

Barbarians at the Gate?

By Michael Ignatieff

Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos

by Robert D. Kaplan

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The contemporary situation in global politics has no precedent since the age of the later Roman emperors. It is not just the military domination of the world by a single nation. Nor is it even the awesome reach of its power, for example, having an air command center in Saudi Arabia able to deliver B-52 strikes on a mountaintop in Afghanistan within nineteen minutes of receiving target coordinates from Special Forces on the ground.^[1] Nor is it just the punishment inflicted on al-Qaeda. Even if Osama bin Laden lives to fight another day, he and his clique will no longer be under the illusion, created by the American retreat from Somalia in 1993, that the empire lacks the stomach for a fight.

The Roman parallels are evident—Robert Kaplan often mentions them in his new book—with the difference that the Romans were untroubled by their imperial destiny, while the Americans have had an empire since Teddy Roosevelt yet persist in believing they do not. But the real parallel with late Rome is that overwhelming military superiority does not translate into security. Mastery of the known world does not confer peace of mind.

America has now felt the tremor of dread that the ancient world must have known when Rome was first sacked. Then and now an imperial people has come awake to the menace of the barbarians. Just beyond the zone of stable democratic states, which took the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as its headquarters, there are the border zones, like Afghanistan, where barbarians rule and from where, thanks to modern technology, they can inflict devastating damage on centers of power far away. Retribution has been visited on the barbarians, and more will follow, but the American military knows it has begun a campaign without an obvious end in sight. The most carefree and confident empire in history now grimly confronts the question of whether it can escape Rome's ultimate fate.

The likelihood that Osama bin Laden managed to escape airborne Armageddon in Tora Bora only illustrates how elusive any final victory against the barbarians will prove to be. Further pacification operations, covert or overt, are being planned for the Philippines, Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan. Al-Qaeda's attempts to launder financial assets have been traced to the Lebanese business circles that control the export of diamonds from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, and the Congo.^[2] There are likely to be cells to root out in the Philippines and Indonesia.

Barbarism is not new. Neither is fanaticism. What is new is that the barbarians have exploited a global ideology—Islam—that gives them an apparently bottomless supply of recruits and allies in a global

war. They have also exploited global civil society and its values—mobility and freedom, as well as its technologies—to take war to the heart of the empire.

While the apocalyptic nihilists who carried out the attack of September 11 were barbarians in the strict moral sense of the term, it is not as easy to apply the word to the entire populations of these border zones—the Afghans, Yemenis, Somalis, and West Africans. The official moral ideology of the empire—i.e., human rights—requires politer terms. But fine words like "human rights" have little meaning for the long-suffering people of these border zones unless the states they live in are minimally competent. Of course many newly emerging states have triumphed over the rapacity of their imperial masters and the poverty they left behind. But where local elites are themselves incompetent or rapacious, where there are enduring religious or ethnic cleavages, and where the inheritance of imperial infrastructure is poor, the stage is set for a descent into crisis, then collapse, and finally into barbarism.

One of the unacknowledged underlying causes of the September 11 events was the coincidence of globalized prosperity in the imperial world with disintegration in the states that achieved independence from the colonial empires of Europe in the 1960s. The collapse of state institutions has been exacerbated by urbanization, by the relentless growth of lawless shantytowns that collect populations of unemployed or underemployed men who can see the promise of globalized prosperity on the TVs in every café, but cannot enjoy it themselves. In states like Pakistan, where the state no longer provides basic services to the poorest people, Islamic parties, funded from Saudi Arabia, step into the breach, providing clinics, schools, and orphanages where the poor receive protection at the price of indoctrination in hatred.

The spreading collapse of state order in postcolonial border zones made possible the emergence of harbors for terror. As Fouad Ajami has pointed out, when American naval planners looked south from the Suez Canal, they only had bad options. All the potential refueling stops—Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Yemen—are dangerous places for American warships.^[3] America paid too little heed to this. It won the cold war by virtue of a genuinely imperial, i.e., strategic, act of concentrating its power against the USSR; but after 1991 the American imperium was consolidated, as the British said of their own empire, in a fit of absence of mind. Successive US administrations during the 1990s thought they could have imperial domination on the cheap, ruling the world without putting in place any new imperial architecture—new military alliances, new legal institutions, new international development organizations—for a postcolonial, post-Soviet world to replace those that Roosevelt and Churchill had created for the world after Hitler.

The Greeks taught the Romans to call this failure hubris. It was also a general failure of the historical imagination, an inability to grasp that the emerging crisis of state order in so many overlapping zones of the world would eventually become a security threat. One of these danger zones was the Pakistan–Afghan border. America's focus on this border dates to the 1980s, but as Christopher Hitchens pointed out in a recent report from Pakistan, the instability of North Asia began much earlier, as a direct consequence of the botched partition which created Pakistan on the departure of the British in 1947.^[4]

Kashmir is a festering legacy of Britain's imperial mistakes in 1947, and now, with the realization that the situation in Kashmir both creates and exports terror as well as increasing the risk of nuclear war on

the subcontinent, America has unwillingly woken up to the disagreeable reality that new empires sometimes have to clean up the mistakes of old empires.

During the cold war America's imperial interest in the region was confined to preventing the southward march of Russian power. The internal stability of Pakistan and its quarrel with India over Kashmir were sideshows. When the Russians retreated, American policy essentially abandoned the region, leaving the Pakistanis to establish control of Afghanistan, through the Taliban. This blunder has forced at least some American policymakers to realize that this frontier zone, once left to proxies, must now be policed, if not by America's own legions, then by a disciplined and enduring policy aimed at rebuilding a stable state in Afghanistan, shoring up Pakistan without alienating the Indians, and preventing both from a nuclear exchange over Kashmir.

Britain's prime minister can shuttle usefully between Islamabad and New Delhi, but the influence that determines outcomes in the region comes from Washington. This is a painful reality for Europeans, who like the Japanese believed the myth that economic power could be the equivalent of military might. Events since September 11 have rubbed in the lesson that global power is still measured by military capacity. Having rallied to the American cause after September 11, the NATO liaison officers who arrived at Centcom in Florida had to endure the humiliation of being denied all access to the Command Center where the war against Osama bin Laden was actually being run.^[5] The Americans trust their allies so little—the same was true during the Kosovo operation—that they exclude everyone but the British from all but the most menial police work.

The debate about whether America has become more or less multilateral since September 11 now seems archaic. It is unilateral when it wants to be, multilateral when it must be, and it uses its power to enforce a new international division of labor in which America does the bombing and fighting, the French, British, and Germans serve as police in the border zones, and the Dutch, Swiss, and Scandinavians provide humanitarian aid.

This is a very different picture of the world from the one entertained by liberal international lawyers and human rights activists, who had hoped to see American power integrated into a transnational legal and economic order, organized around the UN, the WTO, the International Criminal Court, and international human rights organizations. A new international order is emerging, but it is being crafted to suit American imperial objectives. The empire signs on to those pieces of the transnational legal order that suit its purposes (the WTO, for example), while ignoring or even sabotaging those parts (the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol, the ABM Treaty) that do not.

The Europeans may be resigned to their role as servants of an international order designed and policed by the Americans. The case is different with the Chinese and the Russians. In the short term, until revenues from Russian resources can rebuild the Russian state, Vladimir Putin sees it in Russia's interests to ally with the imperial war on terror. Besides, the alliance is profitable: it secures American silence toward his own "war on terror" in Chechnya, even though it is less a war on terrorists than a war on the entire Chechen people, accompanied by 100,000 civilian deaths and the indiscriminate bombardment of cities. The Chinese too have signed up, since they immediately realized that allying with America's war would secure American compliance with their own campaign against Islamic movements in northeastern China. But these are alliances of convenience rather than conviction. In the

longer term, the American penetration in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—especially the creation of permanent military bases there—is bound to challenge Chinese and Russian power in the region, and when the opportunity presents itself, they will respond accordingly.

Dealing with these challenges from state competitors like China and Russia presents American policymakers with challenges that classical realism equips them to handle. They can both offer countries rewards and threaten them if necessary—for example, by sending the US Navy into the Formosa Straits. The really intractable questions for American power, discussed in Robert Kaplan's book, *Warrior Politics*, are what to do about the collapsing zones of state order in the developing world. Afghanistan has shown, once and for all, the price of imperial neglect of failed and failing states. In the 1990s, these states were described as a humanitarian problem and as a result were ignored. Since September 11, places like Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Sierra Leone have become perceived as strategic risks of the first order.

Robert Kaplan has traveled more miles in the barbarian outer reaches of the empire than perhaps any other American writer or journalist. His previous work recounts his encounters with civil war and slaughter in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the Congo, Somalia, Soviet Central Asia, and Afghanistan, as well as the Balkan war zones. *Soldiers of God*, an account of his sojourn among the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, first published in 1990, demonstrated that he has courage: when Kandahar was still occupied by the Soviets, he accompanied a Mujahideen assault team that made its way to the outskirts of the city. *Soldiers of God* was republished this past autumn with a persuasive new account of the seemingly inexorable disintegration of Pakistan and its "lawless frontier" with Afghanistan.^[6]

Kaplan aspires to be a reflective traveler in the British tradition of Patrick Leigh Fermor, Wilfred Thesiger, Eric Newby, and Bruce Chatwin. But he is less of an aesthete and less of a stylist. He is also more interested in national policy, more concerned about the impact of these places on imperial interests than the British travelers ever were. This interest in politics and foreign policy ought to give him something in common with writer-travelers like Timothy Garton Ash and Philip Gourevitch; but they were engaged on the side of intervention while Kaplan was not among those who demanded that Kosovo, Bosnia, and Rwanda be saved. Kaplan's position owed much to Samuel Huntington's thesis that the United States should beware of interventions in civil wars and conflicts that involve "clashes of civilization," i.e., entrenched and intractable battles for territory between traditionally hostile religions.^[7]

Kaplan's account of lawless frontiers and civil wars, especially in his book *The Coming Anarchy*, has had an ambiguous effect. On the one hand, he has brought these places to the attention of the powerful officials of the empire and he was one of the few American writers to do so. On the other, he paints a picture of such ferocious hatred, such intractable collapse, that his readers may get the impression that the barbarians aren't worth the trouble of saving. Many influential people have readily accepted his pessimistic conservatism as tragic wisdom. One of the excuses that President Clinton afforded himself for not intervening in Bosnia in 1993 reputedly derived from a reading of Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, which portrayed the conflicts there as the eruption of ancient hatreds too deeply rooted to be eradicated by human hand.

Kaplan's new book is a series of loosely linked essays on the theme of imperial rule and the moral and political temperament he thinks modern American imperialists must possess. He extracts lessons from imperial careers as various as those of Winston Churchill and the Roman emperor Tiberius, and from texts that range from Machiavelli to Malthus. The book is short, but it comes garlanded with advance praise from Henry Kissinger, Newt Gingrich, and two former secretaries of defense, William Perry and William Cohen.

This suggests that the imperial elite likes what it hears, especially the passages in which Kaplan criticizes the "barons of punditry" (the liberal ones at least) for their ceaseless calls for "something to be done" and reaffirms the legitimacy of a conservative elite as the proper executors of American foreign policy. What this elite also must like to hear is Kaplan's encomium to the greatness of the empire, together with a warning that America risks compromising its fundamental interests if its policies are guided by sentimental illusions like democracy and human rights. Long-term interests and a sober concern for consequences, he argues, must replace Wilsonian earnestness, moralizing, and a Clintonesque weakness for the rhetoric of good intentions.

Kaplan excoriates Clinton's foreign policy, especially toward China, as "sanctimonious, undertaken with little hope of practical results, merely to demonstrate what the administration assumed was its superior morality." Kaplan's "pagan ethos" in foreign policy means jettisoning those Christian impulses to save or redeem the barbarians. Some appeasement of barbarian evil, he says bluntly, will be necessary in imperial policing. If America intervened to bring order wherever human rights abuses rise to the level of massacre and ethnic cleansing, it would have troops stationed in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Kashmir, Rwanda, Burundi, northeastern Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, and many other places. Imperial rule will require a firm exercise of triage, and though Kaplan doesn't lay down any rules, it is obvious that he thinks humanitarian interventions are, by and large, a waste of resources. Interventions should occur only where national security threats, for example from terror, can be identified.

There is much to praise in Kaplan's sober realism, his genuine knowledge of the world's danger zones, and his justified contempt for liberal good intentions when they are not backed by steel and will. But Kaplan's realist clarity begins to blur at the edges when he claims, "Human rights are ultimately and most assuredly promoted by the preservation and augmentation of American power." This would only be true if the power is actually risked in the promotion of these rights. But it is precisely this risk-taking that Kaplan's pagan realism is supposed to avoid. Pagan realists really shouldn't bother with human rights at all if they are not prepared to use power to defend them, and Kaplan clearly is not.

The same inconsistencies occur in Kaplan's treatment of American promotion of freedom and democracy as foreign policy goals. Faced with growing unrest in the border zones, Kaplan argues, America should remember that its chief goal should be stability, even if that means entering into pacts with various authoritarian "devils we know." Ethnic and religious unrest, he writes, is caused not only by political oppression. It may also result from liberalization. "Political freedom itself has often unleashed the violence that liberal societies abhor."

Tocqueville said much the same more than a hundred years ago, and it is true that liberalization in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, for example, may unleash fundamentalism rather than secular democracy. A

decent and uncorrupt authoritarian—Kaplan cites General Musharraf of Pakistan as his example—may provide a better buffer against religious extremism than a corrupt "democrat" whose survival depends on appeasing religious parties. Aiding the military in Indonesia might be a better guarantee of stability in the archipelago than putting pressure on a weak democratic regime there to cashier its corrupt and violent officer class.

The preference for stability over democracy was a basic feature of American foreign policy in the cold war. In the war on terror, this preference is reinforced, with the added feature of a complicitous silence about the human rights violations of major partners, like the Russians and the Chinese. Kaplan adapts this cold war preference for stability over justice to the bleak problems of bringing order to the border zones of the new empire. No one who has been to Afghanistan or Central Africa would quarrel with stability as a desirable goal. Indeed, the great menace to the human rights of ordinary people in the twenty-first century often comes more from chaos and disorder than from state tyranny. As Kaplan rightly says, freedom becomes an issue only after order has been established. Yet order at any price looks sensible only in the short term. In the longer term, one might ask which society is more stable, the Iran of the Shah or the Iran slowly emerging from the rule of the mullahs—the state kept in order by an American-backed secret police, or the state whose legitimacy is anchored in a form of democracy and the religious traditions native to the country? What long-term order is secured if you repeat the mistakes of the cold war, for example, subverting Chilean democracy and handing the country over to Augusto Pinochet? That particular exercise in the preference for order over democracy has taken a generation for Chile to overcome.

If America wants a stable world, it should do what it can to promote democratic regimes, without making the mistake of overthrowing regimes in order to get a sham democracy. Democracy and democratization have successes to their credit—in Poland, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, South Africa—which Kaplan's tragic pessimism makes it difficult for him to admit. Nation-building has not been a disaster everywhere in the third world. Mozambique and Bangladesh have had a relatively good decade, overcoming obstacles that would have daunted much richer states and doing so while consolidating basic elements of democracy.

Kaplan's weakness as an analyst is his attraction to a bracing, intransigent pessimism that leads him to ignore humble successes. These include the Dayton accords that brought peace to Bosnia, the NATO intervention in Kosovo, and the UN transitional administrations in Cambodia and East Timor. All of these can be seen as exercises in nation-building, and while it is fashionable to say that they have all been soured by corruption and back-sliding into intolerance, they have at least succeeded in preventing a re-turn to Hobbesian chaos and ethnic war. As the UN's special representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, and the transitional ruler of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, begin to rebuild the Afghan state, the chief intellectual obstacle they face is the easy assumption—never explicitly stated by Kaplan, but implicit in the gloomy fatalism of his pages—that Western nation-building never works.

No nation-building challenge is bigger than Afghanistan, but as Kaplan knows, the country does have a state tradition, and Karzai may be able to call on the talent and resources of the huge Afghan diaspora to recreate it again. More than internal factionalism, it is American disengagement and lack of interest that menaces the state-building project ahead in Afghanistan. If Kaplan's pessimism reinforced the conventional wisdom in Washington that nation-building never works, it would have a

baleful impact. Moreover, as his reading of the classics would surely tell him, no empire survives if its leaders become infected with tragic fatalism. Imperial ruthlessness requires optimism as a continued act of will.

Notes

^[1] Eric Schmitt and James Dao, "Use of Pinpoint Air Power Comes of Age in New War," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2001.

^[2] Douglas Farah, "Al Qaeda Cash Tied to Diamond Trade," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2001; also, Douglas Farah, "Digging Up Congo's Dirty Gems," *The Washington Post*, December 30, 2001.

^[3] Fouad Ajami, "The Uneasy Imperium," in *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and the New War*, edited by James F. Hoge Jr. and Gideon Rose (Public Affairs, 2001), p. 21.

^[4] Christopher Hitchens, "On the Frontier of Apocalypse," *Vanity Fair*, December 2001.

^[5] Sylvie Kauffmann, "Le nouvel unilatéralisme américain," *Le Monde*, January 2, 2002.

^[6] *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Vintage, 2001).

^[7] See his long, approving article on Samuel Huntington, "Looking the World in the Eye," *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2001.