

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Dimitri Neos

Robert Kagan is senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His publications include *Of Paradise and Power* and current book, *Dangerous Nation: America in the World, 1607-1898*.



Dr. Kagan writes a monthly column on world affairs for the *Washington Post*, and is a contributing editor at both the *Weekly Standard* and the *New Republic*. He served in the State Department from 1984 to 1988 as a member of the Policy Planning Staff, as principal speechwriter for Secretary of State George P. Shultz, and as deputy for policy in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs. He is a graduate of Yale University and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and holds a PhD in American History from American University.

He is also author of *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* and is co-editor with William Kristol of *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign Policy*.

International Affairs Forum: In your book *Dangerous Nation*, you say that America's historical perception of itself as an isolationist nation is not true. In fact, that's quite the opposite – an expansionist country with an aggressive foreign policy dating back to its colonial roots...

Dr. Robert Kagan: Yes.

IA-Forum: You identify a few factors for this including the timing of major works being published by John Locke and Adam Smith. Do you think that physical distance from the monarchy and aristocracy helped create an environment for Americans to seek not only freedom but expansion?

Dr. Kagan: There was an experience that was entirely different from the European continental experience. That was: you're an industrious and inquisitive people on the largest, richest continent in the world with nothing between you and ownership of that continent but Indians and some European empires who have some level of a foothold of which you're able to drive out without too much difficulty. So if you take Lockean man and put him in that situation, there's an almost inevitable expansionist nation.

Even people in Britain believed that this was going to be the most powerful part of the Empire – more powerful than England itself. Adam Smith predicted that the seed of empire would ultimately move from London to North America. So it wasn't just the American colonists who felt they had this great destiny to be an empire but so too did many observers in England.

IA-Forum: The name of book, 'Dangerous Nation'. Meaning what?

Dr. Kagan: It was from a letter that John Quincy Adams wrote to his father when John Quincy Adams was serving as Ambassador to England. He wrote that all the governments of Europe regarded the United States as very likely to "become a very dangerous member of the society of nations", meaning they regarded Americans as a fairly belligerent people. This is in 1817, after the end of the War of 1812 which the British regarded as an entirely unjust war to begin with. They not only thought it evidence of Americans as a belligerent, expansionist, war-like people but also – and I think this is what John Quincy Adams was focusing on more – that the United States, because of its own revolutionary ideology, represented a threat to the European order of monarchy.

The reason I chose 'Dangerous Nation' for a title is that it indicates how far from the general American perception of itself, especially in this early period, was from the (self-) perception at the time. I think when most Americans look back at a period like 1817, they can't imagine that anyone regarded the United States as a dangerous nation and yet the other countries of the world did. So using this as a title was a way of showing that this was a different take on the standard perception of American history.

IA-Forum: A few years later came the Monroe Doctrine, again something commonly thought of as isolationist...

Dr. Kagan: In the context of the time it was an incredibly audacious statement by a relatively weak nation. No one outside of the United States thought they had a right to essentially claim that the western hemisphere was its exclusive prerogative – that it could tell anybody that they should stay out of the hemisphere which, after all, the European powers had been involved with for over three hundred years. In Europe, the statement was regarded as an incredibly arrogant, hubristic and bold assertion of American authority in the region which was not yet under American domination. In that sense, it's hard to see this as isolationist because it was an enlargement of what America considered its sphere of influence.

Another myth was that the Monroe Doctrine was an attempt by the United States to separate itself from Europe. But if you look at what Monroe wanted to say in the Monroe Doctrine, it was a statement of international solidarity for republican movements against despotism and conservative movements that were trying to quash

them. He wanted to talk about the French invasion of Spain and the quashing of what was regarded as the Spanish republican revolution there; Metternich's intervention in Italy, the war for liberation in Greece – and he did mention some of those things. The final document looks the way it does because John Quincy Adams thought that if they were asking Europeans to stay out of the Western Hemisphere they could hardly claim a right to say anything about the European theater. Even so, Monroe did talk about the European theater and American spectating of what happened in Europe. Therefore, I see the Monroe Doctrine more as a statement of solidarity of republican movements around the world rather than an effort at isolation.

IA-Forum: The book portrays that ideology was more of a driving force in American expansionism than commerce.

Dr. Kagan: It's hard to downplay the effect of commercial interests because that was a major force... although, as Locke would say, the acquisition of property was a virtuous act, not only good for you but good for everybody. So, in that sense, even commercial expansion was partly ideological.

But I do place a great deal of emphasis on the role of the universal principles adopted in the Declaration of Independence as a force in American foreign policy. This is because those universal principles shape American foreign policy in a number of very significant ways from the beginning to the present. First, the Declaration's assertion that only governments that are in the service of the individual rights of the people are legitimate governments and that other governments deserve to be overthrown. That was a Lockean principle that was put into the Declaration of Independence – the assertion that all governments that do not protect individual rights of the people are illegitimate. Also, the Americans believed they were transitory – that there would be change and the change would be desirable. Of course, this didn't mean that the U.S. went off and tried to overthrow every dictatorship, especially when it was weak, but it did mean that this was the lens through which the United States viewed the world. When the United States acquired more power by the end of the 19th century, they began to make those ideals more an essential part of their foreign policy actions. The intervention in Cuba against the Spanish was very much in service to those moral and humanitarian impulses – something that is contrary to how many historians treat that war.

There was a combination of having a world view of non-democratic nations as illegitimate and transitory and also that the American people believed that they represented the truth and that their system was the right system – the only right system. They didn't accept alternative ways of looking at the world. Here there was a nation that was increasingly powerful and also firmly convinced that they represented the truth about human nature and for mankind. This led Americans to believe from the very beginning that anything that served America interests also served the interests of the world. This is something Benjamin Franklin said at the time of the revolution: 'our

struggle is the struggle for the world'. And continue to our own time when Dean Acheson talked about 'the United States as a locomotive for mankind'. I believe the equation of American interests with international global interests is very strong and almost unique among nations in terms of its sense of itself. That meant that Americans felt that they had the right to do what they thought was necessary.

IA-Forum: Does that help explain the number of conflicts America's been involved in?

Dr. Kagan: I think that's part of the explanation. Another myth among Americans is that we're reluctant to go to war. In one sense we are... but have gone to war frequently. There is a very strong martial tradition among Americans and this has a lot to do with the early wars that the United States fought - in particular the effect of the Civil War - America's first moral crusade. It was a war ultimately justified and fought on the basis of moral principles because the south's slave institution violated the central premises of the Declaration of Independence. The experience of that moral war stayed with Americans. For example, Teddy Roosevelt was three years old when the Civil War started - but as the U.S. approached World War I, he believed (along with Henry Cabot Lodge) that this was the second Civil War - the second time the United States had to go to war for fundamentally moral purposes. The sense that we are fighting for moral goods has made us more willing to fight than modern Europeans who don't believe anymore that war can serve moral ends.

IA-Forum: Reconstruction after the Civil War: you call this the first effort at nation building.

Dr. Kagan: When the North invaded the South, it was to not only bring it back into the Union but with the strong conviction that the South had to be remade in the North's image. We talk about America wanting to remake the world in its own image: this was the primary desire of the North, that is, to remake the South in the North's image. Reconstruction began as a project not only to free the slaves and subdue the slave masters but to remake the South politically, socially, and economically by introducing northern capitalism. So the North felt that the South did not just have to be defeated but that it had to be changed to make it safe and prevent it from causing problems again.

This is essentially a view that Americans have had throughout their history. With any enemy that has cropped up in the American experience, the general American assumption is that they are dangerous because they're undemocratic. Therefore, in order to make them safe, they need to be transformed. This was our view of Germany and Japan after World War II, and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The first time this manifested itself was during the Civil War. We have the same experience in the South that we've often had since. Although reconstruction was the goal, the North was unwilling to pay the price to achieve that goal. They put too few troops in the South to

enforce Northern dictates, devoted too few economic resources to bring about the kind of transformation they wanted, and ultimately the North lost the political will to impose their views on the South. Many in the North began to argue that you can't impose democracy at the point of a bayonet – something we've heard many times since. Reconstruction was a failed attempt that failed on its own terms and failed in terms of nation building because the South was able to persist in an undemocratic fashion for many decades after that. It's a cautionary tale as well as a parallel to future such endeavors.

IA-Forum: There's been considerable debate whether America is an empire. Niall Ferguson, for example, has said that America is an empire that doesn't want to act like one. Your thoughts?

Dr. Kagan: Actually, this is something Niall Ferguson has discussed at some length at an event. I think that America has behaved as an empire but doesn't want to admit that it is an empire. The obvious American imperialism was in its very early days – which is ironic because people don't tend to think of it as that way. The desire to take territories that belong to others is imperialism. When we acquired the Philippines, even though our goal was not imperialistic, it was in fact a colony for some time. But Americans are not imperialistic in any reasonable definition of the term because they have never wanted to rule other people. In fact, the thing about American expansion is that they would have been delighted if the people on the territory they wanted would simply disappear. In the case of the Indians, they helped them disappear. They didn't want to rule the Indians and didn't want to set themselves up as rulers. Even in the Philippines they were mostly just interested in quelling the insurgency, allowing the Philippines to become what they wanted it to be, and then leaving. That's different from say, the British Empire and the French Empire. The British intended to rule India and they thought it was perfectly legitimate to rule India because they thought the British race was the superior race. Americans also considered themselves a superior race but because of their core liberalism and belief in self-determination, they didn't want to rule others. Imperial expansion basically crashed on the rocks of self-determination – the only thing Americans thought was legitimate if another country was going to be taken over was to make it another state. When this was impossible, then most Americans didn't want to do it.

I don't think, in the technical understanding of the term, that America has been an empire for most of its history. On the other hand, it has wielded as much power as any of the greatest powers in history. Nations that are wielding great power use the same tools that empires use but the ends are somewhat different. Even the wielding of great power has caused problems for America. For instance, the belief in self-determination creates a paradox. When you want to spread individual rights and self-determination around the world, often you have to use coercive measure to do it which often deprive people of their individual rights and self-determination. This is a paradox we live with every time we intervene in another country.

IA-Forum: Could you give us a look into the second volume of 'Dangerous Nation' as it moves into the twentieth century into present day.

Dr. Kagan: I'm reluctant to answer that because I don't know what I'll uncover in my research. But I can answer part of the question. From the very beginning of the twentieth century, starting with McKinley and to Roosevelt, America's power combined with America's sense of being on the right side of history and American commercial interests made America an expansionist power in terms of influence. It was no longer interested in territorial expansion but was willing to be expansionist in terms of being willing to wield influence in various parts of the world. For instance, in Asia, the story of the twentieth century is the story of increasing American influence in varieties of ways. Some of it was on behalf of humanitarian purposes like saving China from Japanese aggression – when you claim to have a say about what goes on in Manchuria, even if we're on the side of the angels, that's still an effort to extend the reach of your influence. Even through the so-called isolationist period of the 1930s, America was wielding tremendous economic influence and attempted to hem in Japan to the point where Japan ultimately felt that the United States Navy had to be taken out if Japan was going to achieve its goals. That was clearly a part of an American effort to expand its influence into a region that another country to be part of its own preserve.

Even the Wilsonian efforts to create an international system, like the League of Nations, was an attempt to expand American influence to an ever greater part of the world. It sounded like a neutral international institution but it was an institution designed to further American liberal ideals. So there's been four hundred years of steady American expansionism, whether it be territorial, commercial, or in the twentieth century, in terms of influence - to the point where today we want to exercise influence in central Asia, something we have never considered to be in our sphere before.

IA-Forum: As America finds itself now as the world's lone superpower, has this affected American policy in terms of expansionism vs. isolationism? If so, how?

Dr. Kagan: At the end of the Cold War there was the Soviet Union who was America's leading competitor and then disappeared. What was the American response to that? If America were an isolationist nation, then that was the time to become isolationist because the greatest threat was gone and no other power like that had emerged. But in fact the American response was to become more interventionist than at any time during the Cold War. You have to go back to the early twentieth century to find America as interventionist as it is after the Cold War. Under three different Presidents – George Bush Sr., Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush – you had, between 1989 and 2003 – nine significant American military interventions, not even counting Grenada: the invasion of Panama in 1989, the Gulf War of 1991, the entry into Somalia in 1992, the intervention in Haiti in 1994, intervention in Bosnia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, and then Afghanistan and

Iraq. So since the end of the Cold War, America has greatly increased its power and faces much less resistance to its ability to intervene elsewhere yet the number of interventions increased.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Dr. Kagan.

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