

*Robert Kagan:  
Machiavellian in Liberal Disguise*

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*The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*,  
by Robert Kagan, Alfred A. Knopf.

*The World America Made*, by Robert Kagan, Alfred A. Knopf.

*The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, by Robert  
Kagan, Alfred A. Knopf.

*Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from Its  
Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century*, by Robert  
Kagan, Alfred A. Knopf.

*Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New  
World Order*, by Robert Kagan, Alfred A. Knopf.

ROBERT KAGAN is the king of the Washington foreign policy commentariat, or at least its neoconservative wing. There are several rivals to the throne, but with the passing of Charles Krauthammer, the previous monarch, the prize should surely go to Kagan. That is not because Kagan is more insightful or more prolific than other neoconservatives, but because he got the closest of any of them to power, sidling up to Republican and Democratic leaders alike.

Kagan's latest work, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (2018), is his fourth short book on American foreign policy. The first one, *Of Paradise and Power* in early 2002, made him famous. Its thesis was that "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus"—a geopolitical appropriation from the best-selling pop-culture work by John Gray on how to overcome irreconcilable differences between the sexes. The partners in the trans-Atlantic relationship, Kagan worried, "agree on little and understand one another less and less." The moral of the work (my translation) was: "Venus, we love your beautiful garden; now let Mars tend to the rest. You live in

a Kantian paradise, but the larger world is fashioned after Hobbes's state of nature. You may dream your beautiful dream. We must act in the world as it is." The end of the book featured a justification for the preventive war against Iraq, soon to be opened in March 2003 by George W. Bush. Kagan subsequently became a drafter in 2005 of Bush's Second Inaugural, with its militant call to end tyranny everywhere and its pledge to commit America to that ceaseless project.

In April 2008 came *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, an ironic play on Francis Fukuyama's "end of history." History, Kagan argued, far from ending in the universal triumph of liberal democracy, had returned with a vengeance in the form of an authoritarian axis linking Russia, China, and Iran. He called for a Concert of Democracies to combat the menace. Kagan had been close to Bush; he was now close to John McCain, the Republican contender in 2008. McCain's platform owed mostly to McCain's convictions, but it had Kagan's imprint. McCain and Kagan saw eye to eye on all the big questions.

McCain lost in 2008, but Kagan was regarded with deep respect by the Democratic victors, Barack Obama and his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton. Obama took Kagan's next book, *The World America Made* (February 2012) on vacation with him and studied it. Kagan announced that Clinton had excellent good sense on foreign policy and became her defender rather than critic. He especially rallied to her in the 2016 election, as did a whole swath of neocon Never-Trumpers.

In his 2012 book, Kagan argued that America could decline, but that would be a choice, not a decree of fate. He urged maintenance and continued expansion of the American system. America had saved the world, and it must keep trying to save it, or else chaos—the jungle—would return. Obama answered, in the State of the Union no less, by saying that he was doing just what Kagan recommended, preserving and extending the American system. Obama and Kagan were both stout adherents of America's "liberal world order." Yet there was a hint of defensiveness in Obama's response to Kagan. Seriously, Bob, Obama was saying, we're on the same team, Team America. Don't hassle me with accusations of being a declinist.

It has been my fate to study these books, the little books and a long one, *Dangerous Nation*, published in October 2006. I read one of them every year, sometimes more, in the classes I taught in US foreign policy at Colorado College. They were simply the most lucid statement of the official view, a bite-sized version for busy students from the pen of America's leading court historian. They expressed the bare-bones consensus and helped students understand why the custodians of the nation's foreign policy believed as they did. Convinced that in pedagogy one presents multiple conflicting perspectives, it seemed a good idea to fill the rest of the course with invectives against the official view. Andrew Bacevich, the leader of the antiwar battalions, was a favorite author and produced a lot more than Kagan in that fifteen-year stretch, issuing blistering deconstructions of the conventional wisdom every year or so. (Bacevich is the founder and president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a new think tank advocating military restraint in US foreign policy.) Kagan and Bacevich often did battle in my writing assignments. Ten years ago, Bacevich nearly always came out on top with the students; lately, to my puzzlement and dismay, Kagan has been gaining ground. I do not have a good explanation for this surprising turn of events. I speculate that the Gospel According to MSNBC, featuring retired spies as liberal champions, has made inroads on their receptive minds.

*Dangerous Nation* is an imaginative recounting of American foreign policy from the Pilgrims to 1900. It ends with a tribute to Theodore Roosevelt, whose portrait hung in the Oval Office of George W. Bush. Critics of the neocons have always charged them with insincerity; I consider their appropriation of the Rough Rider as one of the most authentic things about them. Bush and the neocons were indeed very much like Theodorus Maximus. They modernized his belligerent outlook. TR's great insight, when frothing over *The Winning of the West*, was that the civilized had to acquire the barbarian virtues—bloodlust, that is—if they were to do anything great. Custodians of the nation's morals at Harvard despised Roosevelt for saying that. President Charles Eliot, who saw America's commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes as its leading contribution to

civilization, considered TR “a degenerate son of Harvard.” But it was Roosevelt who came to power, not they. In office, TR proved not quite the full-scale fire-eater they feared, though his successor as president, William Howard Taft, remained appalled by his bellicose inclinations. Roosevelt, Taft declared in 1911, “has the spirit of the old Berserkers.”

I admired *Dangerous Nation* for its flair and creativity. It was not easy to extract neoconservatism and the Bush Doctrine, with their calls to end tyranny everywhere, from the staid gentry of Virginia, or the on-the-make lawyers and merchants in the bustling metropolis of New York, as they stood at the end of the eighteenth century. But Kagan persevered, so that the book became, in several of its parts, an exordium to a brief on behalf of the Iraq War. George Washington was the first neocon. Honest Abe was also of that school of thought. This judgment is mostly silent and by inference, but it pervades the text. This too recalls Roosevelt. “In the year 1898,” begins Roosevelt’s gilt-edged presidential edition of *The Winning of the West*, “the United States finished the work begun over a century before by the backwoodsman.” Roosevelt’s generation was “but carrying to completion the work of our fathers and of our fathers’ fathers.” *Dangerous Nation* stands in relation to the Iraq War as *The Winning of the West* stands in relation to the conquest of the Philippines.

An interesting feature of this appropriation, shared by the imperialists of 1898 and the neocons of 2003, is this particular relation to the past. Both said simultaneously that they were embarking on a wholly new policy, repudiating the false pacifism and forbearance of their predecessors. At the same time, both evoked the Fathers and insisted that what the Founders had done in the past was exactly what the United States was doing and needed to do in the present. Very different, in short, but the same. The first part of this proposition was largely true: the “large policy” of the 1890s and the preventive war of 2003 represented a repudiation of the dominant values of the preceding generation. The second part of this appropriation, however, presented a big historiographical problem for the ninety-eighters, but even more so for Kagan and the neocons. It wasn’t true: there was no unbroken line of commitment to foreign military intervention stretching from

George Washington to George W. Bush. To sustain this assumption required creativity in the handling of the evidence. You had to learn to put in phrases without the attached qualifiers. Not so hard, really, but still, a problem. Kagan's transformation of John Quincy Adams into an interventionist is a classic in this genre. He noted that Adams invoked the right of every people to throw off oppression but failed to note that Adams also believed that external intervention to overthrow despotism was a violation of the law of nations. For Adams, that belief reinforced his conviction that America should not go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy."

Another key similarity between the imperialists of 1898 and the neocons of 2003 was their justification for war. Was it for us or for them? In the Philippines, for strategic bases, or to save the Filipinos and prepare them (a century or two hence) for freedom? In Iraq, for US security or democratic liberation? Both wars were freighted out with solemn invocations of the national interest and the highest callings of the highest civilization. Both established the priority in the same way. Fearing a popular backlash, Lodge observed, "Whatever duty to others might seem to demand, I should pause long before supporting any policy if there were the slightest suspicion that it was not for the benefit of the people of the United States." That, too, was the Bush resolution, justifying the Iraq War as imperative for national security and as the noblest venture in human history, bestowing the precious teachings of our civilization on a backward people in need of them.

In both cases, the question—for them or for us?—acquired particular urgency once the costs, contrary to expectations, began to mount. American commanders in 1898 thought they could stare down Filipino resistance and that no war of occupation would be necessary. Over the next three years they fought a brutal war of imperial subjugation against a stout but ultimately failing nationalist movement in the Philippines. In 2003, "Mission Accomplished" proved the beginning, not the end. The United States didn't call them nationalists in the Philippines, but brigands and savages, and the United States didn't call them nationalists in Iraq, branding them as terrorists. It was pretty much the same analysis, the civilized compelled by the logic of their

enterprise to convert the respective countries into a bloodstained patch of jungle or desert. This “howling wilderness” strategy more or less worked in the first instance, the Filipinos submitting in 1902 and putting themselves under the care of America’s colonial overlords. The latter enterprise was not so successful.

A great test for neoconservatives today is their attitude toward the Iraq War. They believe that it achieved its main purpose, the defanging of Iraq, so still secretly admire that catastrophic intervention. Wouldn’t Saddam have nukes now, if we hadn’t removed him back then? Their basic answer is “yes, most probably.” In public, however, they have bowed to the reality that the American people didn’t think it was worth it. Why fight that losing battle with them, when they’ve already made up their mind? Thus, after more than a decade, the neocons one by one threw in the towel. The liberal hawks had jumped ship long before. After cooing about how massive external force would provide a decent government for Iraq, which the liberal hawks thought the best reason for the US invasion, they turned tail after agonizing reappraisals, just as their forebears had done in Vietnam. Thomas Friedman, David Remnick, George Packer, Fareed Zakaria: all were initial boosters, but were pretty much off the boat after two years. The neocons jumped a lot later. This followed the five-step Kübler-Ross pattern: 1) anger (at Rumsfeld); 2) denial (the surge will win it); 3) bargaining (a new Iraqi government, please); 4) depression (we’ve lost the elections and are out of power because of this stupid war); and 5) acceptance (OK, it was a big mistake). The way the towel was thrown, in Iraq and Vietnam, would make a great project for a future historian. Both entailed dramatic changes of heart among the elite, some of them the Wizards of Armageddon, others just pundits and hacks, but all once believing and then believing no longer. The reappraisals entailed lots of angst and private doubt, sowed before the important public recanting. There was much internal cogitation among them of when it was safe to admit it without being seen by your allies as a rat.

Neoconservative reappraisals were sometimes insightful. Eliot Cohen, in *The Big Stick* (2016), recounts how the Iraq War practically destroyed the British Army, once a proud companion in the

application of US military power. He shows the devastating effects on the US armed forces, with soldiers and their families ground down by the multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. (I personally bore witness to that devastation; it was real.) So yeah, he concludes, a mistake. I like most the stout neocons who continued to regard the war as a raging success, though with a few hiccups. They have the courage of their convictions—and are also easiest to refute. There is an added benefit: the more they cling to this dead horse, the less their views will find public favor.

Kagan's viewpoint on this entails a candid admission. He argues in *The Jungle Grows Back* that both Iraq and Vietnam weren't aberrations. They were unavoidable parts of the great plan. Post-World War II containment led to Vietnam. Post-Cold War globalism led to Iraq. The normal reaction to this would be: we've got to abandon the plan. Kagan's lesson is that no, we've got to stick with it. In baseball, he says, if you bat .300 lifetime, you're in the Hall of Fame. Good point, though it might be observed that a game with nuclear-tipped missiles in play cannot profitably be compared with baseball. Even if it were just another "great game," the .300 batting average is a bit too generous. A fair judgment of the last seventy-five years is that America started out like Derek Jeter and ended up an overpaid and hitless has-been, like Alex Rodriguez in the waning days of his career.

Kagan's *The World America Made* (2012) pledged itself to the "liberal world order" and justified the US role by describing the awful world that would have resulted had America abdicated. Such an America, Kagan argued, would have been like George Bailey, jumping off that bridge into oblivion, taking the eternal holiday from the toils of life. Everyone who has seen *It's a Wonderful Life* knows that George would have been making a terrible mistake, letting the carelessness of his brother cause the utmost pain to his dear wife, his beautiful children, and an expanding universe beyond them. Had he done it, we wouldn't have judged him so well, he who turned out to be the guy who made all the difference.

Kagan's tale is certainly relevant for the United States, as its great power did confer great responsibility. But if suicide was wrong, did that then countenance murder as the only alternative to self-immolation?

Perhaps there was a middle path. For a hard realist, Kagan gives a surprisingly unhistorical account of what he terms the triumph of the Western democracies against the fascist powers. Though Kagan nods occasionally to the sacrifices of the Soviet people, he more often in his works gives the entire credit to the West. Yet Soviet military losses are estimated at between 8.7 and 14 million dead soldiers. By contrast, 407,000 American soldiers died in World War II; 671,000 were wounded. Total Soviet losses were over 25 million souls. In 1946, when Winston Churchill warned of an Iron Curtain falling over the historic capitals of Central and Eastern Europe, the former Prime Minister also expressed “strong admiration and regard for the valiant Russian people.” How could he not? To them, in fact, is due the chief honor of defeating the beast. Today’s Western leaders, more propagandists than diplomats, cannot bear to utter a single word of praise in their remembrance and even exclude them from memorial ceremonies, though the scale of sacrifice by the Russian people was staggering, almost beyond comprehension. Wrote one Russian in November 1941, shortly before American entry: “To imagine for a moment the possibility of Hitler’s victory meant to forego all reason; if it were to happen then there could be no truth, logic, nor light in the development of human society, only chaos, darkness and lunacy; and it would be better not to live.” Those illiterate peasants from the steppes seem just like the men who braved certain death at D-Day, differing only in suffering ten times the casualties. It is perfectly true that the Russian people were cursed with terrible leaders, of whom Stalin holds first rank. Nor would they receive as the reward of victory over the Nazi tyranny their own freedom from despotism. But when everything was on the line they did more than anybody else to defeat Hitler, the necessary condition for the subsequent reconstruction of the world on liberal lines. In the American press today, this is never said. Objectively, I don’t see how it can be denied.

*Of Paradise and Power* in 2002 avowedly made the case for preventive war against Iraq. That unfolded in the last part of the book, for which the sweet talk about Venus and Mars was a titillating preface. The last three short books, on the other hand, are massive attempts

to change the subject. Iraq hardly comes up. In the few times it is mentioned in *The Return of History* and *The World America Made*, it is in passing. *The Jungle Grows Back* devotes a few paragraphs to Iraq, acknowledging the public judgment that it was a disaster, like Vietnam, and telling the American people, candidly, that there's more of that in the future if they take Kagan's advice. "As with Vietnam," he writes, the Iraq War "followed naturally from a foreign policy doctrine that successive administrations had embraced and justified." That judgment may be a bit unfair to Bill Clinton, who was not as bold as Bush, but one must be grateful for Kagan's acknowledgment. Most establishment writers say war is the furthest thing from their minds, as they applaud the steps that get us there. Kagan admits it is in our future if we follow his prescriptions.

Despite that acknowledgment, offered almost in passing, like the stray dicta of a prolific federal judge, Kagan's move in the later books is to change the subject and focus on America's historic contribution to the creation of the "liberal world order." The Middle East is hardly mentioned; the focus is relentlessly on the greater great-power cockpit that pits the United States against Russia and China. Iran is detailed as a threat in *The Return of History*, but barely discernible in *The World America Made* or *The Jungle Grows Back*. The historian and theorist Jeanne Morefield has called this the "politics of deflection" and explored it in a series of wonderful works; Kagan is a master at that enterprise. If they hit you in your exposed Pusan perimeter, stage a sweeping amphibious movement around their left flank and hit 'em where they ain't. It reminds me of the old joke about the Moscow subway that Nathan Glazer liked to recount: "You said there was a subway; there is no subway; where is the subway?" Came the reply: "Well, what about lynching in the South?"

Kagan's move in the last three books, focusing on the threat from Russia and China, resembles in a lot of ways the post-Vietnam reconstruction of the US-led order. That shift from incomprehensible Third World clime to "the West" shored up the American system by refocusing it, in the 1970s and 1980s, on the trilateral relationship—North America, Western Europe, Japan. Yes, we messed up Southeast

Asia, but our contributions to these other places have been pretty darn stellar, right? The US Army, ripped apart by Vietnam, reconstituted itself with that new mission on the Central Front in Germany. Those olive-drab boys might have conducted themselves just like Bill Murray and other ne'er-do-wells in *Stripes*, for all the difference it made, since the Soviets had no intention of invading. Kagan recognizes that at one point, but then still attributes the postwar miracle to US armed forces. That's much too sweeping. Even if one accepts the necessity of the North Atlantic Treaty and the subsequent militarization of the commitment to Western Europe after the outbreak of the Korean War, and then, for good measure, deflects criticism of later US moves by insisting that peace, after all, was preserved, there *were* alternatives to the Soviet-American arms race that could have been pursued were it not for the hysterical chest-thumping about "clear and present dangers" from the neocons. (In *Commentary* time, it's been 1938 since 1980.)

The 1990s discovery from Soviet archives that the Soviets didn't plan to invade but were on more than one occasion terrified that the United States would do so has left no imprint on Kagan's analysis whatsoever. This results in some laughable contradictions. On one page, we learn that in the late 1970s the Soviets were bidding for world conquest and believed that the correlation of forces had shifted radically in their favor; by the early 1980s, they are facing the dustbin of history. In just a couple of years? Their estimation of themselves rested on the US election returns? Ronald Reagan did play a role in the Soviet collapse, especially in making Afghanistan the Soviet Vietnam, but the real impetus to change in the Soviet Union was Gorbachev. The Reagan Revolution cannot plausibly take responsibility for the fact that a Russian statesman, birthed in the school of Stalin, should emerge projecting a Kantian reconstruction of international order. For Gorbachev, this meant profound demilitarization alongside the idea that every nation was free to go its own way. A Kremlin spokesman christened it "the Sinatra Doctrine." This was truly an "out of world" experience, like a five-hundred-year flood. At the same time, it laid bare the inherent weaknesses of the Soviet regime, which for the

longest time had struggled to hold on to what it had, with no thought whatsoever of taking over the world.

The real American triumph in the postwar period was the role it played in the Franco-German reconciliation. Kagan devotes a few perceptive pages to that and how it went down, though over-emphasizing the US role. At the heart of the European problem was the German Question, and at the heart of that was the Franco-German rivalry. Three wars, each deadlier than the last—from 1870 to 1871, 1914 to 1918, and now again from 1939 to 1945—had yielded such a mound of corpses that something had to change. War had succeeded only in bringing out the worst in the two countries. A lot of people at the time said that the antagonists couldn't change, that they would revert again to the old ways, but the French and Germans ultimately proved the cynics wrong. After all that killing and all that hatred, they tentatively began steps toward reconciliation, as Kant had intimated they might. In a shorter time than anyone expected, they would become fast friends. This must surely rank as one of the most hopeful moments in the history of the world.

The framework of security that the US commitment provided was seen by almost everybody—the British, the French, the Germans, and various others, but not the Soviets—as essential in that aim, though the credit would belong most of all to the people who made it happen and had to fight through so many dreadful memories to achieve this beautiful result. When I was in college, I wept at Henry Fairlie's account of my country's role in the achievement of this miraculous renaissance. Fairlie described the terrible winter of 1947, when he "walked the fields of Northumberland in what ought to have been the warmth of a new spring, but which was instead still a freezing cold, kicking the carcasses of the sheep which had frozen to death." The British journalist recalled that he "could as easily have walked through the cellars of Europe, kicking the unburied corpses of human beings. . . . Ortega y Gasset once described the Europeans as a swarm: innumerable bees, but a single flight. Without the assistance of the United States, the swarm might have died, the flight might have ended."

Meritorious though this action was, when American leaders acted “with a foresight beyond measure, and a magnanimity beyond praise” with the Marshall Plan, it does not mean that the steps along the way on the military front were correctly made. The Soviets, devastated by the war, often proved tractable, cautious, predictable. They had a victory to preserve, not a defeat to avenge, and this made for a fundamental difference between Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. Washington never really got that point. Stalin pushed, as George Kennan thought he would, but he also drew back, responding to American pressure in crises over Turkey and Iran, and yielding before British-American might in Greece. He didn’t want a major war. At the same time, he couldn’t withdraw from the vast empire that the Soviets had acquired by their conquest of German forces in the war, appalling though his actions appeared in the West, so repugnant to the promises of freedom in the Declaration of Liberated Europe issued at Yalta. Stalin saw, as his successors saw, that they could not offer a more liberal constitution to the Eastern European peoples they subjugated than what was on offer at home; liberalization there, they deeply believed, would threaten power at home. This grim logic condemned subject peoples to the extinction of their political independence and cultural autonomy, but it also bespoke a defensive rather than offensive orientation. In the end, the Stalinists and post-Stalinists turned out to be absolutely correct in their analysis, as the feared scenario played out exactly as predicted after Gorbachev came to power: dominos tumbled from west to east until the final domino—the very structure of the state—collapsed in a heap.

The American imperial predicament is similar in character, though different in detail. Kagan and the triumphalists believe that illiberal means are the best ways of securing liberal ends, when in fact that cheap bargain destroys the fabric of democracy at home and is profoundly inimical, simply by virtue of its manifest militarism, to the preservation of liberty. This contradiction eats at their enterprise and will ultimately confound it, the only question being the number of casualties suffered and ideals traduced along the road to this unhappy destination.



Where the neoconservative sensibility comes from, and what it resembles in philosophic speculation, are fascinating questions, though inevitably indeterminable and complicated. There have been ingenious attempts to trace the origins to controversies in the 1930s, when the first generation of neoconservatives (let's call them pre-neos) fought it out in the cafeterias of City College over arcane points of Marxist doctrine, featuring tenacious slugfests between Trotskyites and Stalinists. This history, however, was not especially significant for the first generation, who grew up during World War II and then came to consider their previous ideas as rather infantile. Those distant controversies on the left had no effect at all on the second generation of neoconservatives, people like Kagan or William Kristol or John Podhoretz, who generally came of age in the 1970s. They read about those disputes in *Commentary* or heard about them from their fathers, but that history had no real effect on them.

If not that, then what? Here I just have to blurt out my answer, one that would not have occurred to me to give five years ago. I think they are best seen as neo-Machiavellians, who view the world, as Machiavelli did, as hostile and forever bearing seeds of war, and who conclude, as he did as well, that odious means are sometimes required to achieve good results. Kagan relishes that insight and announces it with somber rectitude, quoting Reinhold Niebuhr's words, but failing to note that Niebuhr made that allowance to embolden resistance to Hitler when he was staring down the throat of civilization, not to justify dirty tricks against less powerful nations. The steps from "we must do this out of dire necessity" to "we should do this for our advantage" to "we can do whatever we like, because we are better" are the easiest in the world for the powerful to take. It would have been exceptional in history if Americans did not take them. In doing so, they proved to be not so exceptional after all. God no longer reserves a special providence for fools, drunkards, and the United States of America.

The parallel with Machiavelli goes beyond that of the immunity of evil deeds to condemnation when committed for a good cause.

Machiavelli in his *Discourses* distinguished between the “Tuscan” and the “Roman” methods of expansion, the former favoring confederation, the latter empire, the former closely resembling in key respects the liberalism built into European institutions after World War II, the latter the Mars-like infatuation with armed overthrow that became emblematic of neoconservatism. Machiavelli pronounced emphatically for the latter choice, as does Kagan. What Machiavelli called “the Roman method” meant acting preemptively, never allowing your enemies a chance to coalesce against you. It meant holding out a false promise of equality, and then reducing your associates to subjects. It meant the acquisition of protectorates, the more the merrier if your purpose was expansion. No better method suggested itself than hitting hard, seeking more, but doing so under a smokescreen of pieties about the equality of your associates and the nature of your enterprise. Is this not Kagan and neoconservatism in a nutshell?

Robert’s father Donald Kagan, the distinguished classicist, made the basic point crystal clear, something he thought big children understood but which had somehow eluded US leaders: “If you don’t want trouble with somebody else, be sure he has something to be afraid of.” The traditional view in liberalism is that threatening to injure people is a sure-fire method of getting into trouble with them. Not so, according to the Kagans. If you can make everybody fear you, you’re in the clear. Machiavelli was actually a bit more moderate on this important question. He wrote in the *Discourses* that the emperors who ruled according to justice earned the love of the people and the Senate. He saw this as crucial to the stability and legitimacy of their rule. At the same time, he could write more darkly, as he did in *The Prince*, giving the edge when necessary to fear over love. The problem with love was that it could be easily withdrawn, and you couldn’t rely on it under exiguous circumstances. That didn’t mean, in his view, that it was unimportant.

Machiavelli’s teaching was shocking in many ways, but one stands out. As Mark Hulliung writes in his superb work, *Citizen Machiavelli*, the Florentine “deliberately inverted the master symbols of Latin literature, and each of his inversions was an intentional

subversion of the humanist creed: by turning the Stoicism of Cicero upside down, Machiavelli forced the *studia humanitatis* to give birth to Machiavellism—a Machiavellism born not of ‘necessity,’ but of a yearning for the grandeur of conquest, matched by an impatience with—and disdain for—any humanistic sympathies standing in the way of the glory of republican empire.”

Kagan, in his treatment of American history, follows a similar path. In *Dangerous Nation* and other works, he has inverted the master symbols of American civilization. Whereas liberalism was once indelibly associated with reciprocity, Kagan associates the liberal order with dominance and imposition. We imposed the liberal world order for the benefit of all, in his account, but it was still an exercise in domination. Whereas empire was once derided as entirely atypical of the American experience, such excursions being considered aberrational by liberals and conservatives alike, Kagan (though a bit skittish about the word) elevated the imperial dimension to supremacy. “Once,” as the late Jonathan Schell wrote in 2004, “the left had stood alone in calling the United States imperial and was reviled for defaming the nation. Now it turned out to have been the herald of a new consensus. Yesterday’s leftwing abuse became today’s mainstream praise.” The intellectuals who were drooling over empire a decade and a half ago have trimmed their sails on that point; no one makes the case for empire today in the now faintly hilarious tones of Max Boot, Robert Kaplan, and Niall Ferguson, circa 2002. As Machiavelli noted, however, you can do the actual thing under the banner of something else. If people want to be fooled, why not humor their whims and call it something other than what it is? To American ears, “liberal world order” sounds a hell of a lot better than “empire.” Ergo, the liberal world order it shall be.

Of all the appropriations in Kagan’s revisionist history of the United States, the most irritating is his current self-identification as a great liberal. “What we liberals call progress,” Kagan writes in *The Jungle Grows Back*, “has been made possible by the protection afforded liberalism within the geographical and geopolitical space created by American power.” Back in 1996, when Kagan and Kristol wrote their neo-Reaganite platform in *Foreign Affairs*, they were against

“liberalism” and for “conservatism.” They disdained the “Wilsonian multilateralism” of the Clinton administration and made a renewed pitch for the dazzling success of two great American conservatives, Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. “American hegemony,” they insisted, “is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order.” Preserving military dominance for as long as it could should be the US goal. To achieve that, “the United States needs a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence” —in other words, just what Kagan is calling for today under the standard of “the liberal world order.” Reagan, it might be recalled, did not consider himself a liberal. Roosevelt, as Kagan and Kristol surely appreciated, considered liberals as subsisting in the same general class as “mushy philanthropists and mollicoddles,” “visionaries” making “windy rhetorical promises,” “make-believe humanitarians” appealing to “sham altruism,” “the peace-at-any-price people.”

It must be recalled, too, that liberalism arose in world history in conscious rejection of Machiavellism. The law-of-nature liberals, including the American Founders and Emer de Vattel, the Swiss writer on the law of nature and nations, advised the Golden Rule in opposition to *realpolitik*. The utilitarian or economic liberals, like Adam Smith and countless followers in the nineteenth century, advised trade and reciprocity in contrast to war and plunder. Institutional liberals fought in the twentieth century for Tuscan-like confederations, in regions and on a universal scale, that were to tame the beast of power politics.

Kagan throws cold water on all these approaches. Trade does not lead to peace; besides, plenty should usually be subordinated to power. International law is a sham, a snare to weaken the United States. If Kagan were not a tad more moderate than Krauthammer, he would advise, as Sir Charles did, to let the United Nations sink into the East River. He is content to eviscerate the institution, ensuring that its great Charter will be resolutely ignored as a fount of normative instruction.

Above all, one can't observe the Golden Rule with scorpions, whose nature is to sting, the delight in which for them surpasses any real consideration of their interest. Once a world order breaks down,

Kagan writes, “the worst qualities of humanity emerge from under the rocks and run wild.” It follows from these formulations that America’s enemies—Russia, China, and Iran, especially—are destitute of the fundamental right that the law of nature once assigned to them, their equal right to survive. A relaxation of tensions with any of them is for Kagan a snare and a delusion. He still yearns for regime change: “one wonders what the Islamic world would look like if a fraction of [America’s] time, effort, and resources had been devoted to nurturing democratic government there rather than to supporting a succession of dictatorships.”

It just confuses things for Kagan to call himself a “liberal” and a “progressive.” He is not a liberal. He is under the influence of powerful currents of thought fundamentally antagonistic to liberalism, with a philosophy of international affairs stressing rough-hewn power politics in the ostensible service of democracy and human rights. Utterly changing the meaning of liberalism and giving it in its new apparel an illiberal cast is admittedly a strong preoccupation of the cultural moment. In colleges, “liberals” are hostile to the liberal arts curriculum. In think tanks, “liberals” entertain far-reaching visions for regime change. It does tell us something important about Hillary-Clintonism that Kagan could so easily morph from a Republican neoconservative to a Clintonian liberal.



Kagan’s repudiation of traditional liberal beliefs, alongside his rebranding as a liberal, are part of a larger pattern of argument on display in his books. In the official rendering, the United States was the proud creator of the rules-based order and the inveterate defender of international law. Kagan argues that the United States succeeded because it was willing to break the rules, secretly holding international law in contempt. The conventional account touts America’s commitment to multilateralism; Kagan argues that unilateralism was its defining *modus operandi*. Misty-eyed retrospectives of America’s once-great hold on world public opinion, in Kagan’s view, miss the point entirely. My translation: “Think America is unpopular now? Wait

till I tell you about the rotten eggs thrown on Vice President Nixon's caravan during his South American trip in the late fifties, and how the raging mob almost nailed the bastard. Wait till you fully understand the profound disgust the world's peoples felt for America's bombing campaigns in Vietnam. You say that Iraq was an unprecedented fiasco? Well, that's not quite right. It was the historic pattern throughout the Cold War, with as many SNAFUs then as these days."

Kagan has found that line of analysis an effective debating tactic, serving to elevate Bush by downgrading his predecessors. Nor is his point without merit. He's right, for example, to compare Kosovo in 1999 with Iraq in 2003; there was a sort of Clinton-Bush-Clinton consensus that transcended the parties. It is also a useful reminder that the adulation for "the greatest generation" obscures as much as it reveals. But why Kagan thinks that these instances of massive failure and worldwide condemnation prove his larger case is beyond me. All they show is that the United States has been conducting foreign misadventures for the longest time. And yet Kagan does not stick to this argument consistently. In fact, he contradicts it directly, when he reflects on the great love the rest of the world supposedly feels toward the United States. This is the time-honored Washington way: the establishment listens to a handful of sycophantic allies and then pronounces world opinion to be united behind America's leadership.

The dominant feature of Kagan's outlook, like that of other neo-conservatives, is that it continues to inhabit the moral and geopolitical world of the 1930s. The argument always comes back to Hitler, via the well-worn trope of the "Hitler-of-the-Month Club." Kagan's analysis of the 1930s in *The Jungle Grows Back* is a bit wanting, however, as he seems to buy into the old canard that had the allies stood up to the Japanese in 1931, in the name of collective security, the aggressors would have been stopped in their tracks. Nonsense. The deployment of European military strength to combat Japan in China would have weakened yet further the Europeans' preparedness against Hitler's Germany, by far the most important threat. Kagan likes to quote Michael Howard, the distinguished British historian; he should read Howard on that point. "Collective security" and "the balance of

power” were in fatal antagonism in the 1930s, as Howard showed on more than one occasion.

These intricacies of 1930s diplomatic history, however, are probably beside the point, which is whether America’s antagonists today resemble, in character and threat, the challenge that Hitler posed back then. The technological and demographic realities are fundamentally different, and on that basis alone the comparisons don’t hold water. More important, the neocon view of geopolitical conflict requires a monumental leap into Manichean moralism, in which you define your adversary’s fundamental character in relationship to the worst thing he ever did, while contrasting yourself to him by emphasizing the best things you’ve ever done. The neocons declaim against moral relativism, but they violate the most fundamental rule of morality by reading their foreign opponents out of the human race.

In *The Jungle Grows Back*, Kagan decries Trumpism. He notes the existence of a “Counter-Enlightenment of surprising potency” that stirs today “in Moscow, Budapest, Beijing, Tehran, and Cairo, in parts of Western Europe, and even in the nation that saved liberalism seventy-five years ago.” In Kagan’s accounting, that potent wave has apparently not yet reached Jerusalem, but it’s raging elsewhere in the Middle East and in our own dear land.

Probably the book was conceived when a post in the Clinton administration just possibly beckoned. If not for him, then for his wife Victoria Nuland, a big cheese in Obama times and tight with Hillary. Then came the crushing blow on 8 November 2016. The neocons have been Trump’s fiercest critics, though they somehow miraculously ended up in the catbird’s seat. Kagan has become an outcast, having delivered some choice words about Trump, but the rank and file have done just fine. At first regarded with profound suspicion, they subsequently filled up the staff offices at the National Security Council and the State Department. They have a leader in Mike Pompeo. Elliott Abrams, point man for Ronald Reagan in Central America in the 1980s, has become Trump’s point man for Central America today. Trump’s aggressive support of Israel and his hawkishness toward Iran—going far beyond what Bush had done—is just their cup of tea. In early

2020, with Trump's assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, this puzzling anomaly—Trump hates the neocons; the neocons are back—got clarified. Trump now seems to have swallowed the whole neocon eschatology regarding America's purpose in the world, the glorious consummation consisting of a death struggle with Iran. We'll see how long that lasts. The neocons hated Trump for not yearning for revolution in Russia, and then again for not getting with the program in Syria, but his Iranian misadventure has set their hearts fluttering. My prediction: they will uniformly applaud a war with Iran but will ultimately decry the botched execution.

In our post-Trump dystopia, Kagan has the debility of contending with an American popular opinion sick and tired of imperial adventures, but he makes up for it by playing to America's moralistic tendency to divide the world into the good and the wicked. He pretends that the American mind is divided, one day wanting to rule the world, the next wanting to withdraw in a huff. That oscillation, however, reflects a much larger division between the establishment and the people, the court and the country. The contest has proved to be unequal, as the court pays attention while the people live paycheck to paycheck and don't have time to keep up with the news. The people, it is true, are not of a fixed view: they don't like the expense of foreign adventurism, but they are easily persuaded by Manichean rhetoric. In a pinch, that has shown itself to be a very successful appeal, and once you've gone over the cliff of war there is no turning back. That's a big reason why the United States has remained in Afghanistan for twenty years, and why any war with Iran would be a long one. The United States has had no theory of victory, just a prodigious fear of losing (alongside a ready propensity to lie to the public about all things war related, as the *Washington Post's* recent detailing of Afghanistan deceptions shows once again). For Washington's strategic masterminds, escalation is a tempting way forward because retreat would imperil the whole apparatus.

Kagan warns that "history and human nature" may cause a revisitation of the horrors of the twentieth century's first half, a prospect that must be taken seriously. Though Kagan evokes this danger as the greatest one we're facing, his advice for addressing it is to get into

the faces of US adversaries and let them know that no deviation from proper conduct will be allowed, on pain of war. Is this really the formula for keeping the peace in a multipolar world? It would seem rather that Kagan's project to maintain America's artificial status as the world supremo, unquestionably superior in all realms of conflict (land, air, sea, space, and cyber), will infallibly lead to conflict.

Kagan is right to dispel the illusion that great power conflict is impossible. It has become more and more probable. And why is that? Because policymakers have listened to the Kagans of this world in accepting the necessity of the full court press for superiority on the borders of other great powers. Kagan thinks the budget for war-making has been radically underfunded in the last fifteen years. He believes that this commitment to military superiority sits amiably alongside his commitment to "Enlightenment values"; in fact, it was universally accepted among Enlightenment thinkers that avoiding a condition of such supremacy in any one power was necessary for international order, as the uniform rule of history was that such overweening power would be abused. They got that right.

Supporting democracy, Kagan's ostensible cause, has also become problematic in a way that would have seemed unthinkable a decade ago. Kagan notes the undemocratic trends in Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia—he could have added the Baltics for flourish, or the Balkans and Ukraine for additional flavoring—yet has little to say on how the crisis should be addressed. Hungary or Turkey, he suggests, may need to have some of their privileges suspended. What of Poland? What does it mean to "support democracy" in Poland when, as Kagan alleges, democracy is being extinguished there? Should we threaten to withdraw US support given its untoward turn? He doesn't say that, and probably wouldn't say that, but undiminished support for Poland by the United States would surely be read in Warsaw as a message that they needn't bother with trans-Atlantic lectures on liberal constitutionalism. Ditto for the remainder of Eastern and Central Europe.

Kagan's whole conception of European order rests on the United States standing guard at the borders of Russia, and yet the land over which this security umbrella extends is, on his own account,

increasingly lost to liberalism. Poland, it would seem, is asserting its national character, a process Kagan describes elsewhere as a sort of reversion to form among the world's nations, becoming more like what they once were and could be yet again. For this new condition, which closely tracks the history of disillusionment in the interwar period, it is difficult to see the remedy. For starters, Kagan would doubtless say, get a new US president. No argument with him there, but that overestimates the ability of a fresh face in Washington to contend with the turn to "populist nationalism" in the former Soviet sphere. Those new political forces respond to a conjunction of circumstances—still-lagging economic growth, depopulation from the talented tenth, fear of Muslims, resentment over being effectively powerless in EU councils—for which American power does not have any apparent remedy. To blame Russia for it is absurd. To shore up Poland's defenses in these circumstances looks much more like a vote of support for authoritarianism than opposition to it.

Some critics thought it cheeky that Kagan, in 2018, should venture into jungle-talk, adopting with such nonchalance the language of "civilized" and "barbarians," which was also of course a great theme for Roosevelt. Maybe at the Brookings Institution, where Kagan has long resided as a senior fellow, you don't get much of a taste for what's going on elsewhere in the country, but I am guessing that uttering this Rooseveltian theme in all its original testosterone-laced racism would get you run out of most campuses today. Happily, there's a way out of that problem. Just identify barbarism with Russians, and you're on your way to delirious applause. What a boon to the neocons that the left is consumed with hatred toward Putin and Russia. Kagan adduces these Rooseveltian themes, seeing an eternal war between the civilized and the uncivilized, while yet managing to excoriate the nationalists who traffic in racist stereotypes—employing the trope, in fact, while ostensibly scorning it.

Kagan's use of the garden metaphor is also a bit mysterious. "Pushing the jungle back from the garden," he writes, "is a never-ending task." Gardens are typically enclosed by fences or walls, but Kagan punts on the most elementary questions. What is inside the

garden? Where exactly is the jungle? Is the garden the West, all democracies, the handful of states that vote with you at the UN, or just the catalogue of US protectorates? Kagan acknowledges that the liberal world order from the beginning ran against the enclosures signified by “spheres of influence.” But there was an exception, which lay in the peculiar role of the United States. It “essentially claimed the whole world as its sphere of interest.” Kagan passes off that contradiction as if it had received the full light of right reason, when it is in fact a proven formula of geopolitical disorder and conflict.

Gardening is actually a very good metaphor for statecraft. For leaders, as for gardeners, the situation is not fully under your control; even due diligence can't prevent catastrophes. Tending to it doesn't change the universe, just ensures little improvements in that domain of it under your supervision, a-thousand-points-of-light-like. That's a properly conservative conception of statecraft; you're there to prevent all hell from breaking loose, not to deliver humankind to the millennium. So the idea of using nature, but also holding it off, like the gardener does, is a useful way to think about governing. That leaves us with a few questions. Does tending the garden require preemptive strikes against dandelions and unsightly vines ten thousand miles away? Would that be good horticulture? And whoever thought of tending their garden by launching a military expedition on the other side of town?