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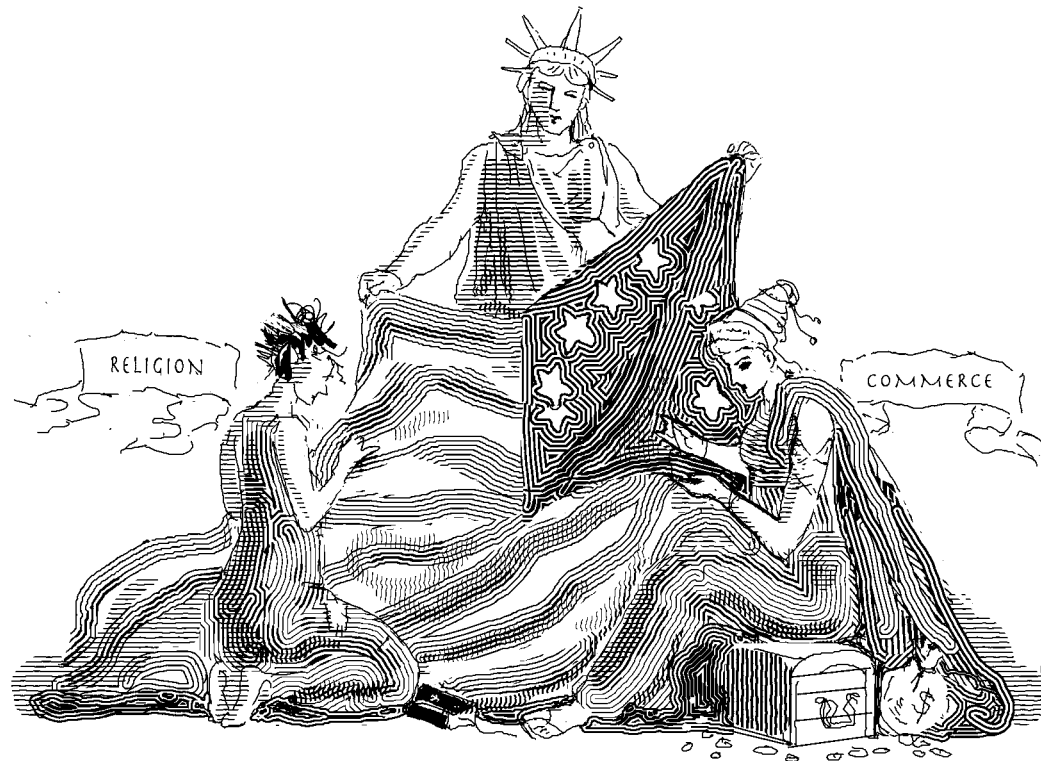
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Book Review by Angelo M. Codevilla

## TRANSCENDENTAL HUSTLERS

*Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History, 1585–1828*, by Walter McDougall.  
HarperCollins, 656 pages, \$17.95 (paper)

*Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829–1877*, by Walter McDougall.  
HarperCollins, 816 pages, \$34.95 (cloth), \$19.99 (paper)



WALTER MCDUGALL'S *FREEDOM JUST Around the Corner* and *Throes Of Democracy*, the first two volumes in a planned trilogy, tell America's story up to the end of Reconstruction, when the United States took the physical, moral, and political forms that we know today. These two books present the roots of the American tree, and although they foreshadow events and problems to be dealt with in a third volume, they are no mere setup for what the author may say about our own time.

A professor of history and international relations at the University of Pennsylvania and the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* (1985), McDougall grasps at the ever-shifting, ever-recognizable character of the ever-diverse American people, while telling something like "the whole story" about us. He presents social, economic, intellectual, political, and military history all woven together. If the references to economics throughout these volumes were gathered in one place, they would amount to a good eco-

nomics history of the U.S., and the same goes for the other aspects of American life covered here.

Yet, intellectual-moral factors drive the tale. Running through the mass of facts are two key impulses present in the people who first crossed the Atlantic, that most foreigners still find peculiar to Americans, and that, McDougall argues, propelled the United States to greatness: we are religious, and we are "hustlers." In the 21st century as in the 17th, we want to be transcendently good even as we hustle to do well for ourselves. Hence we invent ways of feeling good about hustling. Some of our countrymen have secularized religion and others have endowed politics with pseudo-sacredness. Accordingly, America has changed. The first two volumes show the many ways in which we reconciled piety with preening, and greed with solid achievement, preserving the yeasts of the starter dough. Presumably, the third volume will show how Americans in the 20th century dealt with their perennial temptations.

Rich with portraits of people, events, escapades, and ideas, these big books illustrate why

people left Europe for America, how they did so, and how they made their living when they got here. McDougall keeps the reader up-to-date on evolving industrial techniques, including the difference between English and American axes, and shows their consequences. And did you know that common workers on the Erie Canal were paid 80 cents per day, plus all the eggs, pork, potatoes, and bread they could eat, and a shot of whiskey every two hours? Along the way, McDougall explains why commodity prices dropped while stocks rose over the long run, and draws lively images of how this forced producers to innovate, filled spare homes with life's comforts, gilded the rich, and allowed the country to expand.

HIS COVERAGE OF AMERICAN POLITICS may be too lively. Not every one of the colorful characters in his tale is George Washington Plunkitt, the Tammany Hall politician who famously proclaimed himself a practitioner of "honest graft." But especially in the multi-page sidebars on each state's



admission to the Union there are accounts like this one of Missouri:

It began and ended in violence. The St. Louis junto's candidate for territorial delegate, John Scott, won a razor-thin victory in 1816 thanks to ballots he himself carried to Governor Clark in his saddlebags. The loser appealed, resulting in a second election scarred by riots and fraud.... Thomas Hart Benton killed the son of Judge John Lucas on Bloody Island. But the victorious Scott assured Congress that Missouri was tame and ready for statehood. (He also lobbied, on behalf of a New Madrid planter eager to get out of Arkansas, to affix to Missouri the curious "boot heel" in its southeastern corner.)

Even the many thoughtful portraits of statesmen like Thomas Jefferson are done with a gimlet eye. Though McDougall shows Jefferson to have been as good a president as he was a writer, the third president comes off a self-indulgent man who lacked courage and died in debt. Among the most sympathetic portraits is one of President Andrew Johnson, "the dry bones of... Old Hickory":

his nationalism was that of an old Jacksonian, as were his resentment of wealthy planters, belief in states' rights, opposition to big capital and government.... The Radical Republicans, hypnotized by their faith that a great civil war must work a great revolution, applauded.... It did not occur to them Johnson wanted to lead the nation thirty years *backward*, not forward to a Yankee millennium.

Nevertheless, I suspect that because the book's premise is that Americans are "hustlers" as well as because the political parts of these volumes look so much like a rogues' gallery, some readers will come away too convinced of a conclusion that the author intended only partially, namely, that Americans are no less corrupt than other peoples, but that they have managed to make their political-economic corruption "creative." McDougall knows too well that the American people's preoccupation with righteousness, which limits our corrupt concern for "who gets what, when, and how," is itself the source of the deadliest corruptions, namely hubris and nihilism. McDougall's political history focuses precisely on questions that transcend sins of the flesh and that tempt us to those of the spirit: If we are different from Europeans, then what kind of people shall we be? Shall we be and remain independent? For what purpose? How shall we deal with one another? Who is

equal and unequal to whom and why? Do we recognize any source of right that can tell us we're wrong? What limits are there to American power? Who are we among nations? Such political questions have only intellectual and cultural answers.

**T**HESE VOLUMES TREAT INTELLECTUAL and cultural matters largely by letting historical figures speak for themselves, illustrating their minds' development with lengthy quotations. Hence readers will find a substantial account of Mormon theology and history that few would dispute. But the history of mainstream American culture turns on a transformation in Protestantism. *Freedom Just Around the Corner* shows us America's earliest theologians, Increase and Cotton Mather, decrying what they saw as the country's central problem: "Religion brought forth prosperity, and the daughter destroyed the mother." Jonathan Edwards preached every individual's responsibility before an angry God to refrain from following such a path.

McDougall describes how American Protestants, especially in New England, developed new ways of worship and secularized the focus of their devotion. In *Throes of Democracy*, he argues that "the overlapping careers of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Longfellow, Lowell, and Poe...made an impression on American literature as deep as the one made by Yankees on demography, technology, religion, education, and reform." These authors' careers map the trail from Puritanism to Unitarianism to Transcendentalism and spiritually supercharged social reform.

For McDougall, capitalism and religion are at the heart of America's story. He describes the economic changes that made the British Isles capitalist and created a socially mobile population at ease with the notion of private property and contracts. At the same time, he shows how parts of this population came to believe that salvation could not be found in the Old World. Once arrived on new shores, the settlers prospered, grew by natural increase, and diversified through immigration. America's earliest New England settlements differed from one another economically and religiously; but these differences paled in comparison to those with the Middle Atlantic colonies, set up as the property of their founders, and the Southern ones chartered by the king. Nonetheless, every colony loosened, disregarded, and then broke its original constitutional and legal arrangements. Thus did they become Americans.

The characters that mixed in the great American pot included rich and poor alike from across northern Europe, Catholics as well as Protestants. But each colony had its own socio-political,

religious, and ethnic character because each contained very different kinds of people. Virginia, for example, was divided at first between English aristocrats who were Anglican, and poor Scots-Irish and Baptist "border men" who had as little to do as possible with gentry. (Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun came from the latter stock.) Germans were the first and most influential non-British immigrants, but there were vast social-political differences between the first and the late arrivals, between the Germans of Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin, and between German Catholics and Lutherans. McDougall details both religious differences among New Englanders and their shared tendency to organize democratically for the common good that they carried with them to other regions.

For all their diversity, immigrants came for prosperity. Benjamin Franklin called America "the land of labor," and ever since the 17th century, labor here paid off. Those who set strong backs to farm abundant land and clear endless trees could expect food and fire, perhaps even great riches. One consequence of prosperity, McDougall notes, is that the Americans who fought the Revolutionary War were typically two inches taller than their British and Hessian opponents. Their numbers were growing fast because with more food and a better climate, more infants per capita survived here than anywhere else.

**T**HE LINK BETWEEN PRODUCTIVITY AND righteousness, between doing good and doing well, is not peculiar to America or even to Protestant Christianity. John Winthrop's "City on a Hill" speech to the Massachusetts Bay colonists paraphrased not only Jesus' Sermon on the Mount but also Moses' charge to the Israelites to obey God's commandments and honor Him before the gentiles, that He may make their labor fruitful. In a sense, American Protestants re-Judaized Christianity, renewing essential Christianity. Their injunction to pray and work was identical to the Benedictine motto "*ora et labora*." But as Increase and Cotton Mather asked, did Americans really worship God and his righteousness, or did they use God as a pretext for feeling good about satisfying their own ever more extravagant desires? The Mathers knew that indulging material passions is less dangerous than indulging spiritual ones—chiefly the passion to purify one's neighbors by force. McDougall sees in this choice the passionate spirit of American power, and America's essential spiritual problem. His first two volumes expertly trace this passion's intellectual and practical consequences as Americans grew stronger and more secular.

As *Freedom Just Around the Corner* makes clear, for the American settlers independence



became their birthright because outsiders could neither help nor hinder them in those things that mattered most to them. Although Americans were always interested in world events, their interest proceeded from a natural focus on the things that affected them. They were involved in the struggles between Britain and France, and within British politics insofar as they mattered in America, but they ignored decrees from across the ocean because they could do so with impunity. They considered themselves British insofar as the mother country helped against the Indians and the French, but regarded as unnatural Britain's post-1763 attempts to subordinate American interests to its own.

In explaining to themselves by what right they were asserting their interests against their king, Americans drew not only on abstract political principles but on the Protestant insistence on human equality and the common-law tradition of respect for ancient custom, which combinations, writes McDougall, "made self government, religious freedom, economic opportunity, and territorial growth *inseparable*." By detailing the debauchery of the British ruling class (in which Ben Franklin took part before the Revolution), he illustrates why so many Americans believed that separation was a moral imperative. Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* was so influential precisely because it harnessed the Bible, interest, and resentment of presumptuous rulers to the cause of independence, even if Paine himself detested the Bible (but tacitly while in America).

**D**OUBLING IN NUMBER EVERY TWO DECADES or so, Americans increasingly possessed the technology to make use of abundant resources; and being spiritually confident, they were undaunted by Mexican claims to essentially empty lands in California. The settlement of Texas by Americans beginning in 1819, who then declared their independence in 1836 and joined the U.S. ten years later, showed that the U.S. government could not have stood in the way of westward expansion any more than could Britain or Mexico. The only practical question

was whether this expansion would be consistent with Americans' dedication to divine and Constitutional right. Here they failed terribly, resulting in the Civil War, which McDougall takes pains to describe as an unmitigated catastrophe.

His treatment of the war recalls Harry V. Jaffa's description of it as the most characteristic event in American history, the one in which the elements of the American character showed themselves most fully. McDougall ponders how Northerners and Southerners came to differ not so much on concrete items on the nation's agenda as they did about each other's character and intentions. Each came to see the other as ungodly, rapacious enemies of liberty. Each despised the other's tastes. Concrete differences may be arbitrated; cultural enmities cannot be. Radical Southerners sought to safeguard their way of life by expanding, perhaps by force, and radical Northerners wanted to reform the South, if necessary by force. Not for the first or last time, especially in the North, would religious passion coalesce around what Christ had warned against: reforming one's neighbor rather than one's self.

"Reconstruction," an Orwellian misnomer for what happened after the war, shows the disastrous consequences of Americans' first nationwide indulgence of this temptation. Drawing parallels between "nation building" in the American South and in Iraq, McDougall previews what will likely be his judgment on much of 20th-century U.S. foreign policy. Although no imaginable policies and no amount of effort by a conqueror can transform cultures and reconcile antagonisms rooted in race, religion, or injuries suffered or feared, grandiose ends pursued with inferior means are guaranteed to make matters worse. Reconstruction also showed that those who pushed hardest for it were less interested in improving the lot of Negroes than in lording it over defeated enemies, usually profiting themselves in the process. So it would be in subsequent nation-building ventures and in domestic politics.

Arguably the Civil War's worst effect was the rise, in Northern culture, of a corrupting sense

of triumphalism. Protestantism morphed into a Darwinist social gospel, accepting as its paramount spiritual leader Henry Ward Beecher (brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe). "Where he stood on theology was anyone's guess," notes McDougall, but his politics and public demeanor shielded him even when it turned out his sermons were ghost-written and he had taken other men's wives. He ended up in President Ulysses S. Grant's inner circle, and the media's infatuation with him was such that the public looked down on his detractors. To Beecher McDougall contrasts New England Catholic intellectual Orestes Brownson, who lived to see Cotton Mather's fears confirmed:

Americans bent on pursuing their happiness established a culture in which all individuals were effectively free to craft their own religion, as if they were gods... [and] to shove their disparate moral agendas down others' throats, again as if they were gods.... [T]he Civil War...magnified the threat posed by humanitarians, whose ambition would grow along with the nation's raw power. Brownson feared that future William Lloyd Garrisons [the radical abolitionist] in league with future Henry Ward Beechers would seduce or cajole the people to make war on property, privacy, marriage, and even foreign countries in the name of perfecting mankind according to their lights.

At the threshold of the American Era, *Throes of Democracy* ends with the warning that Americans will be tempted to make war on each and every one of the principles and practices that had served them so well, and to do so in the name of those very principles.

Angelo M. Codevilla is professor emeritus of international relations at Boston University, and the author of a new revised edition of *The Character of Nations: How Politics Makes and Breaks Prosperity, Family, and Civility (Basic Books)*, among other books.

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