Dangerous Nation Roundtable Review

Review by James E. Lewis, Jr.

Reviewed Work:

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Robert Kagan’s *Dangerous Nation* is a massive undertaking. He tackles nearly three centuries of American history, from the earliest colonies to the eve of the Spanish-American War. Aware that the lines between foreign and domestic were rarely clear, he includes not only many of the key events, individuals, and themes of American diplomatic history, but also some measure of American political, economic, and even social history, as well. And he considers both how Americans understood their own place in the world and how this dynamic and evolving place was understood by others.

With so many scholarly books and articles competing for our limited reading time, though, why would academic historians invest such a precious resource in a work of popular history—a work written for a popular rather than a scholarly audience and based largely or exclusively on secondary source research? What do and should we expect from such works? With over four hundred pages of text and nearly one hundred additional pages of notes and bibliography, *Dangerous Nation* raises these questions with some force.

At a minimum, it seems to me, popular histories should be reliable. In popular as in scholarly histories, frequent errors in such basic facts as names and dates fatally compromise a book. For the most part, *Dangerous Nation* avoids such errors. Kagan does refer to Gabriel’s Rebellion as the “Prosser Gabriel slave rebellion” (p. 183)—reviving and reversing a name, Gabriel Prosser, that most scholars rejected years ago. But such errors are rare. Far more common are points where I would challenge his understanding of an event or reading of a document (most of which he seems to have seen only as quoted in secondary works, even when they are readily available in published collections); others certainly might interpret these events and documents as he does, however. A more troubling problem is Kagan’s clumsy integration of primary and secondary source quotes into his own text, which frequently makes it appear that a historical figure wrote or said something that was actually written by a historian (see, for example, the paragraph beginning “Monroe believed . . .” on page 172, in which what appears to be a quote from James Monroe is, in fact, a quote from Ernest R. May). Compounding this problem are the decisions—standard for popular histories and probably made by the publisher not the author—to use block citations rather than separate citations and endnotes rather than footnotes, both of which make it more difficult to sort out precisely who said what.
If the standards should be similar for popular and academic works when it comes to basic, factual reliability, they should be somewhat different on stylistic matters. Sadly, scholarly works do not consistently display the careful crafting and precise polishing that make for a truly engaging book. Relieved of the arduous duty of extensive primary source research, however, popular historians should have more time to craft and polish their prose. Writing for a popular audience, moreover, it is probably more necessary for them to engage their readers as much with their prose style as with their arguments and information. I would hardly call *Dangerous Nation* scintillating in stylistic terms and it includes some real clunkers, such as a reference to “Puritan America as a pious Greta Garbo” (p. 8). But the chronological structure is effective, if unimaginative, and the jargon-free writing is clear. As such, the book is at least no worse than the common run of academic writing in stylistic terms.

If popular historians are largely freed from any expectation of primary source research, they certainly need to be both up-to-date and comprehensive in their secondary source reading. Kagan set a monumental task for himself—synthesizing and explaining nearly three centuries of American foreign affairs and policies. SHAFR’s recent *Guide to American Foreign Relations Since 1600* identifies more than three thousand books and articles that might be relevant to his project, not including either primary sources or reference works; even that volume, moreover, lacks most works published after 2000 (and there have been a number of important books and articles in recent years). 1 Obviously, no one could be expected to read all of those works. But, if scholars are going to invest our time in reading a popular history, we should reasonably expect that it would engage with and respond to some of the most important issues raised by scholarly works. In this area, *Dangerous Nation* falls woefully short. There are some efforts to grapple with recent scholarly developments, including an intriguing chapter on “The Foreign Policy of Slavery.” But large sections of this book revisit scholarly debates of twenty, thirty, or even forty years ago—“republicanism” vs. “liberalism” and “realism” vs. “idealism,” in particular. At the same time, Kagan neglects many of the central issues of recent scholarship—the importance of federalism, the formation of national identity, and the impact of local interests on policymaking—and slights others—international cultural and commercial exchanges, Native American policies and relations, and filibustering. If you are a historian of twentieth century diplomacy who hoped that one book could bring you back up to date on scholarship concerning pre-1898 American foreign relations, you will need to search elsewhere. *Dangerous Nation* would lead you to think that little had been done on much of this period since that graduate seminar you took in the mid-'80s (even the mid-'70s, in some chapters).

Finally, if popular histories—or works of synthesis, more broadly—are going to merit a scholar’s time and attention, they should have something new to say. We hope that the fresh eyes of those outside the academy and the broad vision that is presumably lost.

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through too much attention to documents and details can suggest new ways of making sense of the past that have eluded us. In terms of its major arguments, however, *Dangerous Nation* says little that will be new to scholars of American foreign affairs. His sweeping narrative shows Americans as a “dangerous nation,” beginning even before they were an independent one. Their aggressiveness took numerous forms—territorial, commercial, and ideological—and ultimately left few within or beyond their borders untouched. By deploying such guarded phrases as “most Americans today” and “Or so it is widely believed” (p. 3) on the opening page of the book, Kagan leaves little doubt that he understands that scholars already know and accept much of what follows. They hardly need to be told that Americans were active, even aggressive, on the international stage in various ways long before 1898.

If Kagan’s main argument is familiar, however, some of his secondary arguments are more interesting or more valuable. One thing that he does well, though intermittently, is discuss how the rest of the world viewed the United States. In particular, he demonstrates that, even before American independence, there was a widespread recognition of the danger that Americans could pose, first, to the colonies, land, and trade of their neighbors and, later, to the political, diplomatic, and economic order that had been established within and among Europe’s Great Powers. It is in the writings of these amazed and often alarmed diplomats, officials, and travelers that Kagan’s presentation of Americans as a “dangerous nation” acquires real solidity. Another thing of value in this book is Kagan’s consistent recognition of the artificiality of a division between domestic and foreign policy. He traces the indivisibility of foreign and domestic principally to the nation’s political system; with all power derived from and dependent upon the people, U.S. policymakers simply could not act with the freedom or authority of their European counterparts. The implications of this understanding are not traced as far or as fully as they might be, but it is an important point that is still sometimes lost in writing about American diplomacy.

Ultimately, *Dangerous Nation* is probably more impressive in its ambition than its achievement. There is no question that it is a huge undertaking and Kagan certainly deserves our respect for that effort. But it is one of those “big” books in which the author’s coverage of topics that you do not know well can seem fresh or thought-provoking, while his discussion of topics that you do know well often seems stale or even problematic. I certainly doubt that many scholars of American foreign relations will find its central argument even remotely new; but I also doubt that we make up much of his intended audience. Kagan’s goal is to dispel “the pervasive myth of America as isolationist and passive until provoked” (p. 6)—not a “myth” that has many adherents in the scholarly community. Whether a four-hundred-page book can reach a large enough audience to achieve the goal of dispelling popular myths in any meaningful way is questionable. But there are certainly individuals making important decisions about U.S. foreign policy who would, as Kagan correctly notes of Americans in general, “be better off if they understood themselves, their nation, and their nation’s history better” (p. 6); in fact, we might all be “better off” if at least those individuals found the time to read this book.