

The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World

A Review of Robert Kagan's Book

By [Jim Miles](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*It is always an interesting ride to read a Robert Kagan book as it is a journey into wonderland where things aren't really what they seem. His most recent work, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*, is a mish mash of economics, history, politics, and philosophy with a dose of bafflegab. The underlying premise is the usual, that the U.S. is the creator and supporter of the "liberal world order" maintained through U.S. military power. To his credit, Kagan does not have a Pollyanna view of the world and cites examples of U.S. "errors" and "mistakes" that have caused more harm than good, but even then the underlying implication is that they were mainly mistakes for a good cause: "the liberal democratic capitalist" world order.*

Definitions

At first there is little definition of what this "liberal" order consists of. Later he provides this: "rules based, free trade, market economy...undergirded by American power." Yes, there are rules, consistently abrogated by the U.S., especially in areas of international and humanitarian and war law, but also domestic laws that assume extraterritoriality and extra judicial means to control the rest of the world (probably an even split between military and economic 'rules').

As for "free trade" it does not exist. What is passed off for free trade is essentially the right of corporations to freely move their finances around, move their manufacturing around, and avoid environmental and social concerns of the countries they operate in. It is the search for cheap labour (and labour is not included in any part of "free") and lower or no taxes beyond the domestic scene. Within that free trade arena, market economies do not exist, at least not free markets. All domestic financial markets are highly manipulated, through the high speed computer algorithms, the governments plunge protection team (The Working Group on Financial Markets, sounds nice), and the free money provided by the Fed that keeps the corporations gathering most of the wealth. Foreign markets are controlled through the various machinations of the Washington Consensus group of organizations - World Bank, IMF, WTO, SWIFT, BIS et al - the many tariff and sanction restrictions imposed by the U.S., and the covert operations of the CIA.

The idea of democracy remains undefined, perhaps knowing that within the U.S. system there is only a nominal democracy as the two main parties are basically two sides of the same coin and the system is so well set up that normally, up until Trump times, the winner is always a well vetted insider of the establishment. As for capitalism, it is decidedly non-democratic, operating mainly within the realm of corporate law that creates its own "rules based" system avoiding social, environmental, and economic concerns of society as a

whole.

Which leaves us with the “undergirding of American power” which is the main truth in his arguments. Kagan reveals the truth presented by Thomas Friedman’s “hidden fist” of military support for “American interests” – corporate extractive interests in other countries. He reiterates this idea of military strength throughout the book:

- “...to defend the nation’s physical security and its domestic economy, or even its access to raw material and overseas markets.”
- “...peace and prosperity depend on the exercise of power.”
- “...a favorable international order...backed by power.”
- “...the liberal world order to which other nations have been forced to adjust their behaviour.”

And in reference to the economies of conquered Japan and Germany, they would not have been successful “had it not been for the occupation and enduring presence of American troops.”

No need to read between the lines, U.S. economic success depends on its military adventures overseas and even the occupation of other countries. With over 800 military bases in over 130 countries of the world, the empire is certainly operating as per Kagan’s arguments present it.

Errors of content

Surely Kagan must have been exposed to the realities of U.S. interventions overseas, so he is either wilfully ignorant, in simple denial, or choosing to remain truly ignorant as a few too many of his arguments hold no truth, but simply follow the mainstream establishment narrative of history.

Kagan talks about Vietnam being invaded by North Vietnam, and the response of the U.S. If the “liberal rules based” order had actually been followed, the U.S. would not have denied the right of all the Vietnamese to vote for their government as supported by the UN. The country would have been united under Ho Chi Minh who extolled the virtues of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, you know, all that stuff about free and equal and the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”, unalienable rights that are universal – except when they get in the way of U.S. corporate interests.

When discussing China, Kagan is at his worst. He claims that China prospered under the “protection” of the U.S. military shield in Asia – to which should be added “in spite of” the military shield as the U.S.’ intention all along was to eliminate communists wherever they existed. Kagan simply tells a lie about China’s condition saying, “The Chinese have no reason to fear attack from the United States.” Has he not read the various war plans since WW II, while focusing on the Soviet Union, contained plans to drop nuclear bombs on Chinese cities along the way? U.S. first strike plans certainly include China along with Russia.

Ukraine also comes up for discussion with the usual canards presented by the mainstream media about Russia invading Ukraine and seizing Crimea. This is not surprising both from Kagan’s all-American thesis, but also as he is married to Victoria “F*ck the EU” Nuland, the

U.S. representative who handed out cookies to the neonazi opposition within the Maidan coup. There is also no mention of the billions of U.S. dollars spent in attempts to subvert the democratically elected Yanukovich government. Within the same arena he argues that NATO is no threat to Russia and is simply there to support the so called “liberal” order, contradicting all the information available showing that containment and/or dismemberment of Russia is a geopolitical priority for the U.S.

Russia of course takes a hit, but the biggest canard is the one about Russia being a declining society. Kagan either does not read or simply ignores the demographic statistics showing that Russia is improving significantly in all areas after the Yeltsin era debacle (while U.S. statistics paint a rather dismal picture of decline in most areas) and has a surprisingly strong and resilient economic basis created ironically in part by U.S. sanctions, but also due to other countries now being willing to step away from the U.S. jackboot and work with Russia.

Errors of omission

The largest errors in Kagan’s work is probably what he does not talk about. What he does talk about is presented quite superficially and vaguely without much context, but it is the omissions that speak loudest.

First off is Israel, which receives passing mention about three times with absolutely no contextual information. U.S. foreign policy, geopolitical strategies, and economic policies cannot be truthfully presented without a good look at the influence Israel has both on domestic U.S. politics and economics, and on the geopolitical situation in the Middle East. I will not fill that argument in here, but suffice to say that any discussion representing what truly has occurred and is occurring in the Middle East fully reveals the abrogation and wilful ignorance of humanitarian and war law in particular in relations with Israel.

Included in those relations is Saudi Arabia, also carefully avoided by Kagan. Without a discussion of Saudi Arabia, there can be no understanding of the U.S. petrodollar and the control of oil (the main and most obvious of “U.S. interests”), U.S. arms sales, U.S./Saudi support for various fundamentalist Islamic groups, and the ongoing containment of Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

This of course ties back to the U.S. domestic economy that is never discussed other than its “security” supported by foreign military adventures to access “raw materials and overseas markets.” There is no discussion of the outsourcing of U.S. factories and services in what passes for “free trade.” Further, there is no discussion of the U.S. military-industrial complex, nor the corporate (and thus non-democratic) control of Congress, the media, the financial rules and regulations, on down to the level of private prisons with the largest rate of incarceration in the world – truly a “liberal” phenomenon.

As suggested, the military plays a huge role in the domestic economy as well as its role in geopolitical strategies. It consumes well over half the U.S. budget, and then some as the nuclear industry is seldom accounted for within the military budget. A touch off topic, but the U.S. military ranks 3rd per capita for carbon emissions compared to other countries, and would rank 35th if it were another country – first rank if compared to all other institutional users of carbon products.

Questions?

Kagan's writing raises tons of question concerning what constitutes a liberal democracy, most of them rhetorical.

Actually it is one compound question. Does a liberal democracy:

- Contain systemic racism against descendants of slaves and indigenous people?
- Operate a one party system disguised as two parties?
- Have secret military/CIA budgets?
- Overthrow and subvert other governments?
- Use extraterritoriality and extrajudicial executions to control other countries?
- Create a financialized .1 per cent harvesting the majority of the wealth?
- Maintain a school to teach torture to other countries militaries and mercenaries (now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, sounds nice)?
- Maintain over 800 military bases in over 130 countries?
- Have corporations more powerful than the government?

Simple answer, yes, they - the U.S. "liberal" democracy - does have these elements. I prefer the Oxford definition - generous, open-handed, open minded, candid, unprejudiced - which eliminates the U.S. as a "liberal" system. Robert Kagan's *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* serves as a poorly argued excuse for continued U.S. military dominance around the world.

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Jim Miles is a frequent contributor to Global Research

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