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Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy

William Kristol and Robert Kagan

THE TEPID CONSENSUS

IN FOREIGN policy, conservatives are adrift. They disdain the Wilsonian multilateralism of the Clinton administration; they are tempted by, but so far have resisted, the neoisolationism of Patrick Buchanan; for now, they lean uncertainly on some version of the conservative “realism” of Henry Kissinger and his disciples. Thus, in this year’s election campaign, they speak vaguely of replacing Clinton’s vacillation with a steady, “adult” foreign policy under Robert Dole. But Clinton has not vacillated that much recently, and Dole was reduced a few weeks ago to asserting, in what was heralded as a major address, that there really are differences in foreign policy between him and the president, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. But the fault is not Dole’s; in truth, there has been little attempt to set forth the outlines of a conservative view of the world and America’s proper role in it.

Is such an attempt necessary, or even possible? For the past few years, Americans, from the foreign policy big-thinker to the man on the street, have assumed it is not. Rather, this is supposed to be a time for unshouldering the vast responsibilities the United States acquired at the end of the Second World War and for concentrating its energies at home. The collapse of the Soviet Empire has made possible a “return to

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normalcy” in American foreign and defense policy, allowing the adoption of a more limited definition of the national interest, with a commensurate reduction in overseas involvement and defense spending.

Republicans and conservatives at first tended to be wary of this new post-Cold War consensus. But they joined it rapidly after 1992, in the wake of the defeat of the quintessential “foreign policy president” by a candidate who promised to focus “like a laser” on the domestic economy. Now conservatives tailor their foreign and defense policies to fit the presumed new political reality: an American public that is indifferent, if not hostile, to foreign policy and commitments abroad, more interested in balancing the budget than in leading the world, and more intent on cashing in the “peace dividend” than on spending to deter and fight future wars. Most conservatives have chosen to acquiesce in rather than challenge this public mood.

In a way, the current situation is reminiscent of the mid-1970s. But Ronald Reagan mounted a bold challenge to the tepid consensus of that era—a consensus that favored accommodation to and coexistence with the Soviet Union, accepted the inevitability of America’s declining power, and considered any change in the status quo either too frightening or too expensive. Proposing a controversial vision of ideological and strategic victory over the forces of international communism, Reagan called for an end to complacency in the face of the Soviet threat, large increases in defense spending, resistance to communist advances in the Third World, and greater moral clarity and purpose in U.S. foreign policy. He championed American exceptionalism when it was deeply unfashionable. Perhaps most significant, he refused to accept the limits on American power imposed by the domestic political realities that others assumed were fixed.

Many smart people regarded Reagan with scorn or alarm. Liberal Democrats still reeling from the Vietnam War were, of course, appalled by his zealotry. So were many of Reagan’s fellow Republicans, especially the Kissingerian realists then dominant in foreign affairs. Reagan declared war on his own party, took on Gerald Ford for the 1976 Republican presidential nomination (primarily over issues of foreign policy), and trained his guns on Kissinger, whose stewardship of U.S. foreign policy, he charged, had “coincided precisely with the loss of U.S. military supremacy.” Although Reagan lost the battle to

unseat Ford, he won the fight at the Republican convention for a platform plank on "morality in foreign policy." Ultimately, he succeeded in transforming the Republican party, the conservative movement in America, and, after his election to the presidency in 1980, the country and the world.

BENEVOLENT HEGEMONY

TWENTY YEARS later, it is time once again to challenge an indifferent America and a confused American conservatism. Today's lukewarm consensus about America's reduced role in a post-Cold War world is wrong. Conservatives should not accede to it; it is bad for the country and, incidentally, bad for conservatism. Conservatives will not be able to govern America over the long term if they fail to offer a more elevated vision of America's international role.

What should that role be? Benevolent global hegemony. Having defeated the "evil empire," the United States enjoys strategic and ideological predominance. The first objective of U.S. foreign policy should be to preserve and enhance that predominance by strengthening America's security, supporting its friends, advancing its interests, and standing up for its principles around the world.

The aspiration to benevolent hegemony might strike some as either hubristic or morally suspect. But a hegemon is nothing more or less than a leader with preponderant influence and authority over all others in its domain. That is America's position in the world today. The leaders of Russia and China understand this. At their April summit meeting, Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin joined in denouncing "hegemonism" in the post-Cold War world. They meant this as a complaint about the United States. It should be taken as a compliment and a guide to action.

Consider the events of just the past six months, a period that few observers would consider remarkable for its drama on the world stage. In East Asia, the carrier task forces of the U.S. Seventh Fleet helped deter Chinese aggression against democratic Taiwan, and the 35,000 American troops stationed in South Korea helped deter a possible invasion by the rulers in Pyongyang. In Europe, the United States sent 20,000 ground troops to implement a peace agreement in the former Yugoslavia, maintained 100,000 in Western Europe as a symbolic

commitment to European stability and security, and intervened diplomatically to prevent the escalation of a conflict between Greece and Turkey. In the Middle East, the United States maintained the deployment of thousands of soldiers and a strong naval presence in the Persian Gulf region to deter possible aggression by Saddam Hussein's Iraq or the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Iran, and it mediated in the conflict between Israel and Syria in Lebanon. In the Western Hemisphere, the United States completed the withdrawal of 15,000 soldiers after restoring a semblance of democratic government in Haiti and, almost without public notice, prevented a military coup in Paraguay. In Africa, a U.S. expeditionary force rescued Americans and others trapped in the Liberian civil conflict.

These were just the most visible American actions of the past six months, and just those of a military or diplomatic nature.

During the same period, the United States made a thousand decisions in international economic forums, both as a government and as an amalgam of large corporations and individual entrepreneurs, that shaped the lives and fortunes of billions around the globe. America influenced both the external and internal behavior of other countries through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Through the United Nations, it maintained sanctions on rogue states such as Libya, Iran, and Iraq. Through aid programs, the United States tried to shore up friendly democratic regimes in developing nations. The enormous web of the global economic system, with the United States at the center, combined with the pervasive influence of American ideas and culture, allowed Americans to wield influence in many other ways of which they were entirely unconscious. The simple truth of this era was stated last year by a Serb leader trying to explain Slobodan Milošević's decision to finally seek rapprochement with Washington. "As a pragmatist," the Serbian politician said, "Milošević knows that all satellites of the United States are in a better position than those that are not satellites."

And America's allies are in a better position than those who are not its allies. Most of the world's major powers welcome U.S. global involvement and prefer America's benevolent hegemony to the alter-

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natives. Instead of having to compete for dominant global influence with many other powers, therefore, the United States finds both the Europeans and the Japanese—after the United States, the two most powerful forces in the world—supportive of its world leadership role. Those who anticipated the dissolution of these alliances once the common threat of the Soviet Union disappeared have been proved wrong. The principal concern of America's allies these days is not that it will be too dominant but that it will withdraw.

Somehow most Americans have failed to notice that they have never had it so good. They have never lived in a world more conducive to their fundamental interests in a liberal international order, the spread of freedom and democratic governance, an international economic system of free-market capitalism and free trade, and the security of Americans not only to live within their own borders but to travel and do business safely and without encumbrance almost anywhere in the world. Americans have taken these remarkable benefits of the post-Cold War era for granted, partly because it has all seemed so easy. Despite misguided warnings of imperial overstretch, the United States has so far exercised its hegemony without any noticeable strain, and it has done so despite the fact that Americans appear to be in a more insular mood than at any time since before the Second World War. The events of the last six months have excited no particular interest among Americans and, indeed, seem to have been regarded with the same routine indifference as breathing and eating.

And that is the problem. The most difficult thing to preserve is that which does not appear to need preserving. The dominant strategic and ideological position the United States now enjoys is the product of foreign policies and defense strategies that are no longer being pursued. Americans have come to take the fruits of their hegemonic power for granted. During the Cold War, the strategies of deterrence and containment worked so well in checking the ambitions of America's adversaries that many American liberals denied that our adversaries had ambitions or even, for that matter, that America had adversaries. Today the lack of a visible threat to U.S. vital interests or to world peace has tempted Americans to absentmindedly dismantle the material and spiritual foundations on which their national well-being has been based. They do not notice that potential

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challengers are deterred before even contemplating confrontation by their overwhelming power and influence.

The ubiquitous post-Cold War question—where is the threat?—is thus misconceived. In a world in which peace and American security depend on American power and the will to use it, the main threat the United States faces now and in the future is its own weakness. American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order. The appropriate goal of American foreign policy, therefore, is to preserve that hegemony as far into the future as possible. To achieve this goal, the United States needs a neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy and moral confidence.

THREE IMPERATIVES

SETTING FORTH the broad outlines of such a foreign policy is more important for the moment than deciding the best way to handle all the individual issues that have preoccupied U.S. policymakers and analysts. Whether or not the United States continues to grant most-favored-nation status to China is less important than whether it has an overall strategy for containing, influencing, and ultimately seeking to change the regime in Beijing. Whether NATO expands this year or five years from now is less important than whether NATO remains strong, active, cohesive, and under decisive American leadership. Whether America builds 20 B-2 bombers or 30 is less important than giving its military planners enough money to make intelligent choices that are driven more by strategic than by budget requirements. But it is clear that a neo-Reaganite foreign policy would have several implications.

The defense budget. Republicans declared victory last year when they added \$7 billion to President Clinton's defense budget. But the hard truth is that Washington—now spending about \$260 billion per year on defense—probably needs to spend about \$60-\$80 billion more each year in order to preserve America's role as global hegemon. The United States currently devotes about three percent of its GNP to defense. U.S. defense planners, who must make guesses about a future that is impossible to predict with confidence, are increasingly being forced to place all their chips on one guess or another. They are being asked to predict whether the future is likely to bring more

conflicts like the Gulf War or peacekeeping operations like those in Bosnia and Haiti, or more great-power confrontations similar to the Cold War. The best answer to these questions is: who can tell? The odds are that in the coming decades America may face all these kinds of conflict, as well as some that have yet to be imagined.

For the past few years, American military supremacy has been living off a legacy, specifically, the legacy of Ronald Reagan. As former

No serious analyst doubts that defense has been cut too much.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell once noted, it was Reagan's military, built in the 1980s to deter the Soviet Union, that won the war against Iraq. No serious analyst of American military capabilities today doubts that the defense budget has been cut much too far to meet America's

responsibilities to itself and to world peace. The United States may no longer have the wherewithal to defend against threats to America's vital interests in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, much less to extend America's current global preeminence well into the future.

The current readiness of U.S. forces is in decline, but so is their ability to maintain an advantage in high-technology weapons over the coming decades. In the search for some way to meet extensive strategic requirements with inadequate resources, defense planners have engaged in strategic fratricide. Those who favor current readiness have been pitted against those who favor high-tech research and development; those who favor maintaining American forward deployment at bases around the world have been arrayed against those who insist that for the sake of economizing the job be accomplished at long range without bases. The military is forced to choose between army combat divisions and the next generation of bombers, between lift capacities and force projection, between short-range and long-range deterrence. Constructing a military force appropriate to a nation's commitments and its resources is never an easy task, and there are always limits that compel difficult choices. But today's limits are far too severe; the choices they compel are too dramatic; and because military strategy and planning are far from exact sciences, the United States is dangerously cutting its margin for error.

The defense budget crisis is now at hand. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General John Shalikashvili has complained that the weapons

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procurement budget has been reduced to perilously low levels, and he has understated the problem. Since 1985, the research and development budget has been cut by 57 percent; the procurement budget has been cut 71 percent. Both the Clinton administration and the Republican Congress have achieved budget savings over the next few years by pushing necessary procurement decisions into the next century. The Clinton administration's so-called "Bottom-Up Review" of U.S. defense strategy has been rightly dismissed by Democrats like Senate Armed Services Committee member Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) as "already inadequate to the present and certainly to the future." Both the General Accounting Office and the Congressional Budget Office have projected a shortfall of \$50 billion to \$100 billion over the next five years in funding just for existing force levels and procurement plans.

These shortfalls do not even take into account the development of new weapons, like a missile defense system capable of protecting American territory against missiles launched from rogue states such as North Korea or shielding, say, Los Angeles from nuclear intimidation by the Chinese during the next crisis in the Taiwan Strait. Deployment of such a system could cost more than \$10 billion a year.

Add together the needed increases in the procurement budget called for by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the justifiable increases in funding for existing forces to make up the shortfalls identified by the GAO and the CBO, and it becomes obvious that an increase in defense spending by \$60 billion to \$80 billion is not a radical proposal. It is simply what the United States will require to keep the peace and defend its interests over the coming decades.

If this number sounds like a budget-buster, it should not. Today, defense spending is less than 20 percent of the total federal budget. In 1962, before the Vietnam War, defense spending ran at almost 50 percent of the overall budget. In 1978, before the Carter-Reagan defense buildup, it was about 23 percent. Increases of the size required to pursue a neo-Reaganite foreign policy today would require returning to about that level of defense spending—still less than one-quarter of the federal budget.

The defense budget crisis is now at hand.

These days, some critics complain about the fact that the United States spends more on defense than the next six major powers combined. But the enormous disparity between U.S. military strength and that of any potential challenger is a good thing for America and the world. After all, America's world role is entirely different from that of the other powers. The more Washington is able to make clear that it is futile to compete with American power, either in size of forces or in technological capabilities, the less chance there is that countries like China or Iran will entertain ambitions of upsetting the present world order. And that means the United States will be able to save money in the long run, for it is much cheaper to deter a war

America could enshrine its huge military lead as a defense strategy.

than to fight one. Americans should be glad that their defense capabilities are as great as the next six powers combined. Indeed, they may even want to enshrine this disparity in U.S. defense strategy. Great Britain in the late 19th century maintained a "two-power standard" for its navy, insisting that at all times the British navy should be as large as the next two naval powers combined, whoever they might be. Perhaps the United States should inaugurate such a two- (or three-, or four-) power standard of its own, which would preserve its military supremacy regardless of the near-term global threats.

Citizen involvement. A gap is growing, meanwhile, between America's professional military, uncomfortable with some of the missions that the new American role requires, and a civilian population increasingly unaware of or indifferent to the importance of its military's efforts abroad. U.S. military leaders harbor justifiable suspicions that while they serve as a kind of foreign legion, doing the hard work of American-style "empire management," American civilians at home, preoccupied with the distribution of tax breaks and government benefits, will not come to their support when the going gets tough. Weak political leadership and a poor job of educating the citizenry to the responsibilities of global hegemony have created an increasingly distinct and alienated military culture. Ask any mechanic or mess boy on an aircraft carrier why he is patrolling the oceans, and he can give a more sophisticated explanation of power projection than

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99 percent of American college graduates. It is foolish to imagine that the United States can lead the world effectively while the overwhelming majority of the population neither understands nor is involved, in any real way, with its international mission.

The president and other political leaders can take steps to close the growing separation of civilian and military cultures in our society. They can remind civilians of the sacrifices being made by U.S. forces overseas and explain what those sacrifices are for. A clear statement of America's global mission can help the public understand why U.S. troops are deployed overseas and can help reassure military leaders of public support in difficult circumstances. It could also lay the groundwork for reasserting more comprehensive civilian control over the military.

There could be further efforts to involve more citizens in military service. Perhaps the United States has reached the point where a return to the draft is not feasible because of the high degree of professionalization of the military services. But there are other ways to lower the barriers between civilian and military life. Expanded forms of reserve service could give many more Americans experience of the military and an appreciation of military virtues. Conservatives preach that citizenship is not only about rights but also about responsibilities. There is no more profound responsibility than the defense of the nation and its principles.

Moral clarity. Finally, American foreign policy should be informed with a clear moral purpose, based on the understanding that its moral goals and its fundamental national interests are almost always in harmony. The United States achieved its present position of strength not by practicing a foreign policy of live and let live, nor by passively waiting for threats to arise, but by actively promoting American principles of governance abroad—democracy, free markets, respect for liberty. During the Reagan years, the United States pressed for changes in right-wing and left-wing dictatorships alike, among both friends and foes—in the Philippines, South Korea, Eastern Europe and even the Soviet Union. The purpose was not Wilsonian idealistic whimsy. The policy of putting pressure on authoritarian and totalitarian regimes

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had practical aims and, in the end, delivered strategic benefits. Support for American principles around the world can be sustained only by the continuing exertion of American influence. Some of that influence comes from the aid provided to friendly regimes that are trying to carry out democratic and free market reforms. However strong the case for reform of foreign aid programs, such programs deserve to be maintained as a useful way of exerting American influence abroad. And sometimes that means not just supporting U.S. friends and gently pressuring other nations but actively pursuing policies—in Iran, Cuba, or China, for instance—ultimately intended to bring about a change of regime. In any case, the United States should not blindly “do business” with every nation, no matter its regime. Armand Hammerism should not be a tenet of conservative foreign policy.

FROM NSC-68 TO 1996

THIS SWEEPING, neo-Reaganite foreign policy agenda may seem ambitious for these tepid times. Politicians in both parties will protest that the American people will not support the burdens of such a policy. There are two answers to this criticism.

First, it is already clear that, on the present course, Washington will find it increasingly impossible to fulfill even the less ambitious foreign policies of the realists, including the defense of so-called “vital” interests in Europe and Asia. Without a broad, sustaining foreign policy vision, the American people will be inclined to withdraw from the world and will lose sight of their abiding interest in vigorous world leadership. Without a sense of mission, they will seek deeper and deeper cuts in the defense and foreign affairs budgets and gradually decimate the tools of U.S. hegemony.

Consider what has happened in only the past few years. Ronald Reagan’s exceptionalist appeal did not survive the presidency of George Bush, where self-proclaimed pragmatists like James Baker found it easier to justify the Gulf War to the American people in terms of “jobs” than as a defense of a world order shaped to suit American interests and principles. Then, having discarded the overarching Reaganite vision that had sustained a globally active foreign policy through the last decade of the Cold War, the Bush adminis-

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tration in 1992 saw its own prodigious foreign policy successes swept into the dustbin by Clinton political adviser James Carville's campaign logic: "It's the economy, stupid." By the time conservatives took their seats as the congressional opposition in 1993, they had abandoned not only Reaganism but to some degree foreign policy itself.

Now the common wisdom holds that Dole's solid victory over Buchanan in the primaries constituted a triumphant reassertion of conservative internationalism over neoisolationism. But the common wisdom may prove wrong. On the stump during the Republican primaries this year, what little passion and energy there was on foreign policy issues came from Buchanan and his followers. Over the past four years Buchanan's fiery "America First" rhetoric has filled the vacuum among conservatives created by the abandonment of Reagan's very different kind of patriotic mission. It is now an open question how long the beleaguered conservative realists will be able to resist the combined assault of Buchanan's "isolationism of the heart" and the Republican budget hawks on Capitol Hill.

History also shows, however, that the American people can be summoned to meet the challenges of global leadership if statesmen make the case loudly, cogently, and persistently. As troubles arise and the need to act becomes clear, those who have laid the foundation for a necessary shift in policy have a chance to lead Americans onto a new course. In 1950, Paul Nitze and other Truman administration officials drafted the famous planning document NSC-68, a call for an all-out effort to meet the Soviet challenge that included a full-scale ideological confrontation and massive increases in defense spending. At first, their proposals languished. President Truman, worried about angering a hostile, budget-conscious Congress and an American public which was enjoying an era of peace and prosperity, for months refused to approve the defense spending proposals. It took the North Korean invasion of South Korea to allow the administration to rally support for the prescriptions of NSC-68. Before the Korean War, American politicians were fighting over whether the defense budget ought to be \$15 billion or \$16 billion; most believed more defense spending would bankrupt the nation. The next year, the defense budget was over \$50 billion.

A similar sequence of events unfolded in the 1970s. When Reagan and the "Scoop" Jackson Democrats began sounding the alarm about

the Soviet danger, the American public was not ready to listen. Then came the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the seizure of American hostages in Iran. By the time Jimmy Carter professed to have learned more about the Soviet Union than he had ever known before, Reagan and his fellow conservatives in both parties had laid the intellectual foundation for the military buildup of the 1980s.

AN ELEVATED PATRIOTISM

IN THEORY, either party could lay the groundwork for a neo-Reaganite foreign policy over the next decade. The Democrats, after all, led the nation to assume its new global responsibilities in the late 1940s and early 1950s under President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson. It is unlikely, however, that they are prepared to pursue such a course today. Republicans may have lost their way in the last few years, but the Democrats are still recovering from their post-Vietnam trauma of two decades ago. President Clinton has proved a better manager of foreign policy than many expected, but he has not been up to the larger task of preparing and inspiring the nation to embrace the role of global leadership. He, too, has tailored his internationalist activism to fit the constraints of a popular mood that White House pollsters believe is disinclined to sacrifice blood and treasure in the name of overseas commitments. His Pentagon officials talk more about exit strategies than about national objectives. His administration has promised global leadership on the cheap, refusing to seek the levels of defense spending needed to meet the broad goals it claims to want to achieve in the world. Even Clinton's boldest overseas adventures, in Bosnia and Haiti, have come only after strenuous and prolonged efforts to avoid intervention.

Republicans are surely the genuine heirs to the Reagan tradition. The 1994 election is often said to have represented one last victory for Ronald Reagan's domestic agenda. But Reagan's earlier successes rested as much on foreign as on domestic policy. Over the long term, victory for American conservatives depends on recapturing the spirit of Reagan's foreign policy as well.

Indeed, American conservatism cannot govern by domestic policy alone. In the 1990s conservatives have built their agenda on two pil-

lars of Reaganism: relimiting government to curtail the most intrusive and counterproductive aspects of the modern welfare state, and reversing the widespread collapse of morals and standards in American society. But it is hard to imagine conservatives achieving a lasting political realignment in this country without the third pillar: a coherent set of foreign policy principles that at least bear some resemblance to those propounded by Reagan. The remoralization of America at home ultimately requires the remoralization of American foreign policy. For both follow from Americans' belief that the principles of the Declaration of Independence are not merely the choices of a particular culture but are universal, enduring, "self-evident" truths. That has been, after all, the main point of the conservatives' war against a relativistic multiculturalism. For conservatives to preach the importance of upholding the core elements of the Western tradition at home, but to profess indifference to the fate of American principles abroad, is an inconsistency that cannot help but gnaw at the heart of conservatism.

Conservatives these days succumb easily to the charming old metaphor of the United States as a "city on a hill." They hark back, as George Kennan did in these pages not long ago, to the admonition of John Quincy Adams that America ought not go "abroad in search of monsters to destroy." But why not? The alternative is to leave monsters on the loose, ravaging and pillaging to their hearts' content, as Americans stand by and watch. What may have been wise counsel in 1823, when America was a small, isolated power in a world of European giants, is no longer so, when America is the giant. Because America has the capacity to contain or destroy many of the world's monsters, most of which can be found without much searching, and because the responsibility for the peace and security of the international order rests so heavily on America's shoulders, a policy of sitting atop a hill and leading by example becomes in practice a policy of cowardice and dishonor.

And more is at stake than honor. Without a broader, more enlightened understanding of America's interests, conservatism will too easily degenerate into the pinched nationalism of Buchanan's "America

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First,” where the appeal to narrow self-interest masks a deeper form of self-loathing. A true “conservatism of the heart” ought to emphasize both personal and national responsibility, relish the opportunity for national engagement, embrace the possibility of national greatness, and restore a sense of the heroic, which has been sorely lacking

in American foreign policy—and American conservatism—in recent years. George Kennan was right 50 years ago in his famous “X” article: the American people ought to feel a “certain gratitude to a Providence, which by providing [them] with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.” This is as true today—if less obviously so—as it was at the beginning of the Cold War.



Teddy Roosevelt c. 1898

A neo-Reaganite foreign policy would be good for conservatives, good for America, and good for the world. It is worth recalling that the most successful Republican presidents of this century, Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, both inspired Americans to assume cheerfully the new international responsibilities that went with increased power and influence. Both celebrated American exceptionalism. Both made Americans proud of their leading role in world affairs. Deprived of the support of an elevated patriotism, bereft of the ability to appeal to national honor, conservatives will ultimately fail in their effort to govern America. And Americans will fail in their responsibility to lead the world. 🌐