Dangerous Nation Roundtable Review
Review by Frederick W. Marks III

Reviewed Work:

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: James E. Lewis, Jr., Frederick W. Marks III, William Weeks


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Are democratic governments any less prone to aggression than absolutist ones? Judging from what Robert Kagan has to say, the answer would appear to be “no” since Americans, from the beginning, were about as imperialistic as it was possible for a people to be.

Dangerous Nation is a readable but highly selective survey of American foreign policy from colonial times to 1900. There is virtually nothing on Civil War diplomacy or Commodore Perry's opening of Japan. The Samoan Crisis of 1885 and the Chilean set-to of 1892 occupy more space than events leading up to the Mexican War (which Lincoln and the first Roosevelt regarded as highway robbery), and the story of relations with the Indians of North America does not extend much beyond 1800.

Kagan views American expansion prior to 1800 as more harmful to native American interests than French colonialism because the French were less acquisitive, and by his estimate, such expansion was also inevitable owing to the fact that the government “risked losing popular support if it hemmed in its citizens” (75). Kagan shows how land speculation involving not only the Ohio Company but also the Loyal Land Company, and not only George Washington, but also Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and other luminaries, added a pecuniary motive to territorial covetousness. Conspicuously absent from subscriber lists, as he says, were the names of the Indians “who actually dwelled on the lands that the colonists and their imperial backers were granting to themselves” (18).

To the Indians, as well as to the French and Spanish, the history of British colonialism was one of continual aggression. Kagan notes that in 1754, when Washington rode west to erect a fort in French-controlled territory along the Ohio River, his mission resulted in the murder and mutilation of the French commander. Americans massacred the Pequots and signed treaties with other Indian tribes that were “no more than a consolidation” of gains “before the onward press of the expanding population broke through to the next frontier” (79). Catherine the Great, aptly quoted by Kagan, spoke for many an American when she remarked, “I have no way to defend my borders but to expand them.”

The author reveals that by 1776, the American colonies already enjoyed a higher standard of living than the mother country. Small wonder, then, that they were regarded overseas with a mixture of awe, jealousy, and fear.
Kagan duly notes the improvised nature of American policy. World conquest was envisaged, but only on the ideological level, and there was never a grand strategy for remaking the world along liberal democratic lines. He is quite right, too, in maintaining that genuine humanitarian concerns, rather than imperialism or “yellow press” journalism, brought on the war with Spain. By 1898, Madrid’s failed policy had resulted in what “some would call a genocide” (390).

Another theme developed skillfully and at length is the extent to which slavery influenced American foreign policy from 1850 to 1898. By dividing North and South and polarizing the Democratic Party, it put a definite damper on expansionism. John Quincy Adams hesitated to bring Texas into the Union, Hawaiian statehood was deferred, the annexation of Santo Domingo was put off, and all because of the fear of the spread of slavery. “The United States could not expand,” Kagan observes, “because it could not decide what kind of nation it wished to be... sectional conflict was America’s foreign policy” (201, 203).

Southerners and their allies in the Democratic Party tended to oppose foreign intervention because expressions of moral purpose abroad might have untoward repercussions at home. According to Kagan, this is why postwar Democrats like Richard Olney viewed the Monroe Doctrine with suspicion and sought to forestall its use as a blank check. Olney, who is often portrayed as bombastically aggressive, is shown here to have actually limited the scope of the Doctrine, declaring that the United States would not intervene in hemispheric affairs without a credible threat of extra-hemispheric territorial aggrandizement.

If there is a conceptual weakness in Dangerous Nation, it lies in Kagan’s assumption that late nineteenth century opponents of a stronger navy “were right to predict that increasing American naval power would increase the chances that this new power would someday be used” (356). This is an old chestnut that flies in the face of established facts. Theodore Roosevelt, who presided over the largest peacetime naval expansion in United States history, spent seven years in the White House without firing a single shot at a foreign foe. Woodrow Wilson, on the other hand, who allowed the armed services to languish, took his country to war because Germany was convinced that she could sink American ships and American nationals with impunity. Likewise in the case of Franklin Roosevelt who opposed meaningful defense expenditure during the mid-1930s, both at home and in England. World War II was not long in coming, and Japan felt confident enough to take on the “sleeping giant.”

One can go further. Washington, Eisenhower, and Reagan, who spent heavily on defense, were peace presidents. Reagan, in particular, is remembered for his 600 ship navy, B-1 bomber, and Strategic Defense Initiative, all of which were instrumental in ending the Cold War.

Stepping back in time and comparing Jefferson with Monroe, the pattern remains the same. The sage of Monticello dismantled a powerful navy, and within months he was embroiled in hostilities. James Monroe, who presided over an arms buildup following the War of 1812,
compiled one of history’s most brilliant foreign policy records, and he was forthright about methodology: “An efficient commerce and a growing navy are my pillars of peace.”

Kagan is mistaken on three other points as well. First, he leads the reader to believe that Jefferson’s war against the Barbary pirates was successful when, in fact, it was an embarrassing failure. Four hundred American sailors were taken prisoner—the equivalent in today’s terms of 40,000—and in the end, Jefferson had to eat humble pie, resuming annual tribute to the pirates and paying a hefty ransom for the return of captives. The War of 1812 forced the nation into high military gear, enabling Commodores Bainbridge and Decatur to make headway in pirate-ravaged waters. Still, it was only when a combined Anglo-Dutch naval force demolished the Algerine fleet, along with a substantial portion of Algiers, that the Algerines were forced to pay an indemnity and American Mediterranean shipping could proceed apace.

Secondly, Kagan describes Spain as “at most a wary ally” in the War for Independence (55). Wary she was, but her role militarily was nothing short of indispensable. Her victories against Britain in North American and elsewhere, coupled with the enormous pressure she brought to bear against Gibraltar and the English homeland (attempting invasions against both) were just as important as anything accomplished by Lafayette, Rochambeau, or de Grasse.

Thirdly, Theodore Roosevelt was not a knee-jerk expansionist, as Kagan implies (370, 387, 400). TR’s acute sense of the need for proportion between ends and means curbed his “Rough Rider” instincts, and the territorial growth of the United States during his presidency proved minimal.

My greatest surprise in reading Dangerous Nation was to find Kagan so much in tune with American attitudes. On the one hand, he appears to believe it wrong for Americans to have dismissed Hispanics as hot-blooded and violent (351), targeting them for what C. Vann Woodward terms the “political and ideological submission that Americans were especially inclined to impose” (359). He likewise scores Americans for subscribing to the Black Legend interpretation of Spanish colonialism (379). On the other hand, he himself alleges that centuries of Spanish oppression, barbarism, and cruelty damaged the Latin character (379); and while he states that “civilize’ by conquest” was the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward Indians, Frenchmen, and Spaniards, as it had been toward Welshmen, Irishmen, and Scots, he ignores the fact that Anglo-Saxon slave owners were far less humane than their Latin counterparts in the way they treated their slaves. Similarly, Anglo-Saxon laws against inter-racial marriage, which would have been unthinkable in Madrid or Paris, are passed over in silence.

Kagan writes well and has a knack for making his audience sit up and think. Readers will therefore look forward to the publication of a second volume. It is to be hoped, though, that in the next round, Kagan will be thoroughly candid. Americans are viewed by many in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and Asia as academically inferior, and with good reason. Although Harvard, MIT, and other American research institutions are indisputably
The United States ranks close to the bottom of the industrialized world in terms of educational achievement, and this holds true even when gifted students form the sole basis for comparison. Americans are also widely regarded as morally inferior judging from comparative statistics on abortion, illegitimacy, porn consumption, and marital breakdown.

Kagan does a creditable job of showing why the United States was dangerous in its formative years and how this danger registered on the minds of foreigners. But, as he puts together a second volume, his challenge will be different because the danger is different. American aggression at the moment is primarily cultural. A wealthy Uncle Sam is seen to offer foreign aid and other inducements to governments willing to promote practices regarded by their people as immoral. Will Americans minimize the resentment aroused by such policy? Will they shrug off charges of complicity with the devil as so much “fundamentalist” cant? Clearly, if an unclouded mirror is to be held up before the eyes of the American people and if they are to be spared the hubris that leads to self-destruction, there is work to be done.