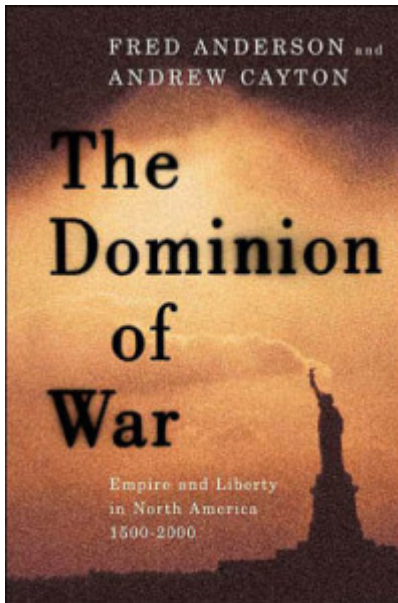


Imperialists in Denial



Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000*.

Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000*. New York: Viking, 2005. 424 pp., cloth, \$27.95; paper, \$16.00.

The Dominion of War is an important book that has been respectfully reviewed in all the right academic journals but still has not secured the public attention it deserves. This is the type of historical project that should be the subject of heated op-eds, TV news shows, the blogosphere, and numerous political campaigns. *Dominion* should be regarded as a thinking man's *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

This is not to suggest that Anderson and Cayton have produced a partisan polemic dressed up as scholarship. Instead, they have attempted a nuanced history of American imperialism—or at least as nuanced a portrait as might be conceived in a work that spans five centuries and an entire continent. Also, remarkably, given the scope of their work, the authors have tried to tell their story through a complicated form of group biography, using the surprisingly interconnected lives of nine men to illustrate their thesis. Portraits of Samuel de Champlain, William Penn, George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, Ulysses Grant, Arthur MacArthur, Douglas MacArthur, and Colin Powell provide their story's core material.

Nonetheless, the provocative argument behind these interlocking portraits can be stated rather simply—most American policymakers have been (and remain) imperialists in denial who have vastly underestimated the degree to which wars of conquest have shaped their culture. This is the sort of bold and broadly

conceived reinterpretation that we don't see much anymore from academics. It is also the reason why this historically minded study has such contemporary relevance. If true, this argument provides a thoughtful context for the post-9/11 world and especially for the current, bitter debate over the war in Iraq. Unfortunately, much like Michael Moore's documentary, this work is more likely to polarize existing opinions than to provoke thoughtful debate about America's current interventionist moment.

There is little doubt, however, that at least the first half of this book offers a brilliant new synthesis of early American history. Anderson and Cayton explain in exquisite detail how the arrival of European explorers such as Champlain and even ostensibly peaceful settlers such as Penn set off a violent chain reaction among native peoples, creating a culture of warfare, which ensnared almost everyone. They help the reader navigate little-known but critical episodes such as the Beaver Wars of the seventeenth century when the Iroquois attacked over fifty other Indian nations during a thirty-year period in a desperate effort to stave off the collapse of their own empire. The authors demonstrate in convincing fashion that the unintended consequence of the initial Native-European contact in North America and the subsequent colonization effort by various westerners led to the dramatic "clash of empires" that became the Seven Years' (or French and Indian) War—a pivotal conflict, which, according to Anderson and Cayton, "altered the whole landscape of empire in North America" (103).

In some ways, this is ground that Fred Anderson covered in his award-winning *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (2000), but the wide-ranging and fast-paced synthesis presented in *Dominion of War* is still quite valuable and eminently teachable. Where the argument becomes strained, however, is when the authors attempt to rewrite the history of the American Revolution as a continuation of the imperial conflicts that shaped the Seven Years' War rather than as an ideological struggle for liberty. They see the rising martial spirit, the "uncontrollable violence" (172) of "ethnic cleansing" (170) on the frontier, and the enticing opportunities for westward expansion as the deciding factors in the development of American nationalism, or what they're calling "the making of an imperial republic" (160).

The evolution of George Washington's attitudes provides the main framework for this analysis. "War made an Anglophile imperialist into a committed American nationalist," write Anderson and Cayton about the father of our country (180). There is surely some truth in this statement, but Washington also seemed devoted to the coming revolution long before the hard years of the war itself—famously showing up in military uniform, as the authors themselves note, at the initial meeting of the Second Continental Congress. In addition, for someone so presumably affected by the military conflict and the promise of expansion, General Washington seemed remarkably deferential to the principles of the rule of law and civilian control within the new republic and quite sincere in his desire for keeping the new nation out of foreign conflicts and

entanglements. Nor is Washington the only example to consider. Figures such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, or Benjamin Franklin would have offered far less convincing material for the claim that American republicanism was “imperial” from the outset.

This suspicion—that selective biography can allow authors to cherry-pick their evidence and thus manipulate their narrative—begins to intrude more and more as *The Dominion of War* describes the rest of the story of U.S. expansionism. Almost inevitably, we read chapters about Andrew Jackson, “Butcher” Grant, and the Generals MacArthur instead of ones focusing on John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, or William Jennings Bryan. The latter figures would certainly have appeared less absorbed by “racial hatred” (246) or prone to the violence and the desire for conquest that Anderson and Cayton see as increasingly defining the American republic. Were they less representative? That is debatable but not really debated within these pages.

In truth, there isn’t much of any debate going on within the second half of this book. Time and again, the authors seem content to quote from the idealistic rhetoric of American decision makers without offering engaged analysis, incorrectly assuming that the hypocrisy is self-evident. They skip quickly past the “good” wars in American history, earnestly explaining why the Mexican War actually mattered more than the Civil War or why the Philippines occupation was more revealing than World War II. By the time they reach the Powell Doctrine and the end of the twentieth century, they seem almost frantic to reach a verdict that will serve to condemn interventionism in places such as Vietnam and Iraq. Ultimately, the book degenerates in its final chapters into little more than a thin textbook survey of modern U.S. military and diplomatic blunders. What began as a fascinating reconstruction of the American narrative thus sadly becomes a stale, uninspired critique of the misuses of modern U.S. military power.

This is why Anderson’s and Cayton’s climactic question lacks some punch. They write at the very end of the book: “At what point do the contradictions between the advocacy of liberty and the use of coercive means become overwhelming?” (424). The appropriate answer to this question is that whenever historians actually succeed in demonstrating that this disconnection is intentional or that the consequences of warfare are routinely catastrophic to freedom is when the “contradictions” will become “overwhelming.” Instead, even after a critique as rich and sometimes as powerful as *The Dominion of War*, we are still left to contemplate the meaning of a national history that includes both noble conflict essential to the preservation of freedom—by containing British imperialism, by destroying slavery, or by defeating fascism—and other more hellish confrontations, which seem, at best, paved only with good intentions.

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