Dangerous Nation Roundtable Review
Review by William Weeks

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When Amazon.com advised me in October of the imminent publication of Robert Kagan’s *Dangerous Nation*, I immediately placed my pre-order and anxiously awaited its arrival in the mail. Happily, *Dangerous Nation* was all that I anticipated and more. My thanks to Thomas Maddux of H-Diplo for the opportunity to participate in a roundtable on *Dangerous Nation* with such a distinguished panel of scholars.

In my view, *Dangerous Nation* is one of the most significant works on pre-20th century US foreign relations to appear in recent years. It makes a powerful case for the role of an expansionist liberal-capitalist ideology as a revolutionary force, perhaps the revolutionary force, in modern world history. It suggests that this revolutionary force, loosely termed “freedom,” was, from the start, inherently expansionist. It rejects the traditional view that the US was isolationist, aloof, or otherwise withdrawn from world affairs, especially in the antebellum. Instead, Kagan portrays Americans as an aggressive, militaristic, expansionist people—a “dangerous nation”—driven by a particular conception of freedom and the way of life it entailed.

Kagan writes with a clear pedagogical purpose in mind—to better educate his fellow Americans, whom he believes lack an adequate understanding of their country’s history, and more importantly, of their country’s reactions in times of international crisis: “On balance, Americans would be better off if they understood themselves, their nation, and their nation’s history better” which he suggests “applies especially to the early history of American foreign policy.” (5) Kagan tells a “different story that is more about expansion and ambition, idealistic as well as materialistic, than about isolationist exemplars and cities upon hills.” (6) Although firmly rooted in the historical scholarship of the period, Kagan’s lucid style and broad focus makes *Dangerous Nation* accessible to more than just a scholarly audience. Indeed, by giving us a radically different foreign policy past, Kagan has opened the door to new perspectives on contemporary American foreign policy in both academia and the world at large.3

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Kagan draws on a wide range of primary and secondary sources in constructing his story. The sheer quantity of secondary sources (of both recent and older vintage) on the period means that his interpretation is to some degree is a synthesis of this work, yet the author has evolved a distinct view of the era that is greater than the sum of its parts. After lying more or less fallow for a generation, during the last fifteen years or so a substantial reevaluation of antebellum American foreign relations has occurred; Dangerous Nation may be seen as a culmination of this trend. It offers much to think about and debate. In this contribution, I want to comment on some aspects of the text and offer some specific criticisms and comment.

Kagan sees the origins of the American national project rooted in the speculative desires of colonial elites: “One can hardly exaggerate the extent to which American leaders, including future leaders of the independent republic had a direct, personal interest in this new phase of territorial expansion.” (17) He asserts, “Mid-18th century Anglo-American thus became the most enthusiastic of British imperialists.” (18) Kagan terms this group of Anglo-Americans and his first chapter ‘the first imperialists.” By the early 1750s, expansionist factions in Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts pushed for control of the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. Kagan emphasizes that “Continued expansion [was] essential to the survival of the colonies and by extension the empire.” (25). The failure of the individual colonies, even when supported by British regulars, to control the western territories, led to the formation of a proto-unionist faction (comprised of most notably Benjamin Franklin and George Washington) defined by their recognition that the colonies needed to act as one in matters of common interest, i.e., security and expansion.

The key events of 1754-1755—Washington's surprise attack on a French detachment at Jumonville Glen and subsequent defeat at Fort Necessity in 1754, the colonies unanimous rejection the same year of Franklin’s Albany Plan of Union, and Braddock’s disastrous defeat in western Pennsylvania the following year, seems to have been a key turning point in this movement toward unionism. By 1755 it was clear that colonial union was an essential pre-condition of expansionist success. For Franklin, rejection of the Albany Plan led to a fruitless twenty-year effort to convince Parliament to impose a colonial union. Unlike the legislatures of virtually every colony, Franklin discerned the boundless potential synergies (to use a contemporary term) to be gained by placing the human and material

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resources of North America under a single political and economic regime. But to take advantage of these synergies required that each colony to concede some measure of its autonomy to a permanent union under a strong central authority. Franklin and Washington’s visionary grasp of the possibilities of union are what makes them pre-eminent among the founding fathers.

Implicit in Kagan’s work, and highly significant in my view, is that Franklin, Washington and others were imperialists before they were unionists, and unionists before they were nationalists, and all three before they were advocates of independence, which now seems best understood as an act of desperation resulting from London’s failure to embrace colonial union. Certainly that is the impression one gets from Gordon Wood’s recent book *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. It explains how someone who came so late to the cause of independence might nonetheless be properly seen as “the first American,” as H.W. Brands terms him. Indeed, it now seems clear that the desire for empire is the chief motive for union, and that need for union was the chief motive for the construction of a distinct American nationality, as a means of conjuring support for that union. The key point to recall is that this emergent nationality was at first intended to occur within the context of the British Empire. In this regard it is not so much that Franklin came late to the cause of independence, but rather that the push for independence eventually came to the cause of union and unionists.

In this regard, *Dangerous Nation* understates the distinct and essential importance of the concept of union in American history. The practical advantages of union—security, expansion, and prosperity—make it both a precursor of and precondition to the idea of the nation. The John Quincy Adams quote from 1817 that gives the book its title suggests this relation; “The universal feeling of Europe in witnessing the gigantic growth of our population and power is that we shall, if united (my emphasis), become a very dangerous member of the society of nations.” My point is that the most important concept in U.S. national history is union, and not other more noted phenomena such as republicanism or independence, for it is union as the preceding quotes suggest, that is the pre-condition for all the others. Republicanism, often treated by historians as an end unto itself, is better understood as a means to the end of union. And yet all too often the concept of union is taken for granted to the point of invisibility.

Casting Americans as more a nation of hungry speculators looking for the main chance than a commune of religious ascetics, Kagan argues that the Puritan influence on subsequent American foreign policy has been exaggerated. He instead suggests that “the society and culture that took root in the Chesapeake Bay region had far greater influence on the evolution of American society, and therefore on American foreign policy, than did Puritanism.” (10) Rather than “isolationism and utopianism” or “cities upon hills and covenants with God” the expansionist impulse was rooted in “aggressive expansionism, acquisitive materialism, and an overarching ideology of civilization that encouraged and justified both.” The author is right to move beyond the Puritan precedent when probing the sources of American nationalism but he underestimates the importance of
evangelicalism in the national project. Material concerns may have been paramount but American expansionist ideology required a messianic dimension to give it legitimacy. Expansion in the name of security, expansion in the name of material success, expansion in the name of God—in the end these motives cannot be separated.

Kagan, echoing recent work by Fred Anderson, Andrew Cayton, John Grenier, and Max Boot views warfare as a major engine of historical change in American history. Conflict bred conflict, and the establishment of security on one frontier merely set the stage for new conflicts on the new frontier. Kagan is unblinking in his assessment of this legacy: “In the 17th and 18th century, [the Anglo-Americans] purchased their security at the price of the insecurity, and often the ruin, of Pequot, Iroquois, and Narragansett, of French and Spaniards, and by the time of the Revolution, of the British, too.” Exterminating war against the native peoples of the continent was, as these works make clear, essential to the survival and success of the American experiment, and a critical cultural bonding agent in the formation of an American nationalism. But how many American today are ready to come to terms with the fact that the Indian name for George Washington—Caunotocarious—translates as “town devourer,” and “town taker,” as Fred Anderson reminds us in George Washington Remembers? Understanding the role of exterminating warfare in the early days of the republic may cast new light on more recent events. Perhaps Hiroshima and Nagasaki are best understood as very large Indian villages, whose utter destruction without regard to age, sex, or physical condition was designed to overawe and compel submission in much the same way as Washington’s campaigns against the Indians in upstate New York in 1778.

Dangerous Nation portrays an expansionist tide driven by waves of settlers under the spell of the chance to get rich, a critical aspect of the creation of the U.S. as “the world’s first modern commercial, liberal republic.” Drawing on work of Gordon Wood, Kagan emphasizes the revolutionary nature of liberated capitalist desire. Portraying westward moving Americans as so many tips of the liberal-capitalist spear, expansionism brought a seeming wilderness under the dictates of a market economy. Although Kagan notes that “it was speculators who bought and sold the land. It was this advance guard of the liberal order that made American territorial conquers both irresistible and permanent” he recognizes that the Federal government provided essential military, diplomatic, and at times, financial support to this movement.

In this context, Indian dispossession, whatever the humanitarian concerns voiced by certain Americans, became inevitable. This was owing in part to the fact the federal government feared losing the support its citizens if it pushed too hard to defend the rights of Native Americans, many of whom expected governmental support for their expansionist

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endeavors. Ultimately, appeals to notions of progress and civilization prompted even those sympathetic to the Indians, such as John Quincy Adams, to back removal.

Kagan portrays the breakneck expansionism of the pre-1820 period as a yeasty combination of ambition and opportunism: “This was not an empire acquired in a fit of absentmindedness, but neither was it acquired by careful design. Each acquisition brought a new horizon and new ambitions. The fulfillment of one desire produced another. Perhaps the most accurate description was that it was an empire attained by determined opportunism.” (137) Although there may not have been a master plan of expansion per se there was a master ideology of liberal capitalism tied to an expansionist imperative that drove the foreign policy of the era; the core of internal American politics was determining the exact direction and speed at which the expansion would occur.

On a related point: the preceding quote is the closest Kagan comes to terming the United States an “empire.” Notwithstanding the effusion of texts from across the political spectrum that use the term American Empire it remains an ideological hot button and Kagan resists pushing it. Yet can anyone read the Dangerous Nation’s narrative of relentless territorial, commercial, and above all, ideological expansion and not think of the United States as an empire, albeit one unlike any other in history?

By 1825, Kagan sees the US on the road to supremacy in the Western Hemisphere and verging on global power, only to be stopped not by external factors but internal divisions over the question of slavery. Kagan pulls no punches about the critical role divisions over slavery played in the collapse of the union, particularly after 1820. Divisions over the nature of American freedom gave the nation “split personality” combining “a principled commitment to human equality and natural rights as embodied in the Declaration of Independence, and a practical commitment to the defense of the institution of slavery as embodied in the Constitution.” (182) He argues, “For American slaveholders, no ‘national interest’ was more vital than the prevention of a domestic slave uprising.” (183) Kagan, no doubt to the consternation of neo-confederates, sees the slaveholding elite as the nation’s Achilles heel, both ideologically and morally; their narrow minded particularism lead to growth of two nations and two foreign policies. The breakdown of the expansionist consensus foreshadowed the breakdown of the union. In end, he suggests that there was not one manifest destiny but two, and that they increasingly clashed after 1820.

Kagan is especially vivid in portraying the nature of the slavery issue as a foreign policy question. From the Missouri crisis on, foreign policy matters, such as the Panama Congress of 1826, were intensely scrutinized for their potential impact on slavery and slaveholders. Kagan is unsparing in his depiction of the Old South as a repository of repression and fear increasingly at odds with the North’s evolving notion of freedom. “Like other quasi-totalitarian regimes in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the South’s paranoia led it naturally toward expansion and conquest as means of eliminating threats posed by free territories on its borders.” (213) In the end, the author seems to agree with Lincoln that the continued existence of slavery compromised the meaning of America. Slavery’s
downfall (later lamented by Hitler, as Kagan notes) was the precondition for future American greatness.

And yet Kagan’s own argument suggests that the South’s fear of encirclement was not paranoid. He describes Northern efforts to cut off the spread of slavery into the territories as a form of containment, and a precursor to the anti-communist policies of the Cold War. Moreover, he makes it clear that the British, too, were attempting to stop the spread of slavery via efforts to acquire Texas. In short, the white South felt encircled by free labor societies (British and American) because they were encircling it. Kagan blames Polk’s aggressive expansionist diplomacy for aggravating partisan differences and hastening the Civil War. Indeed, Kagan frankly acknowledges that the huge Civil War death toll must be understood at least in part as the delayed cost of expansionism. Ultimately, Kagan agrees with the assessment of John Keegan and others that the Civil War was the great ideological struggle in American history, a crusade to define what America truly stood for. The union had to be preserved, if only as incubator of the freedom that the nation represented.

Kagan, much to my satisfaction, portrays John Quincy Adams as both one of the major architects of the evolving notion of American freedom and, by extension, American foreign policy, and also as the guiding light for what was to become the reigning ideology of the Republican party of William Seward and Abraham Lincoln. Adams’s historical reputation has been steadily rising for almost twenty years, chiefly owing to the distinctive understanding that he gave to the idea of American freedom. Adams has emerged as the most important figure in the development of American nationalist ideology between the founders and Lincoln, more so than even Jackson.

By emphasizing the central importance of expansionism, Dangerous Nation makes a major contribution to an enlarged understanding of U.S. history. Kagan’s narrative vividly illustrates the fine line between internal and external, foreign and domestic in American history, especially as concerns the question of race. It has long been said that foreign policy is a function of domestic politics, but Dangerous Nation shows how the reverse of that is also true—that domestic controversies are themselves often influenced by matters beyond the nation’s borders. Dangerous Nation suggests that the nation’s political boundaries are best understood not as a solid barrier but rather as a semi-permeable membrane through which people, ideas, and power can flow bi-directionally. The book is a step in the direction of framing “foreign relations”—that is to say, the sum total of interactions and influences of America and Americans outside the nation’s political boundaries— as essential to the study of American “domestic” history, rather than as the unwanted and neglected stepchild it too often is treated as.

Kagan’s careful and cumulative case for the central importance of ideology as the most important factor in the formation of American foreign policy reaches a climax in his explanation of the causes of the Spanish-Cuban-American War. In recent years it has been an article of faith among many in the profession that economic motives must have been controlling in the march to war; Kagan convincingly argues that reports of Spanish
Atrocities, not all of them exaggerated, pricked the conscience of Americans and created widespread sentiment for a humanitarian intervention based on the presumption of their own collective goodness that, in the end, McKinley could not resist.

Dangerous Nation’s thesis that ideology drove American foreign policy from at least the War of 1812 onward would, at first glance, appear to be a significant challenge to those, chiefly on the left, who argue for the primacy of economic motives. And yet Kagan’s narrative amply demonstrates that American nationalist/expansionist ideology was suffused with economic motives and ambitions far grander than any one economic interest or collection of economic interests at any given time and locale. More broadly, historians might reflect on whether or not an ideological motive is necessarily any less imperial than an economic one. A nation conceiving of itself as uniquely favored by God and destined to remake the world in a manner similar to itself, and which saw its values as synonymous with all that was good and progressive is at once more fascinating and more frightening than one motivated by mere profit. Robert Kagan has given us a new and in many ways, transformative look at pre 20th century American foreign policy. We can eagerly await volume two, dealing with the 20th century, of his history of American foreign policy.