

2002

While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today

Richard Norton

Donald Kagan

Fredrick W. Kagan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Norton, Richard; Kagan, Donald; and Kagan, Fredrick W. (2002) "While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 55 : No. 4 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol55/iss4/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

the decay of the Ottoman Empire seems to suggest, contra Mearsheimer, that wars can be caused as much by the weakness as by the strength of a key actor. Both these points have suggestive applications as we look to the twenty-first century. The war against terrorism might well be the occasion for the formation of a global “concert” of the great powers. The greatest threat to such a concert could well be the continuing weakness of Russia—not, as Mearsheimer holds, the rising strength of China.

CARNES LORD
Naval War College



Kagan, Donald, and Fredrick W. Kagan. *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. 483pp. \$32.50

Did the leadership of the United States throw away a priceless opportunity to bring stability, prosperity, and peace to the world in the decade following the end of the Cold War, as surely as the leadership of Great Britain failed to grasp a similar opportunity following the end of the First World War? For Donald and Fredrick Kagan, the answer is a resounding yes. *While America Sleeps* is their attempt not only to show how opportunities were squandered but also to highlight the similarities of both situations. The Kagans argue that both states dangerously reduced the size of their military forces, falsely believed in the saving power of technology, failed to exercise strategic leadership, and embarked on a pattern of “pseudo-engagement.” The importance of the central question and the

authors' credentials make this a book to be taken seriously.

The Kagans, both historians of note, make a potent father-and-son team. Donald Kagan, the Hillhouse Professor of History and Classics at Yale University, has produced an impressive body of work, including the best-selling *A History of Warfare*. Fredrick W. Kagan, currently a professor of military history at West Point, is perhaps less well known to the general public but has impressive credentials in his own right.

While America Sleeps is divided into three sections. The first, “Britain between the Wars,” chronicles that state's transition from a globally dominant power in 1918 to one of near-fatal weakness by the mid-1930s. It pays special attention to the Chanak crisis of 1922, the Corfu affair of 1923, the Locarno Treaty of 1925, the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1934–35, and the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936. The second, “The United States after the Cold War,” follows a generally similar approach, addressing particularly the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the U.S. intervention in Somalia from 1991 to 1993, the occupation of Haiti in 1994, the Clinton administration's attempts to deal with North Korea's nuclear weapons program, that same administration's efforts to curtail Iraqi production of weapons of mass destruction, and American responses to conflict in the Balkans. The true third section, although actually included in the second section of the book, is the concluding chapter, in which the authors clearly state their belief that the United States is at risk of “suffering a fate similar to that which befell Britain in the 1930s.” They present an argument supporting this conclusion and

offer the chilling suggestion that it may already be too late to prevent such an outcome.

While America Sleeps is rich in background material. Defense strategies, budgets, building programs, and much more are fully and clearly discussed. For example, the section on how both the United States and the United Kingdom turned to technology as compensation for diminished force structure is fascinating. Readers will find compelling the portraits of both countries, depicted as states weary of conflict, desirous of maintaining dominance at the lowest possible cost, and eventually relying too heavily on inadequately led and maintained diplomatic services.

Some areas of *While America Sleeps* are open to criticism. One potential failing is that explaining how events between 1919 and the mid-1930s led to war is a very different thing from explaining how different events would have led to peace. Also, the authors do not address in detail the severe domestic political opposition that choosing a different strategy might have encountered; such difficulties are mentioned only to remark they could have been overcome. There are also discrepancies. The authors imply, for example, that President Bill Clinton was never able to bring himself to order an invasion of Haiti, that U.S. forces were only “prepared” to invade. In reality the forces described were actually in the process of invasion when the military regime of General Raoul Cedras yielded to U.S. negotiators.

Some of the authors’ subjective interpretations are also open to debate. The Kagans are critical of British leaders in 1936 for being overly fearful of the Italian navy should British opposition to Italy’s conquest of Abyssinia lead to

conflict. Yet it is hard to see how Britain could *not* have been concerned with Italian naval power. The Italian ships were new and well handled, and they would have had air support for any operation near the Italian Peninsula. In a more modern example, the decision not to force the landing of the USS *Harlan County* (LST 1196) at Port-au-Prince during the confrontation with Haiti is strongly criticized. There is no doubt that the image of a U.S. Navy warship backing away from a government-directed mob did not reflect credit upon the United States or its military forces. However, the authors might have more fully explored the potential consequences of a forcible landing. The ship was there on a noncombatant mission, with the ostensible permission of the Cedras regime. If a landing had been carried out, potentially killing many Haitians, significant domestic and international repercussions could have been expected to result. Additionally, it is unlikely that the original mission could then have been carried out at all.

One last criticism deserves mention. As Richard Neustadt and Ernest May have long reminded us, all analogies are suspect. The power of analogies is so great that arguments by analogy almost inevitably result in flawed decision making. This is in large part because all too often historical analogies invoked as decision aids are shallow circumstantially and far more different from the situation at hand than they are similar. Yet once the analogy has been invoked the damage often has been done, and the course of action suggested will be followed to its unsatisfactory end. To their credit the Kagans remind the reader that “the United States at the end of the millennium is not England between the wars.”

They point out that comparisons of present policies to those of the British at Munich are premature and that it is not their intention to draw precise parallels between the British and U.S. experiences. However, these admissions come only in the very last chapter, after the reader has had every opportunity to make just such comparisons.

Despite these critical comments, *While America Sleeps* is very much worth reading. The Kagans are asking the right questions. Their warnings about the fate of states that reduce military capabilities to dangerously low levels, lack consistent strategic visions, and replace sound strategy with wishful thinking are more germane than ever.

So too are the questions their work points to but does not ask. Can democracies avoid reducing military capabilities without the impetus of a visible external threat? Does state behavior motivated by self-interest weaken all alliances over time? Can a democracy survive taking on the mantle of world policeman? Can wars be prevented through consistent displays of strength and purpose? These are questions that reading this book evokes, questions that should be considered and discussed far more than they are.

RICHARD NORTON
Naval War College



Detter, Ingrid. *The Law of War*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000. (2d ed.) 516pp. \$39.95

This is the second edition of Ingrid Detter's sweeping survey of the law relating to the "modern state of war." The first edition, published in 1987, was then

reviewed by, among others, Professors Howard Levie (*American Journal of International Law*, vol. 83 [1989], p. 194) and Leslie Green (*Canadian Yearbook of International Law* [1988], p. 473), two distinguished former holders of the Stockton Chair of International Law at the Naval War College. Both reviewers identified numerous inaccuracies and misreadings of source documents. The second edition is intended to explore the changing legal context of modern warfare since 1987. A reader interested in this edition should first read the earlier reviews. Regrettably, the representative deficiencies pointed out by Levie and Green still persist, and a fully balanced discussion of particularly important legal issues is lacking.

Typical errors left unchanged include Detter's erroneous position regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. She states that the 1949 "Geneva Convention III on Prisoners of War specifies [in Article 4] that there need be no fighting for the Convention to apply; it is sufficient for persons to be captured." There is no such provision in the convention. Detter also continues to assert that the convention provides that prisoners of war must not be subjected to interrogation, because Article 17 obliges prisoners to provide only their name, rank, date of birth, and serial number. Article 17, however, then continues, proscribing physical or mental torture, or any other form of coercion, to secure information from prisoners of war. Interrogation short of such prohibited actions is not prohibited by the convention. While a prisoner of war is required to give the identifying information, international law does not prohibit a prisoner from giving more than this, nor a captor from seeking more—so long as torture is not used.