

AMERICA RIGHT OR WRONG

BY BRIAN URQUHART

"Our job is to reclaim America for Christ, whatever the cost. As the vice regents of God, we are to exercise godly dominion and influence over our neighborhoods, our schools, our government, our literature and arts, our sports arenas, our entertainment media, our scientific endeavors — in short, over every aspect and institution of human society."

~D. JAMES KENNEDY

Pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

(co-founder Moral Majority; head of Coral Ridge Ministries
& "Godfather" of the Christian Dominion Movement)

For more than two centuries, nationalism in all its various forms — from the high-minded chauvinism of the British Empire to the virulent poison of Nazism — has been a familiar, and often negative, phenomenon. Emerging first in Europe, which it nearly destroyed and which has now apparently learned to control it, extreme nationalism still erupts from time to time in other parts of the world.

The word "nationalism" never quite seemed to fit the United States, where continental vastness and enormous power have hitherto been tempered by an often-expressed distaste for empire and by the notion of world leadership by example. Two American Presidents, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, both sponsored world organizations whose primary objective was to contain and disperse the aggressive force of nationalism.

In the first years of the 21st century, however, in a dramatic departure from traditional policy, the spirit of unilateralism and militant nationalism began to dominate Washington's policies and attitudes toward the outside world. Reaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001, gave new force and a new direction to this change. Anatol Lieven's *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* examines the roots of longstanding American nationalistic tendencies that have given public support to this fundamental change in United States policy. As it is already clear from some reactions to his book, for a foreigner (a Washington-based British journalist), and a European intellectual at that, this is a courageous, even foolhardy, undertaking, but it may well be that an outside observer can best approach such a sensitive American subject with candor and objectivity. Lieven is relentlessly candid, and has produced a remarkably thought-provoking book.

Lieven contrasts the high idealism of American civic nationalism, the "American Creed" — liberty, constitutionalism, law, democracy, individualism, and the separation of church and state — with current hypernationalistic attitudes that influence both domestic and foreign affairs. His book, Lieven writes,

Should in no sense be read as an attack either on a reasonable American nationalism or on the war on terrorism in its original form of a struggle against al Qaeda and its allies. As I shall argue throughout this book, American civic nationalism is a central support of American power and influence in the world, and has tremendously positive lessons to offer to humanity.

Lieven maintains that because American-style free-market liberal democracy has now become ideologically acceptable in most of the world, logically the United States should be "behaving as a conservative hegemon, defending the existing international order and spreading its values by example."

Instead, the George W. Bush administration has attempted to go in the opposite direction. "American power," Lieven writes, "in the service of narrow American...nationalism is an extremely unstable business for hegemony." Particularly after 9/11, when there was a chance "to create a concert of all the world's major states — including Muslim ones — against Islamist revolutionary terrorism," the Bush administration "chose instead to pursue the policies which divided the West, further alienated the Muslim world, and exposed America itself to greatly increased danger."

It would be foolish to try to summarize in detail a book as tightly written and extensively researched as *America Right or Wrong*. But on a subject so vitally relevant at the present time, it is worth outlining some of Lieven's main ideas. After setting out what he calls the "American Creed," Lieven examines the historical roots of its antithesis, a "wounded and vengeful nationalism." Irrational hatred, even fear, of the outside world, combined with an obsessive belief in the treachery of American



BILL MAULDIN (1969)

"elites" and intellectuals, is not only destructive at home; it also demeans the traditional idea of a people with a special mission to help other nations that has been variously described over the years by many leaders and thinkers. For one example, Lieven quotes Woodrow Wilson, speaking at the end of World War 1: "America had the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world." Ironically, it has taken Nature itself, in the Asian tsunami disaster, to show us once again that only the United States has the will and the resources — ships bearing helicopters and a worldwide logistical network — to respond immediately to such a vast emergency. Can this terrible experience help revive the reputation of Americans as a people with a compassionate mission in the world?

The missionary idea is further distorted, Lieven argues, by the Manichean notion, frequently invoked since September 11, of the struggle between Good — America and those who unreservedly agree with it — and Evil. "Wherever we carry it," George W. Bush told the graduating cadets at West Point in June 2002, "the American flag will stand not only for our power, but for freedom." Such rhetoric has not only fueled self-righteous and nationalist extremism; it has also distracted the United States from the basic measures needed for a successful campaign against Islamic terrorism, including the serious pursuit of peace in the Middle East; and it has badly strained relations with the outside world. "If we have any sense at all of history," Lieven writes, "we should know that our system does not represent the 'end of history,' is not divinely ordained, and will not last forever."

In a chapter entitled "The Embittered Heartland," Lieven examines the paradox that while much of the world sees the modern history of America as "an almost uninterrupted chronicle of success" (Senator William Fulbright's words), very large groups inside the country itself do not see anything of the kind. Their sense of inherited defeat and humiliation not only poisons domestic politics but is also an important ingredient in America's particular form of radical nationalism. Lieven identifies an original source of this feeling in the fear on the part of the first fundamentalist Protestant Anglo-Saxon core of settlers that it was losing its

control of politics and culture to more recent immigrant groups, "cosmopolitan elites," and the like.

The various revolutions of the 1960s — sexual, racial, feminist, and behavioral — certainly gave a powerful impetus to this large group's resentment. In our time the "Gingrich Revolution's" call to "take back America" echoes the old battlecry. As the epitome of such thinking Lieven quotes the French extreme reactionary Charles Maurras as saying during the 1930s, "In order to love France today, it is necessary to hate what she has become." Pride, economic setbacks, and resentment have bred an intensely conservative and religious culture that is also intensely nationalistic.

However, Lieven observes, American radical nationalism unlike similar movements elsewhere, has hitherto shown no clear impulse to move toward authoritarian rule. Pride in traditional democratic constitutionalism and in the strength of democratic culture has always contained any tendency to dictatorship. Time after time "the demons of American radical nationalism have... been bound again sooner or later by the power of the American Creed.... Periods of intense nationalism... have been followed by a return to a more tolerant and pluralist equilibrium."

Lieven writes that while, to the world, American may epitomize the triumph of modern society in all its forms, it is "also home to the largest and most powerful forces of conservative religion in the developed world." He quotes a survey from 2000 which found that white evangelical Protestants made up 23.1% of the population; Catholics, the largest Christian group, were 27.3%. The first figure is certainly larger now. Fundamentalist evangelical beliefs, Lieven argues, are pre-Enlightenment in origin and anti-Enlightenment in substance. Both modern science and a rational basis for human discourse are highly suspect in these circles. Treacherous East Coast liberal and intellectual elites, atheist Europeans, the godless United Nations, and others who have proudly embraced the Enlightenment are particular villains.

Lieven notes that in 1925 there was general mockery of fundamentalism after the much-publicized Scopes trial — Samuel Eliot Morrison referred to the trial as part of "19th



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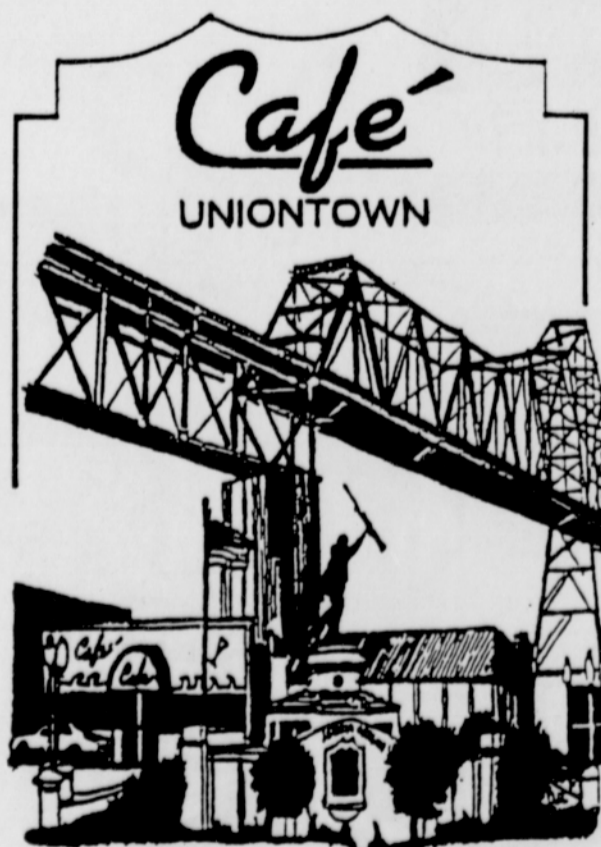
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