



# The Thoughtful Superhawk

**R**OBERT KAGAN is one of America's leading scholars on foreign policy. Described by the online magazine *Slate* in the lead-up to the Iraq war as a 'thoughtful superhawk', he is currently a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a director of the Project for the New American Century. He is also no stranger to Washington, having been a member of the State Department's Policy Planning staff, principal speech writer for Secretary of State George Shultz, and foreign policy advisor to Congressman Jack Kemp.

A prolific writer, Kagan is a monthly columnist for *The Washington Post*, a contributing editor to *The Weekly Standard* and *The New Republic*, author of *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua 1977-1990* (1996) and co-editor with William Kristol of *Present Dangers: Crises and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (2000). His most recent book, the best-selling *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (2003), has been translated into 25 languages. Endorsed by Henry Kissinger as 'one of those seminal theses without which any discussion of American-European relations will be incomplete and which will shape discussion for years to come', it ranks alongside Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* as one of the most influential arguments of the post Cold War era.

On a recent trip to Australia to deliver the Centre for Independent Studies' annual John Bonython lecture, he spoke with SUSAN WINDYBANK about his controversial thesis and America's role in the world.

**Susan Windybank:** In *Paradise and Power* you captured the ideological rift between America and Europe with the now famous phrase ‘Americans are from Mars, and Europeans are from Venus’. Could you briefly explain what you see as the main differences between the United States and Europe?

**Robert Kagan:** To simplify an already simplistic argument, Europeans and Americans differ specifically on the use of military force and its utility, the legitimacy of power and, more generally, on the question of international order and the role of international institutions and international law. These differences have two main sources. The first is the vast disparity in military capability. It is inherently true that nations which have greater military power tend to use it more, and believe in its legitimacy more, while nations which are weaker tend to believe less in military power and less in its legitimacy, and seek to use mechanisms to constrain those who have more military power.

When I think back to the late 18th century, it’s easy to see the roles were reversed. America’s early statesmen spent a lot of time talking about international law and commerce as the real engine of diplomacy while the Europeans talked about power, realpolitik and *raison d’etat*. The greatest advocate for international law on the high seas and rules governing the behaviour of navies in the late 18th century was the United States while the greatest opponent of any kind of international legal regulation was Britain, the hegemon of the seas in those days. So it’s not surprising that when the roles are substantially reversed some 200 years later, attitudes towards power are also reversed.

Second, disparities in power lead to different threat assessments. Nations that perceive they have the capacity to deal with threats are less tolerant of them than those that perceive they don’t have the capacity. That’s actually a more controversial point that few people have taken me up on. Americans were less tolerant of Saddam Hussein because we felt we could do something about it; Europeans were more tolerant because they felt they couldn’t do much about it.

There’s also a historical-ideological difference, based in particular on the last 50 years. Europe has sought, as a consequence of two world wars, to

make the old rules of balance of power no longer apply so that they will never again commit the horrors that they committed twice last century. This is the driving force behind the European Union, not economics. Fear keeps the EU going—fear that should they start backsliding, they’ll backslide all the way and revert to their military past. America’s history, however, has led it in a different direction. Americans are very proud of their role in World War II and politicians from Dean Acheson to Bill Clinton have taken the view that American power is the best guarantor of international peace and stability.

Americans were less tolerant of Saddam Hussein because we felt we could do something about it; Europeans were more tolerant because they felt they couldn’t do much about it.

**SW:** You have urged America and Europe to try and overcome their differences and to recognise and build on what they have in common. Isn’t this largely a cosmetic choice for America rather than a strategic necessity?

**RK:** People tend to forget that it was not American goodwill that led to the close cooperation between Europe and the United States during the Cold War, it was a sense of mutual dependency. Now we don’t have that sense of mutual dependency. Americans don’t feel as vitally concerned that Europe not fall to a non-existent Soviet Union and therefore we are less concerned about Europe. Similarly, Europeans who depended on American power to defend themselves against the Soviet Union, and knew they did, no longer feel that they need America. So it would be very odd, historically speaking, if we were to see the same level of desire for cooperation with those huge underlying forces of the Cold War gone. It’s only natural that the desire for cooperation lessens when the need for cooperation lessens. To maintain the same level of cooperation therefore requires more enlightened thinking and goodwill than it used to. I think that Americans should seek

the support and involvement of Europe and that Europeans should realise that they're better off with a strong America capable of acting, but it's getting harder to convince everybody of that.

**SW:** Perhaps one difference between then and now is that during the Cold War America shaped the international order through what has been called 'hegemony by consent'. Now there's less and less consent, and it seems to be less sought by America.

I think the problem today is Europe's weakness and incapacity. I would not mind a much stronger Europe militarily even if Europeans occasionally or even frequently disagreed with the United States over what should be done in the world.

**RK:** I take the point, but it's an overstatement. Today I find a very hazy, very rosy memory of the past. American hegemony was not achieved by consent but by two brutal world wars in which Germany and Japan were defeated. It was achieved by keeping hundreds of thousands of American troops stationed overseas, shaping the order, both in Japan and Europe. It was not accepted cheerfully by the Russians, the Chinese, large segments of Latin America and the Middle East, and not even entirely by Europeans. We did have de Gaulle, after all. So while American power was more accepted during the Cold War than it is today, the legitimacy we enjoyed then was not because we were consent-oriented in our foreign policy (because we were not), but because those who granted us legitimacy depended on America for security and felt that American power was checked to some extent by the Soviet Union. Western Europeans no longer feel they need the United States to protect them and the Soviet Union no longer exists to balance the United States so it's a lot harder to have the same kind of legitimacy that we once enjoyed—though that is not to say that the Bush administration has not done a particularly bad job of it.

**SW:** Christopher Layne has argued that America became a European hegemon after World War II and that its protection of Europe had a dual purpose: to contain the Soviet Union and to circumscribe Europe's ability to act independently as a unified actor.<sup>1</sup> Do you accept his argument and, if so, is America continuing to follow this strategy by promoting Turkey as an EU member and supporting EU enlargement in general in the hope that a divided rather than a united Europe will be unable to challenge the predominance of the United States and to act as an effective counterweight to American power?

**RK:** Realist theory would predict that, but I don't think the United States is worried that Europe is emerging as a challenger to the United States. I don't think that's going to happen and I wouldn't worry about it if it did happen because I think the problem today is Europe's weakness and incapacity. I would not mind a much stronger Europe militarily even if Europeans occasionally or even frequently disagreed with the United States over what should be done in the world. I think we are all suffering—Europeans and Americans—from European weakness. I favour a strong and united Europe. The Clinton Administration was suspicious of a European defence force somehow supplanting NATO. I think we need to get over that and welcome a European force no matter what name or structure.

I also don't believe that you should look at the history of American foreign policy since the end of World War II as an effort to divide Europe, or to clip Europe's wings. There was always an element of that, more in FDR's case than in Truman's, but if you go back and look at Dean Acheson's policies in particular, he wanted a strong and unified Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet Union. It's ahistorical not to remember that that was a key goal for the United States.

**SW:** Do you think the current differences between Europe and America amount to, or are amounting to, a 'clash of civilisations' within the West?

**RK:** I've never gone as far as to say that we're going to have a clash of civilisations within the West because the West is fundamentally one civilisation. We don't have clashes on major things. We have

disagreements about how the economy should be run, or over the promotion of democracy. But on the use of force and international order, we do have a fundamental difference of world view. We're not going to go to war with each other over this, but if the world is the increasingly dangerous place that I think it is and if the threats are all external to the transatlantic area and we have to go out and confront those threats, if we are fundamentally divided on these issues then we will all be weaker as a consequence.

**SW:** To what extent are differences between Europe and America exacerbated by demographic changes in Europe, in particular the growing Muslim population?

**RK:** I'm not sure I have a real answer. The Muslim issue was one of the reasons why Europeans were opposed to Iraq and why the Palestinian problem is such a concern because they fear their Islamic populations will become inflamed. But the paradox is that I believe that Europeans are actually more hostile towards Muslims than Americans are, and more worried about the influence of Muslims in their own country. I don't rule out the possibility—let's say because of headscarf decisions—that Muslim terrorists will increasingly target France. That does not mean the French will suddenly cooperate more with the Americans. Instead, I think it would mean greater curtailment of individual liberties, a much harder cracking down of terrorist cells extralegally—in short, a much more internal, nationalist response that does not lead to greater cooperation with America, and may in fact lead to less.



Robert Kagan and Susan Windybank

## Contested traditions

**SW:** There's a line in *Paradise and Power* where you note that 'America did not change on September 11, it only became more itself'. What exactly did you mean by that?

**RK:** It sounds like a more provocative statement than I meant it to be. What I wanted to emphasize was the degree of continuity in American foreign policy. There's a tendency to believe that when we have a change of president, or when we go from Democrat to Republican, we have a brand new foreign policy, but if you look back across 200

If you look back across 200 years of American foreign policy you see a great deal of continuity. I find the unilateralism charge overdone because America has always been a fairly unilateralist country.

years of American foreign policy you see a great deal of continuity. I find the unilateralism charge overdone because America has always been a fairly unilateralist country. Similarly, there are very good historians like John Lewis Gaddis who have pointed out that the idea of preventive or pre-emptive action is not new in American foreign policy. The desire to be the most powerful country is not a new phenomenon and the desire to promote democracy overseas is very old. So what I meant by the United States becoming more itself is that when America is struck, as it was in Pearl Harbor in 1941 and on September 11, 2001, these already strong tendencies in American foreign policy—acting in ways that are more aggressive, unilateralist, ideological, etc.—are magnified.

**SW:** What do you say to libertarians and others who are critical of an expansive and activist American foreign policy and who quote the 19th century Secretary of State John Quincy Adams' famous dictum that America is the 'well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all . . . [but] the champion and vindicator only of her own'?

**RK:** John Quincy Adams is one of the most misquoted people ever. The people who quote him have not studied very carefully his foreign policy, which was not reflected in that one statement. The libertarian critique of American foreign policy is perfectly coherent but where libertarians sometimes go wrong is in thinking that America was ever the way they are now describing what they would like it to be. The United States has been expansive, either territorially or in terms of influence, for

It is both unrealistic and mistaken to think that ideological matters or matters of belief will not, and should not, inform a nation's foreign policy. Every nation's foreign policy has been informed in part by the nature of its own government at home.

some 400 years, so where is the non-expansionist, non-interventionist tradition in American foreign policy? The libertarian—and what I consider to be the minimalist realist critique—is fine, but I don't agree with it. It does not describe the country that is the United States of America.

**SW:** Do you accept their concern that an expansive American foreign policy is incompatible with the tradition and goal in America of limited government and that if the United States follows an activist, interventionist foreign policy it'll end up with the opposite—that is, big government?

**RK:** Ever since the anti-Federalists and the debates over the constitution in the 1780s there's been concern that a large foreign policy leads to large government and there's a lot of truth in that. I think those who are truly conservative—with a small 'c'—about American government should oppose, and have always opposed, an expansive foreign policy. There's no question that a large foreign policy does not lead to a small Federal government. But they've also almost always lost the argument. America's a Hamiltonian country, both in domestic and foreign policy terms, and that's simply the reality.

**SW:** What about the constitutional costs of the current war on terrorism and the curtailment of civil liberties in the United States? Does the erosion of due process concern you?

**RK:** There's only one correct answer to that question! My answer is incorrect. I'm not really concerned about the constitutional costs of the war. I acknowledge that there are problems and that there will be injustices in the course of prosecuting this war. Historically, the United States has curtailed constitutional rights, sometimes for good reasons, such as Lincoln and the suspension of habeas corpus, and sometimes for bad reasons, such as the Japanese internment during World War II. We're not at that stage yet. We're more in the suspending habeas corpus stage. Moreover, the constitution has proven to be resilient and we've bounced back after each crisis, or perception of crisis, so I'm not sure how much permanent damage is being done to American civil liberties but certain individuals will be unfairly deprived of their liberties in the course of this war.

**SW:** The minimalist realists you mentioned earlier warn against ideological crusades and favour what you have argued is too narrow and limiting a definition of America's national interest. So how exactly would you define the national interest of the United States? What should it consist of?

**RK:** I'm not in favour of crusades either, but I do believe that it is both unrealistic and mistaken to think that ideological matters or matters of belief will not, and should not, inform a nation's foreign policy. Every nation's foreign policy has been informed in part by the nature of its own government at home. Monarchies had distinctive foreign policies that supported and furthered the idea of the monarchy, and communist regimes furthered the communist cause. A democratic country like the United States is going to make



Published by The Centre for Independent Studies

democracy an essential, though not an exclusive, part of its foreign policy. Of course, security and economic well-being are fundamental to national interest, but beliefs are also fundamental. I've always felt that the expansion of democracy has been beneficial to the United States both from a security and an economic point of view. That doesn't mean that there won't be problems and that the United States may overextend. There are prudential decisions to be made with all foreign policy.

My biggest criticism of realism is that it's unrealistic. It's unrealistic to expect the United States to behave in a way that disregards questions of its beliefs and it's also a bad descriptor of American foreign policy if you go back through our history. Realists have always been the beleaguered group in the American political system, which tends towards a certain idealism, and realists like George Kennan are always losing the battle to make America more restrained and to welcome a balance of power. Americans have always been hostile towards a balance of power if it's balancing towards them.

**SW:** On the question of balance, history demonstrates that other countries are always suspicious of, and hostile towards, a great concentration of power, wherever it may be. Americans don't seem to understand why other countries feel this towards them, which is odd because America's own founding fathers were so suspicious of a concentration of power that they put in place a system of checks and balances so that power would be divided and balanced internally. Yet when the rest of the world applies the same principle to the preponderance of American power, it comes as a shock.

**RK:** You're right that Americans don't have a sense of how the rest of the world views us. We're one of the most expansionist countries in the world. We've been expanding for over 400 years and yet we always think of ourselves as just sitting back minding our own business. I've found some great quotes from 1817 when American politicians were coming back from Europe shocked that everyone thought we were an incredibly aggressive country just because we'd stolen Florida, picked a fight with the Brits, were yelling that we wanted Canada, etc. It's a constant theme. Intervention? Expansion of influence? This is the history of America.

**SW:** One final question. The United States today is often described as the greatest power since Rome. How long do you think American hegemony will last?

**RK:** By definition it won't last forever, but I don't believe it will be short-lived. Barring some unforeseen catastrophe—by which I mean an attack that wreaked so much damage on the United States that its economy was effectively reduced by a quarter, or we went into a depression—the enormous wealth and power of the United States supports the structure of its hegemony in two ways.

The American lead is so great on the military front that it can only discourage others from attempting the almost impossible task of trying to catch up.

First, its economy is strong enough that all the other major players want to, and need to, be involved in it. I keep hearing about how if China pulled all its money out of the United States the American economy would collapse. China doesn't want the American economy to collapse. It needs the American market to sell to. So too does Europe, Russia, India, etc. All the major players have an interest in the continued well-being of the American economy.

Second, the American lead is so great on the military front that it can only discourage others from attempting the almost impossible task of trying to catch up. And even if, say, China or Russia were to try to catch up, long before they reached that point they would have panicked everyone else in their own neighbourhood. Japan is not going to sit back while China tries to become the equal of American power, so you will see webs of containment around any country that attempts to challenge American supremacy. Therefore I think that there are some fundamental structural reasons why American hegemony should last, again barring some catastrophe.

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> C. Layne, 'The United States as European Hegemon', *The National Interest* No. 72 (Summer 2003), 17-29.