Book Reviews

Kagan, Robert. *The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900-1941*. New York: Knopf, 2021.

Could the United States have done more to safeguard global security in the first half of the twentieth century? Further, how did American insular thinking contribute to the breakdown of world order during this time? Robert Kagan seeks to answer these questions in his book, *The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900-1941*. Part of Kagan's trilogy on U.S. foreign policy history, this book begins after the War of 1898, where the first volume, *Dangerous Nation*, ends and takes the reader to the American entry into World War II. These years, says Kagan, brought the United States into the ranks of the world powers and forced Americans to engage with world affairs, however reluctantly. Kagan leads the reader through a series of key events – the colonization of the Philippines, Woodrow Wilson's internationalism, and Franklin Roosevelt's tactful diplomacy, to name a few – to articulate where U.S. intervention made an important impact around the world. In just about every case, however, the United States retreated from using its full power to uphold the liberal world order and deter aggressive foreign states. Kagan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a devout supporter of liberal interventionism, contends that the United States could and should have used its ascendant economic, political, and military power to "preserve the peace in Europe" and confront the "have-not powers" that came to plunder the world in war (220). Instead, Americans, politicians and public alike, rested on their "historic traditions" of isolation and refused to acknowledge the role they now played as a world power (464). Only when war was thrust upon them did Americans come to accept the inextricable link between world affairs and their interests. Readable and incisive, *The Ghost at the Feast* offers the casual reader of U.S. history a view into how global peace was lost during this tumultuous time.

Kagan succeeds in describing the fraught nature of the nation's overseas imperial ventures at the dawn of the twentieth century. He brings in the qualms that the business class and academic community had towards the taking of the Philippines and Cuba. Further, Kagan paints U.S. operations in Latin America and the Far East as critical to the interests of the nation. However, the true strength of the book lies in Kagan's examinations of two wartime presidents: Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. Kagan examines the ideological grounds on which Woodrow Wilson kept the United States out of, and then plunged headlong into, the Great War. Wilson was committed to balancing the nation's overseas interests with that of its diverse and conflicted population. With many wishing for the president to keep the United States out of war, Wilson held to that conviction until German brutalities and unrestricted submarine warfare threatened the liberal world order and "thrust" the nation into war (182). Kagan deftly traces how Wilson moved from the champion of neutrality to that of internationalism, giving the reader a stimulating outlook of Wilson's decision-making vis-a-viz Germany and the Allied Powers. Likewise, Kagan presents the Franklin Roosevelt administration's battle against anti-interventionists in an accurate light. For Roosevelt, who was more prone to internationalist thought than many of his political peers, the thought of rival powers swallowing up large spheres of influence was unacceptable and he moved the nation further into the camp of the democratic powers until the totalitarian states brought war to him.

These strengths notwithstanding, *The Ghost at the Feast* is not free of flaws. First, Kagan places too great an emphasis on the notion of American isolationism. Kagan argues that, when it came to the collapsing world order in Europe and Asia, the United States elected to withdraw from any substantive involvement and opted for isolationism. Sure, Americans were wary of getting involved in European imbroglios after the calamity of the Great War. Many U.S. citizens also remained aloof from developments in the Far East or the European continent for they were, as Kagan states, the beneficiaries of the liberal world order and had no

direct threats to their stateside security. That does not mean, however, that the United States was isolationist. Throughout the Western Hemisphere, the United States exercised colonial power, meddled in the affairs of sovereign states, and even held several under occupation. This was done for a variety of reasons, including to enhance the U.S. strategic position vis-a-viz other Great Powers. Though one may commend Kagan's brief treatment of U.S. intervention in Panama, Cuba, or Nicaragua, he, by and large, considers these intrusions to be less foreign affairs than backyard upkeep. Kagan, in an attempt to explain the lack of U.S. force in Asia and Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, claims that Americans had a historic propensity to resort only to violence in the name of self-defense (464). Any scholar of U.S. relations with Native Americans, Latin America, or the history of the early republic's expansion could easily refute such a notion. Further, Washington, D.C. was never disinterested in developments across Asia or Europe. As Kagan even states, successive administrations brokered arms limitation treaties, restructured European war debt, and took measures to uphold the peace short of war (335). With business interests the world over and colonial outposts in Asia to protect, the United States was never truly isolationist toward these regions during the first half of the twentieth century.

Yet Kagan insists that the United States failed to uphold the liberal world order during the world wars. In so doing, he overstates the role that U.S. power could have played in restraining the fascist states. The United States, in Kagan's view, could have stabilized post-WWI Europe by channeling its newfound economic primacy into rebuilding, and not punishing, Germany while keeping "a few thousand troops in Europe – no more than it kept in the Philippines" (302, 467). Whereas the former assertion holds some water, the latter is fantastic. First, the U.S. garrison in the Philippines never totaled less than 10,932 troops between the world wars, according to the Annual Reports of the War Department. Second, as a U.S. possession, the Philippines held a vastly different strategic mandate than continental Europe. Washington was responsible for its defense and needed to maintain its position there to assert its interests in resource-rich Asia – a region that even Kagan knows required more force in place (333). Kagan's confidence that a small armed U.S. force in Europe would have deterred Germany and Italy is relatively baseless. A 20,000-man American occupation force remained in the Rhineland until 1923, when domestic pressures called them home. Larger British and French forces stayed until 1930. Those very domestic pressures to refrain from permanent commitments, only exacerbated when the Great Depression caused most powers to constrict to their own economic blocs, made it exorbitantly difficult for any U.S. president to convince Congress to deploy a force outside U.S. possessions. These very factors led to the recall of Army units at China's Tientsin district in the 1930s, whose presence did not deter Japanese aggression. How, then, could a small U.S. force have done much to keep the peace in Europe?

The Ghost at the Feast is suitable for lay readers interested in U.S. foreign relations during the twentieth century. Though scholars may find some of its claims dubious and easy to counter, any work aimed at broadening the history of the United States in the world merits attention by those who study it. This reviewer, like many, awaits the final installment of this trilogy to see how Kagan treats the United States as the global hegemon.

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