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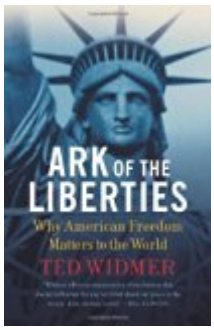
Ted Widmer. *Ark of the Liberties: America and the World.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2008. 384 pp. $25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-2735-4.



Reviewed by Don H. Doyle

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Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

Ted Widmer is a historian, a former political speechwriter, and an observer of American politics and foreign policy who is as worried as he is hopeful.[1] He is a gifted writer with a good eye for the apt quote--and a good ear, for many of his most memorable quotes come from oratory. He also has a knack for utilizing obscure, even quirky anecdotes to make his point. For example, he notes that during the U.S. incursion in the Philippines, the Senate debated torture techniques, including a "water cure" whose origins went back to the Spanish Inquisition (p. 155). In 1906, Teddy Roosevelt was the first sitting president to venture outside the United States. Operation Iraqi Freedom was originally named Operation Iraqi Liberation, until someone noticed the acronym.

In places, especially the discussion of the twentieth century, his interpretation seems partisan in its slant, but not consistently so and not to the point of undermining the author's credibility. He is given at times to soaring prose and loves to quote poetry, often to very good effect. This book, in turns, is inspiring, troubling, and often witty. Scholars of U.S. foreign policy will likely find much of the main story laid out here familiar, but the originality of this book lies in its ambitious scope (from the European discovery to the war in Iraq). The author's bold but not uncomplicated reaffirmation of America's historic mission in the world ought to provoke reflection and argument. This is a good book for the college classroom, and it will likely find an audience among more readers outside than within the corps of specialists in U.S. foreign relations.

This is a study of America's national ideals and how they have guided (and misguided) not only America's foreign policymakers but, more fundamentally, the popular understanding of America's role in the world as well. The title comes from Herman Melville's 1850 novel, ***White Jacket, or the World in a Man-of-War***: "'And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people--the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.... We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of

untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours'" (pp. xi-xii).

What may seem a classic instance of national chauvinism was, we learn, part of a lengthy diatribe against flogging in the American navy, a practice Melville condemned as an idiotic, backward custom inherited from the aristocratic British and entirely out of place in a democratic society. It is this juxtaposition of lofty principle and shameful practice that Widmer uses to preview his concept of American idealism and set up a standard against which national failings, as often as achievements, may be measured. It is only the first of many such inconsistencies he acknowledges aboard the good ship U.S. liberty as he tracks its unpredictable voyage through history.

The metaphor of the ark performs multiple tasks, most often as a ship at sea rather than a religious totem signifying God's covenant with the nation. The ark as ship is a speechwriter's delight, full of possibilities for references to wandering off course, drifting, or sailing full speed ahead. This nautical symbol also serves Widmer's artful interpretation of American history as a voyage, rarely straight from point to point, often stopping to take on new passengers, always moving. He likes "ark" as a figure of speech for another reason, he reveals, because it suggests *arc-en-ciel*, the French word for rainbow, with its promise that "something wonderful--a pot of gold or simply a new beginning--waits over the next horizon" (p. xiii). Rainbows, readers less disposed toward such sunny expectations may recall, also result from dreadful weather.

Widmer rarely lets his optimism get the better of his task as historian for very long. By his account, the ark of the liberties keeps running aground, drifting, or, worse, launching unwelcome invasions on the shores of other nations. Though he spares none of these mishaps in his log, some readers may be left wondering whether this American ark of the liberties is a righteous vessel veering off course now and then, a *Titanic* doomed by its own arrogant recklessness to disaster, or some dreadnought battleship portending trouble for the world whenever it leaves port. He quotes Simon Bolívar, who wryly observed: "'The United States appears to be destined by Providence to plague America with misery in the name of liberty'" (p. 83).

American historians, a British acquaintance once told me, rather than seeing their purpose as providing sardonic witness to human folly, like to think their work will somehow make things better. Widmer exudes American optimism but he is worried; he wants America "to learn from our mistakes and chart a new course" to move toward some more perfect version of our national ideals (p. 315). Accusations of hypocrisy and moral failings are rarely effective without the target espousing high principles against which actual behavior can be assessed. More than most nations, the United States seems to set itself up for poor marks in sincerity and moral consistency by its proclivity for idealistic pronouncements, not only, but especially, in its foreign relations.

Yet this is not the usual scolding book that excoriates leaders and citizens for their failure to live up to the nation's ideals, for Widmer wants to retrieve and restore the ideals themselves, applauding those moments when the nation rises toward its own lofty standards and anguishing when it betrays them. At the opening of the book, he promises to avoid "excessive adulation and criticism" of his subject, but he does so typically by countering one with the other (p. xiv). Throughout the book is a constant back and forth between an inspiring invocation of the nation's ideals and nagging reminders of its failings. At times, I wondered whether Widmer was straining to curb his enthusiasm for America's promise or keep his despair over current failings in check.

An opening chapter, aptly named "Fantasy Island," traces the origins of America as an idealized nation back to early European imaginings of the New World as a place where human society

might redeem itself. Another chapter on the colonial era is the familiar story of the New England Puritans and early millennial thinking about America as the place God would work out his plan for humans. Though warning us against viewing Jonathan Winthrop's "city upon a hill" as a preview of the future Republic, Widmer stresses the millennialism that would continue to influence America's national creed (p. 29). Perhaps unintentionally, Widmer's exclusive focus on New England illuminates how this region would shape America's nationalist narrative long after it took its secular turn. New England dominates Widmer's telling of the American Revolution as well, but he closes with Thomas Jefferson predicting that his Declaration of Independence would, sooner or later, inspire all peoples to follow the American example. A chapter on "Empire of Liberty" gives the stage over to Jefferson and to foreign relations in the young Republic from the Louisiana Purchase to the Monroe Doctrine.

Widmer's treatment of the Mexican War is incisive and damning. The first full-scale invasion of a foreign country by the United States (an earlier invasion of Canada in 1812 was quickly defeated) was a radical departure from American national ideals, he explains. Few articulated those ideals more eloquently than John O'Sullivan who coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" and prophesied America's role as the "great nation of futurity." Widmer seems to understand that the concepts underlying O'Sullivan's "Manifest Destiny" fall very close to his own understanding of America as the ark of the liberties. The ideas were "not entirely bad," he allows; it was their misuse and misapplication in an aggressive war of conquest that he laments (p. 110). The invasion of Iraq is never mentioned here, nor, in the equally cogent passages, is the U.S. incursion in the Philippines, but no one can read these passages without thinking of the American war in Iraq. By the end of the book, we understand how much the recent turns in U.S. foreign policy have informed Widmer's interpretation of the past--and vice versa.

Widmer, the historian, wrote the chapters on America and the world through the nineteenth century; Widmer, the political speechwriter and Democratic Party partisan, tends to loom larger in the telling of the rise of America as a world power in the twentieth century. He opens with a spirited interrogation of the dichotomy that has, on one side, Teddy Roosevelt, the "realist," who "vigorously asserted U.S. military might," and, on the other side, Woodrow Wilson, the "idealist," "tortured by naïve aspirations for democracy and reluctant to project the full force of American power" (p. 189). This myth, Widmer argues, laid the foundation for Republican and Democratic party identities ever since, and he wants to set things right by reassessing Wilson as "a visionary who saw things not only as they were, but as they needed to be" (p. 189).

If Widmer props up Wilson, he positively elevates Franklin D. Roosevelt as a hero not only of America's national ideals but also of the cause of world peace and democracy. In Widmer's rendering, we have in Roosevelt an intellectually inspired and learned president who was imbued with a pervasive sense of America's historic role in spreading democracy and liberty throughout the world. The Atlantic Charter, the United Nations, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stand as testimony to Roosevelt's idealistic vision and also to his capacity to realize ideals. "At long last," Widmer writes with buoyant enthusiasm, "America's capacity to change the world had caught up to her desire. The ark was sailing at full speed" (p. 213). This highly burnished version of Roosevelt is dulled slightly by the admission that he "was not a perfect crusader for freedom," the author conceding as evidence of this imperfection the internment of Japanese Americans, the slow response to Jewish and other refugees from Nazi Germany, and repressive measures against critics (p. 212).

Two chapters on the Cold War link its Manichean vision of good and evil with deep traditions of America's idealistic vision of itself as the champion of liberty in the world. George Kennan's "Long Telegram" in 1946 and his "Sources of Soviet Conduct" in ***Foreign Affairs*** (July 1947) that followed forecast the coming world struggle between Russian Communism and American democracy. Widmer notes similarities between Kennan's article and a Puritan Jeremiad sermon in which Kennan compared the Soviets to "a dangerous rival church with 'mystical, Messianic' tendencies (he disliked its claim to 'infallibility,' a favorite complaint the Puritans had voiced about the Catholic Church).... He even ended his essay with an appeal to Providence and advanced the classic Puritan argument that this moral challenge was welcome, even necessary, if Americans wanted to live up to their potential" (p. 234). So much for Kennan the realist.

Likewise, Harry Truman's commitment to "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation," along with the entire discourse on the "free world," recapitulated centuries of America's self rendering as the beacon of liberty in the world (p. 235). Widmer neatly illustrates the dark side of U.S. Cold War policy in three episodes of intrigue in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), and Vietnam (1954), each with lasting and disastrous practical results, to say nothing of their violations of the nation's vaunted ideals.

At this point in the voyage, it seems piloting duties on the ark of the liberties alternate between messianic zealots and sinister, paranoid Captain Queegs. John F. Kennedy comes aboard to rescue the ship with a renewed sense of America's mission: "'We do not imitate--for we are a model to others,'" he proclaimed the night before he took office (p. 269). But Kennedy appears to win points with Widmer for his signs of backing off the Cold War hard line and admitting America cannot impose its will on the world. The spirit of Captain Queeg, in the form of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, took back the helm after Kennedy's untimely death, and America's ark drifted deeper into troubled waters at home and abroad.

Ronald Reagan is depicted as something of a fool at the helm, albeit one with "an engaging manner, a mellifluous voice, and an unflinching belief in the superiority of American institutions" (p. 291). His references to America as a "shining city upon the hill" might have sent Winthrop (whose 1630 sermon to the Puritans inspired this image) spinning in his grave, but it drew very effectively on deep currents of America's idea of itself as a model for all peoples. Reagan, or rather his speechwriters and handlers, understood how to appeal to that historic idealism of the American people, Widmer concedes, though not without letting us know just how shallow and limited his understanding of those ideals was. While issuing paeans to freedom around the world, Reagan opposed or ignored the civil rights movement and other efforts to expand freedom at home.

Widmer's allegiance to Bill Clinton's administration reveals itself briefly and modestly. After offering kudos to several unappreciated achievements during the Clinton years, he writes: "As a minor participant in the Clinton administration, I realize that my perspective is hardly objective. But still, it seemed at the time--and it still seems, a decade later--as if the best of U.S. foreign policy was working and the worst was held in check" (p. 308).

In the epilogue, however, Widmer takes off his gloves and sets forth a withering assessment of just how far the United States has fallen since George W. Bush took office. "This is not a book about the Bush administration," he writes in the epilogue, but by this point it seems much of this story of America's engagement with the world is informed by recent events. "It is worth pausing for a moment," he continues, "to contemplate how a group of patriotic leaders could have inflicted so

much harm, so quickly, on the world order that had been created by their own country" (p. 317).

Though couched in the language of America's traditional idealism as the ark of the liberties, Bush's incursion in Iraq, by Widmer's account, is a terrible betrayal of that idealism. Those who led America into the Iraq war, he argues, were the opposite of naïve idealists; they were *cynics* who exploited America's tradition of idealism: "what does one call an effort to spread democracy by people who do not seem to believe in the basic consensus of democracy? What does one call airy theories of perfect human behavior floated by people with no inclination to utopia? What does one call the interventionist yearnings of people who have shown very little interest in foreign cultures?" These were nothing more than "wolves in Wilsonian clothing" (p. 321).

Widmer tells us in closing that "we Americans are at their best, and our most truly world-shaping, when we reject the idea of special destiny and simply get to work" (p. 328). Many readers of this book may feel less inspired to set sail on voyages reshaping the world in our image and more inclined to head for port and get to work repairing their own ship.

Note

[1]. Widmer previously authored (under the name Edward L. Widmer) ***Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and coauthored with Arthur Schlesinger Jr. a biography of Martin Van Buren, ***Martin Van Buren*** (New York: Times Books, 2005). He also edited two collections on American political oratory for the Modern American Library. Currently, he serves as the director of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, and before that served as speechwriter and foreign policy advisor for President Bill Clinton.

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