

Imaginary Isolationists

By Michael D. Mosettig

IT'S PRETTY REMARKABLE IF A NEW book about American foreign policy that barely mentions terrorism, much less Osama bin Laden, can stand up after September 11. This one does, brilliantly.

Walter Russell Mead, a prolific and engaging writer, has produced a history of American foreign policy turning upon American ideas and practices since the days of the Founders. At its core is a myth-breaking proposition that the U.S. has been actively, and mostly successfully, involved in the world economically and diplomatically since the early days of the Republic. American isolationism, the author argues, is a myth propagated

to rally public opinion for engagement in the early days of the Cold War. The time spans when the U.S. seemed out of sync with the world, for instance in the decades after World War I and to some degree in the post-Cold War decade, are not the product of isolationism but the consequence of domestic gridlock among the four major schools of American policy. The author reminds that there would have been more than the necessary two-thirds of the Senate ready to ratify U.S. membership in a League of Nations with powers equivalent to the current United Nations had President Wilson been prepared to negotiate with Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. It was this deadlock, not the small bloc of isolationists, that scuppered ratification.

The gridlock theory is as pertinent as any in explaining why the 1990s now starkly loom as one of the great wasted opportunities of American foreign policy. China proved remarkably resistant to the lure of democracy, while Russia and other former Soviet republics had trouble absorbing democracy or capitalism. American public support for humanitarian interventions was shaky at best. The post-World-War-II consensus for expanded free trade began melting after

NAFTA gained narrow congressional approval in 1993. Congress only finally committed to paying back UN dues after the September 11 attacks. So much for the New World Order. Mead acknowledges he is on tricky ground with conventional historiography when he propounds his four-schools matrix. To over-simplify a highly textured presentation, he basically divides policy impulses among Hamiltonians, Wilsonians, Jeffersonians, and Jacksonians. The first two are globalist in outlook, the Hamiltonians to promote primarily economic engagement, the Wilsonians to promote American values, at gunpoint if necessary. The latter two derive from a certain skepticism about the world and the dangers of international involvement for American democracy. The Jeffersonians are particularly interested in limiting American engagement, the Jacksonians similarly inclined but ready to

respond with overwhelming force if they feel provoked.

To those of us who studied U.S. diplomatic history (at least in mid-century) probably at the feet of Wilsonian professors, Mead's exploration of the other schools is thought-provoking. To cite two examples: the influence of British commercial and foreign policies over the Hamiltonians; and the demonstration that the Jacksonians political and cultural influence, once

thought to be waning, has regained such strength as to make it politically impossible for a U.S. president to pursue a limited war. Even those of us who studied under the Wilsonians are reminded that Wilsonianism really pre-dates Woodrow and is rooted in the immensely important role of missionaries over two centuries of U.S. policy. Think of China, for starters.

Mead's historical review leads to several current points, still valid even if September 11 has broken the post-Cold War policy deadlock in Washington. First, this book is a ringing affirmation of a democratic foreign policy process, as much as this confuses and bedevils both foreign and American elites. Policies can strengthen at home and abroad when the tensions among the four

schools are worked out, absorbed and synthesized in democratic debate. Democratic foreign policy is more constant over decades, even centuries, Mead argues, than those that rely on the skills or force of a single great leader.

His second point is that democratic processes need to be engaged more fully as this country moves beyond the Cold War. Mead is worried, and with good reason, that a new elite has taken over from the old elite. While more ethnically diverse, it is even more cut off from ordinary Americans than the much-derided WASP elite in class, education, income and in the absence of such common experiences as serving in the military. He argues provocatively that the more years this neo-elite spends in prestige schools, the less its ability to speak and write in ways that average, less-privileged citizens find convincing.

Finally, Mead raises two basic questions that will outlast any current consensus on the war on terrorism: Namely, to what degree is this country ready to share sovereignty and decision-making with allies and international organizations. And second, that we have not had the necessary debate over the implications of the current American hegemony, a combination of military, economic, technological, and cultural power unmatched in history?

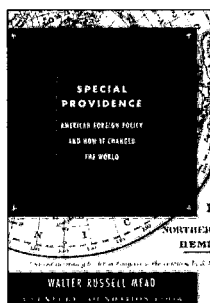
Alas, in contradiction to Mead's own admonition to the neo-elites, hegemony is not a word that fits easily in the American vernacular. Indeed, it rolls far more readily off tongues at the foreign ministries in Paris and Beijing, two places, among many, where this book should be required reading.

MICHAEL D. MOSETTIG is senior producer for foreign affairs and defense at the NEWS HOUR WITH JIM LEHRER.

Moose Tracking

By Howard B. Schaffer

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, TO THE consternation and dismay of the conservative leadership of his own Republican party, Theodore Roosevelt became the 26th president of the United States. It proved a turning point in American history. The youngest and, by any reckoning, one of the most dynamic and fascinating men



SPECIAL PROVIDENCE:
American Policy and How It
Changed the World
by Walter Russell Mead
Knopf, \$25.00

ever to reach the White House, Roosevelt—the Theodore Rex of Edmund Morris's highly readable new biography—followed a long succession of mediocrities who had presided over the country in the 36 years after the death of Lincoln.

Like his assassinated predecessor William McKinley, these mostly forgotten men felt no need to exercise the power and influence inherent in the presidency and were largely overshadowed by the congressional leaders, industrial tycoons and Wall Street bankers who dominated the American scene in the post-Civil War years. Roosevelt rejected their legacy and made the White House a powerful force in shaping the nation's political, economic and social life. The first president to begin his term in the 20th century, he had an impact on the governing of the country that endured long after he left office in 1909 after completing his second administration.

Theodore Rex—Morris recalls that Henry James used the phrase—is a lucid, insightful and sympathetic portrait of Roosevelt's seven and a half years as president. It follows the able biographer's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (1979) in which Morris chronicled Roosevelt's meteoric progress from his childhood in a prominent patrician family in Manhattan, through his years as a privileged Harvard prep and tough North Dakota ranch hand, to a succession of political and military positions—among them the New York State assemblyman, New York City commissioner of police, heroic and famed leader of the Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War, a governor of New York, and, briefly, vice president.

Theodore Rex picks up Roosevelt's story with McKinley's death, when as Senator Mark Hanna famously declared, "that damned cowboy is the president of the United States." Roosevelt was then not quite 43. What follows is an almost play-by-play account of Roosevelt's years in power that begins with his breakneck dash by horseback and special trainride from his cabin in the wilderness of the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York to Buffalo, where McKinley lay dead, the victim of an anarchist's bullet.

In the ensuing 729 pages of narrative and endnotes, Morris focuses on the main events of Roosevelt's two administrations, the time of the Progressive Era in domestic politics and of America's arrival at the high table of world affairs.

These were event-filled years. Morris describes with drama and detail Roosevelt's success in resolving the crippling strike of Pennsylvania anthracite miners, an unprecedented intercession of the federal government in labor-management relations, and his drive to curb the power of the railroads and bust corporate trusts. He devotes long sections to Roosevelt's efforts to enact laws providing for what would nowadays be called consumer protection and his leadership of the conservation movement, which created the vast system of national parks and forests we know today.

Turning to the international scene, Morris discusses with precision and insight the machinations that led to the building of the Panama Canal, and his section on Roosevelt's intervention with the Japanese and Russians to end their 1904-05 war is particularly good. The president's efforts led to a peace treaty and won him a Nobel Peace Prize.

Morris brightens his descriptions and assessments of Roosevelt's official activities with colorful portraits of many of the president's contemporaries, from Elihu Root to William Howard Taft. But all of these characters are overshadowed in Morris's pages by Roosevelt himself. A prodigious writer, voracious reader, tireless speaker, endless talker, keen hunter, wily politician, stern moralist, and loving paterfamilias, the charismatic president was a dominating figure devoted to an incredibly strenuous physical and intellectual life.

Foreign envoys clambered to keep up with him as he raced on horseback through Rock Creek Park and swam in the Potomac. Visiting Germans were astounded by his familiarity with the masterpieces of their fatherland's literature and his comprehensive knowledge of its affairs. He similarly impressed a

delegation of Jews when he recited to them, impromptu, lines from Longfellow's poem, "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport."

Asked by his friend, Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University, to recommend literary

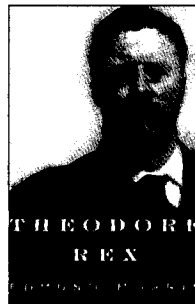
works his students should read, Roosevelt produced a long list that included histories, biographies, novels, poems, plays, and philosophical discourses written by Greek, Roman, English, French, Russian, Italian, German, and American authors, many of which he had read in their original languages.

The newspapers gave him enormous coverage, treating the public to accounts of his

bear hunting in Colorado and Mississippi, his boxing and wrestling prowess, his energetic romps with his five children at the White House and his family home on Long Island. These activities were in sharp contrast to the placid, sedentary style that McKinley and most of his recent predecessors had preferred.

Morris seamlessly mixes his accounts and assessments of Roosevelt's public activities with anecdotes and analyses—both his own and contemporaries'—of the private presidential persona. He writes in a lively style, but too often gets caught up in purple prose. He favors minutely detailed descriptions of places and events and relies too heavily for them on a few contemporary press stories. On several occasions he strays into psychohistory, telling us what Roosevelt was thinking at the time. These techniques, which best-selling biographers like Morris increasingly seem to favor, are distracting and make *Theodore Rex* considerably longer than it ought to be.

Morris is obviously an admirer of Roosevelt but he is objective in his assessments and is not overwhelmed by the long catalog of Roosevelt's achievements he records. He spells out how basically cautious the president often was in expounding changes in political and social policy and how willing he was to compromise with hostile conservatives in his own Republican party



THEODORE REX
by Edmund Morris
Simon & Schuster, \$35.00