



THE
WORLD
AMERICA
MADE

ROBERT KAGAN

AUTHOR OF

OF PARADISE AND POWER

The Return of History and the End of Dreams

Dangerous Nation

Of Paradise and Power

A Twilight Struggle

Present Dangers

THE WORLD AMERICA MADE

ROBERT KAGAN



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IN THE FRANK CAPRA classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey gets a chance to see what his world would have looked like had he never been born. It would be nice if we could do the same for the United States, to see what the world would have looked like had the United States not been the preeminent power shaping it for the past six decades, and to imagine what the world might look like if America were to decline, as so many nowadays predict.

We take a lot for granted about the way the world looks today—the widespread freedom, the unprecedented global prosperity (even despite the current economic crisis), and the absence of war among great powers. In 1941 there were only a dozen democracies in the world. Today there are over a hundred. For four centuries prior to 1950, global gross domestic product (GDP) rose by less than 1 percent a year. Since 1950 it has risen by an average of 4 percent a year, and billions of people have been lifted out of poverty. The first half of the twentieth century saw the two most destructive wars in the history of mankind, and in prior centuries war among great powers was almost constant. But for the past six decades no great powers have gone to war with one another. Our era is best known for the war that never happened, between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹

There's plenty wrong with our world, of course, but from the perspective of thousands of years of recorded history, in which war, despotism, and poverty have been the norm, and peace, democracy, and prosperity the rare exceptions, our own era has been a golden age.

Some believe this is the inevitable result of human progress, a combination of advancing science and technology, an increasingly global economy, strengthening international institutions, evolving “norms” of international behavior, and the gradual but inevitable triumph of liberal democracy over other forms of government—forces of change that transcend the actions of men and nations.

But there is also another possibility. Perhaps the progress we enjoy was not an inevitable evolution of the human species but rather the product of a unique and perhaps fleeting set of circumstances: a particular arrangement of power in the international system that favors a certain worldview over others. Maybe if those conditions were to change, if power were to shift, then the characteristics of the world order would change, too. Perhaps democracy has spread to over a hundred nations since 1950 not simply because people yearn for democracy but because the most powerful nation in the world since 1950 has been a democracy. Perhaps the stunning global economic growth of the past six decades reflects an economic order shaped by the world's leading free-market economy. Perhaps the era of peace we have known has something to do with the enormous power wielded by one nation.

History shows that world orders, including our own, are transient. They rise and fall. And with the institutions they erected, the beliefs that guided them, and the “norms” that shaped the relations among nations within them—they fall, too. Every international order in history has reflected the beliefs and interests of its strongest powers, and every international order has changed when power shifted to others with different beliefs and interests. On some occasions the prevailing world order has simply collapsed into disorder. When the Roman Empire fell, the order it supported fell, too. Not just Roman government and law but an entire economic

system stretching from northern Europe to North Africa was disrupted and would take centuries to rebuild. Culture, the arts, even progress in science and technology, were set back for centuries. People lost the recipe for cement.

We saw a similar collapse of world order in our own time. The world we know today was erected amid the chaos and destruction following World War II and the collapse of the European-dominated order that had evolved over four centuries. That order was far from perfect: it produced many wars, an aggressive imperialism, and the widespread oppression of nonwhite races, but it also produced the conditions for an era of great human advances. By the late nineteenth century British control of the seas and the balance of great powers on the European continent together had provided the relative security and stability to allow for growth in prosperity, a modest if tenuous expansion of personal freedoms, and a world knit closer by the revolutions in commerce and communication we today call globalization. It kept peace among the great powers for almost four decades after the Napoleonic Wars, and for another four decades after the wars of German unification. It was so successful that many concluded at the dawn of the twentieth century that mankind had reached a summit of evolution and that major war and tyranny had become obsolete.

Yet with the outbreak of World War I, the age of settled peace and advancing liberalism—of European civilization approaching its pinnacle—collapsed into an age of hyper-nationalism, despotism, and economic calamity. The once promising spread of democracy and liberalism halted and then reversed course, leaving a handful of outnumbered and besieged democracies living nervously in the shadow of their newly fascist and totalitarian neighbors. Suddenly there was a world filled with predatory leaders sitting atop predatory powers. The collapse of the British and European orders in the twentieth century did not produce a new dark age—though if Nazi Germany and imperial Japan had won the war, it might have—but the cataclysm it did produce was, in its own way, no less devastating.

Would the end of the present American order have less dire consequences? That is a question worth asking now, as so many contemplate the prospect of American decline. A surprising number of American intellectuals, politicians, and policy makers greet the prospect with equanimity. There is a general sense that the end of the era of American preeminence need not mean the end of the present liberal international order. The expectation, if not assumption, is that the good qualities of that order—the democracy, the prosperity, the peace among great powers—can transcend the decline of American power and influence. Even with diminished American power, the political scientist G. John Ikenberry writes, “the underlying foundations of the liberal international order will survive and thrive.”² And there is an accompanying view that American decline is in any case already a fact of life, so whether it is a good thing or a bad thing, there is nothing we can do about it.

Against this backdrop, it is worth exploring to what degree the present world order depends on American power and its unique qualities. What would it mean for the future if the international order were no longer shaped primarily by the United States and like-minded allied nations? Who or what would take America’s place? And there is another set of questions, equally important: Is America really in decline? Or are Americans in danger of committing preemptive superpower suicide out of a misplaced fear of declining power?

WHY CALL IT THE “American world order” at all? The United States has certainly not shaped the international environment by itself. Many other peoples, as well as broad historical forces—the evolution of science and technology, fluctuations in the availability of natural resources, long-term economic trends, population growth—have also created today’s world. Peoples of every continent have worked and suffered to lift themselves out of poverty and destruction and to make better lives for themselves and their children. The world is too big for any nation to shape by itself. Nevertheless, in any given historical period, the most powerful nations do put their own particular stamp on the international order, if only by virtue of their relative weight in the system. They establish many of the “norms” and rules of international behavior. They shape the nature of economic relations. They can even have influence in the realm of ideas and beliefs, including the way peoples worship their gods and the forms of government they consider legitimate. For many centuries the predominant power of China shaped the way millions of people throughout Asia thought, spoke, worshipped, painted, and carried on their commerce. In the nineteenth century, the great European powers imposed standards of international and domestic behavior not only for Europeans but for millions throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There has been an Egyptian order, a Roman order, a Greek order, an Islamic order, a Mogul order, an Ottoman order, and many others, and historians will undoubtedly view the period from the end of World War II until some yet to be determined moment as an American order.

Yet it has also been the American order in a more specific sense. It is not just that the United States has been the most influential power in the international system. The most important features of today’s world—the great spread of democracy, the prosperity, the prolonged great-power peace—have depended directly and indirectly on power and influence exercised by the United States. No other power could have or would have influenced the world the way Americans have because no other nation shares, or has ever shared, the peculiar combination of qualities.

Some of the most important qualities are obvious. America’s unique geographic circumstances, its capitalist economic system, its democratic form of government, and its enormous military power have together shaped a particular kind of international order that would have looked very different had another nation with different characteristics wielded a similar amount of influence.

Less easy to grasp, but just as important to understanding the nature of the American world order, is the complex character of the American people. This is no simple paean to American superior virtues. Some portray Americans as farseeing builders of international institutions and structures of liberal order, as thoughtful “operators” and “managers” of vast global systems.³ But few Americans, and few non-Americans, would recognize this portrait. In most respects, Americans are like any other people, with a blend of selfishness and generosity. More than most, they have been a people of contradictory impulses and a most ambivalent view of what role, if any, they ought to play in the world.

They are a people rife with potent national myths that both inspire and mislead them. Sta

with the fact that one of the most powerful, influential, and expansive peoples in history still think of themselves as aloof, passive, self-contained, and generally inclined to minding their own business. In less than two centuries Americans transformed their nation from a sliver of settlement clinging to a coastline into a globe-girdling superpower with historical and unparalleled power and influence. Yet to hear Americans tell it, they are the Greta Garbo of nations: they just want to be left alone. In their national mythology, the two-centuries-long subjugation of the North American continent, a region inhabited by Spaniards, French, and Russians, as well as by an entire race of indigenous peoples, was not conquest but the peaceful settlement of an empty frontier. Americans do not go “abroad in search of monsters to destroy” is the oft-quoted phrase of John Quincy Adams. If someone points out to them that they have, indeed, often done just that, then they portray themselves as the “reluctant sheriff,” their boots on the desk, reading the newspaper until some unsavory gang rides into town and forces them to pull their rifle off its rack, whether Japanese imperialists, Nazi Soviet communists, or Islamic jihadis. “The United States of America never goes to war because we want to,” said one prominent politician a few years ago. “We only go to war because we have to.”⁴

But this self-perception, while sincere, bears no relation to reality. Since the late nineteenth century, when the United States became a world power, Americans have used force dozens of times, and rarely because they had no choice.⁵ They have sent troops to Mexico and Central America to depose troublesome leaders; they have fought the Spanish in Cuba and independence-minded guerrillas in the Philippines; they have fought anti-Western forces in China and communists in Vietnam and Korea, and have sent millions of troops to Europe twice; they have fought dictators and jihadis in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. And they have done so for many reasons: to defend themselves from distant threats, to preserve economic interests, to protect peoples from slaughter, to resist aggression, to fight tyranny, to support democracy. Far more than any other democratic people in the world today, Americans see war as a legitimate, even essential, tool of foreign policy.⁶ Few modern nations, and no modern democracies, more revere their military heroes, both past and present. But every time they go to war, Americans promise themselves they’ll never do it again.

They are even ambivalent about the cause of democracy, with which they have always been so closely identified. Americans, even in Woodrow Wilson’s day, never had a master plan for making the world over in their image. They have often ignored the dictators in the midst, allied with them, aided them, and done business with them. They are not missionaries. But neither have they been able to escape their democratic identity, their democratic conscience, and their conviction that their special cause is, as Ben Franklin said, the “cause of all mankind.” To be an American is to believe in and be committed to what Americans, and only Americans, like to call “our way of life.” Since they believe their founding principles are universal, they measure all other peoples against the same rigid standard. This high ideological view of the world tells them that all nondemocratic governments are inherently illegitimate and therefore transient. Even John Quincy Adams, in the same speech in which he warned against seeking monsters to destroy, urged the peoples of Europe to follow the American example and mount revolutions against centuries-old monarchies: “Go thou and do likewise!”

Often Americans have done more than exhort. They have gone out to destroy the monster and usually much to the monsters' surprise. A century ago it was José Santos Zelaya and Victoriano Huerta. In recent years it has been Manuel Noriega, Slobodan Milosevic, Mullah Omar, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Qaddafi who have had their rules, and in some cases their lives, ended with the help of American force. Yet having leaped into action against the dictators, Americans have often been plagued by doubt. They have resented the costs, both material and moral. Wars are expensive, and occupations even more so. They have also repeatedly rediscovered the unavoidable ethical quandaries of exercising power. Liberating people requires the same brutal force as conquering them. Even moral wars have immoral consequences. Neither people nor nations can use the tools of war and coercion and hope to keep their hands clean.

Americans have never been comfortable with these brutal facts of life. Their founding ideology contains an irresolvable tension between universalism, the belief that every human being must be allowed to exercise his or her individual rights, and individualism, the belief that among those rights is the right to be left alone. This has made them ambivalent and suspicious about power, even their own, and this ambivalence is often paralyzing. No sooner do they invade and occupy a country than they begin looking for the exits. Critics point out how inferior to the British Empire they are in this respect, but the British for centuries had few if any moral qualms about ruling other peoples. They believed they had a vocation to rule. They maintained a professional imperial service and a permanent colonial office. Americans may be "imperialists" in the eyes of many, but if so, they are reluctant, conscience-ridden, distracted, halfhearted imperialists. They did not want colonies, even the ones they seized and held for decades. They have no trained cadres for rebuilding and managing the nations they invade and occupy. To give themselves such capabilities would be to acknowledge that they are actually in the business of foreign intervention and occupation. Americans will station forces overseas for decades, so long as no one tells them in advance that that is what they are going to do.⁷ But they have never considered themselves more than temporarily involved in the management of others' affairs, even as they have kept troops in some foreign lands for a half century or more.

Given all this, it is hardly surprising that Americans have been ambivalent about their role as global leader. When first challenged to take on that responsibility after World War I, a majority of Americans balked. Only after World War II, with some shame and misgiving for their global abstention in the 1930s, did they grudgingly accept an unusual share of responsibility for the state of the world. But it was a frightening and, at first, unwelcome burden, shouldered not out of magnanimity but only in response to a perceived threat from the Soviet Union. Harry Truman spoke for many when he declared it "the most terrible responsibility that any nation ever faced."⁸

Yet, for all their misgivings, most Americans have also developed a degree of satisfaction in their special role. During the seventh-inning stretch in every game at Yankee Stadium, the fans rise and offer "a moment of silent prayer for the men and women who are stationed around the globe" defending freedom and "our way of life." A tribute to those serving, yes, but with an unmistakable glint of pride in the nation's role "around the globe."

"We are Americans: part of something larger than ourselves," declared George H. W. Bush on the eve of the first Gulf War. "For two centuries we've done the hard work of freedom

Even today, presidents and politicians speak of the “leader of the free world” (Barack Obama), the “indispensable nation” (Madeleine Albright) upon which “the world is counting” for “global leadership” (Hillary Clinton). Of course, no sooner are these words uttered than the pride fades and the concerns rise, and the same leaders start talking about the need to focus on “nation building at home.”

Americans, in foreign policy, are torn to the point of schizophrenia. They are reluctant, then aggressive; asleep at the switch, then quick on the trigger; indifferent, then obsessed, then indifferent again. They act out of a sense of responsibility and then resent and fear the burden of responsibility they have taken on themselves. Their effect on the world, not surprisingly, is often the opposite of what they intend. Americans say they want stability in the international system, but they are often the greatest disrupters of stability. They extol the virtues of international laws and institutions but then violate and ignore them with barely a second thought. They are a revolutionary power but think they are a status quo power. They want to be left alone but can't seem to leave anyone else alone. They are continually surprising the world with their behavior, but not nearly as much as they are continually surprising themselves.

When Winston Churchill observed that Americans could always be counted on to do the right thing, but only after exhausting all other alternatives, it was a sardonic, backhanded kind of compliment. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century he watched them try to do the wrong thing many times. He watched them stay out of World War I in Europe until it was almost too late to prevent a German victory. In the interwar years, he saw them reject participation in the League of Nations and then waited anxiously for them to abandon neutrality and throw their weight against Hitler, which they did only after the attack on Pearl Harbor and only when it was almost too late again. At the dawn of the Cold War he found them insufficiently attentive to the threat of the Soviet Union; then he found them too uncompromising. He knew Americans when they were “sunk in selfishness,” and yet he marveled “at America’s altruism, her sublime disinterestedness.” He compared the United States to some “gigantic boiler,” quiet and cold until “the fire is lighted under it,” and then with “no limit to the power it can generate.”⁹ Above all, he knew Americans were human beings, neither devils nor angels.

THAT IS IMPORTANT TO keep in mind. It is nations, made up of people, that shape the world, not gods or angels. That is why the present order, shaped by Americans, often unconsciously, and with all their peculiarities and flaws, is all the more remarkable. The great mastermind of Germany’s unification, Otto von Bismarck, is supposed to have said that God looks out for drunkards, fools, and the United States of America. Perhaps that extends to the world order that Americans have built and maintained, almost despite themselves.

THE IRONY IS THAT the peculiar blend of qualities that Americans have displayed, not all of them admirable, not all of them noble, and not all of them obvious traits of effective leadership, have nevertheless been a strange kind of asset to American foreign policy. For while it is true that the United States has been a powerful if unpredictable and often unwitting agent of change in the world, the ambivalence of the American people as well as their lack of self-awareness has paradoxically made their awesome power less threatening than it might be. Americans would be scarier if they actually had a plan. Their very distractedness, their evident desire to hold themselves apart from the world even as they shape it with their power, makes them an often frustrating ally, a confusing adversary, but also a less imposing and less frightening hegemon.

These qualities proved indispensable more than six decades ago when the United States laid the main foundation for today's liberal world order by cementing its economic and strategic alliance with Europe. It is easy to forget, now that Europe is supposedly passé and we've entered the "Asian century," that the world we know today—the political, economic, and strategic order in which Asia itself has prospered—was born atop the rubble of Europe after World War II. And it was born only because the United States supplied a novel solution to Europe's insoluble problem.

The European powers after the mid-nineteenth century had fallen into a tragic syndrome from which they were unable to extricate themselves. Too many strong and ambitious powers were too close to one another to offer any of them a measure of security. The European balance of power had worked for stretches of time, but it had also failed periodically and catastrophically. Between 1850 and 1945, France and Germany (or Prussia in the first instance) went to war three times—in 1870, 1914, and 1940. Russia and Germany went to war twice. Britain and France together fought Russia once. In between these major wars were several near wars as tensions rose, especially in the Balkans but also in the division of colonial spoils in Africa and East Asia. Even when the European balance of power succeeded in keeping the peace, it was through the constant threat of war, the dispatch of battle fleets to contested waters, the menacing mobilization of ground forces during crises. Europe had become a cockpit of geopolitical rivalry between heavily armed great powers, with no way of ending the cycle of insecurity. All this had transpired despite a common European culture and civilization, an increasingly integrated and interdependent European economy, and blood relations among some of the ruling families.

Enter the United States, reluctantly. Even after World War II most Americans had never intended to become a global power. Preserving world peace, most imagined vaguely, would somehow be the job of the United Nations. When war ended, the Truman administration looked to pull back across the ocean, rapidly demobilize its armed forces, cut the defense budget, and establish Europe as an independent "third force," capable of standing up to the Soviet Union by itself. That was the original aim of the Marshall Plan and other efforts to boost Europeans' shattered confidence, rebuild their devastated economies, and turn onetime enemies into a united European entity. The Europeans, however, were not interested in being

a third force, nor, as quickly became apparent, were they capable of it on their own. The wanted “American troops” standing “between them and the Red Army” and to keep a revived Germany in check.¹⁰ The NATO alliance was really Europe’s idea more than America’s, a “invitation to empire,” which the Americans grudgingly accepted only when it became clear their original plan was hopeless.¹¹

George Kennan opposed the idea of NATO or any extended American presence in Europe. He feared Americans were “not fitted, either institutionally or temperamentally, to be an imperial power in the grand manner,” and he much preferred to divest “ourselves gradually of the basic responsibility for the security of western Europe.”¹² Yet it was precisely Americans’ limitations and hesitations that made them such an attractive leader of the transatlantic “empire.” With the Soviet version of empire taking hold in the East, the great power across the ocean, distant both physically and emotionally, appeared to Europeans as the perfect *deus ex machina* to solve their dilemma. The United States was geographically far enough away to be a less threatening hegemon, and with no enemies on its own borders, was secure enough at home to keep large numbers of its powerful armed forces on permanent station thousands of miles away. It helped that America was a democracy, not only because Americans shared common values with the British and the French, but also because, as the historian John Lewis Gaddis has noted, their style of working with allies had a democratic quality that permitted weaker powers a very unimperial autonomy.¹³

The United States played a similarly critical role in East Asia after World War II. There, too, large-scale war among neighboring powers had become common by the end of the nineteenth century. Japan and China fought each other several times between 1895 and 1945 at a cost of tens of millions of lives, mostly Chinese. Japan and Russia fought each other twice. Korea served as the battleground for a number of conflicts, and of course the civil war in Korea sucked in both the United States and China. The entrance of the United States into a permanent security role in the region did not put an end to war—the United States itself fought in both Korea and Vietnam—but it did put an end to the cycle of warfare among the region’s great powers. The close American security relationship with Japan mirrored the role the United States played in Germany. The region’s most aggressive power was put out of the aggression business, its people’s vast energies channeled instead into economic growth, technological innovation, and world trade.

It is worth reflecting on these great geopolitical problems that the United States solved after 1945, for had they not been solved, the world would look entirely different today. The strategic relationships Americans formed in Europe and Asia became the pillars of the liberal world order during the Cold War, the engines of the global economy, the heart of the expanding democratic world, and the primary guarantee against world wars and the great power conflicts that had plagued the world for a century. Over time the self-contained liberal order built around American leadership during the Cold War proved too strong, economically, militarily, and politically, for its chief competitor, the Soviet Union, and its own efforts to establish a global communist order. The American order became the dominant world order. Moscow’s former satellites eagerly joined “the West,” thereby making possible the full flowering of the liberal world that we enjoy today.

THERE WAS NOTHING INEVITABLE about this turn of events. No divine providence or progressive

teleology, no unfolding Hegelian dialectic required that liberalism triumph after World War II. Those who live in this remarkable world tend to assume that both the global explosion of democracy and the liberal economic order of free trade and free markets that have spread prosperity these past sixty years were simply a natural stage in humankind's upward progress. We like to believe that the triumph of democracy is the triumph of an idea and that the victory of market capitalism is the victory of a better system, and that both are irreversible.

It's a pleasant thought, but history tells a different story. Democratic progress and liberal economics have been and can be reversed and undone. The ancient democracies in Greece and the republics of Rome and Venice all fell to more powerful forces or through their own failings. The evolving liberal economic order of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries collapsed in the 1920s and 1930s. The better idea doesn't have to win just because it is a better idea. It requires great powers to champion it.

Consider the ups and downs of democracy in just the last two centuries. From the time of the American Revolution until near the end of the nineteenth century, there had never been more than five nations in the world that could be called democracies. A brief flurry of liberal and constitutional revolutions in Europe in 1848 had been suppressed. But in the late nineteenth century there was an upswing. By 1900 there were a dozen democracies in the world, a growth so astonishing that contemporaries believed a democratic revolution was about to sweep the planet. Then came World War I and the victory of Great Britain, France, and the United States. Democratic governments sprouted up all across Europe, in the defeated powers of Germany, Austria, and Ottoman Turkey, in Finland, Poland, and Greece, and there were also in Latin America. In 1920, with the number of democracies suddenly doubled, the historian James Bryce wondered, along with many others, whether this "trend toward democracy" was no temporary fluctuation but "a natural trend, due to a general law of social progress."¹⁴ As the British economist J. A. Hobson later recalled, democracy "was making such advances in most countries of the world as to be considered the natural goal of political evolution. Even those who distrusted it believed it to be inevitable."¹⁵

Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, however, the trend moved in the other direction—a "reverse wave," as Samuel P. Huntington called it. It began with Mussolini's fascist takeover in Italy in 1922. Then the newly born democracies in Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, and Estonia fell. Then came the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany in the early 1930s and their forcible takeover in Austria and then Czechoslovakia. Greek democracy fell in 1936, and Spanish democracy fell to Franco and his fascist regime that same year. Military coups overthrew democratic governments in Portugal, Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. Japanese democracy became a façade for military rule in the 1930s. Across three continents, fragile democracies gave way to authoritarian forces exploiting the vulnerabilities of the democratic system, while others fell prey to economic depression. There was a ripple effect, too—the success of fascism in one country strengthened similar movements elsewhere. Spanish fascism received military assistance from the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. By 1939, on the eve of World War II, the number of democracies had fallen back to no more than a dozen. All the democratic gains of the previous forty years had been wiped out.

The period after World War I showed not only that democratic gains could be reversed but that democracy did not always have to win the competition of ideas. It wasn't just that democracy was overthrown. As Hobson observed, the very idea of democracy was

“discredited.”¹⁶ Its aura of inevitability vanished. Great numbers of people did not believe democracy was a better form of government.

The fascist governments looked stronger, more energetic and efficient, and more capable of providing reassurance in troubled times. They also appealed effectively to nationalistic sentiments. The many weaknesses of Germany’s Weimar democracy and of the fragile and short-lived democracies of Italy and Spain made their people susceptible to the appeals of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, just as the weaknesses of Russian democracy in the 1990s made a more authoritarian government under Vladimir Putin attractive to many Russians—least for a while. It turns out that human beings yearn not only for freedom, autonomy, individuality, and recognition. Especially in times of difficulty, they also yearn for security, order, and a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, something that submerges autonomy and individuality—which autocracies often provide better than democracies. People also tend to follow winners. In the 1920s and 1930s the democratic capitalist countries looked weak compared with the apparently vigorous fascist regimes and with Stalin’s Soviet Union.

It took another war and another victory by Allied democracies (and the Soviet Union) over the fascist governments to reverse the trend again. The United States imposed democracy through force and prolonged occupations in West Germany, Italy, Japan, Austria, and South Korea. With the victory of the democracies, and the discrediting of fascism, many other countries followed suit. Greece and Turkey both moved in a democratic direction, as did Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Colombia. Some of the new nations born after Europe shed its colonies also experimented with democratic government, the most prominent example being India. By 1950 the number of democracies had grown to between twenty and thirty, representing close to 40 percent of the world’s population.

Was this the victory of an idea or the victory of arms, the product of an inevitable human evolution or, as Huntington later observed, of “historically discrete events”?¹⁷ The evidence suggests the latter, for it turned out that even the great wave of democracy following World War II was not irreversible. Another “reverse wave” hit from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Ecuador, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Greece all fell back under authoritarian rule. In Africa, Nigeria was the most prominent of the newly decolonized nations where democracy failed. By 1975, over three dozen governments around the world had been installed by military coup.¹⁸

This reverse wave occurred, moreover, at a time of significant growth in global GDP. The greatest surge in the global economy occurred between 1950 and 1975, and it slowed appreciably thereafter. So while more countries were moving into the phase of economic development that political scientists consider most favorable to democracy, the number of democracies in the world actually declined. Few spoke of democracy’s inevitability in the 1970s or even in the early 1980s. As late as 1984, Huntington himself believed “the limits of democratic development in the world” had been reached. He noted the “unreceptivity to democracy of several major cultural traditions” as well as “the substantial power of antidemocratic governments (particularly the Soviet Union)” as contributing to democracy’s dim future.¹⁹

But then, unexpectedly, came the “third wave.” From the late 1970s through the early

1990s the number of democracies in the world rose to an astonishing 120, representing well over half the world's population. And it is possible that in the Arab Spring we are seeing a continuation of this third wave, or perhaps even a fourth. The explosion of democracy is not about to enter a fifth straight decade, the longest and broadest such expansion in history. Although there has been backsliding in some parts of Latin America and the former Soviet Union, we have yet to witness a reverse wave.

What explains the prolonged success of democratization over the last quarter of the twentieth century? It cannot only be the steady rise of the global economy and the general yearning for freedom, autonomy, and recognition. These were critical ingredients, but they were not sufficient. Presumably, human beings always have an innate yearning for autonomy and recognition, when these are not outweighed by other concerns and innate yearnings. And the economic growth between 1950 and 1973 was even greater than in the years that followed. Yet neither human yearnings nor economic growth prevented a reversal of the democratic trend in the 1960s and early 1970s. Until the third wave, many nations around the world careened back and forth between democracy and authoritarianism, in a cyclical and almost predictable manner. What has been most notable about the third wave is that this cyclical alternation between democracy and autocracy has been interrupted. Nations have moved into a democratic phase and stayed there. But why?

The answer is related to the configuration of power and ideas in the world. The international climate from the mid-1970s onward has simply been more hospitable to democracies and more challenging to autocratic governments than in past eras. In his studies Huntington noted such factors as the change in the Catholic Church's doctrine regarding order and revolution in the Second Vatican Council, which tended to weaken the legitimacy of authoritarian governments in Catholic countries. The growing success and attractiveness of the European Community, meanwhile, had an impact on the internal policies of nations like Portugal, Greece, and Spain, which sought the economic benefits of membership in the EC and therefore felt pressure to conform to its democratic norms. These norms were increasingly becoming international norms. But they did not appear out of nowhere, or as some natural evolution of the species. As Huntington notes, "The pervasiveness of democratic norms rested in large part on the commitment to those norms of the most powerful countries in the world."²⁰

The United States, in fact, played a critical role in making the explosion of democracy possible. This was not because Americans pursued a consistent policy of promoting democracy around the world. They didn't. At various times throughout the Cold War American policy often supported dictatorships as part of the battle against communism or simply out of indifference. It even permitted and at times encouraged the overthrow of democratic regimes deemed unreliable—Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, Árbenz in Guatemala in 1954, and Allende in Chile in 1973. At times American foreign policy was almost hostile to democracy. Richard Nixon regarded it as "not necessarily the best form of government for people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America."²¹

Nor, when the United States did support democracy, was it purely out of fealty to principle. Often it was for strategic reasons. Reagan officials came to believe that democratic governments might actually be *better* than autocracies at fending off communist insurgencies, for instance. And often it was a reaction to popular local demands that compelled the United

States to make a choice it would otherwise have preferred not to make, between supporting an unpopular and possibly faltering dictatorship and “getting on the side of the people.” Ronald Reagan would likely have preferred to support the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1980s had he not been confronted by Filipino “people power.” In only a few cases—such as George H. W. Bush’s 1989 invasion of Panama and Bill Clinton’s 1994 intervention in Haiti—did the United States seek a change of regime primarily out of devotion to democratic principles.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, however, the general inclination of the United States did begin to shift toward a more critical view of dictatorship. The U.S. Congress, led by human rights advocates, began to condition or cut off American aid to authoritarian allies, which had the effect of weakening their hold on power. In the Helsinki Accords of 1975, a reference to human rights issues raised greater attention to the cause of dissidents and other opponents of dictatorship in the Eastern bloc. President Jimmy Carter focused attention on the human rights practices of the Soviet Union as well as on right-wing governments in Latin America and elsewhere. American international information services such as the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty put greater emphasis on democracy and human rights in their programming. The Reagan administration, after first trying to roll back Carter’s human rights agenda, eventually embraced it and made the promotion of democracy part of its stated policy. Even during this period, American policy was far from consistent. Many allied dictatorships, especially in the Middle East, were not only tolerated but actively supported with American economic and military aid. But the net effect of the shift in American policy, joined with the efforts of Europe, was significant.

The third wave began in Portugal in 1974, where the “Carnation Revolution” put an end to a half-century-long dictatorship. As the democracy expert Larry Diamond notes, the revolution did not just happen. The United States and European democracies played a key role, making a “heavy investment ... in support of the democratic parties.”²² Over the next decade and a half, the United States used a variety of tools, including direct military intervention, to aid democratic transitions and prevent the undermining of existing fragile democracies all across the globe. Carter threatened military action in the Dominican Republic when a long-serving president refused to give up power. Reagan’s invasion of Grenada in 1983 restored a democratic government after a military coup. In the Philippines in 1986, the United States threatened military action to prevent Marcos from forcibly annulling an election he had lost. Bush’s 1989 invasion of Panama brought democracy after the military strongman Manuel Noriega had annulled his nation’s elections. Throughout this period, too, the United States used its influence to block military coups in Honduras, Bolivia, El Salvador, Peru, and South Korea. Elsewhere it urged presidents not to prolong their stay in office beyond constitutional limits. Altogether Huntington estimated that over the course of about a decade and a half, U.S. support had been “critical to democratization in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Uruguay, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, and the Philippines” and was “a contributing factor to democratization in Portugal, Chile, Poland, South Korea, Bolivia, and Taiwan.”²³

Many developments both global and local helped produce the democratizing trend of the late 1970s and the 1980s, and there might have been a democratic wave even if the United States had not been so influential. The question is whether the wave would have been a

large and as lasting. The stable zones of democracy in Europe and Japan proved to be powerful magnets. The liberal free-market and free-trade system increasingly outperformed the stagnating economies of the communist bloc, especially at the dawn of the information revolution. The greater activism of the United States, together with other successful democracies, helped build a broad, if not universal, consensus sympathetic to democratic forms of government and less sympathetic to authoritarian governments.

Diamond and others have noted how important it is that these “global democratic norms” came to be “reflected in regional and international institutions and agreements as never before.”²⁴ Those norms had an impact on the internal political processes of countries, making it harder for authoritarians to weather political and economic storms and easier for democratic movements to gain legitimacy. But “norms” are transient, too. In the 1930s the trendsetting nations were fascist dictatorships. In the 1950s and 1960s variants of socialism were in vogue. But from the 1970s until recently, the United States and a handful of other democratic powers set the fashion trend. They pushed democratic principles—some might say imposed them—and embedded them in international institutions and agreements.

Equally important was the role the United States played in preventing backsliding away from democracy where it had barely taken root. Perhaps the most significant U.S. contribution was simply to prevent military coups against fledgling democratic governments. In a sense, the United States was interfering in what might have been a natural cycle of preventing nations that might ordinarily have been “due” for an authoritarian phase from following the usual pattern. It was not that the United States was exporting democracy everywhere. More often, it played the role of catcher in the rye, preventing young democracies from falling off the cliff—in places like the Philippines, Colombia, and Panama. This helped give the third wave an exceptional breadth and durability.

Finally, there was the collapse of the Soviet Union and with it the collapse of communist governments across eastern Europe and the installation of democratic regimes. What role the United States played in hastening the collapse of the Soviet system will always be a subject of contention. Undoubtedly, it played some role, both in containing the Soviet empire militarily and in outperforming it economically and technologically. Nor was the turn to democracy throughout eastern Europe primarily America’s doing. The peoples of the former Warsaw Pact nations had long yearned for liberation from the Soviet Union, which also meant liberation from communism. They wanted to join the rest of Europe, which offered a better economic and social model that was even more attractive than that of the United States. That they uniformly chose democratic forms of government, however, was not simply the aspiration for freedom or comfort. It also reflected the desires of eastern and central European peoples to place themselves under the American security umbrella. The strategic, the economic, the political, and the ideological were thus inseparable. Those nations that wanted to be part of NATO, and later the European Union, knew they stood no chance if they did not present democratic credentials. These democratic transitions, which turned the third wave into a democratic tsunami, need not have occurred had the world been configured differently. The fact that a democratic, united, and prosperous western Europe was even there as a powerful magnet to its eastern neighbors was due to American actions after World War II.

The configuration of power and ideas in any international system invariably affects the

form of government of nations within that system. Contrast the fate of democratic movements in the late twentieth century with that of the liberal revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848. Beginning in France, the Springtime of the Peoples, as it was known, included liberal reformers and constitutionalists, nationalists, and representatives of a rising middle class, as well as radical workers and socialists. In a matter of weeks they toppled kings and princes and shook thrones across Germany and Italy, in France and Poland, Austria, Hungary, and Romania. In the end, however, the liberal movements failed, partly for lack of cohesion, but partly because they were forcibly crushed by the autocratic powers. The Prussian military helped defeat liberal movements in the German principalities. The Russian tsar ordered his forces into Romania and Hungary. Tens of thousands of protesters were killed in the streets of Europe. The sword was mightier than the pen.

It mattered that the more liberal powers, Britain and France, adopted a neutral posture throughout the liberal ferment, even though France's own revolution had sparked and inspired the pan-European movement. The British monarchy and aristocracy were afraid of radicalism at home. Both France and Britain were more concerned to preserve peace among the great powers than to provide assistance to fellow liberals. The preservation of the European balance among the five great powers benefited the forces of counterrevolution everywhere, and the Springtime of the Peoples was suppressed.²⁵ For several decades thereafter, the forces of reaction in Europe were strengthened against the forces of liberalism.

Scholars have speculated how differently Europe and the world might have evolved had the liberal revolutions of 1848 succeeded—in particular, how differently German history might have unfolded if national unification had been achieved under the auspices of a liberal parliamentary system rather than by Bismarck, the “Iron Chancellor,” who unified the nation by war using the great power of the conservative Prussian military led by the Hohenzoller dynasty. As the historian A. J. P. Taylor observed, history reached a turning point in 1848 but Germany “failed to turn.”²⁶ Might Germans have learned a different lesson from the one Bismarck taught, that “the great questions of the age are not decided by speeches and majority decisions ... but by blood and iron”?²⁷ Yet the international system of the day was not configured in such a way as to encourage liberal and democratic change. The European balance of power in the nineteenth century did not favor democracy, and so, not surprisingly, democracy did not triumph, anywhere.²⁸

We can also speculate how differently today's world might have evolved but for the role of the United States in shaping an international environment favorable to democracy, and how it might evolve were the United States no longer strong enough to play that role. Democratic transitions are not inevitable, even where the conditions may be ripe. Nations may enter a transition zone—economically, socially, and politically—where the probability of moving in a democratic direction increases or decreases. But foreign influences, usually by the reigning great powers, are often catalysts that determine which direction change takes. Strong authoritarian powers willing to support conservative forces against liberal movements can undo what might otherwise have been a natural evolution to democracy, just as powerful democratic nations can help liberal forces that, left to their own devices, might have failed. In the 1980s as in the 1840s, liberal movements arose for their own reasons in different countries, but their success or failure was influenced by the balance of power at the international level. In the American era, the balance was generally favorable to democracy.

which helps explain why the liberal revolutions of that later era succeeded. Had the United States not been so powerful, there would have been fewer transitions, and those that occurred might have been short-lived. It might have meant a shallower and more easily reversed third wave.²⁹

The response of the United States to the recent ferment in the Arab world is a good example of how Americans may influence the trend toward democracy even without quite planning or meaning to do so. From 2004 to 2010, the United States had modestly increased pressure on Arab states to undertake mild political reforms, although the effort was halfhearted and uneven. When a Tunisian shopkeeper set himself on fire and sparked a region-wide movement, however, within weeks the United States found itself withdrawing support from longtime allies like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and then, in an impulsive act of humanitarianism, using force to prevent Qaddafi from massacring Libyans in Benghazi. The United States had not set out to unseat these dictators but in both cases felt compelled to place itself on the side of people clamoring for their removal. Once these unexpected decisions were made, American power became a decisive factor shaping the regional and international environment in which the Arab political turmoil unfolded. In Libya, France and Britain took the lead, but neither could have pulled together international support or used force effectively without the United States. The United States did far less than it could have but what it did do made all the difference. Had the United States been weaker, wielding no greater influence in the international system than Russia and China, it is unlikely the dictators in the region would have faced so much pressure and been compelled to give way or be overthrown.

It is ironic, but not unusual, that Americans, having helped topple dictators in the Middle East, are not sure how they feel about what may follow. The inevitable victory of Islamist parties in some Arab states will probably bring governments to power that are less accommodating to some American interests than the previous dictatorships had been. This would not be the first time. The United States helped throw out Marcos in the Philippines only to have the post-Marcos democratic government throw the United States out of its Filipino air and naval bases. In Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere, new democracies have often proved less reliable allies in some respects than the dictatorships they replaced. Nor are the dictatorships America topples always replaced by democracies. The United States withdrew support from the Shah of Iran in 1979 only to see a virulently anti-American and undemocratic Islamic theocracy take his place—an occurrence that many worry may be repeated in the current Middle Eastern turmoil.

The great spread of democratic governments has nevertheless been an essential attribute of the American world order. Whatever specific interests have been sacrificed, achieving Americans' broader interests in a more peaceful world and a more open economic system has been compensated. It is demonstrably true that democracies rarely go to war with other democracies and that politically liberal regimes are more likely to favor liberal economic systems. Americans' enduring interest in a liberal world order generally transcends other more narrow and temporary interests. The United States can lose an Egyptian ally but still gain a healthier world order. That is probably why Americans have sometimes chosen to support democratic movements, and sometimes only purportedly democratic movements, even when their immediate interests might argue against it. And it is that America

predilection, the often uncalculating impulse to support those raising the banner of democracy, that has played such an important part in creating and sustaining the extraordinary levels of democratization in the present world order. Whether or not it is true, as Americans believe, that democracy is the best form of government and the only legitimate form of government for everyone everywhere, the great spread of democracy in recent decades would not have been possible without Americans believing it and sometimes acting on that belief.

A SIMILAR STORY CAN be told about the establishment of the present liberal economic order. It is a common perception today that the international free-market system is simply a natural stage in the evolution of the global economy. The forces of globalization, revolutions in communication and technology, the growing interdependence of nations and peoples, have created a system that is both inevitable and self-sustaining.

Yet history tells us that there is nothing inevitable about a liberal international economy either. A free-market, free-trade global economy does not just come into being. It is a choice and it is also an imposition. As the political scientist Robert Gilpin has observed, “A liberal international economy cannot come into existence and be maintained unless it has behind it the most powerful state(s) in the system.”³⁰ Technological innovations and social trends may support and strengthen such an order, if people want it to be strengthened. But people and nations have to want it, and most particularly the nations with the greatest power—the dominant states—have to want it. Since nations rarely do anything that is fundamentally at odds with their most vital interests, the dominant powers must believe that an international liberal economic order is the best means of increasing their wealth and power.

It is conventional wisdom today that the liberal economic order is in everyone’s interest and that all nations in positions of power would support it. As a historical matter, however, very nearly the opposite has been true. Few powerful nations have ever perceived their wealth being as intimately tied to a liberal free-trade international economy and had the will and power to create and sustain it. Indeed, in the modern era of nation-states, there have only been two: Great Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States in the twentieth. Other great and hegemonic powers of recent centuries—the sixteenth-century Ottomans and Philip II’s Spain, France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany, and the Soviet Union—had little if any interest in free markets, free trade, and a liberal economic order. Not surprisingly, none of these powers even attempted to create such an order.

The global free-market economy we know today was created by British power in the nineteenth century, and when Britain faltered between the two world wars, that liberal economic order was not passed smoothly on to a new group of supporters. It collapsed. The only power that might have had the capacity, the interest, and the desire to uphold the global free-market order in the interwar years was the United States, but Americans were not interested in playing that role in the 1920s and 1930s. It was only when the United States took on the task of creating and sustaining a liberal economic order after World War II that it took hold, and then only in those parts of the world not controlled by the Soviet Union or China. The liberal economic order is a choice, not the inevitable product of evolution.

In the case of both Britain and the United States, an order dominated by free markets and

free trade reflected the special characteristics and needs of two unusual powers—both advanced industrial democratic capitalist nations and both, crucially, “island” powers with dominant navies. Even Britain and the United States did not always favor a free-trade system. Britain was a mercantilist power from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Both nations went through long periods of protectionism before embracing free trade. But at the height of their power—Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, the United States in the twentieth—both nations stood the most to gain from open markets and free trade. Their advanced industries were dominant. Their dynamic economies benefited from the export of goods and capital. Their powerful navies controlled the seas and dominated the trade routes while their competitors were generally land powers that depended on them to keep the land open.

These two qualities, dominance of the seas and free-market capitalism, made Britain and the United States the fathers of the present globalized economy. For not only did these countries uniquely benefit from an open economic system in which they were dominant, but they also had a profound interest in the economic development of other nations and peoples. Capitalists cannot profit overseas from peoples who neither need nor can afford their goods. Both Britain and the United States had a potent, self-interested motive to aid other peoples and even to make temporary sacrifices on their behalf, for the long-term goal of creating lucrative markets for exports and investment. This was more true for the United States even than for Great Britain, because the latter came into this phase of economic development still in possession of a vast colonial empire. The United States was, in the Marxist argot, a “neocolonialist” economy that enjoyed the advantages of dominance and access to open markets but without the burdens, costs, and limitations of actually maintaining colonies. The American solution, best employed in the Marshall Plan and in Japan, was to help the postwar economies of Europe and Asia get back on their feet. Americans “provided the public goods necessary for the functioning of efficient world markets because it was profitable for them to do so.”³²

It was convenient that Americans’ economic interests blended so seamlessly with the preferred global security strategy. By resuscitating the economies of Europe and Japan, the United States strengthened both as bulwarks against the Soviet Union without an excessive commitment of American forces. It was the perfect capitalist solution to a problem that was strategic as well as economic.

The side effect of this essentially self-interested behavior was a period of unprecedented global economic growth, not only in the transatlantic West but in the developing world, too. As John Kenneth Galbraith once observed, “The experience of nations with well-being is exceedingly brief. Nearly all, throughout history, have been very poor.”³³ During the period of American hegemony, the global economy produced the greatest and most prolonged era of prosperity in history. Between 1950 and 2000, annual GDP growth for the entire world was 3.9 percent, as compared with 1.6 percent between 1820 and 1950 and an estimated 0.5 percent between 1500 and 1820. This increasing prosperity was also much more widely distributed around the world than in the past. Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Britain and other European colonial powers were investing and trading with their growing colonial empires, the principal beneficiaries of economic growth were the Europeans. For the peoples of India, China, and the rest of Asia during the age of British and

European colonialism, growth rates were flat (0.03 between 1820 and 1870; 0.94 between 1870 and 1913; 0.9 between 1913 and 1950). After 1950, however, growth rates in Asia matched or exceeded those in Europe and the United States (5.18 between 1950 and 1973; 5.46 between 1973 and 1998).³⁴ Between 1980 and 2002 alone, world trade more than tripled.³⁵

The result was a dramatic improvement in the economic condition of non-European peoples. As the economist Paul Collier has noted, the world at the beginning of this era of prosperity had been roughly divided between one billion rich people and five billion poor, with the great majority of the poor living outside the transatlantic world.³⁶ By the beginning of the twenty-first century, four billion of those poor had begun climbing their way out of poverty. This period of global prosperity has benefited an enormous number of the world's poor and produced rising economic powers like China, Brazil, Turkey, India, and South Africa in parts of the world that had once known mostly poverty. The United States was not directly responsible for this burst of economic growth. National policies undertaken by Deng Xiaoping in China and by governments in other countries, as well as the hard work and entrepreneurial skills of their peoples, created the new prosperity. But these economic successes took place within an overall environment that was favorable to such efforts, an international system of relative peace in which trade was increasingly free and secure and in which the dominant power had a selfish interest in the economic growth of other nations.

It did not have to be this way. The Soviet Union certainly had no interest in free markets and neither did China before its turn to market capitalism in the late 1970s. Continental powers lacking great naval capacity in general tend to favor closed markets that they can dominate with their superior land forces. The Chinese Empire effectively closed itself to foreign trade for centuries, until forcibly opened by Western powers. But even modern European land powers have frequently sought closed economic orders. That was the goal of Napoléon, with his Continental System, which aimed to bring Britain, the island power, to its knees by turning the continent of Europe into a closed trading system. It was Germany's consistent aim, from the late nineteenth century through the time of Hitler, to conquer and control territories in eastern Europe and in France from which it could extract raw materials and labor. Even imperial Japan, though an island power with a dominant navy, sought to set up a closed Asian economic zone, the so-called Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, which it could dominate and from which it could exclude other great powers.

In the years following World War II, many nations in the developing world did not choose the capitalist market model, partly because they did not believe they could compete effectively with the dominant capitalist powers. The world's growing wealth did not address the problem of rising income inequality within and between nations. On the contrary, it often exacerbated it. So the free-market, free-trade economy was not adopted willingly and gratefully everywhere. Americans, and Britons before them, might believe that the free market, free-trade system provided developing nations with the opportunity to get richer. But as one scholar has observed, those "opportunities" nevertheless often had to be "imposed upon the reluctant partners ... Free trade is the policy of the strong."³⁷

Americans generally believe that the free market ought always to win out over any alternative simply because it is better. In fact, capitalism can also lose. It periodically discredits itself with its seemingly unavoidable cycles of boom and bust. Capitalism

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