



America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism

Anatol Lieven

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"America keeps a fine house," Anatol Lieven writes, "but in its cellar there lives a demon, whose name is nationalism."

In this controversial critique of America's role in the world, Lieven contends that U.S. foreign policy since 9/11 has been shaped by the special character of our national identity, which embraces two contradictory features. One, "The American Creed," is a civic nationalism which espouses liberty, democracy, and the rule of law. It is our greatest legacy to the world. But our almost religious belief in the "Creed" creates a tendency toward a dangerously "messianic" element in American nationalism, the desire to extend American values and American democracy to the whole world, irrespective of the needs and desires of others. The other feature, populist (or what is sometimes called "Jacksonian") nationalism, has its roots in an aggrieved, embittered, and defensive White America, centered largely in the American South. Where the "Creed" is optimistic and triumphalist, Jacksonian nationalism is fed by a profound pessimism and a sense of personal, social, religious, and sectional defeat. Lieven examines how these two antithetical impulses have played out in recent US policy, especially in the Middle East and in the nature of U.S. support for Israel. He suggests that in this region, the uneasy combination of policies based on two contradictory traditions have gravely undermined U.S. credibility and complicated the war against terrorism.

It has never been more vital that Americans understand our national character. This hard-hitting critique directs a spotlight on the American political soul and on the curious mixture of chauvinism and idealism that has driven the Bush administration.

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