
A Walter McDougall Symposium

Defending America in an Age of Hustlers, Heists, and Unnecessary Wars: An Afterword

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"When did your eyes open?" The very day I turned my attention to these final thoughts a book review of that title appeared in my campus mailbox. I long ago stopped chalking such timely tips up to chance. Like my brother who says, "There are no coincidences," and my Anglican bishop who says, "All is grace," I believe inspiration answers cues. The book under review was a biography of Andrei Sakharov and the question was baneful to Soviet dissidents because it forced them to recall the illusion, ambition, compromise, and blindness that had entrapped them *before* they dared challenge the propaganda and power structure of the Communist system. So, too, has this assignment for *Humanitas* obliged me to ask when and why I began to bristle under the rigid codes of belief and behavior imposed by American politics, academics, and culture.

When did your eyes open? From a young age I have always been attracted to those I call "truth tellers." Satirical comic books such as *MAD Magazine* and *Uncle Scrooge*, and television shows such as *Sgt. Bilko* and *Maverick*, taught me in the 1950s about the yawning gaps between pretense and reality—and penchant for hustling—in

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American life. My eldest brother encouraged me to sniff out hypocrisy and double standards (his constant complaint was “there’s no justice”). The pathetic Chicago Cubs inspired me to pronounce a “law of maximum heartbreak.” My parents, a brilliant patent attorney and a frustrated actress, shared phenomenal verbal gifts and taught by example about the poses and masks everyone dons in public. My pious grandparents taught me honesty but also the perils of trust (“fool me once shame on you; fool me twice shame on me”). As a young adult I began to select a personal pantheon of truth tellers, such as that self-described gargoyle Malcolm Muggeridge who mused that “only clowns and mystics ever speak the truth.” Muggeridge had arrived in Paris in August 1944 to find the just liberated city in wild celebration. So he spent his first evening in a boozy nightclub until, around midnight, his mood changed. A shabby comedian with a frowning bald head “was intoning a soliloquy about all the terrible things that had happened to him since the Germans came to Paris. *Et maintenant*, he concluded, with an expression of infinite woe, through which he struggled to break into a wry smile—*Et maintenant, nous sommes libérés.*”

Liberated from what? Nazism, but not the human condition. Liberated for what? National shame, remorse, reprisals, broken lives, civil strife, and a new thralldom to materialism either of the capitalist or communist sort. Indeed, it is in deliverance, not defeat, that our eyes really open to truth for only then do our *own* vanities stand as naked as those of our adversaries. Case in point: the decadence of American politics, economics, culture, and foreign relations just two decades after our (pyrrhic) victory in the Cold War. That era, especially since 9/11, has been eye-opening for me because those were the years when I studied the founding Americans even as contemporary Americans squandered their nation’s unprecedented power, prosperity, and prestige. What was it about our natural birthright and character that enabled the United States to rise so high so quickly despite (or because of) its delusional, self-destructive traits?

“*When did your eyes open?*” Not all at once, and never completely, because the best we can expect in this life is “to see through a glass darkly.” But age, experience, sound education, and the fatigue that comes with trying to deny reality should sooner or later induce clairvoyance. (I used to quip that no one under sixty should be allowed to write history.) Indeed, some principal consolations

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of old age, wrote Cicero, were wisdom and the honor it earned. Granted, he was 84 when he wrote *De Senectute*, and since I am still twenty years younger than that I have no cause to feel old. But I do. Having a section of this journal devoted to my works makes me feel old. Thinking back on my youth does, too. But what really makes me feel old is the sense that I'm witnessing tiresome cycles in politics, economics, and world affairs for a third or fourth time. Did anyone really think humanity had arrived at some "end of history" after the Cold War, or that the Dow would reach 30,000, or that America could exert a benevolent hegemony and democratize the Middle East, or for that matter that Barack Obama's election would bring "change you can believe in"?

The answer is yes. Young people believed; disaffected, desperate, and fearful people believed; resentful and hateful people believed. For as Muggeridge also remarked: "People do not believe lies because they have to, but because they want to." Most Americans dare not question, much less disbelieve, their civic religion, political system, global mission, and above all their private pursuits of happiness because to do so (aside from threatening the nation's unity and consumer economy) would force most Americans to admit that they are in fact profoundly *unhappy!* Muggeridge again put it well: "There is something ridiculous and even quite indecent in an individual claiming to be happy. Still more a people or a nation making such a claim. The pursuit of happiness . . . is without any question the most fatuous which could possibly be undertaken. This lamentable phrase 'the pursuit of happiness' is responsible for a good part of the ills and miseries of the modern world." Inner peace comes only to grown-ups who *no longer* believe in unicorns and have learned instead that to love is to suffer. The American Dream, however, does not admit of such treason.

"*When did your eyes open?*" Lest I be misunderstood I should emphasize that whatever scales have gradually fallen from my mid-twentieth-century American eyes were placed there by history, not historians. On the contrary, it is historians who have enabled me to shed the scales, and I have been peculiarly blessed with mentors of genius, diligence, charisma, and integrity. William Buffett and Angus James Johnston, III, turned my childhood fascination with geography into a love for history at New Trier High School in Illinois. John G. Gagliardo and John William Ward inspired me to major in history at Amherst College. William H.

McNeill, Donald Lach, and F. Gregory Campbell were paragons of professionalism and passion during my graduate years at the University of Chicago. Gerald Feldman, Jan DeVries, Martin Malia, Robert Middlekauff, and other brilliant and generous colleagues during my thirteen years at U.C. Berkeley “opened my eyes” in countless ways. Let me also take this opportunity to honor, thank, and apologize to Richard Herr. He was the one who suggested the history of space technology as the topic for my second monograph which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. I never gave him credit because I was embarrassed to confess the idea wasn’t my own. Over twenty-two years at Penn various colleagues, especially Marc Trachtenberg, Bruce Kuklick, Alan Kors, and my lifelong friend Thomas Childers, have helped me open my eyes further. Last but not least, while researching my new American histories, I became a disciple of such wizened scholars as J. G. A. Pocock, David Hackett Fischer, Gordon Wood, Forrest McDonald, Daniel Walker Howe, and Michael Burlingame. Moreover, they all remain so prolific as to make me ashamed to feel old.

Nor am I a cynic about the American character (although Gordon Wood suspected some might draw that conclusion). Nor am I in despair about the American future precisely because I do *not* equate the Stars and Stripes with the Cross or imagine American principles to be somehow exceptional yet universally applicable at the same time. I believe the United States will inevitably decline in relative power and wealth vis-à-vis some other countries, but that very decline may prove healthy if it causes a critical mass of citizens to remember the “Mosaic commands” for fiscal, political, moral, and personal responsibility bequeathed in George Washington’s Farewell Address. Indeed, I cannot despair of our nation’s future so long as I am in constant touch with young people, both students who are fresh, smart, ambitious, and eager to realize their own American Dream, and scholars who comprise a righteous remnant because their eyes managed to open at a much younger age than did mine. Needless to say, that remnant includes Michael Federici and Richard Gamble who (lest anyone mistake them for students of mine as if this were a *Festschrift*) were among my most valuable teachers in the course of my writing *Throes of Democracy*. Indeed, Federici inspired my decision to make the extraordinary life and works of Orestes Brownson the very coda of the book.

What awaits me now? What scales remain on my eyelids? In

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his excellent summary of *Promised Land, Crusader State* (yes, the United States is pretty much a gnostic Protestant millenarian cult, when it isn't just Vanity Fair), Federici notes that much has transpired since that book's appearance in 1997. He wonders whether the misadventures of the G. W. Bush and Obama administrations have made the Old Testament traditions of U.S. foreign relations more worthy of reflection than before, and whether my writing of *Freedom and Throes* has changed my understanding of that Old Testament? The answers are yes and yes. Indeed, my next book project will likely be a sequel to *Promised Land, Crusader State* that carries the story of American war and diplomacy past 9/11 and assesses whether the Bush Doctrine is a candidate to become the ninth U.S. foreign policy tradition. I shall also revisit the earlier traditions and append (not amend: my interpretations have held up remarkably well) new material, especially about the roles of religion and civil religion, technology, and international economics in U.S. foreign policy formation. As for the issue of how to reconcile the hustling and pretense of our American founders with the wisdom and virtue of their grand strategic traditions, my answer is easy (though, I hope, not facile). The Founders of the Republic and Framers of the Constitution looked in the mirror. They admitted the truth about a flawed and immutable human nature, and the special dangers posed by vice and corruption in the land of liberty they meant to construct. So they crafted institutions and preached values meant to check, balance, and constrain the use of power at home and abroad. By contrast, the secular Progressive authors of our twentieth-century traditions in foreign relations might have shrewdly assessed the threats and opportunities in their newly global, industrial, imperial international arena, but they ceased to look in the mirror. Instead, Woodrow Wilson and his successors imagined their own idealized image of Americanism to be the mirror by which all other nations should measure their imperfections. Having tasted world power, Americans began hustling themselves and others on a world scale.

Gamble's use of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* as a lens to make sense of my otherwise kaleidoscopic American history is wonderfully clever. Even better, I think it works. All historians deploy a principle of selection and some "Occam's Razor" principle of causation, even if they are not fully conscious of doing so. So I expect that I do betray a "characteristic approach to history"

derived from Hawthorne's "general rule" about the ubiquity of facades and the far more interesting and revealing "back yards" they conceal. But that insight leads Gamble to ask a troubling question of his own. If pretense is so rife, indeed so vital, in American culture and politics, what calamity would suffice to convict us of our national frailties and inspire confession and amendment before it's too late? I have no answer to that. I can only invoke Hawthorne, who warned in "The Celestial Railroad," his updated *Pilgrim's Progress*, of the cold, soulless death awaiting blind, narcissistic consumers; and Herman Melville, who warned in *Moby-Dick* of the hot, soulful death awaiting blind, narcissistic crusaders. Captain Ahab's *Pequod* is the American ship of state named for the Pequot Indian war of 1637, the Puritan colonists' first holy war for civilization, while the "sky-hawk" that gets fouled in the flag and goes down with the ship of state is the American (imperial) eagle:

A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-trunk downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.

Perhaps Americans will yet prove Gamble's doubts unfounded. Perhaps we perennial adolescents will give up childish things and enter into a wise, creative, decent, humane, charitable, truthful maturity as a nation. Even the vain, hedonistic Muggeridge accomplished that upon learning that "One of the many pleasures of old age is giving things up."

"When did your eyes open?"