

The Illusion of Progress

William Pfaff, a columnist for the *International Herald Tribune*, writing in *World Policy Journal* (Winter 1995–96), criticizes the rhetoric of progress in foreign policy.

National Security Adviser Anthony Lake has said that the United States must struggle against nationalists, “tribalists, terrorists, organized criminals, coup plotters, rogue states, and all those who would return newly free states to the intolerant ways of the past.”

Note that intolerance is of the past. It is the common argument of both Right and Left in Washington that international society is moving toward greater democracy (Freedom House keeping annual account of successes and slippages). Inevitability is imputed to this progress, and a foreign policy of promoting democracy is seen as not only an expression of America’s own values, which it is, but also as practical cooperation with a major historical trend with a security pay-off: political science has “discovered” that democracies do not fight one another. . . .

There is a moral and implicitly theological aspect to this, since in modern times the assumption that man is going someplace—which is to say, he will become better than he is now—has more often than not been the implied corollary to a belief that history is progress. . . .

Fundamental to the Enlightenment’s faith in human progress, as to the Western religious faith it largely replaced, has been a conviction that the forces shaping historical existence are essentially benign. . . . Those who threw themselves into the work of religion, reform, or revolution believed they were cooperating with history’s dominant forces and that eventually there would be a happy ending. . . .

I would myself propose that not only does no evidence exist of man’s collective moral progress but that none is to be expected. That a moral continuity has existed among men and women since the times of the Magdalenian cave painters and the Attic tragedians seems to me cause for a certain confidence. Our ancestors, the classical Greeks, identified humanity’s moral undertakings as Sisyphean—as they remain today, even if in this century we have attempted to deny it.

Some certainly may find in this view a counsel of despair, since if there is a moral constancy among men and women, through time, then the immense sacrifices that have gone into the effort to improve society might seem to have been a waste. I would argue that civilization has indeed progressed, for example, by installing and enlarging certain norms of disinterested international and national behavior (standards of human rights, law, and a structure of international law), but has done so without man’s essential change and without any automaticity in the historical process or security in what has been accomplished. The “retrogression” of the 20th century to barbarism in war and in the practices of totalitarian governments was not in fact retrogression, but discrete phenomena that may recur. Intolerance is not of the past.

sal scale,” there is a “moral duty” to act, and certain “political, economic, and social

breakdowns [are] too dangerous to world order to be ignored.”

Isolationism Forever?

“Early Isolationism Revisited: Neutrality and Beyond in the 1790s” by Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, in *Journal of American Studies* (Aug. 1995), Cambridge Univ. Press, Journals Dept., 40 W. 20th St., New York, N.Y. 10011–4211.

“Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our

peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest,

humor, or caprice?” asked President George Washington in his Farewell Address of 1796. Was he, as many isolationists have since claimed, enunciating eternal principles of isolationism, of peace and neutrality toward all nations? Not at all, maintains Rossignol, a professor of English and American studies at the Université Paris VII-Denis Diderot.

True, she says, Washington did urge his countrymen to adopt this “great rule of conduct” toward foreign nations: “in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible.” But he was not laying down a timeless standard, just being realistic, she argues.

The United States was then a small nation of four million people whose army two years before had only barely defeated the Northwestern Indians after five years of violent clashes. Aided somewhat by Britain and Spain, Indians remained a significant threat in the South.



And the United States was also just recovering from a severe economic crisis. At the time, Rossignol says, it “made good economic and military sense” to avoid European entanglements. That did not preclude U.S. military action when vital interests were at stake, she notes.

“The United States had its own frontline in the 1790s; it was on the [western] frontier, not on

An edict for all time?

European battlegrounds, that its soldiers fought.”

Indeed, Rossignol observes, Washington himself did not rule out America’s participation in European conflicts at some time in the future: “If we remain one people, under an efficient government,” the president said in his Farewell Address, “the period is not far off when . . . we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.”

ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

The Not-So-Miraculous ‘Asian Miracle’

A Survey of Recent Articles

For years, Asia’s economic “miracles” have preyed on the American mind. First it was Japan, then it was the East Asian “tigers,” and now it’s China. The Chinese economy has been in overdrive for a decade, leading the world with annual growth rates of up to 14 percent. America’s trade deficit with China hit \$33.8 billion last year, while the U.S.-Japan trade gap was \$59.3 billion. All of this has fed the American suspicion that inimitable “Asian values” are at work—and that the 21st century may be a long and unpleasant one for the United States.

Lately, however, a number of economists have sharply questioned the conventional view of Asia’s economic successes. In the *Brookings Review* (Winter 1996), for example, Nicholas R. Lardy, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, points

out that the lion’s share of China’s increased exports is being produced by foreign firms.

From only \$320 million in 1985, barely more than one percent of total exports, the country’s exports of goods assembled from foreign components, such as machinery, electronic products, and clothing, soared to about \$35 billion in 1994. China’s inefficient state-owned firms, which in 1986-87 accounted for more than four-fifths of export growth, in 1991-92 accounted for only one-fifth. “Reliance on foreign firms is not a problem per se,” Lardy says, “but, combined with the protection provided to state-owned industries, it has inhibited productivity growth.”

Veteran Asia correspondent Robert Elegant seconds Lardy, emphasizing in *National Review* (Nov. 27, 1995) the