

Of paradise and power by robert kagan

Literature



**ASSIGN
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Of Paradise and Power by Robert Kagan

Robert Kagan's book *Of Paradise and Power* suggests the reason Americans and Europeans sometimes act different is that Americans are big and strong (both economically and militarily) whereas Europeans are relatively weak (especially militarily). The author is troubled by fact, mostly because it means that America has to fight alone to preserve stability and peace around the world. In the end, Kagan claims America is much more technologically advanced and that it can attack safely other countries because it has the means to do so with technological warfare. However, as has been seen over the last few years in Iraq, American military power can get very tied up and may not always be very effective; it can sometimes be limited in its ability to reshape a society or political system. That said, I really do believe that Kagan's argument more or less makes sense and that the Europeans need to take a more proactive, robust role in the world today in order to help solve all the problems.

It's important to ask the question, What is power? Kagan suggests it is purely military force. The US is the lone power in the world with the ability to conduct expeditionary warfare on multiple fronts across the globe whenever it wants to. As was demonstrated in the Balkans in the 1990s, Europeans aren't able to project a credible military force even within Europe. Therefore the Europeans resort to the only thing they have for managing international conflicts, international institutions such as the UN. The success of European integration and solving the "German problem" has a lot of Europeans, Kagan says, to believe that they live in a Kantian paradise where international

institutions can banish war forever. Americans have a different historical reality, and think of the world as a Hobbesian jungle where hard power rules. All of this I agree with. However, I do have a few hesitations when it comes to this erudite and enlightening book

Yes, Europeans don't have a right to tell us that the use of military force in some situations is morally wrong and no you can't do that, because they really do depend on us, but they are also somewhat correct in being apprehensive about our decisions because they are so significantly affected by them. I think Kagan would argue that it is better for them to have an iron in the fire to sit outside of the campfire and complain about the lack of heat reaching them. They should take more responsibility.

But now, looking back from several years after the publication of this book there is one defect in Kagan's argument about power. Kagan believes the world and in particular, Europe, is left with two options: that either they follow the US or be a silent partner. " Rather than viewing the US as a Gulliver tied down by Lilliputian threads", says Kagan, " American leaders should realize that they are hardly constrained at all, that Europe is not really capable of constraining the US" (100). The main reason he reaches this conclusion is because he thinks of power only in a military sense. But power is also economic power, something he doesn't spend very much time talking about. Europe is economically strong enough to trouble the US as and when it wants to, especially when it comes to important trade issues that can seriously affect American technologies and industries. Also, nowadays with the American Economy in so much trouble, it is important to look at the ways military power and economic power are interwoven—especially since Kagan

thinks "... the US can sustain its current military spending levels and its current global dominance far into the future" (97). With America's massive debt and deficit it is hard to imagine how it can also continue to police the globe without some serious economic restructuring. If you can't pay for your military equipment you can't fight with it. Europe, of course, is in a similar situation.

In the end it doesn't really matter what your politics are: this is a very useful book about international politics. Kagan presents a very interesting thesis about the relationship between Europe and America. While he doesn't really present any information that is incredibly new—he does manage to tie together lots of useful ideas in a way that is very coherent and a good introduction for people who might not know so much about the subject.

Kagan uses a lot of good analogies to help paint his picture of the differences in the ways that America and Europe view world-wide threats (A bear roaming in the woods is viewed differently by a man with a rifle as opposed to a man with a knife). And given these acknowledged differences, is it any wonder that America and Europe increasingly find conflict over the way we resolve these problems? America wants to quickly solve the problems with arms (we have lots of over-powering weapons and a strong distaste for any American deaths and boots on the ground); Europe would rather discuss the problems and use international institutions to come to a non-conflict resolution (they don't have the weapons and have come to appreciate the power of discussion). However, with President Obama now leading the United States it is much more likely for a consensus between these two positions to be reached in our lifetime.