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New Transatlantic Tension and the Kagan Phenomenon: A Primer

By Craig Smith*

A. Introduction

A dark cloud appears to have settled over the northern Atlantic. With regard to fostering international security, consensus-based cooperation between Europe and the United States seems overshadowed by tension, divisiveness, and uncertainty. This must dismay anyone who believes that even-handed cooperation would yield more peaceful prosperity than uncoordinated, competitive efforts.

What has caused this disheartening cloud, and how might we remove it? To ask such questions effectively, we need patience and courage: patience because the answers may be tremendously complex, courage because the opinions expressed tend to be unsettling. We thus may be tempted to remain within our comfort zone: to reject hastily, or to ignore unwisely, challenges to favored assumptions. To examine today's transatlantic relationship effectively, therefore, we need open hearts and minds.

Openness is especially important when we discuss the controversial, attention-grabbing thesis of former U.S. Department of State official Robert Kagan. In June 2002, Kagan, who is now a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,¹ published "Power and Weakness." This article presciently described a deep, enduring mid-Atlantic political rift.² Kagan's analysis generated much discussion in the U.S. and Europe and quickly became required reading for observers of relations between these traditional allies and sometimes rivals.³ Moreover, be-

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¹ See http://www.ceip.org/files/publications/kagan_paradiseandpower.asp (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, homepage at <http://www.ceip.org/>) (visited July 23, 2003).

² Robert Kagan, *Power and Weakness*, 113 POLICY REVIEW ¶ 1 (June/July 2002) <http://www.policyreview.org/JUN02/kagan.html> (visited 14 August 2003).

³ Steven Erlanger, "America the Invulnerable? The World Looks Again," *The New York Times* Sec. 4, p. 3, col. 1 (Late Edition - Final, July 21, 2003) (noting widespread debate in Europe regarding Kagan's thesis).

cause of the article's popularity, an enhanced version of it appeared in February 2003 as the now-popular book "Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order." I will briefly describe Kagan's influential thesis and offer a few comments about it.

B. Kagan's Call for an End to Pretense

Kagan's first sentence, in his article and his book, asked readers to "stop pretending" that Europeans and Americans "occupy the same world."⁴ Europeans occupy a "paradise" within the European Union's borders, Kagan wrote. Americans, by contrast, occupy "the jungle": an anarchic, "Hobbesian" world where law is unreliable and only military might can provide security and promote a liberal order.⁵ Hence the U.S. remains outside paradise's gates, geographically west of the EU but conceptually east of Eden.

This placement of Americans and Europeans in different worlds is literally absurd. But figuratively it is powerful. Our "world" is typically less a geographic entity than a collection of our perceptions about ourselves, our neighbors, and our collective social situation. Early in 2003 most Americans perceived themselves to live in a world in which Iraq appeared sufficiently threatening to justify war. This was not the world most Europeans perceived. They saw a world in which U.S. bombs and soldiers promised more harm than good, while multilateral diplomacy and application of international law promised the best hope of humane, effective maintenance of long-term security and prosperity. Accordingly, they voiced strong opposition as the U.S. moved inexorably toward risking its soldiers and investing a huge sum of money in a conquest and "regime change" that extremely few Europeans believed was necessary, sensible, or morally defensible. Nonetheless, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld excoriated "Old Europe" for its unwillingness to fight, and the U.S. military conquered Iraq largely on its own. The gaping "transatlantic divide" Kagan had recently described was painfully laid bare.

C. Kagan's Thesis

Kagan provocatively diagnosed causes for the rancorous European and American disparity in worldviews. The causes of a widening transatlantic rift, Kagan as-

⁴ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 1 (2003); Robert Kagan, *Power and Weakness*, 113 POLICY REVIEW ¶ 1 (June/July 2002) <http://www.policyreview.org/JUN02/kagan.html> (visited 14 August 2003).

⁵ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 3 (2003).

served, are disparity in (1) military power and (2) experience with successful multilateral, nonmilitary creation of lasting peace from the ashes of war.

First, the title of Kagan's article was shorthand for what he deemed the decisive difference between Americans and Europeans: America's military power versus Europe's military weakness. Power, meaning mainly military power, is "the all-important question," Kagan wrote.⁶ Americans have it, while Europeans do not. Moreover, this "vast" disparity of power intellectually situates Americans and Europeans in very different places, from which they "naturally" disagree on international security issues.⁷ On the one hand, the Cold War's threat from the Soviet Union has subsided. New threats – so-called rogue states and terrorism – have proven exceptionally difficult to perceive, quantify, and manage. Americans and Europeans have judged these threats quite differently, Kagan argued, partly because states and groups hostile to Western beliefs and behavior target the U.S. more than Europe. They do so largely because the American military giant has guaranteed the security of the European military "pygmy."

On the other hand, Kagan added, American military predominance has fostered among Europeans a "psychology of weakness."⁸ Contrast two scenarios of a man near a prowling bear in a forest, Kagan asked his readers. In a European scenario, the man's only weapon is a knife. This European's relative weakness would psychologically predispose him to see only "a tolerable danger," Kagan reasoned, because hiding from the bear presents less risk than attacking it.⁹ By contrast, in Kagan's American scenario the man carries a rifle. This American's relative power would predispose him to perceive not only a risk of "being mauled to death," Kagan argued, but also a means to end the danger rather easily.¹⁰

Second, the transatlantic rift also has arisen from disparity in experience with successful multilateralism and supranational governance. Through the EU in particular, Europeans have experienced the substitution of successful multilateral cooperation and supranational governance for disastrous politics based primarily on military might. They know firsthand how supranational, nonmilitary cooperation can produce peace among former enemies. Americans, Kagan asserted, do not. They

⁶ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 3 (2003).

⁷ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 11 (2003).

⁸ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 27 (2003).

⁹ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 31 (2003).

¹⁰ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 31 (2003).

to the contrary "have no experience of promoting ideals successfully without power."¹¹ Europeans also tend to believe that the EU's accomplishment, which Kagan justly calls a miracle worth celebrating, provides models for multilateral, nonmilitary conflict prevention and resolution beyond Europe. But again Americans do not. Nor should they, Kagan suggested, because Europe's miracle was artificial. It depended and still depends on U.S. military protection of Europe. That truth is exceptionally difficult to accept, Kagan added, because it undercuts Europeans' values and ideals. After World War II left Europe in shambles, the EU gave Europeans a new, civil mission: promoting peaceful, prosperous coexistence through nonmilitary means. The willingness of the U.S. to use military force unilaterally, Kagan concludes, gravely threatens that mission.¹²

Kagan's book, published in February 2003, presented this two-part thesis with a bit more tact and explanation than his article had. The added tact is apparent above all from the book's less martial title, "Of Paradise and Power." This contrasts U.S. power not with Europe's weakness but instead with the EU's realm of peaceful, supranational. The book also better explains why Kagan calls the EU a paradise. Former enemies coexist prosperously there, "freed from the laws and even the mentality of power politics." Figuratively but decisively walled off from anarchy by a U.S. military guarantee, Europeans enjoy "the Kantian world of perpetual peace."¹³ Their heady experience of reconciliation and peaceful, supranational governance, Kagan wrote, have made them justifiably idealistic about international relations.¹⁴ By contrast, Americans' powerful experience of a heretofore unthinkable devastating terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, further reduced their trust in and patience with multilateral action within structures such as the United Nations. Europeans have grown more trusting of international law and governance, while Americans have grown less so. "One of the things that most clearly divides Europeans and Americans," Kagan summarized, "is a philosophical, even metaphysical disagreement over where exactly mankind stands on the continuum between the laws of the jungle and the laws of reason. Americans do not believe we are as close to the realization of the Kantian dream [of perpetual peace] as do Europeans."¹⁵

¹¹ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 95 (2003).

¹² ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 61 (2003).

¹³ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 57 (2003).

¹⁴ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 57 (2003).

¹⁵ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 91 (2003).

Finally, Kagan's book also added a provocative question: "Is it still the West?" – that is, should we still consider the U.S. and Europe to form a vital, coherent partnership as they did during the Cold War?¹⁶ Kagan strongly suggested a negative answer. The familiar concept of "the West" has at least lost much relevance, Kagan wrote. Neither Europe nor the U.S. focuses now on standing firmly together along the western border of a threatening Soviet bloc. Europeans focus instead primarily on further integrating and expanding the EU, while the U.S. focuses on fighting threats that now appear able and likely to "overleap" all allies to strike directly at U.S. territory.¹⁷

D. Kagan's Recommendations

Kagan did not end with his armchair psychoanalysis of Europeans and his description of American disregard for Europe's mission of building a peaceful world on a foundation of multilateral, nonmilitary cooperation.¹⁸ These were provocative enough. Yet Kagan really turned heads with his recommendations. Europe should increase its military strength, "move beyond fear and anger" at the U.S., and recall "the vital necessity of having a strong America."¹⁹ The U.S., for its part, should "draw Europe into common battle" in the "jungle" where rules of international law offer little protection.²⁰ The U.S. also should refuse to view European opinions as a constraint on U.S. action, Kagan wrote. Of course the U.S. should respect Europeans' political accomplishments and sensibilities. The U.S. also should honor multilateralism and the rule of law generally. Americans should do so, however, primarily for two purposes: first, to show "generosity of spirit" and thereby foster common understanding with Europeans; and, second, to gather "political capital for those moments when multilateralism is impossible and unilateral action unavoidable."²¹ At those times in particular, Kagan wrote, the U.S. must live by a double standard. That is, it must violate the rules of international law that it otherwise, like Europeans, seeks to strengthen.

¹⁶ ROBERT KAGAN, *OF PARADISE AND POWER* 76 (2003).

¹⁷ ROBERT KAGAN, *OF PARADISE AND POWER* 84 (2003).

¹⁸ Kagan describes this mission as "transmission of the European miracle to the rest of the world." ROBERT KAGAN, *OF PARADISE AND POWER* 61 (2003).

¹⁹ ROBERT KAGAN, *OF PARADISE AND POWER* 101 (2003).

²⁰ ROBERT KAGAN, *OF PARADISE AND POWER* 102 (2003).

²¹ ROBERT KAGAN, *OF PARADISE AND POWER* 102-103 (2003).

E. Comments

Kagan's analysis deserves much of the criticism it is attracting. Some of Kagan's reasoning failed to rise above America-centric platitudes. For example, one section of the book is modestly entitled "The World America Made." This section boldly proclaimed that "today's Europe ... is very much the product of American foreign policy"²² This assertion seems overblown and unhelpful. Even if the EU might not have arisen without an American military commitment to protect Europe, we must not thoughtlessly pretend that the U.S. created today's Europe. Such a suggestion belittles the Europeans' accomplishment and undercuts Kagan's crucial assertion that Europeans produced the miracle of the EU and thereby gained decisively different experiences from Americans. The suggestion also undermines the credibility of Kagan's stated desire to improve mutual understanding.

In addition, both Kagan's article and his book ended with this admonition: "a little common understanding" between Americans and Europeans would "go a long way." That statement seems to amount to little more than an appeal for U.S. officials to exercise more tact - to show less arrogance and more "generosity of spirit" and "respect for the opinion of mankind."²³ Officials such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld create fertile ground for such advice. Yet the advice is so obvious that it must have been clear anyway to Rumsfeld and others. Moreover, Kagan's admonition is lonely; by including no further call for American concessions to European views, Kagan in fact challenged Americans to understand Europeans substantially less than he challenged Europe to understand, and to put up with, the U.S.²⁴

Finally, Kagan asserted that, compared to Europeans, Americans typically see their situation as more distant from "the Kantian dream" of a world ruled by reason. But Kagan did not convincingly explain the relevance of such distance. Disagreement over the world's place along Kagan's continuum between the "jungle" and a more reasoned world need not create disagreement over how to work toward the latter. Consider domestic use of force against potentially threatening criminals. There we see a similar disparity between favored U.S. and European strategies: using lethal force (the death penalty) versus using less drastic options. Analogous international strategies are the U.S.'s ouster by military force versus the European ratcheting of legal and diplomatic pressure. The cause of such strategic disparities

²² ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 70 (2003).

²³ ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 102-103 (2003).

²⁴ Adjusting to "the new reality of American hegemony" is a taller task for the thereby disadvantaged Europeans than for Americans. ROBERT KAGAN, OF PARADISE AND POWER 97 (2003).

need not lie in disagreement over how close we are to a jungle or to a realm of reason. They may lie instead simply in our beliefs about how best to progress toward a peaceful realm. About this Kagan has little to say.

Nonetheless, Kagan's analysis also deserves praise, which it likewise is receiving. One need not agree with it to benefit from examining it closely. Three reasons in particular suggest that we should debate it thoroughly and candidly, whether or not we agree with or like it.

First, it describes accurately viewpoints that seem to be widespread in the U.S. Right or wrong, these are the views Europeans must engage to communicate effectively with many Americans.

Second, we should acknowledge that for most of us Kagan's message is unpleasant. Who really wants to view U.S. military attacks as necessary? Who would not prefer to live in a world where multilateral cooperation prevents and resolves conflict? This unpleasantness increases the temptation to reject Kagan's thesis, to blame the messenger and miss the import and challenge of his message.

Third, Kagan is at least correct to prompt us to move beyond denial and insults as Americans and Europeans debate strategies for promoting international security. We must "face the problem head-on," Kagan wrote,²⁵ and he is right. I commend Kagan for effectively spreading this challenge far and wide, with a plausible thesis and hearty grist for the mill of transatlantic debate.

So let us take up Kagan's challenge. As we do, however, let us show greater willingness than Kagan did to analyze deeply and seriously the European arguments against U.S. disregard for the United Nations and multilateralism. Let us also ask more seriously than Kagan did how the U.S. can concretely foster consensus-building and even-handed cooperation.

²⁵ ROBERT KAGAN, *OF PARADISE AND POWER* 7 (2003).