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Walter Russell Meade, *God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World*

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Walter Russell Meade, *God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

Americans know that we have been an enormous global power since the end of World War II and the single most

powerful since the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991. However, it makes many of us uncomfortable. We do not like to think of ourselves as “empire,” particularly since in so many important respects, we do not behave as previous great imperial powers have.

However, a few books have come out in recent years that explore the origins of our power and one—Michael Mandelbaum’s *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World’s Government in the 21st Century*, indeed makes a strong case that the US functions as a substitute to what would be a world government if there really were such an institution. This would be a much more tumultuous world without us.

Walter Russell Meade takes the argument even further—tracing it back to the British, who created a naval power that spanned the globe, supporting both its imperial holdings as well as paving the way toward the international system we have today. Meade traces the unique decisions of the British, particularly after defeating Napoleon early in the 19th century, to a surprisingly peaceful international order (our wars were really the exception, not the normal situation), and with the decline of the British as a global power, the other Anglo-Saxon power, the United States, took up the standard.

Meade looks back to the British experience with the religious wars that paralyzed Europe for two centuries and shows that the British made several decisions that changed the world thereafter. They decided that state support for a specific religion must be loose enough to permit increasing toleration of other religions; they limited the power of an absolute monarch, executing one and exiling another, until power—particularly monetary power-- was transferred to an elected parliament. They decided that land wars in Europe were a drain on the British economy, and instead concentrated on far-reaching naval power.

The United States is a spawn of the British system, and the development of a two-ocean naval power has served us as well as the prior British system did. Furthermore, with the exception of our brief imperial adventure in the Philippines, which we voluntarily ended in 1946, we have not sought empire. We have no taste for imperial occupation, as observers of our 2008 presidential election campaign can testify.

Our naval power has protected and generated the greatest economic expansions of economies around the world—and the greatest eroding of poverty that the world has ever known. We have seen the extraordinary rise of Asia that continues under the umbrella of the *Pax Americana* naval power. And in addition, Europe, for centuries a continual battleground, has enjoyed 60 years of unprecedented peace and prosperity. Because of our protection, the Europeans were able to devote the majority of their economies to the social programs enjoyed by the enormous European middle class.

Meade explores another issue: the Anglo-Saxon powers have never lost a war. He writes: “Since the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that established parliamentary and Protestant rule in Britain, the Anglo-Americans have been on the winning side in every major international conflict. The War of the League of Augsburg, the War of the Spanish Succession, the War of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years’ War, the American Revolution (Britain lost, but America won), the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War: these are the wars that made the modern world, and either the British or the Americans or both . . . have won every one of them. More than three hundred years of unbroken victory in major wars with great powers: it begins to look almost like a pattern.”

But Meade cautions that we are going through a period of self-doubt, spurred by the emergence of other economic giants who may, in the future, challenge and perhaps supplant us. He does not hazard a guess of how this will end, but for the immediate future, the Anglo-Saxon powers, particularly the United States, will continue to dominate and protect global security.

Another book on this issue that I will explore is Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World*, which proposes that although the world is changing, it is much the better because of us. He does not believe that our biggest challenge comes from terrorism or a rising China, but from our current pessimism about our future. This, he thinks, is unwarranted. We do best when we trust to our historic optimism and desire to do right. Our flexibility is our salvation.

Laina Farhat-Holzman