

Exceptionally American

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Walter Russell Mead. *God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World*. Alfred A. Knopf. 449 pages. \$27.95

In the attempt to explain America's rise to global preeminence — as in ambitious explanatory efforts more generally — historians, political theorists, and social scientists typically succumb to the temptation to isolate a single cause. Favored single-cause explanations for the unprecedented power that twenty-first century America exerts in world affairs include its military might and distinctive strategic doctrines; its geography — guarded by two great oceans, sharing the continent with benign neighbors to the north and south, and blessed with extraordinarily varied and abundant natural resources; its free market economic system grounded in the priority that the law gives to the protection of private property; and its Protestant religious spirit that has encouraged disciplined productivity, deferred gratification, and the propensity to seek progress through social change.

In fact, these causes and more, Walter Russell Mead shows in his marvelous book on the making and meaning of American power, cannot be isolated. They have combined and intertwined in America to form a nation whose ability to project military force to all parts of the world, to expand the international economic order and integrate its commercial life with nations around the globe, and to disseminate its moral principles and popular culture far and wide greatly surpasses anything ever before seen. With due appreciation for the folly, hypocrisy, and injustices that have accompanied America's exercise of power, Mead's book also concludes that on balance the world order that America has taken the lead in making has served humanity's interests because it is well-suited to human nature.

With *God and Gold*, Mead, the Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow in U.S. Foreign Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, cements his reputation as one of our nation's most learned and lucid students of foreign affairs. In *Special Providence* (2002), which won the prestigious Lionel Gelber Award, Mead argued against a consensus that held that America lacked an authentic foreign policy tradition, showing instead that America has a fertile tradition of thinking about foreign affairs that extends back to the Founding and, when well understood, helps makes sense of current challenges.

Mead discerned four strands running through the tradition. He named them after four legendary figures, but they describe idealized sensibilities or outlooks rather than settled doctrines or organized schools. Hamiltonians put the emphasis on making America a world power by forging a stable international order hospitable to commerce and trade among nations. Jeffersonians tend to downplay America's role in the world by defining U.S. foreign policy in terms of what is necessary to preserve and promote democracy at home. Coming

into their own in the twentieth century, Wilsonians contend that moral principle and political interest converge in obliging America to bring all nations of the world into the family of democracies. And Jacksonians are driven by a populist pride that distrusts international institutions and is inclined to leave the world alone provided that America is undisturbed — but when the nation is endangered, Jacksonians seek to marshal the full force of American power to crush the adversary. Versions of each can be found on the left and the right. Moreover, these ideal types, Mead emphasized, rarely exist in isolation: Various blends coalesce in the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens, office holders, and policymakers. Because each sensibility captures an important aspect of the American spirit and reflects a significant interest of the American people, the task of statesmen is to strike the proper balance among them.

Striking the proper balance or giving competing claims their due is a pervasive, if understated, theme of Mead's new book as well. In exploring the causes and consequences of American power, Mead demonstrates the importance of the country's genius in reconciling the claims of rival outlooks and undertakings, institutions and associations, interests and ideas. But this genius did not burst forth suddenly from the New World in the late eighteenth century. American power and the American order are outgrowths of British power and British order.

Accordingly, argues Mead, it is misleading to attribute the rise of the modern world to the West or to Western Civilization. This "disguises one of the oldest and most bitter clashes of civilization in world history: centuries of warfare between the Anglo-Saxons and continental Europe." And it conceals the victory of the Anglo-American order, dominated since the end of World War II by the junior partner, which over the course of four centuries has repeatedly defeated its chief competitors for global preeminence — Spain, France, Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union. In the process, American has inscribed its language, its economic system, its morals, and its political ideals on the international system and the family of nations that participate in it.

Such a claim, Mead acknowledges, is bound to arouse accusations of arrogance and triumphalism. But that does not prevent him from taking a certain mischievous pleasure in pointing out that these accusations are nothing new or in relishing the recitation of highlights from the long history of Anglophobia and anti-Americanism.

Britain and America have tended to perceive themselves as bringers of liberty and prosperity. But for 300 years they have been perceived by the world much in the way that, according to Mead, the Walrus and the Carpenter are depicted in the poem in *Through the Looking Glass*. First, the Walrus and the Carpenter conceive the clueless and hopelessly utopian task of sweeping the world's beaches clean of sand. Then, having satisfied themselves that they are well on the way to perfecting the world, they earnestly invite the oysters to take a stroll along

the shore to discuss fine things — commerce, politics, science, and metaphysics — only to conclude at dinner time with a mixture of firmness and regret that the oysters will serve as a perfect dish. And so, for centuries, have nations around the world thought of the British and Americans — silly, sanctimonious, self-deluded, and very dangerous idealists, whose outward congeniality conceals greed and cruelty and whose schemes are sure to prove disastrous to those who cooperate with, or get caught up in, them.

Often world affairs were sufficiently complex to provide support to both the Anglo-American self-understanding and the anti-Anglo-American critique:

The British role in suppressing the slave trade was endlessly gratifying to British opinion, a nineteenth-century forerunner of American human rights policies. This did not, however, prevent Brazilian sugar producers in particular from noting that Britain's inspiring moral conversion occurred at just the time when Britain's sugar-producing colonies feared the increasing competition from more efficient, slave-importing plantations springing up in Brazil.

Often the hatred, often emanating from France, was grounded in power politics, from Britain's blocking the empire-building ambitions of Louis XIV in the late seventeenth century to the U.S. removal in 2003 of France's lucrative trading partner, Saddam Hussein, from his Oil-for-Food-fattened dictatorship. Often the hatred congealed around accusations that American culture was simultaneously crude, moralistic, and salacious. And often the hatred flowed from envy of and resentment for America's preeminence and prosperity.

By placing anti-Americanism in historical context, Mead delivers a reproach to the unreflective patriots who fail to acknowledge America's sometimes callous and blundering ways. At the same time, by showing that anti-Americanism is anything but a recent malignity caused by the current administration, he brings into focus the ignorance and naiveté on which much Bush-bashing trades. Taking the long view, as he masterfully does throughout his book, Mead makes clear that what has over the centuries seemed to Americans as a high-minded idealism and looked to much of the rest of the world like a conniving, hypocritical realism is better understood as an astonishingly successful blending of idealistic commitment to principle and realistic assessment of national interest, a blending that often advances the latter by honoring the former.

The most visible manifestation of this blending has been the creation of a liberal and capitalist maritime international order, which has led to Britain's and America's spectacular success in world affairs, and has come to define commercial, cultural, diplomatic, and military relations among nations. The cornerstone of Anglo-American grand strategy was never planned or written down. According to Mead, it followed from the logic of Anglo-American geography, culture, and society. All the same, from the time of Lord Protector Oliver

Cromwell to President George W. Bush, Britain and America have adhered to it. Two successive revolutions in transportation and communications — steamships, trains, and the telegraph in the nineteenth century, followed by automobiles, airplanes, telephones, radios, televisions, and the internet in the twentieth century — greatly expanded the maritime system that Britain established, but did not alter its animating principles or its strategic benefits.

The system was pioneered in the seventeenth century by the Dutch Republic, which developed oceanic trade routes, built a world-class navy to protect its ships and commerce, and became a financial center, melting pot, and society open to the best international talent. As preeminence passed to the British, the doctrine of the balance of power was incorporated into the system. Receiving formal recognition in 1713, when Spain, France, Britain, and the Dutch signed the Treaty of Utrecht, balance-of-power politics meant that all states “had a right and indeed a duty to act when necessary to preserve it.” For Britain, the advantages were substantial: While European powers vied for control of the Continent, Britain, protected by the seas that surround it, concentrated on developing its industry and expanding its global commercial enterprises.

Global reach was also central to security policy and military doctrine:

In Anglo-American strategic thought, there is one world composed of many theaters. The theaters are all linked by the sea, and whoever controls the sea can choose the architecture that shapes the world. The primary ambition of Anglo-Saxon power is not dominance in a particular theater; it is to dominate the structure that shapes the conditions within which the actors in each of the world’s theaters live. European policy, Asian policy, African policy, Middle Eastern policy: these policies are all means to an end. The end is control of the system that binds them all together.

For Britain and America the development of global military reach and global economic power went hand-in-hand.

Of course, the consolidation of a global maritime order involved additional factors. It required innovations in the world of finance, such as Parliament’s chartering in 1694 of the Bank of England to finance national defense, and the design and administration of an effective taxation system in the eighteenth century. Indeed, the global system of finance established by Britain and extended and enhanced by America — the work of bankers, accountants, investors, traders, and corporate executives — profoundly changed the world. Because of its elegant complexity, it even counts as a thing of genius: “What the Germany of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms is to music,” says Mead, “what the Italy of Michelangelo, Raphael, and da Vinci is to painting and sculpture, that is what London and New York are to finance.”

Another critical factor was Britain's inclination, even as it created a colonial empire that encompassed the globe, to permit the emergence of self-government in its colonies. Ultimately this led to independence, first, and violently, in the US, then peacefully in Canada (1867), Australia (1901), New Zealand (1907), and eventually in Pakistan (1947), India (1947), Singapore (1965), and Hong Kong (which became part of the People's Republic of China in 1997, while continuing to maintain a high degree of autonomy). It also entrenched English as the language of international business, capitalism as the preferred economic system, and democracy and freedom as the gold standard in politics.

This gift for nurturing nations to independence and bringing them into the international system is crucial to the distinction between empire, which is based on conquest, and an order, which is grounded in freedom and equality. As a world power, the United States took this gift to a new level. After the Second World War, instead of seeking to create its own colonial empire, America

followed the pattern the British established when they helped the South Americans free themselves from the Spanish and the Portuguese. America supported independence drives in the former colonies, and then allowed the new states to enter the global economic system the U.S. was building. The drawback of empire had always been that you had to conquer countries first and then keep them down; the advantage of an order is that people choose freely to belong.

Of course, like Britain's before it, America's inclination to encourage self-government for others did not derive from mere calculation of long-term economic benefit. It flowed also from the universal political principles of freedom and equality on which Americans proudly based their government. The trade routes, financial markets, diplomatic relationships that resulted were, among other things, a happy byproduct of adhering to American ideals in the pursuit of American interests.

Drawing on the writings of philosophers Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and Karl Popper (1902–1993) and of social scientist Max Weber (1864–1920), Mead argues that cultural and religious factors made Britain and America peculiarly capable of taking advantage of emerging capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A closed society, according to Bergson and Popper, the type that dominated in the pre-modern world and remains a potent draw today, satisfies the powerful human desires for regularity, stability, and community by giving priority to tradition, custom, and the claims of entrenched authority. In contrast, an open society provides opportunities to satisfy the similarly powerful human desire to develop, learn, experiment, and create. Capitalism turns open societies into dynamic societies not only by permitting individuals to innovate in their own lives, but also by allowing them to renovate the structure of society itself. And dynamic religion — here Mead follows Bergson and leaves Popper behind — encourages people to find new meaning in old

practices and beliefs. America has been peculiarly successful, argues Mead, in encouraging such dynamism in society and drawing on such dynamism in religion while respecting the claims of tradition, custom, and community.

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But what gave Anglo-American culture its inclination to openness and its capacity to handle the disruptive effects of change? Drawing on Weber to delve more deeply, Mead argues that Protestant Christianity in Britain and America gave religious sanction to the achievement of prosperity and the improvement of society. Whereas almost all religions venerate the past and aim for some form of transcendence of earthly concerns, Protestant Christianity made cultivating the temporal world through the exercise of human reason and disciplined initiative a religious imperative. Early on it taught that success in commercial life was a sign of salvation. It broadened its message to include the call to reform society by caring for the poor, the sick, and the elderly. And following the logic of its universal claims, it extended the demand for social justice to include the promotion of human rights abroad. All the while, Americans supposed that history was on their nation's side, powered by God's providence, which often, we are inclined to think, works as an invisible hand through which the pursuit of private interest promotes the public good. Of course, secular grounds are available to justify disciplined work, aggressive social reform, and universal human rights advocacy. But, argues Mead, it was not the secular reasons but the religious spirit — which preached a balance between reason, revelation, and tradition — that was absorbed and disseminated by the culture and thereby molded the nation's character.

Mead concludes his ambitious exploration of the making of American power with a final ambitious question about its meaning: "How should a knowledge of the history of the maritime order and the long view of American power influence debates over American grand strategy and over key issues in American foreign policy?" He rightly refrains from offering policy prescriptions for the controversies of the moment and instead sticks with the longer view. He suggests that historical knowledge will inoculate us against the prophets of declinism, who are disposed to see in every rising rival and every American stumble a telltale sign of our imminent demise. It will enable us to understand better and maintain more effectively the structure that undergirds the liberal and free market international order forged under our leadership. It will provide us with sharper insight into the common and enduring principles that, despite the inevitable and often vexing policy differences, link us to our friends. It will help us grasp the challenges that non-Western and developing societies confront in liberalizing, and the deeply destabilizing and often unjust consequences of the rapid introduction of democracy and capitalism. And it will give us a more refined perspective on the grievances, real and imagined, that inflame our adversaries. Finally, historical knowledge will improve our appreciation of the insight central to Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's (1892–1971) writings about morals and foreign affairs: Our liberal and democratic principles are just, but even our most high-minded efforts to act in accordance

with them are forever compromised by our passions and prejudices. Accordingly, the conduct of our foreign affairs requires a complex blending of boldness and modesty. Here, history, more than any other discipline, serves as an indispensable tutor.

Mead's grand synthesis is susceptible to further refinement. He rightly emphasizes the dynamic character of the Protestant ethic in focusing Americans on production and commerce, opening them to the benefits of change, and disposing them to trust in the ultimate beneficence of the historical progress. But he understates the importance of the biblical teaching that human beings are made in the image of God and are therefore in the most important respect of equal dignity. While this fundamental teaching has not prevented the commission of crimes and injustices, sometimes of monumental proportions, it has nourished the moral resources to condemn those crimes and injustices and to forge unprecedented legal, ethical, and political bulwarks to protect against their repetition.

Mead's synthesis would also be strengthened by incorporating a more substantial appreciation of America's innovations in constitutional government, which were derived in significant measure from reflections on English liberty and successfully embodied by the Founders in the American Constitution. Operating in harmony with the Protestant ethic and the market economy, the Constitution assumed that the purpose of government was to secure rights shared equally by all, and that toleration, which was essential if individuals were to effectively exercise their rights, was prescribed by both reason and religion. To accomplish government's limited purpose, the Constitution created a framework that took self-interested behavior as a given, and supposed that it could be enlightened but not overcome. This framework sought to channel energy and ambition but not to suppress or commandeer them. And by institutionalizing respect for the individual, one crucial manifestation of which involved making individuals largely responsible for their choices, the constitutional framework offers a life-long school in the virtues of freedom.

Finally, Mead's synthesis needs to include a more probing assessment of the destructive tendencies to which the liberal democratic spirit in America is prone. Particularly relevant to his hopes for the future development of Anglo-American order is the inclination, visible throughout our educational system, to repudiate, in the name of freedom, the basics of liberal education. While every page of his book demonstrates their benefits, Mead occasionally calls explicitly for the study of British and American history, as well as of the history of the civilizations with which we compete and cooperate. Such study brings into focus America's strengths and weaknesses, puts in perspective the nation's accomplishments and setbacks, and sheds light on emerging opportunities and dangers.

The failure of our grade schools, high schools, colleges, and universities to teach history may seem a small matter next to questions about the crafting and execution of America's grand strategy. In fact, it is critical. Without a historically informed awareness of our distinguishing

principles and practices; without a grasp of the past and present of commerce, diplomacy, and war; without an ability to take the long view of our civilization and other civilizations, we — both the leaders among us and the ordinary citizens from whom our leaders derive their political legitimacy — are bound to multiply misunderstandings of ourselves, our allies, and our adversaries. True, as Mead stresses, the Anglo-American order has for 300 years repeatedly managed to overcome its follies and debacles. But the world that Britain and America made and which America today stands astride like a mighty colossus may in the years to come prove less forgiving. That's all the more reason to demand that education in America form citizens and statesmen capable of understanding accurately the variety of causes that sustain American power, and not least the principles that also ennoble it

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and a visiting professor at Georgetown University. His writings are posted at www.PeterBerkowitz.com.