THE BURDEN OF IRRESPONSIBILITY

by John J. Mearsheimer
“In my view the most intriguing thinking on the right, as David Brooks has noted, is taking place among the renegades at the plucky American Conservative, where libertarian propositions are freely aired, where American foreign policy is invigilated, and where, above all, few shibboleths are left unchallenged. It has the feel of what Buckley’s magazine once represented, an insurgent movement with little to lose and much to gain.”

—Jacob Heilbrunn, The National Interest
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The Realist

Maurice Greenberg on China & America
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In the annals of American history, few stories of personal fellowship are as poignant and affecting as the friendship between Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, which culminated in enmity. America saw the GOP rupture based on atmospherics, brazenly inaccurate accusations, ideological fervor and personal whims writ large.
Maurice Greenberg on China & America

The National Interest’s editor Jacob Heilbrunn recently spoke with Maurice R. Greenberg, the former chairman and CEO of AIG, chairman and CEO of Starr Insurance Holdings, Inc., and chairman of the Center for the National Interest. What follows is a lightly edited version of their conversation.

Jacob Heilbrunn: If you look at your career and life as a businessman—as a soldier who fought in Normandy and helped liberate Dachau concentration camp—it does exemplify America at its peak. We’ve had this whole era with America as a superpower. When you look back, do you feel that America today has absorbed the lessons that we learned in World War II and afterward, or have we peaked as a superpower?

Maurice R. Greenberg: Well, we’ve changed. There’s no question about that. When I came back from World War II, along with ten million other Americans, I had to finish high school. I didn’t want to go to college. I could have gone to West Point. But I didn’t want to stay in the military. I was nineteen years old when I came back. I stayed in the reserves because I needed the money, and I was going to school. So when the Korean War broke out, right after I finished law school, I was recalled, and I spent over a year in Korea. But America’s changed, there’s no question about it.

JH: What do you think specifically has changed and why?

MG: We had some principles we stood for and believed in, and we were respected around the world for those principles. Enemy and friend alike may not like us, but they respected us and what we believed in. I don’t sense that anymore. I think we’ve backed away from being a world leader, for whatever reason.

JH: Do you think it’s a loss of confidence and willpower or an actual diminution of American strength?

MG: I think we have the strength potential to do whatever we want as a country. One of our strengths has been the diversity of our population. The immigrants that came to this country were Eastern Europeans. And they had a different work ethic. They’d never go on welfare; my God, they’d rather slit their throats than do that. We have a different population today, and we’ve become entitlement-bound. And it’s not considered improper to get entitlements, for whatever reason. They don’t feel any degradation in their own self, as an individual. That’s a change. Is it going to go back and change again?

JH: It’s interesting that England is doing relatively well economically now, even though its leaders pushed through some pretty severe austerity cuts. The pound has strengthened against the dollar.

MG: They did. They’re doing their best to
encourage financial institutions to settle in London. Because where do you go? Wall Street is under great pressure by regulation. Hong Kong has limitations. Singapore is a little out of the way. So London, which had been at the top of the heap, is trying to regain the crown.

**JH:** What was your impression of the new Chinese leadership when you were there recently?

**MG:** I’m a member of the advisory board to the Tsinghua University School of Economics and Management, and Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, recently spent an hour meeting with the members. He came across as very focused, determined, confident. The Third Plenum showed that he has further consolidated his power. It is a precondition for getting meaningful reform through the bureaucracy. There is agreement that reform in many areas, particularly on the economic side, is necessary and desirable. It won’t happen overnight. The leadership may desire change, but there is a certain time frame over which it will occur.

I think Li Keqiang, the premier, is fighting for more openness in the market. On the Standing Committee I don’t think all are going to go along with that. The Shanghai free-trade zone is a test. Change will come slowly; they can’t do it any other way. There are a number of ghost cities where they move people into and must create jobs for them—it’s not easy to do. I think one of the things they’re wrestling with is that if a farmer wants to sell a plot of land, he should be able to do that and keep the money himself. China must build a larger and more efficient agriculture than it currently has. The leadership needs to make more funds available to small- and medium-sized businesses, and I’ve been arguing with the Chinese about that for years. If you’re going to become a consumer market, you’ve got to let these small companies grow. They’re starved for capital and need to be able to borrow from the banks, and the banks have been lending all their money to these state-owned enterprises. I think there’s a movement to find some way to make funds available to small- and medium-sized companies. Then they grow, hire people, become consumers. There’s change coming, but it won’t be rapid change.

**JH:** Has there been something that’s surprised you the most in seeing China from 1975 through today?

**MG:** A number of things. There were no cars when I first went to China. You wouldn’t see any tall buildings; we constructed the first, the tallest building in Shanghai. We built a hotel, office and apartment complex called the Shanghai Center. It was the tallest building in Shanghai when it opened in 1992. It is now about number eighty in height. That’s happened all over China. They’ve done more in a brief period of time in the course of history than many nations have ever done.

**JH:** So you’re bullish on China?
MG: I am. I’m bullish looking at it from Chinese eyes. It’s not going to be a Jeffersonian democracy; it’s a long ways away. The distrust between our two countries is very concerning. Unless we learn how to trust each other, we have a difficult period ahead. I don’t mean tomorrow or the next day, but in the next decade or so. If China makes the switch, ultimately, not all at once but over a period of time, to become a consumer-based rather than an export-based economy—in principle, it’ll always be exports—but if consumerism grows, their GDP will grow dramatically. They’ll become the largest economy in the world. They’ll radiate more influence around the world. Certainly, they’re exploring that in the South China Sea, along with Japan, the islands with Japan. And so we’re going to be tested. How are we going to respond to these tests? What’s in our best national interests? What’s in the interests of the world more broadly?

JH: When it comes to the financial world that we constructed—you were talking about the debt being a problem in America—liberals like Paul Krugman say, “It’s no big deal,” or “inflation is down, money is cheap, borrow it while you can for nothing, worry about the debt later on.” Why are they wrong?

MG: First of all, we’re printing money every month. The endgame is going to be a burst of inflation. There’s no question about that. How are we going to escape that? What are we going to do with that money? Are we going to burn it? It’s on the books. It’s borrowed. And so clearly we have a problem here. And, you know, you can’t live beyond your means; there’s nothing magic about that. You must pick priorities, and the number of priorities. Certainly the protection of our nation is a priority. You can’t become just a weak power; you do that, and you’ve got all other kinds of problems that emerge almost immediately. There’s always somebody who wants to knock the king of the hill off the hill. And we have a lot of people climbing up on different sides of us. And we don’t do people any good by making them dependent upon government. I’m not saying you don’t take care of those who are truly in need—yes, we have that obligation—but you don’t encourage
everybody to become dependent on the government.

**JH**: How much of that risk-taking entrepreneurial culture do we still retain today?

**MG**: I think it’s around. It depends on the industry. It depends on many things, including people who are not bitten by this dependency bug. But the laws have made it more difficult as well. Eliot Spitzer destroyed—essentially destroyed—AIG, for nothing to do with the law. He decided that he was going to run for governor, and he was going to take down individuals to help his career. And the press played along with that. And so there’s been tremendous change. Why would any company that’s public remain in New York State? We’re hampering ourselves. We’ve lost a compass that made us great.

**JH**: You wrote about Jamie Dimon and JP Morgan in the *Wall Street Journal* as another example.

**MG**: Yes. The government is also investigating JP Morgan and other American companies for hiring relatives of government officials in China and other countries. That only makes sense if they are not qualified or not doing their jobs.

Let’s get real—coming from a certain family doesn’t stop people from getting jobs in America, and Washington’s K Street lobbying firms are full of former officials and former members of Congress. Political donors and supporters become ambassadors and take other key government positions. Why stop U.S. companies from hiring capable and well-connected people by applying a standard we don’t use at home?

**JH**: Do you see another financial bubble because the Federal Reserve is in overdrive?

**MG**: There’s no way out. I don’t see any way out. What we have to do really is make it easier for business to grow and to prosper. We have the highest corporate tax rate in the world. Now, how does that help the country? If you want to avoid the consequences of what we’ve done, you’ve got to counterbalance that by some intelligent action on how to get business going rapidly to pay the taxes that are needed—not at the highest tax rate, but a more moderate tax rate to create jobs and income. You can’t do it by saying, “Well, we’re going to get rid of debt by taxing everybody more.” That’s proven to be wrong—just look at Europe. But how do you get into the minds of those who are socialists by nature? That’s what we have; we are now approaching a socialist society. □
Since early 2011, political developments in Egypt and Syria have repeatedly captured the attention of the American foreign-policy elite. The Obama administration has tried to guide the turbulent political situation in post-Mubarak Egypt and become increasingly engaged in Syria’s bloody civil war. The United States is already helping arm some of the forces fighting against the Assad regime, and President Obama came close to attacking Syria following its use of chemical weapons in August 2013. Washington is now directly involved in the effort to locate and destroy Syria’s chemical-weapons stockpiles.

These responses reflect three widespread beliefs about Egypt and Syria. The first is that the two states are of great strategic importance to the United States. There is a deep-seated fear that if the Obama administration does not fix the problems plaguing those countries, serious damage will be done to vital American interests. The second one is that there are compelling moral reasons for U.S. involvement in Syria, mainly because of large-scale civilian deaths. And the third is that the United States possesses the capability to affect Egyptian and Syrian politics in significant and positive ways, in large part by making sure the right person is in charge in Cairo and Damascus.

Packaged together, such beliefs create a powerful mandate for continuous American involvement in the politics of these two troubled countries.

Anyone paying even cursory attention to U.S. foreign policy in recent decades will recognize that Washington’s response to Egypt and Syria is part of a much bigger story. The story is this: America’s national-security elites act on the assumption that every nook and cranny of the globe is of great strategic significance and that there are threats to U.S. interests everywhere. Not surprisingly, they live in a constant state of fear. This fearful outlook is reflected in the comments of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, before Congress in February 2012: “I can’t impress upon you that in my personal military judgment, formed over thirty-eight years, we are living in the most dangerous time in my lifetime, right now.” In February 2013, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that Americans “live in very complex and dangerous times,” and the following month Senator James Inhofe said, “I don’t remember a time in my life where the world has been more dangerous and the threats more diverse.”

These are not anomalous views. A 2009 survey done by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 69 percent of the Council on Foreign Relations’ members believed the world

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was more dangerous than—or at least as dangerous as—it was during the Cold War. In short, the elite consensus is that Egypt and Syria are not the only countries Washington has to worry about, although they are among the most pressing problems at the moment. This grim situation means the United States has a lot of social engineering to carry out, leaving it no choice but to pursue an interventionist foreign policy. In other words, it must pursue a policy of global domination if it hopes to make the world safe for America.

This perspective is influential, widespread—and wrong. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the United States is a remarkably secure country. No great power in world history comes close to enjoying the security it does today. What’s more, Egypt and Syria are not vital strategic interests. What happens in those countries is of little importance for American security. This is not to say they are irrelevant but rather that Washington’s real interests there are not great enough to justify expending blood and treasure. Nor is there a compelling moral case for intervening in either country.

Equally important, the United States has little ability to rectify the problems in Egypt and Syria. If anything, intervention is likely to make a bad situation worse. Consider America’s dismal record in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Moreover, it does not matter much who is in charge in Cairo or Damascus. The United States has a rich history of working with leaders of all types, including Communists, fascists, military dictators and traditional monarchs. For all the talk about the need to topple Syria’s Bashar al-Assad because he is a ruthless tyrant, Washington was able to live with him—and his equally ruthless father—for more than forty years.

Interfering in countries like Egypt and Syria and turning the world into one big battlefield has significant costs for the United States. The strategic costs are actually not great precisely because the United States is such an extraordinarily secure country. It can pursue foolish policies and still remain the most powerful state on the planet. (This is not to deny that America’s interventionist policies are the main cause of its terrorism problem. Nevertheless, terrorism is a minor threat, which is why Washington is free to continue pursuing the policies that helped cause the problem in the first place.)

The pursuit of global domination, however, has other costs that are far more daunting. The economic costs are huge—especially the wars—and there are significant human costs as well. After all, thousands of Americans have died in Afghanistan and Iraq, and many more have suffered egregious injuries that will haunt
them for the rest of their lives. Probably
the most serious cost of Washington’s
interventionist policies is the growth of
a national-security state that threatens to
undermine the liberal-democratic values
that lie at the heart of the American
political system.

Given these significant costs, and given
that the United States has no vital interests
at stake in Egypt and Syria, let alone the
capacity for fixing the problems afflicting
those countries, it should adopt a hands-off policy toward them. American leaders
would do well to honor the principle of
self-determination when dealing with
Cairo and Damascus, and with many other
countries around the world as well.

The United States is an exceptionally
secure great power, contrary to the fol-
derol one frequently hears emanating from
America’s national-security community. A
good way to illustrate this point is to reflect
on isolationism, a grand strategy with a rich
but controversial history.

Isolationism rests on the assumption
that no region of the world outside
of the Western Hemisphere is of vital
strategic importance to the United States.
Isolationists do not argue that America has
no interests in the wider world, just that
they are not important enough to justify
deploying military force to defend them.
They are fully in favor of engaging with
the rest of the world economically as well
as diplomatically, but they view all foreign
wars as unnecessary.

I am not an isolationist, but the logic
underpinning this grand strategy is not
easy to dismiss. Quite the contrary, as
President Franklin Roosevelt discovered
in the early 1940s, when he had great
difficulty countering the isolationists. It
is commonplace today to dismiss those
isolationists as fools or even crackpots. But
that would be a mistake. They were wrong
to think the United States could sit out
World War II, but they made a serious case
for staying on the sidelines, one that many
Americans found compelling. At the heart
of the isolationists’ worldview is a simple
geographical fact: the American homeland
is separated from Asia and Europe by two
giant moats. No great power can mount an
amphibious operation across the Atlantic or
Pacific Oceans, and thus no outside power,
whether it was Nazi Germany or Imperial
Japan, could directly threaten the survival of
the United States.

If the case for isolationism was powerful
before Pearl Harbor, it is even more
compelling today. For starters, the United
States has thousands of nuclear weapons,
which are the ultimate deterrent and go
a long way toward guaranteeing a state’s
survival. No adversary is going to invade
America and threaten its survival, because
that opponent would almost certainly
end up getting vaporized. In essence, two
giant oceans and thousands of nuclear
weapons today shield the United States.
Moreover, it faces no serious threats in its
own neighborhood, as it remains a regional
hegemon in the Western Hemisphere.

Finally, the United States faces no great-
power rival of any real consequence. In
fact, most strategists I know believe it has
been operating in a unipolar world since the
Cold War ended, which is another way of
saying America is the only great power on
the planet; it has no peers. Others believe
China and Russia are legitimate great
powers and the world is multipolar. Even
so, those two great powers are especially
weak when compared to the mighty United
States. In addition, they have hardly any
power-projection capability, which means
they cannot seriously threaten the American
homeland.

All of this is to say that the United States,
which is the most secure great power in
world history, has been safer over the past
twenty-five years than at any other time in its history. General Dempsey’s assertion that the present marks the most dangerous era in his lifetime is completely wrong. The world was far more perilous during the Cold War, which witnessed the various Berlin crises, the Cuban missile crisis and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. And it is hard to fathom how Senator Inhofe, who was born one year after Hitler came to power, could think today’s world is more dangerous than the first decade of his life.

Am I overlooking the obvious threat that strikes fear into the hearts of so many Americans, which is terrorism? Not at all. Sure, the United States has a terrorism problem. But it is a minor threat. There is no question we fell victim to a spectacular attack on September 11, but it did not cripple the United States in any meaningful way and another attack of that magnitude is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. Indeed, there has not been a single instance over the past twelve years of a terrorist organization exploding a primitive bomb on American soil, much less striking a major blow. Terrorism—most of it arising from domestic groups—was a much bigger problem in the United States during the 1970s than it has been since the Twin Towers were toppled.

What about the possibility that a terrorist group might obtain a nuclear weapon? Such an occurrence would be a game changer, but the chances of that happening are virtually nil. No nuclear-armed state is going to supply terrorists with a nuclear weapon because it would have no control over how the recipients might use that weapon.¹ Political turmoil in a nuclear-armed state could in theory allow terrorists to grab a loose nuclear weapon, but the United States already has detailed plans to deal with that highly unlikely contingency.

Terrorists might also try to acquire fissile material and build their own bomb. But that scenario is extremely unlikely as well: there are significant obstacles to getting enough material and even bigger obstacles to building a bomb and then delivering it. More generally, virtually every country has a profound interest in making sure no terrorist group acquires a nuclear weapon, because they cannot be sure they will not be the target of a nuclear attack, either by the terrorists or another country the terrorists strike. Nuclear terrorism, in short, is not a serious threat. And to the extent that we should worry about it, the main remedy is to encourage and help other states to place nuclear materials in highly secure custody.

Contrary to what isolationists think, there are three regions of the world—Europe, Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf—that are indeed of vital strategic importance to the United States. Of course, Europe and Northeast Asia are important because the world’s other great powers are located in those regions, and they are the only states that might acquire the capability to threaten the United States in a serious way.

One might counter that they still cannot attack across the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans and reach the shores of the United States. True, but if a distant great power were to dominate Asia or Europe the way America dominates the Western Hemisphere, it would then be free to roam around the globe and form alliances with countries in the Western Hemisphere that have an adversarial relationship with the United States. In that circumstance, the stopping power of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans would be far less effective. Thus, American policy makers have a deep-seated interest in preventing another great power from achieving regional hegemony in Asia or Europe.

The Persian Gulf is strategically important because it produces roughly 30 percent of the world’s oil, and it holds about 55 percent of the world’s crude-oil reserves. If the flow of oil from that region were stopped or even severely curtailed for a substantial period of time, it would have a devastating effect on the world economy. Therefore, the United States has good reason to ensure that oil flows freely out of the Gulf, which in practice means preventing any single country from controlling all of that critical resource. Most oil-producing states will keep pumping and selling their oil as long as they are free to do so, because they depend on the revenues. It is in America’s interest to keep them that way, which means there can be no regional hegemon in the Gulf, as well as Asia or Europe.

To be clear, only the oil-producing states of the Persian Gulf are of marked strategic importance to the United States, not every country in the broader Middle East. In particular, Washington should be concerned about the fate of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, because it wants to make sure their oil flows uninterrupted into world markets. Middle Eastern states that do not have much oil are of little strategic significance to the United States. They include Egypt and Syria, as well as Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen. Thus, it makes little sense for Americans to worry much about what is happening in Egypt and Syria, much less countenance military intervention in those countries. In short, what happens in Cairo and Damascus has little effect on American security.

It is apparent from the discourse in the American foreign-policy establishment, as well as the Obama administration’s behavior, that my views about the strategic importance of Egypt and Syria are at odds with mainstream thinking. So let us consider in more detail how those two countries might affect U.S. security.

Egypt and Syria are weak countries by any meaningful measure of power. Both have small and feeble economies, and hardly any oil or other natural resources that might make them rich like Kuwait or Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, neither Egypt nor Syria has ever had a formidable military, even when the Soviet Union provided them with sophisticated military equipment during the Cold War. Neither was a serious threat to its neighbors, especially Israel. Remember that Israel fought major wars against Egypt in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) clobbered the Egyptian army in each instance. Syria fought against the IDF in 1948, 1967 and 1973, and it too suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the Israelis.

Egypt and Israel made peace after the 1973 war, but Israel and Syria remain enemies. Nevertheless, every time there has been a possibility the two sides might become embroiled in a war—during the 2006 war in Lebanon, for example—the Syrians have gone to great lengths to avoid a fight. The Syrians fully understand they
could not hold their own against the IDF. Of course, the recent turmoil and conflict in Egypt and Syria have weakened those two countries further. Indeed, Israel is now so confident of its military superiority over its Arab neighbors that it is actually reducing its conventional forces.

Most importantly for the issue at hand, neither the Egyptian nor the Syrian military is a serious threat to the American homeland or even to U.S. forces stationed in the Persian Gulf. And there is no reason to think that situation will change in the foreseeable future. Given that Egypt and Syria have little economic or military power and hardly any oil, advocates of global domination rely on a variety of other claims to make the case that they are core American interests.

One argument is that the United States should care greatly about Egypt because it controls the Suez Canal. Roughly 8 percent of global seaborne trade and 4.5 percent of world oil supplies travel through that passageway. Moreover, the U.S. Navy uses the canal to move ships from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. Thus, if Egypt were to close the canal, it would damage the international economy and complicate American efforts to project power into the strategically important Gulf.

This is unpersuasive. If Egypt closed the Suez Canal, it would not seriously hurt the international economy. Ships would be rerouted, mainly around the southern tip of Africa, and oil from the Middle East would be distributed to the recipient countries in different ways. Furthermore, Egypt would pay a significant economic price if it shut down the canal, which is its third-largest source of revenue and is sometimes referred to as an “economic lifeline.” Not only would Cairo lose the money generated by that passageway, but it would also risk economic and political retaliation by the countries hurt by the closing. It is worth noting that the canal was closed from 1967 to 1975 and the international economy experienced no serious damage.

The threat of preventing the U.S. Navy from reaching the Persian Gulf by shutting the canal is an empty one, because American ships can reach the Gulf through the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. It might be more convenient for the United States to send some ships bound for the Gulf through the canal, but it is hardly essential for projecting power into that region.

One can discern four arguments in the public discourse about why Syria might be a vital American interest. Some maintain that toppling Assad is important because it would deliver a staggering blow to Hezbollah and especially Iran, since they are both staunch supporters of the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah put the point succinctly in the summer of 2011: “Nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria.” A few months later, Tom Donilon, President Obama’s national-security adviser, explained that the “end of the Assad regime would constitute Iran’s greatest setback in the region yet—a strategic blow that will further shift the balance of power in the region against Iran.”

This deep concern about Iran is motivated by the belief that its influence in the Middle East has grown significantly and that it is bent on achieving regional hegemony. Its pursuit of nuclear weapons, so the argument goes, is part of Tehran’s drive to dominate the Middle East.

Terrorism is the basis of a second argument for treating Syria as a fundamental strategic interest. The claim is not only that Syria supports terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, but also that Al Qaeda and other groups hostile to the United States now operate in Syria. Thus, as two hawkish commentators writing
in the *New York Times* put it, the United States could intervene in Syria and “create a bulwark against extremist groups like Al Qaeda, which are present and are seeking safe havens in ungoverned corners of Syria.” Toppling Assad would also seriously weaken Hezbollah, which is heavily dependent on Syria as well as Iran for its survival.

Another line of argument is that the United States must be intensely involved in Syria because of the danger that its raging civil war will spill over into neighboring countries, thus causing a wider conflict that will threaten American interests in the region. “The longer the war,” the *Wall Street Journal* argues, “the graver the risks to America’s allies.”

Finally, there is the claim that Syria matters greatly because America’s credibility is at stake. Specifically, President Obama said in August 2012 that Syria would be crossing a “red line” if it used chemical weapons against the rebels. The implication was that the United States would respond with military force if that happened.

According to the White House, Assad used chemical weapons on August 21, 2013, and killed 1,429 civilians. This tragic event, so the argument goes, was not only a clear violation of a fundamental norm, but it also put U.S. credibility on the line. This matter is deemed especially important because the fact that Obama did not punish Syria for crossing his red line makes his threat to attack Iran if it moves to acquire nuclear weapons look hollow.

None of these arguments are convincing. There is no question that America’s disastrous war in Iraq strengthened Iran’s position in the Middle East, mainly by bringing a Shia-dominated government to power in Baghdad. But Iran is nowhere close to having the capability to become a hegemon in the Gulf. It does not have formidable conventional forces, and nobody worries much about it conquering any of its neighbors, especially because the United States would intervene to stop it.

Nor is it clear that Tehran is pursuing nuclear weapons. The consensus opinion in the American intelligence community is that it is not. But even if that judgment proves wrong and Iran acquires a nuclear arsenal, it could not use that capability to dominate the Persian Gulf. Nuclear weapons provide states with little offensive capability and thus are ill suited for spreading Iran’s influence in its neighborhood. Furthermore, both Israel and the United States have nuclear weapons and would never tolerate Iran achieving regional hegemony. Nor would
Saudi Arabia or any other Arab state, which means Iran would face a formidable balancing coalition if it tried to rule the Gulf.

Finally, no matter how powerful one thinks Iran is today, losing in Syria is not going to diminish its economic or military power in any meaningful way, although it will curtail its regional influence somewhat. But that outcome has two possible consequences for the United States, neither of which is good. One is that Tehran is likely to go to great lengths to keep Assad in power, complicating Washington’s efforts to depose the Syrian leader. However, if Iran does lose in Syria and thinks it is America’s next target for regime change, its incentive to acquire a nuclear deterrent will increase. Thus, toppling Assad is likely to make Iranian nuclear weapons more, not less, likely.

The claim that the United States should treat Syria as a core strategic interest because it is a hotbed for terrorism also suffers from a number of flaws. For one thing, terrorism is not a serious enough threat to justify intervening in Syria, especially with military force. Moreover, intervening in countries like Syria is precisely what helps trigger the terrorism problem. Remember that the United States faced no terrorism problem from Syria before the Obama administration threw its weight behind the effort to oust Assad from power. Indeed, Syria helped the United States deal with its terrorism problem after September 11. It gave Washington valuable intelligence about Al Qaeda—information that helped stymie attacks on American targets in Bahrain and Canada—and it was deeply involved in the Bush administration’s program of extraordinary rendition. According to the *New Yorker*’s Jane Mayer, it was one of the “most common destinations for rendered suspects.”

By backing the campaign against Assad, the Obama administration has helped turn Syria into a haven for terrorist groups. In fact, groups that loathe the United States dominate the armed opposition to Assad. Moreover, many Western governments now worry because their citizens are flocking to Syria and joining the rebels. The apprehension is that they will become radicalized and return home as full-blown terrorists. Intervening in Syria will just make the terrorism problem there worse, unless, of course, Washington helps Assad defeat the rebels and return to the status quo ante. That is unlikely to happen, however, because Obama is committed to arming the rebels.

But backing the rebels certainly does not solve the terrorism problem, as the most powerful groups are comprised of jihadists who hate America. Furthermore, if the United States gets more deeply involved in the conflict, the actors supporting Assad—Hezbollah, Iran and Russia—are likely to up the ante themselves, increasing the prospect the war will drag on for the
In the foreseeable future. And the longer the civil war lasts, the stronger the jihadists will become within the opposition forces.

If nothing else, one might argue that removing Assad from power would deliver a devastating blow to Hezbollah, which is supported by Syria as well as Iran. The first problem with this claim is that the United States is not a mortal enemy of Hezbollah and not in its crosshairs. Washington should not give it any incentive to target the United States. Furthermore, even if the flow of Iranian and Syrian arms to Hezbollah were cut off, it would remain a powerful force in Lebanon and the broader region, as it has deep roots and enjoys substantial support among important segments of Lebanese society. Moreover, the flow of arms from Iran and Syria to Hezbollah would eventually start up again, because no matter who rules in Damascus, it is in their interest to support Hezbollah. That militant organization directly threatens Israel’s northern border, which provides Syria with the only leverage it has for getting the Golan Heights back from Israel.

What about the claim that the United States should intervene in Syria’s civil war to prevent it from becoming a regional conflict? It’s worth noting that the Obama administration helped precipitate this problem by attempting to remove Assad and failing, which helped exacerbate the ongoing civil war. Furthermore, if America gets more involved in the conflict, Hezbollah, Iran and Russia are likely to increase their support for Assad, which would increase the prospect that the war would spill over into neighboring countries. In other words, further American intervention would probably help spread the fire, not contain it.

In theory, the United States could solve this contagion problem by invading and occupying Syria, much the way it did in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. Thankfully, there is zero chance that will happen. Thus, the best strategy for the Obama administration is to pursue a diplomatic solution.

But even if diplomacy fails and the war spreads beyond Syria’s borders, it would not undermine American security in any meaningful way, as it would not lead to a single country dominating the Gulf and its oil. Besides, every oil-producing country has powerful incentives to sell its oil and generate revenue, whether it is embroiled in a conflict or not.

Lastly, there is the argument that American credibility is on the line in Syria and thus the United States must remain deeply involved in that country’s politics. To be sure, credibility would not even be an issue if President Obama had not foolishly drawn a red line over Syrian use of chemical weapons. One might counter that the president had no choice but to rule the use of chemical weapons out of bounds, because they are especially heinous weapons and there is a powerful norm against using them.

These counterarguments are not compelling. Despite all the hyperbole surrounding chemical weapons, they are not weapons of mass destruction. They are certainly not in the same category as nuclear weapons. Israel, after all, has been willing
to live with Syrian chemical weapons for many years, while it has been adamant that it will not tolerate Iranian or Syrian nuclear weapons.

Also, consider the history of civilian casualties over the course of Syria’s civil war. As noted above, the United States estimates that 1,429 civilians were killed in the August 21 gas attacks, which is a considerably higher number than the estimates of Britain, France and Doctors Without Borders, all of which put the death toll under four hundred. Regardless of the exact number, bombs and bullets killed roughly forty thousand Syrian noncombatants before the recent gassing, yet those many civilian deaths did not prompt the White House to intervene in Syria.

Is the crucial difference that chemical weapons cause a particularly gruesome death when compared to bombs and bullets? This contention dovetails with the White House’s campaign to purvey pictures of Syrians dying or dead from chemical weapons. There is no meaningful difference, however, between killing people with bombs and bullets versus gas.

Regarding the norm against using chemical weapons, it surely is not a powerful one. After all, no country, save for France and the United States, was willing to go to war against Syria this past summer when it used gas against the rebels. And it is hard to argue it is a powerful norm for most Americans, who want no part of a military strike on Syria.

And while Obama may think the norm is formidable, remember that in 1988, when Iran appeared to be on the verge of defeating Iraq in their long and bloody war, the Reagan administration came to the aid of Saddam Hussein and helped his military use chemical weapons—including the lethal nerve agent, sarin—to stymie the Iranians on the battlefield. Washington provided Iraq with information on the location of Iran’s troops, which allowed Iraqi chemical weapons to be effectively dumped on them. And when Saddam gassed Iraqi Kurds at Halabja in March 1988, the U.S. government refrained from blaming him, just as it had throughout the war whenever Iraq used chemical weapons, which it did a number of times.

There is actually a good chance the Obama administration will take the credibility problem off the table with diplomacy. It appears that the Russians and the Americans—working through the UN—may succeed in destroying Syria’s stockpile of chemical weapons. If that happens, Obama should declare victory and then stay out of Syrian politics. But if that effort fails and Assad keeps some chemical weapons, the president will once again be urged to consider using military force against Syria to uphold American credibility. In that event, the United States should not attack Syria; indeed, the smart policy would be for Obama to ignore the fact that he drew a line in the sand and move toward a noninterventionist policy toward Syria. This approach makes sense for a variety of reasons.

First, the credibility problem is greatly overrated. As Daryl G. Press notes in his important book, Calculating Credibility, when a country backs down in a crisis, its credibility in subsequent crises is not reduced. “A country’s credibility, at least during crises,” he writes, “is driven not by its past behavior but rather by power and interests.” Thus, the fact that America suffered a humiliating defeat in the Vietnam War did not lead Moscow to think that the U.S. commitment to defend Western Europe was not credible.

So even if the United States fails to

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enforce the norm against the use of chemical weapons in Syria, there is no good reason to think the leadership in Tehran will conclude Washington is not serious about preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. After all, American policy makers have gone to enormous lengths over the past decade to make clear that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable.

Second, the White House has no viable strategy for removing Assad from power or for eliminating his chemical weapons with force. Actually, it is unclear how committed Obama is to unseating the Syrian leader, given that jihadists dominate the opposition. Moreover, the president is unwilling to punish the Assad regime with sustained and large-scale strikes for fear of getting dragged into the conflict. What this means, in essence, is that even if one believes some damage will be done to America’s credibility by walking away from Syria, it is better to pay that small price rather than engage in fruitless if not dangerous military strikes.

Third, if the United States uses military force against Syria and gets even more deeply enmeshed in that country, it would reduce the likelihood Washington would use force against Iran. It is clear from the recent debate about striking Syria that the American public is tired of war. But if the United States did jump into the fight, even with airpower alone, it would surely make the American people even more reluctant to begin another war against Iran. For all these reasons, American leaders should pay little attention to the so-called credibility problem Obama created when he unwisely drew a red line over Syrian use of chemical weapons.

In sum, no vital American interests are at stake in either Egypt or Syria. Thus, there is no compelling strategic rationale for intervening in their politics. Indeed, it appears that intervention does more harm than good to America’s security interests.

One might concede this point, but argue instead that moral considerations demand deep American involvement in Egypt and Syria—and other countries as well—to eliminate their ruling autocrats. The underlying logic is that these strongmen deny their people basic human rights and are likely to kill innocent civilians. The ultimate goal, unsurprisingly, is to promote democracy in those countries, not only for human-rights reasons, but also because democratic regimes are likely to be friendly to America.

This line of thinking is not convincing; in fact, it is dangerous. The United States should not be the world’s policeman, in part because it should respect the principle of self-determination and allow countries to decide their own political fate. For good
reason, almost every American recoils at the idea of another country interfering in their political life; they should realize other peoples feel the same way about U.S. interference in their domestic affairs. What is sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander.

Furthermore, the United States would be deeply involved in the politics of countries all across the globe if it pursued this ambitious policy. After all, there will never be a shortage of nondemocratic regimes to reform, and sometimes there will be the temptation to use the sword to achieve that end. Moreover, the United States has an abysmal track record when it comes to social engineering of this sort. Remember that the Bush Doctrine, which crashed and burned in Iraq, was supposed to facilitate the spread of democracy across the Middle East. Thus, if Washington pursues a policy of toppling authoritarian regimes and promoting democracy, there will be no end to our crusading but few successes along the way.

Another moral argument says the United States should intervene in the Syrian civil war because it is a humanitarian disaster. Many thousands of civilians have died, and the Assad regime has gone so far as to murder people with poison gas. It is deeply regrettable that civilians are dying in Syria, but intervention still makes little sense. There is no compelling rationale for entering the war and no viable strategy for ending it. If anything, American entry into the conflict is likely to prolong the war and increase the suffering.

Syria is in the midst of a brutal civil war, and such conflicts invariably involve large numbers of civilian casualties. That is especially true in cases like Syria, where there are sharp ethnic and religious differences, and where the fighting often takes place in urban areas, increasing the prospects of collateral damage.

Regardless, what is happening in Syria is not genocide or anything close to the systematic murdering of a particular group. Proponents of intervention are fond of portraying Assad as a modern-day version of Hitler and arguing this is the West’s “Munich moment,” implying he will engage in mass murder if not dealt with immediately. This is hyperbole of the worst kind. Assad is certainly a ruthless dictator, but he has done nothing that would put him in the same class as Hitler, who murdered more than twenty million civilians in the course of a ruthless campaign of territorial expansion, and would have murdered many millions more had he won World War II. As noted, roughly forty thousand civilians have died in the Syrian civil war, and the rebels have killed many of the victims.

Finally, Assad’s use of chemical weapons hardly justifies intervention on moral grounds. Those weapons are responsible for a small percentage of the civilian deaths in Syria. Moreover, the claim that killing people with gas is more gruesome and horrible than killing them with shrapnel is unpersuasive.

Not only is there no moral rationale for intervention, but the United States also has no strategy for ending the war. Even when Obama was threatening to bomb Syria this past summer, he emphasized that the United States, which is the most secure great power in world history, has been safer over the past twenty-five years than at any other time in its history.

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strikes would be limited—“unbelievably small,” according to Secretary of State John Kerry—and not designed either to topple Assad or end the civil war. This restricted-bombing strategy is certainly at odds with the claim that Assad is a contemporary version of Hitler who must be dealt with immediately. Of course, the United States is now involved in negotiations that aim to get rid of Assad’s chemical weapons, but not him. In fact, if they succeed, his prospects for staying in power will increase. More important for the point at hand, those negotiations are not aimed at terminating the conflict.

It is widely believed in the American national-security establishment that Washington has the capacity to fix the problems that plague countries like Egypt and Syria and that the key to success is to turn those countries into democracies.

This is certainly not true in Syria. The United States has no viable strategy for ending the conflict there, much less turning Syria into a democracy. Indeed, it seems clear that the Obama administration made a fundamental mistake when it opted to try to remove Assad. Washington should have stayed out of Syria’s business and let the Syrian people determine their own political fate, whatever the result.

The same logic applies to Egypt, whose politics the Obama administration has been trying to micromanage since protests against then president Hosni Mubarak broke out in January 2011. As the protests gained momentum, the United States stepped in and helped oust him from power. Obama then welcomed Egypt’s move toward democracy and supported its newly elected government, even though the Muslim Brotherhood dominated it.

After a mere one year in office, President Mohamed Morsi, who was a member of the Brotherhood, came under tremendous pressure to resign from the Egyptian military and a large slice of the public. The Obama administration, which was never enthusiastic about a Morsi presidency, stepped into this messy situation and facilitated his overthrow. He was replaced by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, a strongman in the Mubarak tradition.

In taking this step, the United States was helping foster a coup against a democratically elected leader who was not a threat to the United States. The new Egyptian government then turned against the Brotherhood, killing over a thousand people and putting Morsi in jail. The Obama administration lamely tried to prevent this bloody crackdown but failed. Moreover, it has cut only a small portion of the $1.5 billion in aid the United States gives Egypt each year, even though U.S. law mandates that most foreign aid be cut to any country “whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree.”

The end result of meddling in Egypt’s politics over the past three years is that the United States is even more widely despised in that country than it was before (which is saying something). The Brotherhood and its allies loathe America for helping to overthrow Morsi and then standing by while their members were murdered. The military and many civilians dislike the United States for having supported the Brotherhood when it was in power. On top of all that, the Obama administration ended up helping remove one autocrat only to replace him with another, and in the process helped overthrow a legitimately elected leader.

Perhaps Obama mishandled the situation in Egypt and should have employed a different strategy. Yet it is hard to see what Washington could have done differently in Egypt (or Syria) that would have produced a happy ending.
To take this a step further, what happened in those two countries is part of a bigger picture that is filled with failed attempts at social engineering in the Arab and Islamic world. Just look at America’s track record since September 11. The United States has intervened with force and overthrown regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. In each case, American policy makers thought they could help create a stable democracy that would be friendly to the United States. They failed in all three cases. Serious instability is the order of the day in each of those countries, and although the reigning governments in Baghdad, Kabul and Tripoli are not overtly hostile to the United States, they are hardly friendly and cooperative.

So, if you look at America’s performance over the past twelve years in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria, it is batting 0 for 5. Washington seems to have an uncanny ability to take a bad situation and make it worse. This abysmal record is actually not surprising, as doing large-scale social engineering in any society is an enormously complicated and difficult task. And the circumstances the United States faces when it intervenes abroad are especially daunting. After all, it invariably intervenes in countries about which it knows little and where its presence is likely to generate resentment sooner rather than later. Furthermore, those places are usually riven with factions and are either in the midst of conflict or likely to be in turmoil once the government is toppled.

Should the United States just accept this grim reality and do its best to make things work in places like Egypt and Syria? No. These countries are of little strategic importance to the United States, and it matters little who is in charge in Cairo or Damascus. But even if the fate of those countries did have serious consequences for American security—which is true of the major oil-producing states in the Gulf—it still would not matter much who governed them.

The United States has a long history of working with political leaders of all kinds. In fact, it worked closely with two of the greatest mass murderers of modern times: Joseph Stalin during World War II and Mao Zedong during the latter part of the Cold War. Furthermore, Washington does not always get along well with elected leaders, which is why the United States has an extensive record of overthrowing democratic leaders it does not trust: Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran (1953), Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (1954) and Salvador Allende in Chile (1973), just to name a few.

These were all wrongheaded moves, however, because Washington could have worked with those elected leaders, just as it has worked with autocrats of all stripes. There is no doubt leaders sometimes come to power filled with revolutionary zeal and
hostility toward the United States. But that fervor wears off once those leaders confront the realities of exercising power inside and outside of their countries’ borders. Plus, the United States is enormously powerful, and almost always has substantial leverage in its dealings with other countries. Ceteris paribus, it is best for a foreign leader to get along with Uncle Sam; purposely picking a fight rarely makes sense. None of this is to deny that America’s interests sometimes clash with those of other countries. But that does not mean the leadership on either side is responsible for the rivalry in those cases.

In sum, the best approach for the United States is not to intervene in other countries to help influence what kind of political system they have or who governs them. The smart strategy is to let other peoples decide their own political fate, and then use carrots and sticks to foster relations that serve America’s interests.

What makes America’s penchant for intervening in places like Egypt and Syria so disturbing is not just that it makes little strategic sense or that the United States invariably fails to achieve its goals. The costs are also enormous, especially the economic and human costs, as well as the damage it does to the country’s liberal-democratic institutions.

The strategic costs of pursuing global dominance are actually not substantial. As foolish as it is for Washington to intervene in the politics of countries like Egypt and Syria, the mess it makes does not diminish American security in any meaningful way. The United States is a remarkably safe country, which is what allows it to behave foolishly without jeopardizing its security. The “unipolar moment,” coupled with America’s geographical location and nuclear arsenal, creates a permissive environment for irresponsible behavior, which its leaders have been quick to exploit. The one notable strategic cost of these interventionist policies is the terrorism problem. But that threat is not of great significance, which is why the United States is able to pursue the same policies that help cause this problem in the first place.

Unlike the strategic costs, the economic costs of global dominance have been enormous. For starters, the United States has had to maintain a huge and sophisticated military with bases all over the world so that it can intervene anywhere on the planet. Not surprisingly, its defense budget dwarfs that of any other country; in 2012, for example, the United States spent more on defense ($682 billion) than the next ten countries combined ($652 billion). That enormous defense budget accounts for roughly 20 percent of U.S. government spending, which is almost as much as it spends on Social Security and about the same amount it spends on Medicare and Medicaid put together. And then there are the various wars America has fought since 2001, which will probably end up costing a staggering $4–6 trillion.

The enormous amount of money spent on defense since September 11 has contributed significantly to America’s huge national debt, which is now well over $16 trillion. That debt has been a major drag on the American economy and promises
to be so for a long time to come. There are also major opportunity costs associated with all the money spent pursuing global dominance. Some of the hundreds of billions of dollars wasted on preparing for and fighting unnecessary wars could have been spent instead on education, public health and transportation infrastructure, just to name a few areas on the home front where additional resources would have made the United States a more prosperous and livable country.

Then there are the human costs of these imperial policies, and here the main concern is the casualties from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Unlike the economic costs, which affect virtually every American, the human costs are borne by a narrow slice of American society. Because the United States has an all-volunteer force, only about 0.5 percent of the population serves in the military. Contrast that figure with World War II, where more than 12 percent of the population was in uniform. That means the overwhelming majority of Americans who have been eligible to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq have never put on a uniform, much less served in combat.

The fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq has exacted a huge price from the U.S. military—especially the army and the Marines. More than 6,700 soldiers have been killed so far in those two conflicts, and over fifty thousand have been wounded in action, about 22 percent with traumatic brain injuries. Furthermore, as always happens in war, many of the combatants are psychological casualties, as they return home with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression. The Department of Veterans Affairs reported in the fall of 2012 that more than 247,000 veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have been diagnosed with PTSD. Many of those soldiers have served multiple combat tours.

It is hardly surprising that the suicide rate in the U.S. military increased by 80 percent from 2002 to 2009, while the civilian rate increased only 15 percent. And in 2009, veterans of Iraq were twice as likely to be unemployed as the typical American. On top of all that, returning war veterans are roughly four times more likely to face family-related problems like divorce, domestic violence and child abuse than those who stayed out of harm's way. In short, the small segment of U.S. society that has fought in these recent wars has paid a huge price for its service, while the vast majority of Americans have stayed out of uniform and paid no price at all.

Proponents of the Iraq War like to claim that these human costs are deeply regrettable, but that it is a price that the United States had to pay in the wake of September 11. But Iraq was an unnecessary war: Saddam did not have weapons of mass destruction, and even if he did, he could have been contained, just as the United States contained the Soviet Union during the Cold War.3 It was necessary to topple the Taliban in the fall of 2001. But once that goal was achieved—which happened quickly and with few American deaths—the United States should have left Afghanistan and stayed out. Instead, both the Bush and Obama administrations upped the ante in Afghanistan, in what soon became another unnecessary war.

Second, both of these wars are lost causes. The Iraq that the U.S. military left behind after a decade of occupation is teetering on the brink of civil war, and anger at the United States runs deep among its people as well as its leaders. In Afghanistan, a corrupt and incompetent leader has consistently undermined American efforts to pacify and stabilize that country. There is little doubt

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that when U.S. troops finally leave, there will be fighting across Afghanistan and the Taliban will emerge as the most powerful force in the land. The herculean efforts of the American military in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been in vain.

The final reason to think these wars were not worth fighting is that most Americans felt that way. Consider Iraq. According to polling by ABC News and the Washington Post, “By February 2004, just short of a year after it started, 50 percent of Americans said the war was not worth fighting; it reached a majority that June and stayed there, with just three exceptions, in 52 ABC/Post polls across the ensuing nine years.” When the fighting in Iraq was at its worst in April 2007, 66 percent said the war was not worth fighting. Likewise, in December 2009, as Obama ordered his troop surge into Afghanistan, a Pew poll found that only 32 percent of Americans supported this decision. Moreover, only 56 percent of the public thought the initial decision to invade Afghanistan in 2001 had been correct.

Perhaps the greatest cost of a strategy that calls for intervening in countries like Egypt and Syria is the damage it does to the political fabric of American society. In particular, individual rights and the rule of law will not fare well in a country that maintains a large and powerful military and is addicted to fighting wars. It is unsurprising, given the United States has been at war for two out of every three years since the Cold War ended, that a recent Gallup poll found that 71 percent of Americans think the signers of the Declaration of Independence would be disappointed in how the United States has turned out. The number was 42 percent in 2001.

One harmful consequence of America’s interventionist foreign policy is that it creates numerous situations where presidents and their lieutenants have a powerful incentive to lie, or at least distort the truth, when talking to the public. This is due in part to the fact that the United States is an unusually secure country and thus it is difficult to get Americans to support unnecessary wars. This is why the Bush administration had to wage a deception campaign in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War. It also accounts for why U.S. policy makers frequently equate adversaries like Assad and Saddam with Hitler, even though there is no basis for doing so.

Lying is driven in some cases by the government’s need to hide illegal or constitutionally suspect activities from its citizenry. For example, James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, was asked in congressional testimony on March 12, 2013: “Does the NSA collect any type
of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?” He answered, “No.” It quickly became apparent that he was lying, which he admitted when he wrote to Congress several months later: “My response was clearly erroneous—for which I apologize.” Later, he said that he responded to that question in the “least untruthful” manner possible. Although lying to Congress is a felony, Clapper has not been charged and remains in his position today.

One could easily point to other cases where policy makers—including President Obama—have been less than honest with the American people. Pervasive obfuscating and lying, however, inevitably creates a poisonous culture of dishonesty, which can gravely damage any body politic, but especially a democracy. Not only does lying make it difficult for citizens to make informed choices when they vote on candidates and issues, but it also undermines the policy-making process, because government officials cannot trust each other, and that greatly increases the transaction costs of doing business. Furthermore, the rule of law is undermined in a world where distorting the truth is commonplace. There has to be a substantial amount of honesty and trust in public life for any legal system to work effectively. Finally, if lying is pervasive in a democracy, it might alienate the public to the point where it loses faith in democratic government.

Another consequence of America’s policy of global dominance is that the government inevitably violates the individual rights that are at the core of a liberal society and tramples the rule of law as well. The taproot of the problem is that a democracy constantly preparing for and fighting wars, as well as extolling the virtues of using force, will eventually transform itself into a national-security state. Specifically, the executive will become especially powerful at the expense of the legislative and judicial branches of government. Traditional checks and balances will matter little, resulting in an imperial presidency.

An unchecked executive, however, does not simply accumulate great power. It also engages in behavior that involves breaking the law or operating in secrecy, largely to avoid public scrutiny and judicial or congressional review. In this regard, the checks and balances built into the U.S. system encourage executives to act in secret, because that may be the only way to get things done quickly. Leaders do not act this way because they are evil, but because they believe the country’s security demands it. In the tradeoff between security and civil liberties, they almost always come down on the side of security. After all, a country’s highest goal has to be its survival, because if it does not continue it cannot pursue its other goals. Given the exaggerated fear of foreign threats that permeates the American national-security establishment, it is unsurprising that Presidents Bush and Obama have pursued policies that endanger liberal democracy at home.

This tendency toward law breaking and the violation of individual rights explains in part why the executive has a deep affection for secrecy. Both the Bush and Obama administrations engaged in illegal or at least questionable surveillance of American citizens, which they wanted to hide from the public, Congress and the judiciary. This is one reason Obama has seemed so determined to severely punish Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning and Edward Snowden, and more generally why he has gone to war against reporters and whistle-blowers with unprecedented fervor. The president boasts that he leads “the most transparent administration in history.” If true, it is because of the reporters and
whistle-blowers, not Obama, who is deeply committed to government secrecy.

L et us consider in more detail how the national-security state threatens America’s liberal political order. Three stories are in order, the first of which involves the right to privacy as it relates to the Fourth Amendment’s warrant requirements. Generally speaking, the government cannot gather information on American citizens without a warrant or other judicial authorization. Normally, there must be probable cause to think an individual is engaging in illegal activity before obtaining a search warrant. Thus, even in cases where the government thinks someone is dangerous or behaving unlawfully, it typically cannot act without judicial approval.

There is no question the Bush administration was engaged in warrantless surveillance of American citizens from shortly after September 11 until January 2007. But that is not the end of the story. We now know, thanks to Edward Snowden, that the government—mainly the NSA—also searches and stores vast amounts of emails and text-based messages. While limited by law to international communications for foreign intelligence purposes, the NSA nevertheless collected the communications of American citizens that were entirely domestic. The government also regularly collects telephone records of millions of Americans, and keeps track of “telephony metadata” that includes the phone numbers of parties to a call, its duration, location and time. It is hard to disagree with Senator Ron Wyden’s comment that “the government’s authority to collect information on law-abiding American citizens is essentially limitless.”

The government oftentimes gets a warrant from a secret court known as the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, or the FISA court. But there are significant transparency and credibility problems with this process. First, this court is a virtual rubber stamp for the government and its intelligence agencies. Since 1979, the FISA court has received about thirty-four thousand requests to conduct electronic surveillance within the United States. It has denied the government’s request in only eleven of those cases. Second, it is virtually impossible to challenge FISA court rulings, not only because they are secret, but also because there is no party to the proceedings besides the government. Third, as the recent declassification of certain FISA court opinions reveals, the government often pays little heed to the court’s warnings unless forced to do so.

The Obama administration, not surprisingly, initially claimed that the NSA’s spying played a key role in thwarting fifty-four terrorist plots against the United States, implying it violated the Fourth Amendment for good reason. This was a lie, however. General Keith Alexander, the NSA director, eventually admitted to Congress that he could claim only one success, and that involved catching a Somali immigrant and three cohorts living in San Diego who had sent $8,500 to a terrorist group in Somalia.

The second story concerns due process, which lies at the very core of America’s
constitutional protections and is the backbone of what is considered the rule of law. It is no exaggeration to say the traditional notion of due process has become laughable as it applies to so-called enemy combatants in the war on terror. When the United States began sweeping up suspected terrorists in Afghanistan and elsewhere after September 11, the Bush administration created a legal black hole at Guantánamo Bay, and strongly resisted the detainees’ efforts to obtain due process.

Notwithstanding President Obama’s efforts to close Guantánamo, it remains open and continues to be a due-process quagmire. For example, of the 164 individuals still imprisoned at Guantánamo, eighty-four were cleared for release in 2009 but remain imprisoned. There are another forty-six prisoners the government cannot prosecute because of insufficient evidence, but it refuses to release them because they are considered to be security threats to the United States. This arbitrary and unprecedented policy of indefinite detention is a blatant violation of traditional American notions of due process.

Worse yet, the Bush administration devised the infamous policy of extraordinary rendition, where high-value prisoners were sent to countries with terrible human-rights records to be tortured and interrogated. And it appears that the CIA itself tortured prisoners at its so-called black sites in Europe, as well as at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and Abu Ghraib in Iraq. This behavior clearly violates American and international law, which both forbid torture.

This disgraceful situation brings us to the third story. Because it has been impossible for the Obama administration either to prosecute or release the detainees, it appears to have little interest in capturing new prisoners and bringing them to Guantánamo, where they would be subjected to indefinite detention. So instead, Obama apparently decided to assassinate suspected enemy combatants, virtually anywhere they are found. While it may be easier to kill them rather than hold them forever and be criticized for adding to the mess at Guantánamo, the ramifications of this new policy may be even more poisonous.

Drones, of course, play a central role in this assassination strategy. Obama has a kill list known as the “disposition matrix,” and there is a meeting every Tuesday in the White House—it is called “Terror Tuesday”—where the next round of victims is selected. The extent to which the Obama administration has bought into this strategy is reflected in the increased frequency of drone strikes since November 2002, when they first began. Micah Zenko wrote in the Financial Times in May 2013 that
there have been “approximately 425 non-battlefield targeted killings (more than 95 per cent by drones). Roughly 50 took place during Mr. Bush’s tenure, and 375 (and counting) under Mr. Obama’s.”

This assassination strategy leaves hardly any room for due process. Indeed, the CIA is authorized to kill young males who are not known to be terrorists, but are merely exhibiting suspicious behavior, whatever that might be. It is also difficult to identify targets clearly from a platform thousands of feet above the ground. Not surprisingly, there are numerous cases where drones have hit innocent civilians. It is difficult to get firm numbers, but it seems clear that at least 10–15 percent of the victims have been civilians. Finally, Obama has used drones to purposely kill an American citizen in Yemen when there was no evidence he was an imminent threat to the United States. This unprecedented act raises fundamental questions about due process, and shows how dangerous an interventionist foreign policy is for core civil liberties.

A comment by former CIA director Michael Hayden in 2012 captures just how misguided Obama’s assassination strategy is: “Right now, there isn’t a government on the planet that agrees with our legal rationale for these operations, except for Afghanistan and maybe Israel.”

What makes these policies even more alarming is that the national-security elites who execute and support them fervently believe in “American exceptionalism.” They are convinced that the United States is morally superior to every other country on earth. It is, so the story goes, the “light of the world,” a shining city on a hill. Americans stand tall and see further than other peoples, as Madeleine Albright put it. These elites obviously do not look in the mirror. But, if they did, they would understand why people all around the world think hypocrites of the first order run American foreign policy.

The U.S. commitment to global domination since the Cold War ended has had huge costs and brought few benefits. That is especially true in the years since September 11. Nevertheless, there has been remarkably little change in how the foreign-policy establishment thinks about America’s role in the world. From neoconservatives on the right to liberal imperialists on the left, there has been no meaningful diminishment in their commitment to intervening in countries all across the globe.

The American public, however, has become less enthusiastic about acting as the world’s policeman, especially when it means using military force and possibly getting involved in more wars. But this disconnect between the foreign-policy elites and the citizenry had not hindered the pursuit of global domination in any meaningful way until this past summer, when President Obama threatened to bomb Syria. It quickly became apparent that a large majority of Americans were strongly opposed to using military force there. Indeed, the opposition was so apparent that Obama seemed unlikely to get congressional backing for an attack, even though he promised it would be limited and the United States would not be drawn into another war. It was, as columnist Peggy Noonan put it, “a fight between the country and Washington, between the broad American public and Washington’s central governing assumptions.”

In effect, the public is saying it is fed up with America’s interventionist policies and it is time to focus greater attention on fixing problems at home. According to a poll done for the Wall Street Journal and NBC News in September 2013, 74 percent of Americans believe their country is “doing too much in other countries, and it is time...
to do less around the world and focus more on problems here at home.” Hopefully, the backlash over Syria is a harbinger of things to come, and the public will increasingly put limits on the elites’ penchant for pursuing imperial missions.

Another encouraging sign is that there was hardly any enthusiasm in the U.S. military for attacking Syria. Hopefully, the senior leadership and the rank and file finally recognize they have been asked to fight losing wars that matter little for the security of the United States and that most of their fellow citizens consider not worth fighting. There are sound reasons to limit how much criticism military commanders can direct at civilian leaders and their policies. At the present moment, however, the generals should push their outspokenness to the limit.

None of this is to say the United States should become isolationist or ignore its position in the global balance of power. On the contrary, it should make sure it remains the most powerful country on the planet, which means making sure a rising China does not dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere.

It should also use force when core strategic interests are threatened. But Washington should stop intervening in the politics of countries like Egypt and Syria and more generally abandon its interventionist strategy of global domination, which has led to unending trouble. We might then begin to restore the tarnished liberal-democratic principles that once made America truly exceptional and widely admired. 

Two and a half years after it began, the revolution was widely considered a quagmire, even a disaster. Rebels had made disappointingly little headway against the forces of the hated tyrant. The capital and the country’s second major city remained under his control. Foreign powers had provided sympathy, but very little real aid. And despite promising to respect human rights, rebel forces were committing widespread abuses, including murder, torture and destruction of property. In short, the bright hopes of an earlier spring were fading fast.

This may sound like a description of Syria today, but it also describes quite well the situation of another country: the young United States in the winter of 1777–1778. George Washington had taken refuge in the miserable winter encampment of Valley Forge. Philadelphia (then the capital) and New York were both in British hands. France had not yet agreed to help the new republic militarily. And in areas under rebel control, loyalists were being persecuted—far more than most American school textbooks admit.

There is little reason to think that conditions in Syria will turn around the way they did in the United States between 1778 and 1781, when the American revolutionaries managed to eke out a military victory. But the comparison illuminates a different point. Historically, very few revolutions have been quick successes. They have been messy, bloody, long, drawn-out affairs. Victory has very rarely come without numerous setbacks, and, unfortunately, without abuses carried out by all sides. It has generally taken many years, even decades, for the real gains, if any, to become apparent. Yet today, international public opinion and international institutions usually fail to recognize this historical reality. There is an expectation that revolutions, where they occur, must lead within a very short period to the establishment of stable democracy and a full panoply of human rights, or they will be viewed as failures.

Consider, for instance, the disappointments that followed the Arab Spring and the resulting worldwide hand-wringing. Thomas Friedman, that great barometer of elite American conventional wisdom, wrote in May 2011 about the young Arabs who had begun to “rise up peacefully to gain the dignity, justice and self-rule that Bin Laden claimed could be obtained only by murderous violence.” Less than two years later, he was lamenting that “the term ‘Arab Spring’ has to be retired,” and comparing events in the region to the seventeenth century’s massively destructive Thirty Years’ War, in which areas of Central Europe lost up to a third of their populations. Many other commentators throughout the world now

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write off the Arab Spring as a disaster and failure, pure and simple. But arguably, not the least of the problems bedeviling the Arab revolutionaries of the last two and a half years has been the absurdly inflated expectations they have had to live up to. Put simply, they have been asked to achieve the sort of rapid and complete success that hardly any predecessors, including in the West, ever managed. The same has been true of the “color revolutions” of the past decade in the former Soviet Union, which commentators like Melinda Haring and Michael Cecire, in a recent Foreign Policy article, have been quick to label “terribly disappointing.”

But think for a moment about the point that some other major revolutions had reached two years or so after they began. Two years after the first shots of the American Revolution, Washington had not even gotten to Valley Forge, and victory looked very far off indeed. Two years after the beginning of the French Revolution, a huge and dangerous conflict was opening up between the country’s political factions, and that summer King Louis XVI severely exacerbated it by trying to flee France and join an enemy invasion force. Many more years of chaos and bloodshed would follow. Two years after the beginning of the Latin American revolutions against Spain, the First Venezuelan Republic had already collapsed, with Spain reestablishing its authority. In each of these cases, the revolutionaries themselves also failed, often quite spectacularly, to behave in a manner that modern human-rights activists would have condoned. Even the West’s paradigmatic example of a “good revolution,” Britain’s “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, was only “bloodless” and “quick” if one equates Britain with England, and fails to consider the extended series of destructive wars that convulsed Ireland and Scotland for decades thereafter. The historian Steve Pincus has written that “far from being aristocratic, peaceful, and consensual,” the Glorious Revolution was “popular, violent, and extremely divisive.”

Why do most observers today seem so oblivious to the historical record of revolutions? What are the consequences of this obliviousness? And what might it actually take, in the way of concerted international action, to help revolutions like the one in Egypt take place in a way that accords better with observers’ ideal script?

In addressing the first of these questions, one place to start is with a rather odd development: current expectations about revolutions in fact represent something of a return to a very old understanding of such events. Up until the mid-eighteenth century, the word “revolution” meant little more than “political upheaval.” Revolutions were held to be sudden, unpredictable and largely uncontrollable. History books told the story of countries’ violent changes of dynasty almost as if they were a series of earthquakes. Revolutions were things that happened to people, not things that people themselves were seen as capable of consciously directing. A typical usage can be seen in the title of a pamphlet by the seventeenth-century English radical Anthony Ascham: A Discourse: Wherein is Examined, what is Particularly Lawful During the Confusions and Revolutions of Government. Samuel Johnson’s dictionary gave “revolution” as a synonym for “vicissitude.” Tellingly, at the beginning of what we now call “the American Revolution,” very few people actually described what was taking place as a “revolution.” The word does not appear in the Declaration of Independence, or in Thomas Paine’s great 1776 pamphlet Common Sense (except in reference to 1688 in Britain). In 1777, John Adams could write to his son John Quincy about “the late
Historically, very few revolutions have been quick successes. They have been messy, bloody, long, drawn-out affairs.

Revolution in our Government,” implying that the event was already finished and in the past.

These ideas began to change in the late eighteenth century, with significant consequences for the events that would continue to convulse the Atlantic world for half a century. In America, by 1779 it was becoming clear that the political and social transformations set in motion by the War of Independence had yet to run their course. In that year, Richard Henry Lee wrote to Thomas Jefferson about “the progress of our glorious revolution,” and Jefferson himself finally began to use the word in reference to American events. By 1780, John Adams was writing to his wife Abigail about “the whole course of this mighty revolution,” treating it as something still taking place. Yet even then, he did not present it as a process he himself had a hand in directing, but as a great natural upheaval sweeping him along.

It was in France where the most decisive conceptual transformation took place. As the country’s “old regime” began to crumble in 1789, observers immediately started to refer to what was going on as a “revolution” in the traditional fashion. Then, within a matter of months, they began speaking of it less as a sudden and cataclysmic event than as an ongoing process. Soon they went even further, presenting the revolution as something that could be controlled and directed. Stanford’s Keith Baker, who has written luminously on this shift, characterizes it as one from revolution as “fact” to revolution as “act.” Before this moment, the word “revolutionary” did not exist, and would have made little sense to people, referring as it does to people or actions that actively drive revolutions forward. But in September 1790, the radical deputy Bertrand Barère referred to the demolition of the Bastille as “a truly revolutionary act,” and soon his colleague Georges Danton was describing himself as “a steadfast revolutionary.” In 1792, Maximilien Robespierre renamed the executive committee of Paris’s municipal government the “General Revolutionary Council,” making it the first political institution in history to bear such a title.

Baker’s colleague Dan Edelstein has added a further fascinating wrinkle to the story, noting that by 1792–1793, “the revolution” seemed to be taking on a life of its own, becoming, in the eyes of its advocates, a quasi-mythic force and a source of political legitimacy. After armed crowds stormed the royal palace in 1792 and overthrew Louis XVI, there were calls to put the king on trial. The radical Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, however, insisted that the people had already delivered a verdict through their revolutionary action. Any procedure that might exonerate the king therefore amounted to “putting the Revolution itself on trial,” in the words of his patron, Robespierre. A year later, with France at war with much of Europe, Saint-Just made a remarkable speech demanding that the ruling National Convention formally suspend the new constitution it had just approved, and declare the government “revolutionary” until the end of hostilities. He insisted on a full overhaul of the government’s personnel and procedures,
arguing that “the laws are revolutionary; those who execute them are not.” And he added the following, remarkable sentence: “Those who make revolutions, those who wish to do good, must sleep only in the tomb.”

This new understanding of revolutions partly reflected the simple fact that the French Revolution was indeed a very different sort of event from its predecessors. Instead of its principal political changes coming to an end quickly, culminating in a document such as a declaration of independence, a process of explosive radicalism continued to build, leading to the deadly Reign of Terror of 1793–1794. But the new ways of thinking themselves provided a spur to radicalization, by giving

the political actors of the day a way to see “revolutions” as exceptional historical moments in which ordinary practices and principles could be suspended. The leading figure of the Terror, Robespierre, developed an entire political theory on this basis. In a legislative report he wrote in the winter of 1793–1794, he distinguished between ordinary “constitutional” government, whose role was to govern a republic, and “revolutionary” government, whose role was to found the republic. In the latter, he argued, the state needed far greater leeway, both to protect its citizens and to ensure that institutions would be given a durable form. “The Revolution,” he thundered, “is the war of liberty against its enemies.” Several of Robespierre’s allies openly urged him to become a “dictator,” a title still then associated with the ancient Roman military office of the name, and which they viewed favorably. In theory, the dictatorship would end once the republic had been durably founded, and the revolution completed, but given the vastness of the radicals’ ambitions, it was not clear when this goal would be reached. “Revolution” was becoming not just a process, but also a utopian one that might extend into the future, indefinitely.

This new concept of revolution as what G. W. F. Hegel would call a “world-historical” event helped to justify the French revolutionaries’ most outlandish projects. These included a new calendar, which started with the birth of the French Republic; the attempt to replace Christianity either with state-sponsored atheism or Robespierre’s deistic “Cult of the Supreme Being”; plans for universal education and charity; and, dangerously, the transformation of a war against other European powers into a crusade for universal human liberation. Robespierre and his allies went so far as to characterize “revolutions” as millennial projects that could literally change human nature. “The French people seem to be about two thousand years ahead of the rest of the human race,” he mused in the spring of 1794. “One is tempted to regard them as a separate species.”
It is hard to exaggerate the hold that this French model of revolution exerted over imaginations throughout the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In country after country, generations of would-be revolutionaries plotted to take power and instigate upheavals of similar or even greater ambition. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the model was potently combined with socialist visions of history as a story of class struggle, but the idea of revolution itself as an ongoing, consciously directed process remained much the same. In Russia, China, Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, self-proclaimed “revolutionary” regimes took power with goals of nothing less than transforming human beings into something new and better. In Terrorism and Communism, written at the height of the Russian Civil War, Leon Trotsky (a great admirer of the French Revolutionary Terror) expressed sentiments very close to those of Saint-Just and Robespierre:

We were never concerned with . . . prattle about the “sacredness of human life.” We were revolutionaries in opposition, and have remained revolutionaries in power. To make the individual sacred we must destroy the social order which crucifies him. And this problem can only be solved by blood and iron.

Mao Zedong, who repeatedly spoke of revolution as a long and arduous road, called its ultimate goal the changing of society and the establishment of a new sort of human freedom (he also famously remarked that “a revolution is not a dinner party”).

Of course, in country after country these later revolutions produced even greater chaos and bloodshed than in France. In Russia and China and Southeast Asia, the number of victims stretched into the millions. And finally, after the Russian Civil War, Stalin’s terror, the Gulag, the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Cambodian holocaust, the myth of a redemptive, world-transforming revolution lost its allure, as one moment of dreadful disillusionment followed another. By the late twentieth century, when the self-proclaimed revolutionary regimes of the Soviet bloc began to crumble, the dissidents who stepped into the breach generally refused the label of “revolution” altogether. As the Polish Solidarity leader Jacek Kuron informed French readers in a remarkable newspaper column in the summer of 1989—as the Poles were ousting the Communists and the French were marking the bicentennial of 1789—the age of revolution was over, and a good thing too. Germans self-consciously refer to the events of 1989–1990 not as a “revolution,” but as die Wende—“the change.”

In some cases, the exhaustion that has followed upon bloody utopian experiments has itself created the conditions under which moderate democratic regimes could eventually take root. In France, for instance, the events of 1789 marked the start of nearly nine decades of astonishing political turmoil. Monarchies, republics and empires succeeded each other so rapidly that, according to one popular joke, libraries began storing copies of the constitution in the “periodicals” section. But finally, after the fall of Napoleon III during the Franco-Prussian War, and one final outburst of radical utopianism in the doomed Paris Commune of 1871, a relatively stable, moderate republic was established, and it lasted until the Nazi occupation of 1940. François Furet, one of twentieth-century France’s great historians, labeled the entire long period from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth as “the French Revolution.” In his view, it only came safely “into port” with the Third Republic in the 1870s. But it is hard to argue that the turmoil and
bloodshed was necessary to achieve this relatively limited goal. And, of course, in many other countries—Russia and China, most obviously—similarly long periods of revolutionary disruption have so far failed to produce similarly benign outcomes.

This long process of disillusionment helps explain why, today, revolutions are expected to be so quick and neat. If revolutionary movements no longer come bearing utopian hopes of redemption, then there is less need for them to extend indefinitely into the future. And indeed, most of the revolutions that have taken place since 1990, such as the “color revolutions” in the Soviet bloc and the revolutions of the Arab Spring, have aimed at relatively modest goals, in comparison with their French or Russian or Chinese predecessors: representative democracy, stability, the rule of law, human rights.

The great exceptions to this rule, of course, are the Islamists, who hope to impose their vision of godly order on human societies. The Iranian Revolution was in this sense the last of the great line of utopian revolutions that began in the eighteenth century. Francis Fukuyama has been widely mocked for his 1989 National Interest article “The End of History?” and his prediction that free-market democracy would become universal throughout the world. But with the exception of the Islamic world, free-market democracy has indeed overwhelmingly become the preferred political model in most countries. As Fukuyama himself put it: “At the end of history it is not necessary that all societies become successful liberal societies, merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society.” At the heart of these earlier ideological pretensions was the idea that the means to these “higher forms” was a French-style revolution.

Of course, even where free-market democracy has become the preferred model, reality has often failed quite dismally to comply. Back at the time when Fukuyama wrote, nearly all observers woefully underestimated the sheer difficulty of instituting such systems in countries plagued by poverty and ethnic and religious differences, and lacking experience in the rule of law or the toleration of opposition. The goal of a revolution may be entirely clear: for example, to transform your country into something resembling Finland. But how can that goal be reached?

This is a question that continues to bedevil political scientists. But the experience of Europe, first after the end of World War II, and then after the collapse of Communism, suggests at least one absolutely crucial condition: a proper structure of incentives for the population in question. After the defeat of 1945, as recent historical work has stressed, the population of West Germany did not magically lose all attraction to Nazism. But the West Germans knew the victorious Allies would not tolerate any serious attempts to revive Hitler’s regime. And at the same time, they quickly learned that moves toward democracy would reap them substantial rewards in the form of Marshall Plan aid and inclusion in the new Western military alliance. Likewise, after 1989 the people of Poland had relatively
little to draw on in the way of democratic tradition. But they understood that free-market democracy would bring the massive rewards of closer connections to Western Europe—culminating in European Union membership—and the protection of NATO. In both these countries, the incentives to build free-market democracy proved more than sufficient to overcome the natural tendency of factions within a state to grab what they can for themselves, and to do whatever possible to keep their enemies out of power. In each country, it was generally recognized that there was far more to gain from establishing democratic, free-market institutions.

In contrast, the populations of countries with recent revolutions have had far weaker incentives to establish these sorts of institutions. Take Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, homes of the “Rose” and “Tulip” Revolutions of 2003 and 2005. Observers like Haring and Cecire have a simple explanation for why these revolutions “failed” (their blunt verdict): “Quite simply, the rule of law never took root.” In fact, they chide the revolutionaries for making what they call “a key mistake: They took the revolutions themselves as the apogee of democracy rather than focusing on the hard, grinding work of institution-building.”

But what incentive did the populations of Georgia or Kyrgyzstan have to respect the rule of law and democratic governance? What incentive have the competing groups in Egypt had since 2011? Has the United States been offering massive economic aid in return for progress toward free-market democracy? Has the European Union been offering a quick timetable for membership? The “hard, grinding work of institution-building” depends on a large degree of popular cooperation. But most people in these countries have not seen any great benefit to be obtained from such cooperation, while seeing all too clearly the dangers of allowing opponents to seize power, or of not taking advantage of the chance for their faction to enrich itself while it can.

Many different factors help populations to play by the rules, and to resist temptations to crush traditional enemies or to treat the state as little more than an instrument of personal enrichment. Ingrained habits of rigid social discipline, found in such widely different societies as colonial New England and twentieth-century Japan, can serve, given the proper conditions, to dampen forms of behavior that damage democratic cooperation.
spiring, charismatic leaders committed to such cooperation—a Washington or a Mandela—can play a critical part as well. The role of eloquently formulated revolutionary principles in inspiring loyalty to democratic institutions should not be underestimated. But these factors are rarely enough. Incentives matter hugely. Furthermore, providing a clear incentive structure is arguably just about the only possible way to “jump start” democratic revolutions and bring them to a successful, rapid conclusion, especially in countries that have long traditions of division, corruption and intolerance.

In short, it is unreasonable, even rather absurd, to expect revolutions to usher in stable representative democracies that respect human rights virtually overnight. It is condescending and cruel to scold countries for their “failure” to reproduce, within a span of a year or two, what took France, the United States and many other countries decades or even centuries to achieve. We need to recognize that even the establishment of supposedly limited, nonutopian goals may well require a revolutionary process that lasts for many years or decades, and that may involve a good deal of violence, chaos and abuse along the way, including abuse by people we would like to think of as the good guys. In fact, just about the only way to avoid this kind of process (which itself may well eventually fail anyway) is to provide a serious external incentive structure, involving long-term commitments to large-scale aid and protection. Clearly, the West is in no position to start massive new aid programs to democratic revolutionaries across the world. But in that case, we have no cause to tout our own superiority over peoples just starting out on the long and difficult road that took us so very long to travel. Quite the contrary. □
In his book *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger concludes that the United States “faces the challenge of reaching its goals in stages, each of which is an amalgam of American values and geopolitical necessities.” The recent debates about U.S. military options in Libya and Syria reflect the enduring tension between these intertwined, at times competing components of our external relations. No U.S. statesman can ignore this dilemma, and none will find it easy to strike exactly the right balance between the two, especially in times of crisis. All would seek to simultaneously pursue the promotion of the national interest and the protection of human rights. Kissinger, famous for advocating an American foreign policy based on the national interest, has long stressed that values and power are properly understood as mutually supporting. As he argued in a 1973 speech, since “Americans have always held the view that America stood for something above and beyond its material achievements,” a “purely pragmatic policy” would confuse allies and eventually forfeit domestic support. Yet “when policy becomes excessively moralistic it may turn quixotic or dangerous,” giving way to “ineffectual posturing or adventur- istic crusades.” The key to a sustainable foreign policy, in his view, is the avoidance of either extreme: “A country that demands moral perfection of itself as a test of its foreign policy will achieve neither perfection nor security.”

This ever-present fusion of American values and national interests was evident in the spring of 1971, as a crisis erupted in South Asia during Kissinger’s tenure as Richard Nixon’s national-security adviser. When the British Raj ended in 1947, a partition of the subcontinent led to the creation of India and Pakistan as separate, estranged sovereign states. Pakistan, envisioned as a homeland for South Asian Muslims, emerged with an unusual bifurcated structure comprising two noncontiguous majority-Muslim areas: “West Pakistan” and “East Pakistan.” While united by a shared faith, they were divided by language, ethnicity and one thousand miles of Indian territory.

Over the course of a fraught sequence of events from 1970 to 1972, a party advocating East Pakistani autonomy won a national parliamentary majority, and Pakistan’s two wings split. Amid natural disaster (a cyclone of historic proportions struck the East on the eve of the vote, killing up to half a million people and devastating fields and livestock),

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3 *Diplomacy*, 471.
constitutional crisis, a sweeping crackdown by West Pakistani forces attempting to hold the East, mass refugee migrations, guerilla conflict and an Indian-Pakistani war, East Pakistan achieved independence as the new state of Bangladesh. By most estimates, the victims of the Bangladeshi independence struggle, which included communal massacres unleashed during the crackdown, numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

In his new book, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide*, Princeton professor Gary Bass, who has written previous books on humanitarian intervention and war-crimes tribunals, portrays the American president and his national-security adviser as the heartless villains of these events. While Bass makes a cursory acknowledgement of the two men’s geopolitical accomplishments, he derides the thinking that informed their actions as the product of a “familiar Cold War chessboard.” His own implicit framework is a deeply heartfelt and contrary view to Kissinger’s, one that places human-rights concerns at the pinnacle of U.S. foreign policy, at least in this crisis.

But how persuasive is Bass’s history? Instead of producing a definitive account, he offers an ahistorical and tendentious rendition that, more often than not, lacks a broader context. He reduces a complex series of overlapping South Asian upheavals, Cold War alliances and diplomatic initiatives to “a reminder of what the world can easily look like without any concern for the pain of distant strangers.”4 He faults the United States for not taking a firmer, more public stand on Pakistan’s domestic repression while offering only vague assurances that this U.S. pressure would have brought about an actual improvement in conditions. Moreover, he trivializes the possibility that his human rights–dominated policy preferences could have had profoundly damaging strategic consequences for the United States. Ironically, in his previous book *Freedom’s Battle*, Bass sympathizes with precisely the sort of cautionary impulses that animated Kissinger:

> Even if a president or prime minister has credible information about atrocities . . . there must still be a cold realpolitik calculation about the costs of intervening. . . . If a humanitarian intervention would lead to a broader international crisis, or plunge the country—or the world—into a massive war, then most cabinets will decide that it is just not worth it. . . . Believing in human rights does not make one suicidal.

In fact, he goes even further, allowing that the “point of a balance of power”—Kissinger’s principal preoccupation in 1971, as throughout his career as a statesman—“is a profound moral goal: it keeps the peace.”5 But in *The Blood Telegram*, he implies that Nixon and Kissinger should have realized that they could have had it both ways with *no risk*—achieved their strategic breakthrough with China, with all of its attendant geopolitical benefits, and concurrently put human rights in East Pakistan at the top of their policy agenda. If only life were that simple: as Kissinger observes, “The analyst runs no risk. If his conclusions prove wrong, he can write another treatise. The statesman is permitted only one guess; his mistakes are irretrievable.”6

Thus, at a time of acute crisis, Kissinger judged that if Washington had mounted an all-out private and public human-

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6 *Diplomacy*, 27.
rights campaign against then president Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan and the Pakistan government, which was correctly convinced that the future of the state was at stake, such a campaign would not have fundamentally altered Islamabad’s policy toward East Pakistan, and the White House’s China initiative could well have collapsed. However, as will be demonstrated at length later in this essay, that hardly meant that he ignored the plight of the Bengali Hindus. Kissinger, both while in office and in his subsequent writings, rejected the proposition that circumstances inevitably force a crude either/or choice between national interests and democratic values, and during this crisis no other nation except India did as much as the United States to directly address the human-rights tragedy in East Pakistan.

One wishes that the chasm between academic and policy-maker perspectives might have produced a certain modesty in Bass’s treatment of these events. Unfortunately, it doesn’t. Instead The Blood Telegram offers a strident, almost willfully biased attack on the personal motives of policy makers whom Bass condemns—from the comfortable perspective of forty years of hindsight and an American victory in the Cold War—for falling short of bringing about all desirable goals simultaneously. In Bass’s theory, Nixon and Kissinger, motivated by a mixture of “racial animus toward Indians,” indifference to human rights and an obsessive focus on Cold War geopolitics, ignored opportunities to save lives, ensured that “the United States was allied with the killers” and incurred “responsibility for a significant complicity in the slaughter of the Bengalis.”7 To reach his indictment of Nixon and Kissinger, Bass pairs a myopic account of the Nixon-Kissinger opening to China and its long-term objectives with a highly selective rendition of U.S. policy toward the breakup of Pakistan.

It is important to stress what Nixon and Kissinger were trying to accomplish in U.S.-Chinese relations beginning in the fall of 1970: no less than a fundamental restructuring of the global balance of power and world order in America’s favor. By establishing a strategic understanding with Beijing based on China’s genuine worry that the relentless Soviet military buildup in the Far East could presage an attack on China, they hoped to strengthen America’s global position; meet Beijing’s test that “only an America that was strong in Asia could be taken seriously by the Chinese”; incentivize Moscow to adopt more reasonable policies toward the United States, including in Europe and on arms control; bring an honor-

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7 The Blood Telegram, 342, xiii, xvi.
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able end to the Vietnam War (a conflict in which half a million Americans were at war at the time of Nixon’s inauguration, but which public and elite opinion increasingly rejected); and reduce tensions throughout Asia. All these crucial objectives—in which success could fairly count as both a strategic and a moral achievement—required a fundamental reorientation of U.S.-Chinese relations. As Kissinger observes in *White House Years*, “The hostility between China and the Soviet Union served our purposes best if we maintained closer relations with each side than they did with each other. The rest could be left to the dynamic of events.”

Nixon and Kissinger’s decision in October 1970 (before the Pakistani crisis) to reach out to China through the Pakistanis is casually dismissed by Bass as “one of many options” and potentially the worst. He suggests France and, curiously, totalitarian Romania as plausible and more ethical alternatives.10 Yet the United States explored all three, and Beijing unambiguously chose Pakistan. The first explicit indication by China that a personal envoy of Nixon would be welcome in Beijing came in December 1970 by way of the Pakistani channel, with Chinese premier Zhou Enlai stressing, “The United States knows that Pakistan is a great friend of China and therefore we attach importance to the message.”11 On April 27, 1971, after American replies through both Romania and Pakistan, Beijing followed up through Islamabad and invited “direct discussions between high-level responsible persons of the two countries,” suggesting that the proper arrangements could “be made through the good offices of President Yahya Khan.”12

As Kissinger stresses, Zhou did not “want to risk subordinates’ thwarting of our common design by their haggling over ‘modalities.’ By keeping technical arrangements in the Pakistani channel, he ensured discretion, high-level consideration, and expeditious decisions.”13 Bass, ignoring the evident Chinese insistence on Pakistan, attacks the White House’s use of Yahya Khan as an intermediary as evidence of a gratuitous Nixonian affection for military strongmen. In addition to the strong PRC preference for Pakistan and the advantages of geographic proximity, another explanation is also pertinent: it is difficult to imagine how it could have been arranged for Kissinger to visit Beijing secretly from either Paris (a world capital) or Bucharest (a prime target of Soviet penetration); secrecy was an essential requirement since Nixon could risk neither premature U.S. domestic euphoria nor a public failure in Beijing. Nothing regarding this highly sensitive matter leaked from Pakistan, and Yahya Khan discreetly managed the complex

9 Ibid., 712.
10 *The Blood Telegram*, 103. Romania’s human-rights record was arguably worse than Pakistan’s before the East Pakistan crisis.
12 Ibid., 301.
13 *White House Years*, 715.
arrangements to get Kissinger secretly from Islamabad to Beijing, as Zhou had suggested.

The late great Harvard historian Ernest May once observed, “What a historian chooses to leave out or minimize is often as important and telling as what he decides to include.”\textsuperscript{14} One must wonder if Bass discounts the clear Chinese preference for Yahya Khan as the intermediary between Beijing and Washington because acknowledging it would undermine one of his core assertions: that Nixon and Kissinger could have openly condemned or even attempted to unseat the Pakistani president without endangering the opening to China. In his book, Bass never directly confronts a series of major questions: If he knew that the opening to China would have faltered, as Nixon and Kissinger feared, because of U.S. pressure on Yahya over the atrocities in East Pakistan, would he nevertheless have forced a showdown with Pakistan over the plight of Hindu Bengalis? Would he have been content to face an outcome in which the China initiative collapsed even as Pakistan rejected American demands as irrelevant? Would the next step have been sanctions against Pakistan, or perhaps American support for the Bengali insurgency—and what other results would these policies have entailed? Statesmen have to make such choices; professors do not.

To duck these questions, Bass must implicitly posit an alternative rosy scenario in which Nixon and Kissinger are able to establish an equally effective channel to Beijing while bringing about a swift improvement in Pakistan’s domestic conditions. But what would the Chinese reaction have been if the United States had informed an adversary of two decades at an enormously delicate moment that its watershed invitation to improve relations had been misdirected and that the Yahya Khan channel was unacceptable to Washington? What if those within the Chinese government who had wished to sabotage the possibility of an opening to the United States had used this U.S. switch in channels to delay Kissinger’s visit? Who could have known how long Zhou would be in a sufficiently strong bureaucratic position to pursue a breakthrough with Washington? (In fact, just two years later, he was “struggled against” by ultraleftists and purged.) Who could have been sure that Mao Zedong, always mercurial and then in exceedingly poor health, would not reverse course and seek to solve his Soviet problem through rapprochement with Moscow? And what conclusions might Beijing have drawn regarding American credibility if Nixon and Kissinger, as Bass advises, had dramatically changed course and abandoned a longtime ally during the defining crisis of its independent existence?

As Nixon and Kissinger had warned, the crisis in East Pakistan produced escalating Indian-Pakistani tensions, which culminated in war in December 1971. India, backed by a freshly signed Indo-Soviet friendship treaty with military clauses and an active Soviet supply line, crushed Pakistani forces in East Pakistan and recognized Bangladesh as an independent state. Pressing their advantage, top Indian officials considered objectives in West Pakistan including a total destruction of Pakistani military power and (as Bass himself notes) “other ways to crack up West Pakistan itself.”\textsuperscript{15} This outcome could have inaugurated an ominous precedent in international order—the destruction of a sovereign state by foreign military action—with consequences that would reverberate far beyond the immediate humanitarian crisis. If India

\textsuperscript{14} Conversation with the author.

\textsuperscript{15} The Blood Telegram, 328.
succeeded, Kissinger warned during the crisis:

The result would be a nation of 100 million people dismembered, their political structure changed by military attack, despite a treaty of alliance with and private assurances by the United States. And all the other countries, on whom we have considered we could rely . . . would know that this has been done by the weight of Soviet arms and with Soviet diplomatic support. What will be the effect in the Middle East, for example—could we tell Israel that she should give up something along a line from A to B, in return for something else, with any plausibility?16

And how would China have reacted if Washington had stood by passively and watched Beijing’s chosen channel to the United States and longtime friend crushed by a combination of Indian military action and Soviet weapons? What then for Mao’s willingness to pursue the opening of U.S.-Chinese relations?

Seeking to deter such a destructive outcome, the United States deployed an aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal (where it was joined by a Soviet naval task force deployed from Vladivostok) and pushed for an immediate UN-backed cease-fire. With military aid to Pakistan frozen, the White House encouraged allies to make shows of force, including a back-channel proposal in which Iran and Jordan would transfer some of their own American-made fighter jets to the West Pakistan front. Bass expresses indignation at this proposal, suggesting that it was undertaken to assist in the repression of civilians in East Pakistan. He fails to explain that the discussion involved transferring jets to West Pakistan during a war in which India was considering a drive for total victory and an all-out destruction of the Pakistani armed forces. In any case, it is not apparent what military role, if any, the planes played in the conflict.17 In Bass’s view, these actions constituted a perverse betrayal of democratic principles by Nixon and Kissinger—American participation in “Kissinger’s secret onslaught” and an “arsenal against democracy” that drove India into the arms of the Soviet Union and “enduringly alienat[ed] not just Indira Gandhi . . . but a whole democratic society.”18 But this insults the sophistication and agency of the main Indian players, in addition to misrepresenting the actual sequence of events.

Scholars will long marvel at how the world’s two largest democracies ended up on opposite sides of the Cold War. Yet their rift was growing well before the 1971 Pakistan crisis, and it transcended Richard Nixon and Indira Gandhi’s mutual personal dislike. Negotiations over the Indo-Soviet friendship treaty had begun by March 1969, when the Soviet defense minister brought a draft treaty text to New Delhi. A draft text was ready by mid-1970, though by some Indian accounts its signing was postponed pending the Indian election. According to one Indian participant in the negotiations, all that remained to be negotiated at this point was the final wording of the decisive military clause.19

17 The record suggests that, after days of interagency and international deliberations, Jordan sent word on December 10 that it would “send four aircraft.” On the morning of December 16, Kissinger reported to Nixon that Jordan had sent “17” planes; India declared a unilateral cease-fire one hour later. See: Ibid., 750, 839.
18 The Blood Telegram, 291, 107, 218.
The 1971 crisis did strain U.S.-Indian relations—yet this was largely because Washington and New Delhi had incompatible strategic aspirations. Washington increasingly accepted that East Pakistan would become autonomous or independent, but opposed an outcome in which this was achieved through a regional war or with Soviet arms. India, pursuing a sophisticated blend of humanitarian impulses and Machiavellian calculation, opted almost immediately for a military solution. As Bass himself notes, “On March 2, over three weeks before Yahya launched his slaughter, [Indira] Gandhi ordered her best and brightest . . . to evaluate ‘giving help to Bangla Desh’ and the possibility of recognizing ‘an independent Bangla Desh.’” Bengali partisans, she assessed, would need aircraft for “quick movement inside India around the borders of Bangla Desh” and “arms and ammunition (including L[ight] M[achine] G[un], M[edium] M[achine] G[un]s, and Mortars”—in other words, Indian military support for a cross-border separatist insurgency. At the beginning of April 1971, Indira Gandhi reportedly told her cabinet that “we don’t mind a war” and ordered the Indian army to prepare for an invasion of East Pakistan. According to one high-ranking Indian officer quoted by Bass, she ordered them to “move in” immediately. When the army balked at invading a flood plain on the eve of a monsoon, a compromise solution was reached: Indian conventional forces would prepare to enter East Pakistan around “the fifteenth of November,” and in the meantime India would provide Bengali separatists with “material assistance” and “training in guerilla tactics, to prepare for a long struggle.” Bengali guerilla units—organized, trained and armed by India—operated from border sanctuaries throughout the summer and fall, backed up by occasional Indian firepower and at least one cross-border Indian raid.

The United States—including Kissinger, in his trip to New Delhi in July 1971, and Nixon, during his November summit with Indira Gandhi—pressed India to refrain from provocations on the border and argued that war would be best avoided if all parties committed to a peaceful political track. India, convinced that it had both a moral obligation and a historic strategic opportunity to act, denied its covert assistance to the Bengali insurgency and insisted that the problem was Pakistan’s to solve. Indira Gandhi refused American requests to send U.S. or UN observers to help administer refugee aid (in retrospect, most likely because two ambitious Indian programs were proceeding simultaneously

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21 Ibid., 93–95.
22 *War and Secession*, 181–85, 187.
among the refugee population—one humanitarian and the other covert).

Each democracy could claim to have achieved a significant portion of its goals. While welcoming and feeding millions of refugees, India succeeded in splitting East and West Pakistan by force and emerging as the midwife of an independent Bangladesh. The United States, after attempting to head off a war through both humanitarian measures and diplomacy, successfully deterred a major Indian campaign against West Pakistan while preserving its course of rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union.

Coinciding with these events was a violent internal crisis in Pakistan. On March 25, 1971, after the collapse of compromise talks between East and West Pakistani politicians, Pakistani forces began Operation Searchlight, a systematic plan to eliminate all resistance in East Pakistan through an overwhelming application of force. This occurred just as Nixon and Kissinger were awaiting a definitive reply from China to messages sent that winter through Pakistan and Romania concerning a prospective high-level bilateral meeting in Beijing (a reply that arrived in April through the Pakistani channel).

In Bass’s account, an obsessive and unwarranted desire to preserve Pakistan as a conduit for the unfolding U.S.-Chinese rapprochement translated into “a green light for [Yahya Khan’s] killing campaign.”23 In this version of events, the opening to China was done at the cost of American complicity in genocide, as “the Bengalis became collateral damage for realigning the global balance of power.”24

This incendiary accusation confuses both the order of events and the ability of governments to bring about rapid changes in other states’ internal practices.

To blame the White House for failing to secure a peaceful outcome to the winter 1971 East-West Pakistan political impasse, as Bass does—much less to equate this failure with complicity in genocide—sets the bar illogically high. The results of the 1970 election raised fundamental questions about Pakistan’s viability as a unified state. The military—already amply armed and equipped by China, France, the Soviet Union and the United States under Nixon’s predecessors—unsurprisingly declared its refusal to abide an East-West split. Would preemptively “threatening to cut off aid” have moderated the generals in charge of managing the transition to democracy, or reinforced a sense of siege?25

Bass never seriously considers whether, given Pakistan’s existing geographic, ethnic and political divisions, the United States could have prevented its two wings’ slide toward violent dissolution.26 In their widely respected study War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh—based on interviews with Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi participants in these events—scholars Richard Sisson and Leo Rose assessed that the American capacity to shape events within Pakistan at this time was, in fact, limited:

The question remains whether Yahya would have responded to a strong public condemnation of the crackdown by moderating his repressive policy in East Pakistan. The general consensus, even among the critics in the government, was probably not. Projected U.S. military and economic aid to Pakistan in 1971

23 The Blood Telegram, 56.
24 Ibid., xv.
25 Ibid., 113.
26 Bass lauds “Pakistan’s grand experiment in democracy” (27) but discounts that the elections, intended to pave the way for civilian rule, produced a genuinely fraught result.
was not of a magnitude to provide Washington with much leverage to pressure the leadership in Rawalpindi to change policies in East Pakistan to avoid the loss of aid. . . . By 1971 Washington lacked much clout in Rawalpindi, particularly on issues that, in West Pakistani eyes, struck at the very basis of their national existence.27

On the particular issue of American arms transfers to Pakistan, the total U.S. cutoff of the long-term weapons pipeline (which in any case was exceedingly modest) predictably had no appreciable effect on the ethnic-cleansing actions of the Pakistani army in East Pakistan. As we have seen recently with respect to Egypt, such U.S. punishing actions have a poor record of actually influencing foreign governments that believe that they are fighting for the fundamental future of their countries.

Even so, Bass has scoured the record for coarse quotations to back his biased and incendiary charges, sidestepping (and seeming purposefully to avoid) ample evidence that Nixon and Kissinger pursued a far more balanced and constructive course—one in which the United States emerged as the leading donor and organizer of East Pakistan’s cyclone relief; provided hundreds of thousands of tons of grain and extensive emergency supplies and financial assistance to prevent a famine in East Pakistan and among refugees in India; attempted through diplomacy and pressure to avert an Indian-Pakistani conflict; and then, when war broke out, pressed for an early UN-sponsored cease-fire to prevent the fighting from encompassing West Pakistan. All this was achieved while carrying out a historic opening to China and ultimately promoting détente with the Soviet Union, which backed India during the conflict. It takes an obsessively strained reading to find in this record, as Bass does, “one of the worst moments of moral blindness in U.S. foreign policy.”28

Much of the force of Bass’s narrative derives from vivid, often-inflammatory quotations from the Nixon tapes, and there is no shortage of those. No crass Nixon statement or sarcastic aside seems to have gone unquoted. Yet presidential vulgarity was hardly a Nixon innovation. Dwight Eisenhower swore like the trooper he was. At a 1953 summit with Winston Churchill, Eisenhower dismissed Churchill’s advice to engage the post-Stalin Soviet leadership, stating (as Churchill’s private secretary recorded) that “Russia was a woman of the streets and whether her dress was new, or just the old one patched, it was certainly the same whore underneath. America intended to drive her off her present ‘beat’ into the back streets.”29 Lyndon Johnson once pressed a point with the Greek ambassador as follows: “F*** your Parliament and your Constitution, America is an elephant, Cyprus is a flea. Greece is a flea.”30 In short,

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27 War and Secession, 260.
28 The Blood Telegram, xiii–xiv.
Bass appears to be curiously offended that conversations in the Oval Office are often not the stuff of a church social.

Furthermore, Bass’s treatment of some sources suggests that he has privileged outrage over accuracy. For example, he recounts a July 30, 1971, Senior Review Group meeting convened to discuss American policy in South Asia as follows:

In a Situation Room meeting, Kissinger defended the president’s man. “We’re not out of gas with Yahya,” he said. “Yahya will be reasonable.” He preferred to be gentle with Yahya, not hectoring or squeezing him. When a State Department official suggested getting the army out of running East Pakistan, Kissinger stood up for Pakistan’s sovereignty: “Why is it our business to tell the Pakistanis how to run their government?”

Heartless realpolitik? Not quite. No reader of Bass’s account would guess that Kissinger was actually discussing how to resolve a refugee crisis and deliver emergency American food aid to the Bengali population. Responding to the argument that a push for political reconciliation should precede further humanitarian assistance, Kissinger argued that the threat of a famine was too urgent: “We’re not out of gas with Yahya. I think he will do a lot of things that are reasonable if we concentrate on the refugee problem. One thing he will not do is talk to the Awami League, at least not as an institution. He might talk to some League leaders as individuals.” The immediate focus, Kissinger insisted, should be on providing food aid:

On famine relief, we must get a program started under any and all circumstances. If famine develops, it will generate another major outflow of refugees. This is one thing we can do something about. I think we can get considerable Pakistani cooperation on this. . . . But the famine will start in October. Under the best possible scenario, political accommodation will have barely begun in October.

As for a colleague’s argument that the United States should “take [the Pakistani army] out of the civil administration” because a civilian presence would encourage refugees to return, Kissinger asked: “We can appropriately ask them for humanitarian behavior, but can we tell them how to run things?” The United States, he argued, was better off dealing with an existing government and insisting that it accept American food relief and logistical guidance:

If we are faced with a huge famine and a huge new refugee outflow in October and we’re still debating political accommodation, we’ll have a heluva lot to answer for. We need an emergency relief plan and we need to tell Yahya that this is what has to be done to get the supplies delivered. Yahya will be reasonable.

None of this discussion emerges in the Bass account, which splices out-of-context quotations to recast a discussion of emergency humanitarian assistance into a scene of careless indifference to suffering. Similar misrepresentations recur throughout the book. Bass also glosses over the action points decided upon in the meeting, which included agreement to prepare “a comprehensive relief program for East Pakistan, including what has already been moved and where the bottlenecks are” as well as “a telegram, to be approved by the President, outlining an ap-

33 Ibid., 295.
34 Ibid., 294.
35 Ibid., 296.
proach to Yahya telling him what needs to be done on refugees, food relief, etc.36

Even as delicate diplomacy unfolded, Nixon and Kissinger made repeated appeals to the Pakistani military to moderate its domestic practices and seek political compromise. In May 1971, Nixon wrote to Yahya Khan pressing him to keep the peace with India and honor his pledges of a transition to civilian governance. Nixon warned that this was both a humanitarian matter and a strategic imperative:

I have also noted with satisfaction your public declaration of amnesty for the refugees and commitment to transfer power to elected representatives. I am confident that you will turn these statements into reality. I feel sure you will agree with me that the first essential step is to bring an end to the civil strife and restore peaceful conditions in East Pakistan. . . . It is absolutely vital for the maintenance of peace in the Subcontinent to restore conditions in East Pakistan conducive to the return of refugees from Indian territory as quickly as possible.37

The same week, the American ambassador, Joseph Farland (a political appointee who was personally close to Nixon), met with Yahya Khan in Karachi and told him that “the first necessity was to stop the shooting and to start the rebuilding.”38 Citing reports from Dacca of atrocities and attacks on East Pakistan’s Hindu minority, Farland warned that “without the creation of normal conditions in the East, a renewed sense of physical security among the Hindu community, and a patent movement with substance behind it toward a peaceful political accommodation . . . the refugee problem will continue.” A continuation of the present course would produce an “escalation of Indo-Pak tensions” and increasing anti-Pakistani sentiment in the United States. Farland concluded his conversation by urging Khan to state publicly his commitment “to effect political reconciliation.”39

Two weeks later Farland met again with Yahya Khan and reiterated these points in sharper terms. As he cabled back to Washington:

I went on to note that the flow of refugees continued and that this flow is symptomatic of the serious situation in East Pakistan. I pointed out that the Embassy continued to receive reports of Hindu villages being attacked by the army, that fear is pervasive, and that until this situation changes the refugees will continue to cross over into India. And I reiterated the U[united] S[tates] G[overnment]’s concern that at some point the Hindu exodus, if not checked, could lead to a military clash with India.

Farland admonished Khan that “a heavy responsibility still rests on Pakistan”: “One could hardly expect the flow to cease until the level of military activity by the army is reduced and repressive measures against the local population, especially the Hindus, was ended.”40

These warnings continued even during Kissinger’s landmark secret trip to Beijing in July 1971. In Rawalpindi, on the eve of his unannounced departure for a country where no American diplomat had been for two decades, Kissinger admonished Pakistan’s foreign secretary that “7 million refugees are an intolerable burden. They overload an already overburdened Indian economy, particularly in eastern India. The Indians see enormous danger of communal riots.” Unless Pakistan could chart a path back to “normal administration” and a

36 Ibid., 292.
37 Ibid., 162–63.
38 Ibid., 133.
39 Ibid., 137–38.
40 Ibid., 169.
peaceful return of refugees, the likely result would be a “military confrontation” which “the Indians feel they would win.”41 Warning that a failure to improve domestic conditions would result in a catastrophic defeat by a historic adversary hardly counts as soft-pedaling the issue.

This issue of private U.S. admonitions versus public condemnations of other governments is, of course, familiar. Similar questions have loomed over America’s recent attempts to moderate political upheavals in friendly countries such as Bahrain and Egypt (both with American-trained and -supplied armed forces responding, at times brutally, to what they regarded as existential internal crises). But these are policy dilemmas, not crimes. Under Bass’s definition of “complicity” with atrocities, few practitioners of American foreign policy would escape unindicted.

The fact that the partition of Pakistan in 1971 involved such catastrophic loss of human life must count among the second half of the twentieth century’s greatest tragedies. But Bass’s policy prescriptions seem likely to have brought about the worst possible outcomes—a delay, if not a rupture, in the U.S. opening to China; no easing of the tragic plight of the Hindu Bengalis; and potentially even the complete disintegration of the Pakistani state itself, sending arms, trained fighters and another round of refugees into already-unstable South Asia and setting a dangerous precedent for other regional conflicts. Fortunately, none of this happened.

In White House Years, Kissinger observes, “The character of leaders is tested by their willingness to persevere in the face of uncertainty and to build for a future they can neither demonstrate nor fully discern.”42 Nixon and Kissinger surely met that test during the South Asia crisis of 1971. Their geopolitical approach, which Bass derides, produced an extraordinarily productive Nixon visit to China in February 1972 and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, which serves as the basic framework for the two countries’ relations to this day; a broad, bipartisan U.S. policy approach to China that has lasted for more than forty years and has promoted peace and stability throughout Asia; major U.S.-Chinese intelligence cooperation against the USSR; and a May 1972 Nixon-Brezhnev summit in Moscow that saw the signing of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and the U.S.-Soviet incidents-at-sea agreement, all hallmarks of a détente that reduced the risk of superpower confrontation even while creating conditions that helped undermine the Soviet Union’s moral and geopolitical claims and bring about its destruction.

Bass would have readers believe that all these historic U.S. foreign-policy accomplishments were written in the stars, irrespective of U.S. policy toward Pakistan in 1971—and that only grotesque callousness prevented Nixon and Kissinger from adding an abject capitulation by the Pakistani government and a consequent radical transformation of Islamabad’s human-rights record to their tally of achievements. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that “man’s most enduring stupidity is forgetting what he is trying to do.” We should be grateful that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did not forget what they were trying to do during this crisis regarding China, the Soviet Union, South Asia and the global balance of power. □

41 Ibid., 238, 241.
42 White House Years, 716.
Between the trial of Chelsea (formerly known as Bradley) Manning and the revelations of Edward Snowden, the debate regarding the leakers and their information has focused primarily on the balance between liberty and security, or between government transparency and secrecy. This is a necessary, even overdue, discussion. But it is also important to reflect upon the lasting damage these unauthorized disclosures will have on future U.S. intelligence collection.

Both Manning and Snowden betrayed the public trust and disclosed national-security information that they had sworn to protect. Both seriously impeded America’s future ability to recruit foreign sources that provide human intelligence (HUMINT). And both harmed America’s ability to enter into cooperative relationships regarding signals intelligence (SIGINT) with foreign partner intelligence agencies—termed “liaison services” in the business.

The degree of access with which Manning was entrusted—hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables, in addition to the so-called war logs of Afghanistan and Iraq—can be traced to the U.S. intelligence-community reforms suggested by the 9/11 Commission after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The 9/11 Commission criticized the U.S. intelligence and law-enforcement communities for not connecting the dots and for hoarding information, thus leaving America vulnerable on 9/11. In the reckoning during the post-9/11 intelligence reforms, the enduring counterintelligence principle of “need to know” was transformed into “need to share,” a new paradigm that mandated that intelligence agencies share information broadly across bureaucratic lines and prepare analysis for the widest possible dissemination in order to prevent intelligence stovepiping.

This expansive conception of information sharing enabled a young army intelligence analyst to access diplomatic cables from around the world that had nothing to do with her core duties as a military-intelligence analyst serving in the Middle East. This access illustrates the distance that the intelligence-community pendulum has swung in the direction of almost-blind information sharing. If an event of the magnitude of 9/11 forced the pendulum in the direction of increased sharing, more recent events such as the Manning and Snowden leaks could reverse the trend back toward greater compartmentalization, especially involving more stringent information-technology protection.

To calculate or quantify the amount of damage that a document might cause if improperly disclosed, the U.S. government looks to the sliding scale of its classification system; logically, the more sensitive
a document, the higher the classification. According to Executive Order 12356, revelation of a “Confidential” document causes “damage” to U.S. national security, exposure of a “Secret” document causes “serious damage” and a “Top Secret” document’s contents would cause “exceptionally grave damage” if improperly disclosed. This system makes sense for characterizing damage to U.S. national security at a fixed point in time, but it is woefully inadequate to assess the future impact of such disclosures. It may not be possible to charge a leaker under the law on the basis of what might have been obtained had it not been for their negligent public disclosures, but despite the lack of legal recourse, it is worth at least discussing the intelligence ramifications past the time and date stamp on the document itself. It is true that time horizons factor into damage assessments because many classified documents contain automatic declassification dates that usually range from ten to thirty years in the future. However, most documents dealing with humint sources and sigint methods usually fall under several exemption codes and are not automatically declassified at any point in time.

It remains hotly debated whether Manning’s revelations actually led to the deaths of either U.S. soldiers or foreign sources. For instance, in 2010 Admiral Mike Mullen, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested that “the blood of some young soldier or that of an Afghan family” might be on Manning’s hands. Indeed, it is easy to see why this could be the case judging by the sheer volume, and the classification levels, of material that was released. Others have disputed this claim based on the recent courtroom testimony by the Pentagon’s damage-assessment team in the Manning trial. Mullen may not have been referring exclusively to American military deaths that may have been caused because the locations, timing or movements of soldiers were divulged, but rather in terms of revenge attacks whose seeds may have germinated in the outrage over American military mistakes caught on film, such as the widely known case of the helicopter pilot accidentally engaging a media crew or other tragic incidents involving civilians (described by the misnomer “collateral damage”).

Nevertheless, the scope of this debate so far has been about water under the bridge. It would be appropriate to consider the water that will now not pass under said bridge to fill American intelligence aquifers. Thus far the debate about the damage wrought by Manning and Snowden has only dealt with what has been revealed about U.S. intelligence and diplomacy; surprisingly, there has been little public discourse regarding the future implications for U.S. intelligence of their wanton actions. Perhaps the popular choice of terms is to blame
for this narrow discourse. The term “leak” suggests a drip that, over time, might result in a problem but in the short term is more of a nuisance than an emergency. The opposite of a deluge, of course, is a drought. If intelligence agencies must perform all-source analysis in order to connect the proverbial dots, what happens if a single important dot never materializes?

Of course, a hypothetical argument is difficult to prove and might not be considered as evidence in a court of law, but the prosecution team in the Manning case did not even attempt to make the argument about future intelligence losses and collection efforts that will be stillborn because of the leaks. During the sentencing phase the prosecution did solicit testimony about the leaks’ impact on American diplomacy, but consideration of future effects stopped there. This is surprising because future loss of earnings (if intelligence gained is the profit derived from the investment of national-security resources) is often considered in legal cases. Granted, the Manning trial is a criminal case under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, not a civil suit, but there is a logical parallel between what income is to an injured person and what intelligence is to a nation: the latter both require the former to thrive.

What would future losses to American intelligence actually look like? Recruiting human-intelligence sources is already a difficult task, made harder by Manning’s treachery in particular. A representative of a hostile government or a member of a terrorist network may wish to cooperate with American intelligence for any number of reasons, provided his safety can be reasonably assured. If he is considering cooperation, he will look for an American official who is a discreet professional to provide his information. He may study the Americans for a long time in order to make up his mind about such a potentially life-changing decision. Indeed, any slipup on the part of the recruiting officer, such as indiscretion or sloppy agent tradecraft, could very well cost the foreign agent his life and potentially even jeopardize the well-being of his family in his home country. This is serious business, and a potential foreign agent will weigh carefully the risks and benefits of a clandestine relationship with the U.S. government. The potential agent must be satisfied that the Americans can assure his safety, and, of course, these assurances must be credible.

Recruitment of a foreign source may take many forms. For instance, a potential source may be sought out due to his placement and access, approached by a CIA case officer or FBI special agent. He might walk into a U.S. embassy or consulate abroad and volunteer his services. Or he may seek out an American representative at a diplomatic function, although it will not be obvious for him to know who is an intelligence officer. Perhaps he will need some convincing that the risk is worth the reward and, in any case, the risks will be minimized by clandestine interactions with well-trained professionals.

But how can the U.S. government continue to attract these sorts of people whose information our policy makers and defense planners urgently need? Human-intelligence sources have a nuanced risk calculus and are motivated to provide secrets for a range of reasons, including money, ideology, ego, revenge or some combination of these. But in all cases potential sources must be reassured that hushed words stated in confidence won’t endanger them in the next tranche of leaked information. The consequences for diplomats, military officers or security personnel of hostile regimes or terrorist networks would be swift and severe. Given this guaranteed punishment, it is wholly understandable that a potential
foreign agent may decide against walking into a U.S. embassy, seeking out a U.S. representative or accepting a follow-up meeting with an American. In fact, those who would face the harshest retribution if exposed have the information most desired by U.S. policy makers.

American diplomats might also have additional trouble in the future engaging foreign interlocutors, and one can envision why. Diplomats may meet privately with each other and may say some typically undiplomatic things in order to get past public posturing and move an issue forward. The American diplomat will honestly relate the information provided by his interlocutor to Washington and will naturally include the name and position of his interlocutor along with his interlocutor’s unvarnished remarks. In the era of Manning, foreign government officials will think twice about sharing frank thoughts with their U.S. counterparts if they think what they say will be online tomorrow. For instance, German Free Democratic Party (FDP) member Helmut Metzner was identified in a WikiLeaks cable as providing candid information to the U.S. embassy in Berlin about German government coalition negotiations in 2009. Metzner was fired from his position as chief of staff to the FDP chairman in light of his forward-leaning approach to keeping U.S. officials apprised of German political developments. Perhaps with the Metzner case in mind, Patrick Kennedy, the under secretary of state for management, characterized Manning’s disclosures as having a “chilling effect” on foreign officials. If the practice of diplomacy requires trust and discretion, how much more difficult is the task for intelligence officers?

The real question of the Manning case, beyond the damage of what information he has revealed, is the potential value to American policy makers of the intelligence that won’t be collected. It is the discreet conversation with a potential cooperative source that will not happen that is the intelligence price to be paid. To be sure, Manning did not have access to CIA operational cable traffic (the internal communications of the National Clandestine Service), but we can be reasonably confident that if he had it, he would have provided it to WikiLeaks, and the cost in human lives would have been dramatically higher.

The CIA takes the protection of source identities extremely seriously, and even in a “need to share” culture, Manning did not have access to this sort of information. But does a potential future human-intelligence source know exactly the types of cable traffic to which a low-level army analyst may or may not have access? Or, rather, might he assess that people like Manning could know his identity? What might he calculate the chances to be that his name could be buried somewhere within hundreds of thousands of U.S. government cables? A dedicated counterintelligence service would surely invest the time and energy to comb through tens of thousands of cables to find—and connect—dots that would lead to the exposure of sources, as was vividly illustrated by the Iranian revolutionary students who painstakingly reconstructed shredded cables.

Mass disclosure of classified information was never part of the risk calculus of a potential human-intelligence source. Surely, it is now.

Former defense secretary Robert Gates concluded:

I spent most of my life in the intelligence business, where the sacrosanct principle is protecting your sources. It seems to me that, as a result of this massive breach of security, we have considerable repair work to do in terms of reassuring people and rebuilding trust, because they clearly—people are going to feel at risk.

It would be wrong to conclude that massive leaks might only affect strategic-level HUMINT. Operational- and even tactical-level HUMINT are also potentially compromised. For instance, the Taliban claimed to have reviewed the WikiLeaks war logs looking for names of people who had cooperated with the Americans in Afghanistan. The Taliban, thanking WikiLeaks for revealing “spies,” further claimed to have executed tribal elder Khalifa Abdullah of Kandahar, who was unmasked by the documents. Others have argued that Abdullah was not actually named in any leaked document. However, belatedly scouring WikiLeaks for Abdullah’s name misses the point: regardless of whether the Taliban positively identified Abdullah in a cable and then targeted him for execution, perception is the reality that matters in the world of intelligence. An Afghan who heard the Taliban’s lethal claim, true or false, may decide to believe retired general Robert Carr, chief of the Manning “Information Review Task Force,” when he testified that the Taliban’s threat seriously and steering clear of Americans. Carr is probably correct given his former position, but the Taliban’s credible threat is also worth considering, especially if more massive disclosures come in the near term.

Under cross-examination by Manning’s defense team, Carr acknowledged that Arabic (and presumably Pashto, Dari, etc.) names were not rendered in their original language in U.S. cables, but rather were transliterated into English. Manning’s defense team pressed Carr by asking if Iraq or Afghanistan shared an alphabet with the United States. Carr truthfully replied, “No,” and then conceded that Afghans are less “plugged in” than Westerners. Even if Manning’s defense team was able to demonstrate that Afghans aren’t as glued to their smartphones as Westerners are, they exhibited a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Manning’s defense team made the willfully ignorant suggestion that their client’s disclosures did not have a great impact on the safety of deployed soldiers because the areas in which U.S. troops are deployed are not English-speaking countries. This canard is insidious because
one can be certain that the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other extremist or insurgent groups have plenty of members who speak passable or even native English. In fact, in the era of online linguistic and translation tools such as Google Translate, America’s enemies do not need to speak English. Yet they often do—and some are even native-born American citizens or former U.S. residents. For instance, the architect of the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, attended Harvard University and later was a naval attaché at the Japanese embassy in Washington, DC. He was not only a fluent English speaker, but also a true student of his American adversaries. The former leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen, held various advanced degrees from American universities. “American Taliban” John Walker Lindh and Al Qaeda spokesman Adam Yahiye Gadahn (born Adam Pearlman in Oregon) are two further American citizens who switched allegiances and could review WikiLeaks documents just as easily as any literate American with an Internet connection.

In addition to American humint, American sigint has also paid a steep price in potential but nonactualized intelligence recently with the Edward Snowden affair. Appearing before Congress in June 2013, FBI director Robert Mueller testified that Snowden’s leaks had caused “significant harm to our nation and to our safety.” Mueller could have reasonably gone even further to assert that Snowden’s actions made intelligence “liaison” (clandestine diplomacy between intelligence services) more difficult as well. In the same way that potential human sources may now be wary of working with American intelligence officers, potential sigint partners may wish to distance themselves from mutually benefici-
administration's playbook in trying to actually explain to its concerned electorate why SIGINT cooperation with allies benefits the security of both parties. Instead, it opted to take a politically expedient approach that only reinforced the conception that SIGINT cooperation is overly invasive. Sounding retreat in the face of misunderstood allegations about the Prism program likely will reinforce the pernicious suggestion that such programs are endeavors of which to be ashamed. In stark contrast to his German counterpart, British foreign secretary William Hague stood his ground, confidently stating, “The intelligence sharing relationship between the UK and the US is unique in the world, it’s the strongest in the world and it contributes massively to the national security of both countries.”

The question must now be asked: What is the intelligence legacy of Snowden’s treachery? How many foreign governments will argue the case to their electorate like Hague? How many will cancel extant agreements like Westerwelle? And how many intelligence services will avoid future collaborative contact with the National Security Agency for fear of being painted with rhetorical brushes that evoke overwrought fears of an East German surveillance state while chiming the death knell of personal privacy?

Intelligence-liaison relationships are vital to the success of any intelligence or security service. As H. Bradford Westerfield asserted, liaison holds a “central place [in the] real world of intelligence” and is a “core feature” of American intelligence. No single service can track every malign actor, every rogue state, every weapons proliferator or terrorist. Intelligence services, all of which reside in the real world of resource limita-

tions, rely on trusted cooperative services to act as force multipliers for their own efforts. It would be beyond the scope of this essay to include a raft of examples demonstrating the value of intelligence-liaison relationships, but, in brief, since World War II the “special” intelligence relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom, covering both HUMINT and SIGINT, has been a bedrock of foreign-policy and defense planning for both sides. As Hague counseled, the two countries’ intelligence ties represented “a relationship we must never endanger because it has saved many lives over recent decades in countering terrorism and in contributing to the security of all our citizens.”

To consider just one case that Hague may have been recalling, the joint handling of Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, a Soviet military-intelligence officer, by both the CIA and the United Kingdom’s Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) may have “saved the world” during the tense days of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, according to credible authors who have read the declassified files. Specifically, Penkovsky first volunteered to American intelligence in Moscow in 1961,
but the Americans were unable to act on his request for a cooperative relationship. The British sis, hand in glove with the cia, was able to secure personal meetings with Penkovsky both in Moscow as well as in London and Paris. Although unable to match the sis's agent-handling resources in Moscow, the cia provided two case officers, including the legendary George Kisevalter, as well as the primary reports and requirements officer to effectively handle Penkovsky and his enormous amount of intelligence.

Although Penkovsky was only active for a short period of time, he played a critical role. It is fair to say that the Cuban missile crisis may not have been so deftly handled by the Kennedy administration had it not been for Penkovsky's intelligence on Soviet missile systems and artillery-deployment philosophy. Even when the prospects of exfiltration dimmed, Penkovsky stayed the course until his arrest in 1962 and subsequent execution in 1963. One must wonder if the next Oleg Penkovsky to volunteer to the cia will be even more courageous than the last one. He would have to be in an era where it appears questionable whether America can keep its secrets from the front pages of major media outlets and the Internet. In fact, the next Penkovsky may well wish to volunteer his services but may be reticent lest his identity (or information traceable back to him) be included in a possible deluge of American classified information. To retain its preeminence as well as its reputation for excellence, American intelligence must satisfy both its official liaison partners and its clandestine sources that it can continue to work in the shadows, not under a spotlight.

It could reasonably be asked if the impact of the Manning and Snowden disclosures might be worse than the results of a traditional penetration agent (commonly referred to as a “mole”) working in the U.S. intelligence community. The combined treachery of former fbi agent Robert Hanssen and erstwhile cia operations officer Aldrich Ames led to dozens of deaths of American human sources and nearly crippled U.S. intelligence operations aimed against the Soviet Union (and subsequently Russia after the end of the Cold War). There are several critical elements to this important question, including the nature of the intelligence business and the evolution of information technology in the practice of intelligence. On one hand, despite the Taliban’s claims, no deaths have been conclusively linked to the Snowden or Manning revelations, in stark contrast to Ames and Hanssen. On the other hand, hostile penetrations of U.S. intelligence do not seem to have overly retarded offensive recruitment operations, even in the Soviet bloc. Moreover, an intelligence officer who switches allegiances is well aware that the adversary can penetrate his new intelligence service just as well as his original service. This has been an accepted part of spying since time immemorial. It’s why even the most productive agents are eventually pulled out of a dangerous assignment before the risks outweigh the gains. Yet, Snowden and Manning represent a new dimension in espionage because mass disclosure of

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classified information was never part of the risk calculus of a potential human-intelligence source. Surely, it is now.

American intelligence will survive, and possibly thrive, despite the increased challenges that massive unauthorized disclosures bring. As in the past, American intelligence officers will rise to modern challenges and continue to provide policy makers and analysts with timely and relevant intelligence, but the mountain has certainly become steeper and more treacherous. The issue isn’t that American intelligence will become defanged or wither on the vine, but rather that it will not be as good as it could be, especially in an unstable global climate when it is most needed. As the Penkovsky case so aptly demonstrates, a single human source with the right placement and access, at the right juncture in time, can have a profound impact on policy and potentially even change the course of history. U.S. intelligence will not cease to recruit human sources or enter into important bilateral or multilateral SIGINT relationships, but one must recognize the chance that a skittish SIGINT liaison partner, a single prized HUMINT source, or even the next Penkovsky (although he could be Iranian, North Korean or Chinese, just to name a few) might prefer to play it safe rather than cooperate with American intelligence, at least until America gets its intelligence information locked back down to pre-Manning and -Snowden levels.

The future damage of the Manning and Snowden disclosures will wane over time, but this does not make them any less dangerous, especially now. In the short term, America has lost valuable diplomatic leverage as well as counterterrorist capabilities. In the medium term, America will have lost HUMINT from potential future sources as well as SIGINT from liaison partners that could provide an intelligence advantage over rival states, avert strategic surprise, and identify terrorists or proliferators of weapons of mass destruction. Only in the long term, once America has proven to both its allies and its adversaries that it can keep its secrets, will the country be able to benefit from HUMINT and SIGINT sources that will not be obtained in the short and medium term thanks to Manning and Snowden. This damage could take a generation to repair. □
China’s Near-Seas Challenges

By Andrew S. Erickson

The U.S. National Intelligence Council forecasts that China will become the world’s largest economy (measured by purchasing-power parity) in 2022. Jane’s predicts that by 2015 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) funding will double to $238 billion, surpassing that of NATO’s eight largest militaries after the United States combined. The International Institute for Strategic Studies says that China’s defense spending might surpass America’s as early as 2025. Even if these projections prove exaggerated, economic, technical and industrial activity of an amazing scope and intensity is already affording China potent military capabilities. This is especially the case when such capabilities are applied—most likely through peacetime deterrence, or a limited skirmish with a neighbor such as Vietnam—to the “near seas” (the Yellow, East China and South China Seas), currently a major Chinese strategic focus.

Allowing Beijing to use force, or even the threat of force, to alter the regional status quo would have a number of pernicious effects. It would undermine the functioning of the most vibrant portion of the global commons—sea and air mediums that all nations rely on for trade and prosperity, but that none own. It would undermine important international norms and encourage the application of force to more of the world’s many persistent disputes. Finally, it would threaten to destabilize a region haunted by history that has prospered during nearly seven decades of U.S. forces helping to preserve peace. No other nation has the capability and lack of territorial claims necessary to play this still-vital role.

A number of strategists appear to believe that America faces the threat of conflict with China in the future, but that it can be avoided through accommodation or prepared for over a protracted period. In fact, a different scenario is more likely: even as the two Pacific powers are sufficiently interdependent to avoid direct hostilities—and share significant interests on which they may cooperate increasingly—China is already beginning to pose its greatest challenge to U.S. influence and interests in the Asia-Pacific.

American psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs depicts a fundamental reality that is directly applicable to China’s strategic priorities and efforts: basic needs must be fulfilled before higher ambitions can be pursued. From the origins of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its PLA, the party has prioritized its own leadership authority and continuity—deemed essential for China’s physi-
cal integrity, stability and modernization—above all else. Before 1949, the CCP devoted itself to achieving political control over a Chinese state; no particular geographic element could trump that prerequisite.

To ensure its continued authority, the CCP relies on an extensive, elite party-state structure. The CCP boasts eighty million members, roughly equivalent to Germany’s population. Consider the task the Organization Department faces simply in maintaining its dossiers and presiding over its assignment. This governmental structure extends first over China’s core homeland territory, which for centuries has been dominated by an overwhelming Han majority. Chinese bureaucratic governance of this area in some form or another is perhaps unmatched by any other civilization in its duration and cultural assimilative capacity; any modern Chinese government must preserve stability here to maintain both national functions and its own ethnocultural and political legitimacy. At the country’s outer limits are borderlands with significant racial, linguistic and religious minorities. Vast in area, rich in resources and traditionally associated with imperial China under various arrangements sometimes more nebulous and contested than is the case today, these areas are integral parts of the Chinese state but their history can generate instability. Ensuring Beijing’s control therein has entailed the expenditure of significant resources since 1949, initially in the form of “sticks”—military, paramilitary and domestic-security activities—and more recently supplemented with major “carrots” of economic development and preferential policies. While exact figures remain elusive, and metrics are fiercely contested by foreign analysts, it is widely reported that China’s domestic-security budget today exceeds its military budget.

During the Cold War, China’s land borders were hotly contested, and Beijing suffered disputes with nearly all of its fourteen continental neighbors. It has since reached settlements with all but two: India and Bhutan. Such settlements included major concessions on Beijing’s part, particularly with Russia. Here China acted because of imperial treaty obligations, and because its leaders judged that an environment conducive to national development necessitated stable relations with its vast land neighbor. Indeed, pacifying the vast majority of its land borders offers China the prospect of becoming the first great continental state since the Persian and Roman Empires to make a successful transition from land power to sea power—though the most realistic outcome is for China to become a continental-maritime hybrid.

Rather than its land borders, it is China’s immediate maritime periphery that is most contested today. The issue of cross-Strait relations aside, China has not reached comprehensive agreements with any of its eight maritime neighbors. The near seas contain the vast majority of China’s outstanding claims, all of its island and maritime disputes, and significant resources that Chinese strategists believe can replace depleting continental reserves. These are of paramount importance to a China that feels acutely wronged by history, has largely addressed its more basic security needs and craves further development. Beijing is therefore focusing its latest military capabilities on the near seas and their immediate approaches. The PLA faces enduring weaknesses in real-time coordination and data fusion, but fiber optics, high-powered line-of-sight communications, missiles and sea mines offer workarounds for operations in the near seas.

Beyond the near seas, it remains much harder for China to fight major militaries. The further from China one looks, the
fewer forces it can deploy and support, the less capable they are, and—in a worst-case scenario—the more susceptible they are to disruption and destruction. Beijing lacks the robust network of overseas allies, bases, logistics and defenses that America has developed over decades to mitigate such problems. Reducing this disparity even incrementally would require spending, time and policy changes on a scale that Beijing may well prove unwilling or unable to muster.

To understand China’s military development clearly, then, it is necessary to view it through the lens of distance. China’s ability to deploy military force and project power resembles gradually dissipating waves. Close to home, they are cresting dramatically, threatening to overtop nearby seawalls. Yet virtually the only waves China is making far away are the wakes of its ships protecting merchant vessels from pirates in the Gulf of Aden and engaging in diplomacy beyond.

China is achieving rapid but uneven military development. Its capabilities are divided among PLA services limited in real-time coordination ability. To further its near-seas interests, China is attempting to undermine the efficacy of, and decrease the likelihood of involvement by, U.S., allied and friendly military forces there. By developing abilities to hold foreign military platforms at risk, Beijing hopes to deter them from intervening in areas of sensitivity to China in the first place, and to persuade Taipei, Tokyo, Manila, Hanoi and other regional actors that Washington’s assistance will be neither reliable nor forthcoming. The PLA thus systematically targets limitations in foreign military platforms stemming from laws of physics: for example, the fact that missile attack tends to be easier and cheaper than missile defense. China is on the verge of achieving major breakthroughs in multiaxis cruise-missile strikes, antiship ballistic missiles (ASBM), antisatellite weapons and navigation satellites. Such achievements, coupled with determination to address near-seas disputes, promise to enhance China’s “keep out” capabilities and undermine regional stability.

China’s DF-21D ASBM has reached initial operational capability and has already been deployed in small numbers. While it is only one of manifold advanced weapons systems that China has developed and deployed, the ASBM is illustrative of Beijing’s ability to utilize its defense industrial base to develop a novel major system to respond to an emergent strategic need—a capability that only a handful of nations possess. China’s ASBM development is an example of “architectural innovation” (linking existing design concepts in new ways), which is potentially disruptive and unpredictable. The ASBM stands out from this already-potent antiaccess/area-denial effort because it draws on over half a century of Chinese experience with ballistic missiles. It may be fired from mobile, highly concealable platforms, and it has the range to strike targets hundreds of kilometers from China’s
shores. It also exemplifies the vulnerabilities and risks inherent in Beijing’s current approach.

For all their disruptive aspects, however, China’s ASBMs and associated systems did not emerge from a vacuum. For over three decades, Chinese leaders and strategists have been thinking of using land-based missiles to hit threatening targets at sea. Beginning in the late 1970s, Chinese experts scrutinized America’s Pershing II theater ballistic missile, and appear to have incorporated, or at least emulated, some of its key technologies. China’s space program has furthered relevant capabilities. And China’s Second Artillery Force, which assumed conventional missions for the first time in 1993, has capitalized on leadership support for missile development and controls land-based ballistic missiles, including the ASBM.

China’s ASBM development dates at least to the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, which underscored Chinese feelings of helplessness against U.S. naval power. But it was perhaps the physical destruction and damage to sovereignty caused by the United States’ accidental bombing of Beijing’s embassy in Belgrade in May 1999 that most strongly catalyzed China’s efforts to develop the ASBM and other “keep out” weapons systems, along with the supporting command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) infrastructure. The bombing reinforced the visionary thinking of China’s paramount leader of the time, Jiang Zemin, concerning the future of warfare and prompted other leaders’ support. Accordingly, that same month China began funding megaprojects for the development of “assassin’s mace” weapons, systems that promised disproportionate effectiveness vis-à-vis a top military power such as the United States despite China’s overall technological inferiority.

These events demand American reflection on the unintended consequences that the use of force can have. As a prominent Chinese policy expert once told this author, “The problem with you Americans is that you go off and hit someone but then forget that you did it. Later, you wonder why they remain reluctant to become close friends with you.” In this sense, China’s ASBM development constitutes in part a reaction to actual U.S. force deployments in the 1990s. A negative reaction, to be sure, but hardly surprising.

Road-based Chinese ASBM development since then suggests that China will continue to make great progress on the infrastructure supporting these missiles. China enjoys a formidable science and technology base, and can be expected to devote considerable resources and expertise to “keep out” weapons development. An emerging network of air- and space-based sensors promises to radically improve targeting. The DF-21D’s C4ISR infrastructure is already sufficient to support basic carrier-targeting capabilities.

Beijing is likely seeking to influence strategic communications regarding ASBMs, with its exact motives unclear. However, it seems most likely that China’s significant and growing ASBM capability could be part of a larger pattern in which Beijing is becoming increasingly “translucent” (if still not fully transparent) regarding selected capabilities in order to enhance deterrence.

China must have conducted a rigorous program of tests sufficient to demonstrate that the DF-21D is mature enough for initial production, deployment and employment. This has likely entailed a variety of flight tests, albeit not yet fully integrated over water—perhaps because of a desire to avoid embarrassing failures. Moreover, manifold challenges may limit the ASBM’s tactical and strategic utility. Data fusion, bureaucratic
coordination and “jointness” remain key limitations.

For the first time since the 1920s, the United States thus faces a direct threat to the platform that has represented the core of its power projection: the aircraft carrier group. Already, U.S. decision makers must face the possibility that China might decide to use asbms in the unfortunate event of conflict, and that they might be able to strike and disable one or more aircraft carriers.

When it comes to targeting a carrier, there will not be a sharp red line between initial operational capability and full operational capability. This is part of a larger analytical challenge in which Chinese “hardware” continues to improve dramatically, but the caliber of the “software” supporting and connecting it remains uncertain and untested in war.

China’s present focus on developing potent capabilities to use—or, preferably, to threaten the use of—military force to resolve disputes in its favor in the near seas jeopardizes stability and important international norms in a critical area of the global commons. Beijing seeks not a global Soviet-style military presence, but rather to carve out the near seas and the airspace above them as a zone within which existing global legal, security and resource-management norms are subordinated to Chinese interests. That would be a loss for the world: these are the same standards that ensure the global system operates openly and effectively, for the security and prosperity of all. Beijing wants to use this zone to address China’s historical grievances and rise again as a great power that commands its neighbors’ deference.

While Beijing emphasizes cooperation, it continues to insist on acknowledgment of its sovereignty as a precondition for joint resource development in disputed areas. China’s rapid, broad-based development of maritime law enforcement (mle) forces, now coalescing as a unified coast guard, is giving it a broad spectrum of regional coverage, signaling and escalation options. As the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff demonstrated, the Philippines was handicapped in its interaction with China by not having an equivalent to China’s mle vessels that it could deploy. Indeed, the United States itself faces a challenge in responding to China’s assertiveness with civilian “white hulls,” as the majority of its forces in the region are naval “gray hulls.” This leaves Washington with difficult alternatives: Should it risk escalating an already-sensitive situation, or appear acquiescent to bullying behavior? Facilitating development of China’s neighbors’ mle forces could help limit Chinese coercion while reducing the risk of escalation.

While substantial Sino-American cooperation is already possible—and in most cases highly desirable—regarding many global issues, particularly those involving commerce and nontraditional security threats, there is at present regrettably little hope of reaching an effective, durable understanding on traditional security issues in China’s immediate backyard.

Growing challenges stand in the way of China fulfilling its objectives in the near seas and shifting emphasis to safeguarding growing overseas interests and resource imports through “far seas” operations. First, China insists on preconditions involving recognition of its sovereignty over disputed claims that its neighbors are unlikely to accept. It is difficult to see how Beijing can hope to realize its objectives anytime soon over its neighbors’ growing opposition and Washington’s continued commitment to preserving regional peace. Second, overseas objectives lack strategic
coherence, limiting support for military approaches. This is especially true as the U.S. provides substantial global-commons security gratis.

Even larger factors are in play, however. More basic Chinese security achievements could come undone. While China’s continental neighbors remain reluctant to disrupt its borders, even cross-Strait integration—however unlikely to happen rapidly—portends complex historical-political questions that could convulse Chinese society. Then there is the continued question of stability in China’s hinterlands, particularly given increasing cross-border trade and international religious and ethnocultural currents. Yet even in China’s core homeland territory, a wide range of domestic challenges could rapidly rise to the fore. China faces profound environmental damage, resource constraints, worsening health problems, corruption and income inequality—all issues that greatly concern even the most nationalistic Han citizens. Chinese leaders themselves acknowledge these problems’ existence and importance.

Yet the tools available to meet these challenges may be increasingly limited. As the work of American political scientist Robert Gilpin demonstrates, great powers typically follow an “S-curved” growth trajectory. Initially, national consolidation and infrastructure construction, combined with competitive labor costs, unleash rapid economic development. The resulting increases in economic, military and political power facilitate domestic consensus and international influence. Eventually, however, internal inefficiencies and external overextension slow growth. It is fashionable to trace such patterns in American power, but observers are only just beginning to appreciate how this type of analysis might apply to China. While Beijing—to its credit—has studiously avoided Moscow’s Cold War military overstretch, domestically it faces rent-seeking behavior, aging, rising labor costs and growing welfare demands.

Moreover, unlike other nations, China is already facing such headwinds long before it has achieved high per capita income, comprehensive welfare programs or an innovative, high-efficiency economy that can absorb rapid cost increases generated by temporary or permanent resource scarcity. Demographics represent one of China’s most intractable growth challenges: three decades of a largely enforced one-child policy combined with one of history’s largest, most dramatic urbanization efforts make it virtually impossible for China’s already-low birthrate to recover. That leaves transition to a consumption-driven economy as one of the few conceivable ways to sustain rapid growth. Achieving this new growth model will require significant economic reforms, however, and it remains to be seen how politically entrenched vested interests can be made to yield.

With these gathering challenges come both risks and opportunities. One risk is that Beijing will seek to compensate for waning economic achievements by bolstering its one other major source of popular legitimacy: nationalism. While China’s leaders are unlikely to seek diver-
sionary war, fanning historical grievances and pursuing diversionary tension vis-à-vis its near-seas claims may be a real temptation. Efforts at deterrence themselves, however envisioned, can have significant strategic consequences; “defensiveness” is in the eye of the beholder. Disturbingly, authoritative PLA sources reveal overconfidence in China’s ability to control escalation. Close encounters between Chinese and foreign military platforms could readily produce an accident, yielding at best a crisis harming all parties involved. That is one of the reasons why Washington must continue to play its role of maintaining its presence and preserving the peace.

From the perspective of the United States and many of China’s neighbors, Beijing has voiced concerns about regional tensions but maintained that it is always other parties that must make concessions to reduce them. China’s leaders are motivated at least in part by genuine domestic pressure, which is fueled in turn by China’s meteoric rise and corresponding expectations. Why agree to something today when you will be much stronger tomorrow? Chinese citizens and officials alike show signs of expecting treatment based not only on how strong their nation is today, but also on how strong it is projected to be in the future. Yet no economy is permanently immune to the business cycle, and rare is the straight-line projection that is proven in practice. No matter how capably managed, China cannot defy the laws of economics.

An abnormally weak China became vulnerable to invasion and humiliation two centuries ago, and it is understandable that its people have spent decades ensuring that this unjust history can never be repeated. From now on, however, achieving the great-power status to which China understandably aspires will hinge largely on what it provides the world, not what it demands from it. Receiving the recognition China craves requires embracing reciprocity and a “responsible stakeholder” mentality. A popular movie says this better than any demarche: with great power comes great responsibility. There are direct implications for China’s fulfillment of its hierarchy of priorities: absent military contests with other nations, defense of Chinese citizens, assets and imports from substate malefactors and natural disasters is readily achievable and affordable. Other nations might even be willing to help toward this end as Beijing might desire.

Perhaps slowing growth will eventually help moderate public expectations and thereby allow Chinese leaders to pursue positive approaches even in the sensitive near seas. Until that happens, however, only U.S. security capabilities and partnerships can preserve the peace there that underwrites the success of all Asia-Pacific nations, including China itself.

Beijing is here to stay as a great power, and has the potential to recapture its historically preponderant regional status, as well as achieve unprecedented influence in a globalized world. Yet in the longer term, likely within a decade, China’s growth rate is almost certain to slow considerably and its domestic challenges proliferate while the United States—for all its problems—enjoys sustained advantages in national power and influence. Time is likely to be far kinder to America’s approach and overall position in the Asia-Pacific than to China’s. This may finally establish a basis for the two Pacific powers to achieve a “competitive coexistence” by allowing Beijing to adjust on its own rather than pressuring Washington. The key for the United States is to weather the present window of vulnerability without making unilateral concessions, losing credibility vis-à-vis its allies or China, or—worst of all—allowing Beijing to change the status quo through the threat or use of force.
The Myth of America’s Triumph

By Michael Lind


In The Myth of America’s Decline, Josef Joffe offers a book-length version of what, by now, is a familiar line of argument—the antideclinist polemic. Joffe, the American-educated publisher of the German weekly Die Zeit, has been closely associated with neoconservative foreign-policy thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic for a generation. An engaging and entertaining writer, widely read in history and current events, Joffe scores many hits against his targets. But he goes too far in trying to counter the errors of declinism with a defense of American triumphalism. Instead of dispelling myths about America, he creates his own.

The terms “declinism” and “neoconservatism” have been the sibling rivals of American foreign policy. Both terms originated as insults. After the socialist thinker and leader Michael Harrington sought to stigmatize liberal and social-democratic opponents of the New Left by calling them “neoconservatives,” Irving Kristol and others adopted what was intended as an insult as the name of their movement, though some intellectuals such as Daniel Bell and Sidney Hook continued to insist that they remained on the left, not the right. “Declinism,” another insult masquerading as a description, was popularized by the late Samuel P. Huntington, a neoconservative Democrat, in a 1988 article for Foreign Affairs. In the piece, he criticized Paul Kennedy (among others) for underestimating America’s power and potential, most notably in Kennedy’s 1987 surprise best seller The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Unlike neoconservatism, however, declinism has not been adopted as a proud label by any individual or school of thought.

Ever since Huntington’s essay, neoconservatism and declinism have been closely linked—if only because thinkers and writers of the neoconservative school have specialized in denouncing those who do not share their optimistic vision of America’s potential power and influence as “declinists.” An all-purpose term of abuse, “declinism” allows neoconservatives to denounce their rivals across the political spectrum, from paleoconservative and libertarian isolationists who have always supported a minimalist foreign policy to anti-interventionist liberals who insist on “nation building at home” and realists who
propose a U.S. foreign policy of “offshore balancing.”

Much of The Myth of America’s Decline is, in effect, a restatement, updating and expansion of Huntington’s 1988 article, “The U.S.—Decline or Renewal?” In it, Huntington declared:

In 1988 the United States reached the zenith of its fifth wave of declinism since the 1950s. The roots of this phenomenon lie in the political economy literature of the early 1980s that analyzed the fading American economic hegemony and attempted to identify the consequences of its disappearance. These themes were picked up in more popular and policy-oriented writings, and the combination of the budget and trade deficits plus the October 1987 stock market crash produced the environment for the spectacular success of Paul Kennedy’s scholarly historical analysis in early 1988 [The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers]. Decline has been on everyone’s mind, and the arguments of the declinists have stimulated lively public debate.

Huntington offered “three core propositions” of the alleged declinist school:

First, the United States is declining economically. . . . Second, economic power is the central element of a nation’s strength, and hence a decline in economic power eventually affects the other dimensions of national power. Third, the relative economic decline of the United States is caused primarily by its spending too much for military purposes, which in turn is the result, in Kennedy’s words, of “imperial overstretch,” of attempting to maintain commitments abroad that the country can no longer afford.

He concluded:

Declinist literature sets forth images of a nation winding down economically, living beyond its means, losing its competitive edge to more dynamic peoples, sagging under the burdens of empire, and suffering from a variety of intensifying social, economic and political ills. It follows that American leadership must recognize and acquiesce in these conditions and accept the “need to ‘manage’ affairs so that the relative erosion of the United States’ position takes place slowly and smoothly, and is not accelerated by policies which bring merely short-term advantage but longer-term disadvantage.”

Joffe follows Huntington in describing several waves of declinism. In Joffe’s version of the schema, Decline 1.0 in the late 1950s and the early 1960s was associated with the shock of Sputnik and the fear that the United States was losing the arms race and the space race to a dynamic Soviet Union. Decline 2.0 came with the “malaise” (to use Jimmy Carter’s term) that afflicted the American national psyche in the 1970s, when U.S. failure in Vietnam, out-of-control inflation and two oil-price shocks created a depressed and defensive national mood.

A third wave of declinism, according to Joffe, took place in the 1980s, when Americans feared economic eclipse by a rapidly growing Japan and perhaps Western Europe. In the fourth and fifth waves, American decline has been attributed
by some to a rising China or a broken economy, symbolized by the U.S.-centered financial crisis that triggered the Great Recession.

Joffe notes that each time that the perception of American decline has become part of the conventional wisdom, the foreign challenger has failed and the United States has enjoyed, at least temporarily, an economic and military comeback. Thus, the Soviet Union that seemed unstoppable at the time of Sputnik stagnated in the 1970s and 1980s and disintegrated in the 1990s. Japan’s remarkable industrial boom gave way to decades of stagnation following the crash of the early 1990s. China’s rapid economic takeoff, like Japan’s, cannot be sustained over time. And thanks to shale gas and other factors, the United States, where the Great Recession originated, may find it easier to recover than China, Japan and Germany find it to rebalance their economies away from excessive dependence on export markets.

Joffe provides a thorough and often-amusing history of alarmist prophecies culled from the public debates of the last half century, from misguided alarm about the “missile gap” in the Kennedy years to Ezra Vogel’s 1979 work Japan as Number One. And he makes a shrewd observation about the popularity of the jeremiad as a genre in America. Arguments that the United States is about to lose its place in the world, Joffe observes, often have been deployed to persuade Americans to undertake reforms that are desirable for other reasons.

A good example of this tendency is provided by Joffe in the case of American education reform. Again and again, the proponents of reforms in schooling (justifiable on their own merits) have felt the need to justify them in terms of America’s geopolitical competition with the Soviets or America’s geoeconomic competition with the Japanese or the Chinese—“Sputnik moments.” After the National Academies issued an alarmist report claiming that America graduated only seventy thousand engineers in a year, compared to 350,000 in India and more than six hundred thousand in China, subsequent reports slashed the Chinese and Indian numbers, which included many students who would be considered lower-level technicians in the United States.

When Shanghai led the United States in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, former Reagan education official Chester E. Finn Jr.
managed a declinist “twofer” by declaring: “Wow, I’m kind of stunned, I’m thinking Sputnik.” As Joffe rightly observes:

Comparing the richest, best-educated, and privileged city of China with a broad sample of U.S. and European schools is like matching a choice apple against the entire harvest. Pitting Shanghai against Cambridge, Palo Alto, and Bethesda with their “tiger mothers” and “Volvo dads” would have yielded a different tally.

As Joffe points out, when America’s disproportionately poor and less educated immigrant population is factored out, the United States rises from the middle of Pisa rankings to near the top. In this case, declinism is bipartisan; misleading claims that America’s relatively successful educational system is a failure allows the Left to justify higher spending on public schools even as it allows the Right to argue for charter schools or complete privatization of K-12 education.

If Joffe had limited The Myth of America’s Decline to observations like these, he would have produced a slight but persuasive study of the perils of linear extrapolation in geopolitics and the abuse by American reformers of the jeremiad as a genre. Unfortunately, he defends a version of American “triumphalism” that is as unbalanced as the very declinism he scorns. It is not enough for Joffe to declare that the United States is not doomed to relative decadence and decline; he must insist that Europe and Asia are themselves doomed to decadence and decline relative to the United States. Among other things, this inverted declinism makes Joffe an unreliable guide to the subjects of economic growth, demography and the welfare state.

Consider his views on capitalism. Joffe contrasts state-directed, “modernitarian” capitalism like that of Japan, the “little tigers” and now China with the “liberal capitalism” exemplified most by Britain and the United States. To maintain his dichotomy between modernitarianism and liberalism, Joffe must rewrite British and American history, to minimize the significant “modernitarian” or state-capitalist and mercantilist periods. Joffe says that free trade was “an early American idea that defied the mercantilist spirit of the times.” He adds:

As the nineteenth century progressed, the United States, like all developing nations, became a high-tariff country. The average peaked at 45 percent in 1870; today it is 1.3 percent. Still, Jeffersonian idealism, though conveniently framed by self-interest, made for a commercial policy quite different from France’s in the eighteenth or China’s in the twenty-first century.

Not so fast. The commercial policy of France influenced the early United States by several channels. Alexander Hamilton, whose “Report on Manufactures” laid out the case for American import-substitution protectionism, learned much of his economics from Malachi Postlethwayt’s mid-eighteenth-century English translation of the Dictionnaire universel de commerce. It was written by the sons of the French merchant Jacques Savary, who codified French commercial law for Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the great archi-
Joffe defends a version of American “triumphalism” that is as unbalanced as the very declinism he scorns.

tect of French economic reform. Hamilton’s most important successor in the early nineteenth century, Kentucky senator Henry Clay, explained to Congress that his “American System” of protectionism, infrastructure and manufacturing was inspired in part by Napoleon’s autarkic “Continental System.” As for Thomas Jefferson, he introduced a French military system for the mass production of guns to the United States, where the imported French technique helped lay the basis for America’s later industrial miracle. By 1816, Jefferson had renounced his earlier support for free trade and become reconciled to protectionism: “He . . . who is now against domestic manufacture, must be for reducing us either to dependence on that foreign nation [Britain], or to be clothed in skins, and to live like wild beasts in dens and caverns.” He continued, “I am not one of these; experience has taught me that manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort.”

Joffe concedes that the United States pursued protectionist policies from the 1790s to the 1940s—that is, for 70 percent of its history under the Constitution. Behind their tariffs, the United States and Germany flourished at the expense of free-trading Britain, which finally abandoned free trade too late to rescue its ravaged industrial base in the 1920s. As Britain had done in the 1840s, the United States in the 1940s adopted free trade only when its national industries, developed behind tariff walls, no longer needed protection and expected to dominate foreign markets—not because of some harmony between America’s liberal political principles and free trade. If China were to achieve uncontested manufacturing dominance, it too could be expected to drop mercantilism and preach free trade to other nations, for the same selfish reasons that Britain and the United States did.

In addition to downplaying the contribution of generations of protectionism to U.S. industrial supremacy, Joffe minimizes the role of America’s native version of state capitalism in American innovation. According to Joffe, “Top-down, modernitarian states are not good at fabricating the intellectual explosives that crack old molds and break new paths.” He concedes that the U.S. federal government contributed to technological innovation through massive subsidies of higher education and research and development beginning in World War II—but he does not fully acknowledge the role of the government and large corporations in the founding of Silicon Valley, while exaggerating the role of venture capitalists and independent inventors.

As Joffe says:

Present at the creation was an academic entrepreneur—nay, a buccaneer—by the name of Frederick Terman. The engineering professor, who would later become provost, was obsessed with building “steeples of excellence” at the Farm [owned by Stanford]. As a by-product, he launched Silicon Valley, which would grow in symbiosis with Stanford, each nourishing the other. The unwitting founding act occurred in 1939 when Terman prodded two of his students, David Packard and William Hewlett, to start a little electronics company, now a very big one, in a Palo Alto garage. . . . The
empire builder Terman then lured back William Shockley. The inventor of the transistor set up Shockley Semiconductors, a prototypical start-up. . . . The Shockley renegades went off to found Fairchild Semiconductors with a $1.5 million investment from New York’s Fairchild Camera, the first of the venture capitalists or “angels” who populate Sandhill Road on Stanford’s northern border today.

Note what is left out of Joffe’s rather conventional account of the tech revolution as the product of audacious inventors in garages and visionary venture capital. The U.S. military was a client of Terman’s Radio Research Laboratory at Harvard during World War II, and it remained the chief customer for most early computer technology for decades. In addition, giant corporations, many of them defense contractors like Lockheed, were early tenants of Stanford’s Industrial Park. Joffe neglects to tell his readers that Shockley, before founding Shockley Semiconductors, worked from 1936 to 1955 at Bell Labs, where he co-invented the transistor in 1947. Elsewhere he mentions the telephone company, only to disparage it: “Recall ‘Ma Bell’ in twentieth-century America, a government-sponsored monopoly that could hold back on new technology and keep long-distance rates sky-high.” But however laggard Bell might have been in switching to wireless a few decades ago, its prolonged status as a government-sponsored monopoly, by letting it recycle profits into Bell Labs’ research and development, allowed Bell to support the development of the transistor, among much other modern technology. In the same way, the near-monopoly status of the Western Union Telegraph Company helped it bankroll some of the early experiments of Thomas Edison. From the 1940s to the 1980s, staid, corporate IBM led the evolution of the computer industry, making the careers of later entrepreneurs like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs possible.

Why are these details important? To the extent that the American-bred IT revolution depended on procurement and research by big government and big corporations, and not only on geniuses in garages and venture capitalists, the contrast drawn by Joffe between the uncreative state capitalism of Japan and China and the creative, individualistic liberal capitalism of the United States is undermined. As Joseph Schumpeter observed in the middle of the twentieth century, the site of invention has moved from the labs of individual geniuses to corporate and government laboratories. Research in subjects from DNA to subatomic particles requires enormous up-front investments in equipment and teams of researchers.

So it remains today. “China trounces US in Top500 supercomputer race” was the headline of a June 17, 2013, piece in Computerworld. The author of the piece, Joab Jackson, claimed:

The supercomputing arms race is heating up again between the United States and China, as China retakes the top spot in the 41st Top500 listing of the world’s most powerful supercomputers with Tianhe-2, an updated system that was able to execute 33.86 petaflops, or 33.86
thousand trillion floating point operations per second.

According to Joffe, the Chinese can never replicate American creativity. Jackson disagrees:

Besides challenging the U.S. dominance of the Top500, the Tianhe-2 system is also notable for its use of technologies developed in China. "Most of the features of the system were developed in China, and they are only using Intel for the main compute part. The interconnect, operating system, front-end processors and software are mainly Chinese," said Top500 editor Jack Dongarra in a statement.

Oh, well. Let "modernitarians" relying on state capitalism and national-champion corporations build supercomputers; the "liberal" United States can specialize in social-media software like Facebook.

Mid-twentieth-century Britain was extremely innovative, contributing to the development of computer technology, radar, the jet engine and television. But the lack of a modernized industrial base, large and successful industrial corporations, and government procurement on a sufficient scale doomed Britain to fall behind the United States, Germany, Japan and other rivals. Today’s deindustrialized Britain makes a mockery of Joffe’s paean to the genius of Anglo-American liberal capitalism, while providing the United States with an example of a fate it should try to avoid.

Nor is Joffe any more persuasive when it comes to the contentious issue of American demography. On this issue, Joffe reflects the conventional wisdom of the transatlantic elite that circulates among Aspen, Davos and the Clinton Global Initiative and opines in the prestige press. According to this conventional wisdom, America’s immigration policy gives the United States a demographic advantage over its rivals, by providing the American economy with foreign-born talent and higher fertility. But this conflates skilled and unskilled immigration. The foreign-born skilled immigrants, largely Asian and European, contribute next to nothing to American fertility rates, while the unskilled immigrants who contribute to relatively high U.S. fertility and relative youth, largely Latin American, tend to lower America’s overall educational levels and, in some cases, depress wages for low-income workers.

Indeed, as a proportion of its immigrant population, the United States gets far fewer educated immigrants than do other Western countries. The majority of American immigrants come to the United States under the “family reunification” program, which disproportionately brings in less educated Mexicans and Central Americans compared to their native-born peers. In contrast, Canada, with its “point system” that assigns points for higher education, English proficiency and other factors, tends to get more educated immigrants from many of the same countries in the Western Hemisphere that send immigrants to the United States.

Another claim of the demographic-exceptionalist wing of American triumphalism is that a never-ending
stream of youthful immigrants with high birthrates will expand the U.S. labor force while reducing budgetary pressure on entitlements for the elderly for generations to come—even as European and Japanese populations shrink, followed by low-fertility, aging China. Joffe quotes the demographer Nicholas Eberstadt: “By 2025, under current UN and Census Bureau projections, China would account for less than a fifth of the world’s population but almost a fourth of the world’s senior citizens [emphasis added by Joffe].”

The reality is hardly as apocalyptic as Joffe makes it sound. A chart that he reproduces—“Graying China, Youthful America, Young India”—actually undermines his argument. In 2050, according to the graph, about 21 percent of the U.S. population and about 25 percent of the Chinese population will be over sixty-five—compared to only about 13 percent in India. Surely a better description of this scenario would be: “Graying China and Graying America, Youthful India.” Will China really be crippled by having 4–5 percent more of its population over the age of sixty-five than the United States half a century from now?

Demography is neither as favorable for the United States nor as dire for China as Eberstadt and Joffe suggest. In the case of the United States, immigration (legal and illegal) and birthrates plummeted during the Great Recession, as they did during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They might resume, with a strong, prolonged economic recovery. But if the United States, like other advanced industrial economies, endures decades of weak demand and slow growth, then recent forecasts of an immigration-driven population explosion in the United States in the twenty-first century may turn out to have been mistakes, caused by a one-generation boom in Latin American immigration attracted by an unsustainable, debt-driven bubble economy.

Like many on the political right, Joffe believes that modern, Western-style welfare states crowd out investment capital: “Another reason for slowing growth is the enormous welfare burden, with transfer spending eating up about one-third of Western Europe’s GDP, leaving correspondingly less for investment, which is a down payment on tomorrow’s growth.” This is confused in three ways.

First, as noted above, in the particular case of China, reducing overinvestment and boosting consumption—including
consumption by the elderly—would be a good thing. Second, the world for the foreseeable future is likely to be awash in private and sovereign-wealth-fund capital which cannot find adequate investment opportunities, notwithstanding high levels of spending on the elderly in the United States, Europe and Japan. Third, and most important, the main constraint on global growth is not the competition of overly generous welfare states with productive industry for money, but rather the toxic interaction of glut-inducing overinvestment in heavy industries by China and other mercantilist economies with inadequate global consumer demand.

Inadequate global consumer demand, in turn, has a short-term cause—the collapse in spending by households that are “deleveraging” or reducing their indebtedness, in the aftermath of housing and stock-market bubbles—and a long-term cause: the refusal of economic elites, including both the kleptocratic Communist Party princes of China and America’s increasingly plutocratic investors and managers, to share the gains from economic growth equitably with most of their workers in their own nations. In such an environment, slashing entitlements for the elderly would not significantly increase investment, while it would contract demand further, by suppressing spending both by the elderly and the younger relatives who would have to support them more directly.

Echoing Robert Kagan’s thesis that “Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus,” Joffe warns Americans against surrendering their martial virtue to the lotus-eater comfort of a European-style welfare state. He writes:

For the great democracies of Europe and Japan, the load [of the welfare state] is not as weighty as it is for the United States. The former are not in the business of world order; in fact, they have been steadily shifting from warfare to welfare. Twenty-first century America is straggling, but moving in the same direction.

Apart from a small group of neoconservative Republicans, there is no constituency in the United States for expanding military spending while cutting Social Security and Medicare. It is hardly a sign of decadence, however, that many Americans prefer “nation building at home” to debacles like those in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Nor is there necessarily a trade-off between military preparedness and a generous social safety net. The fact that Americans spend a larger percentage of their economy than do Europeans on health care, for comparable or worse results, suggests that reforming America’s dysfunctional medical-industrial complex could free resources for more butter and more guns, if more guns really were needed.

Connecting all of Joffe’s critiques of declinism is a largely implicit but partly articulated theory of history that blends both American and liberal triumphalism, a theory of a kind familiar among contemporary neoconservative and neoliberal thinkers. Nowhere does he set forth his version of triumphalism systematically; he is writing a polemic, not a treatise. Nevertheless, a
more or less coherent account of world history and America’s role in it can be pieced together from the incidental comments he makes while attacking declinism.

Like Francis Fukuyama and the Whig historians of yesteryear, Joffe evidently believes that liberal capitalism and democracy are destined to supersede other ways of organizing modern industrial societies. Democracy is a more or less inevitable spin-off of the economic growth produced by industrial capitalism: “The historical correlation is perfect. Growth favors democratization, and as democracy expands, growth shrinks” as “the empowered masses will demand more for themselves and grant less to the state.” According to Joffe:

The benign historical experience of the West—from wealth to liberty, though with murderous totalitarian lapses—has jelled into a kind of economic determinism: with development comes democracy. . . . This deterministic blend of Karl Marx and John Locke does hold for the West, as well as for East Asia’s first risers, where it happened much faster.

Thus, today’s authoritarian China will be pressured to choose democracy by the very economic success that it has enjoyed recently under authoritarian rule.

The view that world history is moving in one direction, toward free markets and multiparty democracy, has become the conventional wisdom among Atlantic elites since the end of the Cold War. A more plausible minority view is that set forth by the Israeli scholar Azar Gat and others: the survival and diffusion of liberal capitalism and democracy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been a historical accident, contingent on the geopolitical triumph of the United States over illiberal great powers.

The fascist model of modernity found supporters from Latin America to the Middle East and Asia and was discredited only by the military defeat of Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and fascist Italy in World War II. Suppose that the United States had stayed out of World War II and that the world beyond the Americas had been divided among totalitarian empires. Is it really the case that economic growth in a victorious Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan would have led to successful demands for democratizing those authoritarian, state-capitalist regimes? Would the “murderous totalitarian lapses” in Germany and Japan have been mere temporary blips in “the benign historical experience of the West” on the road to liberal, capitalist democracy, absent the pulverization and occupation of Germany and Japan by the United States and its allies?

Similarly, the discrediting of Marxism-Leninism and the wave of democratization and marketization that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall can be viewed more as a case of opportunistic emulation of the triumphant superpower than as a vindication of a “deterministic blend of Karl Marx and John Locke.” The rapidity with which the nostrums of the New Left of the era of Khrushchev and Mao gave way within the global intelligentsia to paeans to markets and democracy in the
1990s suggests tides of fashion, not deep, underlying currents of history. From this perspective, the collapse of the Soviet threat in the 1980s removed the rationale by which anti-Communist military regimes around the globe had justified their rule, both to their own populations and to their U.S. ally. If the Soviet bloc had remained intact and if the Cold War had persisted to the present, is there any reason to believe that the United States would have pressured its authoritarian allies to democratize? The absence of Soviet-American competition is one reason that the United States today can afford to be relatively relaxed about the overthrow of friendly autocracies like Hosni Mubarak’s in Egypt as part of the Arab Spring.

There would seem to be a contradiction between Joffe’s expression of confidence in the long-term triumph of liberal-democratic principles and his concern, expressed elsewhere in the book, that liberalism and democracy in the world depend on American military and economic power. “A rules-based world requires a caretaker. . . . How would the world fare if the global commons were run by China or Russia, illiberal giants both? Or even by democratic India, Japan, or Europe, which cannot take care of their own back yards?” Joffe’s list of dangerous powers that only the United States can stand up to is the familiar neoconservative most-wanted list:

Pushing against the fences, revisionists like China and Russia threaten to break into the global commons. . . . Others like revolutionary Iran or Terror International, which respect neither fences nor rules, must be defanged, a task that demands collective action and hence a leader who harnesses and maintains the coalition.

It is particularly ironic that someone long associated with neoconservatism like Joffe should endorse a complacent view of history that makes Lockean liberal democracy a quasi-Marxist epiphenomenon of capitalism, including initially successful authoritarian state capitalism. After all, the neoconservative school has been defined by its opposition to “appeasement” and its emphasis on the willpower of nations and alliances rather than on material resources and constraints. If economic growth would have inevitably produced liberalism and democracy anyway, and if “totalitarian lapses” were temporary deviations from “benign historical experience,” then perhaps Americans could have saved much blood and treasure by forgoing participation in the world wars and the Cold War and waiting patiently for prosperous, confident consumers to take to the streets demanding multiparty democracy and civil rights from the mellowing heirs of Hitler, Tojo, Mussolini, Stalin and Mao.
Joffe is largely right in his critique of what might be called “premature declinists.” However, from the fact that earlier prophecies of American decline were followed by American resurgences, it does not follow that Joffe’s Decline 5.0 will necessarily be succeeded by a new, Reaganesque “Morning in America.” Chicken Little was wrong to claim that the sky was falling. But in Aesop’s fable about the boy who cried wolf, it should be recalled, a genuine wolf eventually showed up. What if this time things really are different?

All of America’s previous would-be “peer competitors”—Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and the Soviet Union—had economies smaller than that of the United States and succumbed, directly or indirectly, to American strategies of economic attrition. Depending on whether one prefers purchasing-power parity or other comparisons, Chinese GDP will surpass U.S. GDP in the near- or medium-term future. Even if, as seems likely, Chinese economic growth slows, a world in which the United States has the second-biggest economy after China (if disunited Europe is not treated as a single power) presents challenges which are fundamentally different from those of the twentieth century.

And while it is true that the United States has been the only great power with global reach since the end of the Cold War, that global reach may be a wasting asset. To cut the United States down to size, regional great powers like China need not develop global navies and air forces of their own. They need merely overmatch the United States in their own regions by means of what the U.S. military calls “antiaccess” forces, converting the United States from a truly global superpower to a less exalted regional or multiregional power.

Even then, the United States would remain part of the great-power club. All other things being equal, a First World country with a large population will be more powerful and influential than less developed large-population nations and less populous developed nations. Even if its long-term population growth is lower than expected, because of less immigration or lower fertility or both, the United States, along with China and India, will be one of the most populous nation-states in the world.

But it is not clear that immigration-driven population growth creates more opportunities than it solves. Nor is it clear that the United States—the most unequal society in the Western world, with the lowest rates of intergenerational mobility—is capable, in the twenty-first century, of providing rapid assimilation and mobility for low-skilled immigrants, now that the frontier is closed and good wages for unskilled and semiskilled jobs are a thing of the past.

Joffe’s affection for America is plain, but it has misled him into becoming its cheerleader at a moment when the flaws in the American model are increasingly visible. His mistake is to present excessive optimism about America’s relative standing in the world as the alternative to excessive pessimism. There is an alternative to both declinism and triumphalism: realism.
Western Civ’s Life Coach

By David Rieff


Albert Einstein is said to have recommended that “everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” It is an injunction that Arthur Herman would have been well advised to heed when he embarked on the writing of his latest book, The Cave and the Light. But then oversimplification has been at the heart of Herman’s enterprise from the outset. Anyone who has already extruded works such as The Idea of Decline in Western History, To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World, Gandhi and Churchill: The Epic Rivalry that Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age, Freedom’s Forge: How American Business Produced Victory in World War II and How the Scots Invented the Modern World is clearly not someone in whose imagination either nuance or complexity can be assumed to occupy much psychic space. Instead, Herman is a serial extoller, a panegyrist whose attention is periodically seized by one great man (Winston Churchill or Senator Joseph McCarthy, upon whom he lavished an admiringly revisionist biography) or a great people (the Scots) or a great institution (the Royal Navy, American business), which he then presents as the explanatory key to the success and dynamism of the Western world, even if we epigones in the West no longer necessarily understand our own great intellectual, moral, political and technical inheritance.

Even by Herman’s own grandiloquent standards, however, The Cave and the Light is in a class of its own. It is a monument not to the importance of historical thought but to his own hollowness. He begins in bombast and ends in triviality. He is a self-appointed life coach for Western civilization.

At the outset, he asseverates, “Everything we say, do, and see has been shaped in one way or another by two classical Greek thinkers, Plato and Aristotle.” That such wisdom constitutes little more than the conventional thought inculcated in nineteenth-century British public schools does not seem to trouble Herman unduly. This is in part because his project is to refute those in the contemporary West who, in his telling, dismiss these thinkers as “dead white males” and the classics as having no future. Herman at times in his book takes a break from his breathless romp through Western history and philosophy to settle scores real and imagined with the global Left—in this

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To say that one can understand all the major political events in Western history as somehow being expressions of the spirit of Plato or Aristotle really does stretch credulity.

case, the cynical teaching assistant’s tag for History 101, “From Plato to NATO,” is literally accurate. But while he is a political conservative (currently a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute) and an admirer of both Friedrich Hayek and Ayn Rand, even he might have thought twice about the “grandeur that was Greece, glory that was Rome” approach.

This is where the second part of his thesis comes in, the one already limned in his book’s subtitle, where Herman posits that the conflicts in Western civilization ever since ancient Greece have their roots in the dichotomy between Aristotle’s vision of what he calls “governing human beings” and Plato’s philosopher-king. To be sure, Herman’s heart is unquestionably with Aristotle, as he makes clear in his broad praise for Rand’s aversion to Platonism and also in his description of Hayek at the end of his life watching televised images of the overthrow of Communism in Czechoslovakia in 1989. “I told you so,” Hayek tells his son, to which Herman adds, “So had Aristotle.” Given his political views, this Aristotelianism should come as no surprise. “Today’s affluent, globalized material world,” Herman writes, “was largely made by Aristotle’s offspring.” But while he not only greatly prefers Aristotle, but also taxes Plato’s intellectual and spiritual heirs with virtually every political tendency and historical development in European and global history that he deplores, Herman nevertheless insists that “our world still needs its Plato.”

In Hayek’s terms, and—to careen vertiginously down the intellectual and moral food chain—in Rand’s as well, such a view is anathema. Late in The Cave and the Light, Herman approvingly quotes Rand’s assertion that “everything that makes us civilized beings, every rational value that we possess—including the birth of science, the industrial revolution, the creation of America, even the [logical] structure of our language, is the result of Aristotle’s influence.” Hayek’s view was far more nuanced (but then, compared with Rand’s, whose wasn’t?), and he was less concerned with praising Aristotle than with rejecting Platonism. For as his denunciations of solidarity and altruism in his book The Fatal Conceit make clear, Hayek viewed Platonism as a kind of owner’s manual for totalitarianism and saw socialism as Platonism’s twentieth-century avatar, much in the same way that Karl Popper did. But unlike his intellectual heroes, Herman insists on Western society’s need for Platonism as well as Aristotelianism. Though he returns over and over to Platonism’s intrinsic faults, and, by extension, to its economic fatuities and the world-historical crimes to which it has given rise, from Bolshevism and the Gulag to what Herman calls Plato’s “American offspring”—a term capacious enough to include Josiah Royce, John Dewey, Woodrow Wilson and FDR—Herman is adamant that Platonism remains key to the West’s identity, and a necessary corrective to Aristotelian dynamism, with its constant, stupefying potential for change.

This may seem contradictory (it certainly would have to Hayek and Rand, and surely cannot sit well with many of Herman’s
colleagues at the AEI), but in fact it constitutes the core of Herman’s thesis. For him, it is the “tension” between the West’s Platonic “spiritual self” and its Aristotelian “material self” that has allowed the West to continue its “never-ending ever-ascending circle of renewal.”

For so proudly an anti-Hegelian, anti-Marxist writer as Herman, this tension he deems so essential bears a surprisingly close resemblance to G. W. F. Hegel’s idea, later taken up by Karl Marx and his twentieth-century inheritors, of the dialectic—that is, of thesis and antithesis that sooner or later are combined in a synthesis that represents either a compromise between the two initial philosophical or moral positions, or a combination of the best features of each. To be sure, Herman’s version of the dialectic is one that puts more emphasis on the creative tension between the two philosophical stances and less on the possibility of any enduring compromise or synthesis between them. As Herman puts it, while discussing what he argues was the English romantics’ doomed effort to reconcile the Platonic and the Aristotelian, “The creative drive of Western civilization had arisen not from a reconciliation of the two halves but from a constant alert tension between them.”

But Herman is inconsistent on this point. For example, in the concluding paragraphs of his book he asserts that this tension “inspired one breakthrough after another” in the clash between Christianity and classical culture, in what he anachronistically calls the “culture wars” between the romantics and the Enlightenment, and today, in the clash “over Darwinism and creationism or ‘intelligent design.’” He is explicitly making a case for what he calls the “indispensability” of both the Platonic and the Aristotelian worldviews in the creation of the Western synthesis that the “all-pervasive tug of war” between those worldviews has produced over the centuries. That tension and renewal, he argues, “are our [Western] identity.”

To a hammer, everything is a nail. No one would deny that, in the Western tradition at least, the Greeks “invented” politics. But to go from this to saying that one can understand all the major political events in Western history as somehow being expressions of the spirit of Plato or Aristotle or of some tension between the two schools of thought as refracted down through the centuries really does stretch credulity. In fairness, such vast oversimplifications have always been the stuff of popular history, and popular history certainly has its place. If, for example, one wanted to recommend a book to an intellectually ambitious but not particularly well-read high-school sophomore, one could do a lot worse than Herman’s conspectus. It moves along jauntily, and its explanations, wild oversimplifications though they generally are, provide a basic framework for the future studies that, if undertaken and supervised properly, will challenge and overturn most of Herman’s facile binary summations. Herman himself points to this approach when he rather startlingly declares in his book’s concluding passage that the intellectual and moral tug-of-war dating back to classical times between Plato
and Aristotle could also be called “yin and yang or right brain versus left brain.”

In doing this, Herman in effect vitiates his own most fundamental claims. There is no point in assaying a vast work of intellectual history if all one is actually doing is saying that in all cultures and, arguably, in all human beings, there is a tension between the rational and the irrational, the spiritual and the material, or the scientific and the artistic. Any of a thousand self-help books published over the last three decades can tell you that. And yet, reduced to its bare essentials, this is precisely what Herman ends up doing. According to him, “It is the balance between living in the material and adhering to the spiritual that sustains any society’s cultural health.” This seems more appropriate to a New Age retreat than to a believer in a very different, and in many ways far more mystical construct—a West that will never decline or be superseded because of that “never-ending ever-renewing circle of renewal” Herman invokes as if it were an undeniable fact rather than the hubristic, ahistorical fantasy that it actually is. It also raises the more interesting question of whether The Cave and the Light can properly be called a work of history at all.

To be clear, while the book begins and ends philosophically, its core is a straightforward work of intellectual history in which each major paradigm shift within the Western tradition, whether religious or secular, is described as being the expression in history of either the Platonic or the Aristotelian tradition or of some synthesis of the two. Thus, what Machiavelli “did in reality was to plug Aristotle’s formula for understanding civic liberty into Polybius’s time machine, the inevitable cycle of historical rise and decline.” To cite another example, Herman quotes Percy Bysshe Shelley’s celebrated if floridly narcissistic line about poets being “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” According to Herman, what Shelley actually meant was that poets were “Plato’s Philosopher Rulers in the flesh, for a world desperately needing the emanations of their genius”—a claim about which the fine old Scottish legal verdict, with which Herman, given all the hagiographical things he has said of the Scots, is surely aware, would seem to be the most generous response one can make: not proven. But to describe historical events is not the same thing as being a historian in any true sense of the word, just as writing sweepingly on a broad range of subjects does not make you a polymath.

The problem with The Cave and the Light is not Herman’s unfortunate tendency to ignore the sensible adage, usually attributed to Mies van der Rohe, that sometimes less is more, and instead to provide utterly baseless “color” and novelistic details about the historical figures he is describing—grating as these often are. Examples of these abound, even if, for example, Herman cannot possibly know whether, as Michelangelo walked from his lodgings to the Vatican Palace in 1510 to work on the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling, whether Bramante’s workmen “appeared like shadows,
...as they yawned and stretched among the piles of masonry and coils of rope” in front of the unfinished basilica of St. Peter’s. Nor can Herman have the remotest idea as to whether Gerard of Cremona, who would go on to translate Aristotle’s *On the Heavens* into Latin, thus reintroducing him to the Western world, reacted to the Muslim call to prayer by thinking that it seemed “like an audial illusion, like the cry of a bird that you briefly mistake for a human voice” when he visited Toledo in 1140. And these are only two of many examples of such poorly grounded speculation.

A more serious defect is that Herman is an extraordinarily old-fashioned writer (not, to avoid misunderstanding, because he is a man of the political Right: so is John Lukacs and his work suffers from no such infirmity), and an even more defiantly retrograde thinker. Herman’s practice as a historian is a throwback to what nineteenth-century German academics called *Geistesgeschichte*—that is, history conceived of almost exclusively as the identification and description of the “spirit” of the times. It is actually almost refreshing, if not very serious, to read a work from which material history as practiced by such great historians as Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie—the history of climate, of agriculture, of migration—is so singularly absent and in which great men and great (or terrible) ideas all but exclusively determine the course of events. At times, Herman can be quite shameless about this, as when, in his chapter describing the rise of Christianity in the Roman world, he blandly opines that “today, historians point to social and economic factors to explain Christianity’s amazing spread. But the key factor was its skill in seizing the high ground of Greek thought, especially Plato.”

To call this an impoverished and partial account not only of Christianity’s encounter...
with the classical world but also of Western civilization more broadly is about the kindest possible way to put the matter. This can seem almost poignant given that his general tone—and at least some of the way he chose to frame his thoughts—suggests that Herman’s purpose was to defend the West against its detractors both at home and abroad. But by insisting that everything that has happened in the West since Aristotle’s death is in one form or another indebted to the legacy left by him and by Plato, Herman does the tradition he is so determined to uphold no favors. Quite the contrary. Herman’s own discipline, history, owes everything to the Greeks but little or nothing to Plato or Aristotle. As the great Oxford classicist Sir Moses Finley pointed out in his 1965 essay, “Myth, Memory and History,” Aristotle, though he “founded a number of sciences and made all the others his own, too, in one fashion or another. . . . did not jibe at history, he rejected it.” Finley goes on to quote the passage in the ninth chapter of the Poetics in which Aristotle says, “Poetry is more philosophical and more weighty than history, for poetry speaks rather of the universal, history of the particular.” Both Plato himself and the Neoplatonists were even more dismissive. And, again, as his remark about the eternal renewal of the West suggests, it is hard not to feel that, almost in defiance of his own vocation, Herman shares this view to an uncomfortable, not to say embarrassing, extent.

A second difficulty with the book is its woefully superficial and—if not wholly in tone then certainly in substance—dismis-

sive treatment of the centrality of Judaism in the formation of Western culture and politics. In Herman’s account, it was Plato whose works “provided a framework for making Christianity intellectually respect-
able [in the classical world], while Christian-
ity in turn gave Plato’s philosophy a shin-
ing new relevance.” There is no doubt that the history of its interaction with classical culture is central to the early church—even if Herman is at his vulgar worst when, ap-
parently in all seriousness, he observes that the “forerunners of the stereotypical nuns with steel rulers are Plato’s Guardians in the Republic.” Herman does devote some pas-
sages to the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, Philo. But, to appropriate the title of one of Leo Strauss’s most important books, Athens is omnipresent but Jerusalem all but absent from Herman’s account of Christianity’s rise, even though, as Strauss wrote, “The Platonic statement taken in conjunction with the biblical statement brings out the fundamental opposition of Athens at its peak to Jerusalem: the opposition of the God or gods of the philosophers to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the opposition of reason and revelation.”

This is a grave and telling error both historically and philosophically. Instead of a polarity between Plato and Aristotle, Strauss posed what the great French political philosopher, Pierre Manent, has correctly characterized as a different polarity. Plato and Aristotle (not Plato or Aristotle) are on one side of this dichotomy, but it is Judaism and not philosophy that is on the other. Herman discusses St. Augustine in
considerable detail, but what he focuses on is what he calls Augustine’s “final authoritative fusion of Neoplatonism and Christianity,” which would “have a sweeping impact on Western culture for the next thousand years and beyond,” even if, four hundred years later, in what even for Herman is a crass low stylistically, Aristotle would “strike back.” Manent’s version is rather different. For him, Augustine co-opted Plato for his own purposes, rather than, as it so often seems reading Herman, being co-opted by him. Anyone tempted by Herman’s reductive account would be well advised to read Manent’s entire essay, which appeared in *First Things* in 2012. In it, he wrote:

> For Augustine, Christianity confirms these two separations while overcoming them. He presents Christianity as the resolution of the two decisive breaks of human unity: the Jewish and the Greek. The mediation of the God-man Christ allows the unity of mankind to be restored while each human being is made capable of sharing in the truth enacted by Jewish life as well as the truth discovered by Greek philosophy. Jewish life and Greek philosophy, two very different ways of finding one’s way toward the true God, prepared humanity for the decisive step only God could take.

We are a long way from Herman’s dire simplicities about how Augustine’s *City of God* represents “a kind of Platonic ideal.” As Thorleif Boman pointed out more than half a century ago in his magisterial study, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, the Jews of the Roman Empire of that period “defined their spiritual pre-disposition as anti-Hellenic.” To be sure, had the early Christians chosen to expunge all traces of their faith’s Jewish roots, Herman’s account of what he calls the “thoroughgoing synthesis between Christian revelation and ancient reason, between Plato and Jesus” would be dispositive. It was this that the second-century bishop Marcion had pressed for, proposing an alternate canon beginning with an expurgated version of the Gospel of Luke and the ten Epistles of Paul. But the Marcionite project that opposed the God of the Old Testament to Jesus as revealed in the New Testament failed, and with it so did the attempt, as the English Biblical scholar Sydney Herbert Mellone once put it, to propose the advent of Jesus as “an entirely new event, with no roots in the past history of the Jewish people or of the human race.” One can fairly assert that historically relations between institutional Christianity and the Jewish people have been nothing short of catastrophic. But this does not mean that, to cite Boman again, “the question of the formal and real relationship between Israelite-Jewish and Greek-Hellenistic thinking” was any less of a “live problem” for Christianity and the church, as one might infer from the scant attention Herman pays to the role of Hebrew thought in the shaping of Christian dogma and the formation of the Christian commonwealth. And even if one views Augustine largely as a Christianized Neoplatonist, as Herman apparently does, the relevant tension, to use Herman’s preferred term, is not between Augustine’s Neoplatonism and some Aristotelian

*Perhaps the most curious aspect of The Cave and the Light is the way in which Herman seems to want to downplay the Western tradition as fundamentally Christian.*
alternative, but between that Neoplatonism and the Jewish tradition out of which Christianity had come.

But perhaps the most curious aspect of *The Cave and the Light* is the way in which Herman seems to want to downplay the Western tradition as fundamentally Christian. If, as Herman claims, the influence of Plato and Aristotle down through the centuries was “the greatest intellectual and cultural journey in history,” then in a sense he is forced to write from the perspective of Christianity being only one stop, however long and important, on that trip. It is not only the obvious fact that neither Plato nor Aristotle was Christian. After all, Augustine or Aquinas could be adduced to deal with that. Rather, it is the fact that Herman’s depiction of our own times is almost ostentatiously post-Christian. He does emphasize the spiritual needs to which Platonism and its heirs seem to be able to respond while Aristotelianism cannot. But this spirituality has no specific content, and certainly no particularly Christian content. Indeed, near the end of his book, Herman speaks not of Jesus Christ dying for the sins of humankind, but instead avers that all of Western history can be summed up as “a battle founded, in the last analysis, on the irreconcilable contradiction between Plato’s God and Aristotle’s Prime Mover.”

Given all the historical elements this analysis forces Herman to downplay or at times ignore, this claim seems much more far-fetched than the traditional understanding, well articulated in the modern era by Pope John Paul II, of Western civilization as a fundamentally Christian construct, to which, unquestionably, the thought of both Plato and Aristotle made important contributions. But then, Herman does appear to have an awfully pagan understanding of Western identity. When he writes that “tension and renewal are our [Western] identity,” he begins to sound more like a member of some mystery cult of the Roman era—Mithraism comes to mind, though there were others—than either a Greek philosopher or a Christian. And why he thinks that rediscovering that identity might allow the West to “save the world” is not the smallest puzzle of this comically pretentious excursus into the past. □
The Odd Couple

By Robert W. Merry


In the early 1890s, when Theodore Roosevelt met William Howard Taft during their early stints as government officials in Washington, Roosevelt said, “One loves him at first sight.” Later, as president, Roosevelt extolled the virtues of Taft, then U.S. governor-general of the Philippines: “There is not in this Nation a higher or finer type of public servant than Governor Taft.” After Taft became Roosevelt’s war secretary, the president reported to a friend that the new cabinet chief was “doing excellently, as I knew he would, and is the greatest comfort to me.” Before going on vacation, TR assured the nation that all would be well in Washington because “I have left Taft sitting on the lid.” Subsequently, when Taft expressed embarrassment about a news article unflattering to Roosevelt that had been spawned by a Taft campaign functionary, the president was unmoved. “Good heavens, you beloved individual,” he wrote, suggesting Taft should get used to false characterizations in the press, as he himself had done, although “unlike you I have frequently been myself responsible.”

Such expressions betokened a special relationship between public servants that extended beyond political expediency and touched deep cords of personal affection. For his part, Taft described their friendship as “one of close and sweet intimacy.”

After Taft succeeded Roosevelt as president and sought in his own way to extend the TR legacy, though, the friendship fell apart. Roosevelt, concluding his old chum didn’t measure up, turned on him with a polemical vengeance that negated the mutual affections of old. Going after his former friend, first in an effort to wrest from him the 1912 Republican presidential nomination and then as an independent general-election candidate, Roosevelt destroyed the Taft presidency—and brought down the Republican Party in that year’s canvas. When the Taft forces prevailed in a typical credentials fight at the GOP convention, TR seized upon it as proof of Taft’s mendacity and corruption. “The receiver of stolen goods is no better than the thief,” he declared. When Taft’s political standing began to wane, largely from TR’s own attacks, he dismissed his erstwhile companion as “a dead cock in the pit.” The former president said, “I care nothing for Taft’s personal attitude toward me.”

In the annals of American history, few stories of personal fellowship are as poignant and affecting as the story of the Roosevelt-Taft friendship and its brutal disintegration. But it carries historical significance beyond the shifting personal

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sentiments of two politicians. This particular story of personalities takes place against the backdrop of the Republican Party’s emotion-laden effort—and the nation’s effort, and these two politicians’ efforts—to grapple with the progressive movement and the pressing contradictions and societal distortions created by industrialization.

Now the distinguished historian Doris Kearns Goodwin scrutinizes the Roosevelt-Taft saga, bringing to it her penchant for presenting history through the prism of personal storytelling. In *No Ordinary Time*, she illuminated the Franklin Roosevelt presidency by probing the complex and mysterious marriage of Franklin and Eleanor. In *Team of Rivals*, which examined Abraham Lincoln’s unusual decision to fill his cabinet with his political competitors, she not only laid bare crucial elements of Lincoln’s political temperament but also presented a panoramic survey of his time—and gave currency to a term that now figures prominently in the nation’s political lexicon. And now, with *The Bully Pulpit*, she deciphers a pivotal time in American politics through the moving tale of TR and Will, girded by her characteristic deft narrative talents and exhaustive research. And there’s a bonus: she weaves into her narrative the story of S. S. McClure’s famous progressive magazine, named after himself and dedicated to the highest standards of expository reporting and lucid writing.

Goodwin’s narrative takes on a particularly powerful drive as the TR-Taft friendship crumbles—and then, after the sands of time have eroded the sharp edges of animus, is restored. The author’s narrative doesn’t bring a strong focus to Roosevelt’s powerful views and actions on foreign policy—his vision of America as preeminent global power, for example, or his dramatic decision to send his Great White Fleet around the world as a display of U.S. naval prowess and a spur to congressional support for his cherished naval buildup. Nor does she trace in elaborate detail the challenging developments in the Philippines, called by TR biographer Kathleen Dalton “the war that would not go away” (although TR finally brought it to a conclusion through a notable level of military brutality directed against insurgent forces). Rather, this is a book about the emergence of the progressive impulse, which sought to apply federal intervention to thwart “the corrupt consolidation of wealth and power” within industrial America. Goodwin clearly believes this counterforce was necessary to protect ordinary Americans from the unchecked machinations of the “selfish rich,” industrial titans, and corrupt local and state governments.

She is correct, of course. The advent of American industrialization had generated substantial economic growth through the latter half of the nineteenth century, and that in turn had fostered the creation of vast new wealth. The Republican Party, as the champion of this development, enjoyed a dominant position in American politics. But the party was beginning to falter at century’s end as it failed to address the attendant problems of the industrial
era—predatory monopolies, abuse of the working classes, fraud and malpractice in the distribution of food and medicines. A new turn was necessary, but any suggestion of one antagonized entrenched interests, many within the Republican Party itself. These included industrial plutocrats, their cronies among the urban political bosses and allied members of Congress. A potent political clash was probably inevitable.

Roosevelt and Taft, born thirteen months apart in the late 1850s, enjoyed comfort and privilege as children. Taft’s father was a prominent Cincinnati lawyer and judge who served as U.S. war secretary and attorney general in the administration of President Ulysses Grant. He was a loving but demanding father who approached life as relentless duty, devoid of anything resembling joy. By contrast, Roosevelt’s father, scion of a family that had amassed a substantial fortune in New York commerce, real estate and banking, took delight in his work but skillfully combined it with a robust social life and exuberant family activities. He was “the most intimate friend of each of his children,” recalled Theodore’s sister, Corinne.

Both youngsters demonstrated acute intellectual abilities and developed early ambitions to leave a mark on society. Both emerged among their peers as natural leaders to whom others looked for guidance. Both gravitated to the law and to public service and never hankered for private attainment or wealth. Both experienced significant career propulsion at an early age. Both embraced a reformist sensibility dedicated to clean government and opposition to political bossism. Both began their formative years of political consciousness with a mild conservatism of the kind typically found among the privileged, but both later developed an appreciation for elements of the progressive ethos.

There the similarities end. Roosevelt was a man in perpetual motion—restless, forceful, cocky, a “bubbling, explosively exuberant American,” as the Boston Daily Globe put it. A British viscount said he had seen “two tremendous works of nature in America—the Niagara Falls and Mr. Roosevelt.” The writer William Allen White suggested TR’s mind moved “by flashes or whims or sudden impulses.”

Roosevelt’s theatrical self-importance led even his children to acknowledge that he wanted to be “the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral.” His speech sparkled with vivid expressions that reflected his unabashedly held strong opinions. When Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes came down on what TR considered the wrong side of an important decision, Roosevelt declared, “I could carve out of a banana a judge with more backbone than that.”

On the other hand, wrote White, Taft’s mind moved “in straight lines and by long, logical habit.” He was easygoing—modest in demeanor, conciliatory by temperament. While Roosevelt garnered attention by putting himself forward with endless quips, asides and pronunciamientos, the more self-conscious Taft let others come to him, and because he stood out as solid and
fair-minded they almost always did. White described him as “America incarnate—sham-hating, hardworking, crackling with jokes upon himself, lacking in pomp but never in dignity . . . a great, boyish, wholesome, dauntless, shrewd, sincere, kindly gentleman.”

As the two men made their way in government service, Roosevelt moved amid a constant cloud of controversy. And yet he discovered that his penchant for relentlessly pushing his pet issues to the forefront and forcing decisions could be highly effective. As the youngest member of the New York state legislature, he became one of New York’s leading reform politicians. “I rose like a rocket,” he later explained with characteristic pride.

Taft meanwhile gravitated to the judiciary, which proved compatible with his judicious nature. At the remarkably young age of twenty-nine, he was appointed an Ohio state judge. He distinguished himself sufficiently to win a presidential appointment as U.S. solicitor general in the Benjamin Harrison administration. Thus, he moved with his wife Nellie to Washington and took up residence near Dupont Circle, just a thousand feet from the new residence of Theodore Roosevelt, recently appointed to the Civil Service Commission. The two took to walking together to work each morning.

Based on their experiences under Harrison, Taft would have appeared to be on the faster track. The president found his temperament much more to his liking than that of Roosevelt—who, the president complained, seemed to feel “that everything ought to be done before sundown.” Sensing the president’s disdain, Roosevelt complained to his sister that his fight against corruption in federal employment practices was conducted with “the little gray man in the White House looking on with cold and hesitating disapproval.” Goodwin writes that Harrison considered firing the underling but feared a backlash from the large numbers of people who appreciated his forceful anticorruption agitations. Conversely, Harrison took an immediate liking to Taft, inviting him to call at the White House “every evening if convenient.” Harrison eventually nominated the thirty-four-year-old Taft to a seat on the U.S. Circuit Court, the second highest in the federal judicial system. Roosevelt, meanwhile, returned to New York City as police commissioner.

The next Republican president, William McKinley, developed similar views of the two men. When he needed a judicious
and calm figure to become governor-general of the Philippines, he chose Taft. But when Roosevelt’s friends sought to get him appointed assistant naval secretary, McKinley hesitated. He told one Roosevelt promoter, “I want peace, and... I am afraid he is too pugnacious.” But eventually he relented and gave Roosevelt the job, to which the new assistant secretary brought a whirlwind of activity aimed at getting the navy ready for a war with Spain that he not only foresaw but also welcomed with a kind of romantic martial spirit.

When war came, Roosevelt embraced it not only philosophically but also physically, organizing his “Rough Rider” militia unit that distinguished itself in the campaign to capture the crucial city of Santiago in Cuba. Leading his famous charge up Kettle Hill on the San Juan Heights, he demonstrated a disregard for his personal safety that was courageous and foolhardy in equal measure. That single action cemented his place among his countrymen as the most stirring personality of his time. He already had become nationally known for his impetuous ways and reformist zeal; now he was a national hero.

Roosevelt promptly parlayed his new status into a successful run for New York governor. His budding progressivism ran headlong into the conservative doggedness of the state’s political bosses, particularly Senator Thomas Platt, who ran the New York Republican machine. Although Roosevelt sought to nurture a working association with Platt, he ran afoul of the senator when he pushed for a business franchise tax on corporations—streetcar firms, telephone networks, telegraph lines—that had been given lucrative business opportunities through state franchises. “You will make the mistake of your life if you allow that bill to become a law,” Platt warned, hinting at a suspicion that Roosevelt harbored Communist or socialist tendencies. Roosevelt countered: “I do not believe that it is wise or safe for us as a party to take refuge in mere negation and to say that there are no evils to be corrected.” He got the bill passed, though with some amendments designed to placate Platt if possible. The party boss sought to put a friendly face on the outcome, but the machine now considered Governor Roosevelt a marked man.

Undeterred, Roosevelt sent to the legislature a call for state actions to curtail the growth and power of corporate trusts, the increasingly monopolistic enterprises that sought to squeeze out competitors, often through corruption and dishonesty, and thus gain dominance over crucial
burgeoning markets. Taking a cue from his friend Elihu Root, one of the country’s leading lawyers and war secretary in the McKinley administration, Roosevelt carefully crafted his language on the trusts to avoid any hint of radicalism. He stressed, “We do not wish to discourage enterprise; we do not desire to destroy corporations; we do desire to put them fully at the service of the State and the people.” Notwithstanding this measured approach, which was to become a hallmark in subsequent years, the antitrust effort never got off the ground. The reason, he concluded, was that the problem had not seeped sufficiently into the political consciousness of the people.

But Roosevelt’s apostasy was never forgotten by Boss Platt and his cronies. They sought to oust him from the governor’s chair and perhaps even deny him renomination at the next gop convention. The solution came in the form of a movement to get Roosevelt on the McKinley ticket as vice president in the 1900 balloting. Roosevelt wasn’t sure he could handle being stuck in such a passive, backwater job, but the threat of being upended as governor proved a powerful incentive. As his friend Henry Cabot Lodge succinctly put it, “If you decline the nomination, you had better take a razor and cut your throat.”

Less than seven months after assuming the vice presidency, TR became president, to the consternation of his foes, following the assassination of McKinley in September 1901. The country’s new chief executive was just forty-two years old.

“I am President,” he declared with characteristic audacity, “and shall act in every word and deed precisely as if I and not McKinley had been the candidate for whom the electors cast the vote for President.” Roosevelt proved adept in working with the congressional opposition and in encasing his antitrust goals in descriptive language designed to be moderate, measured and balanced. Federal power over the trusts, he declared, must be “exercised with moderation and self-restraint.” And he argued that Democratic calls to eradicate all trusts would “destroy all our prosperity.” But he encountered an apathetic public on the issue, just as he had during his days as New York governor.

Enter S. S. McClure. He hit upon the idea of sending his talented young writer, Ida Tarbell, after a single trust, thus rendering the story vivid and understandable. She chose John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil, “the Mother of Trusts.” In a twelve-part series that later became a best-selling book, Tarbell documented, among other things, how Rockefeller induced corrupt railroad magnates to impose discriminatory freight rates upon his independent rivals, thus killing off competition and cornering the mushrooming oil market. The reaction was electric. Suddenly the trust problem became a matter of high concern to the nation.

This helped pave the way for Roosevelt’s progressive agenda, which he pressed with his usual urgency. He pushed through a reluctant legislature the Hepburn Act, which authorized the Interstate Commerce Commission to set the rates charged by
railroads to their shipping customers—a direct reply to Tarbell’s famous Rockefeller series. He got Congress to create the Department of Commerce and Labor (later split into two separate departments), with regulatory powers over large corporations, and to pass legislation expediting prosecutions under the Sherman Antitrust Act. Responding to other “muckraking” journalism in McClure’s Magazine and elsewhere, he fostered passage of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act. Roosevelt’s Justice Department filed suit against the Northern Securities Company under antitrust laws and brought the company down. It broke up Standard Oil and went after the beef trusts that had colluded to parcel out territories and fix prices, resulting in sharp cost increases for consumers of meat.

In addition, he personally—and adroitly—handled a coal-strike crisis that threatened the national economy. And he preserved some 230 million acres in public trust through creation of a multitude of national parks, forests and monuments. In foreign affairs, he set in motion the building of the Panama Canal by fomenting a successful Panamanian revolt against Colombia and then negotiating with the new Panamanian nation for rights to the swath of isthmus needed for the canal. He put himself forward as mediator to foster a negotiated end to the Russo-Japanese War, a bit of diplomacy that earned him a Nobel Peace Prize.

Roosevelt deployed federal power on behalf of national goals, far beyond anything seen since the Civil War. But two realities surrounding the Roosevelt presidency merit attention. First, the Rough Rider president, in bringing progressive precepts into the national government, stopped short of the kinds of redistributive economic policies favored by more radical progressives of the era. His aim was to level the playing field by outlawing practices and privileges that allowed favored groups to thrive at the expense of the mass of ordinary citizens. He didn’t embrace the goal of a graduated income tax, for example. And, although he despised the high tariff rates of the McKinley administration, he shied away from attacking those discriminatory levies because he wasn’t prepared to expend the
kind of political capital that would have been required for such a fight against party bosses committed to protectionist policies.

Indeed, Roosevelt constantly expressed his preference for middle-ground approaches that raised the ire of both laissez-faire conservatives and more radical elements of the progressive movement. Even as New York governor, he confessed that he wasn’t sure which he regarded “with the most unaffected dread—the machine politician or the fool reformer.” He added that he was “emphatically not one of the ‘fool reformers.’” As president he declared that “there is no worse enemy of the wage-worker than the man who condones mob violence in any shape or who preaches class hatred.” He identified “the rock of class hatred” as “the greatest and most dangerous rock in the course of any republic.”

Second, Roosevelt found that during the latter part of his seven-year presidency he no longer possessed the political clout to get his initiatives through Congress. He attributed this to the “lame duck” effect of his promise to the American people, when he ran for a second term, that he wouldn’t seek a third. Goodwin credits this rationale, and no doubt it contributed to his diminished political force as his White House tenure wound down. But another factor was that the country had absorbed about as much progressivism as it was prepared to handle at that time in its history, absent the kind of crisis that emerged a generation later with the Great Depression. Indeed, even Roosevelt’s distant cousin, Franklin Roosevelt, found his New Deal initiatives reaching their limit after he sought to exploit his landslide reelection victory of 1936 by “packing” the Supreme Court.

But Theodore Roosevelt, with his big domestic initiatives, had altered the political landscape of America and thus had emerged as a leader of destiny among American presidents. Accepting, based on his two-term commitment, that he must relinquish the presidency, he deftly fostered the election of Taft as his successor and then headed off to Africa for a year of big-game hunting, confident that his friend would carry on his policies. Upon his return, he thought otherwise.

Throughout their friendship and intertwined careers, Roosevelt and Taft had been a powerful combination, complementing each other’s weaknesses and foibles. That was in part what each appreciated about the other. Roosevelt the impetuous, instinct-driven politician appreciated Taft’s measured, careful decision making. Taft admired Roosevelt’s ability to size up a political situation instantly and seize the initiative on it. Roosevelt wrote: “He has nothing to overcome when he meets people. . . . I realize that I have always got to overcome a little something before I get to the heart of people. . . . I almost envy a man possessing a personality like Taft’s.” For his part, Taft often wished he could incorporate some of Roosevelt’s quick insightfulness and scintillating use of the language. “I wish I could make a good speech,” he confessed to his wife, adding that a recent performance in Michigan had left “a bad taste in my mouth.”
But once their paths diverged with Roosevelt's trip to Africa, these differences in temperament took on an entirely new coloration. Progressives who expected Taft to carry on Roosevelt's policies often seemed unmindful that even Roosevelt had failed to carry on his own policy preferences to the end of his presidency. Worse, the most ardent progressives seemed to want Taft to operate in TR fashion. That wasn't possible. At one point, when President Taft shied away from taking a particular fight to the American people, as TR no doubt would have done, he said wistfully, “There is no use trying to be William Howard Taft with Roosevelt's ways.”

Indeed, there was a halting quality to Taft's leadership. But he pursued significant elements of the progressive agenda, ultimately with considerable success. While Roosevelt had avoided a tariff fight lest he drive a wedge through his party, Taft plunged into the fray and helped produce trade legislation that represented a significant party turnaround on the issue. Though he didn't get as much as he wanted and radical reformers complained when he didn't veto it, the legislation represented a significant political achievement. But then the president unwisely heralded the bill as “the best bill that the Republican party ever passed,” signaling that he had no intention of pursuing any future tariff reductions. Predictably, the radical reformers cried betrayal.

Despite such political lapses, Taft brought forth a new railroad bill that bolstered the power of the Interstate Commerce Commission to initiate action against rate hikes. He created a “special Commerce Court” to expedite judgments and brought telegraph and telephone companies under the authority of the Interstate Commerce Act. New reporting requirements for campaign contributions were enacted. Arizona and New Mexico joined the union as states. A new Bureau of Mines emerged to regulate worker safety in the mining industry. Taft also fostered the creation of a postal savings bank to provide people of limited means a safe haven for their savings. Much of this was possible because of Taft's deft deal making during the arduous efforts to get his tariff bill through Congress, when he accepted amendments from old-guard conservatives in exchange for later support for his broader agenda.

In addition, Taft proposed legislation to enact a corporate income tax, which cleared Congress, and a constitutional amendment authorizing an individual income tax, which also cleared Congress and was sent to the states for ratification. (It was ratified in 1913.)

It's impossible to know what drove Roosevelt to ignore all these achievements and go after his old friend, to destroy his presidency and deliver a powerful blow to his own party. But it's difficult to escape the conclusion that the greatest factor was the former president's outsized ego. A telling clue may be the report, mentioned by Goodwin, that Roosevelt told a friend he would cut his hand off at the wrist if he could retrieve his pledge not to run for a third term. Wisconsin senator Robert La Follette, a close Roosevelt observer, speculated that he left the White House
with a prospective 1916 run for president firmly in mind. But, when he saw Taft’s weakness with GOP reform elements and tasted the nectar of his own lingering popularity, he “began to think of 1912 for himself. It was four years better than 1916.”

After all, it isn’t easy becoming an ex-president at age fifty, yielding to others the power and glory that once were so heady and thrilling in one’s own hands. For a man who wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral, it was particularly difficult to accept such a loss of position and power. In any event, while Roosevelt couldn’t win on an independent-party ticket, he could keep Taft from winning. And that paved the way for the presidency of Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

Goodwin believes Taft’s political demise stemmed from his own limitations as president. “For all of [his] admirable qualities and intentions to codify and expand upon Roosevelt’s progressive legacy,” she writes, “he ultimately failed as a public leader, a failure that underscores the pivotal importance of the bully pulpit in presidential leadership.” Perhaps. But presidential leadership comes in many guises, and ultimately it’s about performance. Taft’s performance, based on the political sensibility he shared with Roosevelt, was exemplary. His largest burden was the split within the Republican Party spawned by Roosevelt’s own resolve to interject progressive concepts into national governance. This resolve, coupled with Roosevelt’s own increasingly rough-hewn manner of dealing with Congress, had absorbed his last stores of political capital long before the end of his presidency.

But Taft managed to wend his way through this political environment and keep the flame alive, to replenish the stores of political capital through his own deft deal making and good-natured compromising. His most dangerous adversaries turned out to be those people Roosevelt had called “fool reformers.” Then his old friend Teddy returned from Africa and joined the fool reformers. But suppose Roosevelt had taken a different tack. Suppose he had rushed to the defense of his old companion and heralded his middle-ground techniques as being firmly in the tradition of his own political ethos. Suppose that, in doing this, he had enabled Taft to arrive at a synthesis of politics that could have sustained a winning coalition and carried him through the coming election and into a second term. Then Roosevelt’s legacy would have remained secure under the Republican banner, and he would have been positioned to take ownership of the 1916 canvas, when he would have been a vigorous fifty-eight years old.

Instead, the country saw a party rupture based on atmospherics, brazenly inaccurate accusations, ideological fervor and personal whims writ large. It was the politics of temper tantrum, the product of a man whose most outrageous traits, though frequently charming, had always been potentially problematic but generally under control. Now they erupted onto the political scene with unchecked force, sweeping his old friend, his party and his country into the resulting vortex. □
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