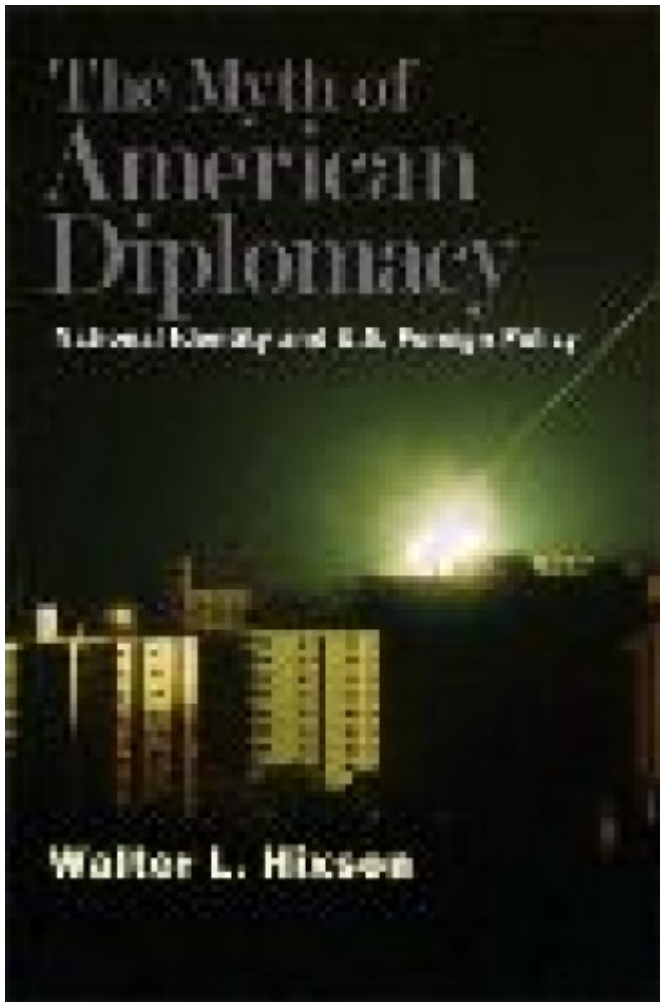


The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy

reviewed by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [May 6, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U. S. Foreign Policy

Walter L. Hixson

These are sobering times. I recently attended a faculty meeting hosted by my university's chief officer for emergency planning. (Who knew that universities *have* chief officers for emergency planning?) In the shadow of tragic campus shootings at Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University and other colleges, my colleagues and I were briefed on the specifics for dealing with such an attack on our campus, especially in the classroom.

We were informed that official police procedures for such situations have changed in recent months. Prior to Virginia Tech, police would set up an information post at the site of a shooting, map out the last-known location of the assailant and of any people who were wounded, and develop a plan before proceeding. Now campus and local police are instructed to storm the building immediately with as many personnel as possible, guns loaded and drawn. Every second is critical, so the police are instructed to bypass the wounded; the solitary initial objective is to take out the shooter. And the police, we were informed, will shoot to kill.

In addition to shattering every cliché about the insulated, idyllic life of America's college campuses, the meeting posed for me a simple question: How did we come to this? How did acts of horrific violence become the norm, a matter for the everyday business of faculty meetings, alongside discussions of departmental budgets and the rising cost of copy paper? It seems that violence is no longer something to be resisted—except by other acts of even more elaborate violence. Why has violence become an accepted part of the fabric of our daily lives?

In *The Myth of American Diplomacy*, Walter Hixson, a professor of history at the University of Akron, puts forth the disturbing thesis that we Americans are so violent because we presume ourselves to be virtuous. He argues that the roots of our current situation can be traced back to America's Puritan beginnings and are sustained through a national narrative that glorifies violence as an instrument of moral purification and divine providence. The potent and deadly mix of self-interest and religious rationalization has created an American citizenry that turns to violence quickly, naturally and with a deep sense of entitlement. Violence has become enmeshed in the very notion of who we are as a nation.

The "myth of America," Hixson writes, is rooted in "the Puritan jeremiad, a ritualized denunciation of sin with an attendant call for redemption." Violence against external

enemies, from Native Americans to contemporary terrorists, defines not merely our foreign policy but our national identity. Anthropologists have long argued that who we are is defined by the “other”—by who we are *not*. Hixson takes this logic one step further: who we are is defined by whom we *kill*. “I argue that the United States *chooses* to go to war, seizing opportunities to engage in militarism throughout its history,” he explains. “The United States emerges as a warfare state, a nation with a propensity for initiating and institutionalizing warfare.”

In the simplest sense, Hixson’s volume is a history of America, starting with Coronado and extending through Bush. Readers accustomed to tales of presidents cutting down cherry trees and freeing the slaves will find little that is familiar here. This is a story of America at its darkest.

In Hixson’s version of history, the earliest European settlers, from Columbus to the Puritans, came to the Americas with the verses of Deuteronomy 7 on their lips: “When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, . . . and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.” As native societies perished through direct acts of European violence and the invisible hand of the settlers’ pathogens, William Bradford of Plymouth Plantation perceived “the hand of God” at work. Extermination, rather than colonization or conversion, became the earliest American response to otherness and emerged as the colonies’ first “foreign” policy.

In this account, Ben Franklin’s claim at the outset of the American Revolution that “our cause is the cause of all mankind” becomes an ironic rationalization rather than an inspirational call to arms. Franklin’s revolution is far from universal and is accomplished only by means of the often violent marginalization of countless others, from native peoples to women and slaves. In this vision of America, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is not a solemn prayer for courage and sacrifice, but a speech that ignores African Americans and contributes to the widespread revival of belief in an expansionist national destiny under God: the God who delivers America from the carnage of the Civil War must have a greater plan in store for the nation.

This plan is articulated in the late-19th-century doctrine of Manifest Destiny, a “celebration of militant national identity” based on the premise that Cubans, Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, Samoans, Hawaiians and other peoples are unfit for self-

government. Through this policy, conquest is turned into “a benign providential mission” and the carnage continues. In Hixson’s account, the U.S. entry into World War I is traced to a desire for deliverance from domestic divisions and anxieties. It serves to affirm “the nation’s identity as a divinely sanctioned redeemer nation.” When, in the mid-20th century, the Soviets reject the “scripted teleology of U.S. global hegemony,” American leaders manufacture a new other—a godless, evil empire against which America’s religious character stands “as a sturdy pillar in the anticommunist fortress.” After the events of 9/11, the national other changes from godless Soviets to fanatical Muslims, but the dynamic remains the same: Americans define themselves through their fear and hatred, and affirm their national strength through their ability to extinguish their foes. They define themselves through war. These are sobering times indeed.

Critics will doubtlessly contest Hixson’s account of American history. He rarely pauses to acknowledge national acts of altruism and compassion, and there have been many. He also decides not to discuss the violent tendencies inherent in the foreign policies of other nations, leaving open the question of whether his depiction of a nation defined by its violence captures something uniquely American or something universally human.

But such criticisms may miss the point. Yes, Hixson’s book is a painful and at times less-than-balanced read. He offers a depiction of America that many of us would prefer not to confront and that doubtlessly needs to be questioned and tempered in places. But much like the message provided by my university’s chief officer for emergency planning, Hixson’s message may be one we are better off hearing now, before it is too late.