

BOOKS

[*America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, Anatol Lieven, Oxford University Press, 274 pages]

America's New Nationalism

By Scott McConnell

OF THE SCORES of good books published in the last year about American foreign policy, the young British scholar Anatol Lieven's *America Right or Wrong* stands ahead and apart. An erudite analysis of the historical and cultural strands that have forged contemporary American nationalism, it is the antidote to a view now popular among Bush administration critics: there is little wrong with American foreign policy that reducing the influence of several dozen Beltway neoconservatives would not cure. While Lieven carries no water for the neocons, he will convince many readers that if William Kristol, Richard Perle, and company had not been around after 9/11 to push a unilateralist war plan, Americans would have somehow invented them. Lieven is one of the rare authors who can change minds on a subject where opinions are firmly entrenched.

He sets out to explain "why a country which after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, had the chance to create a concert of all the world's major states—including Muslim ones—against Islamist revolutionary terrorism chose instead to pursue policies which divided the West, further alienated the Muslim world and exposed America itself to greatly increased danger." His answer is that the terror attacks roused from slumber a not-so-attractive American nationalism—a doctrine that incorporates in roughly equal measure both

what is "best" in the American experience (respect for formal liberties and republican government) and what he most dislikes (religious, anti-elitist, racially tinged populism). The result is a kind of isolationist spirit with a global reach, which he likens at one point to a sort of national autism. Some will resist seeing their country through the eyes of a European intellectual, especially one not given to diplomatic euphemism. But they will miss something: the author knows the United States deeply, has lived here for a long time, and without question wishes us well. Yet this affection hardly mutes his criticism.

For example: "trailing one's coat." Lieven resurrects this 18th-century phrase for provoking a quarrel by dragging one's coat along a crowd so that another man will step on it. As he puts it, "American imperialists trail America's coat over the whole world and rely on America to react with 'don't tread on me' nationalist fury when the coat is trodden on." The analogy explains something of the seeming paradox that while most

concrete reasons of state. Thus, wide swatches of the American establishment quickly convinced themselves that al-Qaeda initiated war on the United States because it "hated freedom" rather than because of opposition to American presence and policies in the Mideast.

Lieven views American nationalism as drawing sustenance from a pool of reactionary racial and ethnic resentments, and here his critique is conventionally liberal (and somewhat overstated). But he has novel and challenging observations to make as well. One is a link between America's foreign policy and the new reign of political correctness, most pronounced on matters pertaining to race. He admires America's transformation from a slave-holding country waging an expansionist war against Indian tribes to a nation upholding equal rights for all. But there might be a cost to the new anti-racist consciousness. He suggests an analogy in the Claymore mine. Shrapnel and explosives are packed in, the rear and sides blocked, so the explosion hurls the shrapnel out in

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Americans aren't much interested in foreign interventions in the abstract, they always rally when the fighting starts. Opposed in principle to an imperialist policy, they end up supporting one.

Lieven admires the formal elements of the American Creed as stated in the Constitution and Declaration, stressing individual rights and liberties. But even the positive has its drawbacks. When a nation's self-definition is grounded in the idea of democracy, potential enemies spring up everywhere—any country that does not share the creed is a candidate. American leaders who have fully internalized the creed are prone to conclude that those who oppose the United States must do so because of opposition to democracy itself, not for more banal or

one direction. Since proponents of any sentiment deemed racist now face social censure and often loss of employment in the United States, the only permissible focus for group hostility is outward. As Lieven puts it, "the suppression of feelings at home may have only increased the force with which they are directed at foreigners, who remain a legitimate and publicly accepted target of hatred."

Lieven closes with a long and tightly argued chapter on America and the Israel-Palestine conflict—that realm where the distance between American attitudes and those of the rest of the world is greatest and poses the most peril for the United States. What has occurred, Lieven argues, is a sort of

fusion of Israeli and American nationalisms so that American and Israeli actions in the Middle East are largely perceived as one. To some degree, that foreign perception is correct: Israeli and American attitudes have actually fused.

There are historical reasons for this development. America's own Protestant past and a literalist reading of the Bible among many churches plays a role. So too does America's early conception of itself as a New Israel. Add to that the American frontier narrative, so large a part of our national imagination. Our frontier is now closed and the Indians long since subjugated, but on the West Bank "civilized" Israeli settlers are carving out communities amidst natives who do not want them—or at least the story can be played that way. Add the institutional power of the Israel lobby, and the sum is something more than a relationship between a great power and a dependent ally.

One corollary of Israel's becoming embedded in America's own nationalist narrative is that many American intellectuals have adopted for themselves some of the more extreme ideas circulating in Israel—most dangerously the notion that the entire rest of the world is blindly, irrationally anti-Semitic and malevolent, so it is futile to listen to what other nations actually say.

Historical analogies to such a relationship between a major power and a client state are hard to come by. But Lieven suggests one: in 1914, Russia's rulers, heavily influenced by the ideology of Pan-Slavism, gave Serbia a sort of blank check, a license to press irredentist claims against Austria it would never have dreamed of doing otherwise. The results were lamentable for all concerned.

Or again, Lieven quotes an American diplomat as comparing the more or less unconditional support America gives Israel to supporting a West Germany with undefined and violent eastern borders during the Cold War. Under such circumstances, a peaceful reunification of Europe would never have taken place. Lieven clearly understands and supports the importance of Israel's exis-

tence as a Jewish state with recognized and secure boundaries. He defends the ethnic cleansing (now acknowledged by Israeli historians) that accompanied Zionist victories in the 1948 War as necessary to set up a viable Jewish state without a hostile internal minority. In public forums, he argues that acceptance of Israel's right to exist within secure boundaries is the essential admission ticket to serious debate on the subject. Such views, fairly conventional and, in my opinion, correct, are a platform from which he makes several other points, equally correct but hardly ever voiced in American discourse.

For instance, Lieven discusses the Palestinians' "original sin"—their failure to accept the UN's partition resolution of 1947, their readiness to fight Israel from the beginning. This history is often used to posit an irrational hatred of Israel's very existence on the part of the Arabs and to delegitimize the notion that any land-for-peace agreement is plausible. But Lieven adds to the discussion two facts that are almost always left out. Quoting Hannah Arendt, he reminds us that the Zionists in the 1940s demonstrated little inclination to grant any right at all to the Arabs in the Palestine

should be given up to form the state of Israel, they would have been acting in a way which, as far as I am aware, would have had no precedent in all of human history."

Lieven makes equally short work of the Beltway platitude, the boilerplate of ten thousand Congressional speeches, that Israel is America's "strategic asset" in the Mideast and its only friend. Friend it may be. But Israel's non-strategic asset status is "conclusively demonstrated by Israel's role, or rather non-role, in the Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003 in which Israeli forces did not participate. Of course they were begged by Washington not to participate, so as not to infuriate the Arab world." Lieven concludes dryly, "Strategic allies are supposed to come into their own when there is a conflict in their region. It is a funny kind of ally which has to be asked to go away and keep quiet so as not to cause vastly increased trouble."

An odd situation has arisen in which American nationalism—for good and ill more than 200 years in the making—cannot be seriously discussed without elucidating the role Israel has come to play in it. This notion would astonish every previous generation of American

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Mandate territory. The American Zionist convention of 1944 called for Jews to be granted "the whole of Palestine undivided and undiminished"—leaving the Arabs no choice but between emigration and second-class citizenship and hardly encouraging Arabs to believe that Israel itself would accept partition, regardless of what Zionist diplomats said at the time. Furthermore, it is often forgotten just what the Arabs were being asked to do. As Lieven points out, "If the Palestinian Arabs in the 1930's and 1940's had agreed that a large part of Palestine—where they were still a large majority ...

statesmen, and stating it now will enrage many. But as America today occupies two Muslim countries and threatens two others, it is hardly honest not to include it. Lieven's book has much that will annoy both conservatives and liberals; it has already brought forth the kind of denunciations meant to isolate and exclude from discussion—the regrettable consequence of candid writing about a vital topic. *America Right or Wrong* is nonetheless a *tour de force* of rhetoric, scholarship, and analysis, and deserves the widest possible readership. ■

[Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction, Paul Franco, Yale University Press, 209 pages]

Philosophy, Not Politics

By Gene Callahan

WHEN THE ENGLISH PHILOSOPHER Michael Oakeshott died in 1990, the *Guardian* called him “perhaps the most original academic political philosopher of this century.” The *Independent* declared that he had offered “the most eloquent and profound philosophical defence of conservative politics that the present century has produced.” Not to be outdone, the *Daily Telegraph* proclaimed that Oakeshott “was the greatest political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition since Mill—or even Burke.” It is ironic that such praise followed the death of a thinker who, during his life, was often neglected because he was out of step with intellectual fashion, or worse, dismissed as a mere apologist for reactionary politics.

While laudatory, these obituaries fail to do justice to the scope of Oakeshott’s thought. Politics was only one of the many areas he examined, and his conservatism was not an ideological stance but the expression of his fundamental understanding of the nature of human life. Oakeshott was far from being a pitchman for the Thatcherite revolution in Britain, as some characterized him. There was, in fact, “very little of Oakeshott in Thatcher’s Hayekian emphasis on economic productivity and prosperity,” as Paul Franco notes. Instead of a partisan program, in Oakeshott “there is a historical and philosophical depth that is often missing in even the best contemporary political theory.”

Michael Oakeshott: An Introduction goes a long way toward improving our understanding of this beguiling, elusive thinker. Franco, a professor of government at Bowdoin College, has produced

an engaging account of Oakeshott’s ideas that is both suitable for readers new to them and enlightening to long-time Oakeshott aficionados. Of particular interest to the latter is Franco’s success in placing his subject’s thought in the larger context of contemporary political philosophy, a matter to which Oakeshott himself paid little attention.

Franco’s effort is especially praiseworthy because Oakeshott’s intellectual journey did not follow a single, straight highway. He wrote on religion, metaphysics, politics, aesthetics, morality, education, history, and even horse racing. (He co-authored a book called *A Guide to the Classics*, a primer for picking winners at the track.) What’s more, while Oakeshott often revised his opinions, sometimes dramatically, he rarely paused to explain his reasons for doing so, seemingly concerned only with expressing his current view. He remains best known, as illustrated by the obituary notices, for his writings on politics, but even there he is not easy to pigeonhole. He is most often categorized as a conservative—a label he embraced at times—but various libertarians, liberals, and communitarians have drawn inspiration from his work.

Space does not permit discussion of every aspect of Oakeshott’s thought that Franco addresses, so instead I will touch on a few highlights of this volume, hoping to inspire my readers to discover the rest for themselves. Oakeshott’s first book, *Experience and Its Modes*, is an uncompromising argument for philosophical idealism. As Franco summarizes his subject’s metaphysics, “The objects of experience are not independent of our experiencing of them but are constituted by mind or thought.” This does not mean Oakeshott believed “that the subject of experience is the sole reality and the cause of what is experienced.” Like Hegel, whom he greatly admired, Oakeshott was an “objective idealist.” To understand what that means, consider that the experience of falling off a high cliff will consistently lead to the experience of a smashed up body, however much the person falling

tries to believe otherwise. It is the inescapable regularity with which certain experiences follow upon others that makes the world of experience a reality to which humans must adjust their conduct, rather than a dream or a fiction.

As Franco explains, for Oakeshott, experience is composed of distinct modes or what the philosopher would later call “platforms of understanding.” These modes include science, history, and practical life. Since each grapples with experience from a fundamentally distinct perspective, none is in a position to critique ideas arising from the others. Franco contends that Oakeshott was particularly concerned to safeguard religion, which he considered to be the pinnacle of practical life, from scientific and historical attempts to debunk faith. Oakeshott saw such criticism as being guilty of irrelevance. Religion is the sole relief within the practical world from the otherwise ceaseless pursuit of satisfactions, which once achieved only give rise to new desires. What matters about a creed is not its conformity with the findings of science or history but the solace it brings to the adherent in his practical life.

Franco argues that Oakeshott’s political philosophy followed naturally from his metaphysics. Since philosophy is not merely a more rigorous examination of commonsense ideas, but is instead experience itself viewed from a vantage different from that of practical life, it is not in a position to expound abstract rules or *a priori* principles that can direct everyday conduct. Oakeshott’s commentary on Plato’s famous allegory of the cave provides an apt illustration of how he conceives the relationship between theory and practice. He considers Plato correct in holding that the theorist, in turning his back on the shadows on the cave walls and ascending toward the light, achieves an understanding superior, in a sense, to those concerned only with practical affairs. But Oakeshott dismisses Plato’s conclusion that, as a result, the theorist can dictate correct practice to those who have remained behind in the cave. Their