

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 330 | Does Great Power Equal Responsibility? America and the World from WWI to Ukraine with Robert Kagan

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Realignment.

Have a run. Welcome back to the show. Quick word before we jump in. The Realignment is brought to you by our subscribers to Supercast. If you'd like to support the show, get access to our exclusive content, including Q&A slash Ask Me Anything episodes, where Sager and I answer audience questions and take comments, bonus discussion, episodes with me and Sager, and more, go to [realignment.supercast.com](https://realignment.supercast.com) or click the link at the top of the podcast show notes in your podcast player. On to today's episode of speaking with Dr. Robert Kagan, the senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of *The Ghost at the Feast, America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900 to 1941*, the second in his *Dangerous Nation* trilogy on America's evolving relationship with the world since the country's founding. I know listeners enjoy hearing about how the present compares with the past, especially the 1890s and turn of the 20th century. From the 1900s to 1941, from the Spanish-American War to World War I and the lead up to World War II, the U.S. replayed debates, including non-interventionism, how we respond to a collapsing world order, and the degree to which America and the Western Hemisphere are insulated from events in Europe and Asia that all rhyme and echo with what's happening today. Robert definitely is on the engagement side of these debates, so folks who disagree should know we'll have differing perspectives

on the show in coming weeks. Robert's book is available on our bookshop, along with his other recent entries and other books of recent guests. Secondly, I'm going to write a bit about this episode in the sub-stack this week, so you can also click the link in the show notes to get access to the realignment's growing newsletter. It's going to be really stepping up in coming weeks. All that said, huge thanks to Lincoln Network for supporting our work. Hope you all enjoy this conversation. Robert Kagan, welcome to the realignment.

Thank you. Great to be here. Let's start with a massive cliché, goes to the feast.

Second part of your *Dangerous Nation* trilogy covers 1900 to 1941. If there was any specific period, dynamic, or year that you would say rhymes the most with January 2023 America, or would that be? Dynamic could be post-World War I exhaustion. It could be debates over isolationism in the 1930s, or it could be, let's say 1938 or 1914. How do you think about that? It's a good question. It's not an easy question to answer because, of course, the situations are never completely parallel. But if you're talking about the mood of the country, I would say we're more in the latter half of the 1930s in terms of the way Americans are maybe shifting their view of the world. In both today and in that period, you had a long period of disillusionment with a previous war. In that case, it was World War I, which Americans for a variety of reasons decided was a mistake and they wish they hadn't gotten into it. There was a lot of revisionist history about how America was pulled into World War I and conspiracy theories about how bankers and munitions makers dragged Americans into World War I against their will, which is, of course, nonsense because Americans went very enthusiastically into World War I, whether they're rightly or wrongly, they were certainly very enthusiastic. But there was a lot of sort of buyer's remorse. And to the point where, as I'm sure everyone remembers in the 1930s, the Congress passed the Neutrality Acts, which forbade providing any aid or assistance to either side in a conflict of belligerence, even if one side was, for instance, Mussolini, and the other side were the victims in Ethiopia. But the desire to keep the United States out of conflict was overwhelming. And then what happened, so which is not entirely dissimilar to the period we've

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been in since Americans turned against the Iraq War, which is roughly the latter part of the 2000s and certainly with the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and in subsequent decades.

But in the 1930s, as today, actions by other powers, in those days, it was Italy, it was Germany, it was Japan. Today, it's Russia and China had sort of awakened in Americans an anxiety about the state of the international system and whether the things that they believe in, the things that they have been generally standing for are at risk. And so what I think we've seen in recent months, really since February of 2022, is sort of moving away from this, we need to stay out of the world to maybe there are things the United States really does need to do in the world in order to maintain this general level of peace, prosperity, and democracy around the world that Americans benefit from and have benefited from for many decades.

You know, as you're articulating a mentality change amongst Americans in the late 1930s, it brings to mind how you've written, if you really look at FDR's policy, let's say from 1937 onwards, it's very clearly within the constraints of those neutrality acts, placing the US on the side of the democracies against the quote unquote bandits that you reference FDR, the bandit nations. But that was a very, and once again, you're writing the history here, so correct, like the quick telling I'm giving here, but that's that's a very almost individualistic decision that the president is making, that's within an administration, there isn't a big foreign policy debate around these matters. You yourself have said we could use a foreign policy debate today. So as you're looking at both this present moment and that 1930s period, how do we actually come about with quote unquote like foreign policy consensus, right? Because it wasn't as if there was actually a debate in 1938. I don't think a debate in 1938 would have been particularly productive, given the mood of the country at that moment. So how should we think about that? Well, I mean, actually 1938 was about the time when the debate really began in earnest. And what I point out in the book, I think it's true is that it actually was events in Germany, and particularly Kristallnacht, which was the sort of the pogrom against against Jews in Germany that led to the shattering of stores and the arrest of Jews, etc. So shocked many Americans that it began the discussion as to whether the United States maybe needed to get more involved. As you suggest, it was a very slow moving process. And what Franklin Roosevelt himself referred to as the great debate did not occur until really 1940, after the fall of France in the summer of 1940. Today we are, you know, I would say it's been such a long time since we had a sort of prominent great debate about foreign policy that this would be this is a good time to do it because Americans tend to like all people, by the way, they tend to respond to events. The events spark certain feelings and reactions in them, but they are often pretty unexamined. And so a lot of what America does and does not do in foreign policy is not the subject for a sort of searching critique and discussion. It usually is reactive. The example I see these days is our response to China. You know, for several decades after the end of the Cold War, the general view of China was that it was a fairly benevolent situation. They were evolving in a certain direction, maybe more liberal, maybe more peaceful, etc. And I think most Americans, you know, they didn't particularly were fond of the Chinese government, but they also weren't worried about it. And what we've seen now is an almost complete reversal of that attitude. And I would say we have almost gotten to the point of almost of paranoia about China. And this is a pretty common quality, I think, in the American public discourse. By the way, it could be a common

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quality in any democratic politics discourse, because democracies behave differently in the world than autocracies do, for obvious reasons. But for Americans, there is a tendency to go from a relative indifference to panic overnight, without stopping in the middle to say, okay, where are we? What are the dangers? What are the risks? What do we need to do? And I think a little bit more care taken. Shifting a position makes sense when the facts change, when the circumstances change. But I think we need to have a better understanding rather than just reacting out of fear all the time, which I think is very much a driving factor in American foreign policy. Yeah, I was listening to another podcast you'd appeared on to prep. And as you pointed out, the dynamic of instantaneous reaction can be unproductive in the American political sense, but it's also frankly, deeply difficult when it comes to our adversaries perspective. So if it's, you know, al-Qaeda and Asala bin Laden in 2001, the expectation was not the global war on terror, given the September 11th attacks, you know, the expectation, at least the gamble on the Japanese side is not, you know, in 1941, that you would get the response that you saw, you know, when it comes to the Germans, you know, in 1915, 1917, with the U-boat campaign. So how do our actual adversaries handle the US stepping back, and then just instantaneously, almost to the danger of overreach, like reengaging? Well, the answer to how they handle it is catastrophically, usually, because I think that there was a pattern in American history that you're describing. I sort of tend to call it the America trap, where for long periods of time, the American public and the American government express relative indifference to what's going on in the world, even though it's pretty clear where an aggressor is heading, but Americans don't think that they care, except that when the aggressor finally makes his move, whether it's, you know, Slobodan Milosevic in Kosovo, whether it's Saddam Hussein in Kuwait, or whether it's, you know, Japan and Germany in World War I, and then Germany and World War I, you know, they are shocked, as you say, to define that the American people have actually decided that they will not tolerate any of this. So Americans give the impression that they will tolerate it, or that they're weak, or that they're not really interested in the rest of the world, only to discover that they are when the event happens. And this is, it's a kind of a trap, because countries start, they have aggressive ambitions, they think they're going to be able to accomplish them, they're overly optimistic about their prospects, because they're resuming the United States, doesn't have what it takes to prevent them. And then they wind up running into the full force of the United States, which, since the beginning of the 20th century, the United States really has been the world's dominant power. We haven't, Americans haven't always acted like they're the world's dominant power, but the power reality is still what it is, whether Americans act that way or not. And it's that power reality that these other aggressors run into, ultimately, and much to their own, you know, disfavor. I really enjoyed your latest Foreign Affairs essay on the Ukraine War. Can you tell or illustrate the dynamic you just described through 2014 Crimean Invasion? 2016, I can't remember President Obama's direct quote, but the raise your hand if you think it's worth fighting over Crimean and the Dumbass. And then our actual response, which when Russia wants to bigger invasion, because I think it's the perfect illustration of how this dynamic could almost not purposely lure Putin into overreaching.

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Exactly. And I would go even further back than you just did. I mean, you could easily start with his sort of semi-invasion of Georgia in 2008, where the Western response was pretty mild, I would say. He didn't really, you know, take over all of Georgia, but he did use force to separate two regions that the Georgians considered to be theirs, which are now autonomous regions, then followed by what happened in Syria in 2013. And we all remember, I think, the famous red line that President Obama drew on the use of chemical weapons by Assad. Ultimately, the United States did not take action. It also did not take and partly out of fear of what the Russian response would be. And it also didn't take action as Russia moved its own forces into Syria in a way that had not been before. And so I think the pattern that Putin saw was an America that was sort of out of this business. And by the way, there's no reason why he shouldn't have come to that conclusion. If you look at the American foreign policy discussion from 2008 onward, it is a constant refrain that America is too involved in the world and doesn't want to get embroiled in another conflict. And as you rightly quote President Obama saying, you know, who wants to get into a war with Russia over part of Ukraine? And yet, here we are. We're virtual co-belligerents in that war, and we don't even know where it may lead. I think it's been the right policy, but it certainly is not the policy that we claimed, that Americans claimed was their intention. And so, yes, I would say it all came as quite a surprise, both to the Russians, but I would say maybe even to Americans as well, that they cared so much about a distant land where, let's be honest, American security, the American homeland is not at risk in Ukraine. What's at risk in Ukraine is the sort of well-being of a certain kind of international order that the United States has both created and benefited from, and that is what it is Americans seem to be willing, much to everyone's surprise, to still be willing to fight for. So as you're articulating this, I'm kind of wondering, it seems as if we're in this difficult situation, no matter which side of these debates you're in, where there's the restraintist instinct within the American body politic when it comes to foreign policy. I think folks should really think back and look at George W. Bush's 2000 presidential campaign. That's a critique of America in the 1990s as being too involved in the world, too engaged, then a year later, obviously, there's a famous foreign affairs essay that Condoleezza Rice wrote, but a year later, you're then seeing the global war on terror and expanding outward. So do we have a situation where restrainers win the debate between periods of action, or challenge, or the intersection of events, and then it tends to be interventionist who win once an event occurs? Is that just the somewhat unhealthy dynamic we've gotten into? Well, you could question whether one side of an argument is winning over another side of argument. These are intellectuals having debates in the pages of magazines that most Americans don't read with all due respect to both of us. I really think what you see is the reaction of the American public as a whole. The United States, the American public, and the American history has lent to a kind of schizophrenic approach to foreign policy. It's a schizophrenic approach that is entirely understandable, because if you think about the situation that Americans are in, and have been in for a very long time, the United States, certainly since the latter part of the 19th century, has been effectively invulnerable. No other nation is really capable of launching an invasion of the United States. It's almost impossible to imagine. That has been true for well over 125 years. So everything the United States does in the

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world to some extent is optional in the sense that it's not required for our very essence for the existence of the United States. Countries in Europe that have gone to war have been fighting for their very existence. Germans felt like they were fighting for their existence. Britons felt they were fighting for the French were fighting for their existence. The United States has never been in the conflict like that. The tendency to say, why do we care what happens 8,000 miles away from us when whatever else is true, it may be horrible, but it's never going to affect us except in a moral humanitarian sense. And so that is, I think, and to some extent, one of the default positions that Americans take on foreign policy. Why does it matter? That exists. That's a reality. The other reality, however, is Americans are also actually very expansive in their view of the world. The Americans have an ideology that is universalistic. It isn't that Americans think that freedom is for Americans and not for anybody else. It's a universal principle that Americans believe in. Americans are engaged heavily in the commerce of the world, which pulls them out. And America has a tremendous amount of power, and power brings all kinds of complications to a situation. If you're a weak nation and horrible things are happening overseas, you can say it's horrible, but what are we supposed to do about it? We can't do anything about it. And in a certain sense, that was the case for the United States back in the early 19th century. The American people in the early 19th century were very unhappy at the growth of tyranny and absolutist monarchies in Europe and the crushing of liberalism because there were liberal movements in Europe that were being crushed. Americans were very unhappy about that. They were very critical of it. But what were they going to do about it? They had no army to speak of. There was certainly not powers in Europe. Quick, quick, quick, quick interruption. I think this gets at the theme of the book. The first words of the book are power changes everything. If it's 1848 and the liberal revolutions are being put down by autocracies in Europe, it doesn't matter. It matters, but it doesn't matter what Americans think because Americans do not have power in that sense. Right. And so power brings both capability, but it also brings problems. So it's harder to stand by when, I think this would be true of individuals. If you know that you can save somebody and you choose not to, that itself is a moral decision. In a way, there is no avoiding the moral complexity of power. If you use power, you're going to engage in acts that can be conceived and probably are, at the very least, amoral, but perhaps even immoral. The use of power, it means killing people. It means horrible things come from the use of power, and yet the world is run by power. And so you have no choice but to wield power. But when you wield it, you're going to have the moral burdens that that carries. Also, if you're a very strong power like the United States and you don't wield it, you carry those moral burdens. And so a lot of this really boils down to, as I said, because Americans have a choice, every foreign policy that decision they make is morally fraught. And I think that is also something that distinguishes the United States, again, from a lot of other great powers, because if you are fighting your neighbor to the death, morality plays very little role in your judgments. You are fighting for survival. But when you were choosing to do things, the moral issues loomed very large for us. So as a people, I think we want to try to do the right thing all the time. And yet, knowing what the right thing to do is not easy. And every action you take has moral consequences, every action you take, and every action you don't take has moral consequences.

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You know, this is interesting, because this brings us back to, you know, your first book in this Trilogy, *Dangerous Nation*. You refer either, I think, in the intro to *Ghost at the Feast* or in your *Ford Affairs* piece to the United States in the 19th century as a realist country from like a foreign affairs like IR, International Relations Theory perspective, will ever you to explain, A, like what realism is, why you would describe the US at the time as a realist country, but then B, some of that kind of wonder when you're describing this power dynamic, power changing everything, how much of early 19th century America, Washington's farewell address, the United States does not go forth, you know, to seek monsters to destroy, no entangling alliances, like how much of that realist foreign policy perspective is, I think, inherent to America, or rather just a result of us not really having an option. So it's, you kind of get what I'm kind of getting at, how inherent, how inherent, how inherent is it to our character now that our power circumstances have changed? Well, I even want to chastise myself for using the term realism, because it's such a loaded, it's such a loaded term. And, and I, you know, the interesting thing about, you know, you quote, you're talking about Washington and Jefferson's warnings, and then ultimately John Quincy Adams warnings, you know, the thing that we need to remember about those is those were very much driven by circumstance. The United States in, when Washington gave his farewell address, was a very weak power, very vulnerable. And so it would have been, as we were discussing earlier, it would have been absurd to say, let's go conquer the world, let's go turn the world into a democracy, et cetera. That was just not one of the options. One of the options, the superpowers of those days were England and France, not the United States. And so a lot, but if you look at the other things that Washington said, and this is the thing I think is often forgotten, of course, in addition, he said, the day will come eventually when we will be able to, the phrase he uses is bid defiance to any power on the world. There was an enormous sense among American leaders at the time and the American public in general, that America was weak at that time, but it was not going to stay weak. It was going to be a major world power. They used the phrase *Hercules in the cradle*, et cetera. So even at the time, they knew that the day would come when America would behave differently than it had to behave at that period of peril and that time of the great vulnerability. What I was referring to was something slightly different, which is, what is realism? Realism, among other things, argues that ideology and belief should not be part of the farm policymaking decision process, that nations have a common set of interests and security and survival. In fact, beliefs are more likely to lead to conflict. And to some extent, realism was born after the religious wars of the 17th century, specifically the 30 years war, the devastated central Europe and what would later become Germany, which were religious wars. And therefore, it was not unreasonable to say, can we get the religion out of discussion here because it's leading to all kinds of horrors. But the reality is, is that belief and ideology are always a big part of every nation and every people's farm policy. People fight for their beliefs. The peculiar thing, also the awful thing about the United States in the 19th century, is that the United States was not a liberal power when it was a slave country, when it was a country that had slavery, because essentially the South was, in many respects, a totalitarian dictatorship. Not only did the South hold these millions of slaves in utter bondage and dominance, but whites in that society could also not speak freely because you couldn't criticize the institution of slavery. And so people were

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thrown in jail for that and censored. And at a certain point, they started censoring the mail from the North because they didn't want abolitionists sending literature down to the South, etc. So the United States could not possibly have been a power promoting liberalism in the 19th century when half the country was opposed to liberalism. Let's not forget, the South may have been quasi capitalist, but it was certainly anti-liberal. It was anti-freedom. It did not believe in universal rights. It did not believe in the Declaration of Independence. What Lincoln conceived the North side in the Civil War as a war for the principles of the Declaration against the South, which was opposed to those principles. So how does a country that is divided like that look out on the world and say, hey, we really want to spread liberalism? Many Americans didn't even want to spread liberalism at home. Which, by the way, brings us to the present, which is an interesting moment also because we have a lot of, I mean, there is a very strong anti-liberal movement in the United States today. And I don't mean liberal like liberals and conservatives. I mean, liberal in the terms of liberalism, much of the Republican Party today is opposed to liberalism. And so it's interesting that we're able nevertheless to have a liberal foreign policy at a time like this. I think if the forces that were anti-liberal really took control of our Congress, for instance, you might not have aid to Ukraine anymore. You know, it all, you didn't ask.

This was very, but this was very, you're not even conjecturing. Like this was very explicitly stated up until, you know, if Joe Kent, you know, I mean, let's get Joe Kent would have been a backbencher, but like there were very articulated pre-midterm disappointment articulations of that. Yeah, right. So, you know, it's one of the great complexities when you deal with American foreign policy. And I try to deal with this in some detail in the ghost at the feast.

There is no such thing as America. There is no such thing as American opinion. There is no thing such thing as the American people. We are always a divided people. We are always divided not only about specific technical tactical questions, but we're divided about the biggest questions. And sometimes I wonder how we ever accomplish anything because we're so divided. And the battle between anti-interventionists and those who thought the United States needed to be doing more in the 1930s was also an ideological and political battle at home. It wasn't just an argument about foreign policy. It was no accident that the bulk of the Republican party was anti-interventionist at that time. They were anti-Roosevelt. They thought Roosevelt was a socialist than a communist and wanted to turn, you know, at least they claimed that this is what they worried about. Therefore, as they looked out on the world, their biggest fear and opponent was the Soviet Union, not Nazi Germany. And many Americans even saw Nazi Germany as a check on international communism. And so at the very least had an ambivalent attitude towards Nazi Germany. Among those who favored a deeper involvement in world affairs were predominantly Democrats. They were predominantly liberals. Their great fear domestically was of fascism. They looked at the fascism in Europe and they thought that they saw signs that fascism was coming to the United States as well. St. Clair Lewis wrote a book basically saying, you know, it could happen here too. And so all of those arguments, which were fundamentally domestically oriented arguments, played out on this foreign policy canvas. And that happens all the time. And it's happening today as well. If you look at the way that opinion breaks down, for instance, the majority of Americans are in favor of helping Ukraine. On the far left, you have opponents who see this as a further acts of American imperialism. And on the far right, you see this as people who

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don't want the United States out there supporting liberalism in the world because they think liberalism is evil. And these factors are playing a role in our current debate as well.

You know, the show is called the realignment. So I do need to ask you about this, obviously.

I would love for you to talk about shifting ideological coalitions when it comes to the foreign policy angle. You know, like you were pretty down on the Republican Party.

In terms of like certain dynamics within the Republican Party, you know, just a few minutes ago, I think it's fair to say that a lot of the ideas you're articulating here, if this book, actually, let me kind of reset my question, related in a related way. So this book actually, *Dangerous Nation* came out in 2006. This book is coming out in 2023. I'm wondering if the 15 year plus gap was purposeful at almost like a narrative level, or like, maybe it's just that this is very hard to do. So I'm not expecting you to turn this out in two years, because it just seems to me that this book would read very differently. If it came same content, if it came out in 2012 versus coming out in 2023, I think it'd be easy to say that this would be a center right to conservative book. In 2012, it'd be easy to say like, Obama is on the side of non interventionism, Mitt Romney is coming, look at John McCain's legacy. But in 2023, this reads as a center left to center right book, from my perspective. So I'm curious how you sort of see these ideological camps kind of shifting and how that plays into the differences between the world of the first book in the trilogy and now the second book.

Well, I'll tell you, it's always a challenge to a historian to try to write the history in a way that is not being influenced by what the historians call presentism. And it's very, I run into this all the time. Well, I ran into it within both of these volumes, because in both cases, the volumes came out after a series of international events, which made it almost feel like I wrote the book to talk about these events. Or a dangerous nation. It's 2006. In 2006, it was, you know, the Iraq war was going on. So people assume I read, wrote *Dangerous Nation* to justify the Iraq war. And, you know, even though that book also took me 12 years, my biggest problem is I'm very slow writing these books. You know, some books you can write quickly, and some books just demand the time that it takes to put into them. I mean, 10 years is a long time to write a book, but I couldn't imagine writing it less than 10 years. Anyway, the short answer to your question is it certainly was not my intention to write a book that was timely. My goal is to try to understand the American character in foreign policy. And so when I go back, I try to just try to delve in. And honestly, I really basically try to let the history take me where it's going. You know, I think it's a mistake as a historian to have a sort of, to think you know what the story is, and then just try to figure out a way to flesh it out. You have to go back and just live in that time and sort of write history forward, like from their perspective. So you can see things from their perspective. So that, that is a problem. However, that's not the question you're asking. And it kind of was so bad credit to you. Well, you know, it's just that any history, even any history that you read today, think of all the histories that have been written about the Civil War, for instance, over the last 100 years and how interpretations change. The interpretations are invariably affected by what's going on at the time. So you went after the Civil Rights Movement, you had a different kind of rendition of what the Civil War was about than before the Civil Rights Movement. And so these, you know, his, as history unfolds, history looks different in retrospect. And I think that's partly what's happening. But I would like to believe, you know, as best, it would make me happy to believe that by and large, these books



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are as close to telling it the way I think it happened, irregardless of what's going on in the current scene, that these books have relevance to the present should not be surprising, especially this latest volume that goes to defeat, because in my view, the world has not actually changed as much as we think it has since the beginning of the 20th century. We sort of tend to treat Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, that's all, you know, you might as well be talking about Ivan the Terrible and, you know, Charlemagne, as far as most people, many people are concerned. But the international, the structure of international relations that came into being after the collapse of British power, you know, there was a British World Order, sort of fundamentally British World Order that lasted from the defeat of Napoleon until World War I, where British ruled the seas. It was fundamentally a liberal order. It was based on free trade, etc., open commerce, with a rough balance of power in Europe. When British power basically was inadequate to dealing with the rising powers around the world, Japan in East Asia, Germany on the European continent, British power could not manage that anymore. World War I represented the explosion of that old order, and then came into play this new international system in which the United States, this is nothing to do with, do you like it? Do you not like it? Is it a good thing or is it a bad thing? It was a reality that the United States emerged from World War I as by far the strongest power in the world, with an economy larger than the next four economies combined, with military capacity, it's not always power and existence, but military capacity that was enough. If you think about it, it's pretty amazing enough to defeat two major world powers in two separate theaters, Germany in Europe and Japan in Asia. Obviously, others were fighting as well, but none of them could have survived without being aided by the United States. People talk about the role of Soviet Union in World War II, which was critical, but Stalin himself says he could not have done it had he not received the lend-lease aid from the United States. We are still living in the world where the United States is at the center of an international system. Other powers may challenge it from the outside, but it is a very hard system to dislodge as Putin is discovering, and as I think Xi Jinping would discover if he became aggressive. If the things that are in this book seem familiar, it's because this world should seem familiar because we're still living in that world. The faces have changed. It's not Japan now, it's China, it's not Germany, it's Russia, but the circumstances are pretty similar, actually. The only difference being, I think, the United States is so much more powerful and in such a stronger position than it was in 1939, for instance, that an aggressor like Putin is having trouble in his first step. If you think about Hitler, Hitler took back the Rhineland, he took Austria, he took Czechoslovakia without a fight, then he occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia, then he conquered Poland, then he conquered France, and then the United States got involved, ultimately. Look at Putin today, he's on step one, which is just getting a piece of Ukraine. Yeah, well, it depends on to your point, though, earlier. To your point, you could really interpret that as starting in 2008. So Putin still had plenty of... Putin still had a couple of steps. But if you think about the strategic gain for Hitler of getting Czechoslovakia, that changed everything, because it was so central to everyone's strategic situation. It gave him the capacity to conquer the east in a way that he would not have been able to do otherwise. Certainly, if Putin were to accomplish his original goal of taking all of Ukraine, he would be in a much stronger position in Europe. The West would feel very threatened in the Baltics, in Poland, in Romania, in Moldova, etc. But he'd still be facing an overwhelmingly

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powerful Western alliance. And so he would not actually have fundamentally shifted the situation in the same way that Hitler was able to, with moves that did not cost Hitler anything. So I'm just saying, the situation is similar, but we should be in a way thankful that the world system that the United States created has been sufficiently resilient to allow the incredibly brave, courageous people of Ukraine to fight back against a country that used to be considered one of the world's superpowers. A couple of questions come from that. So, number one, I'd love for you to talk about the Chinese and Russian case against the American-led order. I think this is an interesting case of the world just shifting at a narrative level. And both countries just not being prepared for that narrative shift. So if it's, once again, 2006, 2007, 2008, Putin making a speech about American interventionism, America overburdening the world, America really being on the offense, and the bricks and those excluded from that world order, or at least who feel seemingly excluded, needing to kind of merge together and resist, that reads very differently in 2007, when he's giving his Munich speech, than making his moves after the US leaves Afghanistan, after the Iraq, Iraq is settled in this, in this sense that Iraq could ever truly be settled. So can you speak to how it seems as if belligerent autocratic powers seem to all, just from my perspective, they seem to have misjudged their timing in terms of when the case that they're trying to make will be most effective and would frankly, G be at its most legitimate. I'm curious what you think about that. Well, that's it. I mean, that raises some very interesting sort of almost metaphysical questions. I mean, what is legitimate in the international system? You know, we, because we are, you know, liberal in the, in a small health sense, we are children, we're children of the Enlightenment, we believe in the idea of progress. And so we believe on the idea of international progress. And I think people look at maybe at one time they look to the United Nations today to look maybe at other institutions, etc. They looked at globalization. Remember, there was a tremendous optimism about globalization. And so, you know, we in the West have a tendency to feel like everything is moving in this direction. And that will be a just piece. Now, the reality is, that's our opinion. You know what I mean? We tend, we tend to view the liberal ideal, the democratic ideal, everybody wants freedom, etc., etc., as being the sort of, the sort of norm and goal to which all humanity is moving. And I think the thing that we have learned over and over again is that that is not the case, that there were disagreements about liberalism as an idea. It is not the truth. I think it's the truth. But I think it's the truth. And in the same way that Protestants thought Protestantism was the truth. You know, I can't prove that it's the truth. And so, and a lot of people agree that liberalism is the right approach, but a lot of people don't. So if you're on the sort of losing side of that, and after all, there has been essentially a liberal hegemony in the world since World War II, of which the Soviet Union was a kind of outlier, of which Communist China was a kind of outlier. Today, we've evolved into a new situation where you still have a liberal hegemony and you have this, these autocracies or this quasi-communist government in China as outliers. What should their attitude be? Do they think this is justice? Obviously, they don't, you know, and nor would it be reasonable to insist that they believe that this is justice. There is no justice. This is a, maybe a painful thing or an unhappy or unfortunate thing for people to accept. There is no justice in the international system. You know, there are only relationships of power, and one side or one of many sides is going to have more power than the other, and they are

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going to, to some extent, impose their way of life or their way of looking at life on others. This is the history of mankind, you know, is that dominant powers have a tendency to try to shape the environment around them, and that is something that the United States has been doing since it became a dominant power. And, of course, those who are not shaping the system feel like what Germany and Japan felt like, as Hitler referred to them, as have-not powers. There were the have powers, which were the, which was Britain and the United States, chiefly, maybe France as well,

and then there were the have-not powers, who were not the ones running the show after the Versailles

Treaty. And, and those powers wanted to reshift the system so that they would have a greater say. And since the system itself is ultimately imposed by military force, let's not kid ourselves, World War I was not, was not an act of moral and ideological persuasion. It was an act of force. And, and the, and the world that was set up in the wake of World War I was, was managed ultimately by power. And so, of course, people on the wrong side of that equation say, well, we have to use power to get what would the way things we want them to be. If you're on our side, the liberal Western Democratic side, these people are outrageous. They're destroying the world order.

If you're on their side, you say, what world order? It's not, it's not my world order. It's your world order. And so this is, you know, until everyone agrees, which I think is unlikely, we're always going to have this clash. These clashes of power and ideology are an eternal reality of human existence. I know that is not what people want to believe. People want to believe there is an endpoint when all the madness stops. And by the way, this used to be a cardinal realist principle. I mean, if Hans Morgenthau once criticized Americans for believing that at some point the curtain falls and the game is over, you don't have to play power politics anymore. And his point was the power politics never ends. And I think it's a hard thing for Americans to swallow. It's a hard thing for liberals in general to swallow because they're not looking to dominate anybody, but they live in a world where domination is a reality. You know, that's interesting. I guess to check myself then, would you say that the instinct to think of, and this isn't just me, obviously, but the instinct to think, oh, well, Russia, you're behaving as a 19th century imperialist power would be like, that's wrong. Like this is the 21st century. Because I'm not trying to argue kind of like end of history, everything's moving in one direction. But you do want to think to yourself, look, there are just certain things that you do not do in the year 2023, you do not say sphere of influence in the way that Putin expresses sphere of influence. Is even that kind of going too far then beyond just the rhetorical? I mean, I think the fact that it's 2023 is meaningless, you know, not to be not to put it that's rather bald statement. But I don't think, you know, behind that idea, it's 2023 is the idea of the there's a kind of moral evolution of the human spirit. And I think that is, as I say, that is an enlightenment view. You know, people want to believe and do believe that human beings are getting better. My argument, unfortunately, it's I don't feel take any pleasure in saying this. But what I what I do say is what we regard as progress is the triumph of liberal values that we share. And the only reason that those liberal values continue to spread and grow, and you're right, within liberal societies, we have said, you don't do this anymore, you don't cut off people's noses, you don't cut off people's hands for theft, you don't torture people, you don't draw in quarter people, etc. And because

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in our societies, we have tried to become more and more humane. But the world at large, the human race as a as a, you know, as a as a fact of life, there is nothing ultimately the humans won't do to each other. And I think it's important, you know, in a way, Putin is providing this a kind of a lesson for us again, because it's not just that Putin decided he needed to commit aggression for whatever reason. And sometimes aggression, you know, it can be explained and understood and might even be legitimate quote unquote. But is there anything Putin is not willing to do to the Ukrainian people? You know, are Ukrainians being tortured? Are Ukrainians being raped? Are children

being stolen from Ukrainian families and brought to Russia, etc. We are overly optimistic that we somehow that there is a new floor beneath which human beings can't seek. My argument is, to the degree that there is such a floor, it's only because someone is enforcing it. And if you isn't enforced, you will see humans resort to the same barbarism that unfortunately humans are always capable of. And this last section that a couple forward facing questions. So number one would

be if the dominant story then is this American led world order, and the fact that as in Versailles to your point post Versailles, you had these powers who felt excluded, unheard, unsatisfied.

Is there are there accommodations to be made? So for example, on the previous podcast you mentioned, you said, yeah, it was probably a mistake for the US not to forgive German and like European work war debts. In terms of the really negative role that that played in the 1920s, like that's an example of an accommodation that could have been made. Do you see there as being do you see there being accommodations beyond what's dismantled NATO and, you know, give put in every single thing he wants or just abandoned Taiwan? Like what are what are legitimate? I don't even want to say concessions, because it has a moral, like way to where is the room for accommodation for those who see themselves as outside? Yeah, well, I mean, look, to some extent, there isn't, right? To some extent, there isn't an accommodation. We're not going to convince we're not going to convince Xi Jinping that it really isn't his best interest to stop being a communist dictator, to relax about Taiwan, and to just settle into this American led world.

Now, by the way, other great powers have done exactly that. Now, two of them did that because they were defeated militarily, Germany and Japan. But Germany and Japan were the outliers. They were on the outside. And then after the wars, it was nothing but accommodation. To some extent, America poured money into Germany. It helped to rebuild both of those countries, but it rebuilt them in such a way that they would be able to conform to this international, this sort of liberal hegemony. And I would say from a German and Japanese point of view, that is the best thing that ever happened to them. That Germany has ended what had become a cycle of conflict in Europe. If you think about what Germany was from the moment that it was, first of all, it was unified by war. And it fought two successive wars in the space of 40 years of unbelievable destruction for Germans, not to mention for everybody else. And that today is something that Germans do not have to think about or worry about. You can't tell me that Germany isn't better off, except in one critical sense. They are not the world power that is telling everybody how things are going to be, which was what Nazi Germany, which is what Hitler wanted, which is what World War I, Germany wanted, Wilhelm wanted. They wanted to be in that position. The Germans have been willing, in a sense, to set aside geopolitical ambitions in favor of economic and social and other ambitions, and I think have flourished as a result. And the same is true for

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Japan. It's a tremendous irony for China in particular. China has never been better off than it is in the current world order. If you think about where China was before the United States became the world's dominant power, it was being constantly invaded by the Japanese before that, by the British, by the French, by Russians. After centuries of being the sort of top power in Asia, it was basically open to any other power that wanted to invade them. And they were under constant invasion, under constant turmoil. China has never enjoyed greater security than it has since World War II, which, by the way, they revealed for many years by having almost no defense budget. They had only in the last 30 years that they increased the defense budget before that. They spent very little. I would say the same thing is true about Russia. Russia has never enjoyed greater security on its western border than it has since the end of the Cold War. Germany was invaded by France in the 19th century. I'm sorry. Russia was invaded by France in the 19th century. It was invaded by Germany twice in the 20th century. It had to fear a possible western invasion during the Cold War. But since the end of the Cold War, Russia has faced no prospect of invasion. What is it that Putin is unhappy about? He's not worried about the risk to Russia's security. He's worried about the risk to Russia's ability to exert hegemonic dominance in its own region, which is what Russia has historically done. It's reasonable to say accommodation, but why can't you just accommodate yourself to the fact that things have never been better for you? What's hard, and I don't mean to make light of this because this is a reality of human behavior as well, what's hard for these countries is to accept that there is a power system in the world in which they are not at the top of the pyramid or an equal of the top of the pyramid. This has always been Putin's great goal to be the equal of the United States, which is what the Soviets felt they were during the Cold War. How much accommodation do we have to make to that when the reality is that the Russian people are better off in this present international order than they've ever been before? The accommodation that I would like to offer, for instance, to China, and this is maybe where I differ from some other people who look at China as a threat, which I also do, but my bargain for what China would be, if China will simply forego using its military power to accomplish its objectives and simply focus on making itself rich, that should be what the United States supports. I don't believe we should be trying to starve China to death. I think we should be giving China a choice between confrontation of a military kind and cooperation and success on the economic front. China can be and is a great power already. It doesn't need to invade Taiwan. It doesn't need to become the regional hegemon of East Asia. It's doing fine. When people talk about accommodating them, they usually talk about giving them a sphere of influence. As you rightly say, that is not what this world is about today. We are not about giving all the different powers to their spheres of influence. That brings us back to a period of constant warfare that existed before this present world order. The key thing that I want to just pick up on what you just said is that it gets a little heady, like when you're talking about the liberal order, like what do these terms mean? The political system isn't an IR grad school, but you hit the point. The world before the liberal order is one of constant war. The thing that's so frustrating and once again, I'm on the more YouTube podcast-centric side of these debates, and I think they are things that are taken for granted and you're a more thinking side of things, but it's just like the dangerous idea that a country can take another country's territory

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and make it its own has killed millions and millions and millions and millions of people, and it could do it all over again. That's what the liberal order stands against. It's frustrating to see both these terms mean something in an academic sense, but almost kind of not mean something or not be understood at a very literal sense. I think the last main question here is to what we really focused on American power and this post-19th century period being a recurrent debate around America's power, what do we do with this? I'd like to hear the extent to which you believe America's power is either at its apex or at its wane. The debate you'll see from people like Bridge Colby, he's been on the podcast, the issue with Ukraine, because Bridge is a realist, but he's not in the illiberal camp. He's not saying, oh, the Ukrainians are Nazis and they're going to steal our monies, Lensky sucks. We cannot do Europe and Asia at the same time. It's not the Cold War. It's not the 90s. It's not even the 2000s or the 2010s anymore. That's the argument of us having to choose because our power is limited. How do you think about the extent to which American power enables us to be expansive in what we are trying to do or how we conceive of the world? It's the excellent question. I don't think America is being expansive. This is the part of it that I just don't fully understand. There is this sense that if America plays the role of maintaining a general peace in Europe and Asia, that somehow this is an imperialist, expansive activity. This is an activity that's fundamentally defensive and based on actual experience. The actual experience is the one that you describe, which is both Asia and Europe before 1945 were cockpits of constant warfare. Ever since Japan emerged as a major power in East Asia, Japan at the end of the 19th century and through World War II attacked one country after another, seeking to increase its ability. They, by the way, felt they were doing it for security. Whatever the reason was, it was a constant cycle of warfare in Asia. And as we already talked about, there was a constant cycle of warfare in Europe. I think what happens to people is that because there's been a long peace, which also brought us in. That's the key thing. Which inevitably brought, that's when American boys die in Europe when that warfare happens. Exactly. And so the lesson, people hate to talk about the lesson, but the lesson was it is in America's interest because we are not going to be able to stay out of these conflicts. It is therefore in America's interest to make sure that these conflicts don't occur. And the way to do that has been very successfully to maintain an American presence in both regions, to have these allies that the United States worked with and who looked to the United States and provide their own abilities and combine them with the United States, which together make it very, very difficult for a Russia or a China to accomplish the objectives that Germany and Japan had accomplished in the earlier period. And that this really should be something beneficial to everybody. But it is a common, I think what you're getting at, and I think you're right, it's very common to take for granted a baseline of peace and prosperity that that is the norm. And then you say, well, what is the United States doing? Why are we getting so involved? Well, the reason you have the peace and prosperity is because the United States is involved. And I think that's what it's a very difficult thing for people to think about. And that's the purpose of history. Not, by the way, to say, here's what happened in 1930s, therefore, X. I'm not saying it's not Munich, everything is not Munich. But what you can say is what does the world normally look like in the absence of the system that we have today? And as you say, what the world normally looked like going back to throughout written history has been constant

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warfare among states, empires and nations, constant ideological struggle, constant poverty, a constant dictatorship. That is the norm in human experience. The period we're living in today, and have been living in for so many decades, is a rare aberration in the history of humanity. And for us to assume that this is the new normal, I think is just, it's naive and ultimately dangerous because as we discover, when we stop working to support it, we see what is happening now. If you say, what is the normal trend of history? What is the natural trend of history? You should say, going back, you should say, it's what World War I was. It's what World War II was. It's what would happen if the United States were not here today. What would be happening in Europe

between Russia and the rest of Europe? What would be happening between China and the rest of Asia

at the United States were not here? So we need to readjust our understanding of what normal is. Normal is not good. It's the aberration that has been imposed by American power that we've been benefiting from.

Well said. Robert, this has been really great. Can you shout out the book? Of course, it's helpful when the author says it, not just me in the intro, but it's been amazing having you on the realignment.

Well, thank you so much. It's great to be here. It's been a really terrific conversation.

The ghost at the feast, the collapse of America and the collapse of World Order 1900 to 1941. That's the name of the book.

Thanks, everyone. You can find it in our bookshop or anywhere else you purchase the books.

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Thanks. See you all next time.