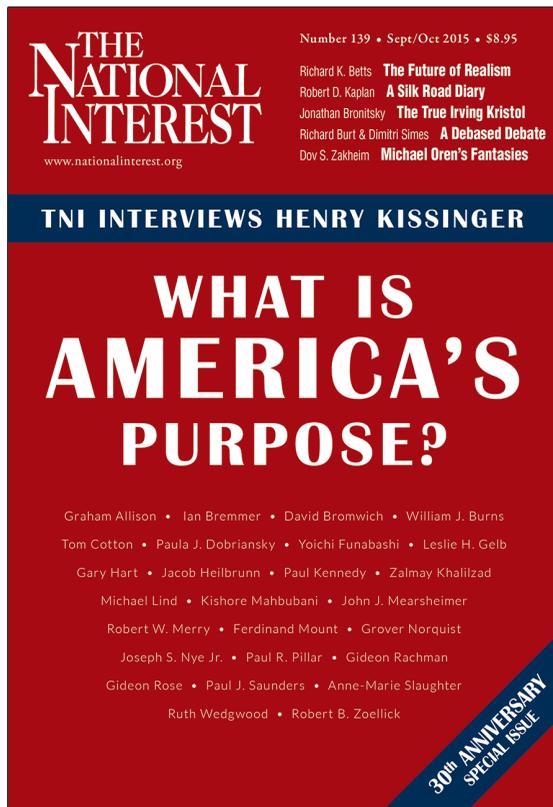


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What Is America's Purpose?

Several decades after the end of the Cold War, the United States is confronting an increasingly unstable world in which its preeminence is facing new challenges. What, if anything, should be the purpose of American power?

In 1989, a recent college graduate interviewed for a job with *National Interest* editor Owen Harries. Harries, the former Australian ambassador to UNESCO, asked whether he sympathized more with the neo-conservative or realist approach to foreign affairs. After a short pause, the candidate boldly split the difference, observing that it was wise to set limits on intervention abroad, but that it was also the case that, as Norman Podhoretz had recently observed in *Survey*, it was imperative to elicit a certain amount of nationalism among the American public to rouse it to action.

That candidate was, of course, me. *The National Interest* may have been founded in 1985 by Irving Kristol as a counterweight to *Commentary*, as Jonathan Bronitsky notes in this issue, but it proceeded, more or less, in an ecumenical spirit. One of my early assignments as an

assistant editor was to work on an essay about the end of history by someone named Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama's article, which appeared in the Summer 1989 issue, established the basis for a crusading neoconservative doctrine that reached full flower in the George W. Bush administration, though Kristol, with his characteristic acerbity, commented, "I don't believe a word of it." (Fukuyama himself would go on to decry the intellectual votaries of the 2003 Iraq War.) A year later, on its fifth anniversary, *TNI* conducted a lengthy series in which the contributors sought to explain what purpose should inform America's foreign policy. Now, on the magazine's thirtieth anniversary, it seemed like a good idea to return to that question. The answers that follow suggest that it is as pertinent today as it was a quarter century ago.

—Jacob Heilbrunn
Editor, *The National Interest*

and more humanitarian, to maintain stability by carefully managing great-power relations than by sequentially intervening in unending individual crises. Indeed, the latter approach has been exasperating for many Americans.

Despite this, conflicts like Syria's civil war and the fighting in eastern Ukraine have been disturbing. Limited U.S. involvement in each case has led some allies in the Middle East and Europe to question America's commitment to their security. Earlier, frequent but inconclusive interventions alienated major-power rivals, Russia and China, and failed to deter them.

The problem is that U.S. elites have increasingly defined leadership as the use of force: we are leaders when we drop bombs or deploy troops. When the public predictably tired of war, Americans rejected this "leadership." U.S. allies and rivals have seen this reaction, and the Obama administration's responses to it, and drawn their own conclusions.

What the United States needs is a new model of U.S. international leadership that rests more heavily on what others truly admire about America—our economic success and our free society. This approach will still require force, particularly when truly vital U.S. national interests are at stake. It will also require applying power without using force.

But no less important will be finding the right mix of inspiration, encouragement, cajolery and intimidation to manage the complex relationships among the world's satisfied and dissatisfied governments to ensure that most are satisfied—and that

no combination of major powers becomes sufficiently dissatisfied to mount a sustained attempt to overturn the system. Notwithstanding their evident limits, the recent BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization summits in Ufa, Russia, illustrate the extent to which China, Russia and others are already frustrated, in different ways and to different degrees.

Ultimately, maintaining a stable international system will require finding a difficult balance between strength (through clear rules and determined enforcement) and flexibility (through compromise). A system that privileges strength will crack; one that relies too heavily on compromise will erode. The real question is not America's purpose, but whether our leaders—in either party—are capable of pursuing it.

Anne-Marie Slaughter

The purpose of American power is to advance American interests in the world. The real question, then, is how to define American interests. First are defensive interests: the protection of American territory and citizens and the safety and security of our allies. Second are the affirmative goals that we pursue in the world, which President Obama has identified as an open global economy, respect for universal human rights and a rule-governed international order. A

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world in which all human beings can trade and compete with one another openly and fairly; can think, speak, write and worship as they please; are free from both fear and want; and profit from the stability and predictability of an international as well as a domestic order is a world in which Americans can flourish.

Standing for such a world and working to promote it is not only an exercise of American power; it is a *source* of that power. It demonstrates that the credo of our founders—that *all* human beings are created equal and that all are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—is more than mere words. It is a set of values that binds together peoples from all over the globe. We must stand for those values in ways that do more good than harm, both for Americans and for those we would help. But we must also understand that we define our interests in moral as well as material terms, a definition that not only guides the use of our power but also augments the power we have available to use.

Ruth Wedgwood

American power is an offshore balancer—detering pugilistic regimes that fancy the land or resources of neighbors, and serving as a caution to dictators possessed of outlandish ambitions. The global reach of America’s navy and air force, the intelligence capability and readiness of our armed forces, and the attractiveness of our democratic form of government have allowed the

United States to function as a cop on the block—a public service that was, in a more naive view, supposed to be undertaken by the United Nations.

To be sure, the American press has forsaken serious coverage of foreign affairs, and Washington’s ability to influence the course of events through an overstretched foreign service is often limited. We have been mistakenly swayed by personalities—Washington’s overripe infatuation with Rwandan strongman Paul Kagame is a case in point. But America’s diverse population and the worldwide rise of Internet news sources have also permitted the United States to sound the alarm in human-rights crises through the press, diplomacy and the voices of NGOs. It was not by chance that the United Nations—with its convocation of all the governments of the world—was placed in New York as a central locus for negotiation and decision making.

Faced with unpredictable events and powerful adversaries—whether the forays of Putin’s Russia in Ukraine or China’s thrusts in the South China Sea—the United States may observe a necessary caution. But ultimately, it is the strength of the American economy, the robustness of its military capability and the attractiveness of its ultimate commitment to human rights that allow this New World power to claim

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