

# LECTURE

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## A Strategy for American Renewal

A. B. Lowther, PhD

### Abstract

*The primary characteristics of the great American narrative—individual liberty, personal responsibility, respect for private property, and the desire to “avoid entangling alliances”—have long served as the glue that binds the nation together, but a new ethic of entitlement, dependence, collective responsibility, and a desire to export democracy through a variety of means—to include force—is replacing that narrative. In the slow turn from American exceptionalism and the great American narrative toward the victim narrative, domestic and foreign affairs have suffered greatly. With the United States facing long-term challenges in economic and foreign affairs that are certain to prove difficult to solve, it is finally time to reject the worldview that has led to the nation’s current condition.*

Historian Paul Johnson opens *A History of the American People* with, “The creation of the United States of America is the greatest of all human adventures. No other national story holds such tremendous lessons, for the American people themselves and for the rest of mankind.”<sup>1</sup>

While many Americans may see Johnson’s words as an example of a mythical “American exceptionalism,” early Americans often viewed the nation in biblical terms. The United States of America was seen as the “new Jerusalem,” the “light of the world,” and “a shining city upon a hill.”<sup>2</sup> America was the earthly embodiment of mankind’s greatest hope for a fallen creation. Through hard work, self-sacrifice, and rugged independence, Americans sought to overcome both the natural world and mankind’s sinful nature.

### KEY POINTS

- Individual liberty, personal responsibility, respect for private property, and the desire to “avoid entangling alliances” are the primary characteristics of the great American narrative and have long served as the glue that binds together a nation of disparate economic, social, and religious interests.
- As more of American life comes before the voter, a plurality is demanding more from government at the expense of a declining number of taxpayers.
- The world is inherently unfair because human nature is deeply flawed, but to suggest that an all-powerful government can right domestic and international wrongs is the height of hubris.
- With the United States facing long-term challenges in economic and foreign affairs that are certain to prove difficult to solve, it is finally time to reject the worldview that has led to the nation’s current condition.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/hl1248>

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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An ethos developed during the nation's early history that was composed of two parts. On the one hand, it was full of hope and optimism, believing that individuals could achieve great success in a country where government did not restrict opportunity. On the other hand, Americans saw the world beyond the nation's borders as prone to strife and warfare.

Thus, when the Founding Fathers spoke of "civil religion," natural abundance, and manifest destiny, they were giving birth to what may be called the great American narrative, which has endured for more than two centuries.<sup>3</sup> Individual liberty,<sup>4</sup> personal responsibility, respect for private property, and the desire to "avoid entangling alliances," the primary characteristics of the great American narrative, have long served as the glue that binds together a nation of disparate economic, social, and religious interests. Today, this narrative is under attack as never before.<sup>5</sup>

A new ethic of entitlement, dependence, collective responsibility, and a desire to export democracy through a variety of means—to include force—is replacing the great American narrative. This new narrative, known as the victim narrative, is—like its predecessor—manifested in both domestic and foreign affairs. The great American narrative and the victim narrative represent opposing worldviews that cannot coexist.

Today, Americans are turning to government en masse, leaving domestic affairs to interest groups competing for the most government benefits. In foreign affairs, neoconservatives and neoliberal institutionalists—the "liberal" school of thought's right- and left-wing variants—are vying for supremacy within a Beltway intelligentsia that cannot decide whether kinetic or nonkinetic means are the best way to export or impose American democracy.

The influence of international relations liberalism is now pervasive in what has long been a bastion of realist thought: the military. When Navy Captain Wayne Porter and Marine Colonel Mark Mykleby, influential officers on the Joint Staff under former Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen, authored *A National Strategic Narrative*, it was clear that even the military was losing its attachment to the great American narrative's domestic and foreign affairs characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

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Porter and Mykleby exemplify the pervasive influence of the victim narrative within the military. As is argued in the remainder of this lecture, it is time to reject the victim narrative and once again embrace the great American narrative and its central characteristics.

### **Rejecting the Victim Narrative**

At its core, the victim narrative rejects the very notion that every American and every nation is the master of their own destiny and responsible for their own success or failure. The belief in rugged individualism and self-reliance, at the individual and national levels, has given way to a focus on real or perceived grievances at home and abroad. Capitalism, classism, racism, sexism, or another "ism" is

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1. Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 3.
  2. See Matthew 5:14. Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address," address delivered at the White House, Washington, DC, January 11, 1989, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29650> (accessed May 6, 2014).
  3. Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), chap. 1.
  4. The understanding of liberty applied here is consistent with that of Thomas Jefferson, who said, "Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law." Thomas Jefferson and Marquis de Lafayette, "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789, [http://www1.curriculum.edu.au/ddunits/downloads/pdf/dec\\_of\\_rights.pdf](http://www1.curriculum.edu.au/ddunits/downloads/pdf/dec_of_rights.pdf).
  5. Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
  6. Wayne Porter and Mark Mykleby, "A National Strategic Narrative," Woodrow Wilson Center, 2011, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/ANationalStrategicNarrative.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2014).
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to blame for the failings of Americans and nations.<sup>7</sup> Personal choices are conspicuously absent from any explanation of success or failure.<sup>8</sup> Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the victim narrative promises to right past wrongs (at home and abroad) and free Americans from the chains that bind them.

This seductive story does not discriminate based on age, gender, race, or religion. It seeks to influence every American. In rejecting Benjamin Franklin's admonition, "They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety,"<sup>9</sup> the victim narrative offers security at the cost of liberty.

The victim narrative is not new. Plato warned of its appeal in *The Republic*, and the Framers of the Constitution sought to create an "Empire of Liberty," preventing the ascension of the victim narrative by creating a limited republic—not a democracy.<sup>10</sup> The checks and balances found in the Constitution were specifically designed to restrain the power of the national government's three branches in domestic and international affairs. The Constitution's limitations, the amendment process, and the separate powers of the states were thought sufficient to protect the people from the rise of Plato's democratically elected despot, similar to what de Tocqueville called "soft despotism."<sup>11</sup>

In the slow turn from American exceptionalism and the great American narrative toward the victim narrative, domestic and foreign affairs have suffered greatly. Today, the United States is again at a crossroads. With the national debt surpassing the nation's gross domestic product, many advocates of liberty are wondering if the nation is beyond salvation. At a time when the American people are deeply concerned about the nation's economic future and are weary of the Long War, proponents of the victim narrative are lobbying for dramatic expansions in the government's role in domestic and foreign affairs.

In domestic affairs, there is a call for greater involvement in the lives of Americans.<sup>12</sup> Government's role in providing food, shelter, clothing, education, health care, and retirement must all grow. If left to their own devices—free to succeed or fail on their own—too many Americans are expected to make the wrong choices or suffer at the hands of the "ists" (capitalists, racists, sexists, etc.). Thus, the benevolent hand of government and its selfless bureaucracy are needed to act on behalf of rugged individualism's erstwhile victims. Only then will the nation achieve John Kenneth Galbraith's "good society."<sup>13</sup>

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Government's creep into every aspect of what was once considered private exemplifies the concrete influence of the victim narrative. In his influential work *The Road to Serfdom*, Nobel Laureate F. A. Hayek wrote, "When the course of civilization takes an unexpected turn—when, instead of the continuous progress which we have come to expect, we find ourselves threatened by evils associated by us with past ages of barbarism—we naturally blame anything but ourselves."<sup>14</sup> It is the natural inclination to look beyond the mirror for a culprit. This enables the victim narrative to persist.

Foreign affairs have fared little better. The history of American interaction in the world over the past 20 years is the history of realism's decline and

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7. Daniel R. Solin, *The Smartest 401 (k) Book You'll Ever Read: Maximize Your Retirement Savings...the Smart Way!* (New York: Perigee, 2008), p. 161.  
8. See James K. Galbraith, *The Predator State: How Conservatives Abandoned the Free Market and Why Liberals Should Too* (New York: Free Press, 2008).  
9. Benjamin Franklin, "Pennsylvania Assembly: Reply to the Governor," letter to Governor Robert Hunter Morris of Pennsylvania, November 11, 1755, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-06-02-0107> (accessed May 6, 2014).  
10. Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).  
11. Plato, *The Republic* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1944), Book VIII, and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), chap. 9.  
12. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Good Society: The Humane Agenda* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).  
13. *Ibid.*, chap. 5.  
14. F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom with the Intellectuals and Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 13.

liberalism's ascension. It was a period marked by a decided turn from a guarded view of activity in the world to a preference for a United States that acts as "global cop" and maker of world order.

Henry Kissinger describes the conflict between realism and idealism, saying:

Such controversy on foreign affairs as takes place is divided between an attitude of missionary recititude on one side and a sense that the accumulation of power is self-implementing on the other. The debate focuses on an abstract issue: whether values or interest, idealism or realism, should guide American foreign affairs.<sup>15</sup>

Over the past two decades, liberalism has carried the day. In much the same way as the victim narrative has shaped domestic affairs, its tenets have shaped and are shaping the American approach to foreign affairs.

A dramatic shift in the nation's approach to the world began after the Soviet Union's demise. This single event emboldened advocates of Immanuel Kant's "perpetual peace" and encouraged them to take the offensive against an all-too-pessimistic political realism.<sup>16</sup>

Kantians challenged the tenets of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Morgenthau, Waltz, Mearsheimer, and American foreign affairs decision-makers by posit-

ing a future that is ahistorical and forgetful of the Cold War's lessons.<sup>17</sup> What E. H. Carr described as utopianism, Enlightenment liberalism, and Wilsonian idealism modern international relations calls neoliberal institutionalism, neoconservatism, and neoliberal internationalism.<sup>18</sup> While differences within the liberal school of thought exist, each of these variants rejects the central tenets of realism.<sup>19</sup>

Hans Morgenthau described the debate between realists and liberals in saying:

One [liberalism] believes that a rational and moral political order, derived from universally valid abstract principles, can be achieved here and now. It assumes the essential goodness and infinite malleability of human nature, and blames the failure of the social order to measure up to the rational standards on lack of knowledge and understanding, obsolescent social institutions, or the depravity of certain isolated individuals or groups.<sup>20</sup>

In rejecting human nature as irreparably flawed, liberalism is inextricably linked to the victim narrative.

Realism, according to Morgenthau, is grounded in a set of objective laws that are rooted in what is best understood as the Judeo-Christian understanding of human nature. Interests, defined in terms of

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15. Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), pp. 19–20.

16. See Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 311–351.

17. For an understanding of realism, see Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962); Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960); Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); and Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (October 1998), pp. 144–172, [http://graduateinstitute.ch/files/live/sites/iheid/files/sites/political\\_science/users/jovana.carapic/public/Rose\\_Neoclassical%20realism%20and%20theories%20of%20foreign%20policy.pdf](http://graduateinstitute.ch/files/live/sites/iheid/files/sites/political_science/users/jovana.carapic/public/Rose_Neoclassical%20realism%20and%20theories%20of%20foreign%20policy.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2014). For an understanding of the current idealist view, see Porter and Mykleby, *A National Strategic Narrative*.

18. See Norman Angell, *The Grand Illusion* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1933); Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation Under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 85–115; Charles W. Kegley Jr., "The Neoliberal Challenge to Realist Theories of World Politics: An Introduction," in Charles W. Kegley Jr., ed., *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), pp. 1–24; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Power and Interdependence," in Richard K. Betts, ed., *Conflict After the Cold War: Arguments on Causes of War and Peace* (New York: Longman, 2007); Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1995); and Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2005).

19. See E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939* (London: MacMillan, 1956); James Dougherty and Robert Pfaltzgraff, *Contending Theories of International Relations* (New York: Longman, 2001); and Ian Clark and Iver Neumann, eds., *Classical Theories of International Relations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

20. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 3.

power, are the main signpost that guides realism but are influenced by American values. These interests are not eternal but evolve with the state over time, and while political action has moral significance, universal moral principles are often difficult to apply directly to the actions of the state. This is because realism separates a state's aspirations from universal moral laws.

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Thus, it should come as no surprise that realism often separates foreign affairs from morality, focusing on national interests.<sup>21</sup> Undeniably skeptical of grand schemes to refashion human civilization, realism proposes a more constrained role for government that focuses on a limited role in defending the nation's vital interests.

The present challenge to the American narrative and the accompanying liberal/realist debate is not new. American exceptionalism, as epitomized in the great American narrative versus the victim narrative, and liberalism versus realism, has long influenced the course of American history.

Near the end of his second term, George Washington published "The Address of General Washington to the People of the United States on His Declining of the Presidency of the United States" in the *American Daily Advertiser* on September 19, 1796.<sup>22</sup> In what is better known as his "Farewell Address," President Washington advised the young nation that it was, in fact, set apart and laid out a realist approach to foreign affairs.

Even as the United States has grown into a global superpower, Washington's wisdom remains as relevant today as it was in 1796. It serves as a useful

framework for a reinvigorated great American narrative that is premised on an acceptance of American exceptionalism and a realist approach to foreign affairs.

### **The Great American Narrative in Domestic Affairs**

When George Washington wrote his "Farewell Address," the Constitution had been the nation's foundational document for less than a decade. Even during that brief period, President Washington saw divergent visions of a culturally, ethnically, and religiously homogeneous people begin to break down national unity. Urging the prevention of such disunity comprises over half of the "Farewell Address." In encouraging a common sense of heritage and patriotism, Washington wrote:

Citizens by birth or choice of a common country, that country has a right to concentrate your affections. The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than the appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of differences, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in common cause fought and triumphed together. The independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint councils and joint efforts—of common dangers, sufferings, and success.<sup>23</sup>

Washington's words were prophetic, and he would go on to expand on this theme in an effort to prevent the differences in habits and interests from tearing the nation apart as they ultimately did.

While the United States has grown in economic and military strength over the past two centuries, it is again at a point where there is reason for concern. With dramatic changes in the country's demographic composition, vitriolic and partisan politics, dramatic growth in government, and serious economic challenges, the common bonds that held the nation together are fraying.

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21. *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

22. See George Washington, "Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States," Senate Document 106-21, 106th Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CDOC-106sdoc21/pdf/GPO-CDOC-106sdoc21.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2014).

23. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

In an increasingly competitive global economic and security environment, the United States will cease to be the world's leading power unless there is a renewal of the great American narrative. To that end, three reforms are required.

**From Democracy to Liberty.** In a rare challenge to the reigning political orthodoxy, economist Randall Holcombe laments the rise of a more democratic system of government in the United States, writing, "By 1980 democracy had completely replaced liberty as the fundamental principle of American government. Liberty remained as something valued by Americans and something worth protecting but only to the extent that it met with the approval of the majority."<sup>24</sup>

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His cause for concern is based upon the loss of individual liberty that has accompanied the democratization of almost every aspect of American life. Where education, health care, charity, retirement, and many additional aspects of life were once the sole purview of the individual, they are now governed by a plurality of voters. Accompanying the rise of democracy has been a dramatic decline in private property rights and the economic freedom of Americans,<sup>25</sup> and as more of American life comes before the voter, a plurality is demanding more from government at the expense of a declining number of taxpayers.

Greater government spending is responsible for higher taxes, greater government borrowing,

greater regulation of everyday life, and a diminution of the very liberty that the Framers of the Constitution sought to protect.<sup>26</sup> According to the most recent data, federal, state, and local spending equals 40 percent of the gross domestic product—a post-World War II high.<sup>27</sup> With approximately two-thirds of government spending consisting of some form of popularly supported transfer-payment program, the United States is well on its way to becoming the democracy that the Framers sought to prevent and that Plato warned against.

Although many Americans envision a solution to the nation's current woes that would "throw the bums out," blaming elected officials for creating popular programs and waging popular wars is shortsighted and places blame where it does not belong. Instead of looking to government, Americans must once again embrace the characteristics of the great American narrative and that sense of rugged individualism, personal responsibility, and private charity that was instrumental in building a remote European outpost into a global superpower.

As Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman once wrote, "The world runs on individuals pursuing their separate interests. The great achievements of civilization have not come from government bureaus."<sup>28</sup> Only when Americans look to themselves instead of the ballot box to find solutions will we find a cure for the nation's domestic and foreign ills.

**From Entitlement to Entrepreneurship.** After more than two centuries, President Washington's words remain as prescient as ever. He admonished Americans, "As a very important source of strength and security, cherish public credit. One method of preserving it is to use it as sparingly as possible."<sup>29</sup> John Adams, in his first address to Congress, offered similar advice, saying, "The consequences arising from the continual accumulation of public debts in other countries ought to admonish us to be careful to prevent their growth in our own."<sup>30</sup>

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24. Randall Holcombe, *From Liberty to Democracy: The Transformation of American Government* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 250.

25. *Ibid.*, chap. 11, and Adam Lowther, "It's the Economy, Stupid! Why Iraq Needed Free Markets Instead of Democracy in 2003," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, Vol. 31, Issue 3 (May 19, 2009), pp. 194-205.

26. Robert Higgs, *Neither Liberty Nor Safety: Fear, Ideology, and the Growth of Government* (Oakland, CA: Independence Institute, 2007).

27. William Watson, "Our Obama Opportunity," *National Post*, April 29, 2009, <http://www.pacificresearch.org/business-economics/be-article-detail/our-obama-opportunity/> (accessed May 7, 2014).

28. Milton Friedman, *Phil Donahue Show*, 1979.

29. Washington, "Farewell Address," p. 21.

30. John Adams, "First Annual Message," November 22, 1797.

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With a national debt that is now greater than the gross domestic product and certain to climb significantly higher, it is clear that neither Republicans nor Democrats have heeded Washington's warning. As the victim narrative has gained influence, an ever-increasing number of Americans demand that government provide more from a declining number of taxpayers.

On one hand, 51 percent of Americans paid no federal income taxes in 2010.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, 52.6 percent of Americans receive "significant income" from the government.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it should come as no surprise that American households are now receiving more in government assistance than they pay in taxes.<sup>33</sup> This is at a time when "the wealthy" are paying a significantly larger percentage of their income in federal income taxes than the wealthy in any other country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In other words, fewer Americans are contributing to the public good, while more Americans are placing demands on it. The entitlement mentality that is now so pervasive has created an entire industry of special-interest groups that seek ways to pilfer the public coffers. Whether it is corporate welfare, farm subsidies, student grants and loans, or entitlement programs for the elderly and poor, federal, state, and local budgets have become the troughs at which far too many Americans feed. As Randall Holcombe notes:

When government is small and the scope of its activities is limited, there is little incentive for special interests to try to use the government to advance their interests rather than to rely on their own productive activities in the market. When the government is large and when its limits are less sharply defined, there are potentially large gains to be had if government policies can be steered in a particular way.<sup>34</sup>

Where Americans once expected to work for many years before enjoying the fruits of their labor, many now believe they are entitled to the comforts they have yet to earn. This state of affairs cannot last for long. The United States will soon find itself in a position where it is unable to borrow the resources needed to sustain entitlement programs at home and wage endless wars abroad to help the world's downtrodden.

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Noticeably absent in the discussion of current fiscal challenges facing the United States has been any discussion of priorities at the national level. The wisdom of the Constitution may provide some guidance in this regard. The Preamble stipulates that our government was established to "provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

Note that it does not say "provide for the general Welfare...." It does explicitly say "provide for the common Defence." It's time to get our priorities straight.

Absent a renaissance of the entrepreneurial spirit and a rejection of the victim narrative's entitlement mentality, the United States will find itself in a steady state of economic and military decline. As history suggests, a nation's military might follows its economic strength. Europe is already facing a time when the welfare state has driven many European economies to the brink and left its militaries impotent.<sup>35</sup> Nations are cutting their military expendi-

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31. Derek Thompson, "51% of Americans Pay No Federal Income Taxes," *The Atlantic*, May 4, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/05/51-of-americans-pay-no-federal-income-taxes/238329/> (accessed May 6, 2014).
  32. Mark Trumbell, "As US Tax Rates Drop, Government's Reach Grows," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 16, 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0416/p01s04-usec.html> (accessed May 6, 2014).
  33. Amy Stone, "U.S. Households Getting More from Uncle Sam Than They Pay In," *MSN Money*, April 20, 2011, <http://money.msn.com/tax-tips/post.aspx?post=63c403d6-0a2f-4506-a8b8-25124d49889b> (accessed May 6, 2014).
  34. Holcombe, *From Liberty to Democracy*, p. 3.
  35. Reuters, "Effort Aside, Europe Fails to Staunch Debt Crisis," *Guardian*, May 9, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/feedarticle/9636703> (accessed February 27, 2014).
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tures so drastically (to maintain the welfare state) that they cannot project power beyond their borders.<sup>36</sup> These enfeebled countries possess neither a robust economy nor a military capable of defending their national interests. Absent significant reform, the United States is likely to find itself in a similar position in the future.

During his first inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson said, “a wise and frugal government, which shall leave men free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned—this is the sum of good government.”<sup>37</sup> He was correct, and today’s scholarly evidence supports Jefferson’s thesis.<sup>38</sup> Without a significant cultural shift away from the victim narrative’s entitlement mentality, the United States will not recover its recently lost fiscal and military power.

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**From Secularism to Civil Religion.** Over the past two centuries, the United States has evolved from a frontier society of Anglo-farmers into a diverse country. However, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity has not diminished the value of the timeless virtues that made this nation great.

In his “Farewell Address,” Washington placed one virtue above all others, saying, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of

human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.” Washington went on to add, “Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?”<sup>39</sup>

For Washington, religion was the basis of morality, which served as the foundation upon which a free people were able to control human passion and govern themselves. De Tocqueville described the role of religion in the United States in writing:

Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of it. Indeed, it is in this same point of view that the inhabitants look upon religious belief. I do not know whether all Americans have a sincere faith in their religion—for who can search the human heart?—but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican government.<sup>40</sup>

Both Washington and de Tocqueville understood the power of religion to constrain human nature. This view—that religion is an indispensable check on the passions of the people—was seen as the glue that held society together and enabled a free people to govern themselves.

Today, the ongoing effort to supplant a Judeo-Christian civil religion with the victim narrative’s aggressive secular humanism is responsible for exacerbating many of the social ills it purports to solve. By substituting an all-powerful government for a belief in the Creator, advocates of the victim narrative have systematically undermined the positive societal characteristics that played a prominent role in the nation’s success during its first century and a half.

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36. Adam Taylor, “The Austerity Cuts Slamming Europe’s Armed Forces,” *The Business Insider*, May 4, 2011, <http://www.businessinsider.com/military-cuts-europe-austerity-2011-5> (accessed February 27, 2014).

37. Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address,” Washington, DC, March 4, 1801.

38. See James Gwartney, Randall Holcombe, and Robert Lawson, “The Scope of Government and the Wealth of Nations,” *The Cato Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 163–190; Stephen Easton and Michael Walker, “Income, Growth and Economic Freedom,” *American Economic Review*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (May 1997), pp. 328–332; and L. Sirowy and A. Inkeles, “The Effects of Democracy on Economic Growth and Inequality: A Review,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 126–157.

39. Washington, “Farewell Address,” p. 20.

40. De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 305–306.



By replacing fathers with welfare checks, government has destroyed the nuclear family for millions of American children. As a result, these children are less likely to lead healthy, happy, productive, and successful lives.<sup>41</sup> In fact, no other variable can better predict the probability that a child will grow up in poverty than whether the child's mother is married.<sup>42</sup> Thus, American society is in free fall and turning increasingly to government to solve social ills that government is largely responsible for making far worse.

Similarly, the demise of a civil religion has left American foreign affairs without its compass. Rather than viewing the United States as a shining "city upon a hill"—a beacon of liberty for the world to emulate—as John Winthrop (1630), John F. Kennedy (1961), and Ronald Reagan (1976) all once called it, today's international relations liberals seek an activist foreign policy that rejects the Judeo-Christian worldview for a secular worldview, one where omnipotence is present in the exercise of American power. It is a macro-level example of the micro-level deterioration of American society.

What, then, is the solution in foreign affairs?

### **Realism: A Pragmatic Approach to Foreign Affairs**

While Porter and Mykleby's *A National Strategic Narrative* has many flaws, they and the *National Security Strategy* are correct in suggesting that a growing American economy is central to successfully defending the nation's vital interests. However, both documents clearly articulate elements of the victim narrative, and they advocate policies that will not stimulate the economic growth they claim to support. It is only in rejecting this worldview and the welfare state that comes with it that the United States can begin to recover lost ground.

Commentators in the economic press have gone to great lengths to elaborate on the specific details

of the reforms required to move America in a positive direction, but with the domestic sea change that would occur, the nation should also experience a cultural shift—a return to personal responsibility and self-reliance. Such a shift could also impact an American approach to foreign affairs similarly, reducing the nation's penchant for activism abroad. In advocating such an approach, three overarching elements will play an important role.

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**By substituting an all-powerful government for a belief in the Creator, advocates of the victim narrative have systematically undermined the positive societal characteristics that played a prominent role in the nation's success during its first century and a half.**

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**From Adventurism to Constraint.** Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler suggest that a realist approach to foreign affairs begins by making three assumptions: First, the international system is anarchic. Second, states cannot know the present or future intentions of others. Third, interstate war is unpredictable and often has devastating consequences.<sup>43</sup> Because of these conditions, a realist approach to foreign affairs accepts the limits of American power—kinetic and nonkinetic—and seeks to focus on defending the nation's enduring vital interests. Should these be harmed, it would cause great damage to the economic and physical security of the nation.

This precludes moral crusading. In a recent dismantling of neoconservative historical revisionism, Christopher J. Fettweis writes, "What the Founding Fathers actually believed, and what they rec-

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41. See Allan C. Carlson, "The Radical Change in American Culture—How Did We Get to This Point?" *The Family in America*, Vol. 15, No. 12 (December 2001); Belinda Luscombe, "Who Needs Marriage? A Changing Institution," *Time*, November 18, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2032116,00.html>; and Ryan Messmore, "Does Advocating Limited Government Mean Abandoning the Poor?" Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2551, May 4, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/05/does-advocating-limited-government-mean-abandoning-the-poor>.

42. University of Michigan, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, National Poverty Center, "Poverty in the United States: Frequently Asked Questions," 2011, <http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>, and Robert Rector, "Marriage: America's Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2465, September 16, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/09/marriage-america-s-greatest-weapon-against-child-poverty>.

43. Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, "A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (December 2011), p. 805, <http://www3.nccu.edu.tw/~lorenzo/Rosato%20A%20Realist%20Foreign%20Policy.pdf> (accessed May 6, 2014).

commended to their successors, was that the United States should be *restrained* in its actions, not isolated from the rest of the world.<sup>44</sup>

William C. Martel suggests the United States follow a policy of “restraint,” which he describes as a “foreign policy designed to counteract the forces that undermine international peace and security, while calling for the United States to exercise greater self-restraint and work collaboratively toward this goal.”<sup>45</sup> Although restraint is designed to be a 21st-century version of containment—designed to deter modern challenges to international order—Martel’s strategy is less about constraining American activism and more about internationalizing such efforts.

Instead, prudence should become the “supreme virtue in politics,” as Hans Morgenthau once suggested.<sup>46</sup> A foreign policy of prudence would require that the United States constrain its desire to act as moral agent in a world that is decidedly imperfect. While adopting former Secretary of State Cordell Hull’s maxim, “He may be a son-of-a-bitch, but he’s our son-of-a-bitch,” may be unappealing, a dispassionate approach to focusing American foreign affairs on the defense of the nation’s vital interests is a prudent policy.<sup>47</sup> In keeping with an approach governed by constraint, the United States would be wise to heed George Kennan’s advice: “The best way for a larger country to help smaller ones is surely by the power of example.”<sup>48</sup>

**From Offense to Defense.** For the United States, the 20th century marked a decided shift from non-intervention to the offensive use of military power. In some instances, such as the defeat of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan, the exercise of American strength was necessary, but in many instances, it did little to protect the nation’s vital interests. Too often in the post-World War II period, American policymakers were susceptible to using military power simply because it was there. As Madeleine Albright

once asked then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell, “What’s the point of having this superb military that you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”<sup>49</sup>

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Instead, the nation could benefit from a grand strategy with the five elements proposed by Clark Murdock and Kevin Kallmyer: First, it should be balanced, aligning competing interests. Second, it should be prudent, employing American power conservatively and cautiously. Third, it should be principled; rejecting American values wholesale is untenable. Fourth, it should be purposive, guided by a clear strategic vision. Fifth, it should be sustainable, enduring across Republican and Democrat Administrations.<sup>50</sup>

While attributes three and four (principled and purposive) are the most problematic for realists, American adventurism could be constrained if the United States were to develop a clear and widely accepted understanding of its enduring national interests. In constructing a more rigorous framework of national interest and grand strategy, it might prove more difficult for a President to employ American power for ill-conceived or arbitrary purposes. Such an approach would leave the Department of Defense more representative of its name.

**From Permanent Presence to Permanent Interests.** When Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*, he warned, “As Europe is our market for trade,

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44. Christopher J. Fettweis, “Dangerous Revisionism: On the Founders, ‘Neocons’ and the Importance of History,” *Orbis*, Vol. 53, Issue 3 (June 2009), p. 511.

45. William C. Martel, “Grand Strategy of Restraint,” *Orbis*, Vol. 54, Issue 3 (Summer 2010), p. 361.

46. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 11.

47. Bernard Diederich, *Trujillo: The Death of the Goat* (New York: Little, Brown, 1991), p. 38.

48. George Kennan, “On American Principles,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (March/April 1995), p. 125.

49. Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Miramax, 2005), p. 182.

50. Clark Murdock and Kevin Kallmyer, “Applied Grand Strategy: Making Tough Choices in an Era of Limits and Constraints,” *Orbis*, Vol. 55, Issue 4 (September 2011), pp. 550–551.

we ought to form no partial connection with any part of it. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions.”<sup>51</sup> Thomas Jefferson shared a similar view, advocating “free commerce with all nations, political connection with none, and little or no diplomatic establishment.”<sup>52</sup>

While some may scoff at such an approach today, both Paine and Jefferson understood that the success of the United States was premised on its trading relations, not its political alliances and ties. In advocating and conducting foreign affairs that were largely noninterventionist, they sought to protect American trade from the arbitrary whims of nations in competition with one another. This objective is no less valid today than it was in the 18th century, despite America’s rise to superpower status. In fact, with the U.S. the world’s largest manufacturer, the *intent* of Paine and Jefferson may be more prescient today than it was more than two centuries ago.<sup>53</sup>

Focusing on the nation’s commercial interests calls for the United States to play a lesser role in supporting or thwarting the machinations of other states and their leaders, be they democratic or authoritarian. This is not to say that the United States should idly watch as the world descends into chaos. Rather, it is a call for a more focused approach to foreign affairs that never loses sight of what has long mattered most to the country. What made the American role in the Cold War so important was that Soviet Communism was a fundamental threat to American commercial interests. This was because the Soviet Union sought to overthrow the economic system upon which American prosperity was based.

Today, however, neither al-Qaeda nor China nor any other potential threat has the means to bring about grave economic harm to the United States—

absent a nuclear exchange. Without such a threat to the United States’ vital interests, less is more when it comes to what has become a permanent American military presence in an estimated 70 percent of countries around the globe. After all, if everything matters, nothing matters.

## Conclusion

With the United States facing long-term challenges in economic and foreign affairs that are certain to prove difficult to solve, it is finally time to reject the worldview that led to the nation’s current condition. The timeless wisdom of the Founders offers 21st-century Americans the intellectual framework for a renaissance of individual and national rejuvenation. To be successful, however, rejecting the victim narrative at home and abroad is crucial.

Yes, the world is inherently unfair because human nature is deeply flawed, but to suggest that an all-powerful government can right domestic and international wrongs is the height of hubris. All too often, those who advocate such policies are judged by their intentions rather than by the effects of their actions. If such were the case, it would be all too clear that the welfare state is an abject failure and that an American foreign policy more narrowly focused on the defense of vital interests is best for a nation that may soon fall from its lofty perch.

—*A. B. Lowther, PhD, is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Center for the National Interest. He delivered these remarks at a meeting of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign and National Security Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*

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51. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Philadelphia: W.T. Bradford, 1791), at <http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/milestones/commonsense/text.html>.

52. Albert Ellery Bergh and Andrew Lipscomb, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 10 (New York: Kessinger, 2006), p. 77.

53. See Jay Timmons, Stephen Gold, and Jennifer McNelly, “Facts About Manufacturing,” National Association of Manufacturers, November 2012, [http://www.themanufacturinginstitute.org/~/-/media/1242121E7A4F45D68C2A4586540703A5/2012\\_Facts\\_About\\_Manufacturing\\_\\_\\_Full\\_Version\\_\\_\\_High\\_Res.pdf](http://www.themanufacturinginstitute.org/~/-/media/1242121E7A4F45D68C2A4586540703A5/2012_Facts_About_Manufacturing___Full_Version___High_Res.pdf) (accessed May 6, 2014).