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Tragic realism: Robert D Kaplan's books may be out of print in Britain, but he is emerging as one of the most influential commentators on the new world order

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Robert D Kaplan has been enchanting and distressing armchair policy wonks and foreign policy makers in about equal measure since his long essay "The Coming Anarchy" was featured on the cover of the Atlantic Monthly in 1994. The article concentrated primarily on the demise of civic institutions and rampant banditry in West Africa, but Kaplan's broader message was a warning of inherent and increasing instability in a world of rapid population growth, greater wealth disparities and diminishing natural resources. Five years later, he published a collection of essays, ranging from meditations on democracy to a bold defence of Henry Kissinger's realpolitik in comparison with the 1990s foreign policy of Warren Christopher, Madeleine Albright and Sandy Berger. Kaplan, it was said, was heir to Kissinger's school of "tragic realism".

It might seem strange that a largely self-educated journalist and traveller would be compared to one of the century's most controversial political scientists and statesmen, but the two share an intuition and respect for the influence of history and timeless principles on world affairs. Kaplan's earlier portrayal of "ancient ethnic hatreds" in his book *Balkan Ghosts* (Picador, UK) allegedly influenced President Clinton's decision to defer American involvement in the early phases of Yugoslavia's disintegration. And his newly republished *Soldiers of God* (Random House, US), which chronicles long months in late 1980s Afghanistan with the mujahedin commander Abdul Haq (who was assassinated in October last year), provides early and fascinating insight into a brutal landscape and hardened fighters who drove out the Soviets and became the Taliban.

Kaplan occupies a controversial middle ground between historical scholarship and adventure travel. He is part Arnold Toynbee and part Robert Pelton (CNN's latest celebrity war correspondent). His latest book, *Warrior Politics*, offers a welcome philosophical underpinning of his last two heady travelogues, *Ends of the Earth* (Vintage, US) and *Eastward to Tartary* (Vintage, US), both of which chronicled the regions of the world most demonstrative of politics as tragedy.

Warrior Politics is a defence of classical realism adapted to modern chaos. In a world of great turbulence and complexity, the philosophical wisdom of the classics teaches us that primitive necessity and self-interest drive politics towards stability, whereas rigid moral arguments lead to war. As no amount of liberal moralising can eliminate conflict from the human condition, conflict can only be mitigated through prudent judgement grounded in historical truth. Kaplan draws on a rich humanist tradition to shatter the illusion of a collective, post-cold war vision of human progress.

Each chapter of *Warrior Politics* contains brief yet entertaining intellectual biographies and epoch-bridging analogies. Rather than rely on Winston Churchill's better-known wartime reflections, Kaplan affirms the richness of Churchill's "historical imagination" through a close reading of his 1899, two-volume account of fighting in Britain's reconquest of colonial Sudan. He moves on to Livy's *The War With Hannibal*, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, not to mention chapters devoted to the Holocaust, realism and Kant, and Chinese warring states and global governance. Both historians and readers unfamiliar with Kaplan's style may be troubled by the ease with which he compares Hannibal to Hitler, Achilles to Radovan Karadzic, Syracuse to Vietnam, and the Punic Wars of the third century BC to the world wars of the 20th century. Though many in the academic world embrace Kaplan as an insightful generalist, some political scientists have attacked his historical generalisations with a hostility usually reserved for Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisations" thesis, with which Kaplan has aligned himself as well.

Kaplan's work allows for a synthesis of philosophy and foreign policy, which have been driven apart by the tension between Judaeo-Christian morality and "pagan virtue". The latter is best encapsulated in Machiavelli's dictum that, in an imperfect world, good men bent on doing good must learn how to be bad.

But western values will not sustain themselves without proven material power. Kaplan's wide-ranging analysis results in the prescription of "constructive realism" for America's foreign policy woes. In a world where a plurality of political systems and corresponding virtues will exist, and "moral questions are often linked to questions of power", constructive realism will place pagan virtue in the service of a self-interested foreign policy. Teddy Roosevelt was Kaplan's ideal "constructive realist", winning a Nobel Peace Prize for his 1905 mediation efforts between Russia and Japan, yet at the same time balancing their threats to American interests and security. And another Nobel laureate, the late Yitzhak Rabin, also qualifies as virtuous, not despite but because of his ruthless treatment of Palestinians during the first intifada, when he was Israel's defence minister.

Warrior Politics is Kaplan's first foray into quasi-academic foreign policy analysis. He is not a trained scholar of international relations theory, allowing him to accomplish what few academics even attempt: an honest assessment of the complex and mutating underlying social and physical conditions within which international relations operates. He has written that the map of the world is constantly in flux and that the "postcolonial era is only in the early phases of collapse". His scholarship makes foreign policy makers squeamish because his intellectual voyages vividly portray a world entering neo-medievalism, where shrinking state authority and spreading technology breed competition with powerful transnational social groups -- Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, for example.

Few writers have delivered such a stark and humanist warning about the world since the end of the cold war. Kaplan has become the Ayn Rand of international affairs, saying what few dare to say. The great military historian Michael Howard argues in his recent book, *The Invention of Peace*, that conflict is inherent to human community and peace can be attained only through cumbersome artificial institutions. On Kaplan's preference for pagan virtue, the respected Oxford professor Adam Roberts recently gave a speech in which he stated that "interest phrased in the language of justice is not prone to compromise". After 11 September, John Gray of the London School of Economics wrote in these pages of the illusion of shared values in the era of globalisation. And in focusing on the "dark side" of development and the impact of "sideswipe" phenomena such as Aids or global warming on geopolitics, Kaplan is supported by political science research demonstrating that foreign policy tends to shift only after systemic "shock s".

The devastating attacks of 11 September qualify as such a shock, because they dramatically make the question of global security local for all. Perhaps, Kaplan writes, in the decades ahead, crises of increasing number and complexity will test our "moralistic certainties", if this is indeed to be the long-term post-cold war scenario, Robert Kaplan's voice of caution and reflection must be heeded with anxious foresight.

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