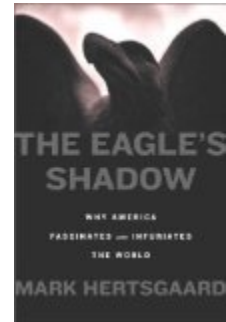


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Hertsgaard. *The Eagle's Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002. 256 pp. \$23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-10383-5.

Reviewed by Rachel Howse (Independent Scholar)  
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## Shadowing the Eagle

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In the aftermath of the World Trade Center bombings on September 11, 2001, commentators on American culture have inundated their own people and the world with a seemingly endless cycle of articles and soundbytes, determined to confirm images of Americans as the victims of biased hatred. Mark Hertsgaard has joined this crowd, but this time wanting to impart, through a series of often charming and loosely stirring vignettes, that “America isn’t what it seems.” In so doing, Hertsgaard has joined something akin to a merger of two group-therapy sessions. One is for bereaved individuals and the other is for the insecure. These groups unite in clamoring for one friend to play with them and to always allow them to win. The difference is that America is not clamoring for just one friend; instead America wants it all: the friends, the money, the natural resources, and the world’s remaining open space to open new strip malls, Starbucks, and fast food restaurants. America has become an angry adolescent, stamping its foot, and Mark Hertsgaard is the parent, intent on reigning in the nation.

Hertsgaard began the research for his book well before September 11, 2001, although it is difficult to ascertain this, as so much of the book centers on the world’s perspectives on American reactions to the attack. The incident led Editor-in Chief of *Le Nouvel Observateur* Laurent Joffin to claim that “one prefers to be savior, not the saved,” and should have led to a pause as the United States considered the costs of constantly trying to be the hero. Traveling to Europe, Asia, and Africa, Hertsgaard inter-

viewed a montage of people with varying pasts and experiences, such as a restaurant owner in China, a former government official in the Czech Republic, a bus driver in South Africa, and a businessman in Egypt. Despite these differences, Hertsgaard’s interviewees often come up with amazingly similar responses, all of them managing to separate American pop culture from its often questionable and self-deluded foreign policy.

Hertsgaard’s book begins with promise, despite a rather chatty tone that brings to mind the coffee house politics that can lead to contemplative writing. Hertsgaard whips the reader from topic to topic with dizzying verve. Through ten chapters he covers what has become of the American Dream: impoverished school systems, lackluster healthcare, the complexity of the electoral system, women’s suffrage, and the elusiveness of racial equality. But his writing lapses into the double-talk that has become the norm for contemporary American politics. Hertsgaard points out that federal guidelines with respect to the educational system have succeeded in giving the government—regardless of the party in power—more control because the guidelines have consistently required less of students; it is easier to lead a nation if few are encouraged to think.

For this abuse of power, Hertsgaard blames the notorious excess of the 1980s, with a scathing focus on Ronald Reagan, referring to him as “the most influential politician in America today, the man whose ideology still shapes the assumptions and policies that reign in Washington.” Hertsgaard believes that the precariously drawn

line between rich and poor, between big business and interest-groups, and between practicality and principle in American policy abroad, has slanted in the wrong direction over two hundred years, particularly under Reagan. There is an abundance of evidence for Hertsgaard to call upon. He points to the crippling welfare cutbacks and the halving of corporate tax rates; the degradation of the political lexicon with double-talk and devastating omissions; and the bizarre caricature of the American military that sprouted from the Iran-Contra scandal. All of this has led to a political climate that is a parody of itself, even after a shift in political power to the Democrats under President Clinton (and then back to the Republicans with President Bush). Under Clinton, for example, the moral justification for military force against Iraq was underlined with self-importance. Thus, Madeline Albright claimed that “[i]f we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation.”

Hertsgaard opens the book with the statement that he “doesn’t have all the answers.” Yet, by chapter 7, Hertsgaard begins to define quite clearly what he sees as, if not answers, a concise, methodological way to devise them. It is here that Hertsgaard reaches toward the clarity of

thought that could well be just what the American mainstream needs. By rejoining the concept of the American Dream and idealism to the politics that govern the nation, Hertsgaard believes that changes in how Americans interact with other countries on an individual basis, and on a scale of global cooperation, will occur naturally. But he also recognizes that this is a difficult task to propagate, as it requires reaching a delicate balance between blind faith, visual clarity, and negation of deep-rooted socio-economic prejudices and stereotypes. Perhaps the most fatal flaw in Hertsgaard’s book, however, is his buying into the myth of “Camelot,” the proverbial golden era of American politics. History should not be about overlooking what makes a nation uncomfortable. Yet, by ignoring the illegal invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, and President Johnson’s relentless and dubious pursuit of war in Vietnam, Hertsgaard does just that.

All in all, Hertsgaard’s book is an energetic attempt to understand why America is so amusing, yet irritating, to others. But is it worth the \$23.00 for the hardcover addition? I think not. Instead one should wait for the book to be remaindered or support the local library and look for it there, just so you won’t be disappointed.

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