

## **EMPIRE AS A WAY OF LIFE: AN ESSAY ON THE CAUSES AND CHARACTER OF AMERICA'S PRESENT PREDICAMENT ALONG WITH A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT AN ALTERNATIVE**

by William Appleman Williams

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William Appleman Williams is one of our foremost revisionist historians; if his work were susceptible to labels, he might be called the dean of New Left American history. But it's a tribute to his integrity, and to his intellectual feistiness, that labels don't fit. Perhaps the tradition he represents is best described as American maverick, the tradition of Thoreau and Carl Becker. Williams is something of a visionary, something of a no-nonsense moralist, and in either guise a self-proclaimed keeper of the nation's conscience. For above all, his commitments are *American*. They're animated by the spirit of nonconformity, independence, iconoclasm, a radical Protestantism translated into the terms of secular social dissent. Fortunately, the spirit of *Empire as a Way of Life* also has behind it the authority of a distinguished professional career.

I say "fortunately" because this book might otherwise be dismissed out of hand. Its thesis is familiar to the point of being formulaic. Empire is the form and substance of the American way; as rhetoric, it is "the opiate of the American people"; in practice it has become the bane of all peoples seeking self-determination. According to Williams, the ideology of empire was established with the Constitution, came to fruition after the Civil War, and achieved virtually undisputed control after 1896. Predictably, the villains of his story include some of the major figures in the national pantheon. Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson, FDR. The heroes are more problematic. Who stood up against empire? Well, the anti-Jeffersonians, certain Confederate apologists, isolationists and feminists; and a few marginal "creative spirits." It makes for a motley crew, the Federalist John Adams and the quasi-Marxist Charles Beard, Herbert Hoover and Herman Melville, Dorothy Detzer (who founded the Women's League for Peace and Freedom), the slave-owner John Taylor, and Dwight

Eisenhower (for attacking the "military-industrial complex"). As Williams develops this contrast of Good and Bad Guys, the familiar comes to seem more and more bizarre. First, there's the distortion of character and motive that attends any transformation of history into allegory (e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr as lackey of the Luce establishment). Then, there's the *reductio ad absurdum* that typifies the single-minded historical exposé (e.g., FDR's Depression policies as the cause of postwar anti-Stalinism). Most deplorable, perhaps, is the sort of ugly name-calling that seems a staple of polemical debunking (e.g., Zionism as a terrorist front-organization for U.S. oil magnates).

Distorted, simplistic—and yet, to repeat, it's fortunate that this book will be widely read. For all its faults, it reveals a courageous adversary mind directly engaged with "America's present predicament." Empire, after all, *has* been a way of life in the United States. In the face of all the "radical" cant about Jefferson, it's well to have on record his fundamentally imperialist cast of mind. Confronted with the evasive pluralism of the new quantitative historians, one can hardly overemphasize the *de facto* hegemony in this country of political and economic interests. Having inherited the rhetoric of mission—the belief, as Melville's White-Jacket put it, that with us "national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy"—it's salutary to see how the lure of empire distracted Americans from the task "of creating a humane and equitable community." Indeed, Williams is at his best in pointing out the contradictions between the errand and the city on a hill, between the imperial vision of new frontiers and the domestic yearning for the great society. His book leaves us with an overwhelming sense of injustice and with new insights into the methods by which the champions of mission managed to co-opt the Christian gospel, Enlighten-

ment reason, and the laws of nature into the service of capitalist greed.

Unfortunately, the book also leaves us with a host of unanswered questions. How could the rhetoric of empire take hold over such a heterogeneous people? How did the leaders of the imperial quest sustain their hegemony across two centuries of turbulence and change? I speak here not only of social factors but of the astonishing capacity (and need) for belief—the enormous idealism invested in the national myth. In his last book, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World* (1976), Williams noted that of his many "neighbors, friends, and acquaintances," of every age and walk of life, "all but a few...cling desperately to a belief in America as an ideal—a truth—that can be realized despite the ever-expanding power of the corporate state."

Given this long-ripened, omnivorous ideological consensus, what options remain to those who resist? What alternatives besides Bartleby's, of merely turning off and dropping out, are open to those who would prefer not to join the corporate covenant? Surely that's the crucial problem for our time, and Williams promises an answer, or at least he puts it in his subtitle, "A Few Thoughts About an Alternative." But the promise never materializes. Citing slave-owner John Taylor, Williams stresses "the threat to property rights in...a centrally controlled program." Williams urges Americans to enter into the "continuing dialogue about how to be leaders...without being imperialists." He endorses "the deeply patriotic—even loving—commitment of American blacks to what Martin Luther King called the Dream of America," and so summons us (quoting Jacob Epstein!) to "a new Americanism" that will eschew "the arrogant assumption that 'evil is always external.'"

To anyone acquainted with the history of American self-criticism, such remedies have a strong aura of *déjà entendu*. What they offer, in effect, is not a "new Americanism" but Americanism renewed. Williams's strategy is to condemn the system's tactical failures while extolling its "pristine virtues": laissez-faire individualism, property rights, equal opportunity under the law, the open competition of ideas, as of commodities. He wants us to exorcise the evil within—the lust for the empire, which he assumes is not so much a product of the culture as a per-

version of the dream. He invites us to be leaders without imposing our will on other nations; he would have patriotism without chauvinism, free enterprise without imperialism, the ideal of America without the arrogance.

This is indeed the legacy of Thoreau and Becker and also, mutatis mutandis, of Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson, and FDR. I don't mean to slight the differences between these men, only to stress that they are differences in degree, not in kind. They bespeak the variety of options available *within* the system. Each of these options, in its own way, appeals to what Thoreau called "the only true America," a sort of Platonic Form of liberal democracy. Each of them offers what Becker promised would be "a new lease on life," once we return to "Americanism, pure and undefiled," believing that "it is the mission of this self-selected people to see that [pure Americanism] does not perish from off the earth." These parallels are not just a matter of rhetoric. Rather, as rhetoric they signal something much broader—a code of behavior, a way of perceiving, a myth of identity that from the start has reflected and helped shape the American Way. To condemn imperialism in this context is like condemning a certain monarch by reference to the divine right of kings or a Christian sect by reference to the precepts of Christ. The very terms of condemnation serve to reinforce the basic social structure because they derive from values and symbols through which that structure is perpetuated.

And essentially these are the terms of Williams's indictment. Far from advancing an alternative, the "continuing dialogue" he advocates is a ritual summons to cultural cleansing and rededication. His book is a testament to the limits of radical dissent in the United States. It finds its place somewhere on the conservative-libertarian left, within an acrimonious, intrasectarian, culture-bound debate that functions, now as before—in Carter's America as in Jackson's—to close off the prospects of fundamental change. We must be grateful to Williams for his sweeping attack on the policies and perils of empire. But the real import of his attack—the central, ironic, and unavoidable message it conveys—is the continuing power of the culture to absorb its critics, even the most informed and impassioned of them, and to transmute radicalism itself into a mode of ideological assent.

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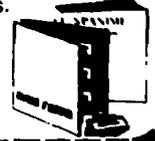
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