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## Books in Review

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### Autocrats and Democrats

#### The Return of History and the End of Dreams

by Robert Kagan

*Knopf. 112 pp. \$19.95*

Reviewed by  
Gabriel Schoenfeld

**T**HE WORLD is full of mysteries. One of them is why, in the aftermath of the cold war, the major powers of the world could not simply get along.

For a very brief moment, things seemed otherwise. After Communism unraveled, a degree of global harmony appeared tentatively to set in. Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe, no longer frozen in the permafrost of Stalinism, displayed a common interest with the West in peacefully journeying toward economic development, democracy, and political integration. Even a major Communist holdout like China appeared to be ambling, with oc-

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casional stumbles, along the same garden path.

Only a handful of smaller tyrannies—North Korea, Cuba, and Burma among them—remained ideologically wedded to dictatorship. As for the benighted countries of the Arab and Muslim Middle East, these, trapped in stasis, were the exception that (it was said) proved the rule. With the death of socialism, it was possible to ask, as Francis Fukuyama did, whether the “end of history” was finally about to arrive. If so, all that would be left was for the democratic idea to work itself out in the associations of men.

Robert Kagan’s *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* is a bracing corrective to the sunny illusions of that post-Communist interval. A senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and an occasional contributor to these pages, Kagan takes the measure of how things look nearly two decades on, traces how we came to today’s worrisome place, and assesses what it means for the future.

A LOGICAL starting place for a book titled *The Return of History* would be the events of September 11,

2001, which ushered in a new era of global terror and great-power vulnerability. But Kagan is looking at deeper and more slowly shifting trends than the one set in motion by a small group of savage men in a training camp near Kandahar. “The world has become normal again” is his opening line, one that encapsulates much of the argument to come.

Far from being transformed, the world in Kagan’s judgment has merely returned to the old game of nations that was its wont in the pre-cold-war era. To have perceived things otherwise—to have imagined a world without war—was to have seen a “mirage.” Or if not a mirage, it was to have confused an extraordinary and short-lived moment with the permanent Hobbesian condition in which ambitions and passions and interests combine to create a ceaseless procession of colliding powers.

“If Russia was where history most dramatically ended two decades ago,” writes Kagan, “today it is where history has most dramatically returned.” Economically prostrate in the 1990’s, it has roared back to life, fueled by rising commodity and energy prices that play to the strength of its great endow-

ment in natural resources. Economic health has in turn permitted Russia to regain some of its lost military prowess. Although Russia's armed might today is nothing like that of the USSR in its twilight years, it is growing rapidly. Moreover, as can be seen from the way it has maneuvered to play an indispensable role in the Iranian nuclear issue, and from the way it exploits the dependence of European and other neighbors on its energy pipelines, Russia is now unquestionably a force to be reckoned with in world affairs.

What does it want? On the one hand, says Kagan, it wants "what great powers have always wanted: to maintain predominant influence in the regions that matter to them, and to exclude the influence of other great powers." But on the other hand, and in common with China and some of the other rising states included in this survey of the strategic landscape, it also entertains objectives that are radically different from those either of Europe (politically integrated, pacific) or the U.S. (still exceptionalist and missionary-minded).

The objectives are shaped by an abiding sense of historical injustice. "[D]eep resentments and feelings of humiliation," stirred up dramatically by impoverishment and the collapse of empire in the 1990's, have fused seamlessly with nationalism to propel Moscow to act in ways designed to flaunt its influence. The men in the Kremlin not only want power, they want to be seen wielding it.

But even more significant is the nature of the ideas that have rushed into the vacuum left by the implosion of Marxism-Leninism. Russia's leaders, like China's, "are not just autocrats," writes Kagan in an observation that is obvious only after it has been uttered. "They *believe* in autocracy."

"*L'état c'est moi*" is how Louis XIV put it three centuries ago. Like him, 21st-century autocrats identi-

fy their own status with the status of their subjects:

By providing order, by producing economic success, by holding their nations together and leading them into a position of international influence, respectability, and power, they believe they are serving their people.

The logic of this fusion dictates a particular orientation toward the external world. If "democracies have pursued foreign policies to make the world safer for democracy," writes Kagan, then today "the autocracies pursue foreign policies aimed at making the world safe, if not for all autocracies, then at least for their own."

BUT THE autocrats face a challenge. For, unlike in previous centuries, they are increasingly an endangered species. Over the past half-century, it is the democracies that have been on the offensive. Indeed, Kagan points out, the democracies have even joined together, under the banner of human rights, to subvert a once-basic stricture of international law—namely, the inviolability of state sovereignty. Instead, they seek to establish "the right of the 'international community' to intervene against sovereign states that abuse the rights of their people."

It is precisely because of this reversal, explains Kagan, that the war in Kosovo in 1999, which lacked the backing of the United Nations, was, for Russia and China, "a more dramatic and disturbing turning point" than the 2003 allied intervention in Iraq. The fate of Serbia at NATO's hands (forcibly pushed out of territory it regarded as integral) and the fate of Slobodan Milosevic (deposed, eventually to die in prison at the Hague) was a mirror in which they gazed at an unhappy reflection of their future selves.

Thus, when Vladimir Putin laments that "no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them," and the Chinese complain about "liberal

hegemonism,” these are genuine expressions of anxiety rooted in a deeply felt vulnerability. Faced with an international system increasingly inimical to their interests, the autocracies have begun to greet push with shove. A de-facto coalition—Kagan calls it the “Association of Autocrats”—has emerged, aiming to construct a new international order that places “a high value on national sovereignty and can protect autocratic governments from foreign interference.”

The clash between the democracies and the Association of Autocrats on this fundamental point may not lead to a new cold war. But in diplomacy as in chess, understanding the thinking of one’s adversary is a crucial task. For Kagan, what the democracies need to acknowledge is that this is no mere “dispute over . . . the niceties of international jurisprudence.” On the contrary, it concerns “the fundamental legitimacy of governments, which for autocrats can be a matter of life and death.”

The West will not be able to talk or trade its way out of this contest. The end result is likely to feature a protracted period of stresses and strains, and unpredictable eruptions in theaters as distant as Burma and Darfur, Tibet, Zimbabwe, and who knows where else.

FOR A BOOK of its brevity, *The Return of History* is extraordinarily rich and suggestive. Inevitably, it raises almost as many questions as it answers. Is it really true, for instance, that, following the collapse of Communism, the entire “modern democratic world wanted to believe that the end of the cold war did not just end one strategic and ideological conflict but *all* strategic and ideological conflict” (emphasis added)? There were plenty of dissenters from that dewy-eyed position in the early 1990’s. Kagan was one of them.

Similarly, is it recrudescant nationalism that fuels “the clashing in-

terests and ambitions of the great powers,” as Kagan argues in his opening chapter? Or is it, as he maintains in a later chapter, the irreconcilable differences among *forms* of government—in particular, dictatorship vs. democracy—that better explain the contentious nature of the world system?

A more fundamental disjuncture seems to exist between the alarming picture Kagan paints in the early sections of the book and its final chapter, where he displays an unexpected confidence in the ability of the democracies to harness their own resources and prevail over their opponents. As he makes plain in that chapter, to understand the autocracies is not to explain away their behavior or to find reasons to cease competing with or challenging them. Indeed, even if that were desirable, it would not be possible.

At least, it would not be possible for the United States, which “never for a moment” has given up seeking to shape an international order congenial to its own interests—interests that preeminently include the spread of freedom and representative government. What this means is not a “blind crusade on behalf of democracy everywhere at all times, or a violent confrontation with the autocratic powers.” But neither does it mean abjuring the promotion of our universal values, both as worthwhile ends in themselves and as a way to foster a peaceful world system.

In short, though Kagan has titled his book *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, the dreams have not ended, even in his own eyes. For one thing, the autocracies, however resurgent they may appear at the moment, have their own acutely sensitive Achilles’ heels. Although Kagan surely exaggerates the degree of political repression in today’s Russia—he writes that Putin “strains to *obliterate* his opponents” (my emphasis)—he is unquestionably right that undemocratic regimes like Russia (and China and Iran) “face an un-

avoidable problem of legitimacy.” He is also right that this is a problem that can and should be exploited by the U.S. and the other great liberal powers.

Kagan also finds that, beneath the surface of a seemingly pervasive anti-Americanism, those powers—Europe, Japan, India—have begun seeking ways to offset their authoritarian neighbors and are edging

closer to the United States, the sole superpower. He thus favors the creation of a concert of democracies, a grouping that can balance the Association of Autocracies by “establishing new means of gauging and granting international legitimacy to actions.”

Beyond such tangible steps to advance both security and freedom, Kagan points to something intangi-

ble. The democratic idea and the free market, he writes in his conclusion, not only retain their powerful attraction but

[i]n the long run, and all things being equal, . . . should prevail over alternative worldviews, both because of their ability to deliver the material goods and, more importantly, because of their appeal to a most powerful aspect of human nature, the desire for personal autonomy, recognition, and freedom of thought and conscience.

Of course, the “long run,” as Kagan sardonically acknowledges, can take a long time. But, still, this is a surprisingly optimistic conclusion to a deeply pessimistic look at the world two decades after the end of history. When combined in equal measure, optimism and pessimism can sometimes coalesce into realism in the non-pejorative sense, of which *The Return of History* is a shining exemplar.

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