

The Revenge of History

Vladimir Putin justifies the annexation of Crimea by its alleged role as the cradle of Russia. ISIS announces that it has erased the Sykes-Picot colonial border. Sunni Arabs see Iranian expansionism as the return of the Safavid empire. China justifies its claims in the South China Sea by “historical evidence” dating as far back as the 21st Century B.C.

Throughout the world, history is making a comeback—with a vengeance. And the West is not ready.

After they closed the wound open during the years 1914–1945—a true war of thirty years, three decades of self-destruction—Western countries turned their backs on major war, believing they entered an era of progress and liberty that would be freed from the barbarism of previous centuries. As a consequence, in the modern bourgeois and consumer-oriented West, the tragic nature of history risks being dangerously easy to forget, especially in Europe which would like to be “post-historical,” or in the United States with its relatively short history and prevalence of lawyers in national decision-making (about whom Henry Kissinger once regretted how much they tended to be “deficient in history”).¹ After a proper examination of conscience and coming to terms with their own past, liberal democracies now live in the present of instant news, current crises, and short election cycles, making history sometimes easy for decision-makers to at least overlook, if not forget.

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This does not mean that history is forgotten everywhere or by everyone. It remains popular in public opinion. Remembrance and commemorations remain

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fixtures of political and social life. But Western governments and populations were not ready for the surge of the distant past that now characterizes claims and demands around the world. They are politically and intellectually ill-equipped to understand how states and peoples emphasize their own past to fight one another, or to fight us. They cannot easily withstand what could be called the “shocks of history.”

It began in the 1980s, with the establishment of the Iranian theocracy and its strange references to Shia martyrdom. It went on in the 1990s with the Caucasian and Balkan wars, the latter setting on fire a region which, to use an aphorism attributed to Sir Winston Churchill “produces more history than it can consume.”² And it continued in the 1990s with the emergence and global extension of violent jihadism and its plan to return to the mythical times of the Caliphate.

History is not only descriptive or pre-descriptive; it is also a mobilizing tool.

History is now everywhere. The four main strategic challenges the West faces are grounded in old historical claims: the Russian challenge, which mobilizes a reinvented past and reconstructs events of the 20th century; the Chinese challenge, which uses ancient maps and tales to justify its territorial claims; the ISIS challenge, which aims to return the region to the Prophet’s time and build a new Caliphate; and the Iranian challenge, which rests primarily on anti-colonialism and anti-Americanism, but also on the past glories of the Persian empire.³

In Europe, too, the revenge of history is now happening within the Union itself. Repressed memories are back. For example, Greece emphasizes Germany’s past—Manólis Glézos, the man who took down the Nazi flag from the Parthenon in 1941, is the leading political party, Syriza’s, most famous elected representative. In France, too, negative references to the German past have reappeared.⁴ Viktor Orban’s Hungary is not shy on reminding its people of the unjust Treaty of Trianon (1920), which deprived the former empire of most of its lands. Anyone who ignores that trauma and “turns a deaf ear to the voice of young Hungarians living in other countries,” or wages a campaign against dual citizenship, is “not a decent person,” says its president, somewhat echoing Vladimir Putin’s famous words according to which those who do not regret the loss of former Soviet Republics “have no heart.”⁵ Waves of migrants are compared with invasions in the Middle Ages. All around the world, calls to redress past colonial wrongs—from slavery to imperial borders—are growing stronger, while demands to repatriate “stolen” works of Oriental or African art multiply.⁶

The Roots of Historical Rage

A convergence of several trends explains this phenomenon. First came the rapid modernization of societies from the end of the 1940s onward, as well as decolonization. Then came two accelerating factors, beginning in the late 1980s: the rise of globalization and the end of communism, both as an ideological reference and as a political construct. As a result, the number of independent countries has skyrocketed since the end of the Second World War, often with borders that do not coincide with a clear nation.

The combination of these trends created an identity vacuum as the Cold War ended, a *malaise* that took different forms in Europe, in the Middle East, and in Asia. This identity vacuum created the temptation to “go back to one’s roots” as an antidote to the vertigo of progress and the complexity of the world—what Harvard literature professor Svetlana Boym calls “restorative nostalgia.”⁷ But it also brought about the reemergence of nationalism as a force for political mobilization.

Compounding the problem is that this happens at a time when the four major strategic disputes inherited from the 1940s—Palestine, Kashmir, Korea, and Taiwan—are far from being settled. These four “Great Divisions” continue to poison international relations, present risks of large-scale conflict, and are fueled by deep historical grievances. Jews see the very existence of their state as a natural outcome of their millennia-long presence on the ground and as reparation for centuries of plight; many Arabs tend to see it as the ultimate form of colonialism and the product of a raid on “their” land. Indians see their mastery of Kashmir as the rightful consequence of its then-prince’s choice in 1947; Pakistanis consider it unfair as it contained and still contains a majority of Muslims. Pyongyang still regards itself as the guardian of the Korean people against Japanese and U.S. imperialism; Seoul remembers the 1950 aggression. The 1912 revolution in China justifies the existence of the Republic of China (also known as Taiwan); the People’s Republic of China claims to be the lawful inheritor of all Chinese land since the 1949 revolution.

Some say that major military crises have material stakes such as oil, gas, minerals, fishing rights, etc. They often do. But look closer and you will find that those are always less important than symbolic stakes rooted in history. When Russia plants a titanium flag below the North Pole, its goal is first and foremost to affirm its return on the geopolitical scene—claiming mining rights is a secondary interest. When China enters Japanese territorial waters, it is as much if not more to affirm its domination on East Asia than to exploit new gas reserves.

This return of history as an engine of international relations is not a mere step back. What is remarkable, on the contrary, is that Russia, China, the Islamic State, and Iran use history to advance their 21st-century political agendas by making the

best possible use of modern communication means—24/7 news channels, social networks, blogs and forums—for propaganda and disinformation. These, in turn, are powerful tools to inflame historical feelings: in the age of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, history is easily reduced to dramatic soundbites and slick videos designed to justify and mobilize.

Robert Kaplan suggests that we are living with a “revenge of geography,” a return to normal geopolitics.⁸ But what we see in fact is a “revenge of history.” The problem is that history is much more passionate than geography. For this reason, it is much more dangerous.

Mobilizing History

In international political relations, history is of course first and foremost a process, which was seen as linear or inevitable by philosophers such as Hegel or Marx. Francis Fukuyama, inspired by Alexandre Kojève, suggested 25 years ago that we would see the “End of History.”⁹ Kojève argued that the progress of history must lead toward the establishment of a universal and homogenous state, and Fukuyama believed that liberal democracy was that end-state, thus the “end of history.” Though this thesis has many critics, U.S. leaders, perhaps unwillingly, vindicate him when they argue that a particular country or government is “on the wrong side of history.”

In addition to a process, history is also a set of lessons. The way Western political leaders use and abuse historical analogies in the way they make decisions has been studied in detail.¹⁰ From the Concert of Nations in the nineteenth century to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, summits and negotiations are marred with historical references. Start a conversation about Afghanistan and it does not take long before someone utters the words “Great Game” or “graveyard of empires.” Nearly a hundred years afterwards, the reference to the Munich Agreement (and appeasement of Hitler) remains the ultimate weapon for criticizing strategic choices—as one scholar recently noted, “it is always 1938, and we are perpetually at Munich.”¹¹ The “humiliation” of the Versailles Treaty is also a reference of choice. Echoes of the first part of the 20th century resound everywhere: in the United States, from the “cyber Pearl Harbor” to the notion of the war on terror as a “Fourth World War;” in contemporary Russia, using the fight against Nazism as a reference both to the fight in Ukraine and against the Islamic State. The memories of the Marshall Plan are mobilized as soon as a country or a region needs major assistance. Referencing the Vietnam War has become the equivalent of the “Godwin Point” when debating the difficulties encountered by Western forces in the field.¹² And the hardening of Russian–Western relations has left pundits wondering whether we are living out a “new Cold War.”

Another more subtle category of analogies is the “return to the 19th Century.” Just as China and India are on their way to reaching the proportion of global Gross Domestic Product that they had in that century, international relations are allegedly returning to what they were before 1914: a game of great power politics seeking to maximize their interests.¹³ Hence, the temptation to raise time-old questions: Is economic interdependence among great powers a new “Great Illusion,” as Norman Angell titled his book in 1910 describing how European economic integration made the initiation of a major war an irrational decision? Is today’s China yesterday’s Germany? As Princeton professor Aaron Friedberg asked, will Europe’s past be Asia’s future?¹⁴

This is what Robert Kagan alleged in July 2007 to be a return to normalcy or traditional power politics that characterized previous centuries.¹⁵ Just a few days later, Russia appeared to validate his claim by asserting its rights to the North Pole through an underwater expedition, prompting an outraged reaction by then-Canadian defense minister Peter McKay: “This is not the 15th Century!”¹⁶ U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry seemed to echo this view seven years later in his admonishments about Ukraine: “You just don’t in the 21st century behave in 19th-century fashion.”¹⁷ A final analogy, one that appeared soon after the end of the Cold War, is the theme of a “New Middle Ages,” which has been used *ad nauseam* in the past 25 years. It refers to a decline of the sovereignty of states, a world without rules, a return to barbarism.¹⁸

History is not only descriptive or prescriptive. It is also a mobilizing tool through the invocation of facts and myths. This is a classic of political discourse. For revolutionaries, history as a mobilizing tool involves cleaning the slate in order to be able to rewrite the past. Winston Smith, the hero of George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, did this for a living: he constantly rewrote the historical past to put it in conformity with the changing party line. Robespierre did this with the French revolutionary calendar, Year One being 1793. Pol Pot, the Cambodian leader, declared that he wanted the founding of the Red Khmer regime to be “Year Zero.” By launching his Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong sought to erase the knowledge and culture of imperial China.

For dictators, history is the “fuel for nationalism,” as Margaret MacMillan wrote.¹⁹ For diasporas, history is a connection with the lost motherland, and sometimes the incentive for revanchism. For citizens, there is what could be termed a “comfort history,” or one that produces “simplicity when the present seems bewildering and chaotic.”²⁰ Or we could add the condition of “when the future seems bleak or uncertain,” as was the case for Serbia in the 1990s, for Russia in the 2000s, or in a different way, for Greece in the 2010s.

Invoking history is a favorite for twin peoples, those separated during the second part of the 1940s—arguably the formative years of contemporary geopolitics in many parts of the world. As suggested by Michael Ignatieff, a Canadian

historian and political analyst, there is a form of “narcissism of small differences” in the way nations construct a separate identity, magnifying differences with the “Other” despite common cultural and ethnic links.²¹ Do Indians and Pakistanis, Israelis and Palestinians, North and South Koreans, Southern and Northern Vietnamese, Serbs and Croats, Eastern and Western Germans share more than what divides them? Each time, in both camps, history has been mobilized to justify the need for national cohesion, the creation of a country, or the urgency of a fight.

References to history are increasingly employed during crises and conflicts.

But what is remarkable today is that the references to history are increasingly employed during crises and conflicts. In the 1960s, Mao’s China could not care less about the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and did not think it was worth claiming it to the Japanese. In the 2010s, it is a key demand by Beijing.

Mobilizing the past can serve different goals. First, it allows the construction of a distinct identity, using either the image of the hereditary

enemy or that of a scapegoat. It may be German, obviously still a Nazi, or Japanese, self-evidently still an imperialist. It is often a Muslim, from Serbia to India (where the current mobilization of India’s Hindu heritage worries both the Muslim minority and neighboring Pakistan). But for Sunni extremists, it is the Shi’a Muslim. Or it can simply be the “Foreigner,” a favorite scapegoat in Asian Communist regimes.

The ultimate scapegoat—which is also often the inescapable hereditary enemy—is also very often the mythical and pernicious figure of the “Westerner.” This is true in Russia, China, Iran, the Arab world, and in Northeast Asia.²² The Westerner is an enemy firstly because of past behavior such as imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. In this regard, the nuclear card—in Moscow, Tehran, Islamabad, Delhi, Beijing, and Pyongyang—has become the best symbolic asset to take revenge against the West, what could be called a true “remedy against humiliation.” But the Westerner is also despised because the image embodies liberalism, progress, and modernism, if not for nefarious designs narrated as part of grand conspiracy theories.

One can also use history to justify political power or strategic design, the two being frequently intertwined. Like Elefthérios Venizélos’ Greece at the time, Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbia used its distant past to justify its intention to dominate its neighborhood. Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman Turkey does not (openly at least) have such ambitions, but its president sometimes has strange outbursts (“Kosovo is Turkey, Turkey is Kosovo”).²³ Vladimir Putin’s Russia makes intensive use of history to justify its fight in Ukraine, seen in its alleged historical rights (Crimea), in the alleged lack of existence of Ukraine as a separate

country with its own identity, and in the fight against Nazism (which is also used to justify Moscow's operations in Syria).

In the Middle East, the creation of a Palestinian state (and sometimes the disappearance of the Israeli state) is conceived and presented as a just settlement for past colonialism; and for those who support it, the establishment of a new Caliphate as a necessary compensation for the Crusades. In South Asia, Kashmir is claimed by both India and Pakistan in the name of an injustice allegedly done in 1947. And Beijing justifies its "rights" on Northern India and the South China Sea by ancient historical conquests or influence.²⁴

Constructing Narratives

This mobilization of history translates into several different narratives. The first kind is "grand narratives," which parse speeches, writings, textbooks, movies, museums, and exhibitions. Often these narratives involve commemorating seminal or exemplary events. For example, revolutionary Iran glorifies the battle of Karbala (in 680). European extreme-rights celebrate the battle of Poitiers (in 732). Russia remembers the baptism of Vladimir the First (in 988). Milosevic's commemoration of the battle of Kosovo Polje (1389) six hundred years later was the founding act of its policies. Erdogan celebrates every year the takeover of Constantinople by the Turks (1453). From Tirana to Skopje, Albanians organized grandiose commemorations in 2012 of the birth of their state (1912). Viktor Orban's Hungary is annually keen on marking the anniversary of the infamous Trianon Treaty (1920). Vladimir Putin has made the victory against Nazism (1945) an allegory of the war in Ukraine. The Palestinian *Naqba* is commemorated every year. The last Friday of Ramadan is Jerusalem Day for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) will allegedly serve as the theater of the final battle before the End of Times.

Often such grand narratives involve revisionist history, where history is being shaped and rewritten. Some Muslim authorities deny any historical Jewish presence on the Temple Mount (*Haram-al-Sharif*). Visit the Riyadh National Museum, and you will see examples of erasing or rewriting pre-Islamic past. North Korea presents to its citizens a completely twisted, and sometimes far-fetched, version of the country's past. The People's Republic of China has rewritten the history of its relations with Tibet.

The case of Vladimir Putin's Russia is a remarkable current example. Kievan Rus'—the name of the federation of East Slavic tribes in Europe in the 9th through 13th centuries—is presented as Russia's cradle, and the very existence of Ukraine as an accident of history. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, a treaty of non-aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union, is now justified

a posteriori (and the existence of its secret annex which, in effect, gave away Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union, is conveniently forgotten). A 2015 documentary presented on Russian television gives a similar defense of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Moscow General Prosecutor has opened an inquiry about the legality of the Baltic states' independence. In 2009, the Russian government created a "Presidential Commission to Counter the Attempts at Falsification of History Which Are Detrimental to the Interests of Russia." Move over, George Orwell, Russia now has a truly "unpredictable past."²⁵

One of the most fruitful themes to encourage revanchism is the narrative of humiliation through various forms of imperialism. It has been a favorite of the People's Republic of China for some time now: the period 1839–1949 is described as the "century of humiliation" by foreign powers, and Japanese atrocities have their very own museum in Beijing. In recent decades, Iran and Arab countries have taken up discussions of imperialism. More recently, it has become a major theme of Russian propaganda.

When the past is not reconstructed or cannot be swept under the rug, then it must be physically destroyed. This is a classic move of many authoritarian regimes, and of revolutionary passions—for example, remember the extraordinary amount of Chinese imperial heritage destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. But the methodical campaigns of physical destruction of the past have reached levels unseen for a long time and are now made available for immediate worldwide consumption through videos and social network posts. The Taliban generated international outrage with the destruction of the Bamiyan statues. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have outperformed them in Mali (destroying the mosques and library of Timbuktu), in Iraq (the Mosul museum, Sufi shrines), and of course in Syria (Palmyra among many other examples). Lest one thinks that this remains the purview of raging fanatics, one only has to look at the evolution of Mecca's geography, where not only traces of pre-Islamic times but sites associated with features of Muslim history are being methodically erased. For Wahhabism, "historical and cultural trappings are gateways to the sin of associating divinity with anything other than God."²⁶ The elimination of "pagan" symbols, or of allegedly *haram* images, does not suffice: the highly symbolic destruction of the markings of the Syria–Iraq border—presented as an erasure of the infamous Sykes–Picot line—was a founding act for the Islamic State.²⁷

A Dangerous Game

At best, the mobilization of history makes crises harder to solve because it magnifies the incompatibility of national narratives. At worst, it may be enough to create risks of open international conflict as it supports territorial claims, as well

as civil conflicts when it amounts—as is frequently the case—to excluding, if not stigmatizing, national minorities.

The four major sticking points of international strategic relations—Palestine, Kashmir, Korea, and Taiwan—are already more than sixty years old. The mobilization of history on both sides makes them almost intractable. But the new flash-points over the past few years all use historical references which fuel nationalist passions, and may soon make them equally difficult to confront. Russia, China, Iran, and the Islamic State mobilize a glorious past; base their claims on ancient maps, documents, and traditions; and add, for good measure, the need to confront “fascism,” “colonialism,” or “imperialism” (even as, like in the days of the Cold War, the stigmatization of U.S. or Japanese imperialism is, more often than not, a convenient excuse to hide one’s own desire of empire).

These trends are all the more dangerous since the memories of the horrors of the World War II are beginning to fade away. The numbers of people who physically experienced the fights and the sufferings of the 1940s are now diminishing rapidly. All that remains is the memory of heroism—an asset that is tempting to use at the service of contemporary nationalisms. And when religious justifications, which by nature are non-negotiable, come into play, any rationality is bound to disappear. Putin has presented Crimea as the Russian equivalent of the Temple Mount for Jews.²⁸ The fate of the latter is a sticking point in Israel–Palestine peace talks, and the growing influence of religious Zionists make the very idea of negotiating the fate of Judea–Samaria increasingly difficult. The Middle East is rich with other claims grounded in religious imperatives, such as the restoration of the Caliphate or the Russian Orthodox Church’s call for “holy battle” in Syria (“from which civilization came to us ... the first monks and priests in Russia were Syrians,” as a lawmaker added),²⁹ and sometimes eschatological ones: the coming end of the world as we know it is part of the narrative among many jihadist fighters in Syria and Iranian Shi’a extremists.

Let us face it: 25 years after the Cold War, passions grounded in history are increasingly an essential feature of international relations, and dangerously so.

Re-learning History

What should the West do? The first step is to learn and understand. We ignore the importance of history at our own peril. It is tempting to reduce its weight in efficiency-oriented Western education curricula, but that would be a mistake. Fareed Zakaria’s *In Defense of a Liberal Education* provides good arguments to support this view.³⁰ Equally important is to avoid believing that behaviors associated with a distant past (“being on the wrong side of history,” as U.S. leaders say about Russian adventures in Ukraine, for instance) are doomed to fail. They may well

fail, but if they do, this might take time. To understand does not mean to sympathize. Henry Kissinger was wrong to ask in 1957, “who is to quarrel with a people’s interpretation of their past?”³¹ On the contrary, we must question, if need be, a people’s interpretation of their past.

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It has been said *ad nauseam* that it was necessary to “understand the humiliation” felt by Russia and former colonized nations in the Middle East and in Asia. This is true, but we must also avoid the post-modern trap that considers all historical narratives of equal value. We must meet passion with reason, exposing facts, opening archives, accepting debate

whenever it is sincere. But we must also assist those non-governmental organizations that work to that effect in countries which still refuse to lucidly face their own past—such as Russia and China. And we must refuse to accept “historic friendships” as a basis for diplomacy. Why should French–Serbian ties in the 1910s have been a basis for French policies in the Balkans in the 1990s? For what reason should the good relations between Paris and Moscow in the 20th century, or between Greece and Russia in the 19th century, determine European attitudes toward Vladimir Putin today?

We must also avoid history-related mistakes, as they can be politically costly. The case of U.S. President George W. Bush’s unfortunate, if innocent, 2002 reference to a “crusade” comes to mind, as well as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s 2013 flight in an aircraft numbered 731—a figure that, in East Asia, immediately triggers memories of the infamous imperial Japanese biological experiments unit.³²

Even more important is to distinguish sincere emotions from their instrumentalization. Attempts at drafting joint textbooks are laudable, given the importance of education in transmitting historical narratives. But private Israeli–Palestinian and Sino–Japanese efforts to that effect have not had a major impact to date. The goal of “reconciliation,” a seductive one on paper, cannot be the overarching principle. It suggests that international disputes are, behind the surface, major misunderstandings or harmless disputes, and that each party is equally guilty—whereas, historical disputes are often a conflict between, to use writer Arthur Koestler’s pithy distinction about World War II, a half-truth and a total lie. And when reconciliation is both necessary and possible, it generally comes soon after a traumatic event, such as WWII, but not created seventy years later.

Ultimately, history cannot be the *ultima ratio* of political claims: democracy and international law, as imperfect as they are, must have the last word. But it may take a long time—and perhaps other major power conflicts—for this principle to succeed in today’s turbulent world. Until that day, history will have its revenge.

Notes

1. Quoted in Niall Ferguson, "The Meaning of Kissinger," *Foreign Affairs*, (September-October 2015), p. 137.
2. The quote reads, "The peoples of the Balkans produce more history than they can consume, and the weight of their past lies oppressively on their present." It is often attributed to Churchill, but the veracity of that is difficult to pin down. See Wikiquote, "Winston Churchill," the section "Misattributed," https://en.m.wikiquote.org/wiki/We_shall_fight_on_the_beaches#The_World_War_II_years.
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4. Some public figures now use expressions such as "diktat" and "Axis country," while a few commentators depict the Chancellor with a Prussian spiked helmet.
5. See MTI, "Hungarians cannot come to terms with Trianon treaty, says Ader," *Politics.hu*, June 4, 2013, <http://www.politics.hu/20130604/hungarians-cannot-come-to-terms-with-trianon-treaty-says-ader/>; and "Interview with German television channels ARD and ZDF," Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, interview with Vladimir Putin, May 5, 2005, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/05/05/2355_type82912type82916_87597.shtml
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11. Christopher J. Fettweis, "Misreading the Enemy," *Survival* 57, no. 5, (October-November 2015), p. 164.
12. The Godwin Point is the likelihood that the longer any conversation goes on, the higher the probability of a comparison involving the Nazis.
13. See the work of OECD economist Angus Maddison at <http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/oriindex.htm>.
14. Aaron Friedberg, "Will Europe's Past Be Asia's Future?" *Survival* 42, no. 3, (Fall 2000), pp. 147–59.
15. Robert Kagan, "End of Dreams, Return of History," The Hoover Institution, July 17, 2007, <http://www.hoover.org/research/end-dreams-return-history>.
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18. Pierre Hassner, "Nous entrons dans un nouveau Moyen Âge" [in French], *Le Monde*, October 27, 1992; Martin Van Creveld, "The New Middle Ages," *Foreign Policy*, (Summer 2000); John Rapley, "The New Middle Ages," *Foreign Affairs*, (May-June 2006).

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31. Quoted in Ferguson, "The Meaning of Kissinger," p. 137.
32. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House archives, "Remarks by the President Upon Arrival," September 16, 2001, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>.