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A review of *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* by Claes G. Ryn Transaction Press, 2003, from *Intercollegiate Review*, Fall/Winter 2004

Many Enlightenment ideologues hoped to see fulfilled in America all the dreams of the Age of Reason: an empire of unfettered minds, natural rights, unbounded human benevolence and progress, the first fruits of a world reborn. Impatient utopians soon despaired, however. Faced with ratification of a conservative Constitution rooted in the long Western tradition of classical and Christian civilization, they turned their imaginations to the promise of revolutionary France. Nevertheless, some Americans persisted in their secular millennial expectations for the United States. Foremost among these at the opening of the twenty-first century are those whom Claes Ryn calls "new Jacobins." In *America the Virtuous*, Ryn analyzes the defining elements of their worldview. In his own words, his "study aims to identify, illustrate, and analyze a general ideological phenomenon, a powerful *tendency* of thought, imagination and action with its own distinctive logic and momentum." That tendency, in Ryn's estimation, is leading America toward profound disorder.

Neo-Jacobinism, like its original embodiment more than two centuries ago in revolutionary France, displaces a concrete, localized, rooted, classical and Christian view of man and society with an abstract, universalized, restless, Enlightenment and Romantic view. To some degree, Ryn is carrying into the twenty-first century the ideological argument between Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Ryn stands with Burke, Irving Babbitt, Wilhelm Roepke, and Russell Kirk against Rousseau, John Locke, the French revolutionaries, and—perhaps surprising to many conservatives—Leo Strauss, and, particularly, Allan Bloom. While he does not hesitate to name names, Ryn's "primary purpose is not to classify particular individuals but to identify a particular intellectual-political dynamic with its own inner logic, to show how certain ideas belong together and form a coherent, if philosophically highly questionable, ideology."

The strength of Ryn's analysis is his identification of deep discontinuities in American history and experience: namely, transformations of leadership, ethical conduct, political philosophy, social and economic structures, language, historical consciousness, and national self-perception and ambitions. Ryn roots American civilization in the heritage of Greece and Rome, Western Christendom, and British culture. America emerged from a particular past, a

concrete historical experience. America is indebted to that past for its culture, political institutions, and freedoms.

New Jacobins, however, viewing the past as a dark prison from which humanity must be liberated, construct an alternative America that fulfills Enlightenment dreams of emancipation, abstract natural rights, and unbridled democratism. Their interpretations of the American founding, canon of state documents, and cultural identity— while perhaps ideologically alluring—are at odds with historical reality. While seeming to advocate “traditional values,” they are actually revolutionaries who subvert the decentralist constitutional democracy of the founders. While seeming to defend the Western tradition from its enemies, New Jacobins advance a “secular, ahistorical, and egalitarian” appropriation of that tradition. Despite their rhetoric of piety toward tradition, they are the enemies of “pre-Enlightenment Western civilization.” Whereas America’s “old moral ethos” acknowledged the binding authority of tradition and custom and the contingencies of particular circumstances, Neo-Jacobin consciousness is ahistorical, universalist, and driven towards greater and greater concentrations of power. In fact, Ryn argues, “what the new Jacobins defend as Western civilization is actually but a small and relatively recent part of it, chiefly that part which came to political prominence with the French Revolution and that finds its other beginnings in the rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its precursors.”

If America is an “idea,” as the new Jacobins insist, then it is properly defined, now and always, by exceptionalism, universalism, democratism, restless innovation, and ideological imperialism. To the new Jacobin mind, the American story is one of unbroken, triumphalist continuity and robust good health. If, on the other hand, as Ryn contends, America over the past two centuries has actually abandoned its moorings and jettisoned the ballast of its classical and Christian heritage, then the American story is discontinuous and headed, perhaps, to an unhappy ending. Most alarmingly, America has abandoned its longstanding fear of power and pride; instead, “the signs are now everywhere that the will to dominate is breaking free of such traditional restraints.” Ryn blames the new Jacobinism for transforming the more modest old republic into an aggressive, ideological, revolutionary state bent on empire and driven to remake the world in its own image.

Ryn’s analysis is disturbing and provocative. It provides a framework within which to organize a range of slogans and policies into a coherent pattern of thought and conduct. From one angle, however, there is something inescapably authentic about the neo-Jacobin temptation. While recent enthusiasms for America as a messianic “universal nation” may represent a *discontinuity* from earlier American self-conceptions, there are also clearly continuities here, and these *continuities* need to be exposed and their implications understood. This is not a criticism of Ryn’s painstaking analysis, but a doorway into further inquiry, perhaps of a more historical nature.

What do we make of, and what do we do, with the messianic, meliorist, liberationist impulse that in one form or another, to one degree or another, has been with us for four hundred years? A type of redemptive universalism came to the New World with the Puritans and reappeared from

time to time even among the most sober-minded of the founders. From "God's American Israel" to Crèvecoeur's "new man," from Yankee nation-building in the Civil War to Wilsonian social-gospel globalism in World War I, America has wrestled with this expansionist revolutionary tendency. There is something about Jacobinism that is persistently and in some sense genuinely American. At the dawn of the twenty-first century we are perhaps merely witnessing the further evolution of a contagion that we have carried in us from the beginning. Doctrines and impulses that we once consciously and deliberately suppressed are now allowed to run free. A more extended analysis of how and when these checks were removed in our history may provide a key to reinstating these checks institutionally, culturally, and personally.

Ryn has not written a book for the lazy, impatient, or haphazard reader. As hard as it may be for his likely opponents to accept, his analysis is refreshingly non-ideological. He ponders his subject with impressive care and attention, taking time to define terms, to trace the redefinition of familiar terms, to establish context and proper categories, to reaffirm hierarchies of obligation, to dichotomize between true and false notions of particular principles, and to distinguish between appearance and reality. Despite its provocative thesis and bold analysis, Ryn's is in fact a cautious book that patiently makes its case, limits its implications, guards the careful reader from misinterpretations, and points out wherever necessary what it is not saying. Anticipating misunderstanding, Ryn frames and fences his argument at every turn. A proper reading of this book requires the all-too-rare mental habits of attention, discrimination, and judgment.

Ryn offers more than diagnosis, however, and his book is infused by hope. This is not a work of despair and cynicism, nor is Ryn nostalgic for a world lost beyond recovery. Indeed, he sees little left for conservatism to conserve. Despite the dreams of mere traditionalists, "the old Western civilization cannot return. It has been too badly damaged." Instead, the task is one of reconstitution of the cultural preconditions of the well-ordered city. To that end, American civilization needs to re-appropriate the best of the Western tradition to meet new times and circumstances. Urgently, America requires "a new moral realism," a foreign policy based on what Ryn calls "responsible nationhood," and a return to limits personally and nationally, including "the rediscovery of responsibilities that are near, immediate, and concrete."

The task, then, is not to win elections and capture positions of political power, but to renew the culture. The greatest responsibility rests with those who help shape the mind and imagination of the rising generations to offer them a coherent, compelling alternative. America requires the reaffirmation, by each of us, of the qualities of character necessary for authentic constitutional self-government—modesty, discipline, demonstrated ability, and a due sense of limits and proportion.

America the Virtuous calls for critical self-examination. It leads us to meditate on the contours of America's past and present. Ryn equips us with an analytical tool that may provide a way of rethinking and retelling at least one part of the American story. He leads us as well to ponder the future of these tendencies, the implications for the nation if Jacobinism triumphs, completing the uprooting of America from the principles that once ordered its civilization. At a historical moment when the American people are being told that their Declaration of Independence and their Constitution embody political principles that ought to govern all peoples in all times and

places and that Americans are the global guarantors of God-given rights, Ryn calls us back to constitutionalism and away from empire, back to character and away from sentiment.

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