

Anglo-Saxon Attitudes: The Making of the Modern World

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God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World . Walter Russell Mead . Knopf , 2007 , 464 \$27.95

Summary: Walter Russell Mead rightly argues that the United Kingdom and the United States made the modern world. But his call for Washington to pursue both a maritime grand strategy and Niebuhrian realism will not fly.

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Walter Russell Mead laments at the beginning of *God and Gold*, "The study of British history and culture has about vanished from American schools today; as a result, many Americans are unaware of just how deep the connection between the two countries go." Mead sets out to dispel that ignorance, but his deeper purpose is to expound a thesis: that the modern world is the creation of the United Kingdom and the United States. This, Mead writes, is "the biggest geopolitical story in modern times: the birth, rise, triumph, defense, and continuing growth of Anglo-American power despite continuing and always renewed opposition and conflict." In his view, militarily, politically, economically, and culturally, their will has prevailed, first with the United Kingdom leading, then with the United States taking over. Americans need to know how and why this has been the case -- not only to understand themselves fully but also to appreciate the nature of the world they have created and to cope with the problems it presents.

To describe the United Kingdom and the United States as Anglo-Saxon countries is to describe not their ethnic makeup but their culture -- to underline how it differs from that of the world at large and even from that of the rest of the West. Mead sees Anglo-Saxon culture and its success across the globe as the product of four elements: a slowly evolved liberal political system amenable to compromise, adjustment, and innovation; a Protestant religious tradition that has become tolerant enough to accommodate different sects and accept the separation of church and state while retaining a strong sense of purpose; a capitalist system preoccupied with material wealth not for its own sake but because of "a passion for growth, for achievement, for change"; and a maritime strategy, initially borrowed from the Dutch, that has used both the freedom of action provided by detachment from the European mainland and ready access to the rest of the globe to manipulate the world's balance of power. Each of these four elements has in itself been a powerful force for change. And each has supported and reinforced the others, constituting a virtuous circle whose impact has been dynamic and self-perpetuating.

Mead puts plenty of flesh on these bones, taking his readers through four centuries of history, from Elizabeth I and Oliver Cromwell to Wal-Mart and George W. Bush. His account is rich in anecdote, laden with quotations, and impressive in its range and erudition. Some things, such as his use of Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter" to capture the combination of impractical idealism and cynicism that sometimes characterizes Anglo-Saxon enterprises, work brilliantly.

On other occasions, perhaps because Mead is trying to address different audiences at the same time, his tone is disconcertingly uncertain. There must be a better way to illustrate a supposed affinity between Cromwell and Ronald Reagan than with reference to a passage from a speech by the Lord Protector being suddenly interrupted with, "Don Felipe, tear down that wall!" And it is surprising to find Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's awful poem "Excelsior" quoted at all, let alone favorably, after what James Thurber did to it.

WEST SIDE STORY

A more substantive, and substantial, problem is that Mead's emphasis on what is special and distinctive about Anglo-Saxon culture downplays the features that all Western countries have in common while focusing on what divides the continental nations from the maritime ones. There is, for example, little acknowledgment of the West's shared Greco-Roman inheritance. Mead's readers will get no sense that during the centuries of the United Kingdom's ascendancy, the education of the British ruling class consisted overwhelmingly of the study of Greek and Latin languages and culture. Yet that education must have shaped these elites' understanding of the world, perhaps as much as the Old Testament and its "Abrahamic narrative," on which Mead lays heavy emphasis. He also gives scant attention to the vast imprint – positive, negative, and complicated – of the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution on the minds of the educated classes of the United Kingdom and the United States, and Europe as a whole. And Germany, whose malign influence did so much to determine the contours of modern world history, gets very short shrift.

These weaknesses are not negligible, but nor are they life threatening. Mead's basic case is sound: the two great maritime, capitalist democracies have been the main shapers of the modern world. There are important virtues in the way Mead makes this case. In his treatment of the international behavior of the United Kingdom and the United States, he is without illusion or sentimentality. If anything, his criticism of the two countries goes too far: "Greed, cowardice, arrogance, complacency, sloth, and self-righteousness: every vice known to history has flourished in the politics and policy of the maritime states. They have committed about every possible folly and crime." Still, he is right to stress the ruthlessness that characterized the ascendancy of both powers, a quality that reflects "the unique mix of cynicism and faith at the heart of the Anglo-American view of the world."

This ruthlessness has been as evident in the two countries' dealings with each other as in their relationships with the rest of the world. The United Kingdom and the United States have often stood together as allies or partners, but when they have done so it has been, quite properly, on the basis of hard calculations of self-interest. The accompanying rhetoric might claim a "special relationship," but even on the occasions of closest cooperation, each country has always looked after itself first when a choice has been necessary. Mead has written elsewhere of their relationship during World War II, when the two countries worked more closely together than ever before, "No reptilian brain could have dealt as un sentimentally with an old friend as Franklin Roosevelt and the Treasury Department dealt with Churchill's government," and, "Despite the best efforts of Lord Keynes, the United States picked the imperial carcass very clean during the war." It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the dismantling of the British Empire was an unacknowledged but important U.S. aim during and immediately after the war.

AN EXPLOSIVE CENTURY

In an impressive set of concluding chapters, Mead meditates on the consequences of the triumph of the Anglo-Saxons in creating a maritime-capitalist order that now encompasses the whole world. Americans, he observes, are inclined to see that triumph as essentially resulting from the application and attraction of certain principles and values. But this is a case of victor's amnesia. As the rest of the world rightly understands, the Anglo-Saxon success has been based on power and is the product of "long and bitter battles to shape the future of the world." Today, the civilizations of the world have to live together in a state of unprecedented intimacy because "liberal capitalist society imposes its preferences on the rest of the world." Much of the world bitterly resents this and is seriously destabilized by it. But having created that intimacy, the United States is going to be faced with managing its consequences as the prime task of its foreign policy for the foreseeable future.

How should the United States go about this, and what are the prospects of its success? Mead is extremely interesting on these questions and cautiously optimistic. He believes that the

emergence of a cluster of substantial powers in Asia -- China, India, Japan, and Russia -- will work in favor of the United States, because these states have the potential to form a stable balance of power among themselves. And should they fail, the United States would still be well placed to manipulate and exploit the power equation among them. The greatest danger, Mead argues, is not the rise of China and India but their failure -- which, given the magnitude of the tasks facing them, is not unlikely. If one were to fail, it would seriously upset the regional balance and require more active intervention on part of the United States. If both failed, the region would be reduced to chaos.

Mead expresses qualified optimism concerning the future of the West's relations with Islam. The extreme Wahhabi and Salafist movements of today, he observes, bear a striking resemblance to some of the radical Protestant groups of the Reformation. They, too, wanted to return to the original sources of their faith, denounced later deviations and elaborations, attacked rival cults, demanded theocratic rule, and, if deemed necessary, spread their religion by war. The Puritan movement adjusted to reality after repeated failures and over time became a critical force in the development of Anglo-American liberalism and democracy. Mead speculates that in the medium to long term, the same process of adjustment might happen in Islamist movements.

But "we should not delude ourselves with easy optimism," Mead warns. "A collective whose feelings have been deeply outraged" by 300 years during which "the Christian powers have been carving up the Islamic world" is not going to set its grievances aside quickly or easily. More generally, the non-Western world is going to have to ride out "huge storms" because of the tempo of change, and those will be even bigger, faster, and more disruptive than the ones that convulsed the West during its own murderous progress to modernity. Mead sees an "explosive century" ahead.

The United States, Mead notes, will continue to be the dominant presence in the next century (he will have no truck with American declinism). The question is, how should it play its hand? In different chapters, Mead offers two different answers to that question. First, "stick to the plan" -- the plan being the maritime grand strategy by which, in Mead's account, the United Kingdom and the United States created the modern world. Second, the United States should adopt a policy of ethical realism, based on the thinking of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, that combines moral concern, an acceptance of the reality of power, and prudence in its exercise.

Opinions will vary about the compatibility of these two pieces of advice. But setting that aside, each has its own implausibility. Sticking to the plan means continuing the implementation of the very policy that created the current state of affairs: it would result in more intimacy with non-Western civilizations and more of the problems that flow from that intimacy. Staying the course would require managing sensitive dealings with other civilizations, which is not an Anglo-Saxon specialty. Why, then, should it mend rather than intensify the damage?

As for adopting Niebuhrian ethical realism in foreign policy, it is an excellent piece of advice. But Mead himself believes that the prospects for the kind of nuanced and demanding foreign policy that Niebuhr advocated are remote. Considering recent performance and the current political scene in the United States, one is compelled to agree. In the end, Mead pins his hopes on the adoption of a Niebuhrian approach by, of all groups, American evangelical Protestants -- possibly the least nuanced constituency in U.S. politics. It is a determined effort to find an upbeat ending to an ambitious and stimulating book, but it is not a convincing conclusion. Walter Russell Mead begins *God and Gold* by quoting some inspirational lines by Alfred, Lord Tennyson predicting a golden future of prosperity and peace for mankind. He might well have ended it with some more equivocal lines by the same poet:

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfills himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.