

# REVIEW ESSAY

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## BOOKENDS

*11/9 and 9/11*

by Peter Berkowitz

Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars—From 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2008.

Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

When it comes to domestic policy in America, one can still fairly easily distinguish progressives from conservatives, Democrats from Republicans. In practice, each side trims or betrays its principles. But fundamental tendencies have remained clear. Progressives put the

emphasis on greater equality—social, economic, political, and moral—and regard government as the primary agent for achieving it. Conservatives generally seek greater individual liberty—in many cases to preserve traditional beliefs and practices—and view government as the principal threat to it. Of course, exceptions arise: when it comes to sex, progressives want more freedom, and when it comes to homeland security, conservatives want more government. Nevertheless, because most progressives and most conservatives tend to be liberal in the broadest sense, affirming that government's primary responsibility is to protect individual rights, the disputes between them over how to balance liberty and equality, and how to harmonize government regulation with varieties of freedom—of speech, of religion, of assembly, of the marketplace—take for the most part a predictable form.

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## Review Essay

In foreign affairs there have been tectonic ideological shifts over the past generation, as can be seen microcosmically in the views of the current presidential candidates on the issue of Iraq. John McCain's assertion, for example, that the United States has a moral obligation and a vital national interest in bringing stability to Iraq, and that it invites dire consequences—humanitarian as well as strategic—should American troops leave before that country can defend itself, has deep roots in the progressive tradition. In contrast, Senator Barack Obama's commitment to bring the troops home within sixteen months of taking office, whatever the consequences to Iraq's future, has more in common with isolationist tendencies traditionally identified with the right rather than with the legacy of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John F. Kennedy.

Despite this shape-shifting and rebranding, as these two books by progressives Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier and neoconservative Robert Kagan show, our serious debates about foreign policy, like those about domestic issues, continue to revolve around conflicting interpretations of the moral and political imperatives of freedom and equality.

Chollet, a former Clinton administration State Department official and now senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security in Washington, and Goldgeier, a former National Security staff member in the Clinton administration and professor of political science and

international affairs at the George Washington University, are leading figures in the Democratic foreign policy establishment. *America Between the Wars* provides a fair-minded and illuminating history of this country's adventures in world affairs, from the dismantling of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, to al-Qaeda's attack on America on September 11, 2001—the interwar era, from today's perspective.

Chollet and Goldgeier reject the view common among conservatives that between 11/9 and 9/11 the U.S., and in particular the Clinton administration, lazily neglected the world and squandered the nation's peace dividend, smugly assuming that the serious threats to national security had, with Soviet Communism, melted away, the essential problems of war and peace had been solved, and few conflicts among nations remained that could not be dealt with through the empowerment of international institutions and artful multilateral diplomacy. Ironically, given his future role in reproaching “neoconservative triumphalism,” it was Francis Fukuyama's famous essay, “The End of History,” which auspiciously appeared in the *National Interest* in the summer of 1989, that did more than anything else to provide intellectual support for the notion that the political and ideological rivals to liberal democracy and democratic capitalism were doomed to defeat and that as all the world became progressively more liberal and democratic, foreign policy could henceforth be left to civil servants, lawyers, and social scientists. What remained for

the West was largely to police the battlefield, shepherding new democracies into the fold.

According to Chollet and Goldgeier, the “end of history” argument was at best premature. Far from achieving a decisive victory over all rivals, liberal democracy in the 1990s faced an array of new threats. After a shaky start owing to a mixture of arrogance and inexperience, the authors argue, the Clinton administration made impressive strides in identifying these threats, if not always in dealing with them. Thus, the years between 11/9 and 9/11

proved not to be a “sabbatical” or a “holiday from history,” but rather the moment during which the ideas and dynamics that characterize the current era took shape. The underlying realities of international politics—the economic, political, and security challenges created by globalization; the rise of nonstate actors; the threat of weapons of mass destruction; the dangers that emanate from weak or failing states; the possibilities and limits of international institutions; and questions about whether and how to use America’s preponderant power to meet global responsibilities—are legacies of the Cold War’s end.

September 11, 2001, may have brought to the fore the threat of Islamic extremists armed with WMD and bent on inflicting

catastrophic death and destruction on the United States and its allies, but Chollet and Goldgeier argue that “we still live in an 11/9 world.”

The authors acknowledge that the Clinton administration never managed to articulate a new grand strategy for the post-Cold War era. To be sure, the administration early on proclaimed its commitment to democratic enlargement, as well as global engagement with the environment, and battles against disease, weapons proliferation, and non-state actors. On the other hand, the president’s preference for action in concert with and on behalf of the “world community,” and his exuberant faith in the liberalizing powers of commerce and technology, blinded the administration to much of the world around it. “The forces of global integration are a great tide, inexorably wearing away the established order of things,” Clinton observed in 1997. That “great tide” reduced a complex and dangerous international scene to a simple narrative of material progress and moral improvement. Among the things that this tide would wash away were traditional considerations of power. Of course, it didn’t. In the end, the Clinton administration remained hamstrung by inexperience, wishful thinking, and the foolhardy idea that it could engage the world more fully without bothering to think through the relation between means and ends.

For all of his musings, Bill Clinton also presided over an era of frenetic military activism. In 1993, the U.S. was humiliated

in Somalia and stumbled in Haiti. In 1994, the administration enjoyed a small success in restoring democratic government in Haiti but failed to lift a finger to stop the Rwandan genocide. In 1995, after two years of delay that violated explicit campaign promises, Clinton gave the order to use military force to halt the Serbian massacre of Bosnian Muslims, which was followed by the Dayton negotiations that brought the war in Bosnia to an end. Clinton ordered a four-day air campaign targeting suspected Iraqi weapons programs in 1998—a campaign, oddly, that coincided with impeachment hearings in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1999, the Clinton administration bypassed Congress and the United Nations Security Council to lead NATO against Serbian forces killing and expelling ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

These interventions—and failures to intervene—highlight the United States' limited but unmatched ability in the post-Cold War world to secure and extend democracy, and with it, a unique responsibility to defend the international order, including against threats arising from crimes committed by rulers against their own citizens. If this was not quite a holiday from history, it was at least a three-day weekend.

Finally, despite its ardent wish that things were otherwise, the Clinton administration's experience confirmed that in the post-Cold War era, as in the Cold War and pre-Cold War eras, the efficacy of diplomacy was limited. It was pleased to

put its imprimatur on agreements with the North Koreans and the Palestinians, despite warnings that neither could be trusted. Predictably enough, the deals disintegrated. The same tendency led to a recognition of the rise of Islamic terrorism coupled with an incomprehension about how to deal with it. In 1993, al-Qaeda operatives detonated a car bomb beneath the North Tower of the World Trade Center. In 1996, terrorists, likely sponsored by Iran, exploded a truck bomb at the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 Americans. In 1998, al-Qaeda terrorists launched simultaneous car bomb attacks on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing hundreds. In 2000, al-Qaeda bombers blasted a hole in the USS Cole, killing 17 sailors and wounding 39. All of this, as Chollet and Goldgeier document well, forced the Clinton administration to acknowledge that Islamic extremism constituted a growing threat, but, as the authors also concede, the White House could not muster the focus or will to respond forcefully or coherently.

**B**ecause the challenges of this between-the-wars period remain, along with the worldview that was unable to arrest their development, the September 11 attacks did not, as some conservatives contend, “change everything.” When one takes the long view, according to Robert Kagan, senior associate at the Carnegie

Endowment for International Peace and the preeminent neoconservative foreign policy intellectual of his generation, what is remarkable about the current era is how little was transformed by that day:

In most places, the nation-state remains as strong as ever, and so, too, the nationalist ambitions, the passions, and the competition among nations that have shaped history . . . The old competition between liberalism and autocracy has also reemerged, with the world's great powers increasingly lining up according to the nature of their regimes. And an even older struggle has erupted between radical Islamists and the modern secular cultures and powers that they believe have dominated, penetrated, and polluted their Islamic world. As these struggles combine and collide, the promise of a new era of international convergence fades. We have entered an age of divergence.

Kagan adroitly limns the contours of these divergences. Contrary to the expectations of its architects in Paris, Geneva, and Berlin, the European Union has not become the center of a new form of world governance. Expansion has stalled, because Europeans have grown skeptical about relinquishing their sovereignty to unelected bureaucrats in Brussels and because of the daunting prospect of

absorbing Turkey's 80 million Muslims. Moreover, contrary to the hopes of political scientists and policymakers, economic growth and economic liberalization have not, as they were supposed to at the end of history, generated political liberalization in Russia and China. Instead, those countries, energized by nationalist ambition and churning economies, have pursued foreign policies that consolidated autocracy. Iran, a once great power, aims to restore its former glory and reestablish its regional hegemony by defying the United States, by sponsoring Islamic terrorism, and not least by acquiring nuclear weapons. So while Communism has passed from the scene, great power competition, in which the United States continues to be enmeshed, has not.

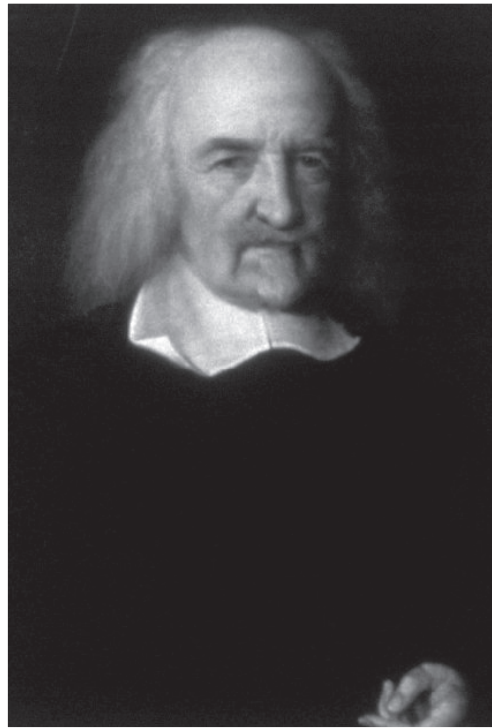
The main line of Kagan's argument gives little weight to the possibility that, alongside or beneath the international pandemonium, a shared sensibility and common interests among nations might also be developing. And yet, in explaining why, although they can inflict horrendous damage on the great powers, Islamic extremists, inflamed by the forces of modernization and globalization, cannot defeat the West, Kagan lays out, almost in passing, a compelling case for a convergence of interests among the world's powers:

All the world's rich and powerful nations have more or less embraced the economic, technological, and even social aspects of modernization and globaliza-

tion. All have embraced, albeit with varying degrees of complaint and resistance, the free flow of goods, finances, and services, and the intermingling of cultures and lifestyles that characterize the modern world. Increasingly, their people watch the same television shows, listen to the same music, and go to the same movies . . . These are the consequences of liberalism and capitalism unleashed and unchecked by the constraining hand of tradition, a powerful church, or a moralistic and domineering government.

And as Kagan subsequently acknowledges, though economic and cultural liberalization have not yet brought political liberalization to China or Russia, too little time has elapsed to conclude that they won't.

The central thesis of *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, powerful as it is, relies on a false dichotomy that echoes a similar theme present in Kagan's 2002 bestseller, *Of Paradise and Power*. There he argued that whereas Europeans brought a postmodern sensibility to their foreign policies, taking to an extreme the Kantian hope that the progress of humanity will make it possible to renounce the use of force in international affairs, Americans maintain a more modernist Hobbesian sensibility, emphasizing the competition among nations for power and affirming the irreducible need for military might, even where the goal is to bolster the prin-



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ciples of a liberal international order. In fact, each sensibility has deep roots in both Europe and the United States. A visit to almost any American university campus or mainstream media outlet offers a local taste of the so-called European sensibility; and for an insight into the rougher American sensibility abroad, one need only chat with some of the voters in France and Ireland who cast ballots with majorities to reject the EU Constitution, or citizens in France, Germany, and Italy who long ago dispensed with polite euphemism in describing a tide of immigrants washing over their countries.

Thus, just as the current era in foreign affairs contains deep divergences *and* convergences, so too does American foreign

policy contain a Kantian or progressive strand as well as a Hobbesian or conservative strand. Each reflects one interpretation of how nations do and ought to relate to each other. The convergences lend support to the progressive interpretation; the divergences provide evidence for the conservative view. Consequently, we depend on both progressives and conservatives for their complementary and competing insights. So, far from being inherently incompatible, these two volumes should be regarded as bookends, halves of a single whole.

It follows that the never-ending contest between progressive and conservative foreign policy schools should be decided not in favor of that which most effectively negates the priorities of the other, but in

favor of the one that most adeptly weaves into its own approach a due respect for what its rival tends to grasp more thoroughly. Soft power and also hard power; commerce and also military force; leading by setting an example of liberal democracy at home and also leading by championing the forces of liberal democracy abroad; winning the hearts and minds of Muslims around the globe while also ferreting out and capturing or killing the fanatical terrorists among them—all require our sustained attention. The foreign policy that deserves our allegiance is the one that enables us, to the extent possible in a precarious world, to give the often conflicting imperatives of progressives and conservatives their due and keeps us from becoming caught in a zero-sum game. ♾