The End of the Insular State?

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D emocracy refuses to think strategically unless and until it is compelled to do so for purposes of defense. These were the wise and prescient words of Sir Halford John Mackinder, professor of geography at Oxford University, in his timeless work *Democratic Ideals and Reality,* written in the aftermath of World War I.[1] Mackinder's construct of the insular or "sea power" and the continental or "land power" provided a new and compelling framework for interpreting history and suggesting the shape of future alliances in a realist fashion. He designated Europe, Asia, and Africa the "World Island" and center of world power. Within the World Island, the "Heartland" was constituted by central and eastern Europe, what today would be most of the Russian Federation. According to Mackinder, "he who rules the Heartland, rules the world."

The most advanced democratic states in the early decades of the twentieth century—and, one could argue, still today in the twenty-first—Great Britain and the United States, are quintessential insular states. They are surrounded by oceans and historically have had need of very strong navies for wartime instead of strong armies, unlike the continental states of Europe, for example, which share land borders with a variety of often-hostile countries. For sea powers or insular states, the "home base" that is productive and secure is key to its ability to foster democracy and innovation. This sense of security, based chiefly on our geography, I would argue, has enabled the United States to become the leading technological innovator in the world and the most prominent, working democracy that guarantees individual liberties and opportunities to all of its citizens.

But this sense of security and superiority, if you will, has often resulted in a mindset that we can fearlessly "make the world safe for democracy" to use Woodrow Wilson's famous words, and take our campaign across oceans to other, "less-developed" states. Wilsonian forays into Latin America were motivated by a sense of moral duty and the Monroe Doctrine. Indeed, the foreign policy of the United States has always had two pillars—morality and national interest—that have often been at odds.

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Traditionally, there has been little concern about homeland defense in the United States—as Mackinder noted more than 80 years ago![2] With the end of the cold war and the development of nuclear weapons in countries often called "rogue states" isolationist trends gave rise to discussion over ballistic missile defense that would protect the United States from nuclear attack. One could argue that our sense of security, our insularity, was lost with the advent of ICBMs and air power. But during the cold war, the balance of power between NATO and the Warsaw Pact kept things in check. No one could imagine initiating a nuclear holocaust. Moreover, as Thucydides explained centuries ago, inequality breeds war. Athenian power inspired fear in the Spartans and compelled them to go to war. During the cold war there was a balance of power that kept the peace to some extent. In the 1990s that balance disappeared, leaving North America quite vulnerable to attack as the single world superpower in a unipolar system.

The recent and unprecedented terrorist attacks on the United States, through suicide plane crashes into key American power symbols and the unleashing of biological warfare, have thrown the whole notion of insularity into a tailspin. The age of innocence is over. Our neighbors to the north are fearful, too.[3] Does Mackinder's thesis still hold water? How will the loss of security and insularity affect our domestic capability to innovate and lead and our ability to respond to events overseas? How will we learn to accept the aid and advice of other, "lesser" democracies in a graceful manner? What kind of impact will this have on the furtherance of democratic ideals and institutions in other countries as well as in our own?

As the title of this piece suggests, Frank Fukuyama's "End of History" essay inspired it.[4] I was working for the RAND Corporation in 1989 when Frank's paper came across my desk. At that time, we "Sovietologists" were experiencing a breathing spell of sorts. Gorbachev was at the helm and glasnost was the word of the day. Overnight, so it seemed, Soviet newspapers and journals became interesting to read; there was dissent and discussion, not propagandistic responses and articles that had undergone the turgid and oppressive pen of official censors. "New thinking" about international security was launched by Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze; unparalleled and one-sided disarmament occurred in the Red Army; intermediate range missiles and ground forces were cut unilaterally. It was a new Soviet Union and the prospect of a *Rechtstaat* and of a political system with democratic attributes was in the air. The Velvet Revolution had taken place in Eastern Europe; it appeared that democracy was on a roll.

Throughout the 1990s, the ethnic tensions unleashed by glasnost and the demise of the Soviet superstructure seemed to undermine Fukuyama's thesis. Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia, Chechnya, and later the Balkans and other regions experienced ethnic conflict that was previously contained. However, such conflicts and political transitions seem to me to be fully in line with the evolution to democracy in the long run. No one said the transition from a centralized form of government to a more democratic one would be either fast or easy. In the light of 11 September's terrorist attacks, Fukuyama's thesis has taken on renewed meaning.

I maintain that Fukuyama's thesis is still relevant today and for the future of world democracy. I have always agreed with his idea, based on ideas of German

philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel—"the end of history . . . is the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."[5] Just look at the response we in the United States have received in the wake of the terrorist events! An outpouring of support from all over the world—from developed democracies such as Britain, to undeveloped democracies such as Russia. Who would have thought that the Russian president, especially one schooled in the communist era and formerly associated with the KGB, would be among the most eager to assist us in our dark days and work to help us with our military campaigns? The photograph on the front of the *New York Times* "Week In Review" seemed to sum up the changes beautifully. There were the leaders of Russia, China, and the United States at the economic summit in Shanghai sporting national Chinese dress under the heading "In Terror, At Last a Common Enemy for the Big Three."[6]

Thus I end on a positive note as did Mackinder in 1919 in reference to the world community: "neighborliness or fraternal duty to those who are our fellow-dwellers is the only sure foundation of happy citizenship."[7] In the end we are a world community that will work to achieve freedom for all persons. Our former enemies have become our friends; the European/Russian/Asian "Heartland" has extended us a hand and the World Island, I believe, will one day be democratic.

NOTES

1. Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study of the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York: Holt and Company, 1942 reprint). I wish to thank Professor George Liska at Johns Hopkins University for introducing the writings of Mackinder and other geopoliticians to me.

2. Ibid.

3. DeNeen Brown, "Canadians Sense Climate of Fear," *Washington Post*, 24 October 2001, A6.

4. Francis Fukuyama, "Have We Reached the End of History?" (Santa Monica: RAND Corp.) Paper no. 7532, 1989.

5. Fukuyama, "Have We Reached the End of History?" 2; Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, 1807.

6. David Sanger, *New York Times*, 28 October 2001, Section 4.

7. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*.