gap.” Individuals and collectivities usually want to think well of themselves. This trait eases our way through a difficult life but causes great problems when conflict arises because we are quick to blame others. Pinker’s coverage of the research on the role of this bias in intergroup and international conflict is a bit thin (something I notice because I have contributed to it), but the basic point is clear and important. Although sometimes those we interact with are indeed responsible for the problem, the immediate assumption that this is the case, and the social and psychological inhibitions against seeing how we may be offending others and infringing upon their legitimate interests, is a major cause of escalating

conflict. Students of international politics know that efforts to gain mutual security can be foiled by the failure of the state to realize that others may see it as a threat, and therefore to interpret their undesired moves as evidence that they are unreasonable and aggressive. Throughout the Cold War, Soviet leaders could not see that their behavior played a large role in their encirclement by enemies; Mikhail Gorbachev’s intellectual breakthrough was to grasp this. Self-knowledge is important and difficult here (religious teachings about our all being sinners can help), but it can also be dangerous. Be too quick to believe that the Other is behaving badly because of what you have done and the lead-up to WWII happens all over again.

Some are likely to see all this as the Whig theory of history decked out in social-science clothes. There is something to this, but Pinker is aware enough to argue that his “is a kind of Whig history that is supported by the facts.” Although he sees deep forces as responsible for much of our progress, he also acknowledges the role of contingency. He might have done more to discuss how these two fit together; could plausible historical counterfactuals have brought us to a very different outcome: Even with the Enlightenment, might full-blown racism have continued in the United States had Gandhi’s campaign of nonviolence not succeeded and World War II not been fought partly in the name of racial equality?

It is the attempt to link so many different types of declines in violence to one

I am not sure he would appreciate the association, but Pinker's argument echoes the motto engraved in the CIA's lobby: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

another that gives pause. Some links clearly are present. Early struggles to broaden the circle of those who were believed to have inalienable rights led eventually to the civil rights movement, just as it, in turn, contributed to the movements for women's equality and gay rights. But there are problems in applying progress in one area to progress in another. Humanitarian advances do not necessarily lead to more peaceful and understanding relations among states. Nor does more self-control in one individual lead to more self-control across groups of individuals. To his credit, Pinker realizes this is a problem, but his attempts to overcome it through social psychology are less than entirely successful. Pinker explains the decline of homicide and the decline of slavery quite differently, and the decline in war, coming later than the other markers of progress, may be even more distinct. Indeed, the two chapters on this subject do not build upon his previous arguments nor do they provide a foundation for later ones. I do not wish to argue that international politics is entirely a world apart, but wars continued to rage while other kinds of violence declined. Perhaps what changed the incentives for peace and war must be found elsewhere. Similarly, the connection between the decline in intra and interstate wars is loose. International tensions often feed internal violence as outside countries support disputing factions. And civil wars can transmit violence to the international level. I agree with Pinker that some of these trends are of a piece with the decline of domestic violence, especially in the smaller role of honor and the general view that vio-

lence is at best a necessary evil rather than a valued mode of conduct. But it is quite possible to imagine a world in which wars coexist with some measure of domestic peace and humane behavior.

For Pinker, much of what was believed in the more violent eras "can be considered not just monstrous, but in a very real sense, stupid," and

As humans have honed the institutions of knowledge and reason, and purged superstitions and inconsistencies from their systems of belief, certain conclusions were bound to follow, just as when one masters the laws of arithmetic certain sums and products are bound to follow.

Only in societies cut off from the free flow of ideas can enormous moral errors continue to flourish. He realizes that this view seems self-congratulatory but does not seem to see that it holds true only if one accepts contemporary values. His claim that previous beliefs "would not stand up to intellectual scrutiny as being consistent with other values [the people in earlier eras] claimed to hold, and they persisted only because the narrower intellectual spotlight of the day was not routinely shone on them" strains credulity. It implies that if we were transported to those times we could argue our new contemporaries out of their benighted beliefs and practices (assuming we were not killed first). Pinker summarizes the correlations between reasoning and education on the one hand and nonviolence, cooperation and endorsement of individual rights on the other, but methodological

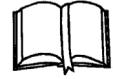
constraints mean that only a few of these studies can make claims for causation, and even those cannot escape the possibility that the results simply show that smarter people are more likely to be socialized into prevailing Enlightenment views. One has to wonder whether those who believed in Fascism in the 1930s or endorsed the burning of witches in the seventeenth century were less able to reason consistently and abstractly than we are.

I am not sure he would appreciate the association, but Pinker's argument echoes the motto engraved in the CIA's lobby: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." These claims place too much of a burden on reasoning. After he moves on from the Civilizing Process, Pinker largely leaves material factors behind. Power and interests, costs and benefits play little role. This, I think, is clearly wrong for the decline of war and questionable throughout. He also downplays the ways in which violence can result from reasoning, just as threats and, when necessary, the use of force is deployed to establish and maintain open societies. When these are engaged in war, they are also capable of killing large numbers of enemy civilians, as the United States and the UK did in the bombings of Germany and Japan when they calculated, correctly most historians now believe, that this would help bring victory. Torture also had a return engagement in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Pinker could see progress in the fact that it was quite limited and was justified not only by the pressing circumstances but also by the claim that it

was not torture (and that the United States had the legal opinions to prove this). I agree, and would not argue that we are headed back to the Dark Ages. But this sorry episode, which I think will be repeated if there is another major attack on America, does show that people can reason themselves into cruelty.

So what does Pinker's analysis tell us about the future? He refrains from speculation, noting the role of contingency and statistical distributions with "fat tails"—i.e., unexpected events with large consequences. But this sensible if cautious stance does not sit entirely well with his central argument. If knowledge, reason and the free flow of ideas have brought violence down in the past, they should continue to do so in the future. It would seem highly likely, perhaps even inevitable, that free societies would develop even further where they are established and spread—if at uncertain pace—where dogma now reigns, with the result that the world would be even better in the coming generations. Once stated, this seems too triumphalist if not reminiscent of George W. Bush, but it is to be welcomed both as a vision and a benchmark against which Pinker's argument can be judged by our successors.

In the end, even if Pinker's explanations do not entirely convince and his faith in reason is exaggerated, he has succeeded in documenting the enormous decline in all sorts of violence and cruelty. This achievement of humankind deserves to be better known, and readers of this important book will remember it and ponder its causes. It is a story worthy of seven hundred pages. □



Lest Ye Be Judged

By R. Scott Appleby

Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 320 pp., \$26.99.

A decade after the national trauma of 9/11, a rude chorus swells in the homeland, calling for restrictions on American Muslims' rights to free assembly and free speech. The controversy over the Islamic prayer center in Lower Manhattan—characterized as “the victory mosque” by Islamophobes, who labor under no abrogation of their First Amendment rights—is a notable but hardly isolated effort to deny Muslims access to public space. Anti-sharia measures, already the law in three states and being considered by a dozen more, serve as warnings to any Muslims who would dare advocate for legislation consistent with Islamic norms. Such morality-based, religiously inspired speech is, of course, as American as apple pie. But no matter: Muslims, whether natural-born or naturalized citizens, are today's “traitors” of choice for the new McCarthyites.

The critics of Islam, whether secular conservatives, evangelical Christians or Zionist defenders of Israel, now inhabit not only the

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blogosphere and sensationalist media outlets but also some local churches, state assemblies and even the halls of Congress. How do they justify the bigotry evident in proposals and policies that deny (or would deny) full civil rights to some of their fellow Americans? By framing Islam as an inherently violent religion and portraying Muslims as closet jihadists harboring sympathy for al-Qaeda and other jihadist networks. This canard is reinforced by the claim that the Holy Koran is, in the final analysis, a terrorist manifesto.

From an unlikely source comes a powerful and provocative riposte. The prolific scholar and public intellectual Philip Jenkins is a Welsh Catholic turned Episcopalian who has written insightfully on topics ranging from designer drugs, child pornography and serial homicide to, more recently, global Christianity, internal church conflict and the revival of anti-Catholicism in the wake of the sexual-abuse crisis. In *Laying Down the Sword*, he has delivered a thoughtful and frequently penetrating analysis of the Bible's own bloodthirsty passages—and how Christians have both enshrined and ignored them over the course of two millennia of church history.

At issue are the “Conquest texts” found in the Old Testament books of Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua and 1 Samuel, in which the Lord God of Israel commands the utter and merciless destruction (herem) of the Canaanites, the Midianites, the Amalekites and the people of Jericho. Compared to these apparently genocidal passages, Jenkins remarks, the Koranic verses (suras) that seem to legitimate deadly violence come off as relatively restrained. In his vengeful dis-

dain for wayward tribes and people, Yahweh takes a backseat to no deity, not even Allah. “While many Qur’anic texts undoubtedly call for warfare or bloodshed, these are hedged around with more restrictions than their biblical equivalents, with more opportunities for the defeated to make peace and survive,” he writes. “Furthermore, any of the defenses that can be offered for biblical violence—for instance, that these passages are unrepresentative of the overall message of the text—apply equally to the Qur’an.”

Laying Down the Sword is not designed to please everyone, and it will infuriate many. The Islamophobes will recoil at Jenkins’s repeated assertion that when it comes to violent scriptures, the differences between Islam and Christianity are minimal: “If Christians or Jews needed biblical texts to justify deeds of terrorism or ethnic slaughter, their main problem would be an embarrassment of riches,” he notes wryly. Jenkins even provides a table categorizing “violent and disturbing scriptures” and finds that the Bible abounds with “extreme” texts—those that call for the annihilation of the enemy or direct violence against particular races and ethnic groups. By contrast, “the Qur’an has nothing strictly comparable.” Unlike the Bible, he reports, “no Qur’anic passage teaches that enemies in warfare should be exterminated.” Nor does the Koran “teach principles of war without mercy, or propose granting no quarter.”

Even more provocative is Jenkins’s expressed doubt that Islam surpasses Christianity in incidents of scripture-inspired violence. Those who despise Islam will not stand still for such heresy, responding (as

Christian evangelist Franklin Graham put it) that whereas the Bible only *reports* violence that occurred in the distant past, the Koran “*preaches* violence” (my emphasis) in the here and now. Jenkins dismisses both claims as nonsense. He insists on using the term “Old Testament,” rather than the politically correct “Hebrew Bible,” as a way of reminding Christians that the Conquest texts are *their* sacred scriptures too; this part of the canon may be “old” and “Jewish,” but the church, following the example of Jesus himself, incorporated the Law and the Prophets and the Wisdom texts fully into its own identity and mission. In doing so, the early Christian bishops overcame the popularity of contrarians such as the eventually excommunicated Marcion, who simply jettisoned the Old Testament when he found it impossible to reconcile the genocidal tendencies of Yahweh with the compassionate and forgiving God revealed by the Jesus of the New Testament.

More to Jenkins’s point, the troubling passages of the Torah did not become dead letters once the pre-Christian eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth era had passed. Instead, they proved handy age after age: for Christian theologians and heresy hunters (Augustine, Calvin, Torquemada), conquerors and colonizers (Oliver Cromwell, Cotton Mather, Theodore Roosevelt), racialists and eugenicists (Jonathan Bayley, John W. Haley), and *genocidaires* (present-day Rwandan pastors). Nor was the political utility of the Conquest texts lost on subsequent Jewish leaders, Jenkins avers, not least the modern Zionists, up to and including the current prime minister of Israel and the reli-

gious nationalists and irredentists who keep him in power. If contemporary Muslim extremists retrieve violence-justifying suras and interpret them as timeless and timely injunctions to crush the presumed enemies of the faith, they are only upholding a long-standing Abrahamic family tradition.

Quite reasonably, Jenkins lays the blame for religious violence on its perpetrators alone. Scriptures do not justify terrorism; terrorists do.

Yet Jenkins is concerned with more than poking self-righteous Christians in the eye or defending Muslims; he wants to understand the ways in which both Christianity and Islam and, by extension, other religious traditions have coped with their respective “problematic” sacred texts. Replete with passages congenial to slave traders, absolute monarchs, ethnic chauvinists, self-styled holy warriors and patriarchs of all stripes, these foundational scriptures have become more and more embarrassing to faith communities. After all, they have increasingly found it necessary (or at least honorable) to adapt the texts’ teachings and practices to modern, “enlightened” sensibilities. Conforming to the human-rights regime which now prevails across much of the world, at least in theory, and which was constructed over several generations by secular and religious thinkers alike, has not been a straightforward process for religions, even for the Jews and Christians who recognize this modern tradition as largely their own. The age-old temptation to coercion and violence is particularly hard to resist. Ever since the Protestant Reforma-



tion, Christians have largely ceded to the state the responsibility for large-scale killing on behalf of God. But this thinly veiled sacralization of state violence, accompanied by the relevant hymns and Bible passages, faces withering criticism from religious and secular humanists, whose putative creed is summarized elegantly in the lyrics of the folk singer John Prine: “Now Jesus don’t like killing / no matter what the reason’s for / and your flag decal won’t get you into heaven anymore.” With all this Jesus talk, and with Jesus portrayed as the original nonviolent champion of “universal human rights,” what’s a would-be Bible-thumping, empire-building Christian politician to do?

It would fill several volumes to survey the strategies of accommodation, resistance and adaptation to secular-religious humanism employed by the Christian churches alone, so Jenkins can be forgiven for confining himself to a handful of tactics for dealing with the Bible’s dark side, which he evaluates on the basis of how directly and frankly

each tactic confronts the most disturbing passages and books. Thus the rejectionists (my term) are scorned for taking the easy way out. These Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment figures, outraged by what they consider the ethical bankruptcy of some or all of the Bible, cope by jettisoning the parts they do not like. For the radical American revolutionary Thomas Paine and the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, that means the story of Moses, Yahweh, and the chastened but triumphant Israel. (Jenkins quotes Buber: “Nothing can make me believe in a God who punishes Saul because he has not murdered his enemy.”) For the deists Matthew Tindal and John Toland, everything in the Bible that does not conform to reason and rational morality must go. For creative rewriters such as Thomas Jefferson, “coping” means starting with the New Testament and excising all references to supernaturalism and divine intervention. For the new atheists of our own day (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and the like), “dealing with the Bible” means dismantling the God business entirely (and then elevating secular humanism to the vacated perch in the heavens).

Jenkins notes, correctly, that most of the solutions proposed by the rejectionists put them outside the orbit of the Christian tradition. The vast majority of Christians, while accepting secular assumptions of science and technology, continue to practice their faith vitally and vividly—all the while ignoring the books of blood held in their churchgoing hands.

But it is easy to learn such forgetting when the unpalatable texts are seldom in-

cluded in the lectionary or catechesis. Or, when they are, the offending passages are construed as if they were allegories or metaphors—a spiritualizing technique that renders the brutally vanquished enemies of God as symbols of sins that were overcome on the journey to the Promised Land. (“No actual Canaanites were harmed in the making of this scripture.”)

Jenkins, though, introduces his own contradictions. On the one hand, he urges his Christian readers to accept and acknowledge the violent scriptures “and to learn to live with them.” And he treats evasive maneuvers as if they are borderline pathological. (The pseudoscientific sidebar that “explains” this behavior by reference to “cognitive dissonance” and the brain’s dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, or “Delete key,” is a bit much.) “A bloodless Bible offers cheap Grace,” he insists. And he seems to agree with St. Augustine that the Bible must be read whole, not selectively.

On the other hand, what Jenkins seems to admire in Augustine is precisely the fourth-century bishop’s skill in getting around the stumbling blocks by avoiding their literal meaning, ignoring their singular impact and burying them in layers of interpretation. Sounds pretty bloodless to me. In place of letting the troublesome texts stand on their own, Jenkins advocates “understanding why the various books were written, and appreciating the core message that each is trying to teach.” This seems a coping strategy of the highest order, not far removed from the collective amnesia he castigates elsewhere.

And what is wrong, after all, with coping? The vicious and genocidal texts *are*

Judaism and Christianity have made their respective Bibles into virtual rubber bands, the interpretive options so multiple and elastic that almost any proximity to the text is permissible.

a scandal, and fidelity to “tradition” has always carried with it both connotations of the Latin root *tradere*—to *bequeath* (“hand down”) and to *betray* (“hand over”).

Are Christians and Jews really so different? Jenkins does not seem to think so—and this is a central weakness in his biblical road map. For him,

If we ask what Deuteronomy and Joshua are “really” about, their core theme is neither genocide nor warfare. Rather, the books represent the clearest declarations of two essential ideas in the Bible and in the Judeo-Christian worldview—namely, monotheism itself, and election or chosenness.

While this is certainly a reasonable assertion, I am unconvinced. Why these ideas and not others which are also, arguably, central to the Christian worldview? Part of the problem Jenkins has set for himself is encompassing both Christianity and Judaism within the same argument without sufficiently adjusting for the rather substantial differences between the two religions, not least the status and meaning of Jesus Christ. Thus Jenkins’s hermeneutic key seems to be the “prophetic faith,” which means the teachings of Amos, Isaiah, Micah and other prophets of the Old Testament, period. This approach might work well for Jews, and certainly Christians recognize, honor and frequently invoke the Prophets. It is less clear, however, that Christians would choose “monotheism . . . and election or chosenness” as the core themes of God’s revelation in the Bible rather than, say, “the fulfillment of the Law

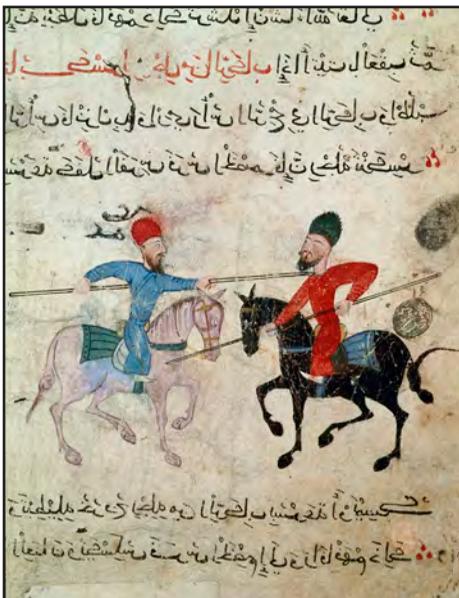
and the Prophets in Jesus the Messiah,” or “the unconditional love and forgiveness God offers to all people in Jesus.”

Such distinctions have real-world consequences in the way various believers enact what they understand their scriptures to enjoin and, lest we forget, roughly one-third of the world’s population claims to be “governed,” spiritually at least, by the one Jewish Prophet his followers hold to be the Son of God. Are we really to believe that the branching off of one set of adherents away from Judaism, with its priority placed squarely on the Mosaic Law and vast commentaries, to Christianity, with its emphasis on divine grace and spirit-inspired acts, did not introduce a fundamentally new religious paradigm, including a new way of reading the sacred texts? Each of these religious traditions has developed its own interpretive strategies, the instincts and core values of which are embedded in, and have emerged from, its own distinctive experiences, memories, practices and authoritative extrascriptural teachings. (Take a simple example: for Christians, Jesus *is* the Passover lamb first prefigured in the book of Exodus, and he is slain for the salvation of *all* humankind, or at least all who believe in him—not only for those who keep the Jewish law.) For Christians, or at least for the subset who would accept Jenkins’s methods of biblical interpretation in the first place, the key to interpreting the Old Testament (as well as the New) is (once again) a person—the figure who embodies the fulfillment of the Old Testament Law and the Prophets. This, of course, is Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah anticipated by

the very Prophets to whom Jenkins gives an odd priority. At least from a *Christian* standpoint, this privileging of the lesser over the greater is odd, a bit like focusing on the messenger who announces the arrival of the king rather than on the king himself.

The interesting question is therefore: Has the centrality of Jesus, “the Prince of Peace,” made a difference in the level of religiously inspired violence performed by Bible-believing Christians, regardless of their specific historical contexts, or even within those contexts?

Here is what Jenkins really cares about: the relationship between scripture and behavior, especially in the urgent matters of violence and warfare. “We talk about ‘religious violence,’” he laments, “but when



exactly can we say that a religion or a scriptural tradition directly caused an act of crime or terrorism?”

Ay, there’s the rub. Note, however, that “a religion” and “a scriptural tradition” are conflated in this formulation of the problem of “religious violence.” Insufficient attention is given to the distinctions between the way a sacred text is read, who does the reading and how that reading is embedded in the life of an actual historical community.

Jenkins rightly emphasizes the difference between what the scriptures (whether the Old Testament, the New Testament or the Koran) themselves “say” on the one hand and particular acts of violence on the other:

However bloody texts may be, however explicit, their mere existence will not lead to actual violence unless and until particular circumstances arise. At that point, the texts can rise once again to the surface, to inspire and sacralize violence, to demonize opponents, and even to exalt the conflict to the level of cosmic war. But without those circumstances, without those particular conditions in state and society, the violence will not occur.

This statement is gratifying and surely accurate, but it is incomplete. As Jenkins well knows, the role, function and status of sacred scriptures varies within any particular religion, and from religion to religion, as does the degree of distance which each religious community has deemed permissible between “fidelity to the text” (whether it be actual or alleged fidelity) and the actual behavior (i.e., the *operative* beliefs and resulting practices) of the community, movement or individual

in question. Over millennia, Judaism and Christianity have made their respective Bibles into virtual rubber bands, the interpretive options so multiple and elastic as to stretch the range of possibilities such that almost any proximity to the text is permissible.

Is this also to be said of Islam? Better put: Is the range of Koranic interpretive strategies that have developed over centuries, especially in the Golden Age of Islamic philosophy and learning from the mid-eighth to thirteenth centuries, currently available to the global Muslim community? Jenkins makes short work of Islamic terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, demonstrating that they are profound distortions of what the vast majority of Muslims recognize as traditional or mainstream Islam. And who would doubt this judgment? Yet it is worth noting that much the same is said even of time-tested (if still controversial) scriptural methods such as those employed by the mystically inclined Sufi brotherhoods. To the interested and sympathetic outsider, the Koranic fundamentalists currently seem to have the upper hand.

One would therefore assume that Muslims, at least, would receive *Laying Down the Sword* with gratitude. But perhaps not. Part of Jenkins's strategy in comparing the Bible and the Koran is to equate, or come close to equating, how the two texts function in their respective religious traditions. In this effort, though, he follows a decidedly Christian template. For Muslims, the Koran is just what the word means in Arabic—the “recitation” of the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad. It is the literal word of Allah. Most Muslims do not

even allow for the idea of a filtering process through Muhammad's seventh-century-CE Arabian sensibilities. The closest analogue among the varieties of Christianity is “plenary verbal inspiration,” the theory favored by fundamentalists and most evangelicals, according to which God inspired the various authors of the Bible even in their choice of words. However, this is not quite the same as the Islamic notion of the Koran's “eternity.” Moreover, Christians disagree among themselves regarding theories of biblical inspiration, and Jenkins adopts an approach that contextualizes and “relativizes” certain books and passages in a way most Muslims would never think of applying to the suras of the Holy Koran.

Catholics and most Protestants will recognize Jenkins's method as a version of historical criticism that emphasizes the specific times and “horizons of understanding” in which the various Books, Psalms, Gospels and Epistles were compiled and redacted (edited according to theological purposes). Yet—notwithstanding Jenkins's assurances that “some Islamic scholars historicize the texts, making them relevant to a particular period in the time of Muhammad, but not applicable to later times”—only a tiny minority of contemporary Muslims, most of them scholars appointed to Western universities or think tanks, will accept the notion that earthly influences shaped the Koran or that the interpretive methods currently being applied to the Bible are even remotely appropriate for the Koran. Let us call this the challenge of Koranic exceptionalism.

Jenkins acknowledges this problem, but it may be a bigger obstacle than he re-

The road to peace among Muslims, and between Islam and other religious and secular traditions, runs through the Koran.

alizes. I write this essay from Mindanao, the southernmost chain of islands of the Philippines, where Christians and Muslims encounter one another amid the second-longest-running conflict in history, dating back to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in 1521. The latest atrocity of the al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group Abu Sayyaf was the beheading of three Filipino marines on the island of Sulu. The government of the Republic of the Philippines based in Manila, some five hundred miles away, has just reopened negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a much-larger and more politically engaged movement with its own violent wing. My hosts here in Zamboanga are the Catholic archdiocese and Silsilah, an organization dedicated to Muslim-Christian dialogue and nonviolent peace building. Each group of Muslims involved in these three very different clusters—Abu Sayyaf, the MILF and Silsilah—claim strict fidelity to the literal word of God, which is the “whole” of the Holy Koran, without remainder. They draw radically different applications from it, however—a fact that infuriates the “fundamentalists” among them. (In this regard, they have much in common with the Jewish and Christian communities.)

The road to peace among Muslims, and between Islam and other religious and secular traditions, runs through the Koran. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is certainly more (and less) than its holy book; the much-discussed (and much-reviled, among Islamophobes) sharia is a body of religio-legal principles (rather than a set of ac-

tual laws) derived not only from the Koran but also from the Hadith, a compilation of the Prophet Muhammad’s own teachings and practices. But the Koran has a different level of authority within the (geographically and culturally diverse and plural) Islamic community today than does the Bible within the (also breathtakingly diverse) Christian community. If the admittedly complicated figure “Jesus Christ” is the hermeneutic key for Christians, and “the Law and the Prophets” the key for Jews, it is not yet obvious to (most) Jews and (most) Christians what (most) Muslims consider the hermeneutic key for reading the Koran as a guide to behavior. Nor is it obvious that the majority of Muslims would even accept or endorse the concept of an “interpretive strategy” for reading the Koran (notwithstanding the facts that such strategies are being deployed constantly in the Muslim world and that Muslims obviously recognize the existence of multiple and wildly varying constructions of Islam itself).

Whether or not faithful Muslims formally acknowledge the reality of options, they remain confronted by the need to determine and observe guidelines for their behavior in a globalizing, conflict-ridden world that is both secular and religious. In such a milieu they cannot long ignore the internal pluralism of Islam itself—the competing voices and subtraditions of interpretation that are increasingly available to more and more Muslims, as are the multiple “renegade,” do-it-yourself Islams placed on offer by Internet jihadists and would-be jurists like the engineer Osama bin Laden and the medical doctor Ayman al-Zawahiri. At its core, this

matter of defining orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right action) is a perennial task for all the global religions, but it is being hotly contested today within the ummah (worldwide Islamic community), and the competing alternatives are not easy



to map or rank according to legitimacy (especially in the majority-Sunni world, where authority structures are not as far-reaching as they are for Christians, who have bishops and a pope to obey or disobey).

Jenkins argues forcefully that sacred scriptures are dependent variables, so to speak, in the etiology of violence and warfare. For social-justice revolutionaries (as in the mostly peaceful revolutions that swept across Eastern Europe in the wake of the Cold War) and violent extremists alike, the utility of certain texts waxes and wanes according to the situation. This assessment is accurate as far as it goes. But Jenkins also leaves dangling the impression that *religions themselves* behave solely according to what their specific social-political-cultural contexts allow—that is, according to “what in the passage applies to me, to us.” Is it possible, however, that religions possess the resources to resist their environments and to retrieve the scriptural passages that justify, and thus empower them in so doing?

History offers hope. In light of the exploding options within the *Dar al-Islam* and the

rise of Koranic “authorities” of dubious lineage and training, the relative coherence of the mainstream religion, and the checks and balances it has evolved over generations for bringing the freelancers into the fold (or ejecting them), looks increasingly attractive.

This authoritative and sometimes authoritarian version of Islam remains the religion of most American Muslims, as it is of their global counterparts. Other Americans, if they are savvy, will want them to continue their fidelity to, and gradual reform of, this Islam. They will hesitate before making Muslims uncomfortable in their own conservative, orthodox, law-abiding skin.

Laying Down the Sword offers a timely warning in precisely this direction. Concerning the culpability of the Koran for violent extremism, it proffers a much-needed exoneration. Concerning the relationship between sacred texts, religion and violence, it raises the right questions and sketches the contours of deeper ones. Central to these achievements is Philip Jenkins’s absorbing discussion of the formidable obstacles found within Jewish and Christian scriptures and histories to the nonviolent expression of biblical faith. That story, in all of its harrowing twists and turns over the centuries, should remind his fellow Christians to attend to the beams in their own eyes before scorning the motes in the eyes of American Muslims. □



Somewhere, beyond the Sea

By *Benny Morris*

David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 816 pp., \$34.95.

In *The Rebel*, his treatise against totalitarianism, particularly of the Left, and in some of his earlier essays, Albert Camus hailed the Mediterranean, which for him embodied life, light, beauty (quite probably sex) and a sense of limits. He contrasted what Cambridge don David Abulafia calls “the Great Sea”—actually a Hebrew designation (*hayam hagadol*)—with the darkness of northern Europe’s cities and forests, seedbeds as they were of the twentieth century’s encompassing murderous ideologies, Bolshevism and Nazism.

“The Mediterranean sun has something tragic about it,” Camus wrote in “Helen’s Exile” (1948):

quite different from the tragedy of [northern] fogs. Certain evenings at the base of the seaside mountains, night falls over the flawless curve of a little bay, and there rises from the silent

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waters a sense of anguished fulfillment. In such spots one can understand that if the Greeks knew despair, they always did so through beauty. . . . Our time, on the other hand, has fed its despair on ugliness and convulsions. This is why Europe would be vile, if suffering could ever be so.

He identified the sea with Greece, a place that revered moderation. “It never carried anything to extremes, neither the sacred nor reason, because it negated nothing. . . . balancing shadow with light. Our Europe, on the other hand, off in the pursuit of totality, is the child of disproportion.”

Abulafia’s sweeping survey of the “sea between the lands” and its shoreline peoples—from the Stone Age through the present era of global tourism—tells us a different story. It is a tale in large part characterized by hubris, excess and mass murder. Take the Punic Wars of the third and second centuries BC, the three bouts of combat between the Phoenician colonies (with their center in Carthage) and Rome for command of the central and western Mediterranean. It was a war to the finish, ending in the annihilation of Carthage and the sowing of its ruins with salt, its inhabitants put to the sword or consigned to slavery. Or take the campaigns of the Almohads, sectarians who ruled the western Mediterranean lands (Spain, Morocco) during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with an iron fist, dispensing death and terror in the name of a pristine Islam. Or take some of the crusaders, who slaughtered Muslims (and Jews) in vast numbers in their efforts to reclaim and purify the Holy Land.

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Abulafia doesn't really tackle the contemporary resurgence, and its implications, of Salafist Islam around the Mediterranean basin, from the Strait of Gibraltar through Bosnia and Alexandria, which may yet herald a new Mediterranean age (in *The Great Sea* he postulates five eras between 22,000 BC and AD 2010, a periodization that is not completely persuasive). But he does refer to a "new Ottomanism" when considering the Gaza flotilla incident of May 2010 and its aftermath. (He could well have added Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent repeated threats to send Turkish warships into the eastern Mediterranean to assert the "rule of law.")

Excess seems to be part of the human condition, and while paragons of excess—mass murderers, in short—may have flourished at certain times in certain places, there are probably few of the earth's regions that have demonstrated complete immunity.

What we have in *The Great Sea* is a history that emphasizes politics and warfare: these are the primary and most significant arenas of human agency—and the major vehicles of change. In fact, in his "Introduction," Abulafia, a man of noble Sephardic Jewish lineage (and in his book one repeatedly encounters the Jewish dimension, almost invariably Sephardic, in this or that period and land—and the occasional precursing Abulafia to boot), sets out the parameters that distinguish his opus from previous major works of Mediterranean historiography, most notably Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*

(1949) and Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2000). Horden and Purcell dealt mainly with communities and peoples living along the littoral, what happened on land, not with what transpired on the sea's surface. Braudel, for his part, argued that geography, rather than men's actions, was the real determinant of development and change in and around the vast water's edges. "Braudel showed what almost amounted to contempt for political history," writes Abulafia. He could have added military history as well. Sea and wind currents, climate and landscapes ruled the tales of men. Abulafia prefers to stress "the human hand" as "more important in moulding the history of the Mediterranean than Braudel was ever prepared to admit."

Abulafia is profusely informative about commercial and cultural connections between the various communities that lived in the surrounding areas (Phoenician fertilization of Italy, the gifts of the Sea Peoples to the Levant) and allows for the importance of geography in periodically determining the foci of human activity, the sites empires and peoples covet, attack or abandon (Gibraltar dominating the sea's western thoroughway, Corfu controlling passage up the Adriatic).

But throughout, Abulafia casts an impartial, not to say jaundiced, eye on the successive struggles for dominance in the various Mediterranean theaters at different times. Occasionally, he appears bent on provocation, and (inevitably) distortion is the result. Take Abulafia's view of Persia versus Greece in the fifth century BC, the

struggle, as traditionally taught in schools, that helped forge who we Westerners are, where civilization battled and overcame invading barbarism. “Whether the Greeks were really fighting for liberty against Persian tyranny is questionable,” he writes. Indeed, the Persians generally left alone cities that offered up the symbolic tribute “of earth and water,” he tells us. Still, a good case can be made that submission to an Asiatic overlord meant loss of sovereignty and that political freedom was what was really at issue.

forced the Ionians to give him ships and men with which to subdue other Greek cities and islands. In 509 BC, the Persians conquered Lemnos and massacred many of its inhabitants. Revolt ensued, and mainland Greek poleis came to the aid of the Ionians. According to Abulafia, as the Ionian revolt “petered out, the Persians were surprisingly considerate, accepting democratic governments and attempting to remove a source of tension between cities by demanding that they make trade agreements with one another.” But then, with the accession of



It all began when the Ionian Greek cities along Asia Minor’s Aegean coast and the Hellespont failed to help the Persian king Cyrus against the Lydians in the mid-sixth century. The Persian ruler, after victory,

Xerxes to the throne in 486, Persian policy “shifted . . . from tough accommodation with dissidents to vigorous suppression of Persia’s foes.” Xerxes prepared huge armies and fleets to invade mainland Greece and

then struck. He was briefly stalled by the Spartan three hundred at Thermopylae (the “hot gates”) and then was thoroughly defeated at sea at Salamis (480) and Mycale (479) and on land at Plataea (479).

Such is Abulafia’s presentation. But it is strangely deficient and incomplete. To crush Greece wasn’t the whim of a particular Persian emperor; it was consistent long-term imperial policy. From around 500, if not earlier, the Persians intended to extend their rule deep into Europe, including over Greece. Facilitation of this was probably the main aim of their abortive expedition against the island of Naxos, midway in the Aegean. No wonder, then, that the Ionian rebels of 499–493 felt able to ask for, and receive, help from the mainland. True, then Persian leader Darius subsequently treated the beaten rebels with (relative) kid gloves—he needed their maritime support for the invasion of Greece—and demanded of the mainland city-states relatively cheap tokens of submission. But when these were not forthcoming, the Persian army crossed the Aegean and attacked Euboea and then, in 490, landed in Attica, north of Athens. There, at Marathon, a small, mainly Athenian force roundly defeated the Persians, putting an end to the first invasion of the mainland. Astonishingly, Abulafia fails even to mention the campaign and the surrounding circumstances, jumping straight from the Ionian revolt to the (second and larger) Xerxian invasion of 480, and then moving on to detailed descriptions of post-479 Sparta and Athens as effectively non-democratic imperial polities, as if to assert a moral equivalence with the empire they

had just defeated. Abulafia devotes a long paragraph to describing the tos-and-fros of the squadrons at Salamis—but not a word about Marathon, surely a crucial battle in European history and one which even inserted itself into humankind’s vocabulary.

And then there is the question of clashes of civilizations, another key historical meme that Abulafia’s narrative seems to skirt. He certainly expends a great many pages on tracing Muslim-Christian conflict and contact in the Mediterranean from the seventh through the twentieth centuries. And one is struck not merely by the quick succession of combat and commercial and cultural intercourse but by the, on occasion, simultaneous occurrence of these interactions. While crusaders are out to beat back the Muslims and reclaim Palestine for Christendom, Christians and Muslims nearby are buying and selling and making cross-civilizational profits. Throughout, Muslim warlords make pacts with Christian warlords as their cousins are busy killing each other.

Take Francis I, king of France (1494–1547), at loggerheads with Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor (1500–1558), who was busy fighting the Turks. Francis goaded the beys in Tunis to send corsairs against the Kingdom of Naples and supplied the Muslims with cannons to reduce the Spanish fort in Algiers. In 1543, a French ambassador “accompanied [the Muslim] Hayrettin’s fleet as it savaged the coasts of southern Italy, carrying off the daughter of the governor of Reggio.” The king even allowed the Turks to use Toulon for a winter bivouac;

with thirty thousand Turks dispersed in the town, the cathedral “was [temporarily] transformed into a mosque.” Meanwhile, the Turks made expeditions into the countryside to lay hold of young peasants to sell off as slaves.

Still, Christian and Muslim rulers continuously fought, with the Mediterranean serving as a major battlefield. Abulafia rightly pinpoints as crucial the late sixteenth-century engagements at Malta and Lepanto in which the Ottoman Empire was decisively contained in its expansion westward. But when it comes to other episodes, Abulafia often pooh-poohs claims that Muslim-Christian clashes were driven by religious motives.

He may have it right when he asserts, quoting the historian Frank Lambert, that the American campaign against the North African Barbary pirates in the early nineteenth century was “primarily about trade, not theology.” But clearly theology, or straightforward religious-national hatreds, trumped commercial interests a century later when Turks slaughtered Armenians during World War I and subsequently killed hundreds of thousands of Greeks. No doubt, individual covetousness on the part of Turkish neighbors played a part, and Turkish leaders were interested, for nationalist reasons, in dispossessing and then replacing the Greek and Armenian middle classes with a new Turkish one. But the testimonies of Western, particularly German, witnesses at the time all point to religious antagonism as a key motivating factor.

Abulafia, reasonably, devotes far more space to the Turkish-Greek episodes (they

inhabited the Mediterranean littoral) than to the Armenians (most lived, and died, in the interior of Asia Minor). And the Greeks—the descendants of the second- and first-millennium-BC Ionians and Black Sea settlers—also served between 1915 and 1923 as fodder for a harrowing and today largely forgotten tale.

The Greeks had been fighting the Turks on and off for years. The Turks wanted the Greeks out of Asia Minor (and, if possible, also out of the Aegean). The outbreak of World War I interrupted the low-key 1914 Turkish campaign to achieve that goal, but it was renewed a year later. Greece then joined the Allies and declared war on the Ottoman Empire in July 1917. By 1919, with the Turks out for the count, the Greek army occupied the port city of Smyrna and part of the Ionian coastline and then pushed inland, reaching the outskirts of Ankara. Economically and militarily overstretched, the Greeks proved unable to defeat the new nationalist Turkish army or to retain the lands they had occupied, and they were eventually driven back. Then came revenge. The Turks first destroyed the Greek communities along the Black Sea (Samsun, Ordu, Bafra) and then, in September 1922, reached the Ionian coast, with the Greek army and many Greek civilians from the interior retreating helter-skelter before their advance. The Greek troops boarded ships and departed for Piraeus. The Turks entered Smyrna, by then the chief Greek city, and torched the Christian quarters. Thousands were killed (the presence of Allied warships probably prevented a wider massacre). Within



days, hundreds of thousands of civilians were evacuated to Greece—though tens of thousands were slaughtered (Abulafia says “something like 100,000”) and a similar or perhaps larger number were deported by the Turks inland, never to be heard from again. (During World War I and its aftermath, the Turks managed to perform a linguistic sleight of hand: “deportation” became synonymous with annihilation, something the Nazis later replicated.) The three-thousand-year-old Greek communities along the coast of Asia Minor and the Black Sea were thus erased, never to be resurrected. Today, only a small community of Greeks in Istanbul remains.

Abulafia blames the United States, Britain and France for Smyrna, saving only “twenty thousand” by placing them aboard Allied ships. He charges the Allied naval commanders—and, by extension, their governments—with “callousness.” And to be sure, everything bad he says about the American high commissioner and naval

chief, Mark Bristol, and more, is justified. But the overall story, as illuminated by the contemporary documentation, is somewhat different. While understandably reluctant to go to war (again) with Turkey, the Allied naval teams performed in the Smyrna crisis with courage and humanity, orchestrating the withdrawal to safety of more than a quarter of a million Ionians, mostly on Greek ships, in one of the great maritime evacuations in history.

And—I can’t restrain myself—one last point about Abulafia’s book in connection with the battle of cultures—and religions. One of its principal theaters in the twentieth century has been Palestine, where the Jews, seen by themselves and by their Arab neighbors as representatives and embodiments of the West, have repeatedly clashed with the country’s Arabs and the surrounding Arab world. The conflict is both political—over a patch of territory—and over values. Abulafia does not

What we have in The Great Sea is a history that emphasizes politics and warfare: these are the primary and most significant arenas of human agency—and the major vehicles of change.

put the Palestine conflict in these terms, or, indeed, in any others, and devotes to it only a small amount of space, mostly by zooming in on the history of the seaside Arab town of Jaffa, on the site of a first-millennium-BC Philistine city, and the emergence of its Jewish neighbor, Tel Aviv, founded in 1909. Arab attacks on Jews by the late 1930s had turned Jaffa into an almost exclusively Arab place, but in April–May 1948 it was conquered by Jewish militiamen and almost all of its population fled to Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon. The town was then co-opted by its larger Jewish neighbor, creating one municipal area designated “Tel Aviv-Jaffa.” While tens of thousands of Arabs inhabit Jaffa today, Arab Jaffa no longer exists.

Abulafia’s cool, evenhanded treatment of this microcosmic history leads to serious elisions that, to my mind, amount to distortion. He writes of the second bout of anti-Jewish rioting by the Arabs: “Outbreaks of violence between Jews and Arabs soured relations from 1921 onwards.” And of the 1936–39 Arab revolt against the British government and its Zionist wards, he writes: “The port of Jaffa serviced Tel Aviv until the outbreak of a new and even more serious round of violence in 1936.” Similarly, his succinct reference to the 1948 war also fails to attribute agency to any side—violence simply breaks out, no one starts it, no one is to blame.

As to Jaffa during the 1948 war, no context is provided. Abulafia tells us, simply:

Over a number of weeks in spring 1948, . . . tens of thousands of Jaffan Arabs fled by ship

or overland. . . . The United Nations had designated Jaffa as an exclave of the proposed Arab state that would coexist with a Jewish state in Palestine. Following bombardment by Jewish forces in late April, the population of Jaffa dwindled.

No mention is made of the fact that the Palestinian leadership in 1947 rejected the partition resolution and launched, albeit inefficiently, a war to prevent its implementation; no mention of the fact that from November 30, 1947, the day after UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (partition) was passed, Jaffa’s militiamen daily assailed Tel Aviv with sniper and, occasionally, mortar fire and that the Jews finally attacked and conquered Jaffa after suffering these deprivations for five months.

Abulafia writes well and offers up a comprehensive, fair-minded history. For those who can plow through 650 pages of historiography, this is a good read. And, occasionally, the prose is captivating. Abulafia has a good eye for quotes. Take Pharaoh Merneptah’s (thirteenth-century-BC) inscription at Karnak relating to his conquest and pacification of Canaan:

Men can walk the roads at any pace without fear. The fortresses stand open and the wells are accessible to all travellers. The walls and the battlements sleep peacefully in the sunshine till their guards wake up. The police lie stretched out asleep. The desert frontier-guards are among the meadows where they like to be.

Would that this were so today. □



A House That Bismarck Built

By Jacob Heilbrunn

Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 592 pp., \$34.95.

On August 4, 1898, the German Jewish theater critic Alfred Kerr wrote a dispatch about the death of Otto von Bismarck. Ever since the impetuous young Kaiser Wilhelm II had abruptly dismissed Bismarck in March 1890—an episode famously depicted by *Punch* magazine as “dropping the pilot”—the aggrieved squire had immured himself at Friedrichsruh, his Pomeranian country estate near Hamburg. Now Kerr, who three decades later would flee Nazi Germany for England, expressed the sense of loss and unease pervading the German empire Bismarck had forged under Prussian leadership:

On Sunday morning you knew that he was dead. A newspaper hangs on the wall, you take it down and want to turn the first page in an unconcerned manner and read the news of his departure. A shiver and tremor possess you—even if you don't want them to. In this second you experience, even if a sense of hatred against him was the basic impulse, how deeply you resentfully loved him. A piece of Germany

has sunk into the streams of world events for all eternity. Travel safely.¹

It should not be surprising that Bismarck would have evoked such conflicting emotions. From the outset of his career, he was a figure of contradictions as gargantuan as his appetite: a conservative who introduced universal suffrage; an East Elbian landholder who helped launch an industrial revolution; a diplomat who never served in the military but strode around in a yellow cuirassier uniform; an empire builder who forswore further imperial projects; a foe of socialism who introduced the social-welfare state; and a crybaby who unsentimentally destroyed the career of anyone who threatened to cross him. He ended up a grumpy old man, but it was Bismarck's drive and magnetism, more than anything else, which allowed him—a chancellor who had no real basis of power other than his hold on King William—to reshape the destiny of Prussia and Europe.

At the start of the nineteenth century, the notion that Prussia would emerge as a great power in Europe would have seemed quite fanciful. Where France had progressively united its provinces since the Middle Ages, Germany had followed the opposite path. The House of Hohenzollern launched its first real bid for power under Frederick the Great, who helped trigger the Seven Years' War in 1756 after snatching Silesia from Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa over a decade earlier. But *Napoléon* almost put the

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¹ Alfred Kerr, *Wo Liegt Berlin?: Briefe aus der Reichshauptstadt* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1998), 407.

Imagine a Teutonic version of Dick Cheney in power for several decades and you may start to get a sense of what Bismarck meant for his colleagues, for Germany and for its neighbors.

dynasty out of business, forcing Frederick William III and Queen Louise to flee eastward. Under the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit, Prussia lost almost half of its territory. It was the War of Liberation, or the “Prussian Rising,” as it was known—a vast upsurge of patriotism that included, to the discomfiture of the Prussian armed forces, free corps—that led to the reconstitution of Prussia and Napoleon’s final defeat. Overnight, the question of a German national identity enjoyed a rebirth.

Bismarck was at the core of debates about what Prussia and Germany were supposed to epitomize. For some he personified the noble hero who, in a mere decade, created the empire that Germans had been longing for ever since the days of Frederick Barbarossa (legend has it that the sleeping kaiser lies resting in the mountains of Kyffhäuser with his knights, waiting to reunite Germany after the ravens stop flying around him). For others, such as Theodor Fontane, the novelist who chronicled Prussian society, the new empire was not an unalloyed triumph. It destroyed the ancient and valorous virtues of *Preussentum*: stern abstinence and self-effacement were replaced by braggadocio and preening; landowners by nouveau riche industrialists. There was good reason for apprehension. The modern parallel to the brash Wilhelm II succeeding his cautious father in 1888 would be George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush.

In retirement Bismarck achieved a public popularity that he never really enjoyed in office. Political parties began to invoke his name. Monuments were built in his honor. By the early twentieth century, his role as

national icon was so entrenched that the city of Hamburg erected a colossal statue of a bareheaded Bismarck holding a sword. As the historian Thomas Nipperdey observed, the monument was supposed to function as a form of “political protest” directed “against pathos and prestige, exhibitionism and a craving for renown.” If so, the rebuke failed. Kaiser Wilhelm II plunged Germany into the abyss of World War I. And though by November 1918 the last German emperor may have fled to Holland (where he devoted himself to cultivating roses), the myth of Prussia was alive and well—ready for exploitation by the Nazis. The newly appointed chancellor Adolf Hitler met World War I hero and president Paul von Hindenburg in a public ceremony on March 21, 1933 (at the Garrison Church, where Frederick the Great was buried) that symbolized the fusion of Nazism with ancient Prussian military traditions. Two days later, the Reichstag gathered in the Kroll Opera House, surrounded by bayoneted storm troopers, to approve the Enabling Act, legally snuffing out the Weimar Republic and vouchsafing the Austrian corporal dictatorial powers. Soon the Nazis disseminated pictures displaying the profiles of Frederick the Great, Bismarck and Hitler, suggesting an unbroken tradition between Prussia and the National Socialists. In reality, the Third Reich and the old aristocracy despised each other; Hitler simply outwitted his adversaries, using them for his own ends, then killed many of the Prussian blue bloods after they staged a failed assassination plot called Operation Valkyrie on July 20, 1944. After World War II, the cult of Prussia came to

an official end. In the Communist East, it was depicted as the culprit for everything bad in German history. And in the West, the Allied Control Council declared that “the Prussian state, which from early days has been a bearer of militarism and reaction in Germany, has ceased to exist,” and officially abolished it.

But when Germany reunified in 1990, these questions of whether there was something innately perfidious in Germany’s past that prompted it to elevate the state above the citizen and predisposed it to totalitarian dictatorship once more bubbled to the surface. The old Adam of German nationalism was again descried by some overly anxious pundits and European politicians. British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, for example, summoned several leading historians to Chequers to discuss whether or not the Germans suffered from nasty, enduring national characteristics. In his memoir, *Five Germanys I Have Known*, Fritz Stern recounts that Thatcher was firmly stuck in the past: she saw the Germans as “dangerous by tradition and character. . . . At the end, thanking us, the prime minister clapped her hands in a schoolgirl gesture, mischievously promising us, ‘I’ll be so nice to the Germans! I’ll be so nice to the Germans!’”²

If the Iron Lady saw the specter of a military feudal order returning to power in a new Greater Germany intent on bullying its neighbors, she couldn’t have had it more wrong. It is one of the many merits of Jonathan Steinberg’s new biography of Bismarck that it reminds us of the immense distance



that the Federal Republic has traveled from the days of the Iron Chancellor. Bismarck has been the subject of many biographies, including a sympathetic one by A. J. P. Taylor, but none has succeeded in capturing his remarkable personality and career as vividly as Steinberg’s. He has drawn on a wide range of documents and memoirs penned by Bismarck’s contemporaries, including the discerning Hildegard Freifrau Hugo von Spitzemberg, to reproduce not simply the statesman but also his milieu. Indeed, more than any other previous scholar, Steinberg pays close attention to Bismarck’s personality, concluding “it was Bismarck’s tragedy—and Germany’s—that he never learned how to be a proper Christian, had no understanding of the virtue of humility, and still less about the interaction of his sick body and sick soul.” What Bismarck did understand was provoking feuds and quarrels that led to wars that served what he perceived as Prussia’s true national interests.

² Fritz Stern, *Five Germanys I Have Known* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 469.

Bismarck was born into the landed Junker class on April 1, 1815. The “von” was critical to his career. As Bismarck’s lifelong friend John Lothrop Motley, a Boston aristocrat who went on to become a well-known historian and ambassador to Vienna, wrote to his parents in 1833: “one can very properly divide the Germans into two classes: the Vons and the non Vons.” Not until the Nazis, who carried out what the American historian David Schoenbaum has correctly called a “social revolution,” were these class distinctions largely effaced.

Steinberg imaginatively speculates that Bismarck was able to serve William I for decades because he was a sort of surrogate son. “By an uncanny set of circumstances,” he writes:

Bismarck ended up in a kind of permanent parental triangle with his sovereigns, not just once but twice. He saw William I of Prussia as a kindly but weak man and his Queen and later Empress Augusta as an all-powerful, devious, and malevolent figure.

It was his own family history all over again. Bismarck’s relations with his parents were troubled. He loved his father, Ferdinand, but viewed him as an ineffectual weakling; his domineering mother, Wilhelmine, he resented for her emotional detachment. “As a small child I hated her; later I successfully deceived her with falsehoods,” he wrote. It is tempting to trace Bismarck’s later emotional turbulence—gluttony, rage, despair and exhilaration—back directly to his childhood, a temptation that Steinberg does not resist. But he makes a very strong

case that Bismarck’s personality was decisively shaped at an early age, both for good and ill.

How otherwise, Steinberg observes, to explain the fact that Motley, who first met Bismarck at the University of Göttingen, turned the seventeen-year-old freshman into a character called Otto von Rabenmark in his 1839 novel *Morton’s Hope*? Rabenmark is “gifted with talents and acquisitions immeasurably beyond his years” and makes a name for himself by insulting the members of the dueling fraternity. In a country where the *Schmiss*, the dueling scar, is the highest honor a university student can display, daring and conflict are Rabenmark’s watchwords. He announces:

After I had cut off the senior’s nose, sliced off the con-senior’s upper lip, moustachios and all, besides bestowing less severe marks of affection on the others, the whole club in admiration of my prowess and desiring to secure the services of so valorous a combatant voted me in by acclamation . . . I intend to lead my companions here, as I intend to lead them in after-life. You see I am a very rational sort of person now and you would hardly take me for the crazy mountebank you met in the street half-an hour ago. But then I see that this is the way to obtain superiority. I determined at once on arriving at the university, that to obtain mastery over my competitors, who were all, extravagant, savage, eccentric, I had to be ten times as extravagant and savage as any one else.

Hyperbole? Not at all. Steinberg does not mention it, but Mark Twain, who witnessed several ferociously bloody duels in Heidel-

berg, noted in *A Tramp Abroad* that “a corps student told me it was of record that Prince Bismarck fought thirty-two of these duels in a single summer term when he was in college. So he fought twenty-nine after his badge had given him the right to retire from the field.”

For all his ambition, Bismarck went nowhere for many years. In 1845 his father’s death meant he had to move to re-

na von Puttkamer,” Steinberg writes, “lost her husband’s full attention even before they had formally been married.”

Bismarck may not have had much of a career, but he built close relations with prominent conservatives who were intent on protecting the patrimonial interests of the Junkers. Many of these conservatives believed in a rigorous branch of Lutheran-



mote Schönhausen to run the family estate. Bismarck, known as the “mad Junker” for his antics, which included firing pistols through the windows at his guests, was bored to tears. He ended up wedding the dour Johanna Friederike Charlotte Dorothea Eleonore von Puttkamer, but his true love was politics. The thirty-two-year-old country squire’s first post was to serve as a member of the Prussian parliament: “Johan-

ism known as Pietism, which stressed an inward and direct relationship with God. As Steinberg notes:

When the Crown Prince Frederick William came to the throne in 1840, he brought Bismarck’s new friends to power with him and, when the unrest leading to the revolutions of 1848 broke out, his neo-Pietist friends would make Bismarck famous.

This was the circle that would launch his career. And thus his great enemy at the outset was liberalism. He knew that the way to make a name for himself was to denounce it in the most vociferous terms possible. In his maiden speech before the Prussian United Diet of 1847, Bismarck committed the ultimate heresy, at least for pious liberals, by mocking the notion that the War of Liberation had anything in common with the demand for freedom or a constitution. In essence, he was saying that it was nothing more than a bunch of sentimental claptrap. The truth was that the Prussian army had always been very uneasy about the existence of the free corps that had fought against Napoléon and the idealism they embodied. Now he declared,

It does the national honour a poor service . . . if one assumes that the mistreatment and humiliation which the foreign power holders imposed on Prussia were not enough on its own to bring their blood to boiling point and to let all other feelings be drowned out by hatred of the foreigner.

This was vintage Bismarck—contempt for parliament and liberalism. Paranoid, restless and scheming, he constantly searched for real and imaginary enemies who might be trying to stymie or topple him. It was a blood sport, little different from the duels he had fought as a student.

Bismarck's first opportunity to shine came during the 1848 revolution. Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who veered between truculence and obsequiousness—and between the hawks and the doves—lifted press cen-

sorship and assented to a constitution after he learned that Klemens von Metternich had fled Vienna to save his skin. Bismarck was horrified. He told a friend that the king had “an unsteady character . . . if one grabbed him, one came away with a handful of slime.” Bismarck wanted to stage a counterrevolution. The military demurred. What ended up happening was more insidious: Bismarck's conservative allies established a secret shadow government known as the “camarilla” that sought, at every turn, to vitiate liberal triumphs. At the very same time, the National Assembly in Frankfurt, which was made up of liberal groupings from the farrago of German states and principalities, adopted a constitution. But Friedrich IV spurned its offer of a German imperial crown and tried to create his own confederation called the Erfurt Union. It failed. Friedrich capitulated to Austria in November 1850 and signed the Agreement of Olmütz. Known as the “humiliation of Olmütz,” the pact signified Prussia's abandonment of any pretension to lead the German states. Instead, Prussia docilely returned to the German Confederation headed by Austria, which had originally been established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

In one of his classic *realpolitik* statements, Bismarck suggested that nationalist grousing about Olmütz was jejune. In retreating, Prussia had made the right move:

Why do great states fight wars today? The only sound basis for a large state is egoism and not romanticism; this is what necessarily distinguishes a large state from a small one. It is not worthy for a large state to fight a war that is not

An older line of historical inquiry suggests that the traits of absolutism and obedience inculcated in the German population made it susceptible to Nazism.

in its own interests. . . . The honour of Prussia does not in my view consist of playing Don Quixote to every offended parliamentary bigwig in Germany who feels his local constitution is in jeopardy.

Now that Prussia had knuckled under to Austria, it needed to send an envoy to Frankfurt, where the German Confederation was based. Bismarck was named Prussian envoy to the federal diet in Frankfurt. His diplomatic path—which would also take him to St. Petersburg, where he became a popular figure among the nobility—had begun.

It was this intersection between domestic and foreign policy that vaulted Bismarck to the twin posts of minister-president and foreign minister of Prussia in 1862. His close friend Albrecht von Roon, the minister of war, had insisted upon expanding the size of the army. King William faced a conundrum: he wanted to implement sweeping reforms that included incorporating the free militias that had fought during the War of Liberation, but the new parliament was balking at paying for them. “That Prussia could easily afford such costs,” writes Steinberg, “had not yet entirely penetrated the consciousness of the tax-paying classes.” The crown and parliament were at an impasse. Roon hammered home the message that only Bismarck could surmount the stalemate, which he did. In his first speech—the famous “blood and iron” one—as minister-president, Bismarck flung down the gauntlet toward Austria, stating that Prussia’s borders were unfavorable for its continued existence. German liberals,

who composed the majority of the parliament, were aghast. But Bismarck simply bypassed them. He produced military victories that forced the parliament, in the end, to indemnify the state retroactively. By then, the liberals, who harbored more than a dose of nationalism, were exultant over German unification. But Bismarck’s contempt for parliament meant that the institutions of the state relied on him to function properly.

Consistent with his proclivity for seeking out new alliances, Bismarck was soon to cut his ties with the conservatives. He was a realist par excellence. Before him, politicians, more often than not, at least made a show of following high-minded principles and predicated their partnerships on the basis of religious or political affinities. Not Bismarck. He said such thinking was humbug:

The system of solidarity of the conservative interests of all countries is a dangerous fiction . . . We arrive at a point where we make the whole unhistorical, godless and lawless sovereignty swindle of the German princes into the darling of the Prussian Conservative Party.

To the dismay of pious, conservative Christians, Bismarck, in other words, was perfectly prepared to ally himself with the parvenu emperor Napoléon III to challenge Austrian predominance in Europe. He was equally capable of turning on France. Only when Germany was united in 1871 did Bismarck declare that Prussia was a “satiated” power and that he feared the “nightmare of a coalition” directed against his shiny new creation.

Bismarck's strategy was as cunning as it was simple: he saw that nationalism, the great force of the nineteenth century, did not have to be opposed to monarchy. Instead, it could be harnessed and manipulated. He was in many ways a populist conservative, which proved to be anathema to his early backers. He did not want to cede nationalism to the liberals, who championed freedom and democracy. Instead, he wanted to hijack it. His first move was to provoke war in 1864 with Denmark over the northern province of Schleswig-Holstein, which remains part of Germany today. By annexing the territory he was able to stir up nationalist feeling and set the stage for conflict with Austria, which had troops stationed in the region. England watched the march toward war with consternation: Lord Clarendon, the British foreign secretary, wrote, "In the name of all that is rational, decent and humane, what can be the justification of war on the part of Prussia?" One of Bismarck's early patrons, Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach, a Pietist and lawyer, visited Bismarck in 1866 and concluded, Steinberg writes, that the minister-president had "abandoned any semblance of the rigorous Christian morality which the two brothers Gerlach and many others thought they had discerned in the young Bismarck." But the Gerlachs (Ludwig and his army-general brother, Leopold) were political dinosaurs; the fastidious Leopold had once reproved Bismarck for visiting Paris, as though a visit to that cosmopolitan city would corrupt him.

Bismarck was on a roll. He concluded a treaty with Italy, which stipulated that it would attack Austria in the event of a

Prussian conflict with the empire. To stir up even more trouble for Vienna, he called for universal suffrage. The idea was that the Hapsburg empire, which contained numerous national groups, would be confronted with competing demands for freedom that it could not satisfy. Once again, orthodox Prussians were horrified. But Bismarck believed that even if the parliament was directly elected, he could emasculate it—later on, as the Social Democrats became a mass party, he wanted to repeal universal suffrage. But on the eve of war with Austria in 1866, he told his ambassador in Paris, "In the decisive moment the masses stand by the Monarchy, without distinction whether it has a liberal or conservative direction at that moment." Liberals and nationalists were happy because Bismarck had defeated the retrograde, Catholic Austrian empire.

Bismarck's third and final war came against France in 1870. The cause was trivial; the consequences immense. Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern was supposed to become the next Spanish king. The French lashed themselves into a frenzy of indignation. War ensued. Prussia, expert at using trains to deploy its troops quickly, prevailed. Yet it soon found itself bogged down in partisan warfare as French irregulars picked off its forces. Then there was the fall of Napoléon III and the rise of the Paris Commune. Eventually, Prussia bombarded Paris with siege guns. The liberally minded Crown Prince Frederick, married to Queen Victoria's eldest daughter, confided to his war diary:

What good to us is all power, all martial glory

and renown, if hatred and mistrust meet us at every turn, if every step we advance in our development is a subject for suspicion and grudging? Bismarck has made us great and powerful but he has robbed us of our friends, the sympathies of the world, and—our conscience.

Bismarck was at the height of his power. Steinberg's verdict is unequivocal:

These nine years, and this 'revolution', constitute the greatest diplomatic and political achievement by any leader in the last two centuries, for Bismarck accomplished all this without commanding a single soldier, without dominating a vast parliamentary majority, without the support of a mass movement, without any previous experience of government, and in the face of national revulsion at his name and his reputation. This achievement . . . rested on several sets of conflicting characteristics among which brutal, disarming honesty mingled with the wiles and deceits of a confidence man. He played his parts with perfect self-confidence yet mixed them with rage, anxiety, illness, hypochondria, and irrationality.

The German Constitution of 1871 retained Prussian particularism, and so Bismarck rode roughshod over parliament, persecuted his foes, and tried to maintain stability inside and outside the new Reich. His friend Ludwig Bamberger once observed about the Iron Chancellor's self-confidence, "Prince Bismarck believes firmly and deeply in a God who has the remarkable faculty of always agreeing with him." Emperor William put it more concisely: "it's hard to be Kaiser under Bismarck."

But the speak-softly-and-carry-a-big-stick approach Bismarck wielded in the realm of foreign policy was nowhere to be found when it came to domestic politics. Imagine a Teutonic version of Dick Cheney in power for several decades and you may start to get a sense of what Bismarck meant for his colleagues, for Germany and for its neighbors. To combat his foes, Bismarck found himself resorting to increasingly extreme measures—the Kulturkampf against Catholicism, the battle against the rise of the Social Democrats and the refusal to say anything to counter the contumely heaped upon Jews. It is this last phenomenon that Steinberg brilliantly chronicles. Bismarck was anything but immune to the anti-Semitism that permeated his class, which objected to the rise of Jews in the arts, journalism, banking, finance and industry. The young Kaiser Wilhelm, as the historian John C. G. Röhl has shown, also was a rabid anti-Semite. Steinberg acutely states that anti-Semitism "represented a revulsion of a deeply conservative society against liberalism." Liberals were well represented in parliament and often opposed Bismarck—and were often Jewish. His hatred of opposition meant that he hated the Jews, to the extent that, in a shameful episode, he actually refused to accept a telegram from the U.S. Congress on the death of the German-Jewish liberal politician and jurist Eduard Lasker hailing his devotion to freedom; in addition, he forbade five cabinet ministers from attending Lasker's funeral at the Oranienburg Synagogue (which has been newly restored) in Berlin. With his customary capacity for invective, Bismarck referred to

Ludwig Bamberger once observed about the Iron Chancellor's self-confidence, "Prince Bismarck believes firmly and deeply in a God who has the remarkable faculty of always agreeing with him."

the parliament itself as the "Guest House of the Dead Jew."

In focusing on Bismarck's unfortunate behavior, Steinberg draws another parallel between Wilhelmine Germany and the Nazi era. He essentially revives an older line of historical inquiry, one which suggested that the traits of absolutism and obedience inculcated in the German population made it susceptible to Nazism. According to Steinberg:

[Bismarck] transmitted an authoritarian, Prussian, semi-absolute monarchy with its cult of force and reverence for the absolute ruler to the twentieth century. Hitler fished it out of the chaos of the Great Depression of 1929–33. He took Bismarck's office, Chancellor, on 30 January 1933. Once again a "genius" ruled Germany.

So was Bismarck really at fault? Perhaps the earliest such line of argument came during World War I, long before Hitler had even come to power. In a fascinating debate between two estranged brothers, the fissures of German society were exposed. In 1914, Heinrich Mann completed his satirical novel pillorying autocratic rule and nationalism, *The Loyal Subject*, but could not publish it until November 1918. Its protagonist is Diederich Hessling, the owner of a small factory in Netzig who tyrannizes his workers and could not be more obsequious toward higher authority. Hessling, who noisily trumpets his patriotism and twirls his mustache in imitation of the kaiser, is supposed to epitomize the corruption, servility and empty bombast of the Wilhelmine era.

Meanwhile, at war's end, Thomas Mann wrote *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*, a series of murky lucubrations about the power of creative irrationalism and Germany's need for an authoritarian and anti-Western government, which he later repudiated. As the productions of the two brothers indicate, the notion that there were peculiarly Germanic traits that issued in the Nazi regime is not so easy to wish away. One, Heinrich, was decrying what he saw as the German penchant for power worship; the other, Thomas, was explicitly hailing an anti-Western, antiliberal mode of thought as precisely the feature that signified German greatness (though he would later view the work with a measure of embarrassment).

Steinberg's is thus a profoundly sobering book that is difficult to read without a mounting sense of apprehension about Bismarck's accomplishments and legacy. But he may go too far. The danger is of adopting a teleological approach in which later events get read backward into history. Can Nazism really be laid at Prussia's doorstep? Did Wilhelmine Germany follow a *Sonderweg*, a special path to modernity that condemned it to launching a genocidal war? As Henry Kissinger observed in his discussion of Steinberg's work in the *New York Times*, Bismarck was, at bottom, a cautious conservative who wanted to conserve, not expand, the German Reich. Hitler, by contrast, was a nihilist. The genocidal racism that Hitler espoused was of a different order than Bismarck's anti-Semitism. Hitler was probably closer to the kind of Napoleonic revolutionary spirit that Bismarck was trying to contain



and smother—the impulse to gamble and overthrow the European order. Instead, the Iron Chancellor wished to integrate Prussia into Europe, not unify central Europe—let alone the whole continent—under German hegemony. His successors at the Wilhelmstrasse were not as modest. In entering the Kaiserreich into World War I, his epigones shattered the empire that he had painstakingly erected.

Nevertheless, any system that rested on one man was likely headed for collapse. There was Bismarck, but no such thing as Bismarckianism. Instead of exemplifying a coherent school of foreign policy, he represented an ad hoc approach, based on equal parts wily operator and profound thinker. It was enough to create but not sustain imperial Germany. “The ultimate and terrible irony of Bismarck’s career,” says Steinberg, “lay in his powerlessness.” He was always dependent on the royals for his authority. The wider point is surely that a patriarchal monarchy had itself become almost impossible to reconcile with the resur-

gent national movements that Bismarck had once attempted to co-opt. The ineptitude of these regimes was exposed by the demands of modern warfare. It was no accident that the Romanov, Hapsburg and Hohenzollern dynasties all crumbled under the stresses of World War I—only to be supplanted by totalitarian regimes.

Were Bismarck to survey today’s Germany, he would doubtless be taken aback to see that it was shorn of East Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia. But perhaps he would not find it odd that Germany has once again become the most powerful country in the heart of Europe, dictating from Berlin not its military but, rather, its economic future. The most that remains of Berlin’s Prussian heritage is an equestrian statue of Frederick the Great, “old Fritz” as he was known, on Unter den Linden. Bismarck has largely vanished from the memories of most Germans. Perhaps that is just as well. He himself asked that the epitaph on his grave should simply read, “A faithful German servant of Kaiser Wilhelm I.” □



In the Hall of the Vulcans

By *Anatol Lieven*

Marvin Kalb and Deborah Kalb, *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 355 pp., \$29.95.

Dov S. Zakheim, *A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 320 pp., \$32.95.

Four decades on, Vietnam remains America's only major lost war. As prominent journalists Marvin and Deborah Kalb write in their new, quite gripping historical survey, this is a memory that has haunted U.S. policy makers ever since. Indeed, the defeat remains critical to the calculations of the Obama administration as it tries to extricate the United States from Afghanistan while preserving at least the appearance of some success—and the avoidance of obvious failure.

Yet the effects of Vietnam were in fact deeply paradoxical: America's position in

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the world changed little and in some ways was better for the war. In Indochina, victorious Vietnam was contained by Beijing. Meanwhile, the memory of the war meant that, very fortunately, Washington did not plunge itself into direct military interventions in developing nations in far-flung lands, which would have brought no gains, only further costs—and more bitter domestic divisions. It is true that the Soviet Union was emboldened and took advantage of the collapse of the Portuguese colonial empire in Africa more aggressively than it might otherwise have done, but this proved utterly irrelevant to the overall balance of power. The USSR collapsed, largely through the colossal military overstretch of its strategic competition with the United States.

The results of Vietnam for American thinking were of course much deeper. The Kalbs show how every subsequent U.S. decision on the use of force has been colored by the Indochina adventure—whether by a desire to avoid further costly entanglements or by a desire to “exorcise the ghosts of Vietnam” through the (vigorous and successful) wielding of hard power. It is true that after every successful U.S. military operation since 1975, parts of the media have raised the cry that “Vietnam is finally behind us.” So far, they have always been wrong.

Ironically, while thinking about the lost war all the time, Americans also did not think about it nearly enough. This was most glaringly true of the U.S. armed forces. Rather than seriously considering how to do counterinsurgency better, the military essentially decided that it would never do it again. Never mind that America's enemies



also have a role in deciding where and when Washington fights—and that the constitutional decision to wage war lies with the president and Congress of the United States, not the chiefs of staff. If they really object to a policy, senior officers have no recourse but to resign. In 2002–03, despite deep misgivings, many senior officers signally failed to let go of their posts in opposition to the Iraq War. (Six years later, Admiral William Fallon did resign in opposition to Bush administration policy toward Iran—thereby helping to block a possible attack.)

Yet because the armed forces held fast to the belief that they could avoid future counterinsurgency, the practical lessons of Vietnam were almost entirely forgotten. The result was the horribly unprepared U.S. military that found itself engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan.

All that said, the most significant resemblances between Vietnam on the one hand and the first years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the other lie not with the insurgents, who for better and worse have been very different indeed from the Vietcong. Instead, the similarities have been on the U.S. side: the nationalist sense of America's mission, which led even many liberal Americans to believe in the United

States' right, duty and ability to build democracy through military means in other countries; the disastrous combination of this with an almost incredible ignorance of those countries in U.S. policy-making circles; and the clash between these megalomaniac "nation-building" aspirations and a U.S. military approach which for the first crucial years relied overwhelmingly on firepower. In Iraq, wise military leadership adopted a different strategy just in time by once again amassing experience and ideas, which helped it to achieve a qualified victory. In Afghanistan—as in Vietnam in the early 1970s—it may however be too late both on the ground and in the minds of the American public for this to make much of a difference.

For some of the explanation as to why the United States stumbled so badly, readers can turn to a truly fascinating, deeply depressing memoir by Dov Zakheim, under secretary and comptroller at the Department of Defense from 2001 to 2004. Zakheim also blames the U.S. military in part for failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, remarking acridly that prior to these wars they had managed to forget everything that they had ever learned about counterinsurgency.

The bulk of Zakheim's criticism, however, is reserved for the present U.S. system of national government in general, and the Bush administration in particular. Indeed, coming as it does from one of the "Vulcans" (the circle of people who served as President Bush's closest foreign-policy advisers), an insider who defends aspects of the Bush administration and likes and respects some of its members, this book must be one of the most devastating indictments of that administration's conduct of external policy that has yet been written. Particularly ferocious are his portraits of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Coalition Provisional Authority administrator Paul Bremer, and Office of Management and Budget associate director Robin Cleveland. These portraits do, it must be said, have a certain air of score settling, and their accuracy might be doubted—were it not borne out both by abundant outside evidence and by the actual results of their behavior.

The core of the problem as far as the lack of planning for Iraq was concerned is summed up by Zakheim in the following passage:

The State Department undertook a broader effort to plan, but, as is widely known, the Defense Department rejected State's nuts-and-bolts approach. One reason was, again, the administration's reigning assumption that the United States would not be in Iraq long enough to require detailed plans. But an almost magical corollary to this assumption also was at play: if one did not plan for a contingency that one did not *wish* to happen, it thereby *could* not happen. (Zakheim's italics)

Sound a little like Vietnam, anyone?

And even after it was apparent that both Afghanistan and Iraq would require prolonged exercises in nation building, the confusion within the administration remained staggering. As Zakheim writes of his attempts to coordinate Afghan reconstruction policy with the State Department after he was appointed coordinator of that policy,

There was one other fact that Rich [Armitage] never mentioned to me: there already was a government-wide coordinator for Afghanistan—Richard Haass, the director of the Policy Planning Office at State, whose formal title was Coordinator for the Future of Afghanistan. I suspect that Rich never mentioned this fact because he assumed I knew it. And I certainly *should* have known. In government service one should never assume anything, however. . . . Indeed, I did not learn about Haass' role until quite some time after he left the State Department in mid-2003 to become president of the Council on Foreign Relations. And to this day I do not know who appointed him, or when exactly he was appointed. (Zakheim's italics)

The only appropriate response would seem to be: what a way to run a railroad. As Zakheim writes, however, this sort of chaos was not only due to the Bush administration but to the entire American system of government. A strong sense emerges of an apparatus that has simply grown far too big and too complicated to be managed effectively, especially when one adds in the impact of oversight and interference by the U.S. Congress—each of whose members acts like an independent prince who has

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to be negotiated with, conciliated and rewarded. As a result, the system described by Zakheim often seems so entangled in its own internal processes and battles that events in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere become almost peripheral. Thus, while Islamabad has often behaved appallingly in Afghanistan, Zakheim also describes his intense difficulty in extracting even a portion of the aid promised to Pakistan in the fall of 2001, a time when the country's help was absolutely vital to the United States. Not surprisingly, this undermined the Pakistani government and left Pakistanis feeling deeply resentful.

Zakheim excoriates Paul Bremer for his decisions to dissolve the existing Baathist state institutions in Iraq, arguing that “as long as Iraq's long-standing institutions—notably the army and the bureaucracy—were not tampered with, there was no compelling reason to think the country would fractionate.” This, however, smells of special pleading. Numerous experts before the invasion warned of precisely this eventuality, and on page thirty-nine Zakheim himself writes of his previous fears concerning an invasion set to topple Saddam Hussein: “I worried about the impact of any military attack on the integrity of that largely artificial country. I could not see how the breakup of Iraq could be in the national interest of the United States.”

Perhaps most depressing of all is the shunning of expertise and openness, the rewarding of conventionality and the total lack of incentive to give a damn about these countries over the long run. One rea-

son experts were ignored—and may well be again in future—is brought out by Zakheim at various points: it is the intense suspicion of “Arabists” by supporters of Israel within the administration. Incredibly, Zakheim—an Orthodox Jew and a deeply committed supporter of Israel (as he stresses in this book)—describes Wolfowitz criticizing him as being “too close to the Arabs” when he raised doubts about an attack on Iraq.

The most shattering reflection on the nature of the U.S.-Israeli alliance—once again, recorded by a passionate friend of Israel—is as follows:

The Israelis did offer to provide materiel support for the U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and did not insist on taking credit for it publicly. Initially I was delighted by the offer on two counts. First, the Israeli military was reputed to be among the world's best, and its systems would be a welcome addition to our own. And second, the United States provided Israel with billions of dollars' worth of military assistance, and it seemed appropriate, at least to me, that Israel should offer to help America in its own time of need. But then the Israelis told me that the U.S. government would “of course” have to buy whatever it was that Israel made available. I was not amused, and told them “thanks, but no thanks.”

No additional comment is necessary on the virtually insane (from an American point of view) form that this relationship has now assumed.

Hostility to “Arabists” has not been the only reason why the U.S. government seems to have a certain difficulty in maintain-

ing and listening to experts on particular countries. The system of political appointments ensures that most people with real expertise will be kept out of the senior ranks of the bureaucracy. The immense scale of America's global commitments means that people who reach the top are likely to be generalists. The intense prejudices and preconceptions which have gripped the Beltway establishment with regard to particular countries (Russia is perhaps an even more striking example than the Muslim world) mean that for long periods anyone who has wished for promotion has had to tailor his or her attitudes to the prevailing norm. Finally, to repeat an earlier point, the central government has grown so enormous and complex that it spends far too much of its time administering itself, or engaged in fratricidal turf wars.

When it comes to state building, however, there is another problem, which applies equally to Europe. Zakheim makes a very strong argument that by plunging into Iraq and neglecting Afghanistan, the Bush

administration (and once again, the sheer inertia of the Washington system) destroyed a good chance to build a successful Afghan state between 2001 and 2007 and enabled the resurgence of the Taliban. To a considerable degree I would agree with this.

Yet it must also be said that the entire Western state-building effort on the ground in Afghanistan in those years was deeply unimpressive, not so much because of lack of money but because of the lack of any real commitment and willingness for sacrifice on the part of too many of the civilian officials stationed there. Indeed, by far the greater number seemed basically uninterested. As a result, even before Taliban attacks became truly dangerous, the Western official and NGO world in Kabul became a closed round of paper shuffling and expatriate parties full of people on short-term contracts, divorced from Afghan society and with neither the time nor the inclination to find out about the place. Thus the U.S. military (without preparation and very much against its inclinations) was forced to pick up most of the

real work of nation building outside Kabul—alas, very probably several years too late. Unless these failings can be corrected, any future Western attempts to create workable societies, governance and infrastructure in countries like Afghanistan will meet the same fate as the Afghan operation to date—a fate which Zakheim's essential memoir does so much to explain. □





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