



American Foreign Policy and the Utopian Imagination

Susan M. Matarese

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With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, American decision makers have been forced to confront anew questions about the role of the United States in world affairs. What are the responsibilities of the United States toward other countries? What are the appropriate uses and limitation of American power? And what, from an American point of view, would be the ideal shape of the imagined New World Order?

However U.S. policymakers may resolve such issues, their thinking will be influenced by assumptions deeply embedded in American culture. Some of those beliefs derive from the nation's distinctive history, geography, and resources. But others are rooted in what Susan M. Matarese calls the "national image"—a set of emotionally charged, relatively coherent ideas about the special qualities of the United States and its place in the world.

Building on a long tradition of scholarship that looks to works of literature for insights into national myths and symbols, Matarese examines a rich trove of utopian fiction written by Americans during the late nineteenth century. Such writings, she shows, provide a useful window into the popular imagination, revealing widely shared notions about the foreign policy of an idealized America— notions that have proven remarkably resilient in the twentieth century as well. Indeed, even in the post-Cold War era, one can find striking similarities between the foreign policy goals of the Bush and Clinton administrations and the dreams of America's utopian architects a century earlier.

The author concludes with an appeal for greater humility and realism in the formation of U.S. foreign policy, and a recognition of the limits of American power in what is likely to be an increasingly fluid, fragmented, and multipolar world.

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