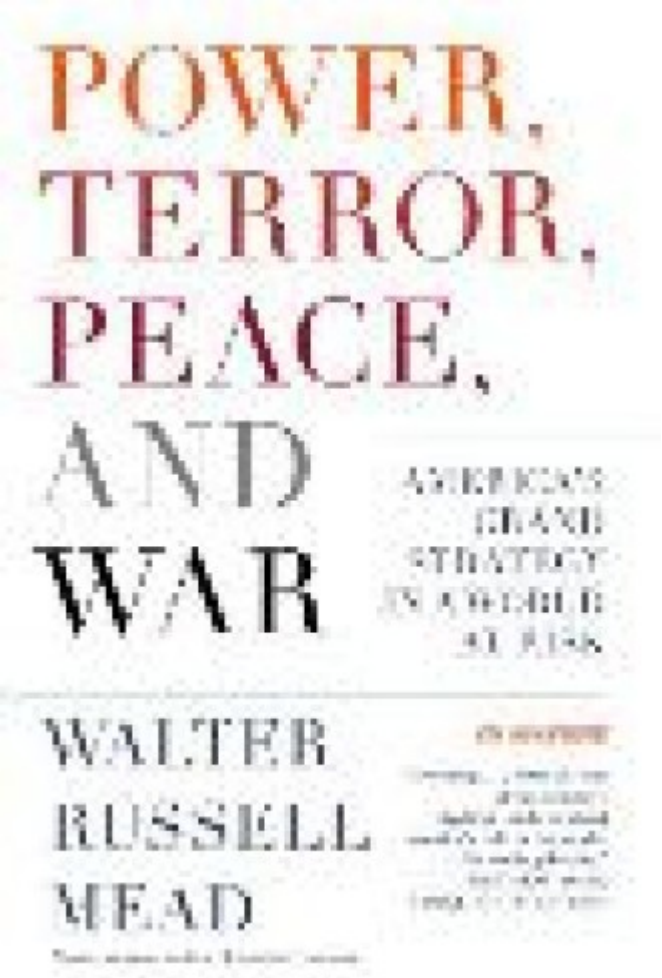
# Using American Power

By James A. Gilchrist in the October 5, 2004 issue

## In Review




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

Walter Russell Mead
Knopf

Walter Russell Mead is one of the most compelling interpreters of American foreign policy. Mead, who is the Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, helps make sense of complicated matters in an engaging way, and he also takes religion seriously.

Although he writes from the seat of the foreign-policy establishment, Mead strives hard for balance, managing to glean appreciative reviews from the *American Prospect* as well as the *Wall Street Journal*. In the current supercharged political atmosphere, where useful analysis has to be sifted from political spin and ideological simplification, Mead's work is refreshing for the civility with which he presents his insights.

*Power*, *Terror*, *Peace*, *and War* describes what Mead calls the "American project," the grand strategic vision that, if not always cogently stated, appears to shape our nation's agenda in the world. This project, "to protect our own domestic security while building a peaceful world order of democratic states linked by common values and sharing a common prosperity," is deeply rooted in American history. Although it is often seriously mismanaged, Mead believes it is fundamentally a good thing.

The dozen years between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the attacks of September 11, 2001, were "lost years" in American foreign policy, according to Mead—"a bipartisan age of narcissism and hubris." Francis Fukuyama proclaimed "the end of history"—that is, the end of ideological challenges to the American embrace of democracy and free markets. "History was over and the United States had won," as Mead summarizes the self-satisfied view of many American pundits, especially on the right.

September 11 changed all that: "The indispensable nation was becoming the indefensible nation." Suddenly Americans awoke to the realization that millions of people around the world view the trials of globalization as bearing a "Made in the USA" label. The crisis for many Americans today, beyond the outrage and fear generated by an attack upon the homeland, is how to make sense of it all. Popular books now ask, "Why do they hate us?"

Mead touches upon the sources of anti-American sentiment abroad, but focuses more on what America has sought to do in the world, and why, given the domestic roots of foreign policy. Here he draws upon his seminal work, *Special Providence*: *American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (Routledge, 2002). In that

award-winning volume, Mead proposed a model of how Americans view foreign policy, a model which merits a brief recounting here.

American discourse about international affairs has largely been construed as a debate between idealists and realists of various shades. The former seek to implement moral ideals—human rights, democracy, etc.—through international bodies such as the United Nations, while the latter insist that what counts is power: "The strong take what they can, and the weak suffer what they must," in the classic formulation of Thucydides. Realists are skeptical about moral projects, limiting them to what is consistent with the "national interest," rather narrowly defined; idealists argue that moral considerations are also relevant to security, insofar as those who suffer injustice are a perennial threat to peace.

Mead's model moves beyond this bipolar scheme, describing four ways in which Americans think about foreign policy. *Wilsonians* are idealistic internationalists who find a moral duty to spread important values abroad through a kind of missionary impulse. *Hamiltonians* are economic nationalists who believe in promoting enterprise at home and abroad, often expecting peace as a byproduct of commerce. *Jeffersonians* are isolationists, wary of "entangling alliances," convinced that America best serves the world as a model to be emulated, without meddling in other nations' affairs. *Jacksonians* are populist nationalists, committed to individualism, honor and protecting the "folk" against all enemies through military power.

While these four types always interact, the current administration embodies a heavy mix of Jacksonianism and "Revival Wilsonianism," not without some tension. The president seeks in Jacksonian style to conjure support for idealistic projects—"liberating Iraq" and "ridding the world of evildoers." But as Mead says, "Wilsonians often write checks that Jacksonians do not want to cash."

Mead offers his prescriptions on a number of issues involving American power. Insofar as globalization and its attendant stresses are identified with American hegemony in the eyes of many, the United States must be vigorous, together with its allies, in promoting orderly and peaceful development among poorer nations. This effort is not only faithful to "the American project," but also aims to strengthen national security by undermining the appeal of terrorists. Such an effort would be part of an updated "containment" strategy against terrorism, along with direct attacks on terrorist organizations and efforts to cut their ties with governments. While remaining committed to the security of Israel, the United States must also

become more conspicuously engaged in seeking to improve the lives of the Palestinians.

In Mead’s view, American power must be used with due respect for the sensibilities of other nations—an area in which the current administration has not excelled. Yet the United Nations and its Security Council need to be updated as well to reflect contemporary realities. The fact that Lichtenstein and India have the same voting power in the General Assembly suggests the kind of radical disconnect from the realities of power that makes it all too easy for Jacksonian Americans, among others, to dismiss the UN. As a step toward making the UN more relevant, Mead believes, the United States should take the lead in urging reform of the Security Council, adding Japan, India and Brazil, for example, as permanent members, along with at least one African nation and one member from the Muslim world.

Beyond his suggestions about what should be done abroad, the great strength of Mead’s work lies in his rich description of the domestic sources of foreign policy. The dangers of failed states, ethnic cleansing and the war on terror suggest that American troops are likely to see long-term deployments well into the future. Insofar as these conflicts involve Israel and the Muslim world, religion will figure prominently, and therefore the religious worldviews of the American public, including resurgent evangelicals, will continue to have some impact on foreign affairs.

General readers will find Mead’s insights illuminating even when they disagree, but leaders, especially, will learn a great deal about their constituents, and therefore the constraints they face in redirecting American foreign policy. Church leaders will recognize the powerful Jacksonian element within their congregations, and the tension it raises with their own Wilsonian impulses.