THE END OF THE AMERICAN ERA

U. S. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

CHARLES A. KUPCHAN

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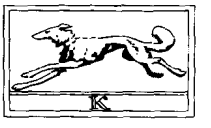

A Council on Foreign Relations Book

ALFRED A. KNOPF New York

2002

THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF

Distributed by Random House, Inc., New York.
www.aaknopf.com

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Princeton University Press to reproduce figures on pages 91 and 92 from Shiller, Robert J. *Irrational Exuberance.* Copyright © 2000 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kupchan, Charles.
The end of the American era : U.S. foreign policy and the geopolitics of the twenty-first century / Charles A. Kupchan.—1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-375-41215-8 (alk. paper)
1. United States—Foreign relations. 2. United States—Foreign relations—1989– I. Title.

JZ1480 .K87 2002
327.73—dc21 2002018443

Manufactured in the United States of America
First Edition

To my family

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to numerous institutions and individuals for the contributions they made to this book. Georgetown University and the Council on Foreign Relations have been my dual intellectual homes for the better part of a decade. Together they offered an ideal environment in which to write a book that attempts to bridge the growing divide between the academic and policy communities. The Council on Foreign Relations provided the primary financial support for this project, appointing me as the Whitney H. Shepardson Fellow for 2000–2002. Georgetown contributed additional funding and granted me a sabbatical leave to carry out the research and writing. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the United States Institute of Peace.

Two individuals played a special role in encouraging me to undertake this book—James Chace and Leslie Gelb. I first met James Chace in the late 1980s. Over the course of the following decade, as we became fast friends and intellectual kin, he steered me toward this project and then was a trusted guide from start to finish. For his good cheer, tireless spirit, and steady advice, I am deeply grateful.

Les Gelb, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, began prodding me along well before I had even conceived of this book. During long walks in Central Park, he repeatedly exhorted me to think bigger and push harder, insisting, between puffs on his cigar, that it was time for the "great foreign-policy novel" of the day. Whether or not I have succeeded in meeting his expectations, his friendship and insight are much appreciated.

When this book was in draft form, I presented it in a series of seminars at the Council on Foreign Relations in both New York and Washington, D.C. James Chace did an excellent job of chairing the seminars in New York. I am indebted to Stephen Walt for chairing the Washington meetings and steering the discussion in just the right direction. The participants in these seminars were Robert Art, Warren Bass, Max Boot, Lael Brainard, Ralph Buultjens, Fraser Cameron, Kurt Campbell, Steven Clemons, Jean-Marc Coicaud, Ivo Daalder, Terry Deibel, I. M. Destler, Frances FitzGerald, David Fromkin, Alton Frye, Michael Getler, James Goldgeier, Paul Golob, Stephanie Golob, Rose Gottemoeller, John Ikenberry, Robert Jervis, Lawrence Korb, Steven Kull, James Lindsay, Robert Manning, Jessica Mathews, Charles William Maynes, Michael McFaul, Karl Meyer, Henry Nau, John Newhouse, Suzanne Nossel, Joseph Nye, Jr., Nouriel Roubini, Allison Silver, Jack Snyder, Fritz Stern, Daniel Tarullo, Cynthia Tindell, Richard Ullman, Enzo Viscusi, Joris Vos, Martin Walker, Jacob Weisberg, and Melvin Williams. A meeting of the Council's national program in Dallas, chaired by Rena Pederson, also provided excellent feedback. I am grateful to all the participants in these seminars for their time and effort. It is an author's dream to benefit from such a talented group of critics.

I would also like to thank the following individuals for commenting on the manuscript in draft form: Caroline Atkinson, Dick Barnebey, Jonathan Davidson, Jeff Legro, Joseph Lepgold, John McNeill, David Painter, Nicholas Rizopoulos, Howard Rosen, Don Rosenthal, Debra Singer, and Peter Trubowitz. In addition, I am grateful to my colleagues and students at Georgetown and the Council on Foreign Relations, who were always ready to let me try out new ideas as they were taking shape.

David Stevens, my research assistant at the Council, was a true partner in this enterprise. He constantly fed me fresh material and explored new arguments, anticipating where the unfolding plot was likely to head. When I ran up against a historical or conceptual obstacle, I turned first to David—and more often than not he had a solution. He regularly had the pleasure of arriving at his desk in the morning to find at least a dozen voice messages from me, left the evening before as I sought in vain to trace down a fact or resolve a puzzle. I am grateful to David for his assistance and commitment. He, in turn, seems not to have suffered excessively, as he has now gone off to do a doctorate in international relations. I would also like to thank

Jason Davidson and Mira Sucharov, former graduate students at Georgetown; Shane Smith, my former assistant at the Council; and Jamie Fly, my new assistant at the Council, for help with research.

It was a pleasure to work with Ash Green, my editor at Knopf. From our initial encounter to go over the book proposal to his final edits on the manuscript, his counsel was as gracious as it was wise. The book benefited enormously from his experience and skill. Knopf's Jonathan Fasman, Ellen Feldman, and Luba Ostashevsky did a superb job of smoothly guiding the manuscript through the publication process. I would also like to thank my literary agents, Suzanne Gluck, Kris Dahl, and Liz Farrell.

Final thanks go to my family. My mother, Nancy Kupchan Sonis, my brother, Clifford Kupchan, and my stepfather, Richard Sonis, were there for me throughout, providing unlimited and unconditional support and encouragement—what an author most needs amid writing's more trying moments. My father, S. Morris Kupchan, although no longer with us, was always by my side in spirit.

Charles A. Kupchan
Washington, D.C.
July 2002

Preface

On September 11, 2001, terrorists turned hijacked airliners into guided missiles, destroying the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center as well as a sizable section of the Pentagon. The attacks killed thousands and dealt a deft blow to prime symbols of America's economic and military might. The searing images of destruction left Americans with a new, and perhaps inescapable, sense of vulnerability that will permanently affect how the United States interacts with the rest of the world.

The tragic events of September 2001 served as a wake-up call to America. From the end of the Cold War until terror struck the heart of New York and Washington, the United States had been steadily losing interest in foreign affairs. Elected officials and the public alike had tuned out, lulled into complacency by American primacy and the presumed inviolability of the homeland. The media had all but stopped covering foreign news. Congress rarely found time to debate foreign policy, with crucial issues of the day—controlling the proliferation of nuclear weapons, bringing peace to the Balkans, protecting the environment—regularly subjected to partisan infighting rather than sound deliberation. America's allies watched with a mix of consternation and dismay as the world's only superpower appeared to have lost its way.

Not so after September 11. Defending the homeland and combating terrorism became top national priorities. Newspapers were filled with foreign reporting, and many television channels devoted around-the-clock coverage to America's "new war." Democrats and Republicans closed ranks, providing a bipartisan spirit long absent from

Washington. And America reached out to others, apparently forsaking its increasingly unilateralist bent in favor of rejuvenating fraying alliances and striking new partnerships. One commentator after another invoked Pearl Harbor as the appropriate analogy. September 11, 2001, like December 7, 1941, was a historical turning point, driving home to Americans that they live in a perilous world requiring engagement, vigilance, and sacrifice.

It is, however, an illusion to assume that America's new sense of vulnerability has put its foreign policy back on course. On the contrary, by riveting the country's attention and resources on combating terrorism and defending the homeland, the events of September 11 and the bioterrorism that followed make it even less likely that the United States will bring into focus more profound, even if more distant, threats to America's well-being. Bolstering homeland security is certainly a must. Despite numerous warnings, the United States failed to take adequate steps to prevent terrorist attacks against its territory—and it paid a heavy price for the complacency. The Bush administration has justifiably been working hard to find adequate remedy. But this task should not be allowed to stand in the way of efforts to address the central and much more dangerous challenge that lies ahead—the return of rivalry among the world's main centers of power.

America's lack of concern with great-power rivalry is understandable. The opening of the twenty-first century marks the triumph of the democratic ideals upon which the United States was founded and for which it spilled much blood. Some 120 of the almost 200 countries in the world now have democratic governments. Communism, the main rival to liberal democracy during the twentieth century, has been turned back, its adherents struggling to maintain their grip in a few holdouts such as China, North Korea, and Cuba. And the United States itself is in a position of unchallenged dominance. America's military and its national economy are second to none; no other country even comes close. In combination with its seemingly unlimited capacity for technological innovation and its cultural appeal, these assets provide the United States an unprecedented level of global primacy.

As they survey this landscape, most of America's strategists remain convinced not only that U.S. primacy is here to stay, but also that a lasting era of great-power peace has finally arrived. The ongoing spread of liberal democracy and capitalism are leading to the "end of history," the obsolescence of major war, and a world in which satisfied

nations will learn to live happily alongside each other. Disaffected individuals and the fringe groups to which they gravitate may well continue efforts to do harm to America and its partners. But assuming that the world's democracies can contain, if not eliminate, terrorism, they will be headed for a peaceful and prosperous future.

Such confidence about the longevity of the American era is not only misplaced, but also dangerous. America appears to be committing the same error as most other great nations that have come before it—mistaking for a more permanent peace the temporary quiescence that usually follows resolution of a major geopolitical divide. The decade that followed the Cold War's end was admittedly one of bounty and peace for America. The world's major players have been at rest, contemplating their next moves. And the current dominance of the United States is no illusion; by any measure, America is in a class by itself.

But the international system is fickle and fragile, and can come apart with remarkable speed. In 1910, Europeans were confident of the peace-causing benefits of economic interdependence and the irrationality of armed conflict. By the late summer of 1914, Europe's great powers were at war. The United States enjoyed prosperity and optimism during the second half of the 1920s. By 1933, the world was well into a painful depression, Hitler was in control of Germany, and the century was fast headed toward its darkest moments. In early 1945, the United States was busy building a postwar partnership with the Soviet Union, U.S. forces were rapidly demobilizing, and the American people were looking to the United Nations to preserve world peace. Within a few short years, the Cold War was under way and the United States and Soviet Union were threatening each other with nuclear annihilation.

The reemergence of rivalry and conflict among the world's major states is by no means foreordained. But there is no better way to ensure its return than for America to set its sights on terrorism and presume that great-power peace is here to stay. Instead, America should realize that its preponderance and the stability it breeds are already beginning to slip away. Europe is in the midst of a revolutionary process of political and economic integration that is gradually eliminating the importance of its internal borders and centralizing authority in Brussels. The European Union's collective wealth will soon rival that of the United States. Russia will ultimately rebound and may well take its place in an integrating Europe. Asia is not far

behind. China is already a regional presence and its economy is growing apace. And Japan, the world's second-largest economy, will eventually climb out of recession and gradually expand its political and military influence.

At the same time that challengers to its dominance are on the rise, the United States is fast losing interest in playing the role of global protector of last resort. The U.S. did pursue a remarkably activist foreign policy during the 1990s; America was busy stopping ethnic slaughter in the Balkans, hemming in Saddam Hussein, keeping the peace in East Asia, working hard to resolve festering conflicts in the Middle East and Northern Ireland, all the while managing a globalized international economy. But American internationalism was at a high-water mark during the last decade and is already on the wane.

During his first few months in office, President George W. Bush made amply clear that he intended to rein in the country's commitments and focus on matters closer to home. It was no accident that his first foreign trip was to visit President Vicente Fox of Mexico and that Bush held his first state dinner in honor of Fox. Bush also revealed his unilateralist proclivities, early on announcing his intention to back away from many of the institutions and pacts that America itself had helped establish to preserve international order. Moreover, the internationalism of the 1990s was sustained by a remarkably strong and durable economic expansion. An economy suffering through leaner times means a foreign policy that loses its outward-looking activism.

For many, the events of September 2001 arrested this trend, convincing the Bush administration and the American public of the need for global engagement. As Andrew Sullivan, the former editor of *The New Republic,* wrote only a few days after the attack, "We have been put on notice that every major Western city is now vulnerable." "For the United States itself," Sullivan continued, "this means one central thing. Isolationism is dead."[1] Others were confident that the threat of terrorism would reawaken not just U.S. internationalism, but a liberal brand—one committed to multilateral action and reliance on international institutions. Terrorism poses a collective threat and thus should elicit a collective response.

It is by no means clear, however, that terrorism inoculates the United States against the allure of either isolationism or unilateralism. In the long run, America's leaders may well find the country's security better served by reducing its overseas commitments and raising protective barriers than by chasing terrorists through the moun-

tains of Afghanistan. The United States has a strong tradition dating back to the founding fathers of seeking to cordon itself off from foreign troubles, an impulse that could well be reawakened by the rising costs of global engagement. America's initial response to the attacks of September 11, after all, was to close its borders with Mexico and Canada, ground the nation's air traffic, and patrol the country's coasts with warships and jet fighters. Americans also have a long-standing aversion to multilateral institutions, stemming from an unwillingness to compromise the freedom of unilateral initiative. Accordingly, when the United States does act, it may well lash out on its own, alienating the partners that it will need to help tame an increasingly divided global system. The liberal internationalism that has sustained America's global leadership since World War II is under siege from both isolationist and unilateralist extremes.

The American era is alive and well, but the rise of alternative centers of power and a declining and unilateralist U.S. internationalism will ensure that it comes undone as this new century progresses—with profound geopolitical consequences. The stability and order that devolve from American preponderance will gradually be replaced by renewed competition for primacy. The unstoppable locomotive of globalization will run off its tracks as soon as Washington is no longer at the controls. Pax Americana is poised to give way to a much more unpredictable and dangerous global environment. And the chief threat will come not from the likes of Osama bin Laden, but from the return of traditional geopolitical rivalry.

As a matter of urgency, America needs to begin to prepare itself and the rest of the world for this uncertain future. To wait until American dominance is already gone would be to squander the enormous opportunity that comes with primacy. America must devise a grand strategy for the transition to a world of multiple power centers now, while it still has the luxury of doing so. This is the central challenge of *The End of the American Era.*

Although this book is primarily about where America and the global system erected under its watch are headed, much of it focuses on the past. I develop each of the book's main arguments by first exploring those historical periods that can best shed light on the nature of our contemporary predicament. This reliance on the past may seem odd for a book that is about the future. But the indeterminacy of the current moment provides no other option. Unless put in historical context, the present offers only a snapshot of a world in the

midst of profound transition. Unless anchored in the past, analysis of the present is likely to be of only fleeting relevance and risks overlooking the potent sources of change that run beneath the surface and become apparent only in historical relief.

Using the past as a guide to the future admittedly entails its own analytic dangers. The spread of democracy has unquestionably altered the character of life both within and among nations. Digital technology and its impact on everything from weaponry to communications to commerce surely make it hard to compare the travails of the Roman Empire during the fourth century with the challenges facing America today. The aim is therefore to sift and weigh, to use the past selectively, and to be on the watch for historical lessons that might mislead rather than illuminate. Furthermore, there are certain lasting truths about world affairs that endure because they are rooted in the human condition. It is these truths that provide a sober warning of the need to be on guard against the return of great-power rivalry and the bloodshed that accompanies it. But it is also these truths that provide cause for optimism about our ability to learn from history and avoid repeating the costly mistakes that have come before.

The central challenge of the future, I contend, will be the same as in the past—managing relations among contending centers of power. This claim runs counter to prevailing wisdom, which identifies terrorism, overpopulation and disease in the developing world, ethnic conflict, international crime, and environmental degradation as the purported security challenges of the twenty-first century. By focusing on a more traditional threat, I by no means intend to dismiss or trivialize this new security agenda. On the contrary, I devote significant attention to terrorism, collapsing states, and poverty in the pages that follow. However, these concerns may well pale in comparison to the dangers that will reemerge if America embraces the illusion that its primacy is here to stay and that more traditional geopolitical challenges are gone for good.

This book is thus meant to be a corrective to a national debate that has gone seriously off course. The costs will be high should the United States fail to adjust its foreign policy to a changing international system. The benefits of getting it right are equally substantial. Only if America and the rest of the world start imagining life after Pax Americana now will they have the time and foresight to manage peacefully the turbulent years that lie ahead. Perhaps then the United States can bequeath the best of the American era to the world that comes next.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles A. Kupchan is a professor of international relations in the School of Foreign Service and Government Department at Georgetown University, and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He served on the National Security Council during the first Clinton administration. He lives in Washington, D.C.

Contents

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