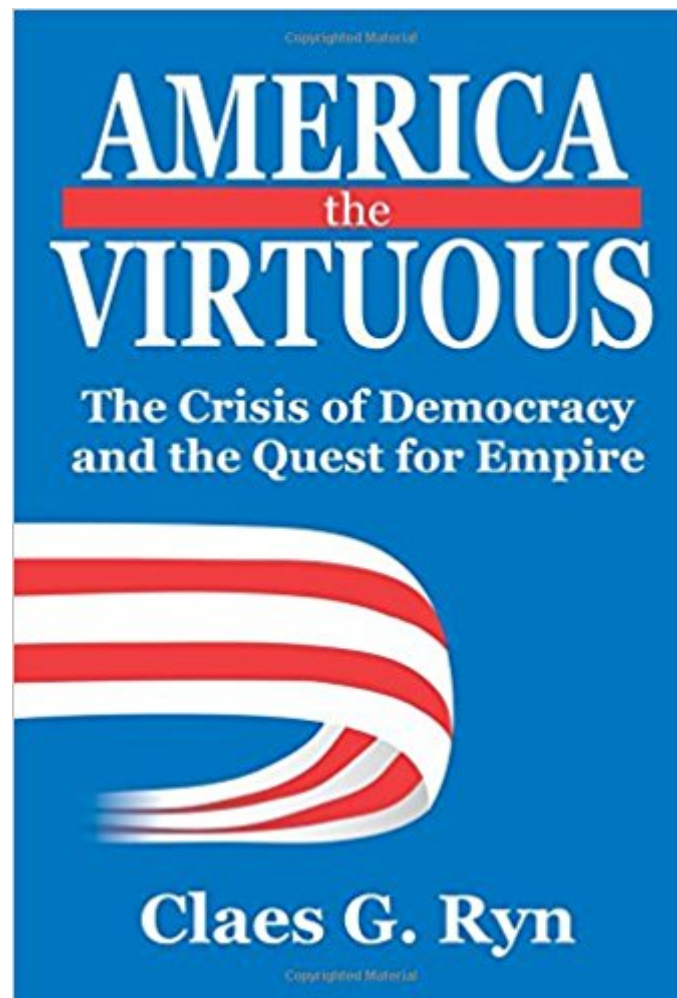




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America The Virtuous: The Crisis Of Democracy And The Quest For Empire



Synopsis

Urged on by a powerful ideological and political movement, George W. Bush committed the United States to a quest for empire. American values and principles were universal, he asserted, and should guide the transformation of the world. Claes Ryn sees this drive for virtuous empire as the triumph of forces that in the last several decades acquired decisive influence in both the American parties, the foreign policy establishment, and the media. Public intellectuals like William Bennett, Charles Krauthammer, William Kristol, Michael Novak, Richard Perle, and Norman Podhoretz argued that the United States was an exceptional nation and should bring "democracy," "freedom," and "capitalism" to countries not yet enjoying them. Ryn finds the ideology of American empire strongly reminiscent of the French Jacobinism of the eighteenth century. He describes the drive for armed world hegemony as part of a larger ideological whole that both expresses and aggravates a crisis of democracy and, more generally, of American and Western civilization. America the Virtuous sees the new Jacobinism as symptomatic of America shedding an older sense of the need for restraints on power. Checks provided by the US Constitution have been greatly weakened with the erosion of traditional moral and other culture.

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Customer Reviews

“Ryn (Catholic Univ.) does not like neoconservatives. He does not even like the term. Instead, he refers to the conservative intellectuals who have secured prominent positions in the

media and in the Pentagon as the "new Jacobins." Like the Jacobins of old, they possess a dangerous arrogance that will lead their nation to disaster. Recommended. Upper-division undergraduates and above.

• R. A. Strong, Choice "An important contribution for those interested in the intense post 9/11 debate on US foreign policy."

• David C. Jordan, University of Virginia "Claes Ryn paints a truly alarming portrait of the new Jacobinism that now constitutes a powerful ideological force among our nation's elites. . . . Ryn's splendid book is a warning of things to come if we fail to recognize the dangers."

• George W. Carey, Georgetown University "There is much wisdom in Ryn's book, and the moral realism he calls for and explicates commands respect. . . . Ryn is onto deep truths about the nature of politics."

• David C. Henderickson, World Policy Journal "America the Virtuous diagnosed our contemporary maladies in both foreign policy and domestic life. . . . We Americans pretend we're a peace-loving people and that our wars have all been foisted upon us. But the United States, as Ryn explains, is an Enlightened or Ideological Republic that has slipped its constitutional moorings, and become a Fighting Faith."

• Walter A. McDougall, Humanitas

Claes G. Ryn is professor of politics at the Catholic University of America where he was chairman of his department. He has taught also at the University of Virginia and Georgetown University. He is chairman of the National Humanities Institute and editor of the journal *Humanitas*. In 2000 he gave the Distinguished Foreign Scholar Lectures at Beijing University. His many books include *A Common Human Ground*, *Will, Imagination, and Reason* (2nd., exp. ed. published by Transaction), and *Democracy and the Ethical Life*.

Claes Ryn's "America the Virtuous" is a must-read for anyone who has reservations about the foreign policy the U.S. has pursued since the end of the Cold War. In it, Ryn argues that American policy has been heavily shaped by neoconservatives--men and women who can be found in both parties, in the government, in universities and think tanks, and writing for a wide range of influential newspapers, magazines, and other media outlets. Essentially, the Neocons believe that the U.S. is a uniquely virtuous nation whose political and economic systems are the best that have ever been--or ever could be--developed. Therefore, the American mission is to spread the American version of democratic capitalism throughout the world, even if doing so requires the use of military force. Drawing on philosophy, history, and theology, Ryn both analyzes and critiques this world view, which he considers arrogant and dangerous. He discusses the ironic fact that at the very time when

the Neocons are touting the U.S. as the ideal model for the world, glaring evidence of a serious decline in American culture is apparent. Although most Americans are unaware of the meaning of this evidence or even that it exists, many foreigners perceive it clearly and are therefore strongly motivated to resist any attempts to convert them to the "American Way of Life." The Muslims of the Middle East come immediately to mind. This book assumes a basic knowledge of American history and the broad outlines of American diplomacy in the last twenty-five years or so. Those who have that background should find it a stimulating, if sobering, read.

From a variety of perspectives, this book discerningly explores the basis, principles, modus operandi, and agenda of "new Jacobinism," an elitist ideology with aspirations of a new global order. Apparently, this term originated with the author to signal the pernicious nature of the contemporary variant of Jacobinism, as prominent in the timeframe of the French Revolution. Regarding the principal focus, the author describes how U.S. neoconservatism is the political embodiment and practical realization of new Jacobinism, and how neoconservatism is widely misrepresented or misperceived because of its essentially stealth tactics and goals. In particular, neoconservatism's espousal of plebiscitary democracy, homogeneous society, aggressive/assertive foreign policy, and strongly centralized government is shown to be hostile and antithetical by design to the traditions and founding principles of the United States. Ironically but hardly surprisingly, the more closely that governance is based on plebiscitary democracy "for the people", the less influence they have on the government because ever more power is ceded to the ruling elite. It is a circumstance that only the mentally or morally derelict or the elite themselves would opt for. Nowadays, moreover, the neoconservatives are pursuing precisely this course, substantially conjunction with the progressives and the radical left. For purposes of their respective agendas, they all want to dismantle the traditional American way of life and governance. The special value of the book lies in its rather thorough and convincing revelation of the deliberately deceptive modus operandi of neoconservatism, with special emphasis on the systematic use of skewed meanings of traditionally revered terms like "democracy," "equality," and "freedom." Such terminology misdirection is facilitated by the prevalence of neoconservative ideologues or thinking patterns in public life, as well as in academia and the financial sector. Such prevalence stems from the movement's extended duration of evolution, its aggressive will to power, its ample financial backing, and its active support within both U.S. political parties. Much of the support by politicians, however, may not be due to conscious commitment, but rather because of the derivative career enhancement inducements. As a by-product of developing the basic message of the book, the rather predictably deleterious

consequences of various ongoing neoconservative initiatives are examined and found to exacerbate already problematic aspects of American society, culture, security, and constitutional integrity. In the ten years since the book was published, moreover, these aspects of American life have noticeably worsened. Taken together, these situations present a highly disturbing prospect for America's future. Specific examples of deteriorating aspects of American life include: 1. society - increasing self-indulgent demands of citizens coupled with a indifference toward contributing to society's well being 2. culture - encouragement of coarseness, self-centeredness, and pervasive sub-mediocrity through ever lowering of social standards and expectations 3. international security - increasing resentment and hostility of foreign governments due to US foreign policy overreach 4. constitutional integrity - pronounced trend toward ever bigger, more intrusive government and impulsive plebiscitary democracy. The author's recommendation for arresting and remedying this concerted decline presents daunting challenges. The remedial course, moreover, is hardly promising in terms of timeframe or tractability. In short, the corrective measures center on developing a new corps of elite in academia, the media, politics, etc. Alas, the aggressiveness of neoconservatives and entrenched political interests afford little opportunity for rectifying our problems and restoring a healthy caliber of governance and quality of community life. In summary, contrary to the neoconservative creed/agenda, America's "virtue" does not justify or lie in imposing a centralized, collectivist governing ideology on the entire world, the pretext of democratization notwithstanding. Rather, the integrity and well-being of the United States and its citizens depend upon a renewal of the spirit of its founding principles: personal responsibility and self-restraint, uplifting standards and rewards, moderation in foreign affairs, and local management of community life under limited/decentralized governance.

This book is written for scholars of political science, not for casual readers or the anti-establishment. Claes Ryn describes a movement throughout Western politics that he calls the neo-Jacobins. The neo-Jacobins bear a resemblance to Rousseau in the sense that (1) they advocate the eradication of tradition and political and individual restraint, (2) their morality is such that they are always right, and anyone who opposes them is wrong. Neo-Jacobin thinking permeates through intellectual elites who stand to gain power from the two points above. The one criticism I have is that his description of the Jacobins may not be taken seriously because it comes across as a "conspiracy." In fact, it is not a conspiracy, and many of the Jacobins are not aware that they are or have not thought carefully about where they stand. Still, such a manner of presentation may discourage serious readers from accepting his views.

If you're interested in American foreign policy and what drives it, especially if you're interested at a deeper philosophical level, this book is for you. It makes a great gift too!

This is an interesting read, though Dr. Ryn's book is much more of a rant. I do not have anything against him and I agree with much of his conclusions. However, Dr. Ryn's best work is to be found in his articles in the journal, *Humanitas*, which he contributes to and edits. These exhibit a much more concise and thorough analysis of the political/philosophical issues that he focuses on. The archives for this journal are here:[...]

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