

# The MISES REVIEW



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## THE BOMBER CAUCUS

*While America Sleeps:  
Self-Delusion, Military Weakness,  
and the Threat to Peace Today*

DONALD KAGAN AND FREDERICK W. KAGAN  
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 2000  
IX + 483 PGS.

**W**hile *America Sleeps* might better have been called *While the Kagans Sleep*. The book is divided into two parts: one on British foreign policy in the 1920s and 1930s and another on American foreign policy in the 1990s. The initial part, marginally better than the dreary laundry lists of military procurement policy that clog its successor, aims to inculcate a lesson. Britain, after the First World War, stood in position to dominate the planet. Foolishly, she threw away her chance at world hegemony by rapid demobilization and disarmament.

Lacking the tools to police the world, disaster followed. Britain failed to crush Germany as a potential

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A Quarterly Review of Books, by David Gordon

antagonist. Further, with craven weakness the British Foreign Office refused to support collective security through the League of Nations. How could the British have failed to see the imperative need to punish Italy for Mussolini's occupation of Corfu in 1923? Without overwhelming military might, Britain felt herself constrained in her options.

The result, you will not be surprised to learn, was Hitler. The new German Führer posed a threat of unparalleled magnitude; but Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax, at the helm of British foreign policy, persisted in appeasement. Only America's intervention saved Britain from disaster, and she became a power of the second rank after the war ended. The Kagans' sad tale, they make evident, has more than antiquarian interest.

The United States occupies a similar position to that of Britain in the 1920s. After the collapse of Soviet Russia, the United States stood poised for world mastery. But overly cautious defense budgets have blocked us from imposing our will on other nations. The Kagans find especially disturbing our failure to dispatch Saddam Hussein

and to destroy the North Korean nuclear program. Has the lesson of Hitler been forgotten so quickly? Only a massive arms buildup can save us. Whether or not you speak softly, at least carry a big stick.

The Kagans leave no doubt as to the moral of their prolix story: "A situation very like ours faced another great democracy this century. Warnings that England was sleeping came too late to do any good. We hope that this one comes in time. America . . . must make the necessary commitments and be ready materially and morally to meet them" (p. 435).

This latest entry into Aesop's fables proceeds in utter disregard of logic and morality. Our authors' initial premise on the surface seems plausible. If a nation has sufficient arms to cope with any conceivable threat, and the will to use them, then is it not obviously the case that her power can be indefinitely maintained? No doubt; but this is merely the tautology that a nation that can meet any threat can, not surprisingly, meet any threat.

It does not at all follow that, in the concrete circumstances of the 1920s and 1930s, Britain could have achieved enough of an arms dominance to attain this ambitious goal. No doubt, Britain after the First World War was in a position to crush resistance to the Versailles treaty by Germany. No doubt, further, that Britain could defeat either the Turks or Iraqi insurgents should the occasion demand this. But how is it supposed to follow that Britain could maintain a force sufficient to meet all of these threats, along with many others?

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Lemuel Gulliver could easily turn aside any of the Lilliputians, but he could not prevail against a number of them acting in concert.

Nor is the problem simply that many threats might come at once. Suppose that Britain could easily meet the first of a series of threats. To do so would inevitably cost men and material, and the next threat might well prove more difficult to handle. Again, the fallacy is manifest: a nation that can

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meet one threat need not be in a position to handle an entire series of them. The Kagans have too quickly jumped from a tautology—a nation strong enough always to maintain hegemony can always maintain hegemony—to the far less evident claim that a particular nation, Britain, was in the 1920s capable of making itself master of the world.

To this objection our authors will likely deploy two responses. First, I have wrongly supposed a static military machine. True enough, if the Royal Air

Force terror bombed Arab tribesmen, as it in fact did, its resources would be depleted; but could these not be readily replenished? Then—happy thought—the RAF would have undiminished capacity to bomb some other alleged threat to smithereens.

Further, it will be said, my argument rests on another false assumption. Once a hegemonic power showed herself ready to confront the slightest resistance to her will with condign force, would not defiance lessen, if not disappear altogether? One threat would *not*, as I have imagined, be followed by another.

The first counter merely serves to expose an unsupported premise of the Kagans' argument. What exactly would Britain have required in the 1920s to meet any new threat with undiminished force? The Kagans never tell us, but surely the cost would have been enormous. Even so notorious a war hawk as Winston Churchill favored cuts in military spending during the 1920s. Where was Britain to obtain the money required to meet the Kagans' gargantuan requirements? If, by some miracle, the necessary funds could be secured, would not a large part of civilian spending and investment be crowded out?

You might think that Churchill's espousal of cuts would induce our authors to reconsider; but this is to underestimate the Kagans. Although they praise Churchill for sparking resistance to the Turks in the Chanak crisis, they incredibly view him as someone unduly averse to war. He foolishly preferred economy to more

bullets. "Churchill's cost limitation proposal . . . was not only unwise but impracticable" (p. 53). What do such pacifists as Churchill and the General Staff know about military preparation? The Kagans have spoken!

In like fashion, the second counter also rests on a false assumption. Nations do not always react to a dominant power by cringing away in fear. If Britain had attempted to pursue the path of dominance our authors urge, would this not have induced other nations to challenge her? Would France always remain the compliant ally, as the book assumes without evidence? And what of the United States? Would we have consented forever to remain appendages of the British Empire? During the early 1920s, influential British experts feared impending conflict with America. Our authors dismiss these fears as nonsense, with no grounds but their complacent assumption of a permanent identity of interests between the two countries.

Even if the Kagans' policy were feasible, it would fly in the face of morality. Why is Britain, or any other country, justified in suppressing any regime that dares flout its dictates? The authors denounce with great ferocity Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935; how could Britain idly stand by the blood of her neighbor? But if Italian aggression is wrong, what sanctifies British aggression? I suspect that the Kagans would dismiss my inquiry as misconceived.

What concerns them is not morality, but its appearance: in order to pursue world hegemony, a nation's policies

must be couched in the proper ideological terms. Wary readers will suspect that I have caricatured the



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authors' views—as if I could do such a thing. But they set forward their standpoint in terms that leave no room for doubt: “It is, in fact, a requirement of true realism in the modern world to recognize the inescapable role of what has come to be called ideology but is not very different from what once was called honor. By 1935 the British public would not ignore the commitment to resist aggression, especially on the part of a dictator against a weak country” (p. 207).

Suppose one puts aside all the objections thus far raised against the Kagans' argument. Even judged strictly on its own terms, their main thesis collapses. They contend that British failure to maintain armed superiority during the 1920s made Britain unable to meet the threat posed by Hitler in the 1930s. Yet they themselves acknowledge that Hitler could easily have been expelled from the Rhineland in 1936. Why, then, all the fuss and fury over the lack of a military force adequate for hegemony? Is the argument supposed to be that with sufficient arms, the British would have found appeasement less tempting? But why believe this? The Kagans' argument rests on an unverifiable counterfactual: given larger armed forces, British generals would have supported a more aggressive policy.

I should myself prefer to press a different supposition: had Britain been less aggressive, war might have been avoided in 1939; but to pursue this would veer too far from our authors' argument. Rather, let us turn to the

book's lessons for America in the 1990s.

As earlier explained, the Kagans fear that the United States will succumb to the British disease. They show, at wearying length, that America cannot respond adequately to several large threats at once. Like Britain in the 1920s, American policy makers pay attention to the costs of military might. For such foolish economy, Les Aspin, secretary of defense under

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Clinton, bears much of the blame. But though his predecessor in office, Richard Cheney, earns from our authors higher marks, he too failed to grasp that a hegemonic nation must turn a blind eye to the budget.

Suppose that our authors, in spite of everything here brought against them, have correctly dissected British policy in the 1920s and 1930s. Britain ought to have striven for hegemony, just as they allege. It does not follow that the United States should do so in the 1990s. It is hardly entailed by their

analysis that a Hitler always waits in the wings to pounce on a nation that neglects its arms budget. One historical instance hardly suffices to establish a law of action; and, absent that, the “lessons” derived from their case study must be set against the risks and costs of the bellicose policy they favor. Their efforts to conjure Iraq and North Korea into major threats to the United States I shall leave to readers to evaluate; I found myself nodding off more than once. The first part of the book contains useful information, although the Kagans oddly think that Harold Nicolson was a Conservative member of Parliament (p. 212). Nicolson was a member of National Labour. ♦

## A TOTALISM OF HIS OWN

### *Two Faces of Liberalism*

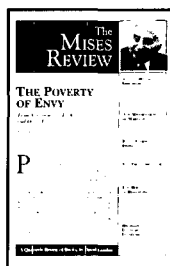
JOHN GRAY  
THE NEW PRESS, 2000  
VII + 161 PGS.

Sometimes a single sentence in a book tells you that something is radically wrong. In the present work we find the damning statement early: “Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett are supremely great dramatists; but we cannot rank their work in value” (p. 37). Mr. Gray uses this example to illustrate his hobbyhorse, value pluralism; but it reveals an

astonishing failure of aesthetic judgment. How can he rank Beckett, a minor playwright inferior to Shaw, among the “supremely great”?

What I suspect has happened is this: our author is in the grip of a theoretical obsession. He quite properly sees that there are many valuable types of life and deplores efforts to press people into a common pattern. Have we not learned in the twentieth century the dangers of totalizing ideologies? But a menace threatens that, unless Mr. Gray can block it, will render us vulnerable to the fanatic drive toward unity at the root of communism and fascism. If all values could be ranked in order, would not advocates of the best life be justified in imposing their conception of the good on those of us less enlightened than they? It is this dire prospect that Mr. Gray most fears, and he believes that he has the answer to it.

Suppose that important values cannot be ranked in an order of merit; instead, they are “incommensurable,” to use our author’s favorite term. Then all is well; the specter of totalitarian universalism dissipates. No advocate of



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