

The Question of Power: Europe versus America

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Robert Kagan's new book, *Paradise and Power*,¹ which expands upon his celebrated and influential article for the *Policy Review* last year, begins with a striking claim: Europeans and Americans do not merely fail to share a common view of the world; they live in different worlds. They differ over "the all-important question of power," over its efficacy, morality, and desirability. Europe is

moving beyond power into a self-contained world of laws and rules and transnational negotiation and cooperation. It is entering a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity, the realization of Immanuel Kant's "perpetual peace." Meanwhile, the United States remains mired in history, exercising power in an anarchic Hobbesian world where international laws and rules are unreliable, and where true security and the defense and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might.

And so, to quote the sound-bite that has sold Kaganism to the masses, "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus" (3).

The contrast is, he admits, based on caricatures – but he makes the implicit assumption that, like successful caricatures, these are simplifications that capture the essentials of the originals. So Americans, when confronting real or potential adversaries, "generally favor policies of coercion rather than persuasion, emphasizing punitive sanctions over inducements to better behavior, the stick over the carrot": they want problems solved, threats eliminated and "increasingly tend toward unilateralism in international affairs" (4). Conversely, Europeans put the emphasis on "negotiation, diplomacy, and commercial ties, on international law over the use of force, on seduction over coercion, on multilateralism over unilateralism" (55). These opposing perspectives are however, he maintains, only recently formed, for "the modern European strategic culture represents a conscious rejection of the European past, a rejection of the evils of European *Machtpolitik*" (55):

When the European great powers were strong, they believed in strength and martial glory. Now they see the world through the eyes of weaker powers. These very different points of view have naturally produced differing strategic judgments, differing assessments of threats and of the proper means of addressing them, different calculations of interest, and different perspectives of the value and meaning of international law and international institutions. (11)

This last quotation points us to Kagan's primary explanation of this alleged opposition of perspectives. It is a matter of the "psychologies of power and weakness" (27). Thus, we are told,

Strong powers naturally view the world differently than weaker powers. They measure risks and threats differently, they define security differently, and they have different levels of tolerance for insecurity. Those with greater military power are more likely to consider force a useful tool of international relations than those who have less military power. (27)

So, "If Europe's strategic culture today places less value on hard power and military strength and more value on such soft-power tools as economics and trade, isn't it partly because Europe is militarily weak and economically strong?" (33) Thus, in the case of Iraq, "Americans, being stronger, developed a lower threshold of tolerance for Saddam and his weapons of mass destruction, especially after September 11" (31).

In support of his psychological theory, Kagan adduces some folksy analogies. When you have a hammer, all problems start to look like nails, but when you don't have a hammer, you don't want anything to look like a nail. A man walking in a forest with just a knife will have a different response to a prowling bear than a man armed with a rifle. Outlaws shoot sheriffs, not saloonkeepers. In fact, "from the saloonkeeper's point of view, the sheriff trying to impose order by force can sometimes be more threatening than the outlaws, who, at least for the time being, may just want a drink" (36). But before turning to the psychology, we should consider the factual and theoretical basis of the alleged contrast it purports to explain.

First the facts. Are Americans really so Martian and martial and are Europeans so Venus-like? The major international institutions and agencies of today, beginning with the United Nations, are all primarily the work of the United States. Certainly it has sought, with much success, to bend them to the advancement of American interests and loudly complained when it failed to do so. But the overt contempt for the UN and repudiation of a whole string of international commitments – the Kyoto protocol on global warming, the Johannesburg agenda on world development, the formation of an international criminal court, and even the strengthening of the protocol to the chemical weapons convention because US industry would not agree to spot inspections – all this is very recent: the fruit of a newly ascendant neo-conservative agenda. And what about the protracted impact of Vietnam on American public opinion with respect to military involvement abroad, the general reluctance to take military casualties abroad (as compared with European peacekeepers in three continents), and the US resistance, for instance, to deploying ground troops in Kosovo, as advocated by Blair's Britain? Not very martial. And as for Europe, the proposed caricature fails to capture one major source of its weakness in the foreign and defense policy field, namely the endemic diversity of

its conflicting component national interests and identities. This has been nowhere more evident than in the differing responses of European states to the onset of the invasion of Iraq when, against the Franco-German axis, Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Denmark, and Hungary all lined up with the US against Saddam Hussain.²

Next the theories. Kagan invokes the names of Hobbes and Kant, but in doing so he traduces both these thinkers. For Hobbes was preoccupied with the problem of how to overcome anarchy by generating a common and legitimate authority that would afford citizens security, safety, and a 'commodious' life. Hobbes's solution was, of course, an all-powerful 'sovereign' whom all would pre-contract to obey. At the international level, this translates into the problem of constructing and maintaining a secure environment in the self-evident absence of a sovereign – to the solution of which the aforesaid international institutions might plausibly be seen as making some contribution. On Kagan's account, the US, acting unilaterally in the jungle, would appear to be contributing to the problem rather than its solution. As for Kant, his conception of 'perpetual peace' was a 'regulative idea,' expressing the essential unity and equality of mankind – a universal (or, as we would say today, global) project seen as both practicable and rational, an ultimate goal that is inescapably implicit in the very idea of justice and morality, not realizable in the immediate or near future but an objective always to be kept in mind as a permanent guide in decision- and policy-making, and a standard against which to judge historical realities. Kagan writes as though it were simply the achievement of pacific relations, fully realizable in the here and now, but only locally, by free-riding Europeans, under the auspices of the United States, providing security from the outside.

What, then, are we to say of Kagan's proposed psychological explanation of why Europeans supposedly differ from Americans in their view of how the world should be governed, the role of international institutions and law, and the appropriate relations between force and diplomacy? It is, he says, "because they are relatively weak" that "Europeans have a deep interest in devaluing and eventually eradicating the brutal laws of an anarchic Hobbesian world where power is the ultimate determinant of national security and success" (37). Moreover, Europeans' hostility to unilateralism is "self-interested." For,

since Europeans lack the capacity to undertake unilateral military actions, either individually or collectively as 'Europe,' it is natural that they should oppose allowing others to do what they cannot do themselves. For Europeans, the appeal to multilateralism and international law has a real practical payoff and little cost. (38)

Moreover, the disagreement goes deep, amounting to a "philosophical, even metaphysical disagreement over where exactly mankind stands on the continuum between the laws of the jungle and the laws of reason" (91).

Notice the form that this 'explanation' takes. In the first place, it is strikingly asymmetrical. The 'American' view is seen as rational, the 'European' as the

'natural' outcome of one's situation. The 'American' view is portrayed as coolly realistic and the 'European' view as illuded and utopian. Secondly, the latter view is 'explained,' therefore, as symptomatic of weakness. It manifests not a rational appraisal of the way the world works but rather an interest-driven, self-serving illusion. This explanation is not Hobbesian but Nietzschean. Those critical of or hostile to what 'America' does abroad are 'Europeans' exhibiting a 'slave morality' – the resentful will to power of the weak. As Nietzsche wrote, "[I]n the history of morality a will to power finds expression, through which now the slaves and oppressed, now the ill-constituted and those who suffer from themselves, now the mediocre attempt to make those value judgments prevail that are favorable to *them*."³ Only the weak, Nietzsche proposes, "praise selflessness *because it brings [them] advantages*."⁴ It is not difficult to see what the effect of being convinced by Kagan's explanation must be. His is an argument perfectly suited to rendering the Bush administration and its supporters, actual and potential, deaf to what its critics and enemies (labelled henceforth as 'Europeans') have to say. Don't answer their arguments, diagnose them!

But Kagan does have a further, less suspect argument to make, which focuses on the vast and increasing disparity in military power between the United States and Europe. He cites the cynical but plausible view within American strategic circles that Europeans are enjoying a "free ride" in terms of global security. This is partly a matter of massive technological superiority and the willingness to pay for its continuance and further growth, as US defense expenditure approaches \$400 billion per year and is heading towards \$500 billion. Europe has no intention of keeping pace with this development. As a result, European powers, whether individually or collectively, have lost their global reach in a military sense: they are no longer a decisive force in regions of conflict beyond their own continent. Moreover, with the fall of Communism it no longer makes sense to speak of 'the West': the "powerful strategic, ideological and psychological need to demonstrate that there was indeed a cohesive, unified West went down with the Berlin Wall and the statues of Lenin in Moscow" (80). In view of this, it was, Kagan writes, "inevitable that the generosity that had characterized American foreign policy for fifty years would diminish after the Cold War ended" (81).⁵ That policy could then "return to normal" (83).

What follows from this analysis? Kagan's answer is that both Europeans and Americans must "readjust to the new reality of American hegemony" (97) and pay the "acceptable price" of having "a strong, even predominant America" (101). Of course, European powers could always choose to spend more on defense and rebuild their military power resources, but that game has basically been lost for the foreseeable future. Essentially, the message is one of "Adjusting to Hegemony" (85). What does that mean? It means that the United States must be left to "use its power in the dangerous Hobbesian world that still flourishes outside Europe" (75). Though it continues to man the walls of the 'Kantian paradise,' it cannot enter the gates: "The United States, with all its vast power,

remains stuck in history, left to deal with the Saddams and the ayatollahs, the Kim Jung IIs and the Jiang Zemins, leaving most of the benefits to others" (76).

Is "adjusting to hegemony," thus understood, the only realistic alternative the world now faces? Is that alternative even realistic? Is the world, including the United States itself, likely to become more secure as a result of the United States pursuing its national security strategy as proclaimed in September 2002? As the document setting out that strategy made transparently clear, hegemony is taken for granted (there must be no question of "surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States") and the exclusive right of pre-emption asserted ("we must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries").⁶ Indifference and hostility towards multilateral policies and international bodies, agencies, and agreements has from the beginning been the unstated but self-evident agenda of one central segment of the Bush administration. With the military victory in Iraq that segment now looks unstoppable in its agenda-setting for the foreseeable future.

What alternative do 'Europeans,' critical of this agenda, have to suggest? The only alternative is to take both Hobbes and Kant seriously. The only realistic route to greater security for all is through the development of rules, institutions, pacts, treaties, agreements seen by all participants, not least the most alienated and desperate, as legitimate. Such legitimacy can only be approached if policies are pursued that presuppose human equality: policies that aim at reducing such alienation and despair and alleviating the conditions that render people amenable to the appeals of fanaticism and terrorism. These boringly familiar 'European' thoughts certainly do not preclude the use of coercion and force to preserve security and safety. But in recognizing this, there is a world of difference between following Kagan, Bush, and Blair, on the one hand, and Hobbes and Kant, on the other.

To see this it is enough to engage in a counterfactual history of the current invasion of Iraq. Perhaps a war to oust Saddam Hussein was inevitable. Without doubt, it has led to the freeing of the people of the country from a monstrously cruel and oppressive tyranny whose demise no one can regret (and let us hope that the Kurds will retain their hard-won freedoms). The war might have been averted, eliminating weapons of mass destruction but without regime change. It might, just possibly, have been averted, with similarly beneficial consequences, if regime change had resulted from prolonged, coercively-backed inspections. But suppose, plausibly, that that is not so. Suppose that the inspection process, and the successful containment it involved, had continued, backed by the continuing presence of American and British and perhaps other forces, in part internationally financed, and that, in the end, greater cross-national agreement had been secured for military intervention, whether within or outside the United Nations, in the face of the continuing intransigence of the regime to comply with UN resolutions. That would have been a different war than the one we have witnessed, one which

would have done far less damage to the United Nations, to inter-European and trans-Atlantic relations, and to relations between the West and the Arab world. Suppose, finally, that the effort to secure such international agreement had been seriously sought over months of coercively backed inspections and had, even so, failed and the US-led war had taken place anyway. Even that war would have been a different war. It would have been less damaging and dangerous to the security of the world than the war that has taken place. That war, as Günter Grass remarked, was a wanted war that, despite its visibly beneficent consequences locally, was neither just nor necessary nor legitimate. In the long run (when we will all be dead) it will be seen as a regression: a giant step away from the world of security and peace that both Hobbes and Kant sought to bring nearer.

NOTES

1. Robert Kagan, *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003); hereafter cited parenthetically.
2. See Timothy Garton Ash, "The Great Divide," *Prospect* (March 2003): 24–26 and also Tony Judt, "America and the World," *New York Review of Books* L, no. 6 (10 April 2003): 31.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, tr. W. Kaufmann and W.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 400.
4. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 21.
5. It is not obvious that 'generosity' is the appropriate term for such foreign policies. Consider the following revealing statistics (which I owe to David Held): The annual UN budget is \$1.2 billion plus money for peace-keeping. Americans spend \$27 billion every year on confectionary, \$70 billion every year on alcohol, and \$550 billion every year on cars.
6. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, 30, 15.