

Politics Versus Culture

by Clyde Wilson

America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire

by Claes G. Ryn

New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers; 228 pp., \$34.95

A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World

by Claes G. Ryn

Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press; 148 pp., \$37.50

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We literate minority still at large here in the *Dar al-Harb* can learn much from Claes Ryn about our present condition and future prospects. In *America the Virtuous*, he makes a rigorous and definitive analysis of that phenomenon of “neoconservatism” that has converted the erstwhile American republic into a (self-)righteous empire.

Neoconservatism is really neo-Jacobinism, an elitist notion of governing the world according to certain abstractions alleged to be universal truths. Contrary to its promoters, as Ryn spells out beyond cavil, neoconservatism is both repulsive to the founding ideas of the United States and a pernicious heresy when viewed against the mainstream of Western civilization. Ryn’s greatest strength is his ability to assimilate the phenomena of current cultural and political life into meaningful patterns of intellectual history and then to detect and expose fashionable and destructive deviations from the Western tradition. His larger purpose is to preserve and perpetuate that tradition amidst inevitable change—a mission he pursues with poise, insight, and catholic spirit.

A Common Human Ground confronts the era of multiculturalism with the ancient home truth of Aristotle that harmony among men is a product not of uniformity but of genuine, mutually respectful diversity. Of course, multiculturalism, as promulgated and practiced in the United States, has nothing to do with the pursuit of cultural diversity. In fact, it has nothing to do with either culture or diversity. Its goal is to substitute a coercive uniform nonculture for the glorious diversity of Western civilization, for the profit of

certain groups and the proletarianization of the majority. Ryn’s case is that respect for other cultures, and the peaceful co-existence of cultures, are only possible among people who are themselves conscious participants in their own, necessarily particularist culture. There is no universal culture. How could there be, when there is no such thing as a universal man? It takes nothing away from the author’s achievement to notice that we must be in very sad shape indeed to require such sophisticated intellectual enterprise to point out the obvious.

The provenance of *A Common Human Ground* is interesting: It grew out of lectures the author was invited to give at Beijing University. It seems that some thoughtful post-Marxist scholars there have interested themselves in the problem of how the unique cultures thrown up by history can be preserved amidst the rushing tidal wave of globalization. These scholars had, despite all the obstacles of language, poverty, and repression, somehow become acquainted with Professor Ryn’s writings and invited him to elaborate them. It is a real comfort to know that there are, somewhere in the world, at least a few representatives of an ancient culture, holding positions in its leading university, who yearn for cultural survival. Would that the same could be said about our country.

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The Bloody Quaker

by James O. Tate

The Man Who Would Be King: The First American in Afghanistan

by Ben Macintyre

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 351 pp., \$25.00

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In recent memory, when we think of Afghanistan, we recall perhaps first the struggle of the CIA-backed *mujahideen* guerillas against the Soviet invaders. The Soviets lost 50,000 men and eventually their power, but in their (our?) victory(?), the Afghans lost a million people and such unity as they had. The transition through civil war to the Taliban is a bit fuzzy, though the impression of “blow-

back” is unmistakable. More recently, we think of videotape of bombs falling on rocks and the bizarre displacement of Afghanistan by Iraq in American bombsights.

The sense of what Yogi Berra called “*déjà vu* all over again” is rather disquieting. America’s repetition of British imperial entanglements offers many points of ironic reflection, not the least of which are the willfully misleading tone of our national rhetoric and the mordant formulation “Wolfowitz of Arabia.” Of course, we all relate to the surreal politics of our time as best we can. I, in considering these matters, think of attending a garden party more than three decades ago at which I heard Jerry Bremer (our recently dethroned proconsul in Iraq) declare that Afghanistan, his first diplomatic posting, had many strategic options. Indeed it did.

British journalist and author Ben Macintyre has had his own experience of Afghanistan and has gone on to actualize and substantiate the imaginative vibrations and resonances he sensed there in 1989. One echo was of Rudyard Kipling’s story “The Man Who Would Be King,” written in 1888 when the author was but 23 years old. Macintyre calls Kipling’s story “thrilling stuff, a story of freelance imperialism in which a white man becomes a powerful potentate in a distant land, but also a cautionary tale of colonial hubris, ending in disaster.” He is right as far as he goes, but I think there is more to say about Kipling’s great tale in its own right. As for the historical genesis of that fiction, Macintyre has made a tremendous contribution—or, rather, two contributions—to our understanding of the colonial imagination.

Macintyre came across hostile accounts of Josiah Harlan (1799-1871)—American Quaker and Freemason from Chester County, Pennsylvania, adventurer, quack, mercenary, and mountebank—in colonial British sources. The bulk of Harlan’s papers were thought to have been lost in a fire in 1929, but Macintyre found his journals and other materials, misplaced in a local library. Harlan had boasted in 1842 that he had once been the prince of Ghor or Ghorree, a realm high in the Hindu Kush, under a secret treaty with its ruler. This boast was assumed either to be untrue or to be without foundation, but Macintyre found the document itself, justifying Harlan’s claim to exotic royalty.

But there, yellow with age at the bottom of the box, was a doc-

ument, written in Persian and stamped with an intricately beautiful oval seal, a treaty, 170 years old, forged between an Afghan prince and the man who would be king.

Macintyre's second contribution is hard to define exactly, though easy to sense. I do not know whether it is his powers of expression or the vision and empathy that are expressed that lend his account such distinction. However that may be, his book is a whopping good read, whether he is accounting for all the senses in which Alexander the Great is such an imposing figure in history, in Afghanistan, in Harlan's imagination, and in Kipling's tale; or taking us through Harlan's campaign of 1838-9. Harlan led a division of the Kabul army of Dost Mohammed Khan as a punitive expedition against Murad Beg, khan of Kunduz, Uzbek warlord and slave trader, over the Hindu Kush, marching in the footsteps of Alexander. With nearly 4,000 men, 2,000 horses, 400 camels, and a bull elephant, Harlan sallied forth to cross mountain passes of nearly 16,000 feet. As he said, with the air too thin for flight, "large storks could be seen labouring up the steep passes on foot." The result of his expedition was both a glorious beginning and an ignominious end. Though he was secret royalty, he could not exploit the opportunity, for, as luck would have it, the results of his expedition were swept away by the British invasion of Afghanistan. Of the 15,000 people of the British incursion, only one survived. Harlan returned to America and obscurity.

The story of Harlan is not quite justified altogether for its own sake; Macintyre connects it firmly to Kipling's story. One stone that he has left unturned is a more precise attack on the great tale itself—a miniaturization of epic, romance, and tragedy, a triumph of the vernacular, and an object lesson in the craft of embedded or displaced narrative. Even Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* owes something to it; and we must be reminded that Conrad's character Lord Jim is based on James Brooke, the White Rajah of Sarawak, who is alluded to in Kipling's text. Another rock to be turned over, in my opinion, is to examine the phenomenon of the "bloody Quaker." Was Harlan so exceptional after all? As Martin Green has pointed out, the bloody Quaker is a staple of imperial romance, in Defoe's *Captain Singleton*, as well as in Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, in Robert

Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods*, and Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

Finally, I must add one further reflection. The excitement of Macintyre's narrative, regarding both Harlan and his own exploration, rather masks the truth that his account is fundamentally an inspired work of creative scholarship. What would have happened if the story had been written by an abstracted academic, hag-ridden with postmodern clichés about Harlan's sexuality, political incorrectness, misogyny, and orientalism? The tale would have had no teller and would have died as a monograph. Instead, a vivid and shrewd imaginative engagement has found its own best expression in this brilliant recital.

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I.O.U.: \$10,000

by Paul Gottfried

The Case for Israel

by Alan Dershowitz

*New York: John Wiley & Sons;
264 pp., \$19.95*



Alan Dershowitz's brief on behalf of Israel has at least some truth on its side. Had the Arabs accepted the territorial partition arranged by the United Nations in 1947, far fewer of them would today be living in exile; and certainly the Palestinians in 1948 bore a heavy blame for the war that resulted in the expulsion of over 700,000 of their countrymen. Moreover, had the Arab commanders won their war in 1948, they would, in all probability, have been faithful to their exhortation to their troops and permitted a massacre of the defeated Jews. Finally, Israel has indeed established a more tolerant and (in the proper sense) liberal regime than have most of her Arab neighbors, and she did work to achieve a comprehensive peace with the Palestinians in the Camp David meetings, which the PLO rejected.

That said, it might seem that I welcome Dershowitz's brief. That, however, is far from being the case. This book includes such glaring factual errors and such odious charges against those who disagree with the author that Elie Wiesel, Mario Cuomo, and other dignitaries who

provided blurbs for its dust jacket ought to be ashamed of themselves. In several internet debates with Dershowitz, historian-gadfly Norman Finkelstein, whose parents suffered in the real holocaust in Eastern Europe (rather than, like Dershowitz, in some belated postwar trauma in Brooklyn), took his antagonist to the cleaners. Dershowitz, as it turned out, was so ignorant of his subject that he could not identify the author of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, requiring the Israelis to withdraw from the occupied territories. Equally significant, Dershowitz has borrowed large gobs of his text from a biased polemic by journalist Joan Peters. From Peters' unacknowledged work *From Time Immemorial*, Dershowitz takes the claim that the Palestinian presence in the disputed territory was minimal when the first modern Jewish settlement was established in the late 19th century. Peters also understates the number of Palestinians driven from their homes, while pretending that the expulsions had nothing to do with an Israeli plan for ethnic cleansing. Israeli historian Benny Morris, whom Dershowitz selectively quotes, had shot to pieces fictions regarding these matters before Peters' book appeared. By the mid-1980's, most of the Dershowitz-Peters account had undergone critical revision by the Israelis themselves, less inhibited than American Zionists about telling the truth.

Dershowitz might be surprised to learn that Jews and Arabs were both represented on both sides in World War I. There were even Jews who backed the "imperialist colonialist Turkish Empire," which Sephardic Jews—e.g., the family of Anglo-Iraqi historian Elie Kedourie—had served for generations. There were, on the other side, Arab leaders, like the shariff of Mecca, a close friend of General Allenby and of Lawrence of Arabia, who fought for the British against the Turks. In World War II, contrary to Dershowitz's assertion, Arabs again had representatives on both sides of the struggle. While the grand mufti of Jerusalem reacted to a growing Jewish presence in the Middle East by endorsing Hitler, the Saudis backed their British allies. And—although this could be hard for Dershowitz to believe—right-wing Zionists, in the Etzel Leumi, solicited and took aid from the Nazis to launch a "Great Revolt" against the British.

In one particularly puzzling passage, we learn that "neo-fascists" and those who "have sided with America's enemies—the