

The American Project
A Review of Walter Russell Mead's

*Power, Terror, Peace, and War:
America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk*

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Three years ago a band of Islamic fanatics conducted a devastating airborne attack on New York's twin towers in a twenty-first century version of the Japanese Pearl Harbor raid which catapulted the United States into the Second World War. Since that attack on the most visible symbol of American worldwide financial hegemony, a couple of major investigations and scores of books have been written in an effort to explain what happened and how those events have altered the American position in the world. Among the best is a short volume by Walter Russell Mead entitled *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk*.

Much of the post 9/11 literature has focused upon various aspects of the Bush Administration's response to the attack. Many have condemned his revival of the doctrine of preemption, while many more have expressed alarm at the emergence of what they regard as an American empire. Some of these works assess the situation in a judicious manner, while others adopt the hysterical tone of the far left. While Mead, who is Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and the author of *Special Providence*, an interpretive history of American diplomacy, does offer measured criticism of Bush Administration policy, he is also supportive of key aspects of it. But what sets this book apart from most others is that it places the events of 9/11 into the broadest possible context of the nation's role in the world, past and future.

Unlike neo-Marxist critics such as Noam Chomsky who view the role of the United States as fundamentally imperialist, Mead approves of what he refers to as the "American Project," an effort deeply rooted in American history "to protect our own domestic security while building a peaceful world order of democratic states linked by common values and sharing a common prosperity." Unlike radical leftists and Islamic fundamentalists who would like to see the collapse of American power and influence in the world, Mead believes that "the destruction of the American system in the world would lead to far more misery and danger than we now see, and . . . would be a catastrophe not only for Americans but for millions and billions who live beyond our frontiers"

Since the Great Depression and World War Two the United States has successfully embarked upon two major elements of this project. The first element was the domestication of *laissez faire* capitalism and the class conflict that went with it, and its replacement with a sort of bureaucratic welfare state he refers to as "Fordism."

Second was an effort to subsume Europe's traditional military and nationalist rivalries within an American guided, dollar denominated, network of trade and prosperity. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed along with its network of subject states, the American project had seemingly succeeded. "Fordism choked Marxism with butter," as he says. All that remained was to expand the network of multilateral economic and cultural ties to those parts of the "third world" which had been left out during the half century of cold war. The world had come as Francis Fukuyama claimed, to "the end of history." Accordingly the Clinton Administration could neglect the nation's "hard" power and concentrate on economic or "soft" power. But then came the events of 9/11 which revealed that power in all its forms was still important.

American power, Mead argues, can be usefully divided into four mutually reinforcing types. The most obvious form of power is the "sharp" force of the military. The next is the "sticky" or economic power which binds through the establishment of mutual advantage. He refers to the influence of American ideas, such as freedom, equality or opportunity, and such cultural forces as music, television and the movies as "sweet" because they have the power to attract. Finally he argues that the synergistic interaction of these forces creates yet another form of power he refers to as "hegemonic" because it confers upon the United States the ability to set the international agenda and the terms of dialogue. With all this power at its disposal, the hegemony of the United States should have been assured but much to the surprise of the "end of history" crowd, the world is full of peoples who do not wish to be brought within the fold of the American project.

Within the context of his analysis of the American project, and the challenges it faces, Mead assess the strengths and limitations of American power as it confronts a dangerous new world. The book is not only well written, but historically and culturally informed with brilliant insights and common sense remarks on almost every page. Among the common sense he dispenses is the notion that "Countries that allow their territory to host terror camps, and who knowingly allow their financial systems to be used to transfer and hold assets for terror groups, are committing acts of war against civilization." Coming amidst the proliferation of paranoid nonsense spread by the Michael Moore crowd, such straightforward assertions are refreshing indeed.

At the end of the Second World War, most Americans looked optimistically forward to the construction of a peaceful new world order administered by the United Nations only to be frustrated as Stalin's "iron curtain" descended across Europe. At that time, as the nation embarked upon a protracted struggle to determine the fate of the world, a young foreign service officer named George F. Kennan wrote a series of influential articles which pointed the nation in the direction of the containment policy it would pursue for the next fifty years. In his suggestions for the reconstruction of the American project Mead often sounds like Kennan. *Power, Terror, Peace, and War* deserves the same sort of attention today, as the nation faces another extended contest that Kennan's work received at the dawn of the cold war.