

EDITOR'S NOTE

Home Before Dark

This issue of *Raritan* marks the centenary of World War I—"every historian's Great War," as Eugene Genovese remarked in one of those simplifications that nevertheless contain a core of truth. The essays in this issue by Andrew J. Bacevich, Casey Nelson Blake, Michael Kazin, and Lawrence Rosenwald all reflect on the war's significance in ways that pose alternatives to the contemporary American consensus—which holds, in effect, that World War I was a botched rehearsal for America's later, long-running role as the guardian of world order. Despite scholarly challenges, that consensus has not changed in seventy years.

According to conventional wisdom, one crucial lesson emerged, belatedly, from World War I: the world simply could not get along without us. This assumption animated the foreign policy elite that has dominated public discourse since World War II—the bipartisan interventionist establishment that includes Congress and the Executive Branch as well as significant parts of the academy and the press. Madeleine Albright summarized the enduring elite perspective in 1998, when she dubbed the United States "the indispensable nation."

The rhetoric of global responsibility has a superficial plausibility. No one can deny that the world's most serious problems are international in scale. Climate change, systemic poverty, the looming prospect of conflict over scarce resources—all require attention from the United States in collaboration with other nations. But the interventionist tradition in US foreign policy provides few precedents for genuine international cooperation. Historically, the rationale for US interventions abroad rests on two pillars: the exceptionalist belief that the United States is uniquely qualified to lead the world toward a brighter democratic future, and the militarist idea that such leadership requires the use of force in foreign lands. Except for a brief period in the 1970s, these assumptions have gone unchallenged since World War II.

But six years of recession combined with a series of misadventures in the Middle East have encouraged public skepticism toward calls for

heroic sacrifice in the service of dubious clients abroad. President Obama himself has referred to the priority of “nation-building at home” over nation-building in the Middle East and has acknowledged the importance of restraint in foreign policy to the graduating class at West Point, among other audiences. None of this means that he is about to dismantle the national security state: the West Point speech was a muddle of inconsistencies, melding commitments to exceptionalism and counterterrorism with the rhetoric of international cooperation. Meanwhile Obama has expanded surveillance and secret warfare in many sinister ways. But even his fitful (and mostly rhetorical) gestures toward a more restrained foreign policy have provoked the ire of interventionists.

The people who brought us the Iraq catastrophe are back, warning against “war weariness”—or “world-weariness,” in Robert Kagan’s formulation. “Many Americans and their political leaders in both parties, including President Obama, have either forgotten or rejected the assumptions that undergirded American foreign policy for the past seven decades,” Kagan writes in the *New Republic*. “In particular, American foreign policy may be moving away from the sense of global responsibility that equated American interests with the interests of many others around the world and back toward the defense of narrower, more parochial national interests.” Perhaps Americans can be inspired again to fight for liberal democracy against Putin or Assad, as they did against Hitler, Kagan hopefully concludes. But they had better make up their minds fast because “the world will change much more quickly than they imagine. And there is no democratic superpower waiting in the wings to save the world if this democratic superpower falters.” The dream of saving the world survives, but even Condoleezza Rice claims to know why it might have become tarnished. “I fully understand the sense of weariness,” she told a Republican fundraiser in March. “I know that we’ve been through two wars. I know that we’ve been vigilant against terrorism. I know that it’s hard. But leaders can’t afford to get tired.” Or as Kagan says: “Superpowers don’t get to retire”—a caption that accompanies a cover cartoon of an exhausted Uncle Sam slumped in a beach chair.

This personification of the nation is significant. It has been a militarist rhetorical strategy ever since Theodore Roosevelt announced that the United States must be prepared to do “a man’s work in the world” by punishing “real wrongdoing” in Latin America and elsewhere. For more than a century, Americans have been confronted with a Manichean moral choice: they can “cut and run” or “stand and fight.” The nation, like the individual, can be either a coward or a hero—or, in our current discourse, either weary or vigorous. Morally charged personification is a way of avoiding coherent policy debate, not engaging with it. The notion that we are a weary superpower deserves close scrutiny.

The first question to pose is: *who*, exactly, is weary? And the answer is straightforward enough: the great majority of Americans, outside the interventionist consensus that envelops both major political parties. This has been true for decades. The American populace has long been skeptical toward the grand designs of the foreign policy elite, which often involve preserving order in remote places. The order in question is normally one that allows foreign investment to flourish, but the intervention is sold to the public as both a moral crusade and a strategic necessity. The customers are often a tough sell; many rightly suspect that business interests throb beneath the robes of righteousness. The invocation of humanitarian ideals creates a bracing atmosphere, but not everyone is enthralled. Moral urgency helps promote military intervention, but what is even more important to closing the deal is a sense of danger. To enroll in distant moral crusades, Americans have usually had to be persuaded that they have been or are about to be attacked—that if South Vietnam fell (for example), it might not be too long before Chinese junks engulfed Seattle harbor. This is the sort of argument that quickly shows signs of strain. Given an unforced choice, the public is far more likely to choose peace than war.

Hence the recoil of interventionist historians when they contemplate the Ludlow Amendment, proposed by the Indiana Congressman Louis Ludlow in the late 1930s. It would have created a constitutional amendment requiring a popular referendum on any declaration of war, except in cases where the United States had been attacked first. To be

sure, there was room for debate about the practicalities of this proposal, but what has always outraged interventionists was that Congress had even considered the possibility of a democratic foreign policy. The very phrase was an oxymoron, they assumed—a strict impossibility. And so, indeed, it has proven to be, in the decades since “isolationists” were excluded from permissible debate. In American public discourse, isolationism is an epithet used to caricature critics of empire as xenophobes and cowards; in historical actuality it is a rich cosmopolitan tradition stretching from William James to William Fulbright, stemming from popular republican and constitutional thought.

Confronting the deep public skepticism toward foreign military adventure, presidents and their spokesmen have tried to trick the public into the belief that aggression has already occurred or that the threat of it is imminent. The fabrication of outrage over a fictitious North Vietnamese attack on US gunboats in the Gulf of Tonkin affair and the manufacture of hysteria over Saddam Hussein’s nonexistent weapons of mass destruction are only two of the most egregious examples. By the time the deception becomes a matter of widely accepted public knowledge, the war is well under way. No wonder ordinary Americans have become numb to the outrage and peril they are constantly warned about. These are the people the war makers have to get around; these are the people who are weary.

They are weary, among other things, of failed interventionist crusades powered by counterinsurgency fantasies. During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, all the old Vietnam tropes were pressed into service as if they had been freshly minted: the “oil stain strategy” based on ever-widening areas of allegedly pacified territory; the winning of hearts and minds. The hubris of nation-building in a foreign land, a terra incognita to our provincial policymakers, was reduced to absurdity—“government in a box,” which was General Stanley McChrystal’s phrase for the new civilian infrastructure he tried and failed to install in the Taliban stronghold of Marjah. Beyond this silliness was a darker pattern: the promotion of instability in the name of stability, the provocation of terrorism in the name of preventing it. The heart of this darkness was concealed by the bland phrase “collateral damage”—the

thousands of shattered veterans, the hundreds of thousands of murdered civilians.

Closer to home, there are more pressing reasons for Americans to be weary. Millions are struggling to keep their heads above water in a sea of long-term unemployment, mortgage foreclosures, and deflating real estate values. A Lost Generation of young people is struggling with chronic joblessness or underemployment. Seldom in recent history have so many symptoms of economic malaise been in place for so long—all accompanied by predictions of debt-based doom, demands for austerity that will only ensure the persistence of economic stagnation, and empty reassurances that recovery is just around the corner. No wonder many people felt a surge of hope at Obama's mentioning the need for nation-building at home—followed by disappointment at his failure to follow through with specific policy proposals.

So why would Americans not be weary? The survey results that worry Kagan and Rice—that show Americans growing wary of overcommitment abroad—are actually a sign of vernacular wisdom. They suggest a dawning public recognition that the problems of boarded-up storefronts and evacuated cities present more urgent policy concerns than the remaking of remote regions that resist remaking. Interventionists will need to evade or overcome this wisdom if they intend to embark on further misadventures abroad. Let us give weariness its due, as a necessary counterweight to the centrifugal force of an activist foreign policy, ever on the prowl for investments to explore and wrongs to set right. Maybe weariness can bring us home before dark.

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Furman's Corner, New Jersey
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With this issue, we bid a fond farewell to Donna K. Green, who has served as *Raritan's* Administrative Assistant since the fall of 1985. We will miss her cheerful presence (that silvery laugh!) and efficient management of the office.