



BARRY MAGUIRE (2001)

Century America's Last Stand." Starting in the 1990s, the fundamentalists have now turned that humiliation around by making a strong comeback. The teaching of creationism is now being demanded in schools in more than 40 states, while the low voting turnout of other, nonfundamentalist groups increases the fundamentalists' political influence. The President himself is publicly skeptical of scientific findings in many fields, including global warming and stem-cell research. He promises to rid the world of Evil, and, as he told Bob Woodward, he is "casting his vision and that of the country in the grand vision of God's master plan." Radical religious nationalism, shrewdly exploited by Bush administration strategists, has become a strong force in American politics.

Lieven's chapter on the Israeli-Palestinian question is unusually forthright and is certain to give rise to much objection. He believes that this question more than any other divides the United States from opinion in most other countries. Critical discussion of Israel's record and its behavior toward Palestinians is often presented as an assault by members of the malignant, anti-American, anti-Semitic international community, symbolized by the hated UN. Such a presentation strengthens unconditional support for Israel among most evangelicals, regardless of Israel's policies and actions toward the occupied territories.

This point of view has become a matter of fundamentalist religious belief. Lieven quotes Jerry Falwell as saying that "to stand against Israel is to stand against God." The Christian Zionist movement, of which the House majority leader, Tom DeLay, is a leader in Washington, is "a block of conservative Republicans whose strong support for the Jewish state is based on their interpretation of the Bible." **

Such beliefs, which disregard international law, generally recognized beliefs, rational discourse, or serious negotiation, fit conveniently with the kind of neoconservative thinking found in the now famous 1996 position paper "A Clean Break," written by Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, among others, which advised the Likud government to insist on "permanent control of the occupied territories," as Lieven puts it. They do nothing to encourage moderation among Arabs and Muslims. After DeLay's visit to Israel in 2003, during which the Texas congressman told Israeli legislators that he was an "Israeli at heart," Saeb Erekat, a Palestinian legislator and negotiator, commented mildly that DeLay was not helping the cause of peace by "being more Israeli than the Israelis themselves."

Lieven observes that debate over the Israeli-Palestinian question is far more open and uninhibited in Israel itself than in the United States, where criticism of Likud policies or arguments that the Palestinians have a case are apt to be construed as "classic anti-Semitism." Lieven quotes, for example, the passionate protest against Likud policies by Avraham Burg, the former speaker of the Knesset. "We cannot," Burg said, "keep a Palestinian majority under an Israeli boot and at the same time think ourselves the only democracy in the Middle East."

It is one of the great tragedies of history that during the years of moderate Israeli leadership and policy, there was no recognition by either Israel or the U.S. of a serious Palestinian negotiating partner. The only organized representative of the Palestinians, the PLO, was kept from the negotiating table until 1993, by which time both the Israeli settlement and the indigenous Palestinian terrorist movement in the occupied territories were well established.

As Lieven puts it, criticism of Israeli actions in no way excuses the barbarities and brutalities of some of their Palestinian opponents: "Yet by its settlement policy, Israel has passed up the chance to end the conditions exacerbating the conflict, as have the Palestinian groups through their continued use of terrorism."

The United States has become deeply embroiled in the Middle East through the combination of strong, and sometimes unconditional, support for Israel and dependence on Arab oil. This creates major problems for its global leadership as well as a serious impediment to the successful pursuit of the "war on terror." There would now appear to be a slightly improved prospect for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. In view of the intrinsic importance of this question as well as its effect on other matters, it is to be hoped that Washington will adopt the courageous, objective, and active policy that might still achieve significant progress toward the peaceful solution that both the Israelis and the Palestinians desperately need.

America Right or Wrong is a valuable and also a troubling book on a subject that is both crucial and in many ways extremely sensitive. Historians may differ over Lieven's interpretations of American history or his assessment of the importance

"In 1937, the Carnegie Corporation, searching for a director for a comprehensive study of the Negro in America, concluded that American social scientist would find it difficult to undertake such a sensitive project dispassionately and objectively. The corporation therefore asked the Swedish social economist Gunnar Myrdal to direct the study. The result was the magisterial *An American Dilemma* (Harper, 1944). Like Myrdal, Lieven has chosen as his basic theme the contrast between American ideals and the sometimes contrasting reality of American politics and society.

(Kenneth B. Clark, an African-American psychologist who assisted Myrdal, died May 1 at age 90. His pioneering research on the effects of racial discrimination, particularly upon black children, was cited by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*.)

** "Palestinians Must Bear Burden of Peace, DeLay Tells Israelis," *The New York Times*, July 30, 2003.

*** *The Nation*, Exchange column, November 29, 2004.

of this or that factor, and others will certainly disagree with particular chapters. Predictably enough, he has already been called both anti-American and anti-Semitic. It seems to me that Lieven's book comes more into the category of what is sometimes called "tough love." Lieven is concerned, perhaps even obsessed, with current crises — the Iraq war, the impasse in the Middle East — and with tendencies such as the rise of radical nationalism that seem to him compromising the American Creed and American leadership in the world. He is also concerned with the absence of a stringent public debate on such matters. He can be tactless, perhaps, but that is hardly anti-American.

In his book *Crowded With Genius: The Scottish Enlightenment, Edinburgh's Moment of the Mind*, James Buchan writes of Edinburgh in the early 18th century, "Men and women were coming to suspect that knowledge acquired through skepticism might be more useful in this world below than knowledge 'revealed' by scripture." It is a painful thought that in the United States in the 21st century we might be turning away from the world of the Enlightenment which inspired the Founding Fathers. Of all the thoughts provoked by Lieven's book this is the most disturbing, both for America and for the world. Since religious freedom and popular elections are both sacrosanct rights of the American people, it is a particularly delicate one. Is it possible that America could eventually vote to go back on the Enlightenment?

Evangelical Protestants are a large and growing group whose influence is greatly enhanced by their voting discipline in comparison to other groups. Their influence is evident both in the rhetoric and in some actions of the current administration, as well as in Congress. This is clear in many domestic issues. The absolutes of Good and Evil, the references to God's will in relation to adventures like the Iraq war, the idea that those who are not with us are against us, impose a rigidity that dismisses criticism and makes it impossible to admit reverses publicly or to correct mistaken policies. Such trends are a serious hazard for such a powerful and important country. And at home, the demonization of elites, anti-intellectualism, hostility to rational discourse and an aversion to scientific method can only stultify and downgrade the educational system at a time when American leadership and technological supremacy are being challenged as never before.

The influence of Christian evangelicals now extends to many essential matters of foreign policy, quite apart from the Middle East. Dogmatic, unilateralist, and radically nationalistic, this influence ignores international law and is particularly hostile to international organizations. In some of its literature the Secretary General of the UN figures as the Antichrist. At a time when the United States is no longer immune from the ills of the outside world, many key problems — terrorism, energy, the environment, epidemics including AIDS, the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, to name only a few — can only be tackled usefully through international collective effort. Dogmatic, faith-based denial of this fact of life would be disaster for United States leadership, and also for the hope of finding solutions to problems that may well determine the future of the human race on this planet.

The absolute right of individuals to select the religion of their choice is not in question. But when particular denominations are in a position to bring their special beliefs and taboos to bear on the general interest and on public policy secular matters, a dangerous point has been reached. That is why the separation of church and state is so important.

Lieven has undertaken the unpopular task of trying to analyze religious forces and nationalistic ideologies that have an important bearing on the present situation of the United States and to warn about their consequences. In a reply to one of his critics he has explained that the failure to remember the searing lessons of how America became involved in Vietnam seems to him "to be closely related to an inability to reexamine certain fundamental national myths.... To say this is not the standpoint of an arrogant foreigner. It stands in a great tradition of critical American thought, which should be revived as a matter of profound intellectual and indeed patriotic urgency."***

Criticism by a foreigner on sensitive national issues is always likely to raise hackles, especially when readers may have a strong feeling that some of the criticisms are right on the mark. People often do not appreciate being told in a foreign accent that they may be heading over a cliff. In his intensity, Lieven sometimes drifts into an admonitory tone that some readers may find patronizing. But his conclusion, far from displaying anti-American sentiment, has a cautionary perspective that Americans should take seriously:

Most important of all, the American elites should have both more confidence in and more concern for the example their country sets to the world, through their institutions, their values and the visible well-being of ordinary Americans.... These institutions and values constitute America's civilizational empire, heir to that of Rome. Like the values of Rome, they will endure long after the American empire, and even the United States itself, has disappeared. The image of America as an economically successful pluralist democracy, open to all races and basically peaceful and nonaggressive, has been so powerful in the past because it has largely been true. Americans must make sure that it continues to be true.

Brian Urquhart is a former Undersecretary General of the United Nations. His books include *Hammerskjöld, A Life in Peace & War* and *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*. This article is reprinted from *The New York Review of Books*.

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