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Tragedy Renewed: William Appleman Williams

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Exactly fifty years ago, late in the Eisenhower era, if still early in the Cold War, William Appleman Williams, then a young historian teaching at the University of Wisconsin, started a revolution of sorts. With the publication of his book, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, U.S. foreign relations became as never before an exceedingly contentious subject. It has remained so ever since.

According to Williams, even in 1959 when *Tragedy* first made its appearance, U.S. foreign policy was in the midst of a profound “crisis.” An approach to statecraft that had once “worked brilliantly” had become “impossible to sustain.” Revolutionary changes were

sweeping the world. If the United States refused to adapt to those changes, it would soon find itself facing “literal isolation.” Yet if they embraced the new order, Williams wrote, Americans could “help other peoples achieve their own aspirations in their own way” and “do much to sustain and extend man’s creativity.”

Soon thereafter things got worse—much worse. The counsel offered by Williams became less hopeful and more urgent.

By 1962, when a “new enlarged edition” of *Tragedy* appeared, John F. Kennedy was occupying the White House. Just a year prior, the Bay of Pigs fiasco had occurred, heightening Williams’s sense of alarm. “American foreign policy must be changed fundamentally,” he now declared categorically. Americans were facing the prospect not of isolation but of annihilation. If the United States persisted on its present course, Williams foresaw “a further acceleration of the already serious momentum toward thermonuclear war,” leading ultimately to “the destruction of democracy.”

A decade passed before a “second revised and enlarged” edition of *Tragedy*—by now a very influential, if controversial, book—found its way into print. By this time, during the Cuban missile crisis, the world had survived a near miss with nuclear holocaust. Kennedy (among other national leaders) had been assassinated while his successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, had plunged the country into the costly and divisive Vietnam War. In 1968, America had all but come apart at the seams, paving the way for Richard Nixon’s ascent to the presidency.

For Williams, the word “tragedy” no longer sufficed to describe the situation in which the United States found itself. Although his book’s title remained unchanged, he now wrote of an “aura of terror” that was enveloping American statecraft. Proposing fundamental changes in foreign policy had become pointless absent a comparably fundamental reorientation of the country itself. To transform American diplomacy, Williams insisted, “existing American society had to be changed” first. Otherwise, he foresaw “more interventions” abroad and “more deterioration at home.”

Previously, Williams had invited Americans to view with sympathy the revolutions through which other peoples were seeking to work out their destinies. Now, he insisted, the time had come for revolution at home, with the anti-war movement inspired by Vietnam potentially offering the vehicle for such a domestic transformation. Yet woe to the nation if it failed to seize this opportunity to save itself. “The final terror,” Williams wrote, “would come to be if ending the war did not lead to fundamental changes in the American outlook, in American society, and hence in American foreign policy.”

The anti-war movement and the New Left that it helped inspire proved a tremendous disappointment to Williams. Williams braced himself for the worst. If Americans persisted along the path that they were following—as they gave every indication of doing—they invited the gravest consequences. “We will suffer what we did unto Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo,” he predicted in 1980. “We will suffocate, sizzle and fry.” America had “run out of imperial games to play.” Armageddon beckoned.

That same year, by a large majority, voters elected as president someone of a decidedly different view. Ronald Reagan found no fault with America apart from the fault-finders (like Williams) who did not share his own sunny confidence that the nation represented the world’s best hope of salvation and that its best days were still to come. Once installed in the White House, Reagan promptly embarked upon a massive build-up of U.S. military power, declared the Soviet Union an “Evil Empire,” and set out to bring that empire to its knees. By the time he left office eight years later, the Cold War had all but ended. New York and Los Angeles had escaped the fate of Dresden and Tokyo. Instead, under American leadership, the West had emerged intact, and in the eyes of many, even triumphant.

Events had seemingly refuted Williams’s dour expectations. Instead, they had validated the twentieth century as the American Century. The preeminence of the United States, now universally acknowledged, promised to continue indefinitely. The Unipolar Moment was at hand.

In fact, that moment—spanning the interval between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003—proved fleeting. During the 1990s, commentary favorably comparing the United States to the Roman and British empires at the height of their glory was all the rage. America stood alone and unchallenged as the world’s sole superpower. A decade later, with U.S. forces bogged down in two middling-sized wars, the very real limits of American power had become embarrassingly evident. Debt-strapped and increasingly dependent on pricey foreign oil, the United States had begun to look less like the world’s Indispensable Nation and more like a country with an incorrigible penchant for unfettered profligacy.

Williams himself did not live to witness this remarkable turn of events. When he died in March 1990, the Soviet empire had vanished, but the long U.S. military campaign to dominate (or transform) the Greater Middle East—what the Pentagon today calls The Long War—had yet to begin. That would await Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in August of that year.

Yet were Williams still with us today, surely he would be tempted to revise *Tragedy* yet again, adding a coda incorporating this latest chapter in the narrative of U.S. foreign policy. Making that temptation all the greater is the fact that this chapter—Williams might have called it “The Liberation Theology of American Empire”—serves to verify the core findings contained in the very first edition of *Tragedy* published fifty years ago.

Williams’s greatness lay as a historian, not as prophet or political philosopher. His frequently voiced predictions of

doom, centered on visions of the world engulfed in a fiery inferno, have not (yet) come to pass. His proposed antidote to the pathologies afflicting his fellow citizens, centered on his own obsessive yearning for “community,” inspired a series of proposals for political decentralization that were—to be charitable—wildly unrealistic, where not simply fanciful. (At the time of the bicentennial, Williams was promoting a proposal to break up the Union into a “federation of democratic Socialist communities.” Under this scheme the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana would join together into an independent nation to be called *Neahkahnie*. Williams, who was then living in Oregon, believed that the people of this region shared a common set of interests likely to foster a common approach to politics. “Which is to say that we are willing and able to confront the power of corporations . . . and have evolved a hierarchy of values to guide us in our life together.” The proposal garnered no political traction.)

Even as a historian, his greatness was confined to a specific sphere. Although a graduate of the United States Naval Academy and a decorated veteran of the Pacific War, Williams proved an unreliable interpreter of contemporary military developments. Intensely preoccupied with the dangers posed by nuclear weapons, he missed a central truth of the post-war era: the invention of the ultimate weapons did not mark warfare’s arrival at some ultimate destination. Instead, mankind’s newly acquired capacity to destroy itself merely inspired imaginative efforts to reinvent war, with an eye toward preserving its utility.

This capacity to reinvent war imparted to the American expansionist impulse restorative powers that Williams failed to appreciate. Military defeat did not produce a reevaluation of first principles; it merely promoted efforts to devise new techniques for employment on the next battlefield. Writing in 1972, Williams felt certain that Vietnam had “set the outer limits of the American Empire.” As a consequence of failure there, “American expansion had finally been brought to bay.” In fact, the reverse was true. Defeat in Vietnam produced in short order a burst of military innovation that within two decades had revived the American appetite for expansionism. Viewed in retrospect, the “lessons” of Vietnam proved remarkably superficial and short-lived.

Likewise, as a practitioner of what scholars today refer to as international history or global history, Williams’s contributions do not stand the test of time. Granted, for Williams, global history never qualified as a central concern. Still, there hovers in the background of his writings, especially when treating the twentieth century, the image of “a world in revolution.” For Williams, social revolution defined the central reality of the age. The point was one to which he returned time and again: in China, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and dozens of other countries, powerful movements on behalf of radical change, inspired by collectivist or Marxian ideals with which Williams himself sympathized, were having a transformative effect. Williams did not deny that revolutions not infrequently gave rise to bloody excesses. He did not mistake Lenin or Castro for Francis of Assisi. Yet on balance he viewed this global turn toward revolution as both positive and irresistible. The challenge facing Americans, as he saw it, was to get with the program or risk being left behind.

From our present vantage point, we can make two points about the social revolutions of the past century. First, without exception, they failed utterly to make good on the ideals and expectations that inspired them. Especially when it came to fostering sustainable economic development, they flopped. Promising bread, land, and peace, they produced want and brutal oppression by regimes that routinely violated human rights on a massive scale. Second, to suggest that social revolutions defined the twentieth century is to give short shrift to myriad of other factors that shaped the warp and woof of that era: resources and technology, race and religion, culture and sexuality, and not least of all, the age-old competition for wealth and power. In short, Williams both misread the revolutions of his time and attributed to them greater significance than they deserved.

Yet however much Williams may have misconstrued the evolution of modern war and the changing nature of the global order, the fact remains that he got his own country and his own people exactly right. These were, after all, the subjects

about which he cared most passionately.

His gifts were largely intuitive. His major works, beginning with *Tragedy*, derive their power not from the quality of craftsmanship—Williams himself admitted that his scholarship might have been “less cryptic and more polished”—but from their boldness and interpretive originality. He delighted in going against the grain, skewering sacred cows, and challenging the conventional wisdom. Carl Becker, a generation older than Williams, once observed that the historian’s true purpose was to provoke readers “to think otherwise.” This describes how Williams defined his responsibility, an undertaking as much civic as it was scholarly.

Expanding on the achievements of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles A. Beard and incorporating insights drawn from other disciplines, Williams sought above all to explain the emergence of the United States as a global superpower, a breathtaking feat accomplished over a startlingly brief expanse of time. He dismissed out of hand the myth that “that the American Empire just grew like Topsy” or that providence had mystically bestowed greatness on a people who simply wanted to tend to their own affairs. The United States acquired power because Americans consciously sought it and relentlessly pursued it.

Williams’s singular contribution was to lay bare the reciprocal relationship among freedom, abundance, and empire throughout U.S. history. Sustaining American freedom required ever-increasing prosperity. Enhancing American prosperity required territory, resources, markets, and influence. The resulting American imperium—continental during the nineteenth century, global during the twentieth—derived its moral justification from the conviction that the United States had erected a uniquely righteous Empire of Liberty that expressed history’s (or God’s) intentions.

Here lay the real genius of William Appleman Williams. Typically classified as a diplomatic historian, he was actually, to use one of his favorite terms, the great interpreter of the American *Weltanschauung*—a “definition of the world combined with an explanation of how it works.”

As depicted by Williams in *Tragedy* and other writings, this *Weltanschauung* consists of several elements, among them the following:

- *A tendency to equate anti-colonialism with opposition to empire as such*, thereby crediting the United States, a frequent opponent of formal empire, with a steadfastly anti-imperial outlook;
- *An insistence that American values are universal values*, leading to this corollary: “other peoples cannot really solve their problems and improve their lives unless they go about it in the same way as the United States”;
- *A self-serving commitment to the principle of self-determination*, informed by the conviction that “all peoples must ultimately self-determine themselves in the American Way if America itself is to be secure and prosperous”; or to put it another way, only when “historic American principles were honored by all” would world peace become possible;
- *A penchant for externalizing evil*, fostering an inclination to believe that trials and tribulations at home have their roots abroad; “domestic problems [therefore] became international problems” and U.S. foreign policy became the continuation of domestic politics by other means;
- *A reflexive predilection for demonizing adversaries*; opponents of the United States are not merely wrong or misguided; they are by definition “beyond the pale and almost, if not wholly, beyond redemption”;
- *A belief that the American economy cannot function absent opportunities for external expansion* and that the American political system cannot function absent prosperity: stagnation fostered internal unrest which threatened stability and raised “the specter of chaos”; economic expansion, therefore, “provided the sine qua non of domestic prosperity and social peace”;

- *A steady, if unacknowledged, drift toward militarization*, as policymakers “increasingly defined safety in terms of conquest—or at any rate domination”; yet as Williams emphasizes, “it was the civilians who defined the world in military terms, not the military who usurped civilian power”;
- *An unshakable confidence in American Exceptionalism and American beneficence*; in the end “a unique combination of economic power, intellectual and practical genius, and moral rigor” will enable the United States “to check the enemies of peace and progress—and build a better world—without erecting an empire in the process.”

At the end of the 1890s, a decade of severe economic crisis, this American *Weltanschauung* achieved an apotheosis of sorts. In the wake of the Spanish-American War—launched in a fever of anti-colonialism, culminating in conquest and annexations—a freshly emboldened United States government promulgated the terms under which it expected all powers henceforth to conduct themselves in relation to China, then very much the target of imperialist exploitation.

This announcement came in the form of the famous Open Door Notes, which Williams interpreted not simply as an expression of U.S. policy toward China but as a sophisticated articulation of a novel grand strategy. Explicitly anti-colonial, seemingly equitable and benign, the strategy of the Open Door sought in fact to set the terms of international competition in ways that played to America’s strong suit while also catering to America’s self-image. Here, for Williams, was the master key, an approach to policy that aimed “to establish the conditions under which America’s preponderant economic power would extend the American system throughout the world without the embarrassment and inefficiency of traditional colonialism.” Over the next several decades, despite many trials and tribulations, as measured by America’s progress toward the summit of power and prosperity the strategy achieved spectacular results.

The strategy of the Open Door was not the handiwork of cynics or hypocrites. “American leaders were not evil men,” Williams wrote. “They did not conceive and execute some dreadful conspiracy.” Rather, “[t]hey believed deeply in the ideals they proclaimed.” Policymakers saw no contradiction between those ideals and the reality of U.S. policy. On the contrary, they “had internalized, and had come to *believe*, the theory, the necessity, and the morality of open-door expansion.”

Nor was U.S. strategy a plot conceived by the few and imposed on the many. Williams took pains to emphasize that the Open Door and the *Weltanschauung* from which it derived both reflected a broad-based political and popular consensus. Those who formulated policy, he insisted, acted in accordance with “an outlook that had been created and accepted by the majority.” A citizenry unhappy with the results therefore had “no elite or other scapegoat to blame.” They had only themselves “to confront and change.”

His own thinking about what that change ought to entail was nothing if not heterodox. Williams the self-styled radical was keen to see Americans shed their preoccupation with acquisitive individualism to join in what he saw as a worldwide march toward socialism. Williams the deeply closeted conservative wrote admiringly of the colonial-era advocates of a “Christian commonwealth”—here lay a distinctively American model of community. Williams the product of a small-town Midwestern upbringing wistfully hoped that his fellow citizens might resurrect the remembered values of rural Iowa during the Great Depression. Williams the populist who in retirement preferred “playing pool with loggers and truck drivers and gippo fisherman” to hanging out with the learned or the well-heeled found among working stiffs an authenticity absent from more sophisticated climes: in blue-collar enclaves remnants of what America might have become had it rejected the allure of empire survived.

In reality, Americans, to include loggers and truck drivers, evinced only passing interest in any of these prescriptions. The great majority remained committed to acquisitive individualism, which defined their commonplace understanding

of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As a consequence, most saw little need to change their country, much less to “confront” themselves. By the time Williams died, the successful resolution of the Cold War and the ignominious collapse of Communism had vanquished any lingering doubts about the superiority of liberal democratic capitalism. The narrative of U.S. foreign policy had not ended in tragedy; it had produced a triumph.

In fact, post-Cold War triumphalism obscured a more complex reality. The stubborn unwillingness of Americans to change or confront themselves had even then set in motion a sequence of events that in our own day has validated *Tragedy's* central thesis.

Call it variations on a theme. Instead of access to Asian markets, access to Persian Gulf oil had become the main issue. The Open Door Notes of 1899–1900 found their functional equivalent in the Carter Doctrine promulgated in 1980. In place of China, U.S. policymakers were soon to fixate on Iraq. Reprising the role of Woodrow Wilson, the most eloquent exponent of America's liberation theology, came the unlikely figure of George W. Bush, who outdid Wilson himself in expounding on history's purpose and in identifying America as history's anointed agent.

President Bush came to believe—and there is little reason to question the sincerity of his belief—that providence had charged the United States with ensuring that the “untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world.” Translated into specific geographic terms, the world's darkest corners coincided with the furthest reaches of the Islamic world, which not coincidentally contained the world's most significant reserves of fossil fuels.

Oil, Williams wrote with considerable prescience in 1980, “is not the primary cause of empire. It is not even the principal definition of contemporary empire. But it is the slickest way we now lie to ourselves about the nature of empire.” In our own day, the lie finds expression in the global war on terror, justified as a defensive response to an unprovoked attack launched on September 11, 2001, by jihadists hell-bent on imposing Sharia law on all humankind.

In fact, the conflict did not erupt without warning on 9/11, as Williams would surely have been among the first to point out. Historians will long argue about when to date the beginning of this war. The toppling of the Ottomans during World War I, allowing Great Britain and France to carve up the Middle East, certainly qualifies as one candidate. Franklin Roosevelt's deal with Saudi Arabia's King Ibn Saud in 1945—security guarantees for the royal family in exchange for privileged access to oil—might also vie for the honor, along with the creation of Israel in 1948. But to pretend that the conflict began with the attack on the World Trade Center is to indulge in pointless self-deception.

After several decades of jockeying, which at different times saw Washington alternately at odds with and cozying up to most of the region's significant players—Libya and Egypt, Jordan and Israel, Iran and Iraq—the United States had long since forfeited any claim to innocence. Although to cite any single moment when America forfeited its virtue would be to oversimplify, Williams might have pointed to the overthrow of Iran's Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and the restoration of the Shah to the Peacock Throne, engineered by the CIA in 1953, as illustrative.

Finally, to pretend that the aims of the United States in prosecuting its Long War are defensive is simply silly. As Williams certainly appreciated, the concept of defensive war is alien to the American military tradition. The conflict in which the United States finds itself currently embroiled—which since 2001 alone has seen U.S. forces invade Afghanistan and Iraq, while also conducting operations in places as far afield as Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and the Philippines—by no means qualifies as an exception. The United States is engaging in its Long War not to avert the rise of a new caliphate—an exceedingly unlikely prospect—but for the same reason that it has gone to war so many times in the past: to assert dominion over a region that American political leaders view as strategically critical.

In short, the reasoning that once sent U.S. troops into Texas and California, Cuba and the Philippines, or Western Europe and East Asia now makes it imperative for them to deploy to the Persian Gulf and Central Asia: we've persuaded ourselves that American prosperity (and therefore American freedom) demands that the United States must determine the fate of these energy-rich precincts.

At a press conference on September 18, 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated the matter succinctly: "We have a choice, either to change the way we live, which is unacceptable, or to change the way that they live, and we have—we chose the latter." Updated and adapted to a new setting in a new era, the strategy of the Open Door has found a new lease on life in the Long War.

There is an important distinction, however. As originally conceived, the Open Door strategy established rules of a contest that Americans were confident they could win. Given the economic preponderance (and self-sufficiency) enjoyed by the United States through the first half of the twentieth century, Americans welcomed the chance to engage in a global competition for markets: the game was rigged in our favor. This is no longer the case. Today Americans buy more than they sell and borrow to cover the difference. Today too, strategic self-sufficiency has given way to strategic dependence, notably so with regard to oil. To the extent that the economic game is rigged, the rules now favor others, ironically given the provenance of the Open Door, the Chinese above all.

Yet if economic competition is no longer America's strong suit, there remains one arena in which the United States still retains a distinct advantage: the global projection of armed force. In the manufacture of cars and televisions the United States may have lost its competitive edge, but when it comes to delivering precision guided munitions or deploying combat-ready brigades, it remains the world leader.

As a consequence, the revised and updated strategy of the Open Door deemphasizes commerce in favor of coercion. The United States once sought to "change the way that they live"—where "they" were the inhabitants of Latin America, Asia, and Europe—by selling them the products of factories back in Detroit and Chicago. Today the United States is engaged in an effort to "change the way that they live"—where "they" are the inhabitants of the Islamic world—by relying on the United States Army and Marine Corps to do the job. A century ago, Americans professed disdain for military power—it was the sort of thing that excited Germans and Japanese. Today Americans embrace military power—it is, after all, what we do best.

Now, setting moral issues aside—and moral considerations never figure more than marginally in the formulation of policy—little of this would matter if the refurbished and militarized strategy of the Open Door now directed toward the Greater Middle East produced the results promised by Rumsfeld and others. Unfortunately, it doesn't.

The originally conceived Open Door worked brilliantly, enhancing American power and abundance. The revised Open Door is squandering American power while exacerbating American problems with debt and dependence. Regardless of its final outcome, the Iraq War does not provide a model for how to "transform" the Greater Middle East. Inspired by a determination to avoid at all costs modifying our own way of life, the Long War is a fool's errand. However impressive, U.S. military power turns out to be an inadequate substitute for America's lost economic preponderance. The longer Americans persist in their illusions that salvation lies in "supporting the troops," the more difficult it will be for them to put their economic house back in order.

The United States today faces a crisis at least as challenging as that which inspired Williams to write *Tragedy* in the first place. Were he alive today, Williams would surely counsel against blaming our predicament on George W. Bush and his lieutenants, on the neoconservatives, on Big Oil, or on the military-industrial complex. To search for scapegoats is to

evade the larger truth. The actual imperative remains what it was in the 1960s: Americans need to “confront and change” themselves.

Unhappily, they wouldn’t then and we won’t now. We will instead cling to the *Weltanschauung* that has for so long kept us in its thrall. As a consequence, the tragedy of American diplomacy promises to continue, with the people of the United States even now oblivious to the fate that awaits them.

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