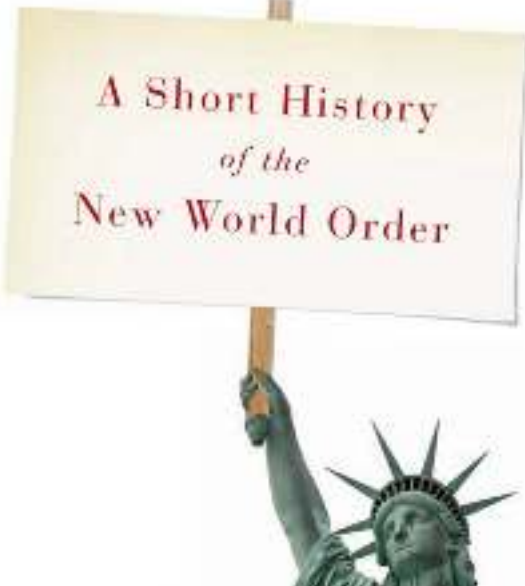


WHAT IS AMERICA?

A small, green-patina figurine of the Statue of Liberty is shown from the chest up, holding a rectangular sign with a wooden stick. The sign is yellowed with age and has red text on it. The background is plain white.

A Short History
of the
New World Order

RONALD WRIGHT

Author of A Short History of Progress

WHAT IS AMERICA?

Also by

RONALD WRIGHT

—

Fiction

A Scientific Romance

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History

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Stolen Continents

Travel

Time Among the Maya

On Fiji Islands

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WHAT IS
AMERICA?

A Short
History of
the New
World Order

RONALD WRIGHT



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For Diane

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

What then is the American, this new man?

—Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, ca. 1776¹

Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?

—Jack Kerouac, 1957²

THE ARGUMENT AT THE HEART of this book—that the New World made the modern world and now threatens to undo it—came to me from the final chapter of my last one, *A Short History of Progress*, which outlined the long record of collisions between Nature and human nature. Much of *What Is America?* seeks to understand the rise of the United States from small colony to world power, but I raise the question within a larger context that has been neglected. Modern America—and modern civilization in general—are the culmination of a half-millennium we might call the Columbian Age. For Europe and its offshoots, the Americas really were Eldorado, a source of unprecedented wealth and growth. Our political and economic culture, especially its North American variant, has been built on a goldrush mentality of “more tomorrow.”

The American dream of new frontiers and endless plenty has seduced the world—even Communist China. Yet this seduction has triumphed just as the Columbian Age shows many signs of ending, having exhausted the Earth and aroused appetites it can no longer feed. In short, the future isn't what it used to be.

When Stanley Kubrick made the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* forty years ago, it did not seem far-fetched to imagine that by the start of this millennium Americans might have a base on the moon and be flying manned craft to Jupiter. After all, only five decades had passed from the first aeroplane to the first space flight. But by the real 2001 there had been no man on the moon since 1972, elderly space shuttles were falling out of the sky, and the defining event of that year—and perhaps of the new century—was not a voyage to outer planets but the flying of airliners into skyscrapers by fanatics.



The question “What is America?” could fill a library and a lifetime. At the beginning of his *Eminent Victorians*, published in 1918, the eminent modernist Lytton Strachey declared: “The history of the Victorian age will never be written: we know too much about it.”³ The wise explorer of the well-papered past, he advised, “will attack his subject in unexpected places . . . he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined.” I have tried to follow Strachey's advice. If history was already choked with data ninety years ago, how much more so now.

So this is an eccentric book, seeking the centre by its edges. I spend less time on the broad highways to the Founding Fathers, slavery, the Civil War—already glutted with a thousand

books—and more on backroads to Mexico, Peru, the Pequots, the Five Civilized Tribes, the Mormons and the Philippines.

All who delve into American history have to contend with a language of misnomer and condescension: whites are soldiers, Indians are warriors; whites live in towns, Indians in villages; whites have states, Indians have tribes. As the Grand Council Fire of American Indians told the mayor of Chicago in 1927, the school histories “call all white victories, battles, and all Indian victories, massacres. . . . White men who rise to protect their property are called patriots—Indians who do the same are called murderers.”⁴

Then there is the term *Indian* itself, which some indigenous Americans accept and others dislike. The word seems to commemorate Columbus's mistaken idea of where he went. America found Columbus. The unknown continents got in the way of his back route to China, and the admiral died in 1506 still believing he had been to islands off the coast of Asia—or, in his less rational moments, of which there were quite a few, to the shores of the Earthly Paradise (a venue revealed to him by its resemblance to a woman's breast).⁵ Not for a generation did European visitors begin to grasp the scale and complexity of the new hemisphere stretching north and south to both polar seas. In yet another mistake, they then named it after the unworthy Amerigo Vespucci, described by his latest biographer as a pimp and confidence man.⁶

It is also true that European notions of “India” and “the Indies” were so vague that “Indian” could mean almost anyone who wasn't white, black or Chinese; Polynesians, for example, were also called Indians. Most of the current alternatives are flawed, unclear or difficult to use. “Native American” is seldom used outside the United States and, confusingly, was also the

name of a white political movement of the nineteenth century. “Aboriginal” has long been associated with Australia. “First Nations” is little known outside Canada and does not work well as an adjective. However, the word *nation* has rightly been used for (and by) indigenous peoples since early colonial times—in the senses of both ethnic group and polity.

In English, American Indians should really be called “Americans”—as they often were until the eighteenth century. The wholesale takeover of that word by white settlers is a measure of the demographic catastrophe that gave rise to the United States. In this book, when the context is clear, I have restored the term *American* to its original meaning before the Revolution of 1776. Thereafter I find it impossible to avoid using *Indian*—especially as the word is embedded in historical sources, treaties and Acts of Congress. I apologize to readers who find the term objectionable.



Any outsider writing about the United States does so in the shadow of a twenty-five-year-old French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, the self-styled “bird of passage” whose *Democracy in America* has never been bettered as a broad analysis of the American character and promise.⁷ I have also drawn on his private travel notes and interviews, published as *Journey to America*, which are less well known than *Democracy* but often more revealing.⁸

In 1831–32 Tocqueville toured the United States on a commission from the French government to study the young nation’s prison system, a duty to which he by no means confined himself. He praised the modern “idea of reforming as well as of punishing the delinquent” but added that he also saw

“dungeons . . . which reminded the visitor of the barbarity of the Middle Ages.”⁹ That this observation might stand today for Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib or a number of stateside penitentiaries is typical of the unfading relevance of Tocqueville’s work.

Though a keen observer and inspired extrapolator, Tocqueville was no historian. I mention this now, not to dwell on his flaws but to dispose of them. The Americans, he wrote, “have no neighbours, and consequently they have no great wars, or financial crises, or inroads, or conquest to dread; they . . . have nothing to fear from a scourge which is more formidable to republics than all these evils combined, namely, military glory. . . . Nothing is more opposed to the well-being and the freedom of man than vast empires.”¹⁰

No neighbours? Tocqueville meant, of course, no *white* neighbours. By the lights of his time and class, only white men of standing were true actors in world events. Because he did not see the first Americans, or “Indians,” as protagonists in American history, he failed to grasp that America already *was* an empire—armed, aggressive, expanding before his eyes and presided over by a militarist, General Andrew Jackson.¹¹ President Jackson was the George W. Bush of his day, loved by the gullible, hated by the intelligentsia and dismissed by Tocqueville himself as “a very mediocre man.” The young Frenchman was a cautious optimist, and he hoped the presidency of the uncouth and violent general would be an aberration. He therefore failed to look very far into Jackson’s career as an Indian killer and a practitioner of what is now called ethnic cleansing, the Indian Removal of the 1830s.¹²

Tocqueville’s neglect of the past can also be put down to his youth: like the new republic itself, he fixed his gaze on the

future.¹³ For him, America had begun with its independence from Britain, barely fifty years before his visit. His interest in the formative colonial period went no deeper than skimming a few “histories” written by early Puritan settlers in New England and later books based on those accounts, which were also the reading of Americans he talked to. Like other extreme Protestants in Ulster and South Africa, the Puritans viewed their colonial migration through the lens of the Old Testament, seeing themselves as a chosen people in a Promised Land.¹⁴ Tocqueville took those writings at face value, unaware they were religious and racial propaganda obscuring the truth about native societies and native-white relations.¹⁵

He therefore missed the importance of the frontier—a westerly zone of warfare and cultural exchange since the 1600s—in shaping the settler nation. That insight would await the great American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who saw that the frontier, which “strips off the garments of civilization,” is the key to understanding American cultural patterns that have drifted away from the European mainstream.¹⁶ “The wilderness masters the colonist,” Turner announced in a lecture at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, “Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.”¹⁷

Although Tocqueville missed Turner’s insight, he did wonder how white America seemed to be having her cake and eating it too: conquering her hinterland yet doing so with her reputation unbesmirched. The Spanish conquerors of Mexico and Peru, he noted tartly, had failed to exterminate the indigenous race or even fully quash its rights, yet the Americans had “accomplished this twofold purpose . . . without violating a single great principle of morality in the eyes of the world.”¹⁸

Then as now, such sleight of hand was done by invoking lofty hopes and ideals to hide unsightly truths. America is the country of the future, shriven from the past, including its own: a land paved with good intentions. As Lewis Lapham wrote sardonically in a recent *Harper's* essay called "Terror Alerts": "We're the good guys, released from the prison of history and therefore free to imagine that our era will never pass."¹⁹

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1.

THE NEW WORLD ORDER

The American Empire . . . bids fair, by the blessing of God,
to be the most glorious of any upon Record.

—William Henry Drayton, 1776¹

I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1784²

I never apologize for the United States of America. I don't
care what the facts are.

—George H. Bush, 1988³

“**W**E ARE ALL AMERICANS NOW!” the front page of *Le Monde* cried in sympathy in September 2001, after airliners became missiles over New York and Washington. Besides solidarity and outrage, the headline held a broader truth, intended or not, that has been slowly dawning for the past one hundred years: through military might, big business, popular culture, covert operations and above all through social example and the shining promise of modernity, the United States has Americanized the world.

This process was just beginning when President Woodrow Wilson idealistically called for “a new world order” after the

First World War.⁴ At that time the phrase had nothing to do with empire. Quite the reverse. Wilson was promoting his plan for a League of Nations, an international body that would safeguard each country's sovereignty and settle disputes by arbitration. More than 10 million had died in four years of slaughter set off by a terrorist attack, the shooting of the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary by a Serbian extremist. Or rather, the war had begun with the *reaction* to that attack—the invasion of a small country that had not sponsored the terrorism by an empire thirsting for revenge.

The United States never did join the League of Nations: not enough of Wilson's countrymen shared his ideals. And it would take another great war before Europe learned the lessons of its past. The phrase "new world order" was not much heard again until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, leaving one nation mightier than all the others. An ironic reversal of Wilson's internationalism came in 2002, when President George W. Bush did all he could to sabotage the founding of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Bush feared that American nationals might be brought to book overseas—a realistic worry, given that his administration was breaking international law on the treatment of war prisoners. In March 2008, with only months left in office, he vetoed a Congressional bill that would have stopped American interrogators from torturing their suspects.⁵



The United States is now the world's lone superpower—a successor to Britain, Spain and ancient Rome—an empire whose deeds could make or break this century.⁶ Both within and beyond America, people are asking themselves what sort of imperium this might be. Will the new Rome, like the old, see

its democracy wither as its power grows? Will it be ruled by a Senate, a Caesar or a Nero? Will its dominion be benign and inclusive, offering benefits as well as duties to its subjects, as in Rome and Britain at their best? Or will it be a rapacious overlordship, a robber empire extorting tribute and obedience, like the unloved reign of the Aztecs or the client-state networks of both Cold War superpowers at their worst?

After the flawed presidential election of 2000, the new Bush regime took the United States further to the political right than any other major western country since 1945, a shift that began *before* the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.⁷ Washington's reaction to that tragedy—trampling its own Constitution and the Geneva Conventions in an unjust “war on terror”—has squandered solidarity at home and goodwill abroad, provoking a re-examination of the nation's essence: Is America what it thinks it is? Is America what the world has long believed it to be?

I hold that the recent difficulties run much deeper than a stolen election and an overreaction to a terrorist assault. The political culture and identity crisis of the United States are best understood as products of the country's past—the real past, not the imaginary one of national myth. The United States did not grow in a vacuum by the power of its ideals: it is not so much a new Europe across the Atlantic as a unique organism engendered by history's “Big Bang”—the collision of worlds that began in 1492. The new world order did not begin in 1919 with the League of Nations, nor in 1989 with the fall of the Soviet Union. It flows from Europe's takeover of the entire New World, or Western Hemisphere: the Spanish conquests of Mexico and Peru, which triggered five centuries of European expansion, and the British-American conquest of what is

now the United States. So the America of my title has two meanings: the great republic most of the world simply calls “America” and the American landmass as a whole. My question “What is America?” applies to both. The answers have long roots, reaching far beyond the familiar tale—the rise of one nation to predominance.

The year 1492 wasn’t very long ago. If you’re past fifty, as I am, you’ve seen for yourself at least a tenth of the time since Columbus sailed. We are all still living with the consequences, good and bad. Our world descends from the American “surprise” that stopped Columbus on his way to Asia.⁸ Within a few decades of that momentous contact, the wealth, crops and land of half a planet—a half that had been developing in isolation for at least fifteen thousand years—were suddenly laid open to the whole. The seed that would become the United States was planted then. The new order is indeed a *New World* order, and modern America more truly American than we know.

As the historian Frederick Jackson Turner first recognized in 1893, the United States was forged “in the crucible of the frontier.”⁹ In the mythology created by romantic novels and Hollywood westerns, the frontier is a virgin wilderness tamed by heroic pioneers. The real frontier was a rolling three-century war zone, from 1607 to 1890, in which the continent violently changed hands. As white migrants both displaced and absorbed the original Americans, a new culture came into being: a rapacious hybrid dependent on expansion—part European, part indigenous, yet neither. Elements of the old European civilization withered or got left behind; other elements grew rank in new ways. Isolated and unschooled, the frontier became a breeding ground for militarism and religious extremism—the

two aspects of American culture that outsiders, and many Americans, find most alarming today, especially when they converge in government policy as they did under Ronald Reagan and again, more strongly, under George W. Bush.¹⁰

Even before the Indian wars ended in 1890 at Wounded Knee, the United States had begun projecting its power across the Pacific and into Latin America. The nation did not wake up one morning and find that it was suddenly imperial; it always has been so. Its founding president, George Washington, was right when he called the United States “a rising empire” back in 1783.¹¹ Nearly two centuries later, President John F. Kennedy proclaimed: “Our frontiers today are on every continent [stretching] ten thousand miles across the Pacific, and three and four thousand miles across the Atlantic, and thousands of miles to the south.”¹² When American Marines sing “From the halls of Montezuma / To the shores of Tripoli,” they are not boasting idly but recalling their conquest of Mexico in 1847 and a war with Libya as early as 1801.¹³

The new republic was also a bold and worthy experiment, an attempt to remake western civilization along utopian ideals of freedom, democracy and opportunity—“the world’s best hope” as Thomas Jefferson, its third president, famously said.¹⁴ But the practice of those ideals relied on a unique historical circumstance: the opening up of a new territory, with new means, in which to try them. Seen from inside by free citizens, the young United States was indeed a thriving democracy in a land of plenty; seen from below by slaves, it was a cruel tyranny; and seen from outside by free Indians, it was a ruthlessly expanding empire. All these stories are true, but if we know only one without the others, what we know is not history but myth. And such myths are dangerous.



Today's world, some argue, changes so quickly that the past is no longer much help to us. But I agree with the Australian historian Inga Clendinnen, who writes in a recent essay, "It is precisely because change is so swift that we need history."¹⁵ From the personal to the international level, humans understand one another by watching behaviour through time. History is the best guide we have for threading our way through the frenetic video game of current events.¹⁶ As the game speeds up, with runaway technological and social change, the great risk is that both the old and the young become isolated, in different ways, by the parochialism of the present: one generation gets marooned, the next swept along without a ship's log or a rudder.

To understand what forces shaped the United States and how the lone superpower may now play on the world stage, we must follow its record of expansion—for three centuries across its continent and for another century beyond. And we must begin with a clear sight of its American origins: of what awaited the European invaders in the Western Hemisphere. Any account that begins at the usual departure—the white-settler revolt against Britain in 1776—is starting halfway through the story.

Much of the first half is also the history of the English, my own nationality, who, like most human beings, have shown themselves capable of almost anything. Just as English schoolchildren don't hear much about their ancestors' colonial outrages in Ireland or how the Mutiny in India was avenged by binding rebels to cannon and blowing them apart, so American youngsters are not taught about the conquest and "removal" of the original Americans or the events that made Benjamin

Franklin denounce his compatriots as “Christian white savages.”¹⁷ To sleep well in their beds, nations, like individuals, rely on the art of forgetting.

It is said that indigenous Americans can live with themselves only by remembering the past, and white Americans only by forgetting it. The United States may not have committed more crimes than most other imperial nations, but it forgets them more quickly and more thoroughly. From the earliest days, the country has been built on the belief that it is an exception to history and an example to the world. Each failure of its ideals is therefore seen as an anomaly, not a pattern.

When the realities of power do intrude on the national consciousness, Americans undergo a “loss of innocence.” This seems to happen about once a generation—as in the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Philippine War, the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam and now Afghanistan and Iraq. At least six of these nine were started mainly by Americans. Innocence grows back in defiance of truth like a self-restoring hymen, only to be lost again and again, with surprise and consoling resolutions of reform. Innocence is saved by ignorance, by not caring what the facts are—and therefore not learning from them. The elder George Bush made the remark quoted at the head of this chapter after a U.S. warship shot down an Iranian Airbus (said to have been mistaken for an F-14 fighter) in 1988, killing all 290 on board. It is hard to imagine a leading citizen of any other leading nation making such a remark in such circumstances or, if he did, receiving so little public censure. Only four months later, Mr. Bush was elected president. That his words did not wreck, or even hinder, his political career raises questions about American culture that the country and the world must address.

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