

Past and perilous

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Robert Kagan

DANGEROUS NATION
America and the world 1600–1898
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wanting only to be left alone in her self-contained world". Their missionary universalism soon joined hands with the possessive individualism of the middle and Southern colonies to create the "liberal materialist forces" that would ever after shape America's stance towards the wider world.

The first major fruit of those forces was the American Revolution. Kagan argues that it arose not from Americans' desire to escape empire but from their desire to acquire one – for themselves, instead of for Britain. The colonists, emboldened by their success in helping to expel France from North America during the Seven Years War, chafed at the limits to their growth imposed by war-weary British politicians. Their "liberalism" found expression in the Declaration's assertions of human freedom, equality and the restless pursuit of happiness. Americans soon appointed themselves the guardians and promoters of such principles, from Spanish America to the Balkans. Or, as Herman Melville put it in *White-Jacket* (1850): "We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time . . . with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America but we give alms to the world".

The world would not always be grateful to America, of course. Kagan takes his title from John Quincy Adams's report from London in 1817 that "The universal feeling in Europe . . . is that we shall, if united, become a very dangerous member of the society of nations". The young United States had already opened up new trades with Asia and made great strides in expanding westwards; it had greedily absorbed the Louisiana Purchase and was now looking hungrily on Spanish Florida, Mexico, Canada and Cuba. As the most ambitiously vibrant and outward-looking republic since Rome, America also offered a menacing alternative to the legitimist monarchical order that had been re-established in Europe after 1815. It could be seen as a state sponsor of terrorism, "foster[ing] . . . revolutions wherever they show themselves", as an alarmed Metternich charged. Who could tell where such an energetic adolescent among nations might next choose to throw its weight around?

Not Americans themselves for, as Adams rightly noted, they were far from united on the single most divisive issue affecting national politics and shaping continental expansion: slavery. The central chapter of *Dangerous Nation* persuasively argues that slavery also decisively informed foreign policy in the decades before the Civil War. Far from possessing a single national interest, the antebellum United States had instead a "split personality"; it "was not only a liberal democratic republic . . . it was also, in part, a racial despotism". The

racial despots and their sympathizers promoted policies, foreign and domestic, designed to protect and extend the slave system.

Abolitionists and Northerners, as well as Southern Democrats, found themselves constrained in their support for westward expansion lest it lead to the achievement of the slaveholders' goals. There was no single "manifest destiny". There were multiple manifest destinies, not all of which could survive the bloody test of the Civil War. Once tried in the fire, the post-bellum United States was more unified, prosperous and populous than ever before; these factors, Kagan argues, protected it from outside invasion far more than the surrounding oceans or the security umbrella provided by the Royal Navy. America could at last remain aloof from Europe because of strength not weakness. However, that could not prevent it from becoming embroiled in intra-hemispheric entanglements.



A memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment by Augustus Saint-Gaudens; from *Seeing America*, edited by Marjorie B. Searle (336pp. University of Rochester Press. \$65. 978 1 58046 244 0)

The climax of *Dangerous Nation* is the war of 1898. Though often portrayed by diplomatic historians as America's first imperialist 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 humanitarianism, "an expression of who the American people were and what they had made of their nation". He portrays a narrowly elected 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 the Spanish colonial governor of 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 Iraq war hawk makes it harder still not to read his latest book as a tract for 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-realist strain in both books. Yet *Dangerous Nation* is far from an explanation, let alone an apology, 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 up 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 Americanness on to centuries when there were no self-identifying Americans. It assumes a conception of national character, 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 combats the myth of American isolationism only at the risk of asserting a peculiarly American exceptionalism that makes other states' interventionisms inexplicable. Yet Kagan avoids outright Whiggishness by ending in 1898, 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 Guantánamo Bay.

Dangerous Nation follows a now 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, for Robert Kagan may have to present more such voices as his second volume approaches the present. One of his fellow neoconservatives, Kenneth Adelman, was recently reported as saying that, thanks to the mismanagement of the war in Iraq, "the idea of a tough 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 its sequel will carry the story as far as the death of American universalist nationalism on the streets of Iraq. Out of continuities can come catastrophe; not even the most selfless superpower can render its revolution permanent.

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 case of 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 innovation. A long-tended myth held 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 monsters to destroy", John Quincy Adams affirmed on Independence Day, 1821. Instead, it stayed aloof from distracting entanglements behind the Monroe doctrine of European non-interference in the western hemisphere. This slumbering Samson rose only to unbearable 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 1798 and 2001 when American military forces had been deployed abroad: an average of one every eight months. The nineteenth-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 militarism 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 that a consistent ideology 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 remains incomplete, for this is only the first part of a promised two-volume study. *Dangerous Nation* deploys an array of contemporary testimony and more recent scholarship to demonstrate that America, far from being innately isolationist, was inexorably expansionist from its earliest years. Kagan calls the motor of that expansion an ideology of "universalist nationalism", whose basic principles were enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, but which long predated the Revolution. Indeed, Kagan finds Americans two centuries before the United States itself. His first Americans are those "global revolutionaries" the Puritans, whose city on a hill was no "pious Greta Garbo,