

[Marching Towards National Tragedy](#)

Paris, June 15, 2010 – This writer has recently published a book which examines the cultural origins of a certain American outlook that since the Second World War has inspired generally unsuccessful military interventions into non-western countries, the most dramatic of the results being the defeat in Vietnam followed by the genocide in Cambodia. This American outlook subsequently inspired the 2001-2003 invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, neither of them successfully settled (or indeed “won”), and both of them, these days, looking as if they may crumble again into internecine violence, despite the continued presence of American troops (and in Afghanistan, those of NATO).

This may make the book sound like just one more American recitation of how the Bush and Obama administrations have gone wrong, accompanied by some new argument about how the U.S. might “surge” its way out of its problems, or renew its efforts to turn Iraq, Afghanistan (and Pakistan), and other non-western countries, into modern global democracies, or reorganize the world generally according to some progressive (or neo-conservative) scheme.

I am in fact more inclined to recommend that the U.S. simply walk away from these disasters, but the principal concern of the book is to explain why all this happened, so as to prevent it from going on happening. Thus the book’s title is “The Irony of Manifest Destiny.” The subtitle is “The Tragedy of American Foreign Policy.” (It’s published by Walker in New York, a part of the Bloomsbury International group).

Let me start with the 18th century Enlightenment. As Peter Gay, the American historian of the Enlightenment has said (as have others before him) , one of the principal outcomes of the Enlightenment’s intellectual revolution was to undermine Christianity and substitute what Gay calls the Modern Paganism. It is easy to see that one of the chief results of this was to cause a great many of the intellectual leaders of the period to cease to believe in a heavenly destiny for humans. Christianity had said (and continues to say) that if you obeyed God’s injunctions, as revealed to humans in scripture and prophecy, you would go to heaven to share the company of God. The political significance of this was that earthly life and struggle settle nothing fundamental, and find a religious resolution.

The isolated American colonies largely escaped the European Enlightenment experience, and therefore escaped the lessons it taught the Europeans during the 19th and 20th centuries. The Modern Paganism inspired the effort to create secular utopias. It taught that as there was no God, no heaven, and presumably no end to history, men would have to change human society and destiny, if there was to be any change at all. A better world would have to come from human effort -- if there was ever to be a better world.

Therefore in the 19th century a series of theories about human destiny were proclaimed, nearly always accompanied by a plan showing how people must behave to make a heaven on earth, or something close to it.. There was Marxism, to lead to the triumph of the working class and perfection of society. There were doctrines of racial superiority and triumph over lesser races, or other human groups or classes. Nazism was the obvious case, but there were plenty of others, few of them peaceful, most involving conquest by war, the destruction of rival groups, and the arrival of a New

Man. Usually it was assumed – as in the 20th century totalitarianisms – that ruthless action was essential to make this happen. Any degree of bloodshed was permissible if the outcome was to be a utopian society.

The alternative of peaceful utopian evolution was proclaimed by Francis Fukuyama – in an expression he probably wishes he had never invented – as the End of History, in which the collapse of Communism had left society perfected in a liberal democratic capitalist order that had no need for future change. There would be no more history because there would be no need for it. All the important problems would have been solved, largely through peaceful action and the good example and leadership of the United States.

It has not turned out that way. Even after the well-intentioned wars waged by the United States, Americans are still struggling to establish their own version of a utopian world order, the great illusion of the Enlightenment. We are still at it by means of American interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and possibly Iran, Central Asia, and elsewhere.

The conclusion of my argument is that no secular Utopia is going to be created. The lesson of modern European history – the world wars and the great totalitarian convulsions – is that trying to create one invites disaster.

My other conclusion is a very old one. No single power is going to “conquer” the world – even if its motivation is benevolent. The effort is nearly always destructive to all. This is a lesson to which few listen. It was formulated in the great period of classical Greek philosophy and drama, and summed up in classical tragedy. The pattern is simple: the achievement of great power, the growth of unchecked ambition, power’s misuse through the flaws of human character, produce crimes against what the commonality of society understands as moral order. This constitutes hubris – arrogant overreaching. It invariably ends in defeat and retribution. It undoubtedly will happen to us too. Read the book.

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