

Progress in the Sands

by Daniel McCarthy

"The mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation."

—William McKinley

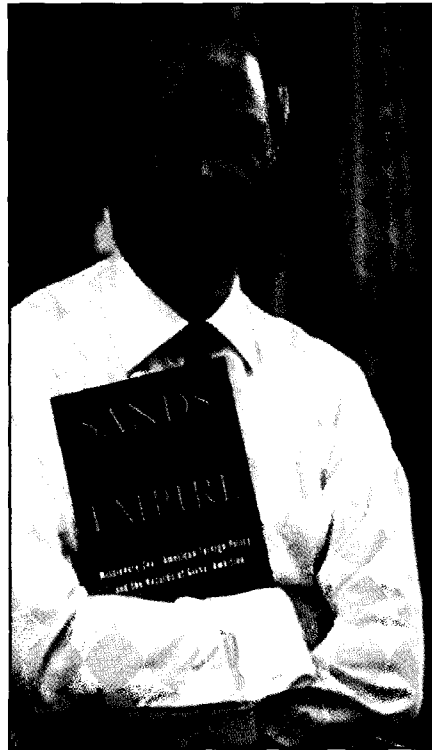
Sands of Empire: Missionary Zeal, American Foreign Policy, and the Hazards of Global Ambition

by Robert W. Merry
New York: Simon & Schuster;
303 pp., \$26.00

What sets *Sands of Empire* apart from the growing list of books scrutinizing the Bush administration's foreign policy is its philosophical ambition. Where other authors have contented themselves with estimating the neoconservative influence on America's strategic posture or describing the nation's slouch toward a garrison state, Robert Merry puts the global misadventures of the last three presidents into the context of *Weltgeschichte*. Behind neoconservative and Clintonite interventionists alike, Merry identifies an erroneous philosophy of history that subordinates all concrete cultures—and, indeed, concrete facts—to the idea of unceasing and inevitable Progress.

Merry, the publisher of *Congressional Quarterly* and formerly a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, has written a book that is part intellectual history, part policy brief, and always with a lay readership in mind. Early chapters survey the development of Progress, a peculiarly Western notion with delusions of universality, from the 18th-century Abbé de Saint-Pierre and the Encyclopaedists to Francis Fukuyama and Thomas Friedman.

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This intellectual lineage alone is enough to discredit the belief in man's continual improvement, for it illustrates in the world of ideas the process that Francis Galton called the regression toward mediocrity. Against the ideologies retailed by these progressive thinkers, Merry offers a cyclical interpretation of the rise and fall of great—but ultimately mortal—civilizations, drawing upon the work of Spengler, Toynbee, and Samuel Huntington. He enlists J.B. Bury and Robert Nisbet to good effect as well in respect of their criticisms of Progress, though he leaves unmentioned Nisbet's reservations about the cyclical alternative.

For adherents of Progress, differences across civilizations—of language, culture, religion, and ethnicity—are all so much ephemera, destined either to assimilate to one another or to fade away as the developing world catches up with the West, which means, in practice, Muslims

eating McRibbs at 24-hour fast-food chains while Africans celebrate the new sacraments of democracy and human rights. America's role in all this is supposed to be that of a midwife—or, as Friedman has put it with singular vulgarity, "Attention Kmart shoppers: Without America on duty, there will be no America Online." Fukuyama, for his part, recognizes at least that there is a price to be paid for fulfilling the *telos* of the human race: "In the post-historical world there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history."

Merry does not believe a word of it. His views are congruent with Spengler's, and, like Spengler, he believes the West has already passed its zenith. Globalization does not mean Westernization, and it certainly does not herald the disappearance of cultural differences. On the contrary, Merry agrees with Huntington that globalization is leading to more intense ethnic and religious identity politics. The best hope for America and Europe in such a world is to avoid unnecessary conflicts with other civilizations while protecting the West's vital interests with military force—a strategy that Merry calls "conservative interventionism."

By contrast, "humanitarian interventionism," of the sort exemplified by George H.W. Bush's deployment of troops in Somalia and Bill Clinton's war on Serbia, promises to embroil the United States in unwinnable wars for utopian goals. Yet Merry is able to demonstrate how the ideology of Progress, articulated by journalists at such publications as *Time* and *Newsweek*, drives the country

into just such morasses. The book's chapters on Serbia and Kosovo provide an excellent capsule summary of the complex history that the respectable media's terrible simplifiers ignored in urging America to war. Selling such liberals as Warren Zimmerman, ambassador to Yugoslavia, on using American bombs and aircraft to settle 800 years of civilizational conflict in the Balkans was an easy task, given their predisposition to believe in the moral imperative and historical inevitability of the triumph of human rights. A surgical strike here and a smart missile there would surely be enough to dispel a few trivial ethno-religious prejudices. Besides, as Madeleine Albright once asked Colin Powell, "What is the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?"

A similar armed doctrine of Progress animates the neoconservatives. That some neocons in the late 70's and early 80's criticized the application of humanitarianism to foreign policy is only an apparent contradiction. Yes, Irving Kristol once wrote,

The proper extent of political rights in any nation is not something our State Department can have a meaningful opinion about. It can only be determined by the people of that nation, who will draw on their own political and cultural backgrounds . . .

But Merry shows that for the neocons, "the underlying principles shift to fit the advocacy of the moment," while their "tendency to see the world in stark terms of good and evil" leads them to

a generally unnuanced view of the global challenge, divorced from the political and global complexities that often force presidents to pursue their goals with flexibility, deftness, and patience.

Criticism of Jimmy Carter's toothless moralizing in foreign policy was one thing; but when circumstances changed and the neoconservatives had sympathetic—and militarily adventurous—administrations to work with, they quickly adjusted their rhetoric to fit the new reality.

Merry is, if anything, too charitable here. He draws on the work of Mark Gerson, a neoconservative himself and hagi-

ographer of the movement, to conclude that "There is no distinctly neoconservative bedrock of postulates or assumptions that provide a consistency of advocacy"; neoconservatism is simply a tendency or persuasion. In accepting Gerson's view, however, Merry risks undercutting his own argument. In fact, the dedication of neoconservatives to progressive ideology is strong, consistent, clear, and on display whenever they discuss immigration. For neoconservatives, America is not a people or a lived culture but an abstraction, a proposition. As Irving Kristol himself has admitted, for them, America is an ideological country—or perhaps just an ideology—in the same way that the Soviet Union once was. Evangelizing for the American proposition may entail practical difficulties (democratizing the world takes time), but the underlying justification is always plain: The national interest is synonymous with an ideology of Americanism. Exporting the ideology thus makes the country safer, regardless of the degree to which democracy is at stake in any given situation.

Merry omits any discussion of the neoconservative commitment to an expansive view of what is best for the state of Israel. Certainly, the identification of American with Israeli interests is a dogma of their ideology that cannot be seen as mere loyalty to a U.S. ally, or even an outgrowth of prudential concern for the well-being of the Israeli people, since the policies advanced by neocons are, if anything, likely to prove even more disastrous for Israel than they have already proved for the United States. The neocon belief that wars to Americanize the world will make Israel more secure is simply irrational, an article of faith—like the idea that the dictatorship of the proletariat means the withering of the state.

In addition to humanitarian interventionism and neoconservative adventurism—two variations on the same theme—three other foreign-policy fallacies, Merry contends, have beset the nation over the last century. One of these, now largely extinct except for its echoes in neoconservative belligerence, is the imperialism of Theodore Roosevelt, modeled after that of 19th-century Britain. This strain flourished only briefly: "An astute politician, Roosevelt could see the limits of his vision," Merry writes. Liberal isolationism, arising in reaction against the Vietnam War, has revealed itself to be similarly evanescent, prospering only in the final days of the Cold War. After that, and with a

Democrat in the Oval Office again, such liberal doves as Joe Biden and Paul Wellstone quickly assumed the plumage of humanitarian interventionism.

As for right-wing isolationism, Merry acknowledges its popularity in the interwar period and gives conservative critics of interventionism a modicum of credit. He believes that conservative isolationism might yet enjoy a resurgence:

it would be unwise to dismiss it for all time, because it is a doctrine that could be brought back to life through events. Should America's ventures into the world come to tragedy, with American lives thrown into turmoil and despair, the country's electorate might very well turn to conservative isolationism as an avenue for returning America to a time of stability and safety.

But ultimately Merry rejects an America that refrains from trying to shape the world by the use of subterfuge and force. He opts instead for conservative interventionism, which

at its best . . . focuses on limited goals of stability fostered through strength and balance-of-power global politics. It accepts the world as it is . . . It embraces the ideas of Western civilization and assumes America is not only part of it but remains its primary protector.

In his closing chapter, Merry makes his case for this strategy. However, he frames his argument against the woolly assumptions of humanitarian bombardiers and neocon revolutionists. His case is valid as far as it goes, but it disregards the criticisms that conservative isolationists—properly speaking, noninterventionists—level against his contentions. For one thing, the "greatest exponent of conservative interventionism," in Merry's own words, was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. "He sought to ensure . . . that America's foreign policy was intertwined with Britain's." One need not be a die-hard critic of America's entry into World War II to think that something is amiss here. According to Merry, Roosevelt "put a mighty squeeze on Japan as a way of forcing America into the global conflict." But if simply getting the United States into the war was virtue enough, surely a liberal interventionist could have

done the thing better—he would not have waited for an attack on Pearl Harbor. On the other hand, if a foreign policy that puts American lives, rather than British interests, first is the proper object of a conservative strategy, provoking the Japanese into attacking us surely would have been the last thing a prudent leader should have done.

A more recent example of conservative interventionism bears fruit even more bitter. Merry is right to say that George H.W. Bush set the precedent for humanitarian warfare in the 90's by sending U.S. forces to Somalia. But before that action, the author claims, the first President Bush's foreign policy had been marked by conservative interventionism, as illustrated by the overthrow of Manuel Noriega and, above all, by the first Gulf War. The latter, we are told, amounted to a proper defense of America's vital interest in oil, which

fueled the Western economy, made possible the commerce that fed, clothed, and housed the peoples of the West, and propelled the U.S. military that in turn served as a force for international

stability.

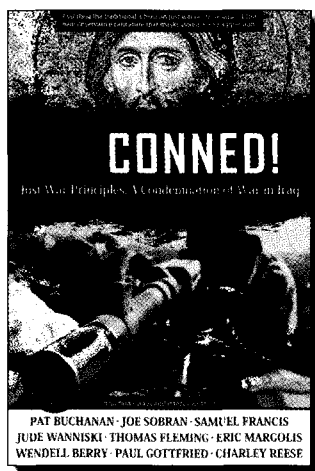
Yet, even if this picture were accurate, the price of interventionism must be borne in mind. The first Gulf War, with its stationing of American troops on the Arabian Peninsula, paved the road to the attacks on September 11, 2001.

Pearl Harbor and the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center provide a strong *prima facie* indication of what is wrong in conservative interventionism. But are attacks on American soil simply the price we pay for the policies needed to keep us free, or at least rich? Leon Hadar has made several arguments in his recent book *Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East* that suggest otherwise. Unless Saddam Hussein has more unusual bathing habits than anyone has hitherto suspected, the only thing he could do with whatever oil he acquired from Kuwait was to sell it. The same would hold true assuming he could have conquered Saudi Arabia as well. In that event, he would have been in a position to meddle with world oil prices more dramatically—while even that eventuality would not have been catastrophic for the United States, which, as Hadar points out, does not (contrary to popular per-

ception) obtain most of her oil from the Middle East. Conservatives might also wonder whether rising oil prices—which necessarily produce incentives to develop other sources of energy and for individuals to walk more and drive less—are always such a bad thing.

What higher prices at the pumps might do is lead the American electorate to turn its wrath upon political incumbents. For the managerial class in this country, such upheavals are too horrible to contemplate. And while there could be a danger in such an event of replacing our current feckless leaders with more radical demagogues, in the era of Bush the Second that prospect seems unimaginable.

The hazards accompanying his policy prescriptions notwithstanding, Merry's book is thought provoking and perceptive, easily one of the most valuable contributions to the foreign-policy debate of the last decade. Robert Merry, who recognizes the present struggle between civilizations for what is, makes a penetrating critic of neoconservatism and the overt left alike. As a study of the baleful consequences that follow from the idea of Progress, *Sands of Empire* merits a place on any informed conservative's bookshelf.



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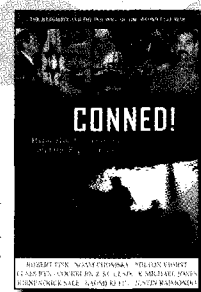
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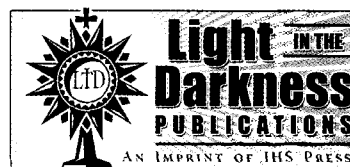
—Michael Scheuer, former Chief, Bin Laden Unit, Counterterrorist Center, CIA; author of *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror*

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Setting History Straight

by Paul Gottfried

*Wie der Dschihad nach Europa kam.
Gotteskrieger und Geheimdienste
auf dem Balkan*

by Jürgen Elsässer

St. Pölten, Vienna, Linz:

NP Buchverlag; 246 pp., €19.90



H Having sensed in the 1990's that most European and American reporting about the Balkans was suspect, I find that this investigative study by a young German journalist, associated with the publication *Junge Welt*, fills in gaping holes in the received account of a controversial phase of recent history. Contributing to my uneasiness over the establishment's presentation of the Balkan unrest was the contradiction between two situations: the supposedly desperate plight of the outnumbered and out-armed Muslim population in Bosnia and Kosovo and the fact that the Muslim armies not only held on there but, in the Krajina, managed, with the aid of Croats and mysterious foreign volunteers, to dislodge Serbian populations. There was also the problem of the uneven reporting about which ethnic minority was committing what when and against whom. Thus, while the Serbs' shelling of Sarajevo in 1992-93 and the Srebrenica massacre of captured soldiers and some civilians in 1995 received considerable news coverage, very little came through, as Jürgen Elsässer points out, concerning the Muslims' wholesale murder of Serbs—a carnage that may have involved as many as 3,000—in Sarajevo in 1993. Nor did one learn from the Western media about the torture and killing of at least 1,000 Serb captives at the Muslim internment camp at Celebici. Bosnian Muslim president Alija Izetbegovic visited this camp and reviewed its soldiers while murder and rape were still going on there; unlike both the Muslim commander he appointed to this camp and the Serb military leader Radovan Karadzic, Izetbegovic was never prosecuted for war crimes before his death in 2003.

I knew in advance of reading this book about one case of distorted reporting that Elsässer brings up: the bloody bombing

of the marketplace in Sarajevo that occurred in February 1994. French journalist Elisabeth Lévy had anticipated Elsässer's revisionist account by several years, while reports as early as 1994 in *Nouvel Observateur* suggest that the French premier Edouard Balladur suspected that Muslims had blown up the Sarajevo marketplace in order to pull NATO peacekeeping forces deeper into the conflict. It is telling that the self-proclaimed voice of French conscience, Bernard-Henry Lévy (no relative of the more honorable Elisabeth), proclaimed in *Le Monde* (February 8, 1994) that "*ceux qui posent la question sont des salauds.*" Presumably, those who looked at the mounting evidence linking the Muslims to the Sarajevo atrocity (which Elsässer reviews) have no status in a discussion among French humanitarians.

Equally upsetting is that, in 1997, the Republican majority in Congress drafted a resolution scolding President Clinton, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, and James Galbraith, the U.S. ambassador in Croatia, for "turning Bosnia into a militant Islamic base." The resolution referred unmistakably to arms deals in which Lake had been involved, including the transfer of rockets from Iran to Bosnian Muslim forces. By 1999, however, the Republicans in Congress were hot to trot when Clinton proposed the bombing of Serbian forces in Kosovo. The painfully detailed information Elsässer packs into fewer than 200 pages—excluding the introductory chapter and his reflections, at the end, about September 11 and current American energy concerns—makes his book difficult reading. No one can reasonably accuse the author of not having done his spadework on multiple trips to the troubled region he examines. Elsässer's core chapters, and the accompanying notes, are worth picking through for the massive refutation they offer of what most of the Western elite press was reporting about the Balkans throughout the 90's. Whether Elsässer is discussing the importation of *mujahideen* armies into Bosnia and Kosovo, Albanian drug deals, the operation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Bosnia before the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Al Qaeda activities in the Balkans, or American violations of the Dayton Accords by the imposition of an arms embargo on all Balkan belligerents, the result is to contradict the disinformation Americans were fed about unprovoked Serbian aggression against inno-

cent Muslims.

Whatever else Elsässer accomplishes, he does manage to discredit the pro-Muslim and anti-Serbian account of events. He also causes one to wonder how anyone with his head screwed on straight could have believed that Izetbegovic and his associates in the Bosnian Muslim government, Muhamed and Hasan Cengic, all of whom had close contacts with radical Muslims going back to before the 90's, were devoted to a religiously pluralistic Bosnia. Even less can it be understood how a sensible Western leader could have believed that the gargantuan Muslim arms-smuggling agency known as the Third World Relief Organization (centered in Vienna) was really about philanthropy. Elsässer cites evidence that Western heads of state, including Clinton, knew better than to parrot the party line. During the alleged "Serbian shelling" of the Markale marketplace in Sarajevo, everyone and his cousin recognized the strong possibility that Muslim terrorists were to blame. But they carefully refrained from expressing these thoughts too loudly—the way the Anglo-American side went on lying about the Soviet massacre of Polish officers even after the outcome of World War II was no longer in doubt.

There is, however, one imbalance about this otherwise illuminating work that fairness obliges me to mention. Elsässer understates leftist support for the misconceived Western intervention on the Muslim side. Not all Germans who favored the Muslim and/or Croatian causes thought of themselves as "renewing the Nazi alliance system," and it is doubtful that such a trip down memory lane dominated the minds of Helmut Kohl or his foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, both of whom hastened to recognize the independence of Slovenia (which had fought against Germany in World War II) as well as that of Croatia. The German left, led by the ferociously antinational Jürgen Habermas and the Berlin *Tageszeitung*, were ecstatically pro-Muslim; and almost the entire German left opposed the Serbs as the enemies of a European multicultural society. Both Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright misrepresented or blurred the events of World War II to make it appear that, somehow, the Balkan Muslims were then anti-Nazis, while the ever-manipulative Elie Wiesel employed the term *genocide* to describe the fate of the ex-Nazi Muslim popula-