

God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World

By *Walter Russell Mead*


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A stunningly insightful account of the global political and economic system, sustained first by Britain and now by America, that has created the modern world.

The key to the two countries' predominance, Mead argues, lies in the individualistic ideology inherent in the Anglo-American religion. Over the years Britain and America's liberal democratic system has been repeatedly challenged—by Catholic Spain and Louis XIV, the Nazis, communists, and Al Qaeda—and for the most part, it has prevailed. But the current conflicts in the Middle East threaten to change that record unless we foster a deeper understanding of the conflicts between the liberal world system and its foes.

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Review

“A serious rethinking of how we study and write modern history—and of how the West pursues its relationship with the Rest.” —*The Washington Post Book World* “Clever, malevolent and with spare time on his hands, Osama bin Laden is supposed to read a lot. If the CIA wants to demoralize and to distract him, it might make sure he gets a copy of Walter Russell Mead's new book.” —*The Economist* “Elegantly written and erudite.” —*The Baltimore Sun* “A thrilling read.” —*The Irish Times* “Mead is a scintillating writer who greatly adds to the gaiety of the often monotonous debate on U.S. foreign policy.” —*Financial Times*

About the Author

Walter Russell Mead, the Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow in U.S. Foreign Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, is the author of *Mortal Splendor* and *Special Providence*, which won the Lionel Gelber Award for best book on international affairs in English for the year 2002. He is a contributing editor to *The Los Angeles Times*; has written for *The New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New Yorker*; and is a regular reviewer of books on the United States for Foreign Affairs. Mr. Mead also lectures regularly on American foreign policy. He lives in New York City.

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Chapter One: With God on Our Side

On September 17, 1656, Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector, addressed the English Parliament to lay out his foreign policy, and he began by asking the most basic political questions: Who are our enemies, and why do they hate us?

There was, he then asserted, an axis of evil abroad in the world. England's enemies, he said, "are all the wicked men of the world, whether abroad or at home . . ."[1]

And, in the language of the seventeenth century, he said that they hate us because they hate God and all that is good. They hate us "from that very enmity that is in them against whatsoever should serve the glory of God and the interest of his people; which they see to be more eminently, yea most eminently patronized and professed in this nation—we will speak it not with vanity—above all the nations in the world." [2]

Cromwell went on to spell out for the Roundheads, as the partisans of Parliament had been known in the English Civil War, that the axis of evil had a leader: a great power which had put itself in the service of evil.

"Truly," said Cromwell, "your great enemy is the Spaniard . . . through that enmity that is in him against all that is of God that is in you." That enmity came from the origin of the Catholic religion in the primordial revolt against God, embodied by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. "I will put an enmity between thy seed and her seed," Cromwell said, citing God's curse on the serpent and the enmity He would fix between the Children of Darkness and the Children of Light.[3]

Cromwell's approach to world politics would resonate more than three hundred years later and three thousand miles away, when on March 8, 1983, U.S. president Ronald Reagan addressed the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida. The Soviet Union, he said, is "the focus of evil in the modern world." [4] And America was engaged in a test of faith against an adversary

that had set itself against God. Citing Whittaker Chambers, the Communist-turned-informer, Reagan asserted that Marxism-Leninism is "the second oldest religious faith," first proclaimed by the serpent in the Garden of Eden when he tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God.[5] And like Cromwell, Reagan saw history as a struggle between spiritual forces. "I've always maintained," the president told the preachers, "that the struggle now going on for the world will never be decided by bombs or rockets, by armies or military might." [6]

Since the enmity between the Free World and the Empire of Evil was existential—the battle between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness—it was also eternal, just like Cromwell's call for unrelenting war with Spain. One cannot make a covenant with the Father of Lies.

Catholic teaching, Cromwell warned Parliament, held that the pope has the power to forgive all sins. If Catholic princes made a peace treaty with England, the pope could absolve them from the sin of breaking their oaths whenever they pleased. As Cromwell summarized the matter, "The plain truth of it is, make any peace with any State that is Popish and subjected to the determination of Rome and the Pope himself, you are bound and they are loose . . . That Peace is but to be kept for so long as the Pope saith Amen to it." [7]

Reagan felt just the same way about Communists: they had a philosophical stance that expressly made it impossible to assume their good faith. The United States could not deal openly and honestly with the Communists, Reagan said, because "the Soviet leaders have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is that which will further their cause." [8] Their materialistic philosophy placed no absolute value on right action or truth and could absolve them of any crime because the end justified the means.

The similarities between the Cromwellian and the Reaganite arguments run deeper. Both leaders called their countrymen to a consensus foreign policy that would unify the nation. The arch-Republican Reagan offended some of his Democratic listeners by claiming to stand in the tradition of Democrat Harry Truman. Bipartisanship was an even more difficult concept for Cromwell's audience than for modern Americans. The "bipartisan foreign policy" of the Cold War was a staple of American political rhetoric in the last generation. In Cromwell's England, the concept of legitimate political parties was still struggling to be born; dissent and disloyalty were still seen as one and the same. Cromwell, who had recently led the parliamentary forces to triumph in a civil war that was concluded by the execution of the king, nevertheless wanted to make the point that all true Englishmen, royalist and republican, agreed on the evils of the Catholic threat. Queen Elizabeth, Cromwell pointed out, had supported the anti-Spanish policy, and in a phrase that must have shaken some of the rounder heads in the room, he praised the "famous memory" of the queen and—just as Reagan did with Truman—asserted a claim to stand in her tradition.

Evil empires throughout history have always trampled on human rights. American presidents during the Cold War routinely denounced Soviet mistreatment of dissidents and religious believers. Here again they were merely following in the footsteps of the Lord Protector. Cromwell's speech of 1656 chronicled Spanish atrocities: he referred to a messenger of the Long Parliament whom the Spanish cruelly murdered and noted that when the English ambassadors "asked satisfaction for the blood of your poor people unjustly shed in the West Indies, and for the wrongs done elsewhere, when they ask liberty of conscience for your people who traded thither,—satisfaction in none of these things would be given, but was denied." [9]

All we ask, Cromwell told Parliament, is liberty. Only that.

Describing the recent, failed negotiations with Philip IV, king of Spain, Cromwell wanted to show how reasonable, how moderate, the English demands had been. "We desired such a liberty as they [visiting

English merchants in Spanish territory] might keep Bibles in their pockets, to exercise their liberty of religion to themselves and not be under restraint. But there is not liberty of conscience to be had . . ."[10]

Don Felipe, tear down that wall!

If empires of evil have much in common across the centuries, so too do alliances for good. America and its Cold War allies, like the Protestant allies of Cromwell's England, were fighting for more than their own—perish the thought—selfish interests. Their fight is the fight for good, right, and human rights everywhere.

"All the honest interests," said Cromwell, "yea, all the interests of the Protestants in Germany, Denmark, Helvetia, the Cantons, and all the interests in Christendom are the same as yours. If you succeed well and act well, and be convinced what is God's interest and but prosecute it, you will find that you act for a very great many people that are God's own." [11]

"America," Reagan told the evangelicals, "has kept alight the torch of freedom, but not just for ourselves but for millions of others around the world." [12]

Cromwell and Reagan faced other problems in common. There was more continuity to the Cold War than to England's long and intermittent contest with Spain, but both rivalries dragged on inconclusively for decades, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes on the back burner, with intervals of détente, reversals of alliance, and many changes in fortune. After the failure of the Armada in 1588, Spain could not attack England at home. English forces were never strong enough to wage sustained warfare on the Spanish mainland. Instead, the intermittent conflict moved indecisively through what we would now call the third world—the scattered colonial dependencies of the two powers and over the trade routes and oceans of the world. English hawks, often Puritans and merchants, wanted an aggressive anti-Spanish policy that would take on the pope while opening markets; moderates (often country squires uninterested in costly foreign ventures) promoted détente.

There was another problem—a domestic one. "And truly he [the Spaniard] hath an interest in your bowels," Cromwell told his audience. "He hath so. The Papists in England,—they have been accounted, ever since I was born, Spaniolised." [13] Ronald Reagan knew just what Cromwell meant, though with the changing fashions in metaphors he would have talked about a fifth column, rather than a Communist "interest in our bowels."

For almost a century, England had wrestled with the problem of how to treat its Catholic minority. Existing Penal Laws against Catholics had been tightened considerably after Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth I in 1570 and declared her an illegitimate queen whom no Christian was bound to obey. The question for Elizabeth was how to tell the difference between Catholics loyal to the throne, or at least willing to live peacefully under it, and those actively engaged in plotting to murder the queen and plunge the country into civil war. The threat of invasion from Spain grew in the 1580s. Pressure on Catholics increased; it became illegal for a Catholic priest to set foot in England, and for any English subject to house or help a priest in any way. The penalty was death. There were also hefty fines for those who refused to attend Protestant services. When the Armada sailed from Spain in 1588, the noose tightened again. Local officials were ordered to imprison Catholics deemed a threat to security; enforcement of the laws relaxed once the threat of invasion had passed. [14]

Through the rest of Elizabeth's reign, the legal situation of Catholics would deteriorate or improve as the war with Spain grew more or less dangerous. Then an unprecedented attempted act of terrorism in 1605 led to a new and darker period for English Catholics in the reign of her successor.

On November 5, 1605, an extremist Catholic group put barrels of gunpowder beneath the Parliament building in London with plans to detonate the bomb when the Lords, Commons, and king were all gathered together. Although only a handful of Catholics were directly involved, and although the large majority of English Catholics probably opposed the so-called Gunpowder Plot, the old laws were brought back into force and new laws were quickly passed against a minority that was now perceived as more dangerous than ever. Anyone who refused to take an oath of allegiance to James I, which was worded in a way that was difficult if not impossible for conscientious Catholics to take, could be deprived of all landed property and imprisoned for life.

Up until the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642 the situation of Catholics gradually improved; there was what would have been called a thaw in the cold war, and in the absence of security threats the enforcement of the laws against Catholics was relaxed. In 1632 an English Catholic was able to publish a group of sonnets in honor of the Virgin Mary; the works of at least one French Jesuit were translated into English and published at Oxford.[15]

The politics of religion grew increasingly fraught in England as the civil war approached. During the war, Catholics largely supported the Royalist side; Charles I, now king, was married to the Catholic French princess Henrietta Maria, and the increased tolerance of the Catholic minority during the 1630s was due to royal, not parliamentary, influence. The victorious Puritans were quick to retaliate; Catholics were punished for being both royalists and heretics. At least sixteen hundred had their homes and land confiscated.[16]

When Cromwell seized power in 1653, he relaxed enforcement of the anti-Catholic laws. After years of civil strife, England needed peace and stability; Cromwell hoped that compromise and toleration would stabilize the realm. The war with Spain changed that, as national-security-conscious conservative Protestants in Parliament demanded tough action against the minority.

About a month after Cromwell's evil-empire speech, a new bill was introduced. Anyone suspected of being a papist was to be summoned before a court to swear an oath of abjuration. This oath was much tougher than the one introduced after the Gunpowder Plot. No honest Catholic could possibly swear to it:

"I, [NAME], abhor, detest, and abjure the authority of the Pope, as well in regard of the Church in general, as in regard of myself in particular. I condemn and anathematize the tenet that any reward is due to good works. I firmly believe and avow that no reverence is due to the Virgin Mary, or to any other saint in heaven; and that no petition or adoration can be addressed to them without idolatry. I assert that no worship or reverence is due to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or to the elements of bread and wine after consecration, by whomsoever that consecration may be made. I believe there is no purgatory, but that it is a popish invention; so is also the tenet that the Pope can grant indulgences. I also firmly believe that neither the Pope, nor any other priest can remit sins, as the papists rave." [17]

Those who refused to swear to this oath immediately lost two-thirds of all their goods; and a second refusal to swear would lead to the confiscation of two-thirds of their remaining goods, and so on. In the past, Catholics had been able to avoid the penalties by settling their estates on their wives. No more: the loopholes were nailed shut.

The law was controversial, even at the time. Lambert Godfrey, a lawyer representing the county of Kent in Parliament, saw the law as an abomination: "I know no difference between it and the Inquisition, only one racks and tortures the purse, the other the person." [18] Lambert was eloquent, but the bill passed—with only forty-three votes dissenting. It proved very useful in separating Irish Catholics from their homes.

Cromwell had another problem that would be echoed during the Cold War. The grand battle against papistry occasionally forced him into strange alliances, even into alliances with papists. Truman found himself aiding Marshal Tito, the Yugoslav Communist leader. In the case of both Nixon and Reagan, opposition to Communist Russia led to improved relations with Communist China; Cromwell found himself trying to explain why Catholic France was a worthy ally against Catholic Spain.

Once again similar problems found similar answers. As Truman and his successors noted that Yugoslav Communists were independent of Moscow, Cromwell claimed that France was in fact independent of the papacy and so able to conclude treaties on its own. Cromwell also argued that his secret correspondence with France's Cardinal Mazarin would result in improved treatment of Protestant dissidents in that country; the prospect of improved human rights in China was constantly held out by uncomfortable American presidents justifying the twists and turns of the Cold War. To make Cromwell's position even more difficult, Mazarin pointed out that his ability to improve the treatment of Protestants in France might well depend on Cromwell's success at making life more tolerable for Catholics in England.

NOTES

[1] *Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. Ivan Roots (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1989), 80.

[2] *Ibid.*, 80.

[3] *Ibid.*, 81.

[4] Ronald Reagan, *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1980-1989*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 363.

[5] *Ibid.*, 364.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Roots, 83.

[8] Reagan, 362.

[9] Roots, 82.

[10] *Ibid.*, 82-83.

[11] *Ibid.*, 84.

[12] Reagan, 362.

[13] Roots, 85.

[14] R. B. Merriam, "Some Notes on the Treatment of the English Catholics in the Reign of Elizabeth," *American Historical Review* 13, no. 3 (April 1908): 481.

[15] *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, s.v. "Edward Bradshaigh."

[16] Godfrey Davies, *The Early Stuarts, 1603-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 211.

[17] Patrick Francis Moran, *Historical Sketch of the Persecutions Suffered by the Catholics of Ireland Under the Rule of Oliver Cromwell* (Dublin: Callan, 1903), ch 8, point 2.

[18] Thomas Burton, *Diary of Thomas Burton, esq., April 1657-February 1658*,

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=36843> (accessed February 12, 2007), 153.

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