

[Hemmer on McDougall, 'The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy: How America's Civil Religion Betrayed the National Interest'](#)

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Walter A. McDougall. *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy: How America's Civil Religion Betrayed the National Interest.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 424 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-21145-0.

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With a title echoing William Appleman Williams's classic *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), Walter McDougall's new interpretive history of American foreign policy is equally sweeping and polemical. McDougall's *Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy* also echoes his own modern classic, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (1997), a book that had a great impact on the current study of US foreign policy in general and on this reviewer in particular. While the greatest contribution of *Promised Land, Crusader State* came in the categories highlighted in the title, the greatest contribution of *Tragedy* is likely to come from its focus on the mechanisms for change in American foreign policy--mechanisms that may also allow for more hope for the future of American foreign policy than McDougall's *Tragedy* foresees.

The central concept in *Tragedy* is what McDougall calls America's civil religion (ACR), which at its core represents the conviction that Americans are God's new chosen people and that He has blessed America's republican experiment. The driving question of *Tragedy* is, "What does that divine-right republicanism, if you will, have to do with the history of U.S. foreign relations" (p. 30)? The answer to this question is complicated by the protean nature of this civil religion, which McDougall describes as "mystical, magical, [and] shape-shifting," where "orthodoxies can turn into heresies and ... heresies can turn into new orthodoxies" (pp. 31-32). Not limiting himself to just analyzing the impact that this sense of divine backing has had for American foreign policy, McDougall takes a clear stand on what he thinks America's civil religion should mean for American diplomacy—or even more decisively, what it should not mean. As he summarizes it, the goal of the book is to "trace the deformation of American Civil Religion over the nation's entire history," (p. 359) which has led the United States into the tragedy of the title.

Although focusing on the concept of America's civil religion, *Tragedy* is not an attempt to offer a new single-factor explanation for American foreign policy. Instead, for McDougall, American civil religion is both "motivation and justification for U.S. foreign policies" and needs to be combined with other factors like "strategy and economics in a sort of unified field theory" (p. 359). Indeed, the first chapter of *Tragedy* explores how multiple single-factor explanations fail to adequately account for the Bush administration's decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003. McDougall's distaste for single-factor analyses is one of the primary ways that he distances his *Tragedy* from Williams's, by (uncharitably in my estimation) treating Williams as an economic determinist (pp. 73, 255, and 360). This,

unfortunately, obscures the ideological components of America's open-door policies that Williams was also concerned with, which are not radically different from major aspects of McDougall's characterization of America's civil religion.

To structure his overview of American foreign policy from the early republic through the Obama presidency, McDougall divides America's experience into three periods of about one hundred years each. The first, or classical, ACR dates from the founding of the nation until around the 1890s; the second, or Progressive, ACR dates from the 1890s to approximately the 1990s; and the third, or millennial ACR, got its start around the 1990s. It is the first, or classical, ACR that is McDougall's ideal. As he convincingly recounts, for the founders and through most of the nineteenth century, US policymakers did not interpret America's status as the new chosen people as having much relevance for foreign policy. As he puts it, "America would be defined not by anything its government did abroad but by what it was supposed to be at home" (p. 30). As a result the founders and their successors sought peace, neutrality, and reciprocity, but made no attempt to actively spread American values overseas. Even Thomas Jefferson, the founder most susceptible to visions of crusading, never gave in to that impulse for fear of what such activities could mean for democracy at home. In words similar to John Quincy Adams's more famous speech about America not going abroad in search of monsters to destroy, Jefferson explained that while "I cordially wish well to the progress of liberty in all nations, and would forever give it the weight of our countenance, yet they are not to be touched without contamination from their other bad principles" (p. 55).

The "deformation" of the classical ACR came with the arrival of the Progressive ACR, under which American policymakers increasingly came to interpret the nation's mission as requiring the active spreading of its values. It was time to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. It is McDougall's account of the factors behind this shift that is probably the most important contribution of *Tragedy*. This shift from the classical to the Progressive ACR is virtually identical to the shift McDougall already helpfully documented in his 1997 volume between those who saw America as the Promised Land and those who saw it as a crusader state. While *Promised Land, Crusader State* offered some tantalizing glimpses of an explanation for this shift, that important question is front and center for *Tragedy*.

In McDougall's account, in its first century of existence the United States operated under "four powerful checks against zealotry": the relative weakness of the United States, a focus on continental aspirations, historical examples regarding the collapse of republican governments, and a belief in the imperfectability of man (the latter two on this list being embodied in the checks and balances built into the Constitution) (p. 31). Throughout the nineteenth century, however, each of these constraints weakened. The United States and the federal government in particular increased in power, Manifest Destiny was achieved, constitutional constraints weakened, and a "social gospel" that focused on the possibility of improving the lot of mankind in this world rather than just preparing for the next spread. As McDougall summarizes it, "no single trend was enough to determine a lurch into activist foreign policies. But all the trends put together were more than sufficient to unleash American power into the Caribbean, then the Pacific, then the whole world, because all those century-old checks against foreign crusades--relative weakness, continental priorities, constitutional constraints, and theological humility--that had previously buttressed self-containment had eroded to the point where devolved Protestant fanaticism burst its chains" (p. 106). Instead of fearing what overseas adventures would do to liberty at home, overseas adventures became a key measure of America's commitments

to its values. In place of Jefferson's fears about "contamination" came William McKinley's affirmation that the American people "reject as mistaken and unworthy the doctrine that we lose our liberties by securing foundations of liberty to others. Our institutions will not abate under tropic suns in distant seas" (p. 115). Under the Progressive ACR the values of the founders were now being used to defend policies they had rejected, or as McDougall skillfully puts it: "That is how heresy works. It stands doctrines on their heads and reinvents history to justify them but continues to call them by the same name (p. 113).

The later shift from the Progressive ACR to the millennial one is less dramatic. Both are crusading, but the former was limited by the constraints of the Cold War, whereas the latter was freed from those limits. This is perhaps the least developed part of the book. Whereas McDougall spends close to one hundred pages on the classical ACR and over two hundred pages on Progressive ACR, he has just under fifteen pages for the millennial ACR covering the period between George H.W. Bush through Barack Obama. For the future, McDougall sees the likely evolution of the millennial ACR into a global civil religion, which he describes in starkly dystopian terms. While it would be "billed as a league of democracies devoted to human rights and free markets," in actuality it would be "run by authoritarian transnational directorates ... grounded on the manipulation of fear" with little to offer the individual beyond promises of material plenty (p. 352). In his final pessimistic sentence, McDougall concludes that the "deformation of American Civil Religion has ended by devouring America itself" (p. 357). The outcome he deems least likely is a return to a classical ACR, "which bade the United States to zealously defend its own national interests but otherwise to mind its own business, cherish the public credit, and pursue peace and reciprocity with all nations" (p. 352).

McDougall's account of the changes that led to the abandonment of the classical ACR, however, leaves a door open to a different and potentially better future. If the history of American foreign policy is a tragedy, it is not a Lutheran one in which "Here I stand, I can do no other." As McDougall documents, the United States has taken other stands in the past and even when those advocating for a more modest foreign policy have been overruled, their dissent survived. If growing strength, the completion of Manifest Destiny, shrinking checks on executive power, and optimism regarding the potential for exporting American values led to the rejection of a self-contained foreign policy, perhaps America's dwindling resources, increasing need to address domestic issues, a potential reassertion of congressional power, and disappointment over the results of America's recent attempts at state building could lead to its return. Although I am hesitant to bet against McDougall, who in 1997 predicted with stunning accuracy how the United States would react to a 9/11 type shock, in this case I hope his crystal ball is less accurate.[1]

One of the delights of *Tragedy* is McDougall's use of evidence from a wide variety of sources, as he deftly combines political rhetoric, novels, poetry, elite and popular culture, and even Broadway musicals to make his case. In the spirit of that eclecticism, I will end this review with a quote from Howard Barker on the purpose of tragedy in *Arguments for a Theatre*: "You emerge from tragedy equipped against lies. After the musical you are anyone's fool." [2] McDougall's well-written, compelling, and provocative book definitely fits in the tragedy genre--one that may help equip future policy makers against lies and against the temptations of the musical.

Notes

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[1]. Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 217.

[2]. Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 19.

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