America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire (2003)

Christopher H Hoebeke, World Maritime University

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America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire

Claes G. Ryn.

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An exceptionally fine explication of America’s current predicament in world affairs. The author takes great pains to define current political and cultural terms, distinguishing their traditional meanings from the bellicose connotations into which our national dissemblers have successfully twisted them (Clinton’s crowd as much as Bush’s). In so doing, Professor Ryn redraws an important link, explained by Irving Babbitt and other observers as early as the First World War, between the American government’s unrestrained militarism abroad and the inspiration it draws from a parallel abandonment of moral constraints in the individual American citizen.

It is not, however, a “Blame-America-First” book. Indeed, the nationalistic virus to which America has been succumbing, as Dr. Ryn points out, made its first appearance in revolutionary France (which makes our current vilification of the French somewhat ironic, if not hypocritical). After a century of near dormancy, the contagion later raged through Europe at large, leading to that continent’s great suicide attempt of 1914-1945. From 1917 until the end of the Cold War it took its biggest toll in Russia. The fact that many of America’s staunchest anti-Communists are themselves suffering from the Communists’ hallucinations of imperialist impulses gives testimony to the resiliency and subtlety of the disease.
As far back as twenty years ago, it began infecting certain quarters of the American academy, but has only recently spread to mainstream journalism and party politics. As the author explains, the intellectuals who have been urging our current global project have, through highly selective references to Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian and European and American experiences, distilled a political ideology that is in fact contrary to the values of Western and American civilizations (and any other civilization, for that matter). While they often battle in the editorial pages against “Post Modern” liberalism’s nihilistic rejection of authority and tradition, theirs is a highly questionable authority derived from a practically fictitious tradition.

Indeed, Ryn believes they have more in common with their Postmodern adversaries than they realize, because at heart they are equally contemptuous of the hierarchical arrangements and institutional customs that the world’s diverse societies have evolved and adapted over the centuries in answer to the changing conditions of particular places in particular times. If the Postmodernists claim there is no authority beyond individual needs and perceptions, today’s hegemonists proclaim the superior authority of abstract principles derived by reason and unencumbered by consideration for the messy details of actual human history. Thus, as is not surprising to any civically informed observer of our so-called “War on Terrorism” – an abstract idea in its own right — the imperialist philosophy in practice proves to be as callously indifferent towards the constitutional limits on the federal government as it is to the non-democratic traditions in the Middle East.

The catastrophic murders of September 11 certainly justified an armed reprisal, in so far as military action could be used to punish or apprehend the planners and instigators, as well as perhaps to deter similar terrorist assaults in the future. However, this simple mandate based on the traditional and internationally accepted concept of “just war” was metamorphosed by the administration’s hawks and their cheerleaders in “conservative” journals and talk-shows into nothing less than a crusade for bringing “capitalism,” “freedom,” and “democracy” to a region of the world that has known at least some of the blessings of civilization for more than five thousand years.
Notwithstanding that circumstances on the ground have proven to be more intractable than the ideologues had originally guessed, they continue to claim for the United States a unique, messianic status that requires us to bear any cost in blood and treasure to extend the frontiers of Reason. Confusing and conflating legitimate self-defense with the ends of empire, they have, wittingly or otherwise, distorted America’s image of itself, using the language of piety and patriotism to mask a formidable will to power.

Having traced the source of this virus of “neo-Jacobinism” to certain strains of ahistorical, Enlightenment thinking, Ryn cautions that it appears to be on the ascent in Twenty-First Century America, a nation that has assembled unto itself more might in nearly every respect than all the powers of all the ages of the Earth. *America the Virtuous* alerts us to the temptations and the likely disastrous consequences of such power in the service of excessive national pride untempered by the humility that comes with genuine historical self-awareness.

Ryn’s is the warning of a true patriot, not the flattery of America’s honey-tongued agents destruction.