

negotiations. When the Iberians reached their destinations, they could kick in the door and take over. Over the next several centuries, European ships, guns, and money dominated the world and created the first global system, the European Age.

Here is the irony: Europe dominated the world, but it failed to dominate itself. For five hundred years Europe tore itself apart in civil wars, and as a result there was never a European empire—there was instead a British empire, a Spanish empire, a French empire, a Portuguese empire, and so on. The European nations exhausted themselves in endless wars with each other while they invaded, subjugated, and eventually ruled much of the world.

There were many reasons for the inability of the Europeans to unite, but in the end it came down to a simple feature of geography: the English Channel. First the Spanish, then the French, and finally the Germans managed to dominate the European continent, but none of them could cross the Channel. Because no one could defeat Britain, conqueror after conqueror failed to hold Europe as a whole. Periods of peace were simply temporary truces. Europe was exhausted by the advent of World War I, in which over ten million men died—a good part of a generation. The European economy was shattered, and European confidence broken. Europe emerged as a demographic, economic, and cultural shadow of its former self. And then things got even worse.

#### THE FINAL BATTLE OF AN OLD AGE

The United States emerged from World War I as a global power. That power was clearly in its infancy, however. Geopolitically, the Europeans had another fight in them, and psychologically the Americans were not yet ready for a permanent place on the global stage. But two things did happen. In World War I the United States announced its presence with resounding authority. And the United States left a ticking time bomb in Europe that would guarantee America's power after the next war. That time bomb was the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I—but left unresolved the core conflicts over which the war had been fought. Versailles guaranteed another round of war.

And the war did resume in 1939, twenty-one years after the last one ended. Germany again attacked first, this time conquering France in six weeks. The United States stayed out of the war for a time, but made sure that the war didn't end in a German victory. Britain stayed in the war, and the United States kept it there with Lend-Lease. We all remember the Lend part—where the United States provided Britain with destroyers and other material to fight the Germans—but the Lease part is usually forgotten. The Lease part was where the British turned over almost all their naval facilities in the Western Hemisphere to the United States. Between control of those facilities and the role the U.S. Navy played in patrolling the Atlantic, the British were forced to hand the Americans the keys to the North Atlantic, which was, after all, Europe's highway to the world.

A reasonable estimate of World War II's cost to the world was about fifty million dead (military and civilian deaths combined). Europe had torn itself to shreds in this war, and nations were devastated. In contrast, the United States lost around half a million military dead and had almost no civilian casualties. At the end of the war, the American industrial plant was much stronger than before the war; the United States was the only combatant nation for which that was the case. No American cities were bombed (excepting Pearl Harbor), no U.S. territory was occupied (except two small islands in the Aleutians), and the United States suffered less than 1 percent of the war's casualties.

For that price, the United States emerged from World War II not only controlling the North Atlantic but ruling all of the world's oceans. It also occupied Western Europe, shaping the destinies of countries like France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and indeed Great Britain itself. The United States simultaneously conquered and occupied Japan, almost as an afterthought to the European campaigns.

Thus did the Europeans lose their empire—partly out of exhaustion, partly from being unable to bear the cost of holding it, and partly because the United States simply did not want them to continue to hold it. The empire melted away over the next twenty years, with only desultory resistance by the Europeans. The geopolitical reality (that could first be seen in Spain's dilemma centuries before) had played itself out to a catastrophic finish.

Here's a question: Was the United States' clear emergence in 1945 as the