The Periodical Observer

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A Summons to National Greatness?

A Survey of Recent Articles

President Bill Clinton has put commerce at the center of U.S. foreign policy, hoping, as Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history at the University of New Orleans, points out in *Foreign Policy* (Spring 1997), to be remembered as "the free trade president and the leading architect of a new world economic order." Critics such as Lawrence F. Kaplan, a Fellow at the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, find this return of the "dollar diplomacy" of the 1920s deeply disquieting. "The defects of commercial diplomacy—its lack of strategic underpinnings, its tenuous moral legitimacy, its disjunction from anything resembling a truly national interest—have been apparent for decades," he writes in *Commentary* (Feb. 1998).

But what sort of foreign policy do the critics want? In a much-noted op-ed essay in the *Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 15, 1997), William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard*, and David Brooks, a senior editor—harkening back to the nationalism of Theodore Roosevelt and Alexander Hamilton—urge a conservatism of "national greatness" as a tonic for both domestic and foreign affairs. At home, this would mean using federal power "to preserve and enhance our national patrimony—the parks, buildings, and monuments that are the physical manifestations of our common heritage." It would also mean, as they explain in an Ethics and Public Policy Center *Unum Conversation* (1997, No. 5), using government in "a limited but effective way" to address crime and other social problems, as Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has done in New York City. Abroad, say Kristol and Brooks, national greatness conservatism means following "a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of national strength and moral assertiveness." Kristol and Robert Kagan, a contributing editor of the *Weekly Standard*, spelled this out in more detail in *Foreign Affairs* (July–Aug. 1996). America's international role, they said, should be one of "benevolent global hegemony. Having defeated the 'evil empire,' the United States enjoys strategic and ideological predominance. The first objective of U.S. foreign policy should be to preserve and enhance that predominance by strengthening America's security, supporting its friends, advancing its interests, and standing up for its principles around the world." That would require, among other things, a $60–$80 billion increase in defense spending.

Historian Walter A. McDougall, editor of *Orbis* (Winter 1998), is appalled by this proposed worldwide crusade. "Benevolent hegemony" is an oxymoron, he says. "Such a self-conscious, self-righteous bid for global hegemony is bound to drive foreign rivals into open hostility to the U.S. and make our allies resentful and nervous." Kristol and his colleagues, McDougall says, ignore the historical record: "U.S. diplomacy has been most successful when it weighs in *against* would-be hegemons such as Germany and the Soviet Union [in order], as John F. Kennedy said, `to make the world safe for *diversity*.' But Kristol and Kagan would have us arrogate to ourselves a hegemony for the purpose of making the world over in our image." Promoting democracy to thwart the designs of an aggressive dictatorship is very different, McDougall points out, from "turning some authoritarian country *into* an enemy because it is laggard in

embracing American values." While agreeing that the United States "must play a leading role in the world, affirm its values without apology, and recommend them to all mankind," he objects to "premature, imprudent crusades."

Moreover, argues Robert D. Kaplan, the author of *The Ends of the Earth* (1996), democracy is not necessarily a good thing for a society. "Hitler and Mussolini each came to power through democracy," he observes in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Dec. 1997). "Democracies do not always make societies more civil—but they do always mercilessly expose the health of the societies in which they operate." In 1994, some 22,000 American soldiers were dispatched to Haiti with the avowed purpose of "restoring democracy." But, notes Kaplan, only five percent of eligible Haitian voters participated in the election in April 1997, "chronic instability continues, and famine threatens." The lesson, he says, is "that democracy emerges successfully only as a capstone to other social and economic achievements," including the development of a middle class and stable civil institutions.

"Without doubt, people around the world thirst for freedom and authentic self-government," observes Andrew J. Bacevich, executive director of the Nitze School's Foreign Policy Institute, writing in *First Things* (Mar. 1998). "Equally without doubt, the obstacles to satisfying that thirst loom large. When it comes to nurturing the spread of democratic institutions, none of the three areas in which the United States today is especially dominant—military might, mastery of the so-called information revolution, and the 'soft power' of pop culture and lifestyle—are likely to be decisive. In the end, values will count most."

And there is the rub, Bacevich adds. "Americans are no longer quite sure what they ought to believe or what their nation stands for. As the sludge of multiculturalism seeps from the academy into everyday life, national identity becomes a cause for remorse or self-flagellation rather than a source of inspiration, collective self-confidence lapses, and moral certitude gives way to doubt and bewilderment." Conservatives, he says, "would do well to defer any crusades abroad until they have turned the tide in the culture war at home."

The "epic" of America, as understood by Americans, has shifted focus in recent decades, observes Nathan Glazer, a professor of education and sociology emeritus at Harvard University and coeditor of the *Public Interest* (Winter 1998). The story once emphasized "the newness, the vastness, the openness of America—the freedom thereby granted Americans." The newer narrative, whether told from an optimistic or a pessimistic point of view, stresses racial and ethnic diversity. Indeed, "the one grand epic has been succeeded" by many smaller stories—and Americans wonder if their nation is being shattered into a multitude of fragments, Glazer says. "We face no great tyranny, and our will in facing even small tyrannies is not strong. We are now doubtful about our capacity to improve the lives of other people. . . . Of course, we can live without an American epic. But that does diminish us."

Virginia I. Postrel, editor of *Reason*, and James K. Glassman, a Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 25, 1997), will have none of this "gloom and doom" about cultural disarray or decadence. They see the cry for "national greatness" as "a kind of wistful nationalism in search of a big project" in the wake of the Cold War. Likening it to William James's famous call for a "moral equivalent of war," Postrel and Glassman contend that "it's one thing to pursue genuine national interests through foreign policy, quite another to cook up grand schemes just to give government something to do and citizens something to rally around." National greatness may be something like happiness—most often found when not pursued for its own sake.

What idea should inform U.S. foreign policy? Neither "national greatness" nor "neoliberalism," argues Bacevich, but realism, in the tradition of Reinhold Niebuhr, Walter Lippmann, and Hans Morganthau. "For the realist," says Bacevich, "the obligation of a great power is not to embark upon crusades but to pursue its interests. If defined with sufficient breadth and imagination, those interests will likewise respond to the minimal requirements of others, permitting the creation of an equilibrium that, however precarious, may approximate peace. Indeed, only then can the expenditure of power be said to satisfy the truest interests of the United States itself."