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The Role of Strategic Planning in American Foreign Policy

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BROOKINGS INSTITUTION PRESS
Washington, D.C.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

Avoiding trivia : the role of strategic planning in American foreign policy / Daniel W. Drezner, editor.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Summary: "Critically assesses the past, future, and potential future role and impact of long-term strategic planning in foreign policy. Key figures from past decades of foreign policy and planning provide authoritative insight on the difficulties and importance of thinking and acting in a coherent way for the long term"—Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-0-8157-0306-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. United States—Foreign relations—Planning. 2. Strategic planning—United States. I. Drezner, Daniel W. II. Title.
JZ1480.A987 2009
327.73—dc22 2009012069

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials: ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Typeset in Minion

Composition by Cynthia Stock
Silver Spring, Maryland

Printed by R. R. Donnelley

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9

Learning the Right Lessons from the 1940s

Occasionally, the question "what decade would you most like to live in?" is an interesting way of reviving a flagging dinner conversation. Among scholars and practitioners of international relations, though, the response is almost as predictable as death and taxes. I speak, of course, of the 1940s. No other decade has been cited as frequently as a model for contemporary U.S. strategy. Since September 11, 2001, everyone, from President George W. Bush to his most ardent critics, has tried to lay claim to the mantle of Presidents Roosevelt and Truman and the strategist George F. Kennan.[1] On its surface, what these men accomplished was indeed awesome. The United States was then a great power with no experience of persistent peacetime intervention in great-power politics, but it managed to design a novel grand strategy, based around international institutions, that laid the foundations for success in the postwar world. The 1940s has therefore become a holy grail to be sought and tapped to recreate a golden age of diplomacy.

Unfortunately, this narrative is based on a myth that distorts modern strategic planning. The myth is that the U.S. planning process for postwar strategy led to a successful outcome. The United States engaged in an unprecedented national effort during World War II to design a postwar strategy, but by 1946 it had irredeemably failed, as the leading U.S. statesmen of the time recognized. What was put in its place, and what ultimately worked, was the product of necessity—a response to a series of overwhelming crises—not of advance planning. That strategy evolved despite, not because of, the newly created department of policy planning. Kennan was perhaps the administration's most cogent critic; for his trouble, he was ignored and then removed from his post.

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The mythology of the 1940s creates unreasonable and unrealizable expectations for grand strategy and policy planning. At worst, it may encourage grand schemes that prove counterproductive. Rather than emulating a failed process, we should seek to learn from the mistakes made, from how the Truman administration recovered from this failing, and from the sixty years of experience that we have with the order that followed. In this chapter I explain the weaknesses of U.S. strategic planning during the 1940s, and I outline six lessons that may be of use for reforming the international order today.

The Mythology of the 1940s

Before World War II, the United States traditionally remained aloof from power transitions in Europe. It occasionally sought to manipulate European politics for its own benefit on the American continent, but it avoided alliances and committed just once to intervention, during World War I, only to recoil into relative isolation after the 1919 peace talks. However, as World War II drew to a close, the United States found itself embedded in the middle of one of the great-power transition dramas in European history—the collapse of Germany, the weakening of France and Britain, and the expansion of a bruised but defiant Soviet Union.

The United States prepared for this challenge with a great national debate about postwar strategy. This debate engaged church groups, think tanks, civil society, government departments, Congress, and the public.[2] Sophisticated plans were produced and discussed. Since little could be acted upon until the war ended, this debate lasted for over four years. U.S. thinking on the postwar world, from the church group to the State Department, was dominated by a desire for something new. Americans believed that the old balance-of-power system had failed repeatedly over the previous century and a half. Only an abandonment of these practices, and a real push for comity between nations, offered hope for peace. A just international order would accommodate the legitimate security concerns of all normal states, and they could then act together against aggressor powers. Secretary of State Cordell Hull summed up the popular mood when he predicted, in 1943, "There will no longer be need for spheres of influence, for alliances, for balance of power, or any other of the special arrangements through which, in the unhappy past, the nations strove to safeguard their security in order to promote their interests."[3]

Thus the United States concerned itself with the construction of a set of universal institutions intended to remove the causes of conflict and to facilitate cooperation and the peaceful resolution of disputes against major powers.

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Even former isolationists argued for a new and powerful world organization that deliberately infringed upon the sovereignty of the major powers in the name of ending war. In a series of speeches John Foster Dulles, the Republican Party's leading foreign policy spokesperson, denounced sovereignty as "inherently conducive to war," "self-destructive and a breeder of violent revolt," and "no longer consonant either with peace or with justice."[4] All this meant that the "nationalist system of independent fully sovereign states is completing its cycle of usefulness."[5]

The Roosevelt administration was bound by a national consensus that rejected balance-of-power diplomacy as a legitimate course of action for the United States. Without domestic legitimacy, the Roosevelt administration stood little chance of winning the congressional support necessary to sustain postwar internationalism. Thus Roosevelt pursued a foreign policy designed to satisfy this domestic consensus: he rejected the notion that the United States would seek to preserve a balance of power with the Soviet Union, and he championed, at least publicly, a new world organization. The apparatus of the U.S. government made the construction of this international order—the United Nations Organization and Bretton Woods—a priority. The key thing to understand is that this order was to be universal, not regional. Indeed, universalism, which meant inclusion of the Soviet Union, was at its very essence.

Placing a new world organization at the centerpiece of U.S. planning meant that the Roosevelt administration placed Soviet participation in international institutions above all other considerations. As a result, it eschewed a series of steps that would have left the United States in a better position at the end of the war. For instance the Roosevelt administration:

—Refused to collaborate bilaterally with Britain on postwar policy and negotiate collectively with the Soviet Union, despite repeated and increasingly desperate British entreaties for such an arrangement.

—Spent diplomatic capital to create the illusion that the Soviet Union would uphold basic democratic rights in Eastern Europe even though it believed that these commitments were largely worthless and that the Soviets would do as they wished.

—Refused to use material and military power to create facts on the ground that would improve the U.S.-British position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, just as Stalin did to advance the Soviet interest and as the British wanted to do to advance theirs. The United States was more powerful than other countries during and after World War II, but it was hesitant to use its raw power in pursuit of political objectives. For instance, during the war the United States could have occupied Prague and other parts of what was to become the Eastern

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zone, as Churchill suggested. America could also have thrown its weight behind a British proposal to create a federation of East European states. Or it could have proposed linking the withdrawal of U.S. forces to the demarcation lines with the holding of elections in Poland. It did none of those things.

—Made almost no effort to identify U.S. global interests, to pinpoint where they might conflict with Soviet interests, and to negotiate accordingly. For instance, Roosevelt signaled disinterest toward the Dardanelles Straits and Iran, which would both become flash points in 1946. There was some thinking about "grand positioning," particularly in the Pacific, whereby the Joint Chiefs of Staff with the support of the administration sought forward basing, but not in relation to competition with the Soviet Union.

These missed opportunities might be forgivable if what was created had served its purpose, but the universality of the design meant that it fell apart once the Soviet Union acted like a rival rather than a partner. From 1944 on, the Soviet Union's actions in Eastern Europe, at international conferences, and on the Northern Tier left little doubt that it would play international politics as usual rather than participate in a transformative constitutional order. More than four years of policy planning came crashing down.

Truman stuck to Roosevelt's strategy for a while, hoping that the Soviets would come round. Repeated crises forced a change in approach. What followed is the stuff of legend—the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, and NATO—but it is absolutely vital to remember that these initiatives were not the product of deliberate thought and planning during the war; rather, they represented an immediate response to very real crises that burst on an unsuspecting public with little warning.

In fact, Kennan, head of policy planning from 1947 to 1949, was relatively uninvolved in the crafting of the Marshall Plan, and he opposed both the Truman Doctrine and NATO. Kennan had a wonderful strategic mind, but contrary to popular belief he was not very influential in the formation of U.S. strategy. He favored a classical balance-of-power strategy, with a twist. Whereas some scholars of the balance of power perceive it as a method and a goal, Kennan believed that it was a method leading to a very different end—the collapse of the Soviet Union and destruction of the political equilibrium that prevailed at the end of the war. His support for this strategy led him to favor rivalry with the Soviet Union at a very early stage and to oppose institutions that were intended to be universal in scope like the United Nations and Bretton Woods. However, it also led him to be extremely uneasy about the direction that containment took in the late 1940s, in particular the Truman Doctrine, the creation of NATO, and the thinking that lay behind NSC-68.

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Indeed, if one were to compose a list of the ten people who most influenced U.S. postwar strategy in the 1940s, Kennan's name would almost certainly not be on it. It seems self-evident that Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Harry Hopkins, Dean Acheson, George Marshall, Paul Nitze, Arthur Vandenberg, Chip Bohlen, Averell Harriman, and James Forrestal all rank ahead of Kennan on this score. This is not to say that these men were greater strategic thinkers than Kennan; in my judgment, at that point in his career, Kennan's strategic judgment exceeded that of any other American, with the possible exception of Marshall. Rather it is to make the point that Kennan's view mattered less because it was outside the mainstream of American strategic thought.

In order to understand the 1940s it is important to distinguish between periods, particularly between the postwar planning that took place during World War II and the innovation in a time of crisis that occurred from 1947 to 1950. What succeeded in the 1940s came out of the best of traditional diplomacy—adjustment to changing international circumstances and vigorous bilateral diplomacy—and not out of advance planning. Some of the insights uncovered during the planning process proved useful to the Truman administration—the Western economic order is perhaps the best example because it was simply a more selective version of the original design—so this point should not be taken as a case against planning; rather, it should simply underscore how difficult it is to make predictions about the direction of international politics.

Five Lessons

If grand strategy in the 1940s is not the success story it is often made out to be, how should we interpret the evidence from this period in American diplomatic history? There is as much to be learned from the mistakes as from the successes. Below I offer five general lessons that may inform how today's strategists seek to reform the international order.

Be Flexible

Plans need to be flexible. Roosevelt's grand design assumed Soviet cooperation. This may have been a legitimate aspiration in 1943, but by late 1944 it was clear that it was a fiction. Similarly, the Truman strategy's greatest flaw was its doctrinal nature, which made it difficult to be prudent in resisting communism—the result was Vietnam. In a democracy, it is risky for a politician to publicly change his or her mind about a matter of great importance, but it is precisely that ability that is called for on the international stage. Consistency,

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while often trumpeted as a virtue, can easily lead to overextension and a lack of prudence.[6]

It is hard to offer an easy solution because the problem is cultural: to be perceived as inconsistent in a matter as grave as resisting communism or using force to prevent proliferation is not usually seen as an electoral strength by any politician. One part of the solution is for the United States to be less beholden to doctrine. Presidents should avoid universal pronunciations for fear of committing themselves without proper thought and consideration. They should also refrain from declaring a country like China or Russia to be a "partner" or a "rival." After all, a country could be one and change, or it could be both simultaneously. If Robert Kagan is right that international politics in the twenty-first century will resemble the nineteenth rather than the twentieth, it is likely that America will not face rivals as clearly "bad" as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.[7] Instead, the United States will worry about a clash with China over Taiwan or the future of a unified Korea while it also cooperates with Beijing to manage global capital flows and preserve stability in the global economy. The United States will compete with China for influence in Africa and Latin America while it seeks to enlist China in a global effort to tackle climate change.

With this in mind, some thought should be given to ensuring that the international order is as segmented as possible so that clashes on matters of security have little impact on cooperation in other areas. Disagreement over intervention or the responsibility to protect should not lead to a Chinese (or U.S.) walkout on economic or environmental talks. One way to advance this goal is to avoid reliance on multipurpose organizations like an expanded G-8 in favor of more focused and autonomous institutions that are established with a specific mission. These institutions should be dissolved once their mission has been accomplished.

Don't Neglect Bilateral Diplomacy

As in the 1940s, there is no institutional fix for the world, and institutions are no substitute for effective bilateral diplomacy. The Roosevelt administration worried more about the integrity of the United Nations Organization than about understanding Soviet intentions and responding accordingly. Signs of Soviet revisionism were brushed under the carpet out of fear that honesty would discredit plans to make Stalin a partner in a cooperative international order. Scarce diplomatic capital was spent on securing Soviet concessions on rules and procedures while Stalin chose to prioritize his influence in Eastern Europe.

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More generally, during the course of the cold war, U.S. diplomacy was at its strongest when the president and the secretary of state sought to understand their Soviet, and Chinese, counterparts. By and large, these diplomatic missions occurred outside of international institutions. Détente, for instance, had only a small institutional component, and that was a byproduct rather than a cause of the easing in tension. None of this is to say that international institutions are not an extremely important tool. Institutions increase transparency, provide voice opportunities, facilitate collective action, and create a set of expectations and rules that countries are encouraged to live up to. However, as Robert Keohane has pointed out, all of this is dependent upon a coincidence of interest. By definition, institutions will be of more use in solidifying international friendships and maximizing the potential of alliances than in improving relations between enemies.

The modern application of this lesson is that it is less important to persuade China and Russia to sign on to a set of rules than it is to build and sustain healthy bilateral relations with each. No doubt we should welcome China and Russia to organizations like the World Trade Organization, but ultimately this means little if we forgo traditional diplomacy and understanding. During the 1990s, the West put great store in bringing Russia into the international order—economically and politically—only to see those efforts largely collapse when Vladimir Putin came to power on the eve of the millennium. Strengthening international institutions is important, and perhaps vital, but it cannot be allowed to replace traditional diplomacy, and participation in institutions cannot be the only criterion by which we measure success. The degree of trust and the length of the personal relationships between senior officials in Washington and Beijing will surely matter more at a time of grave crisis than whether China is engaged in a round of trade talks.

Strategy Needs Domestic Legitimacy

Perhaps the most important factor in U.S. strategic design during the 1940s was the need to secure and retain domestic support, without which any strategy would run the risk of falling victim to congressional opposition. Roosevelt addressed this challenge by tapping into the American people's desire for a cooperative international order, which had the effect of limiting his options. Truman used anticommunism and the Soviet threat to sell the British loan, the Marshall Plan, and NATO, all of which would have been necessary even if there had been no cold war. In each case, the Truman administration tried to secure support for the proposal strictly on its own merits, failed, and then won when it was placed in the context of the communist threat.[8] Even then, the

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most senior officials in government felt the need to campaign widely within the United States, as if they were running for election, to build domestic support for key foreign policy initiatives.

The need for domestic legitimacy was not confined to the 1940s. Many years later, Henry Kissinger wrote that it was the need for domestic legitimacy that ultimately doomed détente. In *Diplomacy,* he wrote:

> There was no ready constituency for Nixon's style of diplomacy . . . liberals found themselves in an uncomfortable quandary: diplomatic results of which they approved in substance, such as the relaxation of tensions with the Soviet Union and the opening to China, were emerging from principles that were anathema to the Wilsonian tradition, such as emphasis on the national interest and the balance of power. . . . To conservatives, Nixon's strategy of treating the Soviet Union as a geopolitical phenomenon was unfamiliar and uncongenial. The vast majority of them viewed the conflict with communism as being almost exclusively ideological. Convinced of America's imperviousness to geopolitical challenges, they treated issues at the front lines of containment as being of marginal concern and as too close for comfort to the traditional struggles of the European powers, which, on the whole they held in low esteem.[9]

Today the international order is suffering a crisis of confidence, both in the United States and abroad. Long before the international financial crisis exposed the shortcomings of the international financial architecture, this was evident in the collapse of congressional support for free trade, the ease with which President Bush disengaged from multilateral organizations in his first term, popular worldwide protests against the G-8, the French, Dutch, and Irish rejection of various EU treaties, the collapse in support for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Asia, and the stresses and strains in the international nonproliferation regime. The economic historian Harold James has observed that "the currently prevalent way of thinking about globalization simply as a system of interconnections, of processes and networks that span national and cultural boundaries is bound to produce a backlash, primarily because it is widely assumed that this is simply a euphemism for some sort of imperial rule."[10] In other words, if the public believes that a strategic plan exists solely for the purpose of keeping the wheels of the machine well oiled, they will be less likely to support it than if they believed it represented a strategic or moral imperative.

What is missing is glue to hold the project together—whether it be common values or a shared threat. The United States and its allies will have to find

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some normative basis for reform of the international order if they are to secure sufficient domestic support to allow it to take place. Statesmen may have to take a leaf out of Acheson and Truman's playbook and actively campaign throughout their countries, for a prolonged period of time, to convince their fellow citizens of the benefits of major international commitments.

Problem Solving Matters More than the Legitimacy Deficit

While it is true that the world looks very different in 2009 than it did in 1945, it would be a mistake to begin reform efforts with changes in the governance structure of international institutions. The aim is laudable, but "Who rules?" is one of the perennially difficult of all the questions in world politics, and it is frequently perceived as zero-sum. An effort to reform the UN Security Council first will get bogged down in regional rivalries as China vetoes Japan, Argentina blocks Brazil, and so on. Similarly, reweighting the voting at the IMF will prove immensely controversial in Europe, as would removing countries from the G-8. Such initiatives will simply suck up all of the oxygen and leave no room for other reforms that are arguably much more important.

The 1940s show that major foreign policy initiatives stood a greater chance of success when they were a response to major and immediate problems—such as the collapse of the European economy, Soviet intervention on the Northern Tier, the need for Franco-German cooperation to facilitate German rearmament—than when they anticipated those problems. Therefore the United States should prioritize institutional reform that is specifically targeted to modern problems like climate change, the management of global capital flows, nuclear proliferation, and so on. Of these, the greatest scope for institutional innovation lies in the area of climate change and the global economy. The first is a concern that simply was not imagined in the 1940s, while the second has changed so fundamentally as to raise real questions about the relevance of the organizations created at the end of World War II. Over time, legitimacy concerns can be addressed as new institutions are created.

Manage Expectations for Policy Planning, Specifically and Generally

The 1940s demonstrate that it is impossible to implement a strategy as sophisticated, rich, and controversial as Kennan's from the perch of policy planning. As noted earlier, Kennan lobbied hard for a balance-of-power approach to the Soviet Union, opposing both universal institutions and the Truman Doctrine in turn. To draw a parallel, try to imagine Henry Kissinger in the same position serving a secretary of state and a president who did not share his vision. The only way in which an approach like Kennan's or Kissinger's can

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stand any chance of success is if its strongest advocates occupy the highest possible positions in the foreign policymaking process, and even then it would require a nontrivial dollop of bureaucratic skill. Grand strategic change must reflect the passions and interests of the president. Otherwise, it must articulate an overwhelming consensus among the foreign policy decisionmakers within the government. It has never succeeded as a minority viewpoint from outside the Oval Office.

More generally, the ability of the United States to shape international institutions will be more limited than it was in the 1940s. The Bretton Woods order was largely the creation of the world's two major economic powers, which happened to be the United States and Great Britain, with negotiations tilted heavily in favor of the former. Today, America's economic peers are not necessarily her political allies and will not feel the need to defer to Washington's will without proper and meaningful consultation. Therefore, there can be no 100-day plan announced on day one because the United States cannot unilaterally remake multilateralism. Instead, the next president should lead an international conversation about how to reform the architecture of international cooperation.

Conclusion

A number of the other chapters in this book point out that it's not the plans but the planning that really matters. Bruce Jentleson sums this up when he favorably quotes Eisenhower's remark, "The plans are nothing but the planning is everything." Of course, it always makes sense to devote systematic thought to key strategic challenges, but it is also worth pointing out some limitations.

The distinction between planning and plans is more artificial in diplomacy than it is in the military, for two reasons. First, military plans are often not implemented until the president makes a conscious decision to launch military action. However, diplomatic plans are frequently implemented on a rolling basis from a very early stage in the planning process—diplomats take a certain tack in negotiations and other avenues are closed off. During World War II, this meant the pursuit of a universal order and the rejection of other options. Therefore, in diplomacy, the plans and the planning are linked to a far greater degree than is true in military planning. Second, the failure of a military plan is frequently more observable than the failure of a diplomatic plan. In war, an invasion may be repelled, assets may be lost, and ground may be conceded, but in diplomacy failure can come a drop at a time but be no less lethal as a result.

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In this chapter I have argued that many of the strategic mistakes in the 1940s stem from a series of false assumptions that constrained and distorted the strategic planning process. Planning is indispensable, but only if it is not flawed by design. Therefore the challenge that policymakers face is to get the process right—to ensure that strategic thinkers are encouraged to be practical and flexible enough to challenge prevailing assumptions and adjust to changing circumstances, not to allow grand plans to be a substitute for traditional bilateral diplomacy, to build domestic support for foreign policy, to address real problems and crises rather than seek utopia, and to have modest expectations.

The shortcomings in U.S. postwar planning were understood decades ago. In the 1950s and 1960s scholars such as Kennan, Kissinger, and Hans Morgenthau argued that during World War II, and immediately following its conclusion, American postwar planning was beset by idealism and naïveté, that the United States did not pay enough attention to material power between 1942 and 1947, and that its later strategy of containment went too far in its universalism. This interpretation, at least the part leading up to 1947, was brutally attacked and began to disappear when the traditionalist-revisionist-postrevisionist cold war debate was joined in the 1970s. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the transformation was completed. Structural realists began to use American strategy as the poster child for state behavior while liberal scholars praised U.S. farsightedness, particularly with respect to its attitude toward institutions, which played a crucial role in containment's eventual success.

The result is that Kennan, Morgenthau, and Kissinger's critique has been forgotten, even though it has been strengthened by the release of evidence from the Soviet archives, which shows Stalin taking advantage of American naïveté. That the U.S. record is mixed should not be surprising; the times were trying, by any standard, and the country was new to playing such a pivotal global role. There is as much to be learned from the failures as from the successes, which means that a clear-headed assessment of the moment of creation, as Dean Acheson put it, is long overdue.

Notes

1. For example, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War* (Princeton University Press, 2001); G. John Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Cornell University Press, 2002). Also see Peter Beinart, *The Good Fight; Why Liberals and*

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Only Liberals Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again (New York: HarperCollins, 2006). For an account of how President Bush and his critics tried to embrace Truman, see James Goldgeier and Derek Chollet, "The Truman Standard" *American Interest* 1, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 107–11.

2. See Harley Notter, *Postwar Foreign Policy Preparation, 1939–1945* (Washington: Department of State, 1950); Robert A. Divine, *Second Chance; The Triumph of Internationalism in America during World War II* (New York: Atheneum, 1967); Patrick Hearden, *Architects of Globalism: Building a New World Order during World War II* (University of Arkansas Press, 2002).

3. Cordell Hull, address before Congress regarding the Moscow Conference, November 18, 1943, in *U.S. Department of State Bulletin* IX, no. 230 (November 20, 1943): 343.

4. John Foster Dulles, "A North American Contribution to World Order," speech to the 3rd Conference on Canadian-American Affairs, June 20, 1939 (John Foster Dulles Papers [JFDP], Seely Mudd Library, Princeton University, Box 289); Dulles, "America's Role in World Affairs," Address to the National Council of Young Men's Christian Associations of Detroit, October 28, 1939 (JFDP, Box 289); Dulles, address at the Second Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, Penn., March 12, 1941 (JFDP, Box 290).

5. Dulles, "America's Role in World Affairs."

6. What is perhaps more surprising than the intransigence of politicians is the intransigence of scholars. The Bush years saw a great debate on grand strategy, but it is hard to think of any grand strategist who radically changed his or her position as the world changed. "The world has changed profoundly, and this proves that I was right all along" sums up the mood.

7. Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Knopf, 2008),

8. The best account of this dynamic is by Richard Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and Internal Security 1946–1948* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

9. Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 743.

10. Harold James, "Globalization, Empires, and Natural Law," *International Affairs* 84, no. 3 (2008): 423.

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