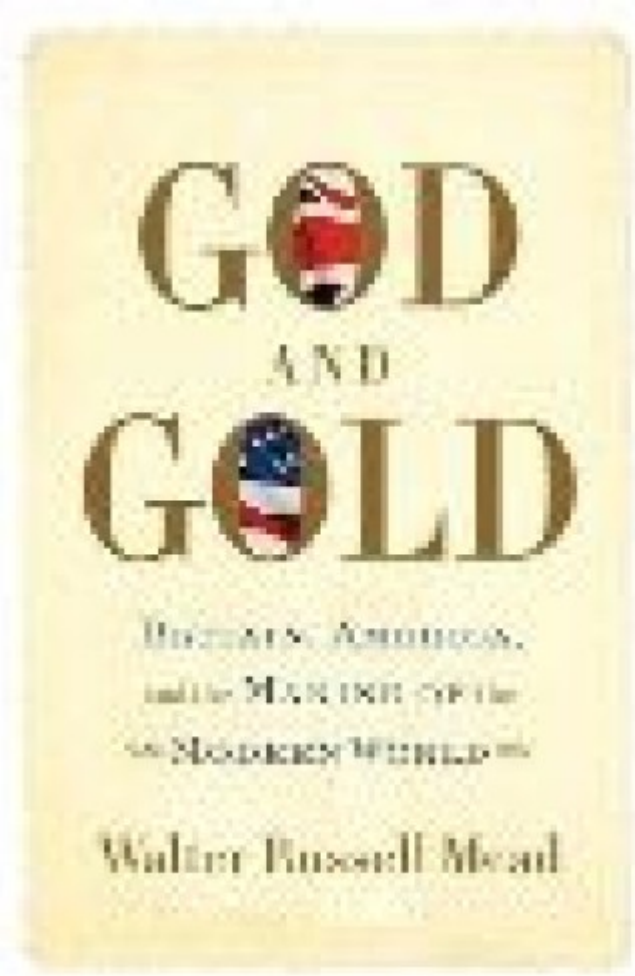
Still on a mission

By Robin Lovin in the March 25, 2008 issue

In Review



God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World

Walter Russell Mead
Knopf

Walter Russell Mead was an early advocate of expanding American power in the vacuum left by the end of the cold war, and he supported the Iraq War in 2003. But his work as a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations defies easy classification as interventionist, neoconservative or idealist. His 2005 book *Power*, *Terror*, *Peace*, *and War* tied the expansion of American power to a broader understanding of what that power is and how it works. At a time when politicians like to portray their opponents as having a fundamentally different vision for the country and the world, Mead sees deeper agreement and patterns that repeat themselves through history.

Mead reminded us in *Special Providence* (2001) that America's ways of thinking about its place in the world have changed little in two centuries. Hamilton, Jefferson and Jackson represented three basic ideas near the beginning. Wilson embodied another at the start of the 20th century. At one point in *Special Providence*, Mead noted that there is a larger story into which this contention over America's role in the world fits. "What we now call globalization—the growth of an international economic system—is one of the most important historical developments of the last five centuries."

In *God and Gold* Mead's lens zooms out to this wider angle, locating the contemporary world in a global order that began among Dutch merchants in the 17th century and that has been fundamentally shaped by Anglo-American power and ideas since 1688. The economic and military power, first of Britain and now of the U.S., speaks for itself, but Mead thinks that the global order is also held together by ideas. The nations that Churchill identified as "the English-speaking peoples" are more than allies and trading partners. They share a set of core ideas about themselves and the world, and because of their power, their vision shapes the world in important ways for everyone else, too. The ideas, Mead argues, are fundamentally religious.

At the beginning of the long period of Anglo-American dominance, Britain resolved the religious controversies that drove it into civil war by adopting what Mead calls "anglican ethics." Reason, revelation and tradition all contribute to an understanding of the world and our place in it, and no one of them can displace the other two. Reason and revelation may continue to squabble, notably in recent controversies over evolution, but these conflicts are contained and mediated by tradition, and few seriously expect our societies to guide themselves by anything except a dynamic

interaction between these three intellectual forces. This lowercase-*a* anglican ethics leads, in turn, to Whig politics: the idea of limited government, answerable to the people and built on constitutional guarantees of fundamental human rights.

When Britain and America went to war against each other (twice), each side thought it was upholding those principles. They have more often fought side by side to defend Whig principles, and together they have prevailed. “Since the Glorious Revolution of 1688 established parliamentary and Protestant rule in Britain, the Anglo-Americans have been on the winning side in every major international conflict.” These shared commitments have proved far more durable than our differences, and far more important in shaping history. Democrats and Republicans, Tories and Labour—in the long run, we are all Whigs, and Whigs rule.

It is difficult to summarize this argument without sounding triumphalist, but it would be a mistake to read Mead’s book as a celebration of the glories of democracy and empire. In fact, the author tries to maintain an objective distance in recounting this long and successful history. He speaks of the Anglo-Americans in the third person. “They,” not “we,” have achieved all this. The system as a whole transcends the policies of any one party, nation or era. A few leaders and innovations have made it work, but the individuals who made the most difference often did not understand what they were doing. Indeed, after three centuries, the system largely sustains itself. Something like Max Weber’s “iron cage” compels today’s Anglo-Americans to find their mission in the realities they have created. Their political, moral and religious ideas are not mere by-products of economics, but the values are remarkably well adapted to the arrangements that have sustained their power and increased their wealth, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that if the arrangements had been different, the beliefs would have been different, too.

What we should do in light of this history is not immediately clear. In *Special Providence*, where his focus was on American history and the options were more sharply drawn, Mead urged a return to an economically motivated, mutually self-interested Hamiltonian diplomacy, rejecting globalized Jacksonian populism and Wilsonian democratic idealism. In *God and Gold* those conflicting American ideals are subsumed in a larger political consensus that we cannot escape, even if we try. For better or worse, Anglo-American civilization and its values will set the terms for global development and conflict. Anglo-Americans will not be able to prevent conflict, but neither will other civilizations be able to resist development. “We will have a situation that satisfies no one. The Whigs will not build a global Tower of

Babel, a single set of laws and values that overshadow the whole world, but those who resist and oppose Whig civilization will be unable to free themselves from its presence. This does not look like a calm world, but it is the world we will have."

Mead thinks it is important for Anglo-Americans to approach this future with the same unsentimental realism with which he narrates their history. They cannot ignore their historical responsibilities, but they must not think they can overcome the risks and ambiguity in history. This is good advice for diplomats and political leaders, but where the dynamics are basic to the future of a whole civilization, this realism must be incorporated into the values of the people.

Above all, the Anglo-Americans need a faith that places their achievements under prophetic judgment, encourages them to accept their limitations, and understands that the end of history remains securely in God's hands. It has not been placed in theirs, despite their record of success. Mead recommends Reinhold Niebuhr's achievement of "a rich and paradoxical view of the world using the classic elements of Anglo-American thought" as a guide to "the diplomacy of civilizations," which must be conducted through the moral and religious life of the whole population, and not just at the level of government policy.

Mead's narrative is not without limitations. The institutions and values of the modern world that the Anglo-Americans mastered so quickly emerged from changes at the end of the Middle Ages that came earlier to continental Europe than they did to Britain, and although the Anglo-Americans successfully resolved the conflicts set in motion by the upheavals of the Protestant Reformation, the European changes provided the political and theological resources for the Anglo-American solutions. The Anglo-Americans did not create their system out of nothing.

Limited attention to these historical contributions from other ages and places is echoed in Mead's underestimation of contemporary critics. He wisely insists that Americans must learn to talk less and listen more, but very little such listening takes place in these pages. Denunciations of Anglo-American culture by European, Asian and Islamic voices are reported, but the complaints are made to appear internally inconsistent, tinged with self-interest and unrealistic. At times, it seems that the purpose of listening is simply to occupy the time until Muslims, for example, make the same transitions that Catholics and Protestants did centuries earlier so as to "find themselves increasingly at home in a dynamic, liberal, and capitalist world that is full of many faiths and many cultures."

A realistic assessment of Anglo-American history requires a greater awareness of the risks inherent in its achievements. It may well be that no one nation, party, policy or leader can rightly claim credit for the success, but history warns us that leaders are always ready to lay claim to a people and its history, especially when historical achievements seem to be under threat. We may expect that *God and Gold* will receive scathing reviews from liberation theologians and antiglobalization activists who see in it nothing more than a celebration of American imperialism. Mead is more subtle than that, but the risks in this narrative are real nonetheless. Which is more likely—that the Anglo-American people will respond to a world that satisfies no one by becoming Niebuhrian realists, or that some leader in the not too distant future will mobilize Anglo-American power and sense of religious mission by promising to eliminate once and for all the unsatisfactory realities that oppose the special destiny of the dynamic, liberal and capitalist world?

We were fortunate that in the most difficult contests of the 20th century, Lenin, Hitler and Stalin leapt into the messianic role first, so that the Anglo-Americans could defend themselves in opposition to it instead of succumbing to its temptations. Not all German theologians or Marxist political thinkers escaped so easily. Nor should we suppose that the unilateralism of the Bush Doctrine, destructive as it has been, is the worst that Anglo-American self-righteousness could do, given the opportunity.

Realism is unlikely to prevail among heads of state unless it is part of the way that people in the streets and in the pews explain the world to themselves. In this connection, Mead pins many of his short-term hopes on a sort of Niebuhrian revival among American evangelicals. This is not so much a judgment about what is likely as it is an acute analysis of what is needed. Mead thinks that there are reasons to hope for this transformation, though not quite enough evidence to expect it. In any case, he suggests that the mainstream Protestants who have learned the most from Niebuhr’s realism will be bystanders in the process. Like many others, Mead seems to assume that the changes that make a difference in American Christianity will happen among evangelicals, not among the aging Protestant mainstream or the scandal-plagued Roman Catholics.

It may be, however, that this kind of transformation of a tradition has to be more interactive. Alongside evangelicals’ renewed awareness, under Niebuhr’s influence, of self-interest and historical limits, mainstream Protestants would benefit from a renewed Niebuhrian confidence in their own core values. And Catholics could help

both Protestant groups see the Anglo-American achievement in an even wider historical perspective, with a more global appreciation for diversity of cultures and values. The result might be a Christian realism that could be genuinely transformed by listening, instead of waiting impatiently for the rest of the world to catch up with the Anglo-Americans. Perhaps we are too determined by our history to transform ourselves in that way, but Mead allows those who preach and teach to hope that what we say and what people believe may still make a difference in what happens next.