The United States is not often classed among the great revolutionary regimes of world history. France, Russia, China, Libya and Iran would make a standard roll call of states that experienced what Edmund Burke called, in the divided France, a "revolution of doctrine and theoretick dogma," an ideological displacement at home that expressed itself as aggressive interference abroad.

The utopian aspiration "to begin the world over again" is common to all revolutions, including the one for which Thomas Paine coined that phrase, the American Revolution. But the attempt to remake the wider world in one's own image is rarer and is usually taken to be a French characteristic. It is understandable that America was a nation born and raised in self-imposed isolation. The Americans had politely shown a "decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind" when they introduced themselves into international society in 1776. Once they had secured independence, their "true policy" was "to steer clear of permanent alliances with the foreign world," as George Washington counselled in his Farewell Address of 1796. America "goes not abroad, in search of war, nor provokes it to destroy." John Quincy Adams affair on Independence Day, 1821. Instead, it stayed aloof from distracting entanglements behind the Monroe doctrine of European non-interference in the western hemisphere. This pattern of protecting the nation from foreign provocations, like those that led to the Spanish- American War of 1898.

It does not take much to demolish this myth of American inertia. In 2002, a Congressional Research Service report counted some 300 occasions between 1790 and 2001 when American military forces had been deployed abroad: an average of one every eight months. The nine-teenth-century average was closer to one a year, but only because the report omitted "the Civil and Revolutionary Wars and the continual use of U.S. military units in the exploration, settlement, and pacification of the Western part of the United States." If those engagements were included, then the chronology of American military intervention would be much more crowded and bloody.

Proving that the United States has, since its earliest days, been incorrigibly interventionist both at home and abroad is hardly the same thing as showing the survival of a consistent ideology that inspired its interventions. That is the task Robert Kagan has set himself in Dangerous Nation: America and the world 1600-1898. Kagan's canvas is deep, stretching from the Puritan settlement of New England to the "splendid little war" of 1898. It is also broad, as the Revolutionary and Civil Wars bulk as large in the tableau as westward expansion, the Mexican War and Southern designs on the Caribbean. For the moment, though, the picture tranforms into a pale, thin one, a consistent ideology that inspired the interventions. That is the task Robert Kagan has set himself in Dangerous Nation. America and the world 1600-1898.

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The climax of Dangerous Nation is the war of 1898. Though often portrayed by diplomatic historians as America's first imperial war, pursued more for the good of American capitalists and journalists than for the relief of oppressed Cubans, for Kagan it was instead the culmination of two centuries of American humanism, "an expression of who the American people were and what they had made of their nation." He portrays a narrowly victorious Republican President drawn reluctantly into intervention by a major blow to national pride, quite against his expressed inclinations -- "We want no foreign wars of conquest," William McKinley had said in his inaugural address -- and against a backdrop of deep international disquiet, but initially with the overwhelming support of the American people. The explosion of the battleship Maine in Havana harbour was no 9/11, and it should not be read as such. Under Fidel, Cuba no Saddam Hussein, but it is hard to avoid reading the book's final chapter in the light of Republican foreign policy since 2001.

That Kagan is a prominent American neoconservative and an Iran war hawk makes it harder still to read his book as a tract on the future of America, or even the times. This is partly because he is what might be called, using terms coined to distinguish competing schools of geology, a uniformitarian rather than a catastrophist when it comes to explaining the roots of contemporary American foreign policy. As Kagan put it in a 2004 afterword to his Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order, "The Bush doctrine, such as it is, has sprung naturally out of the liberal, revolutionary American tradition." This espousal of moral activism rather than national interest as the key to explaining American behaviour forms an explicitly anti-realism strain in both books. Yet Dangerous Nation is far from an explanation, let alone an apologia, for America's most recent, and most disastrous, war of choice. To interpret such a lucid, cogently argued and amply sourced book crudely in the light of current affairs would be to point out only its weaknesses and to fail to recognize its strengths.

The book is strikingly teleological, even to the point of back-projecting a seemingly eternal essence of Americanism on to centuries when there were no self-identifying Americans. It assumes a "national interest," the "national will" of the people, as definitive of a people and expressed outwardly through the actions of their rulers, whose heyday had surely passed at least half a century before modern political science was born. And it combines the myth of American isolationism only at the risk of asserting a peculiarly American exceptionalism that makes other states' interventions inexplicable. Yet Kagan avoids outright Whiggishness by ending in 1906, before the United States had acquired its first extra-continental outposts of empire. The choice to end there was strategic, for the consequences of the nineteenth century's last little war still linger in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawaii and the Pacific islands.

Dangerous Nation follows a well- established strain of American international history in highlighting the primacy of internal politics and culture in determining foreign policy, and does so especially revealingly in its treatment of the foreign policy of slavery. And though teleological, it is far from triumphalist, because it always acknowledges the views of America's victims and opponents as much as those of its boosters and cheerleaders. That is just as well, because the book may have present more voices, voices as its second volume approaches the present. One of his fellow neoconservatives, Kenneth Adelman, was recently reported to be saying that, thanks to the mismatches of the Neoconservative idea of an untrammeled American foreign policy on behalf of morality, the idea of using our power for moral good in the world", is dead, at least for a generation. Readers of Dangerous Nation should be curious to see whether it proceeds with such fatalism as far as the recent death of Republican universalism nationalism on the streets of Iraq. Out of continuities can come catastrophe; not even the most selfless superpower can render its revolution permanent.