

August 24, 2014

Commentary Magazine opened up the September issue with an essay by [Bret Stephens](#) who normally writes on foreign affairs for the WSJ. The title of the piece is *The Meltdown*. It is about the last six years of our country's foreign policy failures. *In July, after Germany trounced Brazil 7–1 in the semifinal match of the World Cup—including a first-half stretch in which the Brazilian soccer squad gave up an astonishing five goals in 19 minutes—a sports commentator wrote: “This was not a team losing. It was a dream dying.” These words could equally describe what has become of Barack Obama’s foreign policy since his second inauguration. The president, according to the infatuated view of his political aides and media flatterers, was supposed to be playing o jogo bonito, the beautiful game—ending wars, pressing resets, pursuing pivots, and restoring America’s good name abroad.*

Instead, he crumbled.

As I write, the foreign policy of the United States is in a state of unprecedented disarray. In some cases, failed policy has given way to an absence of policy. So it is in Libya, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and, at least until recently, Ukraine. In other cases the president has doubled down on failed policy—extending nuclear negotiations with Iran; announcing the full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

Sometimes the administration has been the victim of events, such as Edward Snowden’s espionage, it made worse through bureaucratic fumbling and feckless administrative fixes. At other times the wounds have been self-inflicted: the espionage scandal in Germany (when it was learned that the United States had continued to spy on our ally despite prior revelations of the NSA’s eavesdropping on Chancellor Angela Merkel); the repeated declaration that “core al-Qaeda” was “on a path to defeat”; the prisoner swap with the Taliban that obtained Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl’s release.

Often the damage has been vivid, as in the collapse of the Israel–Palestinian talks in April followed by the war in Gaza. More frequently it can be heard in the whispered remarks of our allies. “The Polish-American alliance is worthless, even harmful, as it gives Poland a false sense of security,” Radek Sikorski, Poland’s foreign minister and once one of its most reliably pro-American politicians, was overheard saying in June. “It’s bullshit.”

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... But perhaps the most telling indicator is the collapsing confidence in the president among the Democratic-leaning foreign-policy elite in the United States. “Under Obama, the United States has suffered some real reputational damage,” admitted Washington Post columnist David Ignatius in May, adding: “I say this as someone who sympathizes with many of Obama’s foreign-policy goals.” Hillary Clinton, the president’s once loyal secretary of state, offered in early August that “great nations need organizing principles, and ‘don’t do stupid stuff’ is not an organizing principle.” Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter’s national-security adviser, warned in July that “we are losing control of our ability at the highest levels of dealing with challenges that, increasingly, many of us recognize as fundamental to our well-being.” The United States, he added, was “increasingly devoid of strategic will and a sense of direction.” ...

... every president confronts his share of apparently intractable dilemmas. The test of a successful presidency is whether it can avoid being trapped and defined by them. Did Obama

inherit anything worse than what Franklin Roosevelt got from Herbert Hoover (the Great Depression) or Richard Nixon from Lyndon Johnson (the war in Vietnam and the social meltdown of the late '60s) or Ronald Reagan from Jimmy Carter (stagflation, the ayatollahs, the Soviet Union on the march)?

If anything, the international situation Obama faced when he assumed the presidency was, in many respects, relatively auspicious. Despite the financial crisis and the recession that followed, never since John F. Kennedy has an American president assumed high office with so much global goodwill. The war in Iraq, which had done so much to bedevil Bush's presidency, had been won thanks to a military strategy Obama had, as a senator, flatly opposed. For the war in Afghanistan, there was broad bipartisan support for large troop increases. Not even six months into his presidency, Obama was handed a potential strategic game changer when a stolen election in Iran led to a massive popular uprising that, had it succeeded, could have simultaneously ended the Islamic Republic and resolved the nuclear crisis. He was handed another would-be game changer in early 2011, when the initially peaceful uprising in Syria offered an opportunity, at relatively little cost to the U.S., to depose an anti-American dictator and sever the main link between Iran and its terrorist proxies in Lebanon and Gaza.

Incredibly, Obama squandered every single one of these opportunities. An early and telling turning point came in 2009, when, as part of the Russian reset, the administration abruptly cancelled plans—laboriously negotiated by the Bush administration, and agreed to at considerable political risk by governments in Warsaw and Prague—to deploy ballistic-missile defenses to Poland and the Czech Republic. “We heard through the media,” was how Witold Waszczykowski, the deputy head of Poland's national-security team, described the administration's consultation process. Adding unwitting insult to gratuitous injury, the announcement came on the 70th anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet pact, a stark reminder that Poland could never entrust its security to the guarantees of great powers.

And this was just the beginning. ...

... The myth of Obama's brilliance paradoxically obscures the fact that he's no fool. The point is especially important to note because the failure of Obama's foreign policy is not, ultimately, a reflection of his character or IQ. It is the consequence of an ideology.

That ideology is what now goes by the name of progressivism, which has effectively been the dominant (if often disavowed) view of the Democratic Party since George McGovern ran on a “Come Home, America” platform in 1972—and got 37.5 percent of the popular vote. Progressivism believes that the United States must lead internationally by example (especially when it comes to nuclear-arms control); that the U.S. is as much the sinner as it is the sinned against when it comes to our adversaries (remember Mosaddegh?); and that the American interest is best served when it is merged with, or subsumed by, the global interest (ideally in the form of a UN resolution).

“The truth of the matter is that it's a big world out there, and that as indispensable as we are to try to lead it, there's still going to be tragedies out there, and there are going to be conflicts, and our job is to make sure to project what's right, what's just, and, you know, that we're building coalitions of like-minded countries and partners in order to advance not only our core security interests, but also the interests of the world as a whole.” Thus did Obama describe his global outlook in an August 2014 press conference.

Above all, progressivism believes that the United States is a country that, in nearly every respect, treads too heavily on the Earth: environmentally, ideologically, militarily, and geopolitically. The goal, therefore, is to reduce America's footprint; to "retrench," as the administration would like to think of it, or to retreat, as it might more accurately be called.

To what end? ...

... In a prescient 2004 essay in Foreign Policy, the historian Niall Ferguson warned that "the alternative to [American] unipolarity" would not be some kind of reasonably tolerable world order. It would, he said, "be apolarity—a global vacuum of power." "If the United States retreats from global hegemony—its fragile self-image dented by minor setbacks on the imperial frontier—its critics at home and abroad must not pretend that they are ushering in a new era of multipolar harmony, or even a return to the good old balance of power. Be careful what you wish for."

For nearly 250 years it has been America's great fortune to have always found just the right leadership in the nick of time. Or perhaps that's not quite accurate: It has, rather, been our way first to sleepwalk toward crisis and catastrophe, then to rouse ourselves when it is almost too late. As things stand now, by 2017 it will be nearly too late. Who sees a Lincoln, or a Truman, or a Reagan on the horizon?

Still, we should not lose hope. We may be foolish, but our enemies, however aggressive and ill-intended, are objectively weak. We may be a nation in deliberate retreat, but at least we are not—at least not yet—in inexorable decline. Two years ago, Obama was considered a foreign-policy success story. Not many people entertain that illusion now; the tide of public opinion, until recently so dull and vociferous in its opposition to "neocons," is beginning to shift as Americans understand that a policy of inaction also has its price. Americans are once again prepared to hear the case against retreat. What's needed are the spokesmen, and spokeswomen, who will make it.

Since I am writing these words on the centenary of the First World War, it seems appropriate to close with a line from the era. At the battle of the Marne, with Germany advancing on Paris, General Ferdinand Foch sent the message that would rally the French army to hold its ground. "My center is yielding. My right is retreating. Situation excellent. I am attacking." Words to remember and live by in this new era of headlong American retreat.

Michael Barone with yet another in the long list of ways to demonstrate the failures of governments.

The private sector has been making raising children more inexpensive. The public sector has been making raising children more expensive. That's the lesson I draw from [this Bloomberg blog post](#) by the indefatigable and insightful Megan McArdle. She links to [U.S. Department of Agriculture data](#) on "expenditures on a child from birth through age 17, total expenses and budgetary component share" for 1960 and 2013, both expressed in 2013 dollars. The pie charts show that the percentages spent on housing and transportation have remained static, while the percentages spent on food and clothing have declined significantly and the percentages for health care and "child care & education" have risen significantly. ...

... The bottom line is that the private sector, thanks in significant part to deregulation and free-market competition, has made it substantially less expensive to feed and clothe children over the past half-century. The private sector, aided marginally by government, has made it only marginally more expensive to transport and house them. But the public sector, together with changes in lifestyles, has made it much more expensive to provide them with health care and to educate them. There's a lesson here, I think.

WSJ article on new understandings of the time modern man spent in concert with Neanderthals. There was a lot of contact for thousands of years and some interbreeding which explains the existence of the Democrat party and the left in general.

... Neanderthals originally emerged from Africa and lived in Europe, Russia and the Middle East at least 200,000 years ago and possibly for tens of thousands of years before that.

Research suggests that modern humans first left Africa roughly 60,000 years ago and first headed eastward. Previous estimates have indicated that modern humans arrived in Neanderthal-dominated Europe about 40,000 years ago, and some Neanderthals continued to persist in parts of the continent until just 32,000 years ago before vanishing, leaving the continent to humans.

The Nature study offers a significant revision of that timeline. It concludes that modern humans arrived considerably earlier—about 45,000 years ago—and the two groups overlapped for anywhere from 2,600 years to 5,400 years before the Neanderthals died out.

Did the overlap mean that two groups in Europe met? Did they breed? Did they exchange or copy tools or other behaviors, a process known as "acculturation"? There is no hard evidence to prove that Neanderthals and modern humans met, interbred, or exchanged tools and behaviors, but there are signs that some contact may have occurred. ...

The cartoonists have fun with the golfing president. In spite of the humor, we continue to think the more time he is on the golf course, the better for the country.

Commentary
[The Meltdown](#)
by Bret Stephens

In July, after Germany trounced Brazil 7–1 in the semifinal match of the World Cup—including a first-half stretch in which the Brazilian soccer squad gave up an astonishing five goals in 19 minutes—a sports commentator wrote: “This was not a team losing. It was a dream dying.” These words could equally describe what has become of Barack Obama’s foreign policy since

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This is far from an exhaustive list. But it’s one that, at last, people have begun to notice. Foreign policy, considered a political strength of the president in his first term, has become a liability. In June, an NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll found that Americans disapproved of his handling of foreign affairs by a 57-to-37 percent ratio. Overseas, dismay with Obama mounts. Among Germans, who greeted the future president as a near-messiah when he spoke in Berlin in the summer of 2008, his approval rating fell to 43 percent in late 2013, from 88 percent in 2010. In Egypt, another country the president went out of his way to woo, he has accomplished the unlikely feat of making himself more unpopular than George W. Bush. In Israel, political leaders and commentators from across the political spectrum are united in their disdain for the administration. “The Obama administration proved once again that it is the best friend of its enemies, and the biggest enemy of its friends,” the center-left *Haaretz* columnist Ari Shavit noted in late July. It’s an observation being echoed by policymakers from Tokyo to Taipei to Tallinn.

But perhaps the most telling indicator is the collapsing confidence in the president among the Democratic-leaning foreign-policy elite in the United States. “Under Obama, the United States has suffered some real reputational damage,” admitted *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius in May, adding: “I say this as someone who sympathizes with many of Obama’s foreign-policy goals.” Hillary Clinton, the president’s once loyal secretary of state, offered in early August that “great nations need organizing principles, and ‘don’t do stupid stuff’ is not an organizing principle.” Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter’s national-security adviser, warned in July that “we are losing control of our ability at the highest levels of dealing with challenges that, increasingly, many of us recognize as fundamental to our well-being.” The United States, he added, was “increasingly devoid of strategic will and a sense of direction.”

And there was this: “What kind of figure will Obama cut at Omaha?” Roger Cohen, the reliably liberal *New York Times* columnist, wondered on the eve of the 70th D-Day commemoration at Omaha Beach in June. “I wish I could say he will cut a convincing figure.” But, he continued:

Obama at bloody Omaha, in the sixth year of his presidency, falls short at a time when his aides have been defining the cornerstone of his foreign policy as: “Don’t do stupid stuff.”... He falls short at a time when Syria bleeds more than three years into the uprising... Obama falls short at a time when Vladimir Putin, emboldened by that Syrian retreat and the perception of American weakness, has annexed Crimea... Obama falls short as Putin’s Russian surrogates in eastern Ukraine wreak havoc... He falls short, also, when the Egyptian dreams of liberty and pluralism that arose in Tahrir square have given way to the landslide victory of a former general in an “election” only a little less grotesque than Assad’s in Syria.

Are we all neoconservatives again? Not quite—or at least not yet. Even as the evidence of the failure of Obama’s foreign policy abounds, the causes of that failure remain in dispute. Has the world simply become an impossibly complex place, beyond the reach of any American president to shape or master? Is the problem the president himself, a man who seems to have lost interest in the responsibilities (though not yet the perquisites) of his office? Or are we witnessing the consequences of foreign-policy progressivism, the worldview Obama brought with him to the White House and that he has, for the most part, consistently and even conscientiously championed?

Not surprisingly, many of the president’s supporters are attracted to the first explanation.

In this reading, the U.S. no longer enjoys its previous geopolitical advantages over militarily dependent and diplomatically pliant allies, or against inherently weaker and relatively predictable adversaries. On the contrary, our economic supremacy is fading and we may be in long-term decline. Our adversaries are increasingly able to confront us asymmetrically, imposing high costs on us without incurring significant costs for themselves. Limited budgetary resources require us to make “hard choices” about the balance between international and domestic priorities. What’s more, the sour experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan—another bad Bush legacy—limit Obama’s options, because Americans have made it plain that they are in no mood to intervene in places such as Syria or over conflicts such as the one in Ukraine. As the president told an interviewer in 2013, “I am more mindful probably than most of not only our incredible strengths and capabilities but also our limitations.”

It would be wrong to dismiss this argument out of hand. Can Obama fairly be blamed for the quarter-century of misgovernance in Kiev that created conditions in which Russian separatists in Crimea and Donetsk would flourish? Was there anything he could realistically have done to prevent Hosni Mubarak’s ouster, or to steer Egyptian politics in the tumultuous years that followed? Is it his fault that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki pursued vendettas against Iraq’s Sunni leaders, creating the political conditions for al-Qaeda’s resurgence, or that Hamid Karzai has proved to be such a disappointing leader for Afghanistan? If the price of better relations with Pakistan was ending the program of drone strikes, was that a price worth paying?

Then again, every president confronts his share of apparently intractable dilemmas. The test of a successful presidency is whether it can avoid being trapped and defined by them. Did Obama inherit anything worse than what Franklin Roosevelt got from Herbert Hoover (the Great Depression) or Richard Nixon from Lyndon Johnson (the war in Vietnam and the social meltdown of the late ’60s) or Ronald Reagan from Jimmy Carter (stagflation, the ayatollahs, the Soviet Union on the march)?

If anything, the international situation Obama faced when he assumed the presidency was, in many respects, relatively auspicious. Despite the financial crisis and the recession that followed, never since John F. Kennedy has an American president assumed high office with so much global goodwill. The war in Iraq, which had done so much to bedevil Bush's presidency, had been won thanks to a military strategy Obama had, as a senator, flatly opposed. For the war in Afghanistan, there was broad bipartisan support for large troop increases. Not even six months into his presidency, Obama was handed a potential strategic game changer when a stolen election in Iran led to a massive popular uprising that, had it succeeded, could have simultaneously ended the Islamic Republic and resolved the nuclear crisis. He was handed another would-be game changer in early 2011, when the initially peaceful uprising in Syria offered an opportunity, at relatively little cost to the U.S., to depose an anti-American dictator and sever the main link between Iran and its terrorist proxies in Lebanon and Gaza.

Incredibly, Obama squandered every single one of these opportunities. An early and telling turning point came in 2009, when, as part of the Russian reset, the administration abruptly cancelled plans—laboriously negotiated by the Bush administration, and agreed to at considerable political risk by governments in Warsaw and Prague—to deploy ballistic-missile defenses to Poland and the Czech Republic. “We heard through the media,” was how Witold Waszczykowski, the deputy head of Poland's national-security team, described the administration's consultation process. Adding unwitting insult to gratuitous injury, the announcement came on the 70th anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet pact, a stark reminder that Poland could never entrust its security to the guarantees of great powers.

And this was just the beginning. Relations would soon sour with France, as then-President Nicolas Sarkozy openly mocked Obama's fantasies of nuclear disarmament. “*Est-il faible?*”—“Is he weak?”—the French president was reported to have wondered aloud after witnessing Obama's performance at his first G20 summit in April 2009. Then relations would sour with Germany: A biography of Angela Merkel by Stefan Kornelius quotes her as telling then-British Prime Minister Gordon Brown that she found Obama “so peculiar, so unapproachable, so lacking in warmth.” Next was Saudi Arabia: U.S. policy toward Syria, the Kingdom's Prince Turki al-Faisal would tell an audience in London, “would be funny if it were not so blatantly perfidious, and designed not only to give Mr. Obama an opportunity to back down, but also to help Assad butcher his people.” Canada—Canada!—would be disappointed. “We can't continue in this state of limbo,” complained foreign minister John Baird about the administration's endless delays and prevarications over approving the Keystone XL pipeline.

And there was Israel: “We thought it would be the United States that would lead the campaign against Iran,” Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon noted in March in a speech at Tel Aviv University. Instead, Obama was “showing weakness,” he added. “Therefore, on this matter, we have to behave as though we have nobody to look out for us but ourselves.”

This was quite a list of falling-outs. Still, most such differences can usually be finessed or patched up with a bit of diplomacy. Not so Obama's failures when it came to consolidating America's hard-won gains in Iraq, or advocating America's democratic values in Iran, or pursuing his own oft-stated goal in Afghanistan—“the war that has to be won,” as he was fond of saying when he was running for the presidency in 2008. As for Syria, perhaps the most devastating assessment was offered by Robert Ford, who had been Obama's man in Damascus in the days when Bashar al-Assad was dining with John Kerry and being touted by Hillary Clinton as a “reformer.”

“I was no longer in a position where I felt I could defend the American policy,” Ford told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour in June, explaining his decision to resign from government. “There really is nothing we can point to that’s been very successful in our policy except the removal of about 93 percent of some of Assad’s chemical materials. But now he’s using chlorine gas against his opponents.”

None of these fiascos— for brevity’s sake, I’m deliberately setting to one side the illusory pivot to Asia, the misbegotten Russian Reset, the mishandled Palestinian–Israeli talks, the stillborn Geneva conferences on Syria, the catastrophic interim agreement with Iran, the de facto death of the U.S. free-trade agenda, the overhyped opening to Burma, the orphaned victory in Libya, the poisoned relationship with Egypt, and the disastrous cuts to the Defense budget—can be explained away as a matter of tough geopolitical luck. Where, then, does the source of failure lie?

For those disposed to be ideologically sympathetic to the administration, it comes down to the personality of the president. He is, they say, too distant, not enough of a schmoozer, doesn’t forge the close personal relationships of the kind that Bush had with Tony Blair, or Clinton with Helmut Kohl, or Reagan with Margaret Thatcher. Also, he’s too professorial, too rational, too prudent: He thinks that foreign-policy success is a matter of hitting “singles and doubles,” as he put it on a recent visit to Asia, when what Americans want is for the president to hit home runs (or at least point toward the lights).

Alternatively, perhaps he’s too political: “The president had a truly disturbing habit of funneling major foreign-policy decisions through a small cabal of relatively inexperienced White House advisers whose turf was strictly politics,” recalled Vali Nasr, the academic who served as a State Department aide early in Obama’s first term. “Their primary concern was how any action in Afghanistan or the Middle East would play out on the nightly news.”

Another theory: The president is simply disconnected from events, indifferent to the details of governance, incompetent in the execution of policy. Last fall, following the disastrous rollout of the ObamaCare website, it emerged that the president had not had a single private meeting with Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius for more than three years—an indicator, given that this was his highest political priority, of the quality of attention he was giving lesser issues. It also turned out that the president had gone for nearly five years without knowing that the National Security Agency was bugging the phones of foreign leaders. In a revealing portrait from October 2013 in the *New York Times*, the president was described as “impatient and disengaged” during White House debates about Syria, “sometimes scrolling through messages on his BlackBerry or slouching and chewing gum.” The president is also known to have complained to aides about what he called “decision fatigue,” demanding memos where he can check “agree,” “disagree,” or “let’s discuss.”

The most devastating testimony of all came from Obama himself. Prepping for an interview on *60 Minutes* after a late-night dinner in Italy, *Politico* reported, the president complained about his hard lot: “Just last night I was talking about life and art, big interesting things, and now we’re back to the minuscule things on politics”—those “minuscule things” being the crisis in Ukraine and his own health-care plan. Then there was this detail, about a presidential excursion in March as the crisis in Crimea was unfolding:

At a leisurely dinner with friends on that Saturday night, Obama expressed no regrets about the mini-vacation at the lush Ocean Reef Club resort or the publicity surrounding the trip, which reportedly required planes, five helicopters, more than 50 Secret Service agents and airspace

restrictions over South Florida. After a difficult few weeks dealing with an international crisis, he relished the break, which included two rounds of golf.

Even allowing that presidents can get work done on the fairway and make executive decisions between fundraising events (Obama did 321 of them in his first term, according to the *Washington Post*, as compared with 173 for George W. Bush's first four years and 80 for Reagan's), there is still the reality that the American presidency remains a full-time job that requires something more than glancing attention. Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, Germany's former defense minister, described Obama as "probably the most detached President [in] decades." William Galston, my (liberal) fellow columnist at the *Wall Street Journal* and a former aide to Bill Clinton, has noted that "this president doesn't seem to be as curious about the processes of government—whether the legislative process or the implementation process or the administrative or bureaucratic process."

Even the ordinarily sympathetic Washington press corps has cottoned to the truth about Obama's style of management. "Former Obama administration officials," the *Washington Post's* Scott Wilson reported last year, "said the president's inattention to detail has been a frequent source of frustration, leading in some cases to reversals of diplomatic initiatives and other efforts that had been underway for months."

Should any of this have come as a surprise? Probably not: With Obama, there was always more than a whiff of the overconfident dilettante, so sure of his powers that he could remain supremely comfortable with his own ignorance. His express-elevator ascent from Illinois state senator to U.S. president in the space of just four years didn't allow much time for maturation or reflection, either. Obama really is, as Bill Clinton is supposed to have said of him, "an amateur." When it comes to the execution of policy, it shows.

And yet this view also sells Obama short. It should be obvious, but bears repeating, that it is no mean feat to be elected, and reelected, president, whatever other advantages Obama might have enjoyed in his races. In interviews and press conferences, Obama is often verbose and generally self-serving, but he's also, for the most part, conversant with the issues. He may not be the second coming of Lincoln that groupies like historians Michael Beschloss (who called Obama "probably the smartest guy ever to become president") or Robert Dallek (who said Obama's "political mastery is on par with FDR and LBJ") made him out to be. But neither is he a Sarah Palin, mouthing artless banalities about this great nation of ours, or a Rick Perry, trying, like Otto from *A Fish Called Wanda*, to remember the middle part. The myth of Obama's brilliance paradoxically obscures the fact that he's no fool. The point is especially important to note because the failure of Obama's foreign policy is not, ultimately, a reflection of his character or IQ. It is the consequence of an ideology.

That ideology is what now goes by the name of progressivism, which has effectively been the dominant (if often disavowed) view of the Democratic Party since George McGovern ran on a "Come Home, America" platform in 1972—and got 37.5 percent of the popular vote. Progressivism believes that the United States must lead internationally by example (especially when it comes to nuclear-arms control); that the U.S. is as much the sinner as it is the sinned against when it comes to our adversaries (remember Mosaddegh?); and that the American interest is best served when it is merged with, or subsumed by, the global interest (ideally in the form of a UN resolution).

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To what end? "We are five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America," Obama said on the eve of his election in 2008. If Obama-Care is anything to go by, that fundamental transformation involves a vast expansion of the entitlement state; the growth of federal administrative power at the expense of Congress and the states; the further subordination of private enterprise to government regulation—and, crucially, the end of Pax Americana in favor of some new global dispensation, perhaps UN-led, in which America would cease to be the natural leader and would become instead the largest net contributor. The phrase "nation-building at home" captures the totality of the progressive ambition. Not only does it mean an end to nation-building exercises abroad, but it suggests that an exercise typically attempted on failed states must be put to use on what progressives sometimes see as the biggest failed state of all: the United States.

That, at any rate, is the theory. Practice has proved to be a different story. If the United States were to go into retreat, to turn inward for the sake of building some new social democracy, just what would take the place of Pax Americana abroad? On this point, Obama has struggled to give an answer. "People are anxious," he acknowledged at a fundraiser in Seattle in July:

Now, some of that has to do with some big challenges overseas...Part of people's concern is just the sense that around the world the old order isn't holding and we're not quite yet to where we need to be in terms of a new order that's based on a different set of principles, that's based on a sense of common humanity, that's based on economies that work for all people.

A new order that's based on a different set of principles: Just what could that new order be? In the absence of a single dominant power, capable *and* willing to protect its friends and deter its foes, there are three conceivable models of global organization. First, a traditional balance-of-power system of the kind that briefly flourished in Europe in the 19th century. Second, "collective security" under the supervision of an organization like the League of Nations or the United Nations. Third, the liberal-democratic peace advocated, or predicted, by the likes of Immanuel Kant, Norman Angell, and Francis Fukuyama.

Yet, with the qualified exception of the liberal-democratic model, each of these systems wound up collapsing of its own weight—precisely the reason Dean Acheson, Harry Truman, Winston Churchill, and the other postwar statesmen "present at the creation" understood the necessity of the Truman Doctrine, the Atlantic Alliance, containment, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and all the rest of the institutional and ideological architecture of America's post-World War II leadership. These were men who knew that isolationism, global-disarmament pledges, international law, or any other principle based on "common humanity" could provide no lasting security against ambitious dictatorships and conniving upstarts. The only check against disorder and anarchy was order and power. The only hope that order and power would be put to the right use was to make sure that a preponderance of power lay in safe, benign, and confident hands.

In 1945 the only hands that fit that description were American. It remains true today—even more so, given the slow-motion economic and strategic collapse of Europe. Yet here was Obama, blithely proposing to substitute Pax Americana with an as-yet-unnamed and undefined formula for the maintenance of global order. Little wonder that leaders in Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow quickly understood that, with Obama in the White House, they had a rare opportunity to reshape and revise regional arrangements in a manner more to their liking. Iran is doing so today in southern Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Beijing is extending its reach in the South and East China Sea. Russia is intervening in Ukraine. It's no accident that, while acting independently from one another, they are all acting *now*. The next American president might not be so cavalier about challenges to the global status quo, or about enforcing his (or her) own red lines. Better to move while they can.

Then again, the next American president might not have options of the sort that Obama enjoyed when he took office in 2009. By 2017, the U.S. military will be an increasingly hollow force, with the Army as small as it was in 1940, before conscription; a Navy the size it was in 1917, before our entry into World War I; an Air Force flying the oldest—and smallest—fleet of planes in its history; and a nuclear arsenal no larger than it was during the Truman administration.

By 2017, too, the Middle East is likely to have been remade, though exactly how is difficult to say. As I write, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which had seized eastern Syria and most of Anbar Province in Iraq in June, is now encroaching simultaneously into Lebanon and Iraq's Kurdish regions. It is too soon to tell what kind of nuclear deal the West will strike with Iran—assuming it strikes any deal at all. But after years of prevarication on one side and self-deceit on the other, the likeliest outcomes are that a) Iran will get a bomb; b) Iran will be allowed to remain within a screw's twist of a bomb; or c) Israel will be forced, at great risk to itself, to go to war to prevent a) or b) because the United States would not do the job. As for Asia and our supposed pivot, a comment this spring by Assistant Secretary of Defense Katrina McFarland could not have been lost on Chinese—or, for that matter, Japanese—ears. "Right now," she said, "the 'pivot' is being looked at again because candidly it can't happen." There just aren't enough ships.

And these are just the *predictable* consequences of the path we've been taking under Obama. What happens if there's more bad news in store? If Vladimir Putin were to invade one, or all, of the Baltic states tomorrow, there is little short of nuclear war that NATO could do to stop him, and the alliance would stand exposed as the shell it has already become. Or, to take another no-longer-implausible scenario, is it inconceivable that Saudi Arabia, unhappy as it is over the Obama administration's outreach toward Tehran, might choose to pursue its own nuclear options? The Saudis are already widely believed to own a piece of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal; why not test one of the weapons somewhere in the Saudi desert as a warning shot to Tehran, and perhaps to Washington also?

Or how about this: What if inflation in the United States prompts the Federal Reserve finally to raise interest rates in a major way? What effect would that have on commodity-dependent emerging markets? And what if the crisis in the Eurozone isn't over at all, and a second deep recession brings a neo-fascist such as Marine Le Pen to power in France? The depressions of the 1920s and '30s were caused, not least, by America's original retreat from the world after it soured on international politics and the promise of global democracy. Now Obama is sounding the same retreat, for many of the same reasons, and probably with the same consequences.

In a prescient 2004 essay in *Foreign Policy*, the historian Niall Ferguson warned that "the alternative to [American] unipolarity" would not be some kind of reasonably tolerable world

order. It would, he said, “be apolarity—a global vacuum of power.” “If the United States retreats from global hegemony—its fragile self-image dented by minor setbacks on the imperial frontier—its critics at home and abroad must not pretend that they are ushering in a new era of multipolar harmony, or even a return to the good old balance of power. Be careful what you wish for.”

For nearly 250 years it has been America’s great fortune to have always found just the right leadership in the nick of time. Or perhaps that’s not quite accurate: It has, rather, been our way first to sleepwalk toward crisis and catastrophe, then to rouse ourselves when it is almost too late. As things stand now, by 2017 it will be nearly too late. Who sees a Lincoln, or a Truman, or a Reagan on the horizon?

Still, we should not lose hope. We may be foolish, but our enemies, however aggressive and ill-intended, are objectively weak. We may be a nation in deliberate retreat, but at least we are not—at least not yet—in inexorable decline. Two years ago, Obama was considered a foreign-policy success story. Not many people entertain that illusion now; the tide of public opinion, until recently so dull and vociferous in its opposition to “neocons,” is beginning to shift as Americans understand that a policy of inaction also has its price. Americans are once again prepared to hear the case against retreat. What’s needed are the spokesmen, and spokeswomen, who will make it.

Since I am writing these words on the centenary of the First World War, it seems appropriate to close with a line from the era. At the battle of the Marne, with Germany advancing on Paris, General Ferdinand Foch sent the message that would rally the French army to hold its ground. “My center is yielding. My right is retreating. Situation excellent. I am attacking.” Words to remember and live by in this new era of headlong American retreat.

Bret Stephens is the foreign-affairs columnist and deputy editorial-page editor of the Wall Street Journal. In 2013 he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. His first book, America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder will be published by Sentinel in November.

Examiner

Private sector makes raising children less expensive, public sector makes it more expensive

by Michael Barone

The private sector has been making raising children more inexpensive. The public sector has been making raising children more expensive. That’s the lesson I draw from [this Bloomberg blog post](#) by the indefatigable and insightful Megan McArdle. She links to [U.S. Department of Agriculture data](#) on “expenditures on a child from birth through age 17, total expenses and budgetary component share” for 1960 and 2013, both expressed in 2013 dollars. The pie charts show that the percentages spent on housing and transportation have remained static, while the percentages spent on food and clothing have declined significantly and the percentages for health care and “child care & education” have risen significantly.

I thought it would be useful to translate these percentages into dollar figures. The following table shows dollar figures for 1960 and 2013 (both in 2013 dollars) and the percentage increase or decrease over those 53 years.

Category	1960	2013	Percentage change
Child care & education	\$3,971	\$44,161	+1,012%
Health care	\$7,942	\$19,627	+147%
Housing	\$61,553	\$73,602	+20%
Transportation	\$31,770	\$34,348	+1,012%
Miscellaneous	\$23,827	\$19,627	-18%
Food	\$47,654	\$39,254	-18%
Clothing	\$21,842	\$14,720	-33%
Total	\$198,559	\$245,339	+24%

Obvious conclusion: Parents have to pay lots more for things that are largely provided by or heavily regulated by government — education (including child care) and health care. The increase for child care also is undoubtedly due to the fact that in 1960, a much higher percentage of children lived in two-parent families in which the mother did not work outside the home. Two-earner households today presumably make more money and can afford this, indeed have chosen to afford the extra costs of child care; but they must weigh pretty heavily on one-parent households.

Housing, despite skyrocketing housing costs in liberal metropolitan areas with high income equality and restrictions on housing supply (New York, Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles, etc.), have not risen substantially. They may not have risen at all, on average, if you count housing cost per square foot, since houses today tend to be significantly larger than they were in 1960. Transportation costs have not risen much at all. Housing and transportation are to some extent provided by government, in the form of mortgage subsidies and spending on highways and mass transit. But most of the dollars go to private sector providers — homebuilders and automakers. They seem to have done a good job of providing goods at pretty steady prices — indeed, declining prices, perhaps, when you account for increased house sizes and technological advances in home appliances and automobiles.

Costs of childrearing have gone down — sharply down — in two areas dominated by private sector provision: food and clothing. Call it the Walmart Effect, although Walmart is only one of many businesses that have squeezed costs out and compete vigorously in providing quality goods at low prices. Some of these declining costs, I am pretty sure, come from the deregulation of transportation and communications, policies pursued vigorously by the [Ford](#), [Carter](#) and [Reagan](#) administrations.

When visiting relatives in [Michigan](#), I have occasion to go shopping in Meijer Superstores, which I'm told Walmart used as a model when it expanded into groceries. I'm amazed by the low prices and profusion of merchandise, including high-quality meat and produce. These stores are not in upscale neighborhoods, and there's plenty of racial and ethnic diversity among the shoppers. The selection compares very favorably with the supermarkets I remember from the

1950s and 1960s. Americans may not realize it, but it is cheaper to buy most things, from fresh vegetables to luxury goods, in the United States than anywhere else in the world.

The bottom line is that the private sector, thanks in significant part to deregulation and free-market competition, has made it substantially less expensive to feed and clothe children over the past half-century. The private sector, aided marginally by government, has made it only marginally more expensive to transport and house them. But the public sector, together with changes in lifestyles, has made it much more expensive to provide them with health care and to educate them. There's a lesson here, I think.

WSJ

[New Study Recasts Human-Neanderthal Link](#)

Researchers Conclude Species Overlapped With Neanderthals for Long Period

by Gautam Naik

A new study, published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*, concludes that modern humans arrived in Europe much earlier than previously believed, and clarifies, more specifically, the long time period they overlapped with Neanderthals.

The study also bolsters a theory that the two species met, bred and possibly exchanged or copied vital toolmaking techniques. It represents another twist in an enduring puzzle about human origins: why modern humans triumphed while the better-adapted and similarly intelligent Neanderthals died out.

Scientists have struggled to pinpoint when and how the Neanderthals disappeared in Europe. Among the reasons is that radiocarbon dating of material older than 30,000 years is unreliable because contamination of the samples can make them appear much younger.



The jawbone of a Neanderthal was found in Zafaraya in southern Spain.

An international team of scientists has now used improved techniques—including methods to remove contamination, plus more sophisticated chemical treatments—to more accurately date samples of bone, shell and charcoal found at 40 archaeological sites from Russia to Spain.

The study was published Wednesday in the journal *Nature*.

Neanderthals are modern humanity's closest known extinct relatives, with about 99.5% of DNA in common with humans. They had a brain size similar to modern humans and much stronger bodies. They were also likely better adapted to Europe's bitter climate, having arrived there from Africa at least 200,000 years ago and possibly tens of thousands of years before that, and had survived several ice ages. Modern humans, by contrast, arrived in Europe from sultry Africa.

Neanderthals originally emerged from Africa and lived in Europe, Russia and the Middle East at least 200,000 years ago and possibly for tens of thousands of years before that.

Research suggests that modern humans first left Africa roughly 60,000 years ago and first headed eastward. Previous estimates have indicated that modern humans arrived in Neanderthal-dominated Europe about 40,000 years ago, and some Neanderthals continued to persist in parts of the continent until just 32,000 years ago before vanishing, leaving the continent to humans.

The *Nature* study offers a significant revision of that timeline. It concludes that modern humans arrived considerably earlier—about 45,000 years ago—and the two groups overlapped for anywhere from 2,600 years to 5,400 years before the Neanderthals died out.

Did the overlap mean that two groups in Europe met? Did they breed? Did they exchange or copy tools or other behaviors, a process known as "acculturation"? There is no hard evidence to prove that Neanderthals and modern humans met, interbred, or exchanged tools and behaviors, but there are signs that some contact may have occurred.

For example, around 45,000 years ago, Neanderthal tools suddenly became more sophisticated and they also started to use symbolic artifacts such as body ornaments—just as *Homo sapiens* arrived in Europe.

"It's possible that the two groups met and that the Neanderthals copied humans in such behaviors, but we don't have any proof," says Sahra Talamo, a radiocarbon expert at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany, who wasn't involved in the *Nature* study. "But another question is: Who copied who?"

"But another question is: Who copied who?" The study doesn't directly address the issue, but says there was "ample time for the transmission of cultural and symbolic behaviors, as well as possible genetic exchanges, between the two groups."

The study doesn't directly address the issue, but says there was "ample time for the transmission of cultural and symbolic behaviors, as well as possible genetic exchanges, between the two groups."

Even if the Neanderthals copied human technology, it remains a mystery why the better-adapted group died out while humans endured. Several factors could have contributed to the better-adapted group's demise. The Neanderthals could have been out-competed by humans.

For example, the Neanderthal hunter-gatherers also may have lived in small groups scattered across Europe and were therefore cut off from one another.

"That presents a real problem for genetic diversity," which can significantly reduce the population and hurt a species' ability to survive, says Tom Higham, a radiocarbon scientist at the University of Oxford and a lead author of the Nature paper.

The Neanderthal legacy hasn't entirely vanished, though. In 2010, researchers showed that as much as 4% of the Neanderthal DNA survives in the genome of most people alive today—proof that the two groups mated and had offspring.

Chris Stringer of London's Natural History Museum notes that significant interbreeding had probably already occurred in the Middle East more than 50,000 years ago, "so the dating evidence now indicates that the two populations could have been in some kind of contact with each other for up to 20,000 years," first in the Middle East and then later in Europe.



The PRESIDENT PAUSES VACATION and RETURNS to WASHINGTON for URGENT MATTERS

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