

Doing Well by Doing Good

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Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter With the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 286 pp., \$26.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 215 pp., \$26.

Richard N. Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States After the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Books, 1997), 148 pp., \$24.95.

IS AMERICA JUST a nation among nations or *novus ordo seclorum*? That is the ur-question, and since the days of John ("Citty upon a Hill") Winthrop in 1630, Americans have never stopped asking themselves what sets them apart from the rest. Rightly so. America *was* different then, and it still is.

First, by dint of history. America started from scratch at a time when the other powers had been around the block a few times, for several hundred years, in fact. As late-comers, Americans were bound to ask new questions: how to fit into the power game, what cards to play, or whether to play at all with those corrupt potentates they had fled to build the "New Jerusalem."

Add to this geography. None of the others could even dream of a time-out option. Not to play was to perish; only Britain, with the world's nastiest navy and a nice stretch of ocean for a border, could occasionally stay aloof. But for the young republic it made

sense to believe, as Washington put it, that "our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course."

Practically from Day One, the United States enjoyed a surfeit of deterrence power (later multiplied by nuclear weapons) that set it apart. Tocqueville still has it right: "Placed in the center of an immense continent . . . the Union is almost as much insulated from the world as if all its frontiers were girt by the ocean." This permitted a grand strategy as different from that of France or Germany as was the Rhine from the Atlantic Ocean.

Finally, ideology. America had spun off from the Old Continent like a new planet from the sun. Neither feudalism nor royalty, neither papacy nor empire, weighed down this eager child of the Enlightenment.¹ A nation indelibly stamped by Locke and the *philosophes* would obviously look through a prism quite different from Richelieu's or Palmerston's. George III's ex-subjects believed, in Paine's words, that they would "begin the world all over again." And to the rest of the globe, they trumpeted, as did Madison, that they knew "but one code of morality for man, whether acting singly or collectively." No *raison d'état* for these folks.

In Europe, only Immanuel Kant talked that way, but he did not have much clout at the Prussian court. Over here, they fervently believed it—and rightly so. Wasn't America,

¹On the consequences for American political thought, see the seminal book by Louis B. Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1955).

soon pushing aside Spaniards, Frenchmen, and Indians, the most successful polity under the sun? Wasn't that proof of divine grace? And a mandate to improve retrograde races round the world—also known as “manifest destiny”? And so President McKinley just *had* to hold on to the Philippines: “There was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them.”

Compare that to Frederick the Great's rationale for attacking Austria in 1740: His troops were “ready” and his coffers “well filled” so that “ambition, interest and my desire to be talked about” could carry the day. His was an absolutist state, and America a democracy—that was the biggest difference of them all. When the Richelieus planned their wars, they did not have to go on “Meet the Press”, or testify before Congress. The national interest was what *they* said it was.

But American leaders had to slug it out with their public *ab initio*. Even before 1776, that made for passionate foreign policy debates that the late-starting democracies of Europe would only confront in the twentieth century. Hence the hoopla and hyperbole. The first official act of U.S. diplomacy, the Declaration of Independence, was one long plea before the court of the “opinions of mankind”—overargued, overwrought, and overladen with philosophical *obiter dicta*. And so it went. Until this day, such ringing rhetoric strikes foreigners as phony or corny. It is never just “We want” or “We shall.” It is always some universal idea of righteousness, justice, or redemption. And no wonder: Unlike the others, America is a “creedal” democracy, one bound to imbue its oratory with a strong religious flavor (and fervor).

SO, AMERICA *is* different. But how “exceptional” should it be? These are the questions around which Walter A. McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State* revolves. To set up his argument, he re-slices the historical pie in a novel way. First he cuts it in two halves, and then into four pieces

each. The first half he labels the “Old Testament.” The four slices, from 1776 to the 1890s, are: “Liberty, or Exceptionalism”, “Unilateralism, or Isolationism”, “The American System, or Monroe Doctrine”, “Expansionism, or Manifest Destiny.” It was “all about Being and Becoming”, about denying “the outside world the chance to shape America's future.”

The “New Testament” has dominated the twentieth century. It “preached the doctrines of Progressive Imperialism, Wilsonianism, Containment, and Global Meliorism, or the belief that America has a responsibility to nurture democracy and economic growth around the world.” The New Testament was about America *shaping* the outside world.

This book is a joy to read because, as *The Economist* rightly puts it, McDougall “combines breadth of vision with merciful brevity. He is erudite and consistently interesting.” Moreover, *Promised Land, Crusader State* is a handy breviary of all those great quotes from Washington to Wilson you always need, but can never find in one place. But why this new “periodic table”; why two testaments?

Because McDougall wants to draw from history a moral for the here and now. Basically, his is a “Jewish” argument: The Old Testament had it right, and the New one, though full of nice ideas, was an unnecessary and misguided departure. The *Promised Land* phase was proper and fitting, the *Crusader State* was—and is—a perilous aberration. Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Adams were the true prophets because they would venture forth only to protect the precious gift that was America's alone: liberty and democracy. The false ones were the likes of McKinley, Roosevelt (Teddy), Wilson, and Carter—moral crusaders all who went off on the wild goose chase of global reformism.

A sprightly debunker and contrarian, McDougall has no patience for those who interpret this history in terms of idealism versus realism, or isolationism versus interventionism. Isolationism never was, and idealism was just a bombastic embroidery of cold-

blooded interest. McDougall doesn't quite reject "exceptionalism", but he peels off the lush leaves of messianism and idealism, accepting only a sparse core he calls "Liberty at home." "Foreign policy", he expounds, "existed to defend, not define, what America was." But "Liberty" hardly called for Christian meekness. It permitted, indeed, compelled internal expansion to get rid of French, Spaniards, and other undesirables in the same way as it demanded the "American System, or Monroe Doctrine" to keep them from coming back.

Which is another way of claiming that the Old Testament, like the Five Books of Moses, was a moral code for the Chosen only—and otherwise a realpolitiker's manual on how to gain and hold the Promised Land. The author nicely shows how the early Americans, in spite of their highfalutin rhetoric, played diplomatic hardball as if personally coached by Richelieu. "The American quest for independence proceeded to war and diplomacy as usual . . . nor was any new or idealistic diplomacy to be found in the process of peacemaking." Or, for that matter, in the next hundred years.

McDougall reserves particular scorn for the notion of isolationism because such a thing "never existed." Better to call it "unilateralism"—a strategy to reserve "complete freedom of action", which is precisely what the Richelieus called it: *garder les mains libres*. But if that was the American game, you wonder why these consummate realpolitikers threw themselves into America's most stupid adventure, the War of 1812—a "righteous war", as McDougall concedes.

True-blue realists would have measured the "correlation of forces" and then swallowed their pride, no matter how dented by British *hauteur*. But those Americans didn't just blather about law and the freedom of the seas; they dispatched their puny navy. If, like McDougall, you believe that ideology (or "values") does not impinge on interests, then you have to resort to the pretty lame explanation that the War was "an unhappy byproduct

of the world war launched by Napoleon." Really? "Real" realists would have continued to act like that ultimate sermonizer, Jefferson—ranting and pontificating, but staying out of Europe's quarrels. Yet Madison did take the plunge, and you have to wonder whether these "realists" did not get hoisted on their own ideological petard after all.

It may not be fair to match a single chapter against a whole book such as *Empire of Liberty* by Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson (Oxford University Press, 1990). Though *Empire* is a more subtle disquisition on early American diplomacy, it does not even get an entry in McDougall's copious bibliography. In his debunking mood, he tends to overshoot and neglect that ideology isn't just a pretentious way of masking one's base motives. It is that, but also more. Ideology is a way of looking at, and interpreting, the world, which shapes assessments and action.

AND SO THERE was more to American Exceptionalism than McDougall's minimalist definition can accommodate. Just compare and contrast. No Continental power would have turned Liberty into a defining quest because freedom was rather a nightmare of Europe's kings and princes. Isolation was another no-no. Forever jostling each other across contested borders, the Europeans were condemned to act and interact in an eternal power game without respite. Nor could they fall for a Wilsonianism that would teach others to "elect good men" and make the world "safe for democracy." Goodness simply was not part of the dynastic game—not in a system where peace was but a pause between two wars.

What McDougall calls the "New Testament" was not really an aberration, let alone an abomination. The impulse to "reform (or dominate) a wicked world" was always there, an integral part of the "Old Testament." Why else would Hamilton passionately preach the tenets of power politics

if not to bring his idealistic Founding Brethren back down to earth?² “Global Meliorism” just took some time to emerge from history’s cocoon because a critical ingredient was missing: power.

In their first century, the United States just had enough of that ingredient to deal with outgunned Mexicans and Indians. When after the Civil War the United States began to outpace the established powers in critical growth areas such as steel and energy, burgeoning resources provided the soil on which grandiose ends could flourish. Wilhelmine Germany, also a rookie in the great power league, merely wanted a “place in the sun.” But newly muscular America, true to its ideological roots, would naturally preach, and believe in its sermons, as it sought to conquer—cf. McKinley and T.R. The New Testament, rather than betraying the Old, flowed effortlessly from it once the wherewithals were in place. Tocqueville sensed this: “The foreign policy of the United States is eminently expectant; it consists more in abstaining than in acting.” It helps to recall Arnold Wolfers’s distinction between “possession goals” and “milieu goals.”³ The former are the usual suspects of grand strategy: land and riches, power and glory. The latter demand the “shaping of conditions beyond national boundaries.” Great powers, especially “creedal” ones, want more than just secure borders. They want a world that “becomes them” in both senses of the term: that befits them, and becomes like them.

If you are capitalist and good at it, you cherish free trade and engage in “Open Door” diplomacy, later transmuted into global institutions like GATT and the IMF. If you are a child of the Enlightenment, you believe that only good (democratic) states make good foreign policy. Hence, you want to shape the domestic sources of their foreign policy. If domestic peace flows from law, you want to spread this blessing to the rest of the world; hence America’s penchant for international law, and, for a while, institutions like the

League of Nations and the United Nations. And if foreigners persist in their retrograde ways, we must show them the light—a good spanking included. *Le juste milieu* isn’t just ideological luxury; it defines those larger vital interests that come right after the protection of one’s space and system.

So the Old Testament merged naturally into the New, as great power became married to built-in milieu goals. McDougall does not like the offspring—“Progressive Imperialism” and all that. Wistfully he asks, “What became of the humble and cautious impulse that had formerly warned them that they too were flawed, that the willful accumulation of power corrupts?” He scorns “Global Meliorism” as “the least effective and . . . most arrogant of all our diplomatic traditions”, scoffing even at its “two great triumphs—the Marshall Plan and the occupation of Germany and Japan.” The only thing about the New Testament he endorses is “Containment” because it was based on the realistic principle that “no hegemonic behemoth dominate Europe or East Asia.”

So what comes after Containment? Let’s return *ad fontes*, to “Liberty at home”, is the book’s plea. No more crusades, which the Founding Fathers believed would “believe our ideals, violate our true interests, and sully our freedom.” America does not really have to worry about milieu goals, as it has “never been more secure than it is today.” Whence follows a posture one might call “muscular stay-at-homeism” (in deference to McDougall’s distaste for “isolationism”). His shibboleth is “healthy nationalism”, meaning

²For instance, in a clear swipe at the likes of Madison, Hamilton expounded during the Federal Convention in 1787 that liberty was not enough: “No Government could give us tranquillity and happiness at home, which did not possess sufficient . . . strength to make us respectable abroad.”

³Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), pp. 73ff.

that if "we have been good citizens of the world, it is because we have been good Americans." America must "remember that charity begins at home, husband the rare liberty and fragile unity our ancestors won, give thanks that our recent enemies were put in confusion." Heed the Moses of American grand strategy, George F. Kennan, who in 1985 counseled "minding our own business wherever there is not some overwhelming reason for minding the business of others."

That would be wonderful advice for a United States lodged in time somewhere between the purchase of Louisiana and the sinking of the *Lusitania*—*when it was in the business of internal expansion, with an occasional "overwhelming reason" to lay low the hegemonist du jour. But those circumstances exist no more. Today, the United States does not have a time-out option. It cannot retract from the world because it is the world. How shall we count the ways? Alliances with half a dozen critical regions? In situ and over-the-horizon deployments of armed forces? Board seats in myriad international institutions? Guardianship over strategic resources like Middle Eastern oil? Defanging the nuclear ambitions of North Korea, Iran, et al.? Chairing the peace process in the Balkans and the Levant? Containing China and watching Russia? Managing global trade? Name the enterprise, and the United States has a controlling share in it.

Breathtaking Geopolitics

THE POINT IS: America is entangled not merely by dint of treacherous ambition, but by enormous power and sound interest. It does well by doing good, serving its own interests by serving those of others. This is where Zbigniew Brzezinski's *The Grand Chessboard* takes off. America's unprecedented "global power", he argues, "is exercised through a global system of distinctively American design that mirrors the domestic American experience." The game is not imposition, but "co-optation", reinforced

by America's domination of the global culture, the "clout of [its] technological edge and its global military reach." The sinews of this peculiar empire derive from an "elaborate system of alliances and coalitions that literally span the globe" and a "global web of specialized organizations" such as the IMF and World Bank.

So "milieu" and "possession" goals have virtually become one and the same. What are the stakes? "Currently, this unprecedented American global hegemony has no rival", Brzezinski points out. "But will it remain unchallenged?" His First Principle is as simple as it is compelling: Number One wants to remain Number One, and so it must act to forestall hostile coalitions. From here on, Brzezinski goes McDougall's realism one better, moving straight into a kind of neo-geopolitics that echoes Haushofer, Mackinder, and Mahan. "For America", he asserts, "the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia", another word for Mackinder's "Heartland." Rule it, Mackinder wrote, and you "command the world." Geography is destiny.

Unlike yesterday's geopoliticians, Brzezinski is not fixated on the ways and means of war. His preferred role for the United States is that of an impresario who deftly exploits his manifold and unmatched power for global management. That, too, is a virtually self-evident principle. He who pulls the strings will not be yanked about, or be felled by the slings of other nations. Those who craft coalitions or "socialize" their rivals will not be encircled by them.¹

But how to do it? Brzezinski's reach is breathtaking. In masterly fashion, he takes the reader on a trip around the world in 200 pages (leaving out only the Middle East, where even the Zbiggest giants fear to tread). But his brilliant tour de force is like a plate of magnificent hors d'oeuvres. They stimulate the appetite and get the intellectual juices flowing, but don't quite fill one up.

¹I have argued this point in "How America Does It", *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 1997).

In part, that derives from the sheer scope of the book, which, given its brevity, must work with broad brush strokes. On the other hand, Brzezinski is too subtle a thinker to slip out of difficult problems with glib answers. And so the discourse sometimes turns too subtle, too nuanced and fraught with conditionals, especially when it comes to operational guidance.

Take Europe, "America's essential geopolitical bridgehead on the Eurasian continent." When he writes off "self-marginalized" Britain and the "special relationship", the policy advice is straightforward enough (though not compelling because Britain has always been America's sturdiest *point d'appui*). Go with France and Germany, "Europe's principal architects", he advises. A "breakdown of Franco-German cooperation would be a fatal setback for Europe and a disaster for America's position in Europe." Really? France has always been trying to organize a Europe that would contain and contest the United States.

Why, then, go for "some progressive accommodation to the French view" on the "distribution of power" in the Atlantic Alliance? Because united Germany, the weightier of the two, might be tempted by a "more nationalist concept of the European 'order'", and there goes America's "Eurasian bridgehead." Ergo, the United States should strengthen France as Western anchor of Germany. Fair enough, but why does Brzezinski also counsel an "energetic, focused and determined American involvement, particularly with the Germans"? This may be too subtle, too "Bismarckian" a policy for the United States to sustain. And what for, unless to play one against the other—which can hardly serve the "cause of European unification" Brzezinski favors.

A particularly intriguing chapter is "The Eurasian Balkans." It lifts the curtain on an area that has been *terra incognita* on America's map. This is the vast swathe of countries between Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China that was liberated by the collapse of

the Soviet empire—all those "Stans" from "Turkmen" to "Kazak" and "Afghan", plus Armenians, Azeris, and Georgians. "This region is not only a power vacuum but is also internally unstable." Add to this ethnic strife, an enormous *richesse* of oil and gas, and the covetous gaze of the surrounding powers, and you have a twenty-first century XXL version of the Balkans.

Brzezinski is right to sound the warning bell. This is where history has not ended, where it might return with a vengeance. America's interest is also plain: While "too distant to be dominant", it is also "too powerful not to be engaged." What follows? Though Brzezinski seems none too fond of the Brits, he talks pure Palmerston: The United States must ensure that "no single power comes to control this geopolitical space and that the global community has unhindered financial and economic access to it." Right again, but how? Oppose "Russian efforts to monopolize access." But there is always a "but." And so, "the exclusion of Russia . . . is neither desirable nor feasible."

The Grand Chessboard is a fascinating book, and a disturbing one in the best sense of the term. It was designed to jar and jolt the mind at a moment when America, witnessing the triumph of its deepest values, is again being drawn to "global meliorism." Righteousness rules, and the environment, child labor, or human rights dominates the agenda. Or, with a rougher edge, teaching the Europeans the virtue of a "closed door" approach to Cuba.

Brzezinski means to say: "It's geography and power, stupid", and that is good advice for a country weaned on the less-than-universal conviction that global harmony comes from a planet full of Kantian republics. But an "on the other hand" is in order. Democracies don't like realpolitik, the descendants of Madison least of all. It requires a sense of *raison d'état*, which, in turn, demands a strong sense of nationhood. The former was never too firmly fixed in the American mind, and the latter may be going the way of the rotary

phone in all the advanced democracies. Deconstructive ethnic politics plus the pursuit of *individual* happiness do not add up to a National Interest. Nor may geopolitics capture the essence of twenty-first century global politics. "Possession goals" are paling at a time when welfare edges out warfare—not only in the West, but also, fitfully, in Moscow and Beijing.

Geopolitics, though it jogs the mind in an entirely salutary fashion, seems like the pale copy of yesterday's real thing, at least in the Berlin-Berkeley Belt. The problem is that we need a "two paradigm" grand strategy. One would apply to the non-zero sum, welfarist and democratist game that is being played out in the West (including Japan and would-be Westerners), the other to the zero-sum, "I want what you can't have" game that tortures the Middle East, and might yet erupt in the "Eurasian Balkans" and the Western Pacific.

The Gary Cooper Problem

IN *The Reluctant Sheriff*, Richard Haass attempts to bridge these two paradigms, while paying a great deal more attention to the domestics of foreign policy than does Brzezinski. The United States, Haass argues along classical realist lines, should make sure that others are "less likely or able to act aggressively." But it is "realism-plus" (or "idealism-minus"). The inhibition of aggression must also work inside countries, to the benefit of its own citizens. The third objective is "mutually beneficial economic arrangements" as well as "multilateral norms" and "institutions." The key is "regulation", with the United States acting the "sheriff." Lacking the authority and clout of a policeman, it must "work with others" and choose carefully where and when to intervene.

It is the difference between "primacy", which the United States has, and "hegemony", which it does not. America can do what nobody else can—from Bosnia to the Gulf. But it "cannot compel others to become more democratic." Nor "can it intervene with mili-

tary force everywhere" or dictate another country's foreign policy. Haass' basic metaphor is neither the "chessboard" nor the "Promised Land", but the market. This is the age of deregulation everywhere, he argues—in the realm of products, capital, and information as well as in the arena of power. The highly regulated market of the Cold War, a.k.a. bipolarity, is gone, former subsidiaries have spun off, and many more players are taking advantage of easier access to bring their unique assets (from trade to terror) into the competition.

What is the American market leader to do? Neither too much, nor too little—that is the one-sentence gist of this intelligent and well-crafted little book. Haass does not pursue a single moral like McDougall, or a single image of world politics, as does Brzezinski. His advice is to be economical about means as well as ends. Hence, "Something must be doable as well as desirable", which is hard to gainsay. He argues against a minimalist (i.e. neo-isolationist) foreign policy because "neglect will prove to be malign." He quickly disposes of "hegemony" or "unipolarity" because "such a goal is beyond our reach." He dislikes "Wilsonianism" because it does not address the question of what to do before goodness triumphs. Terrorism, proliferation, and humanitarian disasters are *now*; hence democracy, though laudable, provides no guide for tackling today's crisis. Nor is economism, "muscular trade promotion", such a smart Clintonite idea, since it is "likely to harm the overall bilateral relationship with the country in question." Right again.

The motto is "regulation", which transcends traditional realism's focus on the *external* behavior of states. Echoing *Ecclesiastes*, Haass believes that there is a time for everything, including promoting democracy and human rights. But in each case, the strategy must be like Gary Cooper's in *High Noon*: trying to organize a posse of the willing, as the United States did so successfully in the Gulf and in Bosnia. This is an eminently reasonable proposal because it combines U.S. lead-

ership with the benefits of synergy. In fact, the "posse" is but an elegant shorthand for U.S. practice since the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Nor could it have been anything else. Formal alliances such as NATO are good for only one thing: defense against an attack. They rarely work as "pro-active" tools. Another advantage of the posse is that the use of force these days requires international legitimation—ideally by the UN, at a minimum by a regional body like NATO. Whether that is also economical, as Haass thinks, is not so clear. It was not the French or Egyptians who dispatched half a million troops to the Gulf.

Like any "collective security" scheme, the notion of the posse poses a deadly problem, as Gary Cooper learned. These folks may not show up when you need them most. Shared interests alone don't propel them to the sheriff's side. They must believe that he is big enough to win, and they must fear his ire more than the risk of commitment. This is precisely why the Gulf operation worked. The United States fielded a force ten times larger than the next-biggest contributor, and nobody, not even the meek-minded Germans

and Japanese, dared avert his gaze when the hat was passed.

The moral of the Gulf story transcends McDougall's "Liberty at home." The strong cannot hide. Those who must lead must also shoulder a disproportionate burden, and synergy is nil when there is no energy in the first place. Both Brzezinski and Haass believe that the generator can only be America. They are right. But they still have to deal with McDougall's 222-page interjection that America, this "delightful spot", does not have to play the game, as it has "never been more secure than it is today." True enough, Haass concedes—we can only do what we must "if we build support at home." Without such an effort to "explain why foreign policy still matters and why we cannot afford to ignore it, the domestic foundations on which national security inevitably rests will crumble." But with that exhortation, alas, the book ends. □

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Stalin, An Incompetent Realist

Robert Jervis

John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 425 pp., \$30.

Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 285 pp., \$30.

Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 346 pp., \$29.95.

CHANGES IN historical accounts are driven mainly by developments, if not fashions, within the historical profession, by current political concerns, by the availability of new sources of information, and by the way in which the events being explored turned out. Although the first two factors are not to be dismissed, I believe the second two are of greater importance in our current efforts to understand the Cold War. Most obviously, recent years have seen the release of major documents from Russia's archives, and the rise of a new generation of Russian historians to help analyze them. In some cases