



The Irony of Manifest Destiny: The Tragedy of America's Foreign Policy

William Pfaff

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"For years," William Pfaff writes, "there has been little or no critical reexamination of how and why the successful postwar American policy of 'patient but firm containment of Soviet expansionist tendencies...has over decades turned into a vast project for ending tyranny in the world. We defend this position by making the claim that the United States possesses an exceptional status among nations that confers upon it special international responsibilities, and exceptional privileges in meeting those responsibilities. This is where the problem lies. It has become somewhat of a national heresy to suggest the U.S. does not have a unique moral status and role to play in the history of nations and therefore in the affairs of the contemporary world. In fact it does not."

Cogently, thoughtfully, powerfully, Pfaff lays out the historical roots behind the American exceptionalism that animates our politics and foreign relations?and makes clear why it is flawed and must ultimately fail. Those roots lie in the secularization of western society brought about by the Enlightenment, and in America's effective separation from the common history of the west during the nineteenth and early parts of the twentieth century, during which it failed to gain "the indispensable experience Europeans have acquired of modern ideological folly and national tragedy." We are, thus, hubristic and naïve in our adventurism, and blind to the truth of the threats we face. No mere critic, Pfaff offers insightful observations on how we can and must adapt to Muslim extremism, nuclear competition, and other challenges of our time.

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