

**Guest: General Brent Scowcroft**

**Interviewed by Tristan Abbey for *Bellum: A Project of The Stanford Review*  
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**BELLUM: Three quotations from friends of yours. Robert Gates in Time Magazine: "I am very much an American exceptionalist. I believe we are the greatest force for good in the history of the world." Colin Powell, GOP Convention 1996: "a country that exists by the grace of divine providence, a land that has truly been blessed, and that we are proud to call America. George H.W. Bush, GOP Convention 1988: "I see America as a leader, a unique nation with a special role in the world." What do you make of American exceptionalism?**

BRENT SCOWCROFT: Well, I do think that we have been exceptional in the sense that, as a world leader, we have tried to look broadly more than anyone else in that position in the past has done. But the 'divinely inspired' and so on is a little much for me.

**BELLUM: There are two kinds of exceptionalism. The idealistic, God-given mission on the one hand, and the factual 'we are the exception' in terms of military strength, national power, etc., on the other. It seems like you fall more in the latter camp.**

SCOWCROFT: We're a country which has been organized around ideas rather than around ethnic origins. We're not a nation-state, we're not an empire in the classic sense of the word. We are a child of the Enlightenment, and that's where the Constitution came from, and that has motivated us to a degree that it hasn't anyone else. In that sense, we are exceptional. Those ideas, in fact, do still motivate us and they put an altruism -- that's probably too strong a word, but let me use it anyway -- into our policy which other countries don't have because they don't have the same basis. That's my sense. I compare us most closely with the British Empire.

**BELLUM: In the 1950s, Britain struggled with balancing commitments against resource constraints, scaling back, etc. Today, superficially at least, it seems the United States is in a similar position.**

SCOWCROFT: Well, it's an interesting point because, in fact, what happened in that period was that we replaced the British Empire, especially in the Middle East region, in the role of a...stabilizing presence. I think we're probably overextended. We are overextended almost by accident. I think that we're not in the same place as the British because the British could take those steps knowing, at least implicitly, that a friendly presence was going to replace them.

**BELLUM: Big brother waiting in the wings?**

SCOWCROFT: Yes. We can't do that. But neither is the world facing a Cold War. So I think the possibility is not to develop a new United States to take our place as we pull back, but rather to calibrate what we think we can do and to try to enlist others to help. And I don't think we've done that quite as well as we could.

**BELLUM: We'll come back to that. Given: a) your past involvement with Republican administrations (Nixon, Ford, Bush 41), b) your complicated but still generally supportive attitude toward the Bush 43 administration; and c) public frustration over the New START Treaty, the split between so-called realists -- Richard Lugar, etc. -- and the Tea Party and movement conservatives, what does it mean to be a member of the GOP today?**

SCOWCROFT: I'm not sure, because I think the GOP is struggling...My views haven't changed fundamentally, my general outlook. But my party -- and I still consider myself a Republican -- has moved fairly dramatically, at least in terms of a lot of the leadership positions. And it's not clear to me why and what the change is.

**BELLUM: If we can time travel for a minute, why did you first become a Republican?**

SCOWCROFT: I was an independent for a good part of my life. I actually became a member of the GOP in the Nixon administration because I thought -- well, maybe in the Ford administration -- that after I got out of the military service, I believed in what they stood for, especially in foreign policy, and that began with Richard Nixon. I thought that that was the course, and I thought that the Democrats lost their way over the Vietnam War. So, it was partly that I was in a Republican administration and I thought I ought to be a member of the party. And I don't regret that at all.

**BELLUM: What is the sustaining force that keeps you in the party? Is it social, cultural...?**

SCOWCROFT: I believe very deeply in the two-party system, and I believe it's in jeopardy, and so I want to try to help. My own sense is that our political system depends on compromise and cooperation to make progress because the Constitution was not designed to set up an 'efficient' government -- 'efficient' in the sense of being able to make decisions easily. It set up road blocks everywhere. It's easy to stop things from happening. To make them happen, you've got to go around the restrictions and

cooperate, and that's what is missing right now, and that I find alarming.

**BELLUM: A few years ago, sitting in this very room, you told me: 'History is at the heart of this business.'**

SCOWCROFT: Yes.

**BELLUM: Surveying the political landscape today, it's hard to escape the fact that there is no political movement more imbued with a sense of history than the Tea Party, starting with its very name. George H.W. Bush on Larry King: "Some of their ideas make a lot of sense. I'm confused by it, frankly, but i think it's alright." What do you make of the Tea Party? It doesn't seem to have much of a foreign policy.**

SCOWCROFT: Well, there isn't much foreign policy coming out of the Tea Party itself. I think you almost have to discuss individuals. I'm not that familiar with the particular views of the actual founders of the Tea Party, but I think they have, in part -- out of the frustrations of the current situation -- misread the Constitution and the founding of the country. So I think their history is wrong. They almost want to go back to the Articles of Confederation, many of them...One of the other notions...is that the Constitution was divinely inspired. Well, the Framers didn't think it was divinely inspired. Indeed, they set up a system for its amendment, and it was bitterly debated. There's an interesting book out recently on the period between the signing of the Constitution and its ratification and the debate in the various states. [Pauline Maier, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* (Simon & Schuster, 2010).] The Framers were very, very aware of their fallibility, and to invest in it a sort of holiness, that it is holy writ and can't be touched, is I think fundamentally misguided.

**BELLUM: The Tea Party raises an issue relevant to the nation's foreign policy, the tension between compromise and principle. How do you know when to take a stand -- we *cannot* raise the debt ceiling, we *cannot* negotiate with terrorists -- and when to compromise -- we *will* talk to the Soviets?**

SCOWCROFT: To me that is judgment, and it's up all the time. My President Bush said, 'Read my lips, no new taxes,' and then he agreed to new taxes because he looked at the situation a few years later and decided that it was important for the country. And it seems to me, what you need to do is look at a situation that you find needs changing and decide whether a little bit of change is an improvement and therefore you are willing to compromise to get some change, or no, you want your change or no change. And to me that's the art of politics.

**BELLUM: You've spoken about the world coming closer together and an international system for a world that no longer exists. Do you have thoughts on what should exist?**

SCOWCROFT: Yes! I think, for example, we had a financial crisis a couple years ago, which demonstrated economically that we have a single world, and what happened in the United States spread everywhere. We do not have a single structure to deal with it. Now, we set one up at Bretton Woods, for a world that doesn't exist anymore, but the two instruments that we set up -- the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund -- still are there doing jobs which the founders of those institutions wouldn't have dreamed of. The G-20 is still just a talking shop. Those are the kinds of things we need to work at. We need to try to set up systems which will operate in a world where we are more interconnected in the fact that these things affect us all, but we approach them from a national point of view. The financial system is one, climate change is another, and we are having difficulties. I think it is incumbent on the United States -- or should be -- more than anyone else, to think up new devices and we have not been in that role.

**BELLUM: Many commentators forecast the imminent demise of the nation-state. Samuel Huntington wrote about 'Davos man,' transnational individuals with no allegiance to a particular country. Others have written about the so-called 'sovereign individual.' Is the nation-state destined to become an artifact?**

SCOWCROFT: I think it is, but I don't think we're just going to supplant it. To me, what's happening to the nation-state is what happened to the medieval system when it was replaced by the nation-state. It happened over a period of centuries and I think now the forces of globalization, which are eroding the power of the nation-state -- to me, globalization is sort of like what industrialization was two or three hundred years ago. Industrialization really made the nation-state. It made it powerful because it had to be stronger than before to deal with the forces of industrialization. Now, globalization is achieving the same effect but in a different way. It is eroding the authority of the nation-state to control its destiny. I would say they're in uneasy coalition now. This is a trend of history and I don't know how fast it's going. I think it's going gradually to move away from the exclusivity of the nation-state as *the* entity in the world.

**BELLUM: There seems to be some tension between training and equipping a powerful military to confront a world full of dangers, on the one hand, and the assertion that the world has never been safer, that we face no nation-state enemies at the moment, that the threat from al Qaeda is overhyped. How do you prepare for future wars if identifying the enemy -- say, China -- makes that war**

## more likely to occur?

SCOWCROFT: I think that thesis is generally correct and in this country especially we have had the sense that the easiest way to cut through some of these complicated problems is military force. I think we're finding that is not necessarily the case. Some of the forces which really beset us are not nation-state against nation-state, but they are radical forces, whether it's Islam or others, who again are motivated importantly by globalization, by the effect that everybody in the world now hears or sees what's going on by television, radio, and all those kinds of things. So they are politicized by it, and a lot of them are upset with it, especially in the Muslim world, where they are assaulted by American television, undermining their whole religious foundation and so on. So, those kind of forces aren't going to be defeated by military force. Part of the art is, what do you prepare for? You know, the right-wing Republicans say, 'Bob Gates never should have stopped production of the F-22,' but what was the F-22 for? Those are the kinds of things on which nobody knows, but it's an estimate of what the future will bring, and it seems to me we ought to have the most analytical, dispassionate view of it, and prepare for what we think are the most likely contingencies, with some hedges if we're wrong. That's a general way to state it.

**BELLUM: Admiral Mike Mullen recently stated that the national debt is the greatest threat to our security. Is that true? And is there a risk in subsuming everything -- climate change, education, etc. -- under the banner of 'security'?**

SCOWCROFT: I think they're all *problems*. We get attention by hanging 'security' -- 'war,' 'security,' those kinds of things -- on the problem, but if we're to continue to try to improve life for this country, for our children and posterity, it means we try to make the world a better place and the country a better place. I look at these as problems which we need to work at in order to be a position to make the world a better place. You know, education, for example: we undoubtedly have the best universities in the world, but our test results from around the world show that our elementary and middle education system is not what it ought to be, and we need to work on that. Is it a national security issue? I don't like to put it that way. But what we are saying is, we ought to produce the best educated people we can in the world to deal with these problems and the questions you raise in a sophisticated way, rather than an emotional 'we gotta do this, we gotta be the strongest, we gotta be this, we gotta do that.'

**BELLUM: You are a hero to many people in the national security community.**

SCOWCROFT: I doubt that.

**BELLUM: My question is who are your heroes?**

SCOWCROFT: Well, not surprisingly, my heroes are the sort of post-World War II: Eisenhower, Marshall, Goodpaster. They're my role models because I think at a time of challenge -- maybe more acute than we have now but similar -- they were extremely thoughtful and far-sighted. They gave us a generation which is probably one of the best we've had, which started, I guess, to come apart in Vietnam.

**BELLUM: Final question. Imagine you're the national security advisor again. What subjects are you thinking about that you would want to read a memo about? What issues don't give enough attention?**

SCOWCROFT: What I'd really like is for us to think more seriously about how we can best harness the nation-state system to produce ways to govern itself. The only system we have is the UN, which was built for a world which has disappeared. But instead of restructuring, what we are doing is piecemeal. The president goes to India and says, 'You ought to be a member of the Security Council.' What does that mean? Where are we trying to go with the United Nations? Is it able to help in this new world? I'm not sure. Those are the kinds of things I would like to focus on. I would like this country to think about the things that you and I have talked about, and think how can we do more? Bretton Woods -- a bunch of really smart people spent a summer up there, I'd love to spend a summer there, thinking about what kind of governance should we have for the world economy, and they did a pretty good job. We're not doing that now.

**BELLUM: It's almost like the framers at Bretton Woods were that generation's Founding Fathers.**

SCOWCROFT: Well, they were, in a way. That's why most of my heroes come from that generation. They really looked at the problem. Now, maybe the problem was easier to see then than it is now.