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Will we see the end of American hubris?

By Stephen Kinzer

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TODAY'S WORLD is being reshaped by forces the United States cannot control. Many Americans, including some who watched events unfold in Crimea last week, find this unsettling. We are much more accustomed to wielding decisive power and having our way.

Part of what built the United States is the optimistic determination sometimes called the “can-do” mentality. It tells us that when a person — or a nation — wants something badly enough and works hard enough to achieve it, the result will always be positive. This wonderful trait helped Americans tame a continent and astonish the world. Recently, however, we have been sobered by the realization that there are some things we want to accomplish in the world but cannot, no matter how much we wish for them or how hard we try.

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This presents Americans with unfamiliar challenges that cry out for creative solutions. Nonetheless, the spectrum of acceptable opinion on foreign policy is lamentably narrow. Assumptions that underlie the consensus have not changed in generations: The United States has vital interests everywhere in the world; these interests are under constant threat; global military

and security forces are necessary to defend against those threats; and wherever our forces are deployed, they promote stability and long-term US interests. Americans have come to think that everything always gets better — that we will become steadily more prosperous at home and more influential abroad. Now, for the first time in our brief national history, we sense that this may not be true.

Catastrophic wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been a sharp and painful blow to the American psyche. They teach a stark lesson: When we overestimate what the United States can do in the world, we risk intensifying the violence we seek to calm while undermining our own long-term security.

Will losing two wars lead Americans to reassess how our country should behave in the world? It's too early to say. Old instincts die hard. Americans have long been moved by a missionary desire to resolve the world's problems, a belief that we know what is best for others, and a presumption that overwhelming power makes us invincible. Perhaps, as we saw in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, memories of Afghanistan and Iraq will fade, and the United States will go back to the interventionist foreign policy it has followed for so long.

That would be a mistake of historic dimension. Civilizations that have survived from antiquity, like China and Iran, are those that have learned to change as the world changes. Over millennia, they have risen to immense power, declined, fallen, risen, and fallen again. They know the tides of history.

Now the United States is called, for the first time in its brief life as a nation, to show geopolitical agility. It faces a restive Latin America, a rising China, a chaotic Ukraine, an angry Pakistan, an emerging Iran, an assertive Russia, a collapsing Syria, a Japan that is breaking away from American tutelage, and the prospect of a return to Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Conflicts over increasingly scarce resources — energy, food and water — are certain to intensify. The United States faces a turbulent and unfamiliar world.

Yet much debate over America's global options is constrained by old taboos and outmoded assumptions. Original ideas are often seen as germs of a terrible plague to be crushed before it infects the national consciousness. Our thinking about the world should be enriched by skeptical, contrarian, and iconoclastic ideas.