

Inquiring Minds topic – 26 October 2018

Bruce McNaughton, Moderator

The Cost of American Retreat

Question - are you a globalist?

Or are you an America Firster?

Do you believe in mutually arrived at defense decisions made by nations?

Do you believe The US should have the strongest military to back up the concept that we should stand alone in the world?

Do you believe that NATO has helped maintain the peace in Europe?

Three minutes maximum per time with the mike. You may request an opportunity to rebut a speaker.

No anecdotal material unless on point to the subject.

Note: see suggested reading list on page 7.

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The Cost of American Retreat

The world order that the U.S. built after World War II required sacrifice and commitment, but it brought unprecedented benefits. What happens if it disappears?

By Robert Kagan (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/thecost-of-american-retreat-1536330449>)

The liberal world order established by the United States a little over seven decades ago is collapsing. This should not be surprising. It was always a historical anomaly. The long period of prosperity, widespread democracy and peace among the great powers was a dramatic departure from the historical norm. It certainly was not where the world had been heading before 1945.

Less than 80 years ago, liberalism outside North America was on its death bed. Dictatorships were thriving, the great powers were fighting their second global conflagration, and acts of unspeakable inhumanity were being committed in the very heart of Western Judeo-Christian civilization and in the ancient civilizations of the East. The very idea of progress seemed absurd.

The dramatic change of course after 1945 was not due to some sudden triumph of our better angels or embrace of Enlightenment principles that had been around for centuries, nor was it the natural unfolding of Universal History in the direction of liberalism. Liberal ideals triumphed because, for the first time, they had power behind them. A new player arose on the international scene: the United States. It possessed a unique and advantageous geography, a large, productive population, unprecedented economic and military power, a national ideology based on liberal principles, and a willingness, after the war, to use its power to establish and sustain a global order roughly consistent with those principles.

That order—with its mutually reinforcing security, economic and political components—has created a geographical and geopolitical space in which liberalism has taken root, spread and evolved. But it was always artificial and tenuous, challenged from within and without by natural forces—the always potent antiliberal aspects of human nature and the competitive and anarchic tendencies of geopolitics. Like a garden, it can last only so long as it is tended and protected. Today, the U.S. seems bent on relinquishing its duties in pushing back the jungle. Among the many complaints heard now against the liberal order is that it was imposed by an often oppressive, selfish, hypocritical and incompetent American hegemony. And there is truth in that—the liberal order was erected and defended by humans. But what, in the real world, was the better alternative?

The world the United States confronted after World War II had been on a steady course toward destruction since the 19th century. The rise of Germany and Japan, and the relative decline of Great Britain, had produced a seemingly endless cycle of war in Europe (1870, 1914, 1939) and in East Asia (1894, 1904, 1914, and 1931-1945). The global economy had broken down into protectionist enclaves and become an arena for geopolitical competition. Fascism and communism had been on the rise since the 1920s. Even after the defeat of Germany and Japan, populations were devastated and inclined to radical or authoritarian solutions. No one contemplating the direction of history in those years put their money on the triumph of either peace or liberalism. And had the United States simply gone home after World War II, as it did after World War I, the old patterns would likely have persisted.

Regretting their abstention in the interwar years, Americans decided that they could no longer sit “in the parlor with a loaded shotgun, waiting,” as Secretary of State Dean Acheson put it in 1950. Protecting what he called the “American experiment of life” required creating “an environment of freedom” in the world and deterring aggressors before they gained control of distant continents. The only guarantee of peace was “the continued moral, military and economic power of the United States.” America would have to be “the locomotive at the head of mankind.” The architects of the new order were not utopian idealists. They believed in the inherent sinfulness of humans, the competitiveness of nations and the tendency of all orders to collapse. They had stared into the abyss and seen the depths to which humankind could fall. They knew the world they created would be flawed and costly to defend, but they believed an imperfect liberal order was better than none at all.

We tend to view the decades after 1945 through the lens of the Cold War, and Soviet communism certainly preoccupied Americans. Yet the response to the Soviet threat, which included the deployment of U.S. forces permanently in both Europe and East Asia and the creation of the global alliance structure, produced a geopolitical revolution. Within the confines of that system, normal geopolitical competition all but ceased. Nations within the order, in Western Europe and East Asia, didn’t compete with each for military superiority, form strategic alliances against one another or claim spheres of influence. Since no balance of power was necessary to preserve the peace among them, as it always had been in the past, they could shift substantial resources and energy from military to economic and social purposes.

Today, some call this “free-riding,” but that misunderstands the revolutionary transformation that proved essential to global peace and prosperity. Historically, Japanese and German economic success had translated into military power and a challenge to the geopolitical hierarchy. But after 1945, their economic miracles simply added to the strength of the liberal world order against potential challengers, most notably the Soviet Union.

The liberal world order was not really “rules-based,” as some say today, at least not in military and strategic matters. The U.S. generally paid little more than lip-service to the United Nations when it used force, and often did not even consult with allies. Yet it did make substantial concessions. At the heart of the order was a grand

bargain: The other liberal powers ceded strategic hegemony to the U.S., but in return the U.S. would not use that hegemony to constrain their economic growth. It could not insist on winning every transaction. There had to be a relatively level playing field—at times even one that favored the other liberal powers. The success of the order was critical to the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War. The Soviets, deprived of opportunities for geopolitical gain, saw themselves falling dangerously behind economically, to the point where they ultimately sued for peace. And yes, the success of the liberal order was accompanied by disasters like the Vietnam War, and American policies were often misguided, selfish, oppressive and resented. Nor in the end did Russia and China, the two great powers outside the order, ever choose to join it except as trading partners. Yet American hegemony was never so intolerable as to drive other members out. On the contrary, nations banged on the door to come in. Participants in the order, then and now, have shared the implicit understanding that however flawed the American-led liberal world order might be, the realistic alternatives would almost certainly be far worse.

Today many Americans seem to have lost sight of that eminently realistic judgment, and this has happened, unfortunately, just at the moment when the world is slipping back into old patterns. Autocracy, not so long ago dismissed as an anachronism, has shown a strength and resilience that Franklin Roosevelt's generation would have recognized, while the democracies suffer from paralysis and self-doubt, as they did in the 1930s.

Advanced communications and computing technologies, once thought to be forces for cooperation and freedom, have been turned into weapons of illiberalism. The globalized economy, instead of producing convergence, remains an arena for great-power competition. Nationalism and tribalism are re-emerging. Territorial aggression and obsessions with borders have returned.

In short, the forces of history and powerful elements of human nature are bringing us back to where we were before the U.S. took responsibility for global peace and the preservation of liberalism.

And Americans today are responding much as they did then. Some still believe in the inevitable march of progress, putting their faith in social and economic revolution. Others bid the liberal order good riddance. On college campuses it is

synonymous with imperialism and white capitalist exploitation. In the White House and on the American and European right, it is seen as an international elite conspiracy working against the interests of ordinary people.

And across the political spectrum, there is broad agreement that American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been a series of disasters. This is said to include not just the Iraq and Afghan wars but also a range of longstanding strategies and attitudes: supporting democracy overseas, expanding NATO and regarding the U.S., hubristically, as the world's "indispensable nation."

None of this began with Donald Trump. His "America First" is a pithier version of Barack Obama's call to focus on "nation-building at home," and the policies of the two administrations have more in common than either would like to admit. A new "realism" is in vogue, best articulated by thinkers such as Barry Posen and John Mearsheimer. It calls for paring back commitments in Europe and Asia, pulling out of the Middle East and adopting a policy of strategic "restraint." It is time to accept the world "as it is," not as we might wish it to be.

It all sounds so sensible. The problem is that, after decades of living within the protective bubble of the liberal world order, we have forgotten what the world "as it is" looks like. To believe that the quarter-century after the Cold War has been a disaster is to forget what disaster means in world affairs.

Which other quarter-century would we prefer? The first quarter of the 20th century included World War I and the birth of communism and fascism. The second saw the triumph of Hitler and Stalin, the Ukrainian famine, the Holocaust, World War II and the invention and use of nuclear weapons. Even the quarter-century beginning in 1950 included the Korean War, the Vietnam War, three Arab-Israeli Wars and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Perhaps our biggest failure is our unwillingness to imagine that things could look again as they did in the first half of the 20th century, with a few besieged democracies hanging on in a world dominated by dictatorships. Aggression was the norm then, not the exception, and every weapon invented by scientists was eventually put to use.

It should be hard to have a 1930s mentality today, since we know what happened next. But we comfort ourselves that those past horrors cannot be repeated. We see no Hitlers or Stalins on the horizon, forgetting that our forebears did not see them either. Those ambitious tyrants rose to power at a time when they faced few constraints: No nation or group of nations was willing or able to sustain an international order of any kind, much less one that might resist them.

Today we know that Vladimir Putin has grand ambitions but not yet the capacity to realize them. He reveres Stalin, but he is not Stalin. What would a less constrained Putin do? A Russia that restored its Soviet and imperial borders would be a far different player on the international scene than the Russia now confined east of Ukraine and the Baltic nations.

Today a more powerful China, with a new premier-for-life, is moving away from the cautious foreign policies of the Deng era. We cannot yet know what an even more powerful and less constrained China will want or do as it expands its regional and global influence, especially if it does so by military means.

We should also recall that the European peace established since the Cold War is less than three decades old. Prior to World War II, wars in Europe were brought on by a combination of growing nationalism, collapsing democracies and global instability, all of which are visible today. Those who oppose the American promotion of democracy abroad generally have non-Western nations in mind, but let's not have too much faith in the West. Few of Europe's democracies date back before World War II. It was in the West that fascism and communism arose, and it is in the West that democracy is at risk once again.

The emerging consensus today is that the U.S. has been doing too much. But what if we have been doing too little? We wanted to believe that the course of history was taking us away from the war, tyranny and destruction of the first half of the 20th century, but it may be taking us back toward them, absent some prodigious effort on our part to prevent such regression. Those who call themselves realists today suggest that we can do less in the world and get more out of it. It is a lovely fiction. Our real choice is between maintaining the liberal world order, with all its moral and material costs, or letting it collapse and preparing for the catastrophes that are likely to follow.

Nothing is determined, not the triumph of liberalism or its defeat. As we have seen these past 70 years, tremendous human progress and human betterment are possible even in a dangerous world. To know that the jungle will always be there is not to despair of keeping it at bay, as we have done more or less successfully for decades. But make no mistake: The liberal order is as precarious as it is precious. It needs constant tending lest the jungle grow back and engulf us all.

This essay is adapted from Mr. Kagan's new book, "The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World," which will be published by Knopf on Sept. 18. He is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.

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If you would like to read more on the origins of our foreign policy in the post "World War Two" world here are some books you might enjoy:

- Truman by David McCullough published by Little Brown
- Present at The Creation by Dean Acheson published by Norton
- Franklin and Winston by Jon Meacham published by Random House
- Conflict and Crisis by Harry S. Truman published by Norton

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What do you think of this statement?

