

---

---

A Walter McDougall Symposium

*The Old and New Testaments  
in U.S. Foreign Policy:  
McDougall and American Identity*

**Michael P. Federici**

*Mercyhurst College*

Prudent and effective political conduct is dependent on historical knowledge that recognizes the boundaries between the possible and the impossible. This line of demarcation is obscured by the limits of human understanding and the obfuscating ideologies that take a partial truth or reality as its whole. The antidote for ideological obfuscation is philosophical insight and clarity. Too often American politics has been conducted on ideological rather than philosophical grounds by using a particular ideological perspective to interpret history rather than using history to shape policy. Prudent policy stems from historical and theoretical knowledge that manages to avoid reading one's contemporary desires and values back into history. An example of the latter is what Herbert Butterfield calls "Whig history," which uses the past as an instrument to validate current partisan political and ideological interests in a way that cannot bear the weight of balanced and truthful historical analysis.<sup>1</sup>

*Prudent policy stems from historical and theoretical knowledge undistorted by ideology.*

The limits of politics and power can only be known if historical experience is analyzed in a genuine search for the proper ends of politics and life more generally. Important scholarly works can

---

MICHAEL P. FEDERICI IS PROFESSOR of Political Science at Mercyhurst College and Director of the National Humanities Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies.

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965).

---

---

provide policymakers with essential insights into the nature of politics and help mark the boundaries between the possible and the impossible. Walter McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*<sup>2</sup> is one such scholarly book. It avoids the problem of ideology and provides insights that can serve as the foundation of a sober American foreign policy.

*McDougall's histories avoid one-sided portrayals of America's past.*

McDougall's contribution to historical understanding is evident from his argument in *Promised Land, Crusader State*. The book reconsiders conventional thinking about the history of American foreign policy and the common language that has been used to describe it. At issue is the meaning of American identity both in terms of American self-perception and how that perception has shaped American involvement in the world. It is useful to connect *Promised Land, Crusader State* to McDougall's recent volumes on American history in order to illustrate some of the larger themes of his work. In *Freedom Just Around the Corner*<sup>3</sup> and *Throes of Democracy*,<sup>4</sup> explaining the American self-understanding and exposing self-deception are central. It seems a plausible nexus that the American crusader state that emerges in the early twentieth century is given life by pretentious ideological hustlers. America the Promised Land provides an alternative to progressive and neoconservative ideological hustling and the movement toward American empire. There is another important connection between *Promised Land, Crusader State* and McDougall's two-volume American history. In all three volumes McDougall avoids a one-sided, ideological portrayal of American history. His balanced view of America's past is summed up in the preface to *Throes of Democracy*:

I believe the United States (so far) is the greatest success story in history. I believe Americans (on balance) are experts at self-deception. And I believe the "creative corruption" born of their pretense goes far to explain their success. The upshot is that American history is chock-full of cruelty and love, hypocrisy and faith, cowardice and courage, plus no small measure of tongue-in-cheek humor. American history is a tale of human nature set free.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Walter McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History 1585–1828* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Walter McDougall, *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era 1829–1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008)..

<sup>5</sup> *Throes of Democracy*, xii.

---

---

*Promised Land* identifies eight diplomatic traditions in American history that McDougall divides into two groups of four. The first group he calls, "Our Old Testament." It dominated American foreign policy from 1776 to the 1890s. The first diplomatic tradition is "Liberty, or Exceptionalism (so called)." The second is classified as "unilateralism, or Isolationism (so called)." The third he calls "The American System, or Monroe Doctrine (so called)." "Expansionism, or Manifest Destiny (so called)," is the final category of Old Testament American diplomatic traditions.

McDougall characterizes this earlier American approach to foreign policy as one that "preached the doctrines of Liberty at home, Unilateralism abroad, an American System of states, and Expansionism." These first four traditions "were all about Being and Becoming, and were designed by the Founding Fathers to deny the outside world the chance to shape America's future."<sup>6</sup> They fit together in a logical progression as variations on a central theme: America should avoid entanglements with foreign nations in order to avoid getting drawn into other nations' business. The common refrain for each tradition in the Old Testament is that America should mind its own business so as to protect such control as it has over its own fortunes. Liberal internationalists and neoconservatives alike are apt to find such an idea antithetical to their understanding of America's role in the world. They believe that because America entangles itself in the world both the world and America are better off. To support their respective ideological positions, the two groups must tell the story of America's past in a way that validates their contemporary policy objectives and that obscures what McDougall brings to light: America was not always a crusader state.

The "New Testament" dominated American foreign policy in the twentieth century. It includes the following diplomatic traditions: "Progressive Imperialism," "Wilsonianism, or Liberal Internationalism (so called)," "Containment," and "Global Meliorism." McDougall explains:

Our New Testament in foreign affairs has . . . dominated the rhetoric and, for the most part, the practice of U.S. diplomacy in the twentieth century, and preached the doctrine of Progressive Imperialism, Wilsonianism, Containment, and Global Meliorism, or the belief that America has a responsibility to nurture democracy and economic growth around the world. These last four traditions are

---

<sup>6</sup> *Promised Land*, 4.

---

---

all about Doing and Relating, and were designed to give America the chance to shape the outside world's future."<sup>7</sup>

*Early  
American  
foreign policy  
embraced not  
isolationism  
but prudent  
engagement.*

McDougall suggests that these traditions, old and new, represent the significant theories and practices that have shaped American foreign policy since 1776. He does not, however, claim (like the Gospel writers) that the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament. In fact, the two are incompatible largely because they are fundamentally at odds in their assumptions about what constitutes sound foreign policy. Moreover, the two positions represent irreconcilable views of the human condition. The older view is far more sober in its assessment of what is possible in political and social life. In short, politics is the art of the possible, not the means by which to transform the order of being. The older tradition "balanced reason and faith"; it was realistic about human nature and saw no reason to impose American political principles on distant parts of the world.<sup>8</sup> Reordering the world was not America's business because it would draw the U.S. into conflicts that had little or nothing to do with her security and interests, and it would undermine the preservation of republican government at home. From this early American prejudice developed the Great Rule, that Americans should avoid permanent and entangling alliances to the extent that circumstances permitted. The Great Rule does not embrace the ideology of isolationism but the virtue of prudent engagement with the world.

The newer diplomatic traditions, by contrast, are more than tinged with gnostic speculation about a world remade and reorganized in ways that would leave the common disorders of the past behind. The newer view has aspects of messianic zeal and what Eric Voegelin calls metastatic faith, the belief that political power can be used to transform the order of being. It is noteworthy that McDougall marks the transition from the Old to the New Testament at about the same time that Edward Bellamy published his utopian and widely influential novel *Looking Backward*.<sup>9</sup> The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the rise of progressivism as advocated by Bellamy, Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Croly, and Colonel Edward Mandell House, among others. Progressive

---

<sup>7</sup> *Promised Land*, 4-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Promised Land*, 203.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1898).

---

---

ideology including Wilsonian interventionism would eventually supplant the Great Rule and its underlying reticence to shape the world in accordance with American principles.

It should be kept in mind that the context in which the New Testament of American foreign policy was developed was different than that of the Old Testament. Hence the theories should not be treated abstractly but historically. Containment would not have made either theoretical or practical sense in late eighteenth-century America. It developed as an option for American foreign policy during the Cold War as a response to the rise of communism after WWII. It also developed as a reaction to and an incorporation of previous traditions.

It is McDougall's insistence on being historically concrete that gives weight to his understanding of the eight traditions. He feels compelled to add the parenthetical "so called" to five of the eight categories because they have become detached from their engendering historical experiences and reinterpreted in a way that allows for more continuity in American foreign policy than actually exists. Exceptionalism, for example, was not a prideful boast that engendered imperial desire. It was, rather, an impediment to interventionism. McDougall explains that, "to the generation that founded the United States, designed its government, and laid down its policies, the exceptional calling of the American people was not *to do* anything special in foreign affairs, but *to be* a light to lighten the world."<sup>10</sup> Winthrop's "City upon a Hill" was not intended to be the impetus for the crusader state but a reminder of the obligations one bears when in search of the Promised Land.

McDougall's understanding of American exceptionalism contrasts sharply with the one offered by Robert Kagan in *Dangerous Nation*, published in 2006. Kagan calls the New England Puritans "global revolutionaries." They established a new Jerusalem in north America "to establish a base from which to launch a counteroffensive across the Atlantic." "The first American exceptionalism was really an English exceptionalism, the first American mission an Anglo-Saxon Protestant, imperial mission."<sup>11</sup> Kagan tells the story of a seamless Whig history of expansion with few, if any, counter-currents. America was born in the spirit of imperial design, and its history is one of repeated efforts to spread its cul-

*For McDougall, early American exceptionalism was an impediment, not stimulus, to imperial desires.*

*In contrast, Robert Kagan calls the New England Puritans "global revolutionaries."*

---

<sup>10</sup> *Promised Land*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World, from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 8, 12.

---

---

ture and expand its wealth. Oddly, *Promised Land, Crusader State* is not cited in *Dangerous Nation* or listed in its bibliography. Nor is it cited in George McKenna's 2007 book *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism*, which reiterates much of the Kagan thesis.<sup>12</sup>

At stake in the debate about the meaning of America is which view of the American identity will prevail and consequently form the imaginative background for future American foreign policy. *Promised Land* is an important book not merely because it provides a counterweight to arguments such as those made by Kagan and McKenna but because it represents a different quality of scholarship. McDougall, whether consciously or not, is true to Butterfield's principles of historical scholarship. He provides an unpresentistic, richly diverse analysis that includes likenesses and unlikenesses. This is evident in his reference to the movie *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, which he uses to make the point that, "Much of the time we (the U.S.) have simply been human, pursuing our short-term self-interest more or less skillfully, and the rest of the world be damned."<sup>13</sup> What is notable about this statement is that McDougall sees a connection between human nature and the conduct and theory of world politics. His expectations are sober owing to his dualistic view of human nature. Moreover, most of the time, at least in the Old Testament era, America tended not to be ideologically motivated (which is not to say that it has always been good and just) in the conduct of foreign policy, although one finds individuals like Thomas Jefferson who in their rhetoric appear torn between their ideological heart and their more pragmatic head. McDougall also marks the Civil War as a pivotal point in the evolution of American foreign policy and self-understanding. In its effort to save the union, the North invoked all four diplomatic traditions—liberty, unilateralism, the Monroe Doctrine, and Manifest Destiny—while the South betrayed or endangered each of them. Yet, ironically, Union victory set the stage for the transition to the New Testament thinking that undermined the traditions Northern victory had seemed to have preserved.

In the New Testament, ideologically motivated foreign policy emerges. For example, Global Meliorism and Wilsonianism are American traditions with significant ideological characteristics.

---

<sup>12</sup> George McKenna, *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> *Promised Land*, 2.

---

---

In other words, what changes with the passing from the Old to the New testament is that foreign policy is colored by gnostic desires to reorder the world and America becomes the instrument for bringing worldwide political salvation. A missionary spirit was infused into American foreign policy that did not replace the pragmatic concerns of security and economic prosperity but mixed humanitarianism with pragmatism in a way that set America on a new course vis-à-vis foreign nations. For America to be secure, according to the new scenario, the world would have to be more like America. In short, Americans began to view their political principles and institutions as universal and their purpose as transnational. Globalism, of a certain type, is born during the rise of America's New Testament.

McDougall avoids analyzing American foreign policy in an ideological way. Some, like nationalists and neoconservatives, tend to see American involvement in the world as good, and they tend to obscure the bad and ugly aspects of American foreign policy. Others, especially the anti-American left, tend to see America as all or mostly bad and ugly. From McDougall's perspective, each view contains an element of truth: American foreign policy has been good, bad, and ugly. Consequently, he calls his approach the "Sergio Leone position" (referring to the director of the Clint Eastwood movie *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*). This approach lends itself to a Butterfieldian analysis. Not only does McDougall find "likenesses" but he also finds "unlikenesses" in American history. American history is not the uninterrupted story of national development that validates the notion that America has been only good, bad, or ugly.

*America's  
historical  
foreign-policy  
motives  
neither  
uniformly  
good nor bad.*

Numerous questions and issues are raised by McDougall's book, not least concerning American empire. Some, like Kagan, have suggested that the imperial inclination was present from the formation of the American republic, others that America has evolved into an empire. In either case, there is an important question about the compatibility between empire and American constitutionalism. McDougall's analysis supports Robert Nisbet's contention that "the American Constitution was designed for a people more interested in governing itself than in helping to govern the rest of the world."<sup>14</sup> The movement from the Old to the New Tes-

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert A. Nisbet, *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003), 1.

tament marks a change in fundamental notions of philosophical anthropology. American identity changes in a way that makes it difficult to find continuity between the old and the new America. Something on the order of a revolution in thinking takes place.

McDougall's analysis raises interesting questions about the continuity of American foreign policy. For example: Was Old Testament America only more modest in its foreign policy because, lacking the capacity to be imperial, it was primarily concerned with avoiding confrontation with imperial powers? Or was there something intrinsic to American republicanism that is incompatible with empire? James Madison suggests the latter in 1795 when he argues:

Of all the enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes. And armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended. Its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force of the people. The same malignant aspect in republicanism may be traced in the inequality of fortunes, and the opportunities of fraud, growing out of a state of war, and in the degeneracy of manners and morals, engendered by both. No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.<sup>15</sup>

Madison's statement supports McDougall's position that the Crusader State is incompatible with republican government.<sup>16</sup>

Further support is found in *Federalist* 1. There, Alexander Hamilton argues that what is at stake in the ratification debate is the issue of "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." To reach the point at which reflection and choice could be part of establishing the American regime required the achievement of American independence and a reasonable prospect that Americans would remain free in their political affairs from foreign interference and intrigue. Hamilton's later arguments in the Pacificus-Helvidius Debates (1793-1794) re-

---

<sup>15</sup> James Madison, "Political Observations," Pamphlet Published in Philadelphia, April 20, 1795, in *Liberty and Order: The First American Party Struggle*, ed. Lance Banning (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), 166.

<sup>16</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land*, 5.

---

---

inforce the idea that Old Testament Americans were not inclined to see the world as something to be remade in their likeness. In fact, it would have been contradictory for Americans to argue that they were proof that governments could be established by reflection and choice and then become a crusading nation that deprived other peoples of their opportunity to establish governments on the same grounds.

McDougall notes that late eighteenth century Americans were sensitive to the problem that a government strong enough to fend off foreign powers would also be strong enough to destroy liberty at home. The passing from the Old to the New Testament marks the loss of this wisdom. Wilsonian faith in big government crusading required a new philosophical anthropology that men like Wilson and Herbert Croly were more than happy to provide. The constitutional apparatus of checks and balances as well as separated powers were the eighteenth-century Framers' way of safeguarding liberty against the dangers posed by political power. From the standpoint of the early-twentieth-century Progressives, however, separated and checked power deprived government of sufficient means to remake America and the world. In that sense, the New Testament was a gnostic departure from the tried and true insights embedded in the Old Testament traditions. This is not to say that Old Testament Americans were not tempted to engage in crusading foreign policy; the French Revolution and ensuing wars provided ample seduction. But McDougall argues that Americans "resisted the intense ideological and military pressure put on them in the 1790s to succumb to the temptation to turn foreign policy into a crusade."<sup>17</sup> Nineteenth-century American wars may have been the product of hustling, but hustling divorced from global humanitarian crusading.

In the end, McDougall traces the evolution from the Old to the New Testament of American foreign policy to cultural currents that include social Darwinism, progressivism, scientism, industrialization, and the decline of Christian realism. He explains that

the sort of humility that stayed the hand of John Quincy Adams and made Lincoln sweat over every assertion of presidential power ceased to restrain American statecraft, to the point that, by the twentieth century, politics came increasingly to function as a religion, and religion degenerated into politics. So while America the Promised Land had held that to try to change the world was stupid

---

<sup>17</sup> *Promised Land*, 32.

---

---

(and immoral), America the Crusader State held that to *refrain* from trying to change the world was immoral (and stupid).<sup>18</sup>

It would seem sensible that reflection on the Old Testament diplomatic traditions could provide the starting point for a return to a more sober foreign policy. Yet those traditions could become a living force in contemporary political life only if the cultural and historical capital that engendered them is reconstituted with the aid of scholars who, like Walter McDougall, are willing to avoid self-serving, ideological history and inspire historical imagination that recognizes man's fallen nature.

Much has transpired since the publication of *Promised Land, Crusader State*. One wonders if, in light of the Bush and Obama presidencies and the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the call to reflect on Old Testament traditions of U.S. foreign relations has not become even more urgent than it was back in 1997. One might also wonder if McDougall's understanding of the Old and New Testaments has changed after writing two lengthy books on American history. For example, do hustlers (the theme of *Freedom Just Around the Corner*) and pretense (the theme of *Throes of Democracy*) have anything to do with the formation of the Old Testament? It seems plausible that American hustling and pretense can be traced further back than the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century period and that in the later twentieth century and beyond they acquire an added dimension, i.e., a gnostic, ideological texture that includes progressive humanitarianism and scientific naturalism. The return to a more sober view of America, then, requires not a counter-ideology but the strength of mind and soul that gives rise to moral realism. McDougall provides an alternative to those who view the nation as an object of worship. He believes that worship must be reserved for something higher and more enduring.

*The nation should not be an object of worship.*

---

<sup>18</sup> *Promised Land*, 205 (emphasis in the original).