



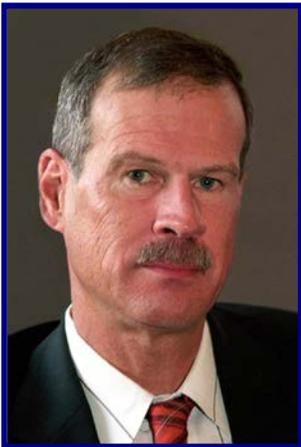
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E-NOTES

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NIGHTMARES OF AN I.R. PROFESSOR

By Walter A. McDougall



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Old friends of FPRI may recall that from 1994 to 2000 I wrote for the journal *Orbis* an editor's column called "Night Thoughts of an I.R. Professor." Today those happy years seem to have been in some former lifetime given how far and how fast America's standing in the world has fallen. Hence the title of these lugubrious lamentations, which I need to get off my chest before starting a long-overdue sequel to my 1997 book [Promised Land, Crusader State](#) ... and which our leaders need to take to heart before trying to remake any more foreign countries.

In Spring 2003 I had the privilege of teaching U.S. diplomatic history to one of those brilliant students for whom every answer conjured new questions. Following the last lecture, which occurred just ten days after the fall of Baghdad in Operation Iraqi Freedom, she praised my course for helping her to appreciate how swiftly the United States had become the mightiest nation in history. But then her voice fell and she asked how long I thought it could last? How long would America remain number one?¹

At first I was tongue tied. Historians are not given to bold predictions and anyway it seemed unwise to encourage either smugness or despair in a future leader. Then it came to me. It all depends, I replied, on whether Americans are as "exceptional" as they want to believe. If they are not—if the United States follows the pattern of all previous powers—then demographic trends, new foreign threats, technological revolutions, shifts in comparative advantage, foolish leadership, imperial overstretch, domestic decadence, or sheer loss of will must knock the United States off its predominant perch, maybe within fifty years. If, however, Americans' institutions, values, and character really are a new order for the ages, a potent mix enabling them to adapt constantly, invent the future, and force *other* nations to adjust to their challenge, then their asymptotic trajectory may continue. I stopped there, but walking to my office I recalled Arnold J. Toynbee's law that civilizations die by suicide, not murder.

Now, the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, hardly amounted to attempted murder by comparison, for instance, to the Cold War threat of nuclear holocaust. Nor did the ensuing War on Terror amount to attempted suicide by comparison to the Civil War or Vietnam War which historian Paul Johnson dubbed "America's Suicide Attempt."²

¹ Perhaps the brightest student I have encountered at Penn, she graduated with highest honors in history and biochemistry, possessed manifold talents, and could have excelled in many careers. She opted for medical school, but wanted to cultivate her interest in world politics. So I recommended her for an internship at the Council on Foreign Relations where she worked, coincidentally, for Max Boot, perhaps the brightest student I knew from my years at Berkeley. Her emphasis on the remarkably swift ascent of the United States anticipated the excellent volume on American diplomacy in the Oxford History of the United States series, George C. Herring's *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University, 2008).

² Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: the World from the Twenties to the Eighties* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

But there is no question the United States was deeply wounded over the years my inquisitive student came of age. She had grown up on buzzwords like End of History and New World Order, Unipolar Moment and Benevolent Hegemon, Indispensable Nation and Assertive Multilateralism, Washington Consensus and Globalization. Not long after her graduation, in a reprise of the terrible 1970s, the buzzwords were about stagflation, malaise, exhaustion, depletion, imperial overstretch, and decline. Will American capitalism and democracy display, as they did in the 1980s and '90s, such powers of self-correction that another "morning in America" is sure to dawn soon? Or has the United States, far from being exempt from the laws of entropy, already entered the sort of climacteric Britain experienced at the start of the 20th century? The comparison is troubling because the British, during their late Victorian heyday, believed theirs was the exceptional Land of Hope and Glory, a vanguard of progress and model for all nations.³ Can it be—O scary thought—that the same faith in Special Providence that inspires energy, ingenuity, resilience, and civic virtue in a nation, may also tempt a people into complacency, arrogance, self-indulgence, and civic vice? Either way, what Americans believe about their past is always a powerful influence on their present behavior and future prospects. No wonder we have "culture wars" in which the representation of history is a principal stake.

I am not an American historian by training. My collegiate and graduate fields were in European history, which I think equipped me to observe American behavior with the objectivity, wry skepticism, and (some have said) cynicism of an outsider. It is certainly true that my study of European international relations naturally inclined me to think about foreign policy in terms of Realpolitik, balance of power, geography, contingency, tragedy, irony, folly, unintended consequences, and systemic interaction—all of which are *foreign if not repugnant* to Americans. Indeed, from a foreign perspective it seems obvious that while Americans ritually chanted their liberation from the politics of the Machiavellian Old World they habitually practiced such politics to great advantage in the New World. It also matters greatly that I am a Vietnam veteran who, though a humble artilleryman, witnessed how arrogance, ignorance, pretense, profligacy, and impatience can pervert the most well-intentioned efforts at nation-building and waste the *best* qualities of Americans, not least those in uniform.

During thirteen years on the faculty of U.C. Berkeley my responsibilities were exclusively in European history. But the topic of my second book turned out to be the Soviet-American race in space technology, which required much research and thought about the diplomacy, politics, economics, and self-image of the United States. Then, after moving to the University of Pennsylvania in 1988, I was asked whether I could teach American war and diplomacy for a colleague on leave that year. That meant working up a big new lecture course from scratch, but I agreed in the knowledge it would teach me a great deal. Never did I imagine it would bend the trajectory of my entire career. For those lectures inspired me to write *Promised Land, Crusader State*, which in turn inspired a publisher's invitation to write a new general history of the American people. Alas, after eight years, two volumes, and 1,425 pages, I only managed to reach the end of Reconstruction in 1877, whereupon the publisher suspended the project.⁴ That long diversion was an education in the cultural and economic roots of American politics and foreign policy during the colonial and early national eras. But my long sabbatical from the public arena also left some readers perplexed as to my views on contemporary world events.

For instance, early in 2012 a young specialist on the Middle East posted a blog about NATO air strikes in defense of the popular revolt in Libya against Muammar Qaddafi. The White House, eager to reassure Americans that the operation was not the prelude to another costly war and nation-building project in the Muslim world, called the President's posture "leading from behind." The blogger wondered whether this modest, multilateral, and limited-liability intervention might signal a full-fledged Obama Doctrine that repealed the proud, unilateral, and rhetorically limitless (George W.) Bush Doctrine. He then recalled a "fabulous book" titled *Promised Land, Crusader State*, which seemed newly relevant in the wake of the Iraqi and Afghan wars, and wondered "what would Walter

3 This is the unanswered question that hovered over Walter Russell Mead's evocative book *God and Gold: Britain and America in the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 2007). If he is right (as I think he is) about the continuity between the British and American projects, then why does he end by proclaiming "Excelsior!" instead of predicting decline?

4 See Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History 1585-1828* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); and *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). For a "short course" on the major arguments of *Freedom* and *Throes*, see McDougall, "Spirits of America: the Founding and Civil War," in Michael P. Federici, ed., *Rethinking the Teaching of American History* (Louisville, Ky.: Butler Books, 2012), pp. 141-96.

McDougall think?”⁵

That query was disconcerting since the “would” made it sound like McDougall was already dead. But the invisibility that comes with being a cloistered scholar has always suited me fine. Unlike public intellectuals I have no urge to spend evenings in television studios just to make sound bites that serve someone else’s agenda (or else get shouted down if they don’t). Moreover, disinterested historians know the phrase “History teaches” is usually a trap or a lie.⁶ Finally, having stepped down as editor of *Orbis* to study early American history just months before September 11, 2001, I was *hors de combat* during the Global War on Terror. No wonder the blogger, cognizant of what I thought *then*, was curious about what I think *now*.

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Promised Land, Crusader State was meant to be a sober corrective to the giddy mood of the Bill Clinton years when American power, prosperity, and values seemed unchallenged and peace, democracy, and capitalism seemed to have “conquered the world.”⁷ Times were certainly very good in the decade after the 1991 Soviet collapse ended the fifty year emergency that began with Pearl Harbor. So if one accepts my definition of a conservative as “someone who knows things could be worse than they are—*period*,” then conservatism was never more apt. That is why I concluded the book with a chapter extolling prudence in U.S. foreign policy lest we risk our hard-earned repose through gratuitous crusades to remake recalcitrant portions of the human race in our image. I quoted Senator J. William Fulbright’s 1966 caution against the vain belief that the United States can “create stability where there is chaos, the will to fight where there is defeatism, democracy where there is no tradition of it, and honest government where corruption is almost a way of life.” I quoted Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr to the effect that pursuit of utopian illusions can breed “terrible fanaticisms.” I cited Margaret Thatcher’s wise observation that no external authority can manufacture healthy nationalism in an alien people. I wrote, “Almost everyone agrees, for instance, that Saddam Hussein is bad for his country. But can Americans be better Iraqis than Iraqis themselves, or presume to tell the Chinese how to be better Chinese?”⁸ I urged Americans, as the millennium approached, to renounce millenarianism once and for all.⁹

Nor was I alone. Irving Kristol, the founding father of neoconservatism, called the idea that the United States had a mission to promote democracy world-wide “superficially attractive” but “empty of substance” and “full of presumption.” Fellow Cold Warrior Jeane Kirkpatrick urged the United States to become a “normal country” again because “<a> good society is defined not by its foreign policy but by its internal qualities.... Foreign policy becomes a major aspect of a society only if its government is expansionist, imperial, aggressive, or when it is threatened by aggression.”¹⁰ After all, long-deferred domestic challenges begged for attention in the 1990s,

5. Rob Lattin, “‘Leading From Behind’: What Would Walter McDougall Think?” Foreign Policy Association (Feb. 26, 2012), at <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2012/02/26/leading-behind-walter-mcdougall-think/>. Thanks, Mr. Lattin, for the praise and recommendation. Thanks, Tally Helfont (Coordinator of the Middle East program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute), for bringing the blog to my attention.

6. See, just for starters, Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York, Oxford University, 1973); Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, eds., *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (Toronto: Viking, 2008); and, if you dare, Friedrich Nietzsche’s essay *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, Adrian Collins, trans., 2 rev. ed. (New York: Liberal Arts, 1957).

7 Michael Mandelbaum, *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), was the climax of post-Cold War triumphalism: it was in press when the terrorists struck on 9/11.

8 Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), quotes on pp. 198, 207, 220. The sources are Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966); Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner’s, 1932); and Thatcher, “The Common Crisis: Atlantic Solutions,” Speech at Congress of Prague (May 11, 1996): <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108361>.

9 Walter A. McDougall, “Back to Bedrock: The Eight Traditions of American Statecraft,” *Foreign Affairs* 76: no. 2 (March-April 1997), pp. 134-46 (quote p. 146).

10 Irving Kristol, “In Search of Our National Interest,” *Wall Street Journal* (June 7, 1990); Jeane Kirkpatrick, “A Normal Country in a

including the “twin deficits” in the budget and balance of payments, decaying infrastructure, social security reform, health care, education, illegal immigration, de-industrialization, drugs, crime, and the collapse of the family. But the very year *Promised Land, Crusader State* appeared the younger “third age” neoconservatives founded the Project for a New American Century with a mission to ensure that the United States display even more military and ideological vigor.¹¹ So even as the Clinton Administration waded more deeply into the 1990s Balkan wars, William Kristol and Robert Kagan damned it for not being aggressive *enough*. They called for a “neo-Reaganite foreign policy” (ignoring Reagan’s caution about military deployments) on behalf of a “benevolent hegemony” to promote democracy abroad and “national greatness” (a tired phrase borrowed from Benjamin Disraeli) and “remoralization” at home. They especially mocked John Quincy Adams’ July 4, 1821, commandment that “America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” asking instead “why not?” Thus did they cast down the Orwellian memory hole Adams’ own prophetic reply: “<America> well knows that by enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the powers of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assumed the colors and usurped the standards of freedom.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.”¹²

Needless to say, the “third age” neoconservatives ensconced at *The Weekly Standard, Commentary*, and various think tanks thought *Promised Land, Crusader State* decidedly inconvenient. They wanted Americans to believe that the United States has always possessed the mission and duty to redeem the whole world by exertion as well as example, and that any American who shirks from that betrays the Founders themselves.¹³ They were loudly decrying cuts in defense spending as unilateral disarmament, likening U.S. policies to Britain’s lethargy in the 1930s, and warning of new existential threats on the horizon. Mind you, these did *not* include Islamic terrorism about which they were silent if not ignorant. But the first target in the cross hairs of their war party was Saddam Hussein.¹⁴ Neoconservatives were also more quietly waging a campaign to conquer exclusive rights to the label “conservative” by tarring realists and libertarians as “crabbed” and “isolationist”. My own new status as a pariah became painfully obvious in Spring 1999 when I addressed The Philadelphia Society on the subject “The Crusader State in the 21st Century.” Joking that they asked me to speak about something I hoped would not exist in an era that had not yet begun, I used the occasion to draw spooky parallels between contemporary American interventionists and Medieval popes! Both could make geopolitical arguments on their behalf: the Crusades, after all, were a long-delayed counteroffensive against Arab jihads. But both promoted forms of “assertive multilateralism” on behalf of “regime change” in hopes of solidifying and sanctifying their home fronts while forcibly exporting their civilization. But pious intentions did not prevent the crusading knights from wreaking death, destruction, and havoc at ruinous cost, including collateral massacres of non-combatant Muslims, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. Worse still, the Crusades became a self-perpetuating, transnational, political-economic *system* justified by “the revolutionary idea that Christendom had an intrinsic right to extend its sovereignty over all who did not recognize the rule of the Roman Church.” With high irony I suggested the audience substitute America for Church and Democracy for Christianity to imagine how our modern crusaders could spawn perpetual war for perpetual peace—like Oceania in

Normal Time,” *The National Interest* (Fall 1990).

11 On the ages or phases of neoconservative personnel and ideas see the definitive treatise by Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2010); translated by Arthur Goldhammer.

12 William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (July-Aug. 1996): 18-32; Walter A. McDougall, “Night Thoughts of an I.R. Professor,” *Orbis* 42: 1 (Winter 1998): 2-6.

13 George Orwell famously wrote that whoever controls the present controls the past and whoever controls the past controls the future. Evidently, “third age” neoconservatives, like Marxists and Progressives before them, dismiss history as mere ideological superstructure to be judged by its utility to their agenda. Thus did Robert Kagan pronounce Jeremi Suri’s *Liberty’s Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011) both “useful” and “valuable” despite its serious flaws (*New York Times Book Review* <Oct. 16, 2011>, p. 23). Kagan’s own *Dangerous Nation: America’s Foreign Policy from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006), is even more tendentious than Suri’s book, but when I dared criticize it at a conference I was told it was an exercise in “useful history.” Kagan himself admitted as much in “Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism, c. 1776,” *World Affairs* (Spring 2008).

14 See for example Donald and Frederick W. Kagan, *While America Sleeps: Self-delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000); “American Power – for What? A Symposium,” *Commentary* (January 2000); and Robert Kagan and William Kristol, *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunities in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (New York: Encounter, 2000), none of which anticipated anything like the Al Qaeda threat.

George Orwell's *1984*—and exhaust their own countries in the process.¹⁵ Much of the audience gave my talk a standing ovation, but an angry minority did not. Some were devout Catholics who took offense that I would liken Urban II to the sleazy Clinton! The rest appeared to be earnest young Straussians in whose neoconservative *Weltanschauung* my Burkean conservatism was heresy.

I see now that during that otherwise halcyon decade I was living Cassandra's curse. Consider my November 1999 keynote address at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's annual dinner on the subject of "America and the World at the Dawn of a New Century." I was loath to spoil the festive mood by speculating about future threats such as "nightmarish visions of failed states, famines, ethnic violence, financial meltdowns, rogue states with nuclear weapons, terrorism on American soil, an angry Russia, a threatening China, and a unified Europe becoming a competitor." So instead I emphasized neither contingencies nor ends and means, but *assets*. Looking ahead, what national assets must the United States husband, augment if possible, and take care not to squander? My list was as follows: (1) a strong economy susceptible only to mild recession; (2) robust armed forces boasting technical superiority and high morale designed for winning wars; (3) presidential leadership that is prudent, patriotic, and persuasive; (4) a bipartisan, internationalist consensus in Congress; (5) sturdy regional alliances; (6) engagement to promote balance of power in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East; (7) strong Pan-American ties to secure of our southern border.

Just take them away, one by one, I suggested, and try to imagine the United States advancing its goals of security, stability, prosperity, and human rights. "You can't do it. A U.S. economy in reverse, a weak or demoralized military, a floundering president, a divided, partisan Congress, a crack-up of our alliances, an Asia gripped by wars cold or hot, with China or Russia checking U.S. diplomacy at every turn, or an America fixated on tensions with the Hispanic world: if only one or two of these conditions exist, then America's sermons and sanctions will suffice to control very little indeed."¹⁶

During the 2000 campaign there was reason to hope that George W. Bush and his foreign policy team shared my conviction that the goal of conservatives is to conserve, as in "first do no harm." They spoke of humility, warned of the "mission creep" plaguing foreign interventions, and eschewed nation-building. But the shock of the 9/11 attacks and the imperative duty to prevent their repetition caused the Bush administration to launch two wars for regime change that eventuated in costly, bloody occupations belatedly devoted to democratizing the whole Middle East. Thus did the United States squander in only five years *all seven* of the precious assets listed in my 1999 speech. When the other shoe dropped—not another Al Qaeda attack but the 2008 sub-prime mortgage collapse—Americans wrestled anew with an inconvenient truth. Foreign enemies cannot harm the United States more than Americans harm themselves, over and over again, through strategic malpractice and financial malfeasance.¹⁷

I commented on these events only twice and only at the behest of FPRI's late president Harvey Sicherman. As a war veteran myself I agonized over our troops in harm's way and prayed for the success of their missions. But as early as October 2001—when Americans were united in fear, anger, and vengeance, and the world rallied behind us—I underscored "the powerful *limits* to what the United States can achieve." First, "our military capacities are decidedly finite and the risks of ground action amid hostile people in the world's roughest terrain could easily multiply the evil done to ourselves without achieving some permanent good." Second, our erstwhile allies in the War on Terror were likely to fall away quickly if the United States occupied Afghanistan or invaded Iraq. A third limiting factor was "the impossibility of nation- or state-building in large multi-ethnic, factional, tribal, terror-ridden, backward, and topographically-challenged fastnesses of mountain and desert." If NATO had proven unable to build peaceful multi-cultural democracies in the shards of Yugoslavia how could it expect to design, construct, and maintain stable states in the Hindu Kush or Mesopotamia? I guessed the Bush administration's principal challenge would be "not so much war-fighting as war-termination" with the likelihood that U.S. armed forces would get "sidetracked and bogged down in a peripheral campaign, Vietnam-like, that wastes assets to no strategic

15 Walter A. McDougall, "The Crusader State in the 21st Century" (April 24, 1999), unpublished paper for The Philadelphia Society. The quote is from Louise and Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: Idea and Reality* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), p. 29.

16 Walter A. McDougall, "America and the World at the Dawn of a New Century" (Nov. 10, 1999), FPRI Wire @ <http://www.fpri.org/fpriwire/0712.199912.mcdougall.americaworldnewcentury.html>.

17 James Kurth saw it all coming in "[Iraq: Losing the American Way.](#)" *The American Conservative* (March 2004): 10-16.

purpose.”¹⁸

Trusting “an angel in the whirlwind,” President Bush decided to invade Iraq anyway in 2003, unless, that is, he had already decided to go after Saddam, perhaps just after 9/11 or perhaps even before taking office. Indeed, we may never know when that decision was made, who helped to make it, or why it was made. No less than *eight* plausible motives compete for causality since circumstantial evidence can be cited to argue that Iraq was “all about” terrorism, or weapons of mass destruction, or oil, or Israel, or neoconservative ideology, or the Bush family feud with Saddam, or Donald Rumsfeld’s military reforms, or Karl Rove’s re-electoral calendar. The perverse result is that the more “over-determined” the Iraq invasion appears the more difficult it is to explain.¹⁹ As of 2012 the popular explanation probably least in favor among scholars is the one that used to be most in favor, to wit, that a cabal of neoconservatives influenced by the philosophy of Leo Strauss and their fellow travelers among the self-described “Vulcans” in the Pentagon somehow “captured” the Bush administration after 9/11. There is simply too much evidence that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and even Colin Powell were (a) eager to effect “regime change” in Iraq even before 9/11; and/or (b) unwilling to accept even minimal risk that hypothetical Iraqi weapons of mass destruction might fall into terrorist hands. It appears therefore that the neoconservatives both inside and outside the Bush administration were far more important to its public relations than to its strategy.

Meanwhile, in May 2003 Harvey Sicherman asked me again to gather my thoughts on the War on Terror. This time—no doubt enthralled by the blitzkrieg to Baghdad—I gloated that those most in “shock and awe” must be the liberal pundits who warned of bloodbaths, quagmires, lost legions, and bridges too far. But I clung to my historical judgment that Americans are far more skilled at bashing bad guys than setting up good guys. I denounced the pretensions of those who swaggered on behalf of American empire. I denied that the occupations of Germany and Japan were a template “for reinventing a largely pre-industrial, only partially educated, never democratic, heterogeneous Muslim state in the Middle East.” I spared readers my pessimistic suspicion that we were in for a reprise of the Vietnam War’s carnage among combatants and civilians alike, massive collateral damage, wholesale corruption, billions in wasted development spending, friendly-fire incidents, scandals about torture, and atrocities by enemy infiltrators and unhinged U.S. soldiers alike. But I did repeat my skepticism of nation-building and suspected “Morning in Mesopotamia” might never dawn.²⁰

Maybe it will, someday. Maybe some positive trends in security and human rights may yet emerge around the Muslim “crescent of crisis” and inspire revisionist histories of the Bush administration’s Middle East strategies. But as of this writing the direct cost of the Global War on Terror has been \$1.4 trillion and total indirect costs may exceed \$3 trillion, the butcher’s bill to the U.S. military numbers nearly 6,000 killed and more than 40,000 wounded, and the collateral damage includes over 100,000 documented civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet those countries and the Middle East as a whole remain unstable, unfriendly, and violent, while the only powers that seem to have made geopolitical gains from the U.S. nation-building crusades are... Iran and China.

By now you can guess “what McDougall would think.”

18 Walter A. McDougall, “Cold War II” (Oct. 2001), FPRI Wire @ <http://www.fpri.org/fpriwire/0907.200110.mcdougall.coldwar2.html>.

19 The various theories and evidence for them are expertly assessed in Jane K. Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall, eds., *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

20 Walter A. McDougall, “What the U.S. Needs to Promote in Iraq (Hint: It’s Not Democratization per se” (May 2003), FPRI Wire @ <http://www.fpri.org/fpriwire/1102.200305.mcdougall.uspromoteiniraq.html>. Needless to say, the literature that has appeared on the American execution of the Global War on Terror, while praising many individuals (especially those in uniform), is almost uniformly critical. The memoirs by Bush administration officials are almost all exercises in self-exculpation, recrimination, selective amnesia, and casting blame on other agencies or people. The scholarly efforts to explain the decision-making for the invasions and reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq already document amply the confusion, interagency rivalries, and hubris characterizing the GWOT. Some excellent *systemic* critiques of decision-making in the war against terrorism include Terry H. Anderson, *Bush’s Wars* (New York: Oxford University, 2011); Peter L. Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and al-Qaeda* (New York: Free Press, 2011); Angelo Codevilla, *Advice to War Presidents: A Remedial Course in Statecraft* (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Rory Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006); Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?* (New York: Norton, 2011); the relevant chapter in Peter W. Rodman, *Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (New York: Knopf, 2009); and Dov Zakheim, *A Vulcan’s Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2011).

McDougall is thinking, “*I told you so!*”

* * * * *

Unfortunately, in an era of interdependent globalization vexed by failed states, rogue regimes, ethnic cleansing, sectarian violence, famines, epidemics, transnational terrorism, and what William S. Lind dubbed asymmetrical “Fourth Generation Warfare,” the answer to questions about humanitarian or strategic interventions abroad can’t be “*just say no!*” For however often Americans rediscover how institutionally, culturally, and temperamentally ill-equipped they are to do nation-building, the United States will likely remain what I (and now Robert Merry) dubbed a Crusader State.²¹ Accordingly, the urgent tasks for civilian and military planners are those of the penitent sinner called to confess, repent, and amend his ways. The tasks include refining procedures to coordinate planning for national security so that bureaucratic and interest-group rivalries do not produce “worst of both worlds” outcomes.²² They include interpreting past counter-insurgencies and postwar occupations in light of their historical *particularities* lest facile overemphasis on their social scientific *commonalities* yield “one size fits all” field manuals.²³ They include figuring out what capabilities are needed in the various federal departments and what interagency mechanisms may minimize friction and maximize joint institutional memory. They include wholesale reform of military procurement, logistics, and operations lest overseas deployments become beyond our means altogether. Finally, they include persuading politicians to cease playing the demagogue on national security and citizens to cease imagining every intervention a “crusade” or a “quagmire”.²⁴

I won’t hold my breath on the last point. But there is reason for hope on the others. The books cited above by Rodman, Codevilla, and Zakheim contain much practical wisdom about the administrative requirements of sound strategy. Douglas Feith’s otherwise turgid memoir recommends many reforms. Not least, new generations of strategic scholars, including FPRI’s Dominic Tierney and Michael Noonan, don’t want to hear old Vietnam veterans say “I told you so” about the political and moral hazards of interventions. They want to know how the United States and its allies can get future interventions right. I hope they do, not least for the sake of the two toddlers to whom I dedicated *Promised Land, Crusader State* so long ago.

21 Robert W. Merry, *Sands of Empire: Missionary Zeal, American Foreign Policy, and the Hazards of Global Ambition* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), is a profound essay on the origins and dangers of American messianism plus the competing schools of American foreign relations. I would love to hear Merry and Walter Russell Mead in debate. Unfortunately Merry does not cite *Promised Land, Crusader State*, albeit he does repeatedly employ the term “Crusader State.”

22 Did Colin Powell’s State Department, Don Rumsfeld’s Pentagon, George Tenet’s CIA, the Arab specialists, Texas oil interests, and supporters of Israel coalesce in favor of the *invasion* of Iraq only to clash fatally over the *occupation* in hopes of achieving the outcome their respective clients desired? If so, that would go far to explain why a victorious though unnecessary war eventuated in a failed though critical peace. Defense insisted on swift assaults in Afghanistan and Iraq followed by just as swift evacuations with postwar authority transferred to indigenous former exiles (the “externals”). In other words, Rumsfeld did not want to do nation-building and hoped to avoid it! State insisted on lengthy reconstruction under the Coalition Provisional Authority to reassure the Saudis and Gulf emirates that “democratization” would not deliver Iraq into the hands of the Shi’ite majority. But the lack of planning and coordination among agencies prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom and the hasty destabilizing decisions of L. Paul Bremer afterward ensured that no faction got what it hoped for, not even the oil. The results included chaos, rival insurgencies, and far too few allied “boots on the ground.”

23 For a revealing exposé of the various social scientific schools of nation-building including those of the RAND Corporation, see Stewart and Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?*, pp. 119-57. The worst “how to” manuals are those generated by international non-governmental organizations, however. Those tasked with “Securing Afghanistan’s Future” met in 2004 to study a 137 page document with 69 tables and charts that nevertheless had nothing whatever to say about Afghan geography, demography, culture, or politics. “Were you to delete the word Afghanistan from the document, and replace it with the word Botswana, it would be very difficult to know of which country you were speaking” (pp. 36-37).

24 See Dominic Tierney, [*How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War*](#) (New York: Little, Brown, 2010).