Book Talk with Robert Kagan: The Ghost at the Feast

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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- **Walter Russell Mead**, *Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship, Hudson Institute*

Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/book-talk-robert-kagan-ghost-feast

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Walter Russell Mead:

Okay. Let's begin. Welcome, everyone. I'm Walter Mead, the Ravenel B. Curry Fellow here at Hudson Institute, and it's my great pleasure and privilege to be here today with one of the most interesting voices in American foreign policy and I can also say an old friend at this time. At least we're both old enough to be old friends. Robert Kagan is the Stephen & Barbara Friedman Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings Institution. He's a contributing columnist to The Washington Post. He served in the State Department from 1984 to 1988 as a member of the Policy Planning Staff, as principal speechwriter for Secretary of State George Shultz, and as deputy for policy in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs.

He's a graduate of Yale University and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and holds a doctorate in American history from American University. And he's here today because he has written really a fascinating book. It's the second volume in a projected three-volume history of American foreign policy. I knew and very much liked the first volume, Dangerous Nation. I've taught it in class and found it a great book for students to wrestle with.

The second book just out is Ghost at the Feast, which takes the story up to 1941, and Bob is going to talk about that today, but I would say that the promise of Dangerous Nation has been more than fulfilled in this second volume. The story is getting richer and more interesting as we go toward the present day. So now the best thing to do would be to ask Bob to start off by just describing the book for us, telling us what it's about, what the main points are you want to get across, whatever you think we need to hear.

Robert Kagan:

Okay. Well, how much time do you have?

Walter Russell Mead:

Endless.

Robert Kagan:

I'll try to hit the highlights. First of all, thank you for having me here. It's great to be talking to Walter. We already had a 15-minute argument before we got on stage.

Walter Russell Mead:

Yup.

Robert Kagan:

I think Walter and I could probably hash out things in American history till the cows come home and happily so. So thank you very much and thank you to the Hudson Institute for hosting this. As Walter said, it's volume two of a multivolume history of American foreign policy and it begins in 1900 with the dramatic events. Really, it begins in 1898 with the Spanish-American War and the intervention in Cuba.
The book in general is about how Americans have, in that period, dealt with the fact that thanks to a radical reconfiguration of power in the international system, primarily the collapse of the British-dominated order that Walter has written about, the rise of Germany and Japan, and the rise of the United States, basically World War I was the critical turning point that made clear what was happening, but it was already happening before World War I.

And basically, what had happened was, the United States, until 1900, in the words of that great British ambassador who wrote The Commonwealth, James Bryce, was sailing on a summer sea. The United States, Americans were the beneficiaries of a fundamentally liberal world system without having to do anything to support it. The Americans were the ultimate free riders and the greatest beneficiaries of this international system.

But then it collapsed and Americans were left with a choice, and the choice was, do something to restore it, to protect it, to fight back against those forces, particularly Germany, in World War I that were opposed to it, or snuggle into the North American continent and enjoy your invulnerability, because this is sort of the key paradox of American foreign policy, is that certainly by 1900, and I think fundamentally ever since, and this is something I think Americans are not quite aware of as much as they should be, the United States is invulnerable to foreign invasion.

We can talk about nuclear weapons and what that effect is, but certainly in 1900, before there were nuclear weapons, the United States was completely invulnerable. So nothing that happened out there in the world necessarily affected American security directly. And so, when Americans acted, it was not out of necessity. It was out of choice. In my view, it was the right choice, and I think I could make a case why it was an important choice. But as we define national interest historically as being fundamentally about security of the homeland in the first instance and security of the economic well-being of the nation in the second instance, those things were not threatened when America went to war, and this has led to all kinds of confusion about why Americans do what they do.

And Americans talk a lot about, as I mentioned before, they talk about wars of necessity and wars of choice, but for Americans, it's always a war of choice. Even our involvement in World War II was a war of choice, and we can argue about that or get into that if you feel like it. The point being that, ultimately, Americans, in both of those wars, decided, as a matter of choice, that they didn't want to live in a world where autocratic, militaristic regimes dominated in Europe and Asia. They wanted to maintain, to establish and maintain a liberal hegemony in the world, not necessarily an American hegemony. Americans didn't want to control Europe. They didn't want to control Asia, but they wanted to make sure that the liberal way of life was both surviving and even predominant, first in Europe and then ultimately in Asia.

And it's that, ultimately, ideological motivation, in my view, that drove the United States into both wars and I think, if we want to jump ahead to the present circumstance, also explains our current policies in Ukraine, because again, even though Mitch McConnell says that Ukraine is a vital national security interest of the United States, to say that is to assume a lot of other things, above all, that it's critical to this liberal world system that Americans created over the course of the period that I'm writing about in the book.

So I'll stop there. That's sort of a general thesis. But one of the things that I did in writing this book, and I'll end with this note, is, I didn't go back and try to confirm all the things that I believed about American foreign policy. I really tried to research and write it going forward to try
to see things. As we live history forwards, we judge history backwards, and our judgments are generally fairly arrogant based on the fact that we know how things turned out, but at the time, you don't know how things are going to turn out.

And the fact is, as we move forward, as we make history, as we take actions, we don't know where they're going to end, and we have to understand the mindset of the people at the time and why they did what they did, rather than always come back and say, "You idiots. You fools." Those people were us. They're not different from us, and they face the same kinds of choices that we face every day, and they made the mistakes that we are probably also going to make, because there's very little learning about in the world when it comes to these things. But anyway, that was my goal in the book, to write a history forward and take it wherever it went.

Walter Russell Mead:

And then that is, I think, a really important idea to keep in mind that we live history forward and judge it backward, that people in the past spent as much time thinking about their circumstances as we spend thinking about ours, and brought all the subtlety and knowledge, which we can't actually reproduce because we can never quite know the past as well as the people in the past, because this is something we're just doing for a few hours a day. It was their life. And this notion, too, that we perceive the past as moving, most of the time, inevitably towards certain outcomes, but no one experiences their own time in quite that way.

And the other thing that I hear in that that I think is just so profound and important is that one of the great lessons of history is that people don't actually learn very much from history, or at least not very easily. If you would like, we will try to have some time for Q&A at the end of this. If you have some questions, please feel free to email them to press@hudson.org, and that would include our friends that are watching the live stream, and then I'll get a list of questions and be able to follow up on that. So press@hudson.org. That also gives you an excuse. You can play with your cell phone now and pretend that this is actually... You're being engaged in what's going on.

All right. I thought, by the way, I want to start by saying I think one of the best parts of the book is the analysis of Wilson's thinking and the American politics pending our entry into World War I. Again, it's a case where everyone thinks they already know everything about Woodrow Wilson that they need to know, and there's a lot of mythmaking and assumptions behind it, but you really show somebody kind of torn by various conflicting forces and dilemmas. So why did Wilson bring the US into World War I, in your view?

Robert Kagan:

Well, one of the things that I would say, as a general historical matter, is that we place, I would say, too much weight on the role of individual presidents in setting foreign policy, as if a president can come in and completely shift the direction of American foreign policy all by himself, whether the people are there or not. And Wilson, who has, probably of any of our 20th-century presidents, maybe of any president of any time, has the reputation for being aloof, uninterested in advice, disconnected, arrogant, living in his own mind and coming up with these wild, idealistic ideas.

And while I would not defend Wilson's personality, I don't think I'd like to spend a lot of time in a room with Woodrow Wilson, unless he was your best buddy. I think maybe he'd let down, then
you could hear some off-color, racist jokes from him. But as a politician, it's worth remembering, first of all, that he was a very successful president up until the League of Nations and the Versailles Treaty vote, and he managed to pass all kinds of major reform legislation as president. And when he, you'll not be shocked to hear, enjoyed a Democratic majority in Congress, he pretty much controlled what Congress did and kept things the way he wanted.

Walter Russell Mead:

He's also the only two-term Democratic president between Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt.

Robert Kagan:

Right.

Walter Russell Mead:

This is an amazing feat.

Robert Kagan:

Right. It was a Republican-dominated era. He only won in 1912 because of Teddy Roosevelt's egomania and running as a third-party candidate. And as it was, Wilson won something like 40% of the vote in a three-way race. But he won legitimately and quite brilliantly in 1916 and manipulated the war issue, among other things. As you know, he was the president who kept us out of war. And he meant that, but even though he knew, he probably was not going to continue to be able to keep them out of war.

Anyway, all of this is a long way of saying that Wilson was like other presidents in the sense that he didn't want to get out in front of the American people. He felt that he had an obligation to do what the American people, what he felt they wanted him to do. And in his own way, he was a better reader of the American public attitudes than, for instance, at the same time, people like Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge.

So, for instance, after the sinking of the Lusitania, there were many people of a certain type, from the Elihu Roots to the Theodore Roosevelts, to the Henry Cabot Lodges, who said, "We've got to go to war. They just sunk the Lusitania. It was a horrible thing. Let's go to war." And people said then and even later that if Wilson had led the American people at that time to go to war, the American people were ready to respond. And the truth is, Wilson, A, did not think that that was true. And as far as I'm able to figure out what the public mood was, he was right that that wasn't true, that the American people were not ready to go to war after the Lusitania, even though Lusitania had a fundamental effect on their attitudes towards Germany, which would later become an issue.

And so, what I see Wilson trying to do is what all presidents try to do, which is solve the intersection of a set of domestic attitudes and an international foreign policy crisis that did need to be settled. And that played out most obviously, dramatically in the great clashes over the League of Nations treaty. Leading the American people to war in 1917 was not a difficult thing to do. By the time he was ready to go to war, the American people were more than ready to go to war, and he enjoyed overwhelming support. There was some very vocal dissent, but the
overwhelming majority of the country was entirely, and events had conspired to make that a plausible option, and he went with it.

But when he came back after the end of the war and said, "Okay. Now it's time for us to really put our shoulder and join the international community as a permanent basis," then we had the great debate with Henry Cabot Lodge and the Republicans, et cetera, which was ultimately a political fight which Wilson lost, but why did Wilson lose it? Because he'd lost control of Congress. Congress flipped in 1918 and became a majority-Republican Congress. And if you look at the history of treaty-making up until that time, the opposition party in Congress always voted against whatever treaty the president was putting forth. The Congress had defeated William Howard Taft's... What do they call those?

Walter Russell Mead:
Arbitration.

Robert Kagan:
The arbitration agreement with Great Britain, which was the simplest, easiest, least offensive, and Lodge did exactly to Taft what he would later do to Wilson, which was put so many amendments on it that it basically became the opposite of what it was intended to do and Taft had to withdraw the treaty altogether. His treaty, he withdrew. So what Wilson faced was long odds to begin with, and then Lodge's willingness to abandon his own internationalism in the interest of defeating the treaty in order to defeat the Democrats and get the Republicans back in the White House in 1920.

So you can blame Wilson for all kinds of things, but that was the world he lived in. And I think until he got very ill when he made his speaking tour in 1919 and then had a stroke, until then, he was doing about as best as he could do, and I don't blame him. There were 15 reasons why people blame Wilson for the defeat of the League and the treaty, but I really think he did about as best as he could do.

Walter Russell Mead:
Mm-hmm. And yet, it didn't work.

Robert Kagan:
And yet, it didn't work, and why it didn't work is an interesting question, because either you could say the American people were never going to buy into that idea of being on call at all times in defense of the liberal world order. But I think it's not clear that they couldn't have, because when he first came back from Paris, the polls... There were no polls then, but insofar as public opinion could be measured, everyone agreed, Wilson and Lodge, that the treaty had overwhelming support.

And Lodge's control of the Senate, he was both Senate majority leader and Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, allowed him to drag out the treaty discussion and bring up every conceivable objection and every ethnic group in America that it was upset because Ireland got screwed or because Italy got screwed or one of those, and he was able, brilliantly, to get the
Republican Party, which was a majority in favor of the League to start, ultimately to turn against it. And again, purely for political reasons, not as a foreign policy argument.

I don't think today, we'll be shocked to know that sometimes politicians flip their views on major policy issues for political reasons, and that's exactly what happened here. What I find impressive is how American historians just refuse to see that and insist on treating this because, I mean, historians are intellectuals, so they have the problems that intellectuals have. So they want to see this as a great conflict between Wilson's vision of the world and Lodge's vision of the world. And the truth is, there was very little difference between their visions of the world. What made them different was that Wilson was a Democratic president and Lodge was a Republican leader of the majority in the Senate.

Walter Russell Mead:

One theme in the book that keeps coming up over and over is your sense that most American historians are not very good, and that the sort of intellectual level in the United States, both of American political history and maybe especially of American foreign policy history, is kind of low. And you can see, you don't always attack people by name, but there are a lot of people whose theories of history you go after in this book. I would say that Henry Kissinger's effort to organize kind of a Wilsonian idealism versus Rooseveltian, Theodore Rooseveltian realism is one of those targets. You really go for that.

Robert Kagan:

Yeah. Yeah. And, of course, Kissinger didn't invent that. That became a kind of mantra in that... What I discovered, by the way, is that as often the case, so you had the events and then you had the political reaction to the events, and then the political reaction to the events led to an intellectual reaction to the events, so the events being World War I and the League and the Versailles Treaty, which were then defeated politically, and in the process of defeating them politically, where they were defeated intellectually as being everything was wrong. And that became the standard narrative of this period, Wilson's excess, Wilson's excessive idealism, Roosevelt's hard-core realism, Lodge's realism, et cetera. That was the argument of the winners, which then became the argument of historians.

Walter Russell Mead:

Until 20 years later when it sort of flipped.

Robert Kagan:

Well, and then it flipped briefly, but we have somehow come back to that, then there's the whole economic-explanation-of-everything problem.

Walter Russell Mead:

This is, right, your attack on the open door without actually mentioning certain historical names.

Robert Kagan:

They're in the footnotes to some extent, but yeah. Right.
Walter Russell Mead:

Yeah.

Robert Kagan:

No, and that's the other thing. And this is particularly notable when you look at the American intervention in Cuba in 1898, what was the cause of that intervention, and I think it's abundantly clear that the cause was humanitarianism, not economic imperialism. And for proof of that, I would only point to the fact that one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the intervention in Cuba was Mark Twain. Mark Twain, I think, epitomized the anti-imperialist view of that time, which was, the intervention in Cuba was good. The intervention in the Philippines and the ultimate acquisition of the Philippines was bad.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right, was bad.

Robert Kagan:

And that was the imperialism that was bad. And that was the standard account for 20 years afterwards that the intervention in Cuba was a good thing, the seizure of the Philippines was a bad thing, to the point where even Robert La Follette, the ultimate progressive defining the left wing of American politics other than socialism, even in the '20s, was still talking about how the intervention in Cuba was about granting freedom to others.

But I'm interested to say that everyone in this room in high school or college learned that the entire event was driven by economic imperialism, despite the fact that most historians have actually debunked that, and yet it survives even in the highest-quality textbooks. And so, it's kind of interesting to trace how a current set of received wisdom, when did it get to be received wisdom, and why did it get to be received wisdom.

Walter Russell Mead:

Yup.

Robert Kagan:

I'm sorry. Maybe this is getting into the weeds here, but one of the reasons the views on Cuba and the intervention changed was that the whole revulsion against American activism in foreign policy following World War I led to revisionist accounts, which then were fed into by... Charles Beard writes his famous book in 1913. I think it is on the economic origins of the Constitution, and then economics is now everything.

And so, between the quasi-isolationist rejection of American involvement overseas as being fundamentally evil and add to it then and the motive for that intervention we are now deciding is always economic. And to some extent, that is still the dominant view of American foreign policy and all these periods that we're talking about today.
And so, in that sense, I guess my book is an attempt at revisionism. I didn't make it kind of overt. As you say, it's not an overt revisionism, but if anybody bothers to read it, they will see that a lot of things that they thought what was true about American foreign policy in various different periods was not necessarily the case.

Walter Russell Mead:

As I was thinking about this, reading it, it struck me that maybe in a democracy, it's sort of inevitable that history gets turned into little political legends so that you can say, "Oh, that's Munich again," or "Oh, that's Hawley-Smoot," or "Oh, that's Iraq," whatever it may be, and that history and some academic history, which is read by very few people, is maybe at one level, but the popular history that we all carry around in our heads of what happened is mostly a tissue of lies, fabrications, or just deliberately distorted views, which may account for the reason that American foreign policy debates so often don't seem to be that consequential or thoughtful.

Robert Kagan:

Well, there is a theme to all of the mythology, and the mythology is basically, almost any time that we've acted in the world, both our motives and the consequences have been terrible. And when I read about how the people write about the last 30 years have been a disaster in American foreign policy, I have to say, after studying these particular 40 years, the last 30 years seem like a dream.

Walter Russell Mead:

Yeah. Give us another 10 would be my worry, but-

Robert Kagan:

My question is always, if you didn't like these 30 years, which 30 years did you like? Did you like the 30 years between 1900 and 1930? The 30 years between 1930 and 1960?

Walter Russell Mead:

Right.

Robert Kagan:

I mean, one of the consequences of our cartoonish approach to our history is that everything looks settled and obvious, and we were talking about this at the beginning, that we think we know what happened and it's a nice simple story, and then when we're faced with the unbelievable complexity of our current situation, we reach back for these simplistic explanations and they take us nowhere, because they don't take us... And this is my ultimate goal in life, as I'm sure it's Walter's, to some extent, goal in life too. They don't take us to an actual explanation as to why Americans do what they do.

There are a lot of mythological explanations, most of which have to do with naming various baddies who got us into this and who got us into that, I mean, that the American intervention in Cuba is regarded as a plot that was foisted on us by Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, is to completely misunderstand what happened in that period where, in fact, it was the
left, if anything, but that the popularity of the intervention in Cuba was so overwhelming that to attribute it to one or two people is sort of absurd, but it is a way that Americans have of letting themselves off the hook for their actions.

This whole concept that there are elites and a few people who were pulling the strings behind in a democracy where wars are voted on, where polls are taken, where congressmen run on whether they supported the war or not, and yet somehow it's all the machinations of a couple of people. This is a constant theme, and a lot of the mythology of American history is about finding the nefarious causes of actions, which, at the time, seemed completely obvious and the right thing to do.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. Hey, one of the interesting things, people used to talk about the Vietnam syndrome, but one of the cause of wars that, in retrospect, people are not that excited by is it often creates a generation of bad foreign policy thinking, because what people do is, say with the Vietnam War, they say, "Well, obviously, it really was horrible. We don't want to go back and do that again." And so, the desperate need to find out, "Okay, what were the 'mistakes'? Who made them?" And then you want to develop a set of rules from this so that if we never do this again, we will never have one of those again.

Robert Kagan:

Right. Right.

Walter Russell Mead:

And foreign policy, I think, ultimately is an art. It's not a science. It's a very inexact art. It's much more like a competitive athletic event, where each side makes mistakes, commits fouls, the best player in the world can lose to the worst player on a given day, all of these kinds of things, but we want to impose a rationality on this process because it's so terrifying what happens when it goes wrong.

Robert Kagan:

Well, exactly, and that the sport that I always compare foreign policy to is baseball. Baseball is a sport where if you fail 70% of the time, you go to the Hall of Fame.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right.

Robert Kagan:

And I think foreign policy needs to be understood that way. It is just as hard as baseball to get foreign policy right.

Walter Russell Mead:
Even harder, perhaps.

Robert Kagan:

Maybe even harder. And so, this sort of demand that we have for perfect, not even perfect, but even... I admit that Iraq and Afghanistan is not a perfect outcome, but even for the bad-but-not-horrible outcomes that occur in foreign policy. I mean, if you think of how many times the British Empire had its Iraqs and Afghanistans over the course of its empire, without shaking the fundamental... By the way, I'm not a fan of the British Empire, but it didn't shake Britain's fundamental feeling that they still had this task to maintain the empire.

And what you say is right, and the only thing I would add to it is that what happens in a situation like Vietnam is we don't just go back and say, "Which little tactical errors did we make?" We go back and say, "It was our entire philosophy of foreign policy that was wrong."

Walter Russell Mead:

It was a moral evil that got us into this.

Robert Kagan:

Well, it's like, you watch the trajectory of a David Halberstam, for instance, on the question of Vietnam. Halberstam, who was a full-throated supporter of the war, even in as late as 1965, was saying Vietnam was a vital interest of the United States, very Mitch McConnell at that time. Then when the war goes bad, Halberstam turns against it, but importantly, not only against the war, but against the entire containment strategy.

All of a sudden, Dean Acheson goes from being a fairly revered figure on the liberal side of the spectrum to being one of the baddies, because somehow... And they're not wrong. Did containment get us into Vietnam? Yes. The theory of containment got us into Vietnam. Do you then get rid of the theory of containment, or do you make sure that the theory of containment doesn't lead you to another Vietnam? And that's the problem we've had with Iraq too, which is, it's exactly what you say, Walter. I always want to say, "Okay. Iraq was a terrible idea. What is the doctrine that keeps us from having the next Iraq?" And that's not as easy to come up with as you think.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. No, and there is none, I would say.

Robert Kagan:

You could say, "Well, we'll never intervene overseas. That is a doctrine that will keep us out of Iraq." And by the way, that was the doctrine of almost half the country in the 1930s, was we just are not going to get involved out there, because to get involved out there is to be pulled into this whole disaster. And they thought World War I was a disaster, which it wasn't really, but then you get this sort of, "Well, therefore, we shouldn't be..." To some extent, the Iraq effect, like the Vietnam effect, is that we shouldn't be involved anywhere, and that doesn't work either.

Walter Russell Mead:
Well, the other thing that I think is interesting is, and you touch on this, that so much of the revisionism of the '20s and '30s was caused by people who had been really emotionally invested in World War I as the war to save democracy, et cetera, et cetera. And then afterwards, when those emotions had subsided and the world looks different and we didn't actually build a shining city on a hill, but sort of the same old mess, more or less continued, then there's a kind of revulsion from those emotions, and you get an equally emotional judgment of that period from there.

Robert Kagan:

Right. And it is usually American liberals who go through this, because as in World War I, and dare I say as in Vietnam, and dare I say as in Iraq, you start with tremendous liberal support because for reasons, I think, are obvious. It does seem to be a fundamentally ideological conflict, that it's about world order to some extent. That's what liberals care about. So they wind up being great enthusiasts for these interventions, and then when the interventions turn...

And as I say, you could say Iraq was very disillusioning. I don't think World War I was that disillusioning. We did win. But when they turn against it, they turn against it times 10 because they're also feeling guilty for the fact that they supported it initially. Liberals in World War I, in particular, felt guilty and then became, if you watched... Watching the trajectory of intellectuals over a period of time-

Walter Russell Mead:

I'd say Reinhold Niebuhr is a good example.

Robert Kagan:

The Reinhold Niebuhrs, the Walter Lippmanns, who were 100%, 110% in favor of the war. Lippmann was basically the cheerleader for World War I, and then disillusioned, Lippmann becomes a realist. He ultimately votes against Roosevelt. He goes so far to the right that he finds Franklin Roosevelt intolerable and he doesn't vote for him. Reinhold Niebuhr goes through. He's a realist. He's a communist. He tries everything.

Walter Russell Mead:

Pacifist, right?

Robert Kagan:

He's a pacifist, everything, until the 1930s roll around, the fascist regimes start rising, and then all of a sudden, the liberals have now... They come back home and they're all ready to go intervene in Europe long before the rest of the country is.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. Right.

Robert Kagan:
World War II was a successful war, so we didn't have to repudiate our support for it. It's the only war, I think, in history that liberals did not have to repudiate their support for.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

But then, and this will get into your next volume, liberals were not that enthusiastic about the Cold War in the beginning, in the ’45 to ’48 period as we're moving-

**Robert Kagan:**

In the ’45 to ’48 period, they thought they wanted... Right. They were in one world, "Let's work with the Russians," et cetera. Sure. Right. ’46, I think, is probably what most people think of as the turning point for Acheson and company anyway.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

For Acheson, but I'm thinking of like Eleanor Roosevelt.

**Robert Kagan:**

Sure, sure, sure. Right. That lasted a little longer with her. Right. Well, that's because, and this gets back to the period that the book is about, which is, the country was politically divided over what to do about the state of the world. It wasn't just that they were divided over whether to intervene or not. Conservative Republicans were, comparatively speaking, soft on Hitler, soft on Mussolini. They thought communism was the big threat at home. They accused Roosevelt of wanting to bring communism to the United States. That was a constant talking point. And therefore, as they looked out on the world, the number one enemy was the Soviet Union, not Hitler, who, after all, positioned himself as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

On the liberal Democratic Roosevelt side, needless to say, what they were worried about domestically was fascism. Sinclair Lewis was writing books about how fascism could come to here. And so, their number one concerns are obviously Hitler and Mussolini, and a potential ally against Hitler and Mussolini is the Soviet Union. So they're soft on the Soviets in this period. I mean, and look at our situation today. You can't tell me that a lot of the conservative opposition to aiding Ukraine isn't about their generally positive views of Putin and their generally negative views of the liberals who are opposed to Putin.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

That's probably the stronger one.

**Robert Kagan:**

The stronger, as always. But whereas, not surprisingly, those who are liberal Democrats tend to be more supportive of doing something in Ukraine, anti-Putin.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Right. See, Putin is the Trump of Russia in a sense.
Robert Kagan:

Exactly. Right. In the same way that there were actual... Charles Lindbergh was pretty soft on the German side, I'd have to say.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. And thought that Franklin Roosevelt was too close to Stalin.

Robert Kagan:

Actually, what he thought was he was too close to the Jews.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. Well, same in his mind.

Robert Kagan:

In his mind. Right.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. I want to ask one more question for myself and then we'll go to some questions that have come in. And this is something I think I wish you'd done a bit more of in the book, and I'd like to pull it out a bit, because it does seem to me that a key factor in the liberal evolution toward Britain and France and disillusioned with World War I is that immediately after the war, France and Britain, they become very imperialist in their behavior, and they're carving up the Middle East, the British are bombing Iraq, the French are driving the noble Arab chieftains out of Damascus, and you have the Amritsar massacre in India.

To me, as I look at the '20s in America, the strength of anti-colonial sentiment among liberals, which is partly brought in by missionaries who are in China, where they see the British... In particular, British colonialism, they see it as hopeless. They look at Asia and they say, "You cannot hold on here. It's impossible." And they're right. And yet, the British are coming at Asia with all the sort of racial and dictatorial thing, and the British will frankly say, and they're still saying this in the '40s, that, "Without the empire, we can't maintain our global position and our living standards at home."

So the liberal perception of the British Empire as a predatory organization and that an alliance with Britain is not about creating a liberal order is something, I think, that really shapes their thinking. Then in the '30s, Britain emerges as... Well, they still don't think it's liberal, but they think Germany is a greater danger. And during World War II, Americans and the leftists, some of them Soviet agents, Harry Dexter White and so on, are systematically using the war to destroy the British Empire as they go through it. And I wish that that theme had... I think it would cast some light on some of what you're talking about. How would you respond to that?

Robert Kagan:
Well, it wasn't even just liberals. And the argument, if you were opposing Versailles and the League and, after that, any involvement in Europe, that was the argument to hand that they were colonialists. When we entered the war in 1917, the William Borahs of this world, who later were the king of the British... They somehow were not troubled at that moment by British colonialism, and that was not even used as an argument against intervening. So I can't tell how sincere it is.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. It probably was before the immediate... I think early in the war, you would hear it.

Robert Kagan:

No. In the war, you would hear it. And when Wilson himself was opposing, was trying to stay out of the war, he said... The quote is something like, "Britain has the world and Germany wants it." That was his summary of the war. Now, at other times, when he wanted to get into the war, he said, "This is a fight between autocratic militarism on the one hand and democracy in the other," which I think is what he actually believed, by the way, because I don't think he was too troubled with British colonialism.

Walter Russell Mead:

I think he had a color-coded view of world politics.

Robert Kagan:

Well, in any case, but interestingly, and the only thing I want to add to what you say is, the people who were making the loudest complaints about helping the British Empire was Lodge when he was opposing the treaty, because the treaty was seen as being nice to Europe and nice to Britain and nice to France, so you had to turn that around.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. And he's also from a state with a large Irish vote, and we shouldn't forget that 1919 and 1920 are periods of literal war in Ireland.

Robert Kagan:

Well, 1916 is the Easter Uprising, and that is probably the low point of American opinion about Britain. In fact, Americans were much more likely to be hostile to Britain because of their treatment of Ireland than they were because of their treatment of India, which most Americans didn't care about.

Walter Russell Mead:

Again, after 1920, that starts to change.
Well, again, at that point, we're in such anti-Europe mode that we'll use whatever argument there is. So that's the only thing I'm saying, is I don't know how deep that feeling ran. But you know what? In the review of my book in The New York Times, the guy repeats, the reviewer repeats that and says, "How could you look at the order that the United States could have created in World War I, which would've included the British Empire and the French Empire? And therefore, it would've been..." And I thought, "My God, I haven't read that argument since 1919."

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yeah. There it was.

**Robert Kagan:**

But there it was. So that's definitely in there. It seems to be mobile though, Walter. I mean, in 1941, overwhelming majority of Americans is helping Britain. Now, right, they hate Hitler more, but...

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Right. Right. No. I mean, I think that is also about perceptions of threat... In the absence of a threat perception, Britain looks ugly. In the presence of a threat perception, it starts looking less unattractive.

**Robert Kagan:**

I think that's right, and I think the question is, what is the question that you're asking? So when Walter Lippmann is making the case for intervening in World War I, he doesn't put it as, "We should help the British." He says, "We need to defend the Atlantic community," by which he means, in fairness, a fairly liberal system.

If you look at the littorals on the American Atlantic coast and the littorals on the European Atlantic coast, you have mostly liberal governments, in the Low Countries, Britain, France, et cetera, and that is what Lippmann called the Atlantic community, which was another way of saying the liberal world order of the time.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yup. I think it's also, and you were writing a history of American foreign policy, but I think we should give a little bit more... In a sense, we should ask ourselves why the British were so bad at communicating or strategic communications with Americans.

**Robert Kagan:**

Were they?

**Walter Russell Mead:**
I think they actually were. I mean, I'm thinking of a post-World War II, but there were a lot of examples before. When they're broke and need American help, they send Keynes over, who's probably the guy least likely to make friends in Congress in the whole-

**Robert Kagan:**

Well, you're talking in the World War II period. Yeah. Right. Right.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Right. But I'm saying, but even then, the Amritsar massacre was probably not the best move in 1920.

**Robert Kagan:**

Well, I don't think they made it as a move.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

No. Right. But you know what I mean?

**Robert Kagan:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

But the idea of trying to think, "Okay, we really need the Americans on board. How do we craft our policies? How do we steer this?" I think they were still in the habit of command.

**Robert Kagan:**

I just don't know. I mean, I would refute that in the... I would push back against that in the following way. They handled the Americans pretty well when they were trying to get the Americans into the war.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Took them longer than they wanted.

**Robert Kagan:**

As Churchill rightly said, "It would've been great if the Americans had come in earlier," but can you blame them for not coming in earlier? The Brits themselves didn't want to go into World War I, and they were 20 miles from the continent.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Right.
Robert Kagan:

We were 3,000 miles from the continent. I don't think you can blame America for not coming in sooner because, for one thing, we'd never gone to Europe at all before then.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right. Another thing, by the way, and this is something that I think we sometimes forget, thing about the debate over US entry into World War I. Everyone is watching the trench warfare.

Robert Kagan:

Yeah.

Walter Russell Mead:

The real thing, the discussion in the United States is, are you going to send your son into that meat grinder?

Robert Kagan:

Right.

Walter Russell Mead:

Because there was no shortage of accounts about what it was like. No lack of information about casualty numbers. This was an extraordinary decision for a political community to take.

Robert Kagan:

That's right. And yet, when Wilson announces in his war declaration of 1917 that he's going to raise an army of 500,000 and then another 500,000 after that, it's standing ovation in Congress, and it's worth remembering that. But yes, it should never be surprising that Americans didn't get into the war. What is interesting is that they did get into the war. And the British, all I would say is, the British... This was the case where the similarities of cultures really mattered, because when the war started and America was neutral, the question was going to be, can you get the goods and the money that you need from the Americans?

The Germans were completely indifferent to the question. They had a substantial trade with the United States, but they did not pay any attention to it whatsoever, because in their minds, it was all about the Schlieffen Plan. They didn't even think the British were going to enter the war, and who cared about the United States? So they had no plan. But because the Americans' and the British financial communities were so tightly intertwined before the war that when it came to working out the terms of neutrality, it was smooth. Their bankers met with our bankers. Their government officials met with our government officials.

Walter Russell Mead:

Now you're sounding like a Nye Commission witness all of a sudden.
Robert Kagan:

No, no, no, no. No. Right. Of course, the Nye Commission was not completely wrong in assessing how it was the United States wound up going to war.

Walter Russell Mead:

Exactly.

Robert Kagan:

It wasn't even completely wrong to say that, yes, the money we were making selling to the Europeans sent the United States economy into one of the greatest growth periods in history, and yes, Wilson didn't feel like ending that and having a recession instead.

Walter Russell Mead:

Yes.

Robert Kagan:

So it wasn't that the American economy actually depended on trade, but Wilson's election depended on trade. And so, those are the kinds of things that we tend to miss, the politics of it all.

Walter Russell Mead:

That's exactly right. Well, let me go to some audience questions. And unlike an old stick-in-the-mud historian like me, the audience is actually interested in current events.

Robert Kagan:

Ah, okay. Well, good.

Walter Russell Mead:

So, "You mentioned in your book that FDR was worried that if Japan attacked Britain and the Europeans but left the US alone, it would be hard to rally American public opinion for a war with Japan. Today, there's a lot of public support for arming the Ukrainians, but not for sending in US troops. Is there a similar dynamic today? And what about if China attacks Taiwan?"

Robert Kagan:

Well, yeah, those are the questions.

Walter Russell Mead:

Yeah.
Robert Kagan:

I didn't even have to write a book to have to address those questions, but I am, right now, very unsure about where the American public is exactly right now. Now, what it looks like on paper is that we're very much in a kind of late-1940, early-1941 mode where the American people are very much taking sides. The majority, at least, have taken sides. We know which side we're on and we want to help the poor guys win, but we definitely don't want to go to war. Our president is assuring us we're not going to go to war, et cetera, et cetera.

Walter Russell Mead:

We'll be the arsenal of democracy.

Robert Kagan:

Right. And if you look at Franklin Roosevelt's speeches, even in his electoral campaign of 1940, at the very end of his campaign, he says, "There will be no American boys sent to fight in foreign wars," period. Election time, 1940. And that's where we are now, and yet we saw how easily that slipped into something else and how quickly Americans moved from, "We want to arm them, but by no means go to war," to "We want to arm them even at the risk of potentially winding up at war." Now, I don't know that that's where the American people think they are right now.

Walter Russell Mead:

And there are no Russian submarines on the high seas-

Robert Kagan:

There were no Russian submarines.

Walter Russell Mead:

... sinking our ships.

Robert Kagan:

Right. Although, I mean, the interesting thing is, one of the reasons that we don't face this question is because we are so much more powerful. For Putin, the last thing in the world he wants is to get us into the war. That's a disaster for him. He's losing to Ukraine. So he doesn't want NATO and the United States in the war. So in a way, we're being spared the difficulty. And, of course, Roosevelt, during this same period, was deliberately pushing against Hitler in the Atlantic in the hopes of ultimately... Whether he consciously meant it or not, but he-

Walter Russell Mead:

He knew that his life would be simpler if Hitler declared war.

Robert Kagan:
Once he says, "The rattlesnakes of the seas and we're going to..."

Walter Russell Mead:

Which is one of the weirdest metaphors ever, the rattlesnake of the sea, but...

Robert Kagan:

Yeah. No. The one thing I would say about Franklin Roosevelt's metaphors, the garden hose and, "We got to go out there and clean up this riot so we can come back home." You know what I'm saying?

Walter Russell Mead:

Mm-hmm.

Robert Kagan:

All of his little metaphors are designed to take something that is a hugely portentous, potentially disastrous decision and make it seem like it's just like garden hoses and stuff and rattlesnakes that you have to step on and stuff. It was really quite a...

Walter Russell Mead:

He was very good at what he did.

Robert Kagan:

He was good at what he did. No question.

Walter Russell Mead:

All right.

Robert Kagan:

I'm sorry, I didn't really answer the question.

Walter Russell Mead:

What about Taiwan though?

Robert Kagan:

Taiwan. Right.

Walter Russell Mead:

Yeah. Taiwan.
Robert Kagan:

Well, the reaction to the balloon seems to me to indicate that we are at a high degree of tension and borderline hysteria in the United States, and this is what Americans do by the way. We go from indifference to panic without stopping in between, and we are now in relative panic mode when it comes to China. And honestly, I hope Xi Jinping is paying attention, because if you go back and look at the way Japan wound up in conflict with the United States, it was definitely a dance for two.

It wasn't just the Japanese got up one morning and said, "Hey, I think we'll go hit the United States." It was a consequence of correctly perceiving that the United States was opposed to what they were doing, wanted to limit what they were doing, and was ultimately prepared potentially to strangle them economically to prevent them from doing, and Japan was 100% dependent on the United States for everything in that period, not the way China has much greater independence.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right.

Robert Kagan:

And the Japanese ultimately got to a point where they sort of knew that they were not going to win probably a war. I mean, Yamamoto says to them, "I'll run wild for six months, but after that..." Because they knew about the productive capacity of the United States, and in 1939, Roosevelt had already launched a massive naval buildup, which was going to come into effect basically beginning in 1942 and then for the rest of the war. So on the one hand, the Japanese knew that they probably couldn't outperform the United States over time. They were hoping against hope that if they smacked us in the nose, that the American response would be, "Okay, we don't want to play and we'll just pull out. You do what you need to do."

Walter Russell Mead:

Right.

Robert Kagan:

But I think at the end of the day, they thought there was a reasonable chance that that was not going to happen. And ultimately, Hirohito says, "Sometimes you just have to take a..." He used whatever, the Japanese thing about jumping from the platform of some shrine. But anyway, it's a way of saying, "Sometimes you got to close your eyes and take a leap and hope for the best." And it's striking to me how many of the countries, the major powers that wound up at war with the United States got to that point.

The Germans in World War I also, at the very end, when they were deciding to turn back to unrestricted submarine warfare, said they knew this was an incredible gamble and maybe that it would be the end of them. I fear that where we are with China right now is that even if Xi Jinping recognizes that maybe the United States is not going to go quietly into this good night as much as he might have thought, he's so far down the road to what he's trying to do, the way the Japanese were so far down the road, that turning back seemed unacceptable to them for sure.
The question is, can he hold where he is right now and avoid a conflict? Or has he already, in a
way, decided that, as he says, "Great changes have occurred in the international system"? By
which he means the decline of the United States and the rise of China, and that this is his best
opportunity, which he would be encouraged to do in the same way that the Japanese were by
the fact that we are now gearing up to deal with him.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yup.

**Robert Kagan:**

So the sooner he acts, the better. I'm hoping that the Chinese, who are very historically minded,
can think of the Japanese example, can think of Germany in World War I, can think of Germany
in World War II, and say, "This whole overthrowing the American system hasn't worked very
well for most people."

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Right. Before Xi Jinping really cracked down, Americans, we used to be able to go to China and
have really pretty frank conversations with our counterparts, scholars, officials, and so on. And
in those days, my impression was it was very widespread in China, this understanding that the
countries that have launched themselves against the maritime system generally don't do well,
and it gets harder the deeper you get into it.

**Robert Kagan:**

Yeah.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

And that was almost conventional wisdom in China, but whether they're still there, I don't know.

**Robert Kagan:**

And we, of course, have contributed to laying... I call this the America trap because we do it
over and over and over again. We have succeeded in making it look like this is a moment of
opportunity.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

That we are such fools, so divided, so internally-

**Robert Kagan:**

And we've been slow to react to the threats of Taiwan because of all this nonsense that we told
ourselves with One China policy and everything. So we're slow and I think we're in a situation
where, again, China can run wild for six months. They might be able to take Taiwan. I don't
know that we have the capacity necessarily to stop them. But if I were the Chinese, then I would say, "Okay, but then what?"

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Yeah.

**Robert Kagan:**

Is that a prelude to really shifting the nature of the international system, or is that the beginning of the end of your regime? Because history would suggest it's-

**Walter Russell Mead:**

When the strangulation sets in, it's-

**Robert Kagan:**

Right. If you're now taking on the United States plus all of its rich allies in Europe and in Asia, that's a much stronger position than the United States was in vis-à-vis Nazi Germany and Japan back in 1941 when they had already conquered everything that we're now trying to prevent these guys from conquering. So we're in a much stronger position, but again, we give off an odor of disorganization and decline, and our buddy Niall Ferguson is saying, "We can't do anything. We need to cut a deal with the Russians, cut a deal with the Chinese. We don't have it anymore." And I think someday that's going to be true that we don't have it anymore. I just don't think it happens to be true right now. And one of the things that-

**Walter Russell Mead:**

I didn't think you were going to end up sounding like Aragorn here. "Today is not that day!"

**Robert Kagan:**

Today is not that day. I mean, the other mistake we make, and I'll end on this, is we look at this America... This is peacetime America. This is not what wartime America looks like. Wartime America spends 8 to 10% of its GDP on defense. We're spending a little under 4%. Wartime America has rejiggered its military industrial platforms to be able to produce the stuff that we need. We haven't even invoked the Defense Production Act to increase the number of shells that we're producing. I mean, this is not wartime America, and the people of America are not a wartime American people.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Right.

**Robert Kagan:**

Let's not kid ourselves. When Americans go to war, they are as brutal as anybody. In fact, in some respects, they can be more-
Walter Russell Mead:

More.

Robert Kagan:

... brutal because they're a democracy in a way. The anger and the passion that greeted... Americans went from not wanting to be in the war in 1940 to wanting to kill everybody in 1942. And so, that's another thing that people just don't take into account.

Walter Russell Mead:

Exactly. Again, one of the great lessons of history is that people don't learn very much from history, but Bob, you continue to try and I think we're all grateful for it.

Robert Kagan:

Well, thank you, Walter. As do you.

Walter Russell Mead:

Thanks.