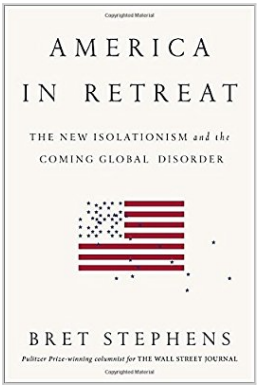

America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder

By Bret Stephens

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In a brilliant book that will elevate foreign policy in the national conversation, Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist Bret Stephens makes a powerful case for American intervention abroad.

In December 2011 the last American soldier left Iraq. "We're leaving behind a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq," boasted President Obama. He was proved devastatingly wrong less than three years later as jihadists seized the Iraqi city of Mosul. The event cast another dark shadow over the future of global order—a shadow, which, Bret Stephens argues, we ignore at our peril.

America in Retreat identifies a profound crisis on the global horizon. As Americans seek to withdraw from the world to tend to domestic problems, America's adversaries spy opportunity. Vladimir Putin's ambitions to restore the glory of the czarist empire go effectively unchecked, as do China's attempts to expand its maritime claims in the South China Sea, as do Iran's efforts to develop nuclear capabilities. Civil war in Syria displaces millions throughout the Middle East while turbocharging the forces of radical Islam. Long-time allies such as Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, doubting the credibility of American security guarantees, are tempted to freelance their foreign policy, irrespective of U.S. interests.

Deploying his characteristic stylistic flair and intellectual prowess, Stephens argues for American reengagement abroad. He explains how military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan was the right course of action, foolishly

executed. He traces the intellectual continuity between anti-interventionist statesmen such as Henry Wallace and Robert Taft in the late 1940s and Barack Obama and Rand Paul today. And he makes an unapologetic case for Pax Americana, “a world in which English is the default language of business, diplomacy, tourism, and technology; in which markets are global, capital is mobile, and trade is increasingly free; in which values of openness and tolerance are, when not the norm, often the aspiration.”

In a terrifying chapter imagining the world of 2019, Stephens shows what could lie in store if Americans continue on their current course. Yet we are not doomed to this future. Stephens makes a passionate rejoinder to those who argue that America is in decline, a process that is often beyond the reach of political cures. Instead, we are in retreat—the result of faulty, but reversible, policy choices. By embracing its historic responsibility as the world’s policeman, America can safeguard not only greater peace in the world but also greater prosperity at home.

At once lively and sobering, *America in Retreat* offers trenchant analysis of the gravest threat to global order, from a rising star of political commentary.

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Editorial Review

Review
“An exceptionally intelligent, well-written book filled with interesting data and analysis that's well worth reading—and I don't even agree with most of it. Stephens [is] fast becoming the most influential conservative writer on foreign policy. So read it to your delight, or to hone your best arguments against it.”
—Fareed Zakaria, *Fareed Zakaria GPS*

“An important book for your well-being.”
—Bill O’Reilly, *The O’Reilly Factor*

“This book is the *Wall Street Journal* columnist at his best: substantive, historically informed, and with the kind of cutting style that helped him earn his Pulitzer Prize two years ago.”
—The Weekly Standard

“Bret Stephens has written not just a good book on American foreign policy. He has written an important book….Anyone even minimally conversant with human nature and history — and Mr. Stephens is far more than that — understands exactly the dangers that are caused by an American Retreat and the lethal global disorder it makes inevitable.”
—The American Spectator

"With a command of American history, a mastery of big foreign policy ideas, and a supple grasp of the conundrums of current events, Stephens shows that the dichotomy between domestic and international responsibilities is facile. For the world’s sole superpower, international affairs inevitably impinge on our economy and our security. Defending our principles abroad advances our interests at home.”
—**PETER BERKOWITZ**, *RealClearPolitics*

“Given the U.S.’s recently renewed commitments in the Middle East, Stephens’s clear, convincing apologia for American power will make especially timely reading for American foreign policy’s skeptics and opponents.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

“A provocative, carefully reasoned argument, anathema to politicians as disparate as Barack Obama and Rand Paul.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Although you can read the 288 pages of this well-researched, well-written, and passionately argued book over a weekend, its message will stay with you for years . . . . [Stephens] argues—with impeccable logic, a dizzying array of well-sourced quotations, and reliable statistics—that if the United States continues to retreat from its position as the world’s policeman, disaster will strike both the world and the United States sooner rather than later.”
—**ANDREW ROBERTS**, *Commentary magazine*

“Wise counsel for a constructive, tough-minded, and sensible foreign policy. Read and learn.”

—**GEORGE SHULTZ**, U.S. Secretary of State, 1982–1989

“At a time when the president of the United States explicitly renounces the role of ‘global policeman’ and a remarkable proportion of Americans—conservatives and liberals alike—seem irresistibly drawn to isolationism in all but name, Bret Stephens has written a shrewd, sharp, and shamelessly unfashionable defense of American power as a force for good in the world. He makes it clear why now, even more than in the past, the supposed benefits of Uncle Sam’s retreat will swiftly be eclipsed by the very real costs of advancing terrorism and authoritarianism.”

—**NIALL FERGUSON**, Laurence A. Tisch Professor, Harvard University; author of *The Great Degeneration* and *Civilization*

“Bret Stephens has produced a powerful and exceptionally literate rebuttal of America’s neoisolationists and a practical prescription for America’s reemergence as the world’s essential good cop, maintaining global order without seeking to remake the world in our own image. Americans ignore his message at their own peril.”

—**KAREN ELLIOTT HOUSE**, Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter, editor, and publisher; author of *On Saudi Arabia*

“Bret Stephens takes on the urgent question of America’s role in the world at a time of crises and upheavals. Writing trenchantly, he argues that the United States is drifting into a dangerous ‘retreat doctrine.’ The result will be global disorder from which the United States will not escape. While engaging seriously with the arguments of those with whom he disagrees, Stephens also depicts a frighteningly realistic scenario of such disorder just five years hence. *America in Retreat* will stir vigorous debate—and stimulate sober thought.”

—**DANIEL YERGIN**, author of *The Quest* and the Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Prize*

“Bret Stephens has the guts to make the case—and make it brilliantly—for why Americans need America to be the world’s policeman (or at least the world’s police chief when we can get allies to join our force). This book is worth buying even if you read only chapter 9 in which Stephens foresees the chilling disorder in the world if America does not reassert its global leadership. That should be effective shock treatment for the isolationists in both parties as we think about the world we want to leave our children and grandchildren.”

—**JOSEPH I. LIEBERMAN**, U.S. senator from Connecticut, 1989–2013

About the Author

BRET STEPHENS, winner of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for commentary, is the foreign affairs columnist and deputy editorial page editor of The Wall Street Journal. He was previously the editor in chief of the Jerusalem Post. He was raised in Mexico City, educated at the University of Chicago and the London School of Economics, and lives with his family in New York City.

INTRODUCTION

The World's Policeman

In the nearly nine years that I have been the foreign affairs columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, I have received tens of thousands of letters from readers, many of them warm, a few of them rude, others critical or constructive. I publish my e-mail address, bstephens@wsj.com, at the foot of my column, read every note, and try to answer as many of my readers as I can. But there are times when a letter deserves a more extended reply than I have time for in the course of an ordinary workday. One reader, responding to a March 2014 column advocating a muscular U.S. stance against Russia's seizure of the Crimean peninsula, wrote me just such a letter.

In response to your editorial today, please repeat after me: "We should not be the world's policeman." Repeat again. And again. Apparently, you just do not get it that an overwhelming majority of Americans would agree with this declaration. Unfortunately, you do not. So, given that, I encourage you to form your own volunteer army to police the hotspots around the globe. Please do not remit any bills to the U.S. government.

Barack Obama agrees with my reader. "We should not be the world's policeman," he told Americans in September 2013. So does Rand Paul: "America's mission should always be to keep the peace, not police the world," the Kentucky Republican told an audience of veterans earlier that year.

This book is my answer to that argument.

In formulating the answer, it's important to acknowledge that the wish not to be the world's policeman runs deep in the American psyche. "For wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us," John Winthrop warned his fellow Massachusetts Bay colonists in 1630 as they were aboard the *Arbella* on their way to the New World,

soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a byword through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause theire prayers to be turned into Cursses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whether wee are going. . . .

Though the phrase "city upon a hill" is taken from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount ("A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid"), Winthrop's admonition is pure Old Testament. The Lord's blessing depends not on our worldly striving but on our moral performance. The fate of the enterprise rests on the virtue of its people. A bad reputation in the opinion of mankind can be fatal. The great task for Americans is to be supremely mindful of *our* business, not of someone else's. Our security as well as our salvation lie in the proper care of our souls, not the acquisition or exercise of power.

To study American history is to understand that Winthrop's admonition has been honored mainly in the breach. The citizens of a city upon a hill may be in "the eies of all people." But those citizens, in turn, will be able to see far over the surrounding lowlands. At a glance, they will see rich plains stretching in every direction. They will seek dominion over those plains and their scattered inhabitants, whether through purchase and treaties or confiscation and war. Beyond the plain they will find oceans to harvest and traverse. They will meet enemies on the seas, and to defeat those enemies they will build a navy. In faraway ports they will find wealth and wonders but also double-dealing and cruelty, arousing their appetite and greed—but also their conscience and charity.

And in mixing with the world they will become part of the world. Yet they shall still think of themselves as a city upon a hill.

So it is that America's encounter with the world has always been stamped with ambivalence about the nature, and even the necessity, of that encounter. It is an ambivalence that has often been overcome—because the temptation was too great, as it was with the war with Mexico, or because the danger was too great, as it was during the Cold War. But the ambivalence has never been erased. Nearly 240 years after our birth, we Americans haven't quite made up our minds about what we think of the rest of the world. Every now and then, we're tempted to return to our imaginary city, raise the gate, and leave others to their devices.

It says something about the politics of our time that I have no idea whether the reader who wrote me that letter is a Republican or a Democrat, a Tea Party activist or a lifelong subscriber to *Mother Jones*. This is new. Until recently, the view that "we should not be the world's policeman" was held mainly on the political left. Yes, the view also found a home on the fringes of the right, particularly among small-government libertarians and latter-day Father Coughlins such as Pat Buchanan. But it was typically the left that wanted America out: out of Southeast Asia, Central America, the Middle East, even Europe. And it was usually the left that made the case for a reduced role for the United States in global politics and for a radical rebalancing of spending priorities from guns to butter.

The case for "America Out" is still common on the left. But now it's being made from within the mainstream of the conservative movement. Many things account for this change, including the deep mistrust, sometimes slipping to paranoia, of the Obama administration's foreign policy aims. Many conservatives have also conceded the argument that the wars they once ardently supported in Iraq and Afghanistan were historic mistakes, and that imbroglios in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, or the South China Sea are other people's problems, best kept at arm's length.

The upshot is that there is a new foreign policy divide in the United States cutting across traditional partisan and ideological divides. It's no longer a story of (mostly) Republican hawks versus (mostly) Democratic doves. Now it's an argument between neoisolationists and internationalists: between those who think the United States is badly overextended in the world and needs to be doing a lot less of everything—both for its own and the rest of the world's good—and those who believe in Pax Americana, a world in which the economic, diplomatic, and military might of the United States provides the global buffer between civilization and barbarism.

Some readers of this book will reject these categories. They will note that there are vast differences between liberal and conservative internationalists; between, say, Samantha Power, President Obama's ambassador to the United Nations, and John Bolton, her predecessor in that job under George W. Bush. Or they will claim that the term "neoisolationist" is a slur on people who really should be thought of as "noninterventionists" or simply "Realists." They will point out that labels often do more to cloud thinking than to clarify it. They're right, up to a point. But labels also capture emotional reflexes, ideological leanings, and tendencies of thought that in turn help predict policy preferences and political behavior.

Where do you fall on the spectrum between internationalists and neoisolationists? Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the United States have a vital interest in the outcome of the civil war in Syria, or in Israel's relationship with the Palestinians, or in Saudi Arabia's contest with Iran?
- Should Americans take sides between China and Japan over which of them exercises sovereignty over the uninhabited Senkaku Islands? Similarly, should we care whether Ukraine or Russia controls Crimea?
- Is America more secure or less secure for deploying military forces in hot spots such as the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea?

How you answer any one of these questions will likely suggest how you answer most if not all of the others. And how you answer all of the questions will be an excellent indicator of how you are likely to think about other foreign policy crises, now or in the future.

This book takes a side in this debate. No great power can treat foreign policy as a spectator sport and hope to remain a great power. A world in which the leading liberal-democratic nation does not assume its role as world policeman will become a world in which dictatorships contend, or unite, to fill the breach. Americans seeking a return to an isolationist garden of Eden—alone and undisturbed in the world, knowing neither good nor evil—will soon find themselves living within shooting range of global pandemonium. It would be a world very much like the 1930s, another decade in which economic turmoil, war weariness, Western self-doubt, American self-involvement, and the rise of ambitious dictatorships combined to produce the catastrophe of World War II. When Franklin Roosevelt asked Winston Churchill what that war should be called, the prime minister replied "the unnecessary war." Why? Because, Churchill said, "never was a war more easy to stop than that which has just wrecked what was left of the world from the previous struggle." That's an error we should not wish to repeat.

A final preliminary: To say America needs to be the world's policeman is not to say we need to be its priest, preaching the gospel of the American way. Priests are in the business of changing hearts and saving souls. Cops merely walk the beat, reassuring the good, deterring the tempted, punishing the wicked. Nor is it to say we should be the world's martyr. Police work isn't altruism. It is done from necessity and self-interest. It is done because it has to be and there's no one else to do it, and because the benefits of doing it accrue not only to those we protect but also, indeed mainly, to ourselves.

Not everyone grows up wanting to be a cop. But who wants to live in a neighborhood, or a world, where there is no cop? Would you? Should the president?

MAY 2014:
LAST CONVOY OUT OF SANGIN

Sangin Valley, Afghanistan—The fighting season will begin in a few days, just as soon as the poppy harvest has been brought in. But the Marines are already gone. They left FOB Nolay, the last of what were once thirty forward operating bases in the valley, late at night on May 4. I watched them gather in the yard to stow away the trash, turn over the garbage bins, and have one final smoke before getting into their heavily armored mine rollers and MRAPs for the slow drive toward Camp Leatherneck, sixty miles away in the desert of Helmand province. They arrived seven hours later without casualty or serious incident.

Their war was over. The withdrawal—code-named Operation Palang-Lee—was described as a "retrograde" by the colonels and generals who orchestrated it. Why use the word "retrograde," I asked one Marine major. "I guess they didn't want to call it a retreat," he answered.

I embedded with the Marines for their last days in Sangin. The generators at Nolay were gone by the time I arrived, and we had to make do with MREs for food and WAG bags for toilets. On all sides of the tiny base we were defended, and surrounded, by the Afghan National Army, which for the previous eleven months had been conducting combat operations in the valley on its own while Americans stayed behind in an advisory role. It was a source of pride to the Marines that the Afghans were taking the fight to the Taliban with native courage and increasing skill. But the Marines remained at risk. In November a gunnery sergeant at the perimeter of the camp was shot in the shoulder by a Taliban sniper. In April, an Afghan within the camp tried to kill Marine advisers at the camp's shooting range; he was wrestled to the ground by his fellow Afghan soldiers before he could get off a shot. Early one morning I heard an IED explosion, followed by a

burst of gunfire, a mile or two outside the base. It was a common enough occurrence as to barely elicit a comment from anyone at Nolay.

By the standards of the valley, this is peace. For years Sangin was a Taliban stronghold, the bloody crossroads where fanatical convictions, tribal identities, and heroin profits met. The British lost more than one hundred men in the early years of the war trying to bring the place they called Sangingrad under control. They failed, and in 2010 they handed the effort to the Marines as part of Obama's surge. More than twenty thousand U.S. troops deployed in Helmand on more than two hundred bases. On a visit to the valley in March 2011, Defense Secretary Robert Gates called Sangin not just the most dangerous place in Afghanistan "but maybe in the whole world."

The Marines who fought here suffered heavier losses trying to take the valley than any other unit in the war. Fifty were killed, though the number doesn't capture the scale of sacrifice in terms of lost limbs, traumatic brain injuries, and third-degree burns. Patrolling the garbage-strewn lanes of the valley—a narrow green belt running alongside the Helmand River—the Marines were hit again and again by IEDs. As recently as February, the Afghan army found 178 of them along a two-mile stretch of road.

Still the Marines crushed the Taliban. They proved they had the will and the wherewithal to destroy the enemy. They were the strongest tribe. The people of Sangin gave them their trust and shared what they knew about the Taliban's movements. The poppies are still harvested; eradication and crop-substitution efforts are mostly a sham. But government authority—and legitimacy—has been established. In national elections in 2009, just 179 people from the Sangin district turned out to vote. In April 2014, more than 5,000 did—58 percent of eligible voters. Two years ago the Marines began training the Afghans to take control of their own security, first on patrols with Americans in the lead, then with Afghans in the lead, then without any Americans at all.

It was as it should be, following the parable of teaching a man to fish so he can feed himself for a lifetime. Afghans knew how to fight—nobody had ever doubted it. What impressed their American trainers was that they knew how to be soldiers, too, disciplined, professional, resourceful. And committed: This was not an army of soldiers of fortune, or soldiers for hire, or soldiers of one ethnic group out to get the better of ancient rivals. It was an army of Afghans trying at last to take charge of their national destiny. "At a time when nobody is talking about winning," said one Marine adviser at Nolay, "they are talking about winning." Thousands of Afghan troops have died in the effort; in Sangin alone, one Afghan battalion alone lost more than six hundred men over the course of eight years.

But that's where Afghanistan's predicament lies. Just when Afghans are beginning to find faith in their cause, Americans have lost faith in theirs.

It's a thought that weighs on Brig. Gen. Daniel Yoo, the Marine in charge of the Regional Command that oversees Helmand. On September 10, 2001, Yoo had just returned from a tour in the Mediterranean to be reunited with his wife and their one-year-old son. Within a day he knew he'd be going to war. He arrived in Afghanistan in mid-November, just as the Taliban were fleeing Kabul and being bombed out of Kandahar. He's one of thousands of Marines for whom the war in Afghanistan has defined their professional, personal, and family lives.

"I don't want people to think it wasn't worth it," he tells me the evening the Marines returned to Leatherneck. "I'm an optimist. I have to be an optimist. I've seen too many Marines die here. I have to think it is worth it."

There's no mistaking the conviction in Yoo's voice. If the Taliban return to power after we leave, how can we be sure we won't have to go in again? Is there no advantage to having U.S. forces stationed in a country

that has Pakistan on one side and Iran on the other? Would Osama bin Laden and other senior Al Qaeda leaders be dead today had we not been able to go after them from bases in Afghanistan?

“We’ve spent a lot of blood and treasure in this country,” Yoo says. “At the end of the day, whose credibility is at stake?”1

Yet as Yoo speaks, it occurs to me that he’s trying to make himself believe that he will be believed. Most Americans couldn’t care less whether or not the Marines have successfully pacified Sangin. They aren’t interested in learning that we’re winning, or that Afghans are making progress. They just want out. A CNN poll from December 2013 found that a mere 17 percent of the U.S. public supported the effort in Afghanistan, down from 52 percent in December 2008.

Americans didn’t turn against the war in Afghanistan in the same way they turned on the war in Iraq—as in a failing marriage, it was more a case of gradual disenchantment than of scandalous revelation. But turn they did.

There is no shortage of reasons for that. Thirteen years is a long time to be at war. There’s a depressing sameness to the conflict: the Taliban get pushed back; they creep forward; they get pushed back again. The Afghan government seems to repay generosity with corruption, honest dealing with shenanigans. Every instance of “insider attacks”—Afghan police or soldiers turning their guns on Westerners—tells Americans that no Afghan can ever fully be trusted.

None of this is untrue, but it’s also a caricature of reality. Aside from special operations, American soldiers no longer do much actual fighting in Afghanistan. What they provide is training, logistics—and confidence. The Taliban have been defeated in the most important battlefield of all: public opinion. The Afghan government is undoubtedly corrupt, like governments in all developing countries, but at least the country is developing. Afghanistan now has nearly eight million children in school, up tenfold since 2001. More than 80 percent of people have access to health care, up from 8 percent under the Taliban. Westerners and their families continue to make their homes in Kabul.

A president who believed in his own war might say such things to the public. But Obama almost never speaks of Afghanistan. Long before the Marines withdrew from the battle, he withdrew from the politics of the battle. Why should Americans be expected to support a struggle that the commander in chief is so plainly not committed to winning? Why not join him in beating the global retreat that is the motivating impulse of his presidency?

Much of my time in Sangin was spent in the company of Afghans. Their attitudes combined bravado with apprehension. Again and again they told me they were ready to fight for themselves—but they still were counting on U.S. help. Who was I to tell them that Americans had grown frustrated and bored with them; that we weren’t interested anymore in hearing about their progress or their sacrifice? A “transition” was taking place in Afghanistan, as well it should, but it was a transition being dictated by an overwhelming desire not to succeed but to depart.

We lifted off from FOB Nolay on a CH-53 Super Stallion at around 10:30 at night, maybe the last U.S. helicopter to leave the place. It was too dark to see anything; the roar of the rotors made it impossible to hear anything. I wondered what the Afghans were thinking, looking up at us for perhaps the last time. Mainly, though, I wondered: what are we thinking?

CHAPTER 1

Come Home, America

America is in retreat.

Let's be clear about what retreat is *not*. Retreat is not decline—though it can be a symptom of decline, or a cause of it. Retreat is not surrender—though, as Napoleon is reputed to have said, "the logical outcome of retreat *is* surrender." Retreat is not cowardice; it can also be an act of prudence, even salvation, as Churchill knew from the deliverance at Dunkirk. Yet Churchill also knew, and warned, that "wars are not won by evacuations."

Nevertheless, America's retreat—or what the Obama administration prefers to call "retrenchment"1—is the central fact of this decade, just as the war on terror was the central fact of the last decade. We got out of Iraq—at least until we had to go back in. We are getting out of Afghanistan. We want no part of what's happening in Syria no matter how many civilians are brutalized or red lines crossed. We are dramatically curtailing our use of drones in Pakistan. We pretend to "pivot" to Asia, but so far the pivot has mostly been a feint. We are quietly backing away from our security guarantees to Taiwan. We denounce Russia's seizure of Crimea, accusing Moscow of being hopelessly out of touch with the accepted norms of the twenty-first century. But we refuse requests by the Ukrainian government to provide their diminished military with arms. In November 2013 Secretary of State John Kerry went so far as to renounce the mainstay of U.S. foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere for 190 years. "The era of the Monroe Doctrine is over," the secretary told the Organization of American States. "That's worth applauding, that's not a bad thing."

We're also in retreat at home. In the name of civil liberties we are taking apart the post-9/11 domestic security architecture—warrantless wiretaps, telephony metadata collection, police surveillance programs—brick by brick. In the name of budgetary savings the Army is returning to its June 1940 size, the month Nazi Germany conquered France. In 2013 the Navy put fewer ships to sea than at any time since 1916, before our entry into World War I,2 and ship numbers keep falling. In the spring of 2014 the Pentagon announced it would cut U.S. nuclear forces, four years ahead of schedule, to comply with the terms of the 2010 New START treaty. Within days of the announcement Moscow test-fired its latest multiple-warhead ICBM. The size of Russia's nuclear arsenal has *grown* since it signed New START.3 As for NATO, total military spending as a percentage of aggregate GDP is at the lowest point in the alliance's sixty-five-year history.

Not long ago, these trends would have prompted anxious and extensive public debate. These days, not so much. A growing number of Americans no longer want the United States to shape the world according to its interests and values, or out of a sense of global stewardship, or even from a concept of enlightened self-interest. Nowadays, Americans mainly want to be left alone.

Sounding this American retreat is Barack Obama with his signature foreign policy theme: "nation building at home." It's a revealing phrase. Every president since World War II has worked to strengthen the economy, reduce unemployment, build or repair infrastructure, mend the frayed edges of society, and launch major domestic initiatives—from the interstate highways to the Great Society to welfare reform. Never before have domestic ambitions prevented any president from championing America's forward strategic momentum in the world. That is, until Obama came to office and began treating foreign and domestic policies as if they were an either-or proposition. In academic parlance, "nation building" is an exercise reserved for failed states: Somalia, Bosnia, Afghanistan. It takes a remarkably dim view of the United States to suggest we fall into that category.

For Obama, an activist foreign policy isn't a complement to a strong domestic agenda. It's a distraction from it. His ideal foreign policy is to have *less* foreign policy, on the view that there's a sharp limit on what the

United States can hope to achieve. The president insists he isn't a declinist. But as he told one interviewer in 2013, "I am more mindful probably than most of not only our incredible strengths and capabilities, but also our limitations."4

PRESIDENT CANUTE

Happily for the president, he believes nation building at home is possible because global trends are benign and don't demand our attention elsewhere. Hence the other line of which he is so fond: "The tide of war is receding."

In nature, tides wax and wane according to forces beyond the will, vanity, or wishes of men: the legendary King Canute, standing on the seashore ordering the tides to recede as the water laps his feet, is a parable for this reason. If war is indeed a tide then a president can *observe* it receding. But he cannot *make* it recede with a speech, an executive order, or even the removal of troops from a foreign country.

Since becoming president Obama has been engaged in a kind of conjurer's trick, pretending to make the tide recede when he's merely backing away from the waterline. "Core Al Qaeda," he likes to say, is "on a path to defeat." What remains of the group, he adds, poses mostly a nuisance threat. This being so, President Canute concludes, "we must define the nature and scope of this struggle, or else it will define us." War is what we choose it to be. It is in our hands to engage, or desist from engaging, just as we please.

This is a comforting thought. But it knows no precedent in the annals of human conflict. "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you," Leon Trotsky is said to have observed. War *is*; how we choose to speak or think of it doesn't change it. Wars end because they have been won, or lost, or brought to some kind of mutually agreed truce. Only in the age of Obama do wars end by means of attitude and expectation adjustment, of learning to "move on," in the parlance of left-wing politics and popular psychotherapy.

"I think of the New Yorkers who filled Times Square the day after an attempted car bomb as if nothing had happened," the president told Americans in May 2013, referring to the May 2010 terrorist attempt by Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad. But New Yorkers only acted that way because, in fact, nothing happened. A different president might have urged people to remain calm while recognizing that only a bomber's incompetence spared the city from an atrocity at a crowded intersection. Obama's message about terrorism, like Jimmy Carter's message about communism, is that it's time Americans got over their "inordinate" fear of it.

In the year the president made this pronouncement, Al Qaeda in Iraq—a spent and discredited force when Obama took office—murdered 8,000 civilians in a country where 4,400 Americans had recently given their lives. A year later, as this book was going to press, Al Qaeda seized Mosul, Iraq's second city, and began marching on Baghdad. An Al Qaeda offshoot in North Africa nearly overran the nation of Mali and was only stopped by emergency French military intervention, an intervention Obama initially refused to support. That summer the United States closed more than twenty of its embassies and consulates after intelligence emerged of a terrorist plot "very reminiscent of what we saw pre-9/11," as one member of the Senate Intelligence Committee put it. "Regrouped Al Qaeda Poses Global Threat," *The Wall Street Journal* reported in a front-page headline. The National Security Agency even succeeded in listening in on a conference call of Al Qaeda leaders. "The intercept provided the U.S. intelligence community with a rare glimpse into how Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, manages a global organization that includes affiliates in Africa, the Middle East, and southwest and southeast Asia," *The Daily Beast* reported.5 A 2014 report by Seth Jones of the RAND Corporation found that between 2010 and 2013 the number of jihadist groups rose by 58 percent, the number of jihadist fighters doubled to 100,000, and the number of Al Qaeda attacks jumped from 392 to

1,000.6 If Al Qaeda is on the path to defeat, as Obama often says, it remains a very long path.

The return of Al Qaeda arrives in tandem with the return of rogue states, another political category from the Bush years that Obama's presidency was supposed to have redefined out of existence or engaged into cooperation. As I write, North Korea appears to be close to conducting its fourth nuclear test. China is making legally risible but militarily serious territorial claims from India to Indonesia. The Assad regime continues to defy Obama's once-confident predictions of its imminent demise. Russia is orchestrating a covert takeover of eastern Ukraine and Vladimir Putin is speaking openly about a "new Russia" with new, bigger borders. Iran has successfully defended its client in Damascus and appears to be on the cusp of achieving its twin strategic objectives: the easing of international sanctions without the abandonment of core nuclear capabilities.

But the president does not seem overly perturbed: "There's a suggestion somehow that the Russian actions have been clever, strategically," he said about Moscow's Crimean caper. "I actually think that this is [*sic*] not been a sign of strength." Happy is the statesman who convinces himself that his adversaries' triumphs are not triumphs at all; that the cold water rising above his knees is something other than a waxing tide.

Obama's failings as a world leader—his habits of indifference, illusion, and self-regard—have not gone unnoticed among our allies. "In Europe, doubts about America's wisdom, strength and resolve are increasingly focused on the person of the president," notes John Vinocur, the former editor of *The International Herald Tribune*.7 Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy is reported to have told an aide that Obama "is not a leader but a follower."8 U.S. policy in Syria, says Saudi Arabia's Prince Turki al-Faisal, "would be funny if it were not so blatantly perfidious, and designed not only to give Mr. Obama an opportunity to back down, but also to help Assad butcher his people."9 "We can't continue in this state of limbo," complains Canada's foreign minister about the administration's endless postponement of a decision on the Keystone XL pipeline. "If your image is feebleness, it doesn't pay in the world," says Israeli defense minister Moshe Ya'alon. "We thought it would be the United States that would lead the campaign against Iran." Instead, Washington was "showing weakness. Therefore, on this matter [Iran's nuclear programs], we have to behave as though we have nobody to look out for us but ourselves."10

U.S. adversaries have noticed, too. Masoud Jazayeri, an Iranian general, calls Obama a "low-IQ president." Obama, he says, "speaks of the effectiveness of 'the U.S. options on the table' on Iran while this phrase is mocked at and has become a joke among the Iranian nation, especially the children."11 A top adviser to the prime minister of Turkey calls Obama "a half-leader."12 After Russia's formal annexation of Crimea, the United States sanctioned a handful of Russian individuals. "It seems to me that some kind of joker wrote the U.S. president's order :-)" tweeted Russian deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin, one of the sanctioned individuals.

These aren't mere words. Perceptions shape actions. Allies who doubt the credibility of American security guarantees, of its strength of will, will pursue their interests irrespective of Washington's wishes or commands. Enemies who think they have nothing to fear from the United States will do as they please. Should Americans care that Israel might strike Iran's nuclear facilities because Jerusalem has lost confidence in Obama's promises to prevent Iran from getting a bomb? Perhaps we should, because such a strike could draw the United States into a conflict in a time and manner not of our choosing. And should we mind that leaders in Beijing, Moscow, or Tehran think the president of the United States is a self-infatuated weakling? The answer is yes, assuming we don't want to see Taiwan, Estonia, or Bahrain become the next Crimea.

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To all this criticism, defenders of the administration insist that the United States is not retreating under

Obama. Instead, they say, it is merely reducing its exposure to the Middle East by backing away from unwinnable and fruitless wars, seeking acceptable strategic accommodations with adversaries such as Iran, "taking the long view" of sweeping historical currents such as the Arab Spring (to avoid getting swept into them), keeping the pressure on Al Qaeda while making fine-grained distinctions between truly dangerous enemies and mere local nuisances. They also say the administration is husbanding American energies by refusing to impose military solutions upon the world's every tragic situation, while attending to more important corners of the globe. "We have to be able to distinguish between these problems analytically," Obama told *New Yorker* editor David Remnick, "so that we're not using pliers where we need a hammer, or we're not using a battalion when what we should be doing is partnering with the local government to train their police force more effectively, improve their intelligence capacities."

Yet even the most ardent supporters of the president are hard-pressed to argue that a signature foreign policy initiative such as the Russian Reset has been a rousing triumph of American diplomacy. "The days when empires could treat sovereign states as pieces on a chessboard are over," Obama declared in Moscow in 2009, at the start of his presidency. Now the remark seems almost amusing. Russia has spent the Obama presidency pocketing one American concession after another: the abrupt cancellation of U.S. ballistic missile defense sites in central Europe in 2009; nuclear superiority over the United States via the New START treaty in 2010; vastly enhanced diplomatic leverage in Syria and Egypt following the Arab Spring; America's de facto acquiescence in the seizure of Crimea in 2014.

As for another signature administration move, the so-called pivot to Asia, a news story in Reuters took brutal stock of it in October 2013, three years after it was first announced: "When then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared two years ago 'we are back to stay' as a power in Asia, the most dramatic symbol of the policy shift was the planned deployment of 2,500 U.S. Marines in northern Australia, primed to respond to any regional conflict. At this point in time, however, there is not a single U.S. Marine in the tropical northern city of Darwin, according to the Australian defense ministry."13 Several months later, Assistant Secretary of Defense Katrina McFarland let slip that "right now, the pivot is being looked at again, because candidly it can't happen."14 Next it emerged that the Navy was meeting the pivot's goal of deploying 60 percent of its ships to the Pacific through the simple expedient of decommissioning ships based in the Atlantic.15 Even the semantics are telling: "The U.S. has significantly contributed to the confusion" about the meaning of the term "pivot," notes Trefor Moss in *The Diplomat*, "by repeatedly reframing the strategy, which was originally a 'pivot' and then evolved into a 'rebalancing,' a 'shift,' and now also a 'Pacific dream.'"16 This is an administration for which no problem is beyond the reach of a semantic fix.

One looks in vain for other administration foreign policy successes. Obama's brief surge in Afghanistan to "disrupt" the Taliban, rather than defeat it, resulted in one thousand American deaths, proving that wars inevitably become expensive when their goals are made cheap. The killing of Osama bin Laden was a great operational achievement and a cathartic American moment, and Obama deserves full marks for ordering the mission. But a tactical success is not a strategic victory, and bin Laden's death has mainly served the administration's political objective of declaring victory in the war on terror and going home.

John Kerry's marathon efforts to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace ended in failure, all the more complete for being so completely predictable. Administration supporters will sometimes argue that it is better to try and fail than not to try at all. Yet diplomatic capital, like money itself, cannot be made limitless without also becoming cheap. Even if Kerry *had* succeeded—achieving the goal that eluded every former secretary of state from Dean Acheson to Hillary Clinton—what would it have accomplished for the United States? The symbolism might have been good, but the notion that resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict would ease other frictions in the Middle East, from Sunni-Shia tensions to the lack of opportunity for Arab youth to the theological attractions of militant Islam, does not withstand basic scrutiny.

At this writing it is too soon to say what will become of efforts to negotiate a nuclear deal with Tehran. What is clear is that any negotiated settlement will require the United States to abandon its long-held insistence, backed by multiple UN Security Council resolutions, that Iran give up its uranium-enrichment capability, which is the core of a nuclear-weapons program, in exchange for diplomatic concessions from the West. The best plausible deal will leave Iran six months away from being able to produce enough highly enriched uranium to produce a bomb, as opposed to two months away with its current capabilities. But that would require a degree of faith in Tehran's honesty that nothing in the Islamic Republic's history can justify. And why should Americans be confident that the same intelligence agencies that got the story of Iraq's WMD completely wrong would nonetheless be able to catch and prevent the Iranians from cheating?

Obama has even failed to restore a measure of international affection for the United States. In Egypt and Turkey—both places Obama went out of his way to woo early in his presidency—public perceptions of the United States plumb deeper lows than they did under George W. Bush. In Europe, the days when Obama could bring out crowds by the tens of thousands to listen to him speak are a distant memory. Instead, he has become the president who listens in on Angela Merkel's phone calls. Or so Europeans think. The truth is worse: "President Barack Obama went nearly five years without knowing his own spies were bugging the phones of world leaders," *The Wall Street Journal* reported in October 2013. It's hard to accuse the president of being malevolent when he's merely inattentive.

A CHANGE OF HEART

And yet the cascade of foreign policy failures and reversals seems not to make much of a dent on America's consciousness. It's all taking place far from our shores. And all of it, we seem to imagine, will remain beyond our shores so long as we don't overly concern ourselves about it. An era of American internationalism is giving way, with amazing swiftness, to a period of American indifference.

In the fall of 2013, the Pew Research Center found that for the first time since it began polling the question in 1964, a majority of Americans—52 percent—agree with the view that the United States "should mind its own business internationally." That's up from 20 percent in 1964 and 30 percent in 2002. The feeling is broadly bipartisan. Another Pew survey noted that in 2011 just 39 percent of conservative Republicans agreed that it is "best to remain active in world affairs," down from 58 percent in 2004. Across the political spectrum, 58 percent favor paying "less attention to problems overseas," with 65 percent saying they want to "reduce overseas military commitments." That includes a majority of self-identified Republicans. Several months later, after Russia's conquest of Crimea, another Pew poll found that 56 percent of Americans—including 50 percent of Republicans—thought the right policy was to "not get too involved in the situation." Only 29 percent of Americans favored taking a "firm stand against the Russians."17

To what degree Obama's approach to foreign policy has shaped these attitudes—and to what degree the attitudes have shaped the approach—is difficult to say. "The president had a truly disturbing habit of funneling major foreign-policy decisions through a small cabal of relatively inexperienced White House advisors whose turf was strictly politics," complained Vali Nasr, a State Department aide in the administration's early days. "Their primary concern was how any action in Afghanistan or the Middle East would play on the nightly news, or which talking point it would give Republicans."18

Then again, what message were Americans sending the administration when it came to foreign policy? Mainly, that they would rather neither hear nor know much about it. This, too, found a reflection in the White House. "Even as the debate about arming the [Syrian] rebels took on a new urgency," reported *The New York Times*, "Mr. Obama rarely voiced strong opinions during senior staff meetings. But current and former officials said his body language was telling: he often appeared impatient and disengaged while listening to the debate, sometimes scrolling through messages on his BlackBerry or slouching and chewing

gum.”19 A former State Department aide noted bitterly that, even as it was becoming clear that Assad was crossing Obama’s red line on chemical weapons, “there was no plan in place to respond to a major chemical attack by a regime that had already demonstrated its deep and abiding contempt for the president and his red lines.”20 The aide shouldn’t have been surprised. Why should the administration draw up contingency plans for something neither the president nor the American people wanted to do?

The causes of this indifference can be summed up in two words: Iraq and recession. In the crude version of conventional wisdom, the United States embarked on a ruinous misadventure in Mesopotamia that wound up bankrupting the national coffers and led directly to the economic travails that followed. “For over the last decade,” Obama said in May 2013, “our nation has spent well over a trillion dollars on war, exploding our deficits and constraining our ability to nation build here at home.” Yet Obama spent more money in a single day—February 18, 2009—with the signing of the $787 billion stimulus package than the Defense Department spent in Iraq in an entire decade: $770 billion.21 Many things are responsible for our “exploding deficits,” involving more than $33 trillion in federal expenditures since 2001. The approximately $1.5 trillion spent in Iraq and Afghanistan is not the major part of it.

A smarter explanation for the new American indifference is that the hard experience of Iraq, followed by the long twilight of Afghanistan, shows that sometimes the game is not worth the candle. “Nation building” might have been worth American treasure and energy when the nations being built were postwar Japan and Germany, or post–Cold War Poland. But what serious hopes could there have been for nation building in Baghdad or Kabul? Were these going to be turned into democratic showcases for the rest of the Muslim world? It’s a reasonable question. If Americans are now resistant to the idea of intervening abroad, so the argument goes, it’s because they are drawing a firm line between core and peripheral U.S. interests, and don’t want to squander their energies on the latter.

As for the U.S. economy, now in its sixth year of anemic growth, it’s also not a shock that Americans should worry more about their next paycheck or their next job than about the outcome of a civil war in Syria or an island dispute near the Philippines. One might also fairly make the argument that our indifference to the rest of the world is a rational response to an international environment that does not really threaten us all that much. During the Cold War, the reality that thousands of Soviet ICBMs were a half hour’s flight time away from every American city gave everyone a personal stake in the conduct of foreign policy. But the Cold War is over. There are other things to worry about, starting with ourselves.

No wonder, then, that we have entered a period in which Americans are generally turning their back on the rest of the world. It has a compelling superficial logic, and a potent political appeal. It’s why Obama polled well in his handling of foreign policy, at least in his first term, and why an increasing number of Tea Party and libertarian-leaning Republicans like Sen. Rand Paul are espousing their own version of George McGovern’s “Come Home, America” speech. If Barack Obama wants to retreat from America’s global commitments in order to build bigger government, many Republicans want to reduce those commitments for the sake of smaller government. The ends differ, but the means are the same.

WHAT IS ISOLATIONISM?

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