

# Republic Undone

How militarism overtook American patriotism

By John Lukacs

IN THE BEGINNING of the third American century the United States found itself in a situation that was unprecedented and unexpected. It had become the only superpower of the world. In one sense this was the outcome of a Eurasian earthquake, the collapse of a Russian empire, which occurred largely without American intervention. In another sense, this was the result of a resurgent nationalism among the American people—something that most of them were mentally, and spiritually, comfortable with.

Many have attributed the collapse of the Soviet Union to Ronald Reagan: his massive armament program, they contend, forced the Soviet Union into bankruptcy. This was not so. The end of the Soviet Union was the result of a vast erosion of belief in Communism and in the benefits of its system, something of which Mikhail Gorbachev had become convinced. This man, largely without powerful external or internal pressures, dismantled the second-largest empire in the world within a few years. Why he acted thus had nothing to do with the American military budget, while it may have had much to do with the mysterious, guilt-ridden vagaries of the Russian soul.

That was not how Reagan, and the myriad of his followers, saw it. Their preoccupation was primarily with the evil of international Communism rather than with the geographical reality of Russia. The American propensity to identify the opponents of the United States as “Evil,” as the antitheses of

America the Good, made Americans overlook the weakness of the Russian empire. A result was the vast armament program on which Reagan and his government embarked: the federal defense budget more than doubled, from \$134 billion in 1980 to \$299.3 billion in 1990.

But more was involved than spending. The words, the voices, and the very gestures of this president showed a sentimental and somewhat puerile passion for the American military, from someone who spent World War II in Hollywood. Before that, even presidents who had once been generals employed civilian manners. But now there were Reagan’s fervent, sentimental expressions when speaking to American soldiers, sailors, and airmen. There was, too, his willingness to employ the armed forces in rapid and spectacular military operations against minuscule targets like Grenada, Nicaragua, and Libya.

No great harm was done in the short run. It behooves us to give credit to Reagan, who eventually concluded that Gorbachev was sincere, whereby no undue ideological obstacles remained against the gradual cessation of the Cold War. Creditable, too, was the reaction of the mass of the American people to this enormous historic change. In the warming climate, their animosity melted fast away.

The diminution of the Russian empire and other changes on the world scene during the 12 years of Reagan and the elder Bush were tremendous events of long-range consequence, leading to great changes both in the course of the

gigantic American ship of state and in its command structure.

But we ought to be aware of an attendant contemporary condition, which is the American people’s general lack of interest in and ignorance of these events. It was the slackness of interest in world affairs that probably led to the erosion of President George H.W. Bush’s popularity after the Gulf War, an erosion sufficient to result in Clinton’s electoral victory.

Of their “It’s the economy, stupid!”: the slogan of Clinton’s propagandists during that election campaign was an insufficient explanation. No fundamental, important, or radical changes had occurred in the economies and finances of most Americans in the early 1990s. There occurred a large inflation of paper values and sometimes of profits, contributing probably to Clinton’s electoral victories both in 1992 and 1996. But when that bubble finally burst in 2000, that was not why the “conservative” George W. Bush defeated Al Gore.

From the very beginning of his presidency, Bill Clinton, sinuous and alert, sensitive to the eddies and whirls of public opinion, revealed ever more obvious faults of character. His decisions were marked by a superficial opportunism and habit of prevarication. He was not much interested in foreign policy, leaving relevant decisions to other members of his government, sometimes with questionable results. During his second term he chose for his secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who, among other questionable endeavors, extended NATO to three Eastern

European states close to Russia. Clinton and Albright also intervened in the bloody civil and tribal wars of the former Yugoslavia.

The very presence and recent memory of Clinton was a handicap for the Democratic Party during the 2000 presidential campaign. Yet they had reasons to expect that Gore would triumph over the son of George Bush. Well before the election, Bush showed the shortcomings of a man whose mind and character were often astonishingly shallow. Yet he won the contest. A then hardly noticed statement of Bush was telling in what was to come: "It's great to be commander in chief of this nation." None of the presidents who governed this country during its great wars had defined themselves as commanders in chief. But, as Bush's expression and as forthcoming events would reveal, he had a great liking for this capacity.

On Sept. 11, 2001, the complacency of the American people and of their administration received a shock as dramatic as it was unprecedented. The president's first reaction was telling. He declared that the terrorists were "cowards" (which they were not; they were worse than that) and that this was "war" (which this was not either). Never mind: the American people, united in shock and dismay, rallied behind him. Understandably so. This was, after all, the first wounding attack inflicted on the continental United States since 1814.

Meanwhile, the self-appointed leader of anti-American terrorists of many kinds, Osama bin Laden, had fled to Afghanistan. In October 2001, American troops were flown into Afghanistan, where the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime was swiftly defeated. But now this president, spurred by his advisers and by his vice president, chose to pursue military glory. His advisers directed his attention to Iraq, led by the ruthless dictator Saddam Hussein.

There were presidents in the past who wanted war: Polk in 1846, Lincoln in 1861, McKinley in 1898, Roosevelt in 1941; but whereas all of them were convinced that war was a well-nigh inevitable and regrettable choice for the supreme cause of the nation's interest, this president seemed to relish the prospect. When it became evident that international inspectors were finding little evidence of weapons of mass destruction and when important foreign nations chose not to vote for a resolution of war, Bush declared war on his own, thereby dissipating the sympathy that most of the world had demonstrated for America on the morrow of the September 2001 disaster. Eschewing the constitutional requirement of a declaration of war by Congress, Bush had the support of his party (and, alas, of the majority of the American people), while the Democrats cowered in fear lest they be reputed insufficiently patriotic.

The invasion was, at first, a military success. The feared prospect of thousands rushing to Iraq in support of their brother Arabs did not happen, and Bush's pretext, the existence of horrible weapons "against mankind," did not exist. No matter: opinion polls suggested that for most Americans that had become irrelevant; they cheered the war on. What mattered was the invincibility and the glory of the American military. The Armed Forces of the United States were not only technically superior but also much larger than other armies of the world. The long-lasting effects of these conditions were of course incalculable. A perhaps less enduring effect was the obvious pleasure of George W. Bush in appearing as a supreme military personage. Thus he acted, and spoke, descending from the skies onto a giant American aircraft carrier and declaring that the war in Iraq was over. It wasn't. Chaotic conditions, and guerrilla attacks and bombing in Iraq (and Afghanistan), continued.

We have now seen that this militarization of the American presidency began with Reagan, whose vision of American greatness was inseparable from his vision not only of the globe but also of the universe, whence his announcement in 1983 of a project to ensure American domination in the celestial sphere. Twenty years later it was this global (though not yet cosmic) vision that had become something of a reality, enthusiastically supported by the majority of the American people: a kind of nationalism which, like most nationalisms (but unlike earlier kinds of patriotism), amounted to a substitute religion.

We can know very little about man's relationship to himself; we have but very few evidences (and certainly not definite or even ascertainable ones) of his relationship to God. What we can know, and what we can judge, are his acts and words, evidences and symptoms showing his relationship to other living beings. Likewise, a nation's behavior, its relationship to other nations, tells us something about its own character, its inclinations. Because of this, the term "foreign policy" is somewhat misleading, for that policy is not entirely "foreign." It reflects some of the preferences and the thoughts and beliefs of a people.

In the case of the United States, there is an additional problem: the discrepancy between the historical development of the American people and of the American state. Before World War I, the apparatus and the personnel of the State Department (and also of the War Department) had been much smaller than those of the governments of any comparable Great Power. But during World War II, and especially during the ensuing Cold War, they grew enormously. This went on, without abatement, during the past 20 years, at the same time when the knowledge of most Americans about the world lessened.

But then the coexistence of increasing activity with increasing ignorance is not rare in the history of nations.

The very conduct of American foreign relations changed apace with the enormous transformation of its bureaucracy. The old, spare, carefully selected and well-trained Foreign Service virtually ceased to matter or even to exist. The bureaucracy of American foreign affairs, of the presidency, and especially of “defense” kept inflating itself. On the highest level, secretaries of state began to be surrounded and jostled by advisers of “National Security,” duplicating and, in many cases, superseding the authority and the office of the secretary. Many of these

Finally, gathering speed during the Reagan years and then especially after 2000, the power of the Department of Defense over that of State grew—a condition that became manifest as well as endemic under the presidency of the second Bush, with the bellicose Donald Rumsfeld acquiring an influence wider and greater than that of the secretary of state, the sometimes hapless Colin Powell. Indeed, it was the secretary of defense and his close ally the vice president who set the course of the giant American ship of state.

Already in 1956, Section Nine of the Republican Party platform called for “the establishment of American air and naval bases all around the world.” (This

Republic, Poland, and Hungary, with American military bases established there. That this was accomplished during the Clinton presidency and not during a Republican one was proof of the persistence of the Wilsonian ideology of American internationalism—the temptation to believe that what is good for America is good for the rest of the world.

In the Middle East, the United States had interests even before the end of World War II: oil, the supposed danger of Soviet/Communist expansion, the state of Israel, Islamic and populist fanaticism. Of these, dependence on the first, with careful American planning of domestic oil consumption, could have been largely reduced; the second disappeared by 1990; but the third and the fourth were intimately combined. The United States chose to be the protector and guarantor of the state of Israel since the latter’s creation in 1948.

Not many Americans considered or perhaps even understood that Arab hatred of America was largely the result of its almost unconditional support of Israel. This support may not be entirely ascribed to the purpose of attracting American Jewish votes, to the powerful and resourceful Jewish lobbies, and not even to the considerable presence of Jews in high government positions, advising Bush and his allies. These factors were important. Yet more important, and more ominous, was this president’s impulsive reaction to the September 2001 catastrophe: “This is war!”

Long-range consequences of American arrogance were yet to be seen; more ephemeral was the rude attack on the French and German governments that were only contemplating their eventual right not to vote for the American plan in the United Nations. Such reactions as renaming French food or boycotting French wine were transitory and childish. More worrisome were the reports of

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powerful panjandrums were academics from the dubious discipline of “International Relations”; many of them were foreign-born. Some of them eventually became secretaries of state (Henry Kissinger, Albright); others who did not (Zbigniew Brzezinski) had sprung to the top of the celebrity heap, careful not to recoil.

Another element in the transformation of American diplomacy (if that term still applies) was the rapidly burgeoning intrusion of “intelligence” into the administration of American foreign relations. Some of the leaders of the CIA were decent and honest American patriots; but the very bureaucratic structure of the CIA made it dependent on politics. Its advice to the highest levels of government, including presidents, seldom dared to differ from the overall accepted ideological views and political desiderata of the White House.

was a party still called “isolationist” by some of its myopic liberal opponents.) Less than 30 years later, under Reagan, this desideratum had become a reality.

Still, the greatest and the most consequential event of the past 20 years was the break-up of the Soviet empire. This was a historical and geographical earthquake, far more important than the end of international Communism. The reactions to this event by both the American government and people were moderate. There was no gloating, no triumphalism as the Cold War came to an end. But, alas, this would not last.

Almost everywhere the Russians had retreated, the American empire advanced. Washington supported, even more than it welcomed, the breaking off of portions of the Russian empire. Contrary to assurances given to the Russians in 1989, NATO was extended to the former East Germany and then to the Czech

polls according to which a majority of Americans approved of Bush and the war even in the event that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction were never to be found. Nor were most Americans disturbed by the condition that the triumph of their troops in Iraq instantly led to: anarchy, criminality, and chaos.

Thus at the beginning of the 21st century this prevalence of a populist nationalism has become characteristic of American foreign policy. Yet much of this had begun to be propagated well before the emergence of terrorism in the Middle East. Already in the 1980s, and then during the collapse of the Russian empire, certain American intellectuals called for America's destiny and duty to govern the globe in the name of "freedom," going even beyond the universalist ideology of Wilsonianism ("making the world safe for democracy"). It is regrettable to record that many of these proponents were American Jewish intellectuals, the descendants of former Trotskyist or Stalinist or other Left-liberal families, now evidently enjoying the heady spirits of nationalism. For there are fellow travelers not only on the Left but also on the Right: people whose former fears become transmuted in the pleasurable feeling that they are admitted to the company of nationalists and haters. Their propagation of hatred against the Russian empire (in the view of ironical observers, it had taken them two generations to realize that Russians were anti-Semitic) went apace with their dismissal not only of Marxism but also of much of liberalism. Suddenly they became chief spokesmen not only of antiliberalism but for an American global domination without precedent.

At the beginning of the third American century the conditions of political and ideological and governmental commerce in the United States have become such that these neoconservatives could occupy influential positions

**The London terrorist attack is reshaping how Europeans view their collective security, particularly regarding illegal immigration.**

Italy, with its long, unprotected coastline, has been at the forefront of the battle against the waves of illegals entering Europe. In one week in June, the arid island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily, was overwhelmed by nearly 1,000 arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa seeking asylum. After London, Italy's Interior Minister Giuseppe Pisanu rushed reinforcements to Sicily and reopened some of its old border control points with Austria and Slovenia to stop infiltration from Greece and the Balkans. The Italian government believes that Italy will be the next target of a major terror attack because it has troops in Iraq. The attackers will likely come from the huge, illegal Muslim communities that have grown around major cities, particularly in the north. Police and Carabinieri officers backed by Italy's special antiterrorism unit, the DIGOS, are carrying out security sweeps in Turin, Florence, Bologna, Rome, and Naples. Italian public opinion has swung sharply to the right and some politicians are demanding that all illegal immigrants be expelled. In the midst of the outcry, an Italian court in the northern city of Brescia convicted two North Africans of belonging to an extremist group planning terrorist attacks against the Milan subway. The two men, Mohamed Rafik from Morocco and Kamel Hamraoui from Tunisia, were both illegal immigrants.



**France has also responded to the London bombings with the unprecedented re-establishment of border controls with its European Union neighbors,**

particularly Spain, to impede travel of North Africans into northern Europe. The French cited a safety clause in the 1995 Schengen open-border agreement permitting security measures in case of national emergency. Some politicians in Germany are calling for creation of a national anti-terror database and are urging the anticipated post-September-elections Christian Democratic government to crack down on immigrants. Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment in France and Holland was a major contributing factor in the recent defeat of the European Union constitution. After London, that sentiment will no doubt become even stronger.



**Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province's plans to introduce religious police are arousing concerns among Pakistani Christians and minority Shi'ites.**

The new force, empowered to ensure that Muslims behave properly, is supposed to use persuasion rather than punishment. The police will be headed by a Sunni cleric and will be called the Hasba Force. Hasba means "accountability." Critics note that the new police would be similar to the Taliban's Department of Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue in neighboring Afghanistan, which forced people to pray, beat women if they were not covered head to toe, and compelled men to grow long beards to demonstrate their piety. North-West Frontier Province, which is deeply religious, has already banned music in public and has excluded men from any involvement in women's sports. It is also illegal for a male doctor to assist or examine a woman patient, even if she is dying. The province is governed by an alliance of religious parties called the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal.

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