

## Making Sense of the Dinosaur of Democracy

By JOSEF JOFFE

MUNICH – What is the mystery that goes by the name of “American foreign policy”? Foreigners always return from Washington with a sense of alarm, tempered by bemusement—even those “friendlies” who know the corridors of Foggy Bottom as intimately as those of Whitehall and the Quai d’Orsay. Endlessly, they bemoan America’s lack of constancy, its inability to define, let alone follow, *raison d’etat*, and its breathless devotion to causes both quixotic and costly.

And Americans? Unless there are wars to be fought or crusades to be launched,



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#### “America at Century’s End” By James Schlesinger

foreign policy rarely raises their blood pressure. With the United States in mind, George Kennan once compared democracy to a dinosaur: “You practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination” that he may destroy his habitat along with his adversary.

Now James Schlesinger offers us a volume that should be required reading for anyone trying to make sense of that dinosaur. In “America at Century’s End” (Columbia University Press, 1989, 113 pp.), America’s former “Secretary of Everything” (Defense, Energy, CIA) opts for what is known as the “exceptionalism” side of the debate on America. In foreign policy, the classic version of the argument runs like this: America is different, as Tocqueville wrote, it has “no foreign interests to discuss, since it has, as yet, no powerful neighbor on the American continent.” Recently it has become fashionable to pooh-pooh exceptionalism, but anyone looking at America through a traditional *realpolitik* lens would remain blind to the most critical facets of the nation’s foreign policy.

“America at Century’s End” is a remarkable little book—at once discursive and terse, both hard-headed and elegant, even literary. The first essay here—one of three originally delivered as the Radner lectures at Columbia—is appropriately entitled “What America Is Like.” Above all, America is *not* like the great powers of yore, Mr. Schlesinger states at the outset, “and those differences make it difficult for our allies and our opponents to understand us.” Because the United States has no “feudal past,” there is a “very modest respect for authority.” It follows that “reason of state” or the “primacy of foreign policy,” does not play well in Washington, let alone in Peoria.

This point is basic. “Reason of state” or “the national interest” as something beyond the political fray are ante-, if not anti-democratic concepts. They presume an aloof authority who can say “*l’etat, c’est moi*,” who is impervious to the pulls and pushes of the democratic process. Yet the U.S. never had a Louis XIV or a Cardinal Richelieu; it is a country where politics never stopped at the water’s edge, where anything is fair game for the 535 secretaries of state who make up the Congress, and for the 100-odd million voters, who put them there. And given television, which allows everybody to form his own opinion (or at least to think he is doing so), foreign-policy making has become *more* democratic; leaders cannot count on blank checks, but “must *earn* public support,” as Mr. Schlesinger justly stresses.

This does not make for constancy, as President Reagan found out when public opinion forced him to withdraw the U.S. Navy from Lebanon after the murder of 240 marines. When the dinosaur is finally roused, it loves crusades—“For conquer we must, when our cause is just”—but it does not take well to those causes the country will have to face now that the Cold War is said to be over and real bad guys (Kaiser Bill, Hitler, Stalin) are hard to find.

But no matter how much the Cold War fades, force will not disappear. Nor can the

U.S. recreate that wondrous state of insularity which, as Tocqueville put it, allowed the country to “abstain” rather than “act.” The latest isolationist dream—an SDI space bubble—may be good against Russian rockets; it does not hold off terrorists or chasten the Gadhafis of this world.

So the U.S. cannot shed the burden that comes with being No. 1 in world politics. But force, both covert and overt, will have to be limited. And it will have to be applied in morally ambiguous circumstances—whether in Lebanon, where there are *only* bad guys, albeit of different shades, or in Afghanistan, where yesterday’s “freedom fighters” may turn into America-hating “fundamentalists” tomorrow.

Hence the problem limned by Schlesinger: “The use of American arms in a limited way—out of some subtle calculation of the national interest—does not come easy to us.” It “will enjoy public support only if it is limited in time”—and successful, one must add. Grenada “works,” Lebanon does not. Yet the Lebanons of this world will top the agenda of the future—places that do not rouse the “dinosaur” but intrude on America’s interests and world stability.

The moral of the story that Mr. Schlesinger tells with extraordinary insight, wit and elegance is two-fold. One, America is not an ordinary great power. Two, it must act like one because it can neither ignore nor reform the world and because power, one presumes, breeds responsibility. That dilemma is as old as the debate between Jefferson, the idealist, and Hamilton, the *realpolitiker*. But there is also a quantum of solace: In spite of all the fashionable talk of decline, America remains a very big power, and that spells a large margin for mistakes. Or, as Mr. Schlesinger delicately puts it, “We will, no doubt, err—but those errors will not seriously endanger this Republic.

Mr. Joffe, foreign editor and columnist of the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, is the author of “The Limited Partnership: Europe, the U.S. and the Burdens of the Alliance” (*Ballinger*).