

The Washington Post

July 17, 2005, Sunday, Book World, page T03

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War of the Worlds

Review of SANDS OF EMPIRE: Missionary Zeal, American Foreign Policy, and the Hazards of Global Ambition, By Robert W. Merry, Simon & Schuster. 302 pp. \$26; THREE BILLION NEW CAPITALISTS: The Great Shift of Wealth and Power to the East, By Clyde Prestowitz, Basic. 321 pp. \$26.95; THE CUBE AND THE CATHEDRAL: Europe, America, and Politics Without God, By George Weigel, Basic. 202 pp. \$23.

In Sands of Empire, Robert W. Merry frames history as a debate between those who believe in progress and those who believe in cycles. The progress camp -- think Abbe de Saint-Pierre, Woodrow Wilson and Thomas L. Friedman -- firmly Enlightenment modern; the cycle camp - - think Oswald Spengler and Samuel P. Huntington -- is pre- or post-modern, or perhaps just "unenlightened." Merry identifies himself firmly as part of the cycle camp, arguing that Western civilization, led by the United States, is about to get rolled by Islam unless we get our priorities straight.

George Weigel agrees in his new book, The Cube and the Cathedral, although he sees the coming clash more as a replay of the Ottoman Empire vs. Christian Europe. Clyde Prestowitz, meanwhile, sees doom approaching from farther east, in the form of Asian cheap labor. In Three Billion New Capitalists, he warns of a coming tsunami but attributes its power less to the indelible features of a specific civilization than to the logic of the market. (Indeed, Prestowitz is really in the progress camp but, like his fellow modernists, believes progress needs a helping hand from time to time.) All three authors offer prescriptions for heading off disaster: a healthy dose of foreign policy realism, in Merry's case; religious renewal, according to Weigel; and for Prestowitz, a new New Deal. Readers disinclined to think that the sky is falling are in for an unpleasant jolt.

Merry's chief target is what he sees as the idealistic tradition of American foreign policy, currently embodied in the Bush administration's push to reform the Middle East. He argues that we in the West have been misled by the idea of "progress" into thinking that Western values of individualism and democracy represent some sort of ultimate standard for all civilizations. Instead, each civilization is unique and bound to remain so, competing against the others for global dominance.

And if we are fated to clash with the world's other civilizations, Merry reasons, why waste time trying to make them over in our image? Make no mistake, the war on terror is not a war for democracy or a war against a small group of evildoers. Merry, following Huntington, has a much more straightforward answer: "The enemy is Islam."

Thinking we can bring democracy to Islam is Eurocentric and foolhardy, although, as Merry laments, it is a strategy that currently commands the support of both neoconservatives and liberal internationalists. Merry's preferred foreign policy is "conservative interventionism," another name for Kissingerian realism. Specifically, he argues, we can win the war on terror only if we are ready to side with all those who oppose radical Islamic fundamentalism, even autocratic regimes. Certainly the debate here is cyclical; remember all the arguments for why we had to support Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Chile and the generals in Argentina in the 1970s?

Merry's prescriptions for the home front are more sinister still. "It is naive," he tells us, "to believe that the country can assimilate and protect itself from large numbers of Muslims entering the country as the civilizational war continues." The answer, in his view, is immigration restrictions for Muslims. At this point the civilization we are supposed to be defending becomes difficult to recognize.

Weigel is similarly worried about a war of civilizations, although, focusing on Europe, he fears that the West's defenders are not so much distracted as dispirited and feeble. He describes a Europe in profound spiritual and demographic crisis: two sides, in his view, of the same secular coin. His basic argument is that if Europeans fail to cast off the "atheistic Humanism" that led to the horrors of the 20th century and rediscover their Christian, specifically Catholic, roots, their future could be bleak.

Weigel offers several possible scenarios. His "nightmare scenario" is titled "1683 reversed," a reference to the year when the Ottoman defeat at the gates of Vienna saved Europe from becoming a Turkish protectorate. As he imagines it: "Most of western Europe [would become] Islamicized . . . in the sense of being drawn into the civilizational orbit of the Arab Islamic world. . . . Non-Muslim western Europeans become dhimmis, second-class citizens with no effective role in public life." But even the "muddling through" scenario sounds rather grim. Quoting the historian Niall Ferguson, Weigel projects: "A youthful Muslim society to the south and east of the Mediterranean is poised to colonize -- the term is not too strong -- a senescent Europe."

This is strong stuff. Weigel sees Christianity as the moral foundation of Europe's traditions of democracy, human rights and freedom. He is certainly right that Christian morality played a role in the European Enlightenment and the development of the concept of human dignity. But Christian morality also played a role in the Inquisition and the Thirty Years War, in which fighting between Catholics and Protestants killed a far larger percentage of the European population than did the world wars. And to argue that secularism is responsible for the Holocaust is breathtaking on its face; the European church, whether Catholic or Protestant, did precious little to protect Europe's Jews or to stand up for the human dignity of any of Hitler's victims.

Worse still, Weigel seems to believe with Merry that Islam and democracy are fundamentally incompatible. Only Turkey, in his view, has succeeded in becoming a "pluralistic democracy," and then only by forcefully taking "Islam out of public life." This is no accident, he believes; "it reflects the deep theological and doctrinal structure of Islam."

Weigel would do well to reread his American history; Massachusetts Bay colony was a theocracy if ever there was one. Indeed, the American journey from Plymouth Rock to the First Amendment was marked precisely by the realization that we could achieve a pluralist democracy only by taking Christianity, or any other religion, completely out of public life. If Turkey has successfully followed the European and American path, why should the way be barred for the Middle East and North Africa?

What unites Merry and Weigel most fundamentally is their insistence on seeing the world through a civilizational lens, one that assumes a predisposition to a particular kind of politics. Yet at what point does this “civilizationism” become racism? In America’s contemporary culture wars, even to raise the “r” word is to invite countercharges of political correctness and an unwillingness or inability simply to face reality. Arguments about the inevitable clash of civilizations, however, have an ugly essentialist quality, running directly counter to the American creed that liberty, democracy and human dignity are universal values. Our founders, after all, held it “self-evident” that all human beings, regardless of religion, are created equal and are equally entitled to self-government.

This is not American idealism, as Merry would charge; it is the cornerstone of American identity. To argue, as Weigel does, that Europe cannot be Europe if it is full of Muslims, or, as Huntington does in his most recent book, *Who Are We?*, that America cannot be America if it is full of Hispanics, betrays the deepest values of the Enlightenment and the tolerance and individualism that are the West’s greatest strengths.

Compared with the doomsday scenarios of Merry and Weigel, Prestowitz’s economic wake-up call seems downright calm, though the crisis it foretells will likely have far larger effects than the war of civilizations the other authors imagine. *Three Billion New Capitalists* makes the case, familiar to readers of any major newspaper or magazine, that the entry of hundreds of millions of cheap, highly skilled workers is profoundly restructuring the global economy. Simply put, Americans must learn to compete against Chinese and Indian workers who will accept a fraction of U.S. wages to do the same jobs -- and perhaps even do them better.

Prestowitz’s Friedman-esque synthesis of anecdotes, statistics and metaphor is engaging, though it has appeared unfortunately close to the publication of the New York Times columnist’s *The World Is Flat*. Many of Prestowitz’s recommendations are familiar -- a more proactive industrial policy in Washington, more investment in research and development, better education in science and math (where the United States trails the industrial world) -- but some are eye-opening bold. For example, he advocates a national system of education financing, national health care and a national consumption tax in place of the current income tax. Prestowitz also recommends developing NAFTA into a European Union-like entity that would extend beyond North America to include Japan in a common trade and currency area.

These suggestions are not likely to advance far in a country currently struggling to approve a free trade agreement with the tiny economies of Central America. Still, they are perhaps not unexpected from an author who, when he was a U.S. trade official, reputedly kept a baseball bat in his office so that he could illustrate the smashing of trade barriers on hapless desktop items.

But even if they are not politically viable, Prestowitz's suggestions are at least constructive. They are aimed at riding the cycles of history comfortably, if not rising completely above them. America sorely needs such thinking at a time when the triumphalism of our rhetoric is increasingly undermined by the apocalyptic visions of authors such as Merry and Weigel. America's historic strength is the ability to look, however imperfectly, beyond religion, culture, language, ethnicity and tradition -- all the elements that define a civilization -- to see individual men and women seeking to create the best possible lives for themselves and their children, both at home and abroad. Better in the end to keep our values and lose our place in the world, like Britain before us, than to keep our place and lose our soul.