

Caricatures and Political Purposes: A Comment on Robert Kagan's *Of Paradise and Power*

By John Lotherington*

Robert Kagan's *Of Paradise and Power* is the latest attempt, following Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* and Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, to provide us with "The Answer," an analysis of the way the world works to take away some of the pain of the uncertainties which have dogged us since the end of the Cold War. The pattern has been the same: first an article in a journal, striking a chord with a wider than usual readership and then the press in general, aided by an arresting sound-bite –(the titles in the case of Fukuyama and Huntington, the tag from the first page of Kagan's *Policy Review* article: "the Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus."). It is through such caricature, given just enough resonance to contemporary anxieties and provoking just enough outrage, that a viewpoint can gain currency among the journalists and policy wonks who set the parameters of the policy debate surrounding governments and legislators. To reinforce academic respectability, the articles were then expanded into books, to reveal, or create, the philosophical and historical underpinnings of the original argument. The timing of these publications creating a stir is everything: those moments when the worrying complexity of international relations cry out for the simplicity which a caricature can offer, when there is a demand to make the hard-to-calibrate risks in world affairs comprehensible through their replacement by goals achieved or threats cut and dried.

The impact of these works does not seem to be lessened by their obvious failings in philosophical or historical analysis. Fukuyama gave us a rickety Hegelianism, while Huntington's footnotes revealed a dependence on such dubious authorities as Toynbee and Spengler. Kagan does not attempt to develop a philosophical argument but uses the names of Kant and Hobbes to dignify respectively the characterisation of those who value international institutions and those who believe they are a snare and a delusion in a world dominated by rogue states. For all the primacy he gives to power, Kagan denies that his argument is in Machiavellian mode. That would certainly not have brought him good press, but, albeit in the line of the *Discourses*, with their emphasis on preserving republican liberties, rather than *The*

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Prince, it would still have been more apt. For Machiavelli the masculine *virtù* (the capacity to do the right, manly thing) of leaders may maintain a state's position through bold action and the projection of power, over-riding as necessary treaty obligations, popular pieties and the international institutions trusted only by the deluded and the effeminate. This is not to suggest that Kagan shares all the other characteristics and qualities of Machiavelli, but it is interesting to note how, in a time of apparently increasing uncertainty and complexity, gender politics can be projected onto an understanding of international relations with – “*virtù*” or “Mars” saving the day and justifying the over-riding of current norms.

Leaving philosophical reflections aside, Kagan early on admits that he is presenting caricatures. However, this admission is a tactical ploy in seeking to disarm criticism. Rather than adding nuance to his portraits of the United States and Europe, the rhetorical oppositions harden as his analysis proceeds. But what lines in Kagan's caricature might not be distortions? There are basic facts, which he, and many others, correctly highlight. The *raison d'être* of the transatlantic alliance has been profoundly shaken by the end of the Cold War, and, in conventional military terms, the United States is overwhelmingly preponderant. The temptation for countries wielding such military power is to use it. It is also the case that countries with much less military power, as in Europe, may prefer a non-military approach to problems in world affairs, in which they are likely to have greater weight. However, such temptations and preferences are strands in the tangled skein of international relations and domestic policy debates, along with other differences, rivalries, common interests and shared values, and do not amount to strategic cultures as he delineates them. As with Fukuyama's “master-slave dialectic” and Huntington's taxonomy of civilizations, Kagan's strategic cultures based on a European paradise and American power start to look very blurred when more closely inspected.

Henry Kissinger was famously sceptical of the notion that “Europe” had any real meaning. Kagan writes as though there is someone you can ring now. The purpose of his essay demands a simple, homogenizing view of Europe. Of course, when it comes to trade and some other issues, there is now someone in Brussels who will pick up the phone. When it comes to foreign policy and security issues, it is more problematic than anyone would expect in paradise. Javier Solana and Chris Patten are just the switchboard operators. Kagan notes the stalled attempt to create a rapid reaction force, but fails to remark on the reasons why: the EU has moved painfully in some areas towards a common security and foreign policy but there is no prospect of a single policy. It is still nation states, which make the running. There may be successes through common efforts, when both hard and soft power are deployed deftly - as in the case of the dog that did not bark, Macedonia, brought back from the brink of civil war by the combined efforts of Nato and the EU. But on other issues, Europe may divide in ways that defy any notion of a sin-

gle strategic culture. This throws up awkward facts, which Kagan has to get around, and he does so through rhetorical sleights of hand. For all their military inferiority to the United States, France as well as the UK can project military power beyond the borders of Europe and are prepared to do so (as in military operations by both in recent years in their former African colonies). Rather than admit this in his text or face the obvious criticism for omitting it altogether, Kagan relegates this point to footnotes. Elsewhere the independent French nuclear force is written down by Kagan as “symbolic,” which of course it is, in terms of it not being a significant military option, but it is also the precise opposite, symbolically, of that paradise of peace which Europe is supposed to project. Germany is the one country which really has by an act of will, as Kagan would say, turned away from war as a consequence of the trauma of Nazism and its destruction, but even there the possibility has opened up of sending forces abroad. There is no general delusion about the way the world works beyond Europe’s borders, that all problems are amenable to soft power alone, that all you need is love. European powers are comparatively weaker and prefer to work through the UN where they have a greater role, but they vary in their weakness and they vary in their attitudes to war from case to case. The homogenized European strategic culture as defined by Kagan is presented as an antithesis in order to set off the power of the United States, and encourage a particular attitude towards that power.

Kagan uses the concept of power as though it were an end rather than a means. Occasionally, he justifies its accumulation by reference to the manifest threats which only the United States can and will deal with. For instance, in his *Washington Post* column of 10 April 2000, Kagan included Putin among such threats for consideration in the Presidential election campaign; in his *Washington Post* column of 25 June 2000, he wrote: “And as Vladimir Putin clamps down on the Russian press, after stomping on Chechen throats, his chief punishment is to be slobbered over by Gerhard Schroeder and Tony Blair.” (We must remain uncertain whether President Bush’s current friendship with Putin involves any slobbering.) Nowhere is there a hint that power and the threats to which it might be used in response are complex. Instead in *Of Paradise and Power* the United States is depicted as the international sheriff, “self-appointed perhaps but widely welcomed nevertheless, trying to enforce some peace and justice in what Americans see as a lawless world where outlaws need to be deterred or destroyed, often through the muzzle of a gun.” The bad guys are all, simply, bad guys. By the time Kagan wrote this, Putin had dropped out from his list of threats, but Jiang Zemin is still there, ranged alongside Kim Jong Il and others. There is no distinction as to whom it is possible to do business with or how to ameliorate the threat or the tyranny, who is best contained, and who is an irremediable and immediate threat. The paradigm case, though, must be Saddam and Iraq, the most prominent issue in the background to Kagan’s piece.

Saddam has fitted Kagan's bill perfectly in one respect. The overwhelming technological superiority of American forces ensured that he was defeated, not as readily as the hawks had hoped, but far faster than those who had predicted that the defence of the homeland by Iraqis would keep Saddam in power convincingly enough to force the striking of a deal. However, events in Iraq since the war was officially declared over reveal how much more problematic power is than Kagan allows. He acknowledges "perhaps a long-term occupation of one of the Arab world's largest countries" (and he urges throughout his journalism that American power must be for the long haul and not about quick fixes), but he gives no indication of how, during this time, power is to be translated into security. In Chile or East Timor in the 1970s that problem, and the dirty work, was left to the locals. In Iraq the process is going to be more transparent. The ideal for Kagan is that Iraq will become an American style democracy, or one that has a close enough resemblance, as in Japan's case where MacArthur's occupation is taken to be paradigmatic. An alternative scenario is that Iraq will be riven by ethnic and religious conflict, a magnet for terrorist activities and a source of constant instability in the region and the world at large. The British and French empires wielded great power, but they did not leave behind themselves stable democracies.

While we wait to see which scenario is to play out, the United States is already starting to run up against some of the other limits of conventional power. The losses of soldiers, as this is written in August 2003, continue day by day. They are not significant in military terms but they are in human terms, and domestic political support for the war, persuaded that it would be decisive and welcome, is waning. There are few signs that American voters are from Mars, or at least not for long. That will constrain future policy choices.

There is also the financial problem. The billions spent on the war are escalating in the occupation and reconstruction of the country. Kagan is confident that increases in military spending is not a problem, but the deficit has already been ballooning, in order to afford tax cuts, and there will be limits to its further growth before other spending programs must be cut. Medicare and other programs, cared about by those who actually vote, will be the buffers which a militant foreign policy may well run into, the same sort of buffers, which, Kagan observes, are present in Europe. Iraq as a burden, a country which may be intractable to rapid democratisation, waning domestic support in the United States, and a much bigger financial haemorrhage than anticipated, these are the realities of power and its exercise beyond the scope of the Revolution in Military Affairs or the image of power, pure and simple, presented in Kagan's writing.

For tyrants such as Stalin, Hitler or Saddam himself, power can be made much simpler. Resistance would be dealt with by brutalising the population into submis-

sion. But this is where American power is also self-limiting. The United States cannot and will not employ brutality in Iraq. It has presented itself there as a liberator, not a conqueror. The sorts of secret campaigns undertaken in the Vietnam War are simply not possible. American power, therefore, will ultimately depend on legitimacy. That was supposed to emerge from an Iraqi gratitude for their liberation, but signs of that have been weak. For that reason, as well as the over-stretch of its resources, the United States is turning to the international community for support, while working hard to cede as little political control as possible. This reaching out to multi-lateral support is not a conversion to paradise but practical necessity over the longer term. The appalling attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad may well have been an attempt to drive out this practical and legitimising support. If international contributions are not forthcoming the United States faces a far harder and longer task, with uncertain outcome. Power, as conceptualised by Kagan, is the power that can destroy a conventional threat, not one that can easily build security in its place.

While Iraq in the run up to war was the immediate background to his work, Kagan also developed a historical line to try and show that the strategic cultures he describes have deep roots. It was his historical reflections, which were mainly expanded when the article was turned into a book. There are intriguing oddities in the judgments offered and in key omissions. For instance, he discusses European appeasement in the 1930s at length to suggest that the European strategic culture he is characterising pre-dated the EU. One thing, which jars with his argument, is Suez. He notes Eisenhower's undermining of the Anglo-French campaign against Nasser as an example of underlying disdain for Europe. He does not enquire into the similarities between the Anglo-French attack on Nasser in 1956 and the American-led attack on Saddam in 2003, with the roles of the United States and France reversed. (The continuity appears to be in British attitudes towards threats in the Middle East.) It is changing interests and capacities which explain this, rather than divergent strategic cultures with roots in the years of appeasement. Kagan wishes to make the tangled lines of history straight, so he leaves out the knots. The United States, he asserts, was expansionist from the moment the republic was born. He ignores the continental limits to these ambitions so that the American mission, the "empire of liberty" may be thought to be worldwide from the start. He does not discuss "manifest destiny," but then that was a slogan describing the agenda of politicians pushing a particular set of policy choices, based on particular interests, as something inevitable, even metaphysical.

In his discussion of appeasement in the 1930s, Kagan acknowledges that the United States turned away from Europe in this period, but there is no discussion of the significance of American isolationism. Later he simply dismisses "the myth of America's 'isolationist' tradition." To acknowledge isolationism would be to

weaken the historical validation for the American mission Kagan is advocating. This is intriguing as, in *The Weekly Standard* on 26 April 1999, he had pointed out that the war in Kosovo had “usefully illuminated the fault-lines in elite opinion about the goals of American foreign policy and the purposes of American power in the post-Cold War world”; he worried about the influence of “a rather motley combination of neo-isolationists” and stated that it was too early to know whether they or internationalists would win the debate. In *The New York Times* on 24 March 1999 he had urged Republican Presidential candidates and its leaders in Congress to invoke the internationalist legacy of Ronald Reagan - “but in the current crisis, candidates and legislators alike have flirted with another Republican tradition, the isolationism of William Borah, Robert Taft and Patrick Buchanan.” It seems that the strategic culture of the United States is not so cut and dried, that the tradition of isolationism, while being contested, is not simply a myth. It may be that *Of Paradise and Power* itself represents the invention of a tradition for the purpose of capturing the hearts and minds of the GOP and moving it towards a particular set of policy choices.

Two specific, key historical experiences for the United States, the significance of which Kagan chooses not to discuss, despite their striking relevance to any discussion of strategic cultures, are Vietnam and Somalia. They are the ghosts that haunt American foreign policy-making and unsettle the faith in overwhelming military might as the ultimate solution to problems. Both Vietnam and Somalia are of course evidence of an American willingness to be interventionist (and Kagan cites Somalia on that) but they are both also evidence of the limitations to conventional power where the situation is more complex than just “taking out” a detested tyrant. For the Vietnam generation, such as Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, the Reagan years did much to lay the ghosts of Vietnam to rest, but Somalia resurrected and then added to them. The image of body-bags was still unacceptable to American public opinion in the 1990s. Computer directed warfare from the air is one answer, into which the American military have invested a vast amount of resources. But for this to work it has to be the right sort of war, and very few are. The war on terrorism, for instance, although American public opinion would probably accept significant casualties in that after the horrors of 9/11, is not the right sort of war. So, to help exorcise those ghosts of recent American history for the likes of Rumsfeld and Cheney, *Of Paradise and Power* presents a simple picture of American power, without discriminating between types of war and the different stages a conflict may go through.

For many commentators the new assertiveness in American foreign policy dates from 9/11, following which Americans in general, and President Bush in particular, were prepared to be led into foreign adventures. Kagan, however, downplays the significance of 9/11: “[it] did not alter but only reinforced American attitudes to-

ward power." While there were indeed preceding moves towards missile defence and other policies, which fit Kagan's prescriptions, they were essentially defensive and the move to interventionism was not simply reinforcement. There was nothing ineluctable in all this, as Kagan's own work with the Project for the New American Century, which he co-founded with William Kristol, and his journalism show.

The 1997 manifesto of the New American Century, signed by Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Jeb Bush and Francis Fukuyama, along with 20 others, argued that the American foreign and defence policy was adrift. "Conservatives have criticized the incoherent policies of the Clinton administration. They have also resisted isolationist impulses from within their own ranks. But conservatives have not confidently advanced a strategic vision of America's role in the world. They have not set forth guiding principles for American foreign policy." Once the Bush doctrine was declared, it looked as though the New American Century was indeed dawning, except that Colin Powell was still struggling to rein in the assertiveness of the Bush administration's foreign policy and Republicans in Congress remained divided. Fearful that Bush might back off from a war against Iraq, Kagan wrote an editorial for *The Weekly Standard* on 3 June 2002 entitled "Going Wobbly?" in which he asked "Did President Bush really not understand what he was saying when he pronounced the Bush doctrine?" He noted "other, worrying signs of non-seriousness about war in the highest reaches of the Bush administration: An unwillingness to substantially increase the defence budget. A lack of preparation of the American public for the fact that the war on terror is going to get bigger not smaller." Kagan worried (rightly) that the administration thought they could have a brief engagement and on the cheap. It does not look like a well-embedded strategic culture.

Of Paradise and Power occludes these realities of politics, making it seem that policies would not be, and should not be, subject to varying calculations and choices, but are set in stone. Specifically as well, concerns about entanglements abroad and about international law and legitimacy needed to be set aside. To achieve this, Kagan sets up a European strategic culture as the "Other," embodying and effeminising those concerns. This plays perfectly to the despise for Europe felt by many Republican neo-isolationists, and it may well be them whom *Of Paradise and Power* is principally intended to bring on side.

The dialectic set up between caricatures of European and American strategic cultures goes beyond the ordinary inter-play of history: "[it] 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." Such a dialectic pushes a particular set of policy choices pursued by a particular political group as, one might say, manifest destiny. *Of Paradise and Power* is a significant book, not because of the

analysis it offers of the way the world is, but because of the attempt it represents by one political faction to change the party they belong to and the United States as a whole.