

To what degree is the present world order dependent on American power and its unique qualities? What would the future international order be if the US were no longer shaping it? Who could replace us? And is our power really declining? These are all questions asked by historian Robert Kagan in his 2012 book, *The World America Made*, discussed in our last column.

We have not done it alone, of course. Broad historical forces (evolution of science and technology, availability of natural resources, long-term economic trends, population growth) have certainly played roles. But some specifically American institutions have been essential: the great spread of democracy, the prosperity, the prolonged great power peace, and an extremely attractive and influential culture (popular culture, movies, dress, education) have created a global culture.

We have been lucky, having a geography that has protected us for a long time; we have a political system that has ingenious roots, giving us an unusual stability; and we have a population that is made of the most talented and energetic immigrants who left other countries lacking this benefit.

The alliances we made with countries with similar values and economies to ours, felt respected by how we treated them. We even had the illusion at the beginning of the 20th century when President Teddy Roosevelt said that it was unthinkable that democracies should ever go to war with each other, that this was so. Unfortunately, twice in the rest of the century, two horrific world wars were fought.

Immediately after the end of World War II, we entered another period of rising conflict that came close to being World War III. The western democracies defeated the challenges of the USSR, and it collapsed--almost becoming a new democracy. Almost. We thought it was inevitable.

We were also disillusioned when we backed democratic revolutions in the Arab world (and elsewhere) that such democracies could not undo ignorance, fundamentalist religion, and a long tradition of warlords. Such countries got dictatorships, not participatory governance.

Yet, this world that America made and supported with arms, popular culture, and increased health and economies, is still the norm, and we continue to support it. America deserves this credit.

But what in America made this happen? What in the rest of history must be considered along with principles and trends, the sweep of history? The surprise here is the role played by individuals

The good things we have today were not inevitable. America's geography and talented immigrant population have benefitted by the most unexpected genius of individuals, the lucky advent of the right person at the right time. Without that person, nothing was inevitable.

Looking back in history, who could have predicted a Julius Caesar whose brilliance made Rome the biggest and best run empire of its time? Without the extraordinary religious revolution of Jesus and administrative brilliance of St. Paul, there would never have been the world religion of Christianity.

Who could have predicted that 18th century France would undertake to conquer the Russian Empire? One man, Napoleon, did. And even though he lost (predictable), the evolution of European civilization was never the same.

America's historic direction could not be predicted either. It was shaped by George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, none of whom inevitable. Without three men: Roosevelt, Churchill, and Harry Truman, we might have lost to Nazi Germany or had a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Our success was not inevitable.

Evil individuals such as Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Tojo, and a stream of totalitarian villains slowed the evolution to democracy. Because of America's unexpected heroes, Nazi Germany and Fascist Japan are now decent democracies in partnership with us and other democracies.

If we have learned one thing under the horrible gallop toward fascism by our former

(and twice indicted) president, the formerly trusted norms of democratic governance could have been destroyed. The only protection we have is law: rule of law that can make governance accountable. We are the beneficiaries of a lucky history and the mystery of good individuals who appear when we need them most.

We are more lucky than virtuous.

685 words

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