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A Critique of Foreign Policy

John W. Danford

Professor Bellah's article on the condition of our universities is characteristically thoughtful and should be helpful to anyone interested in the state of higher education in America. The same cannot be said of the last couple of pages, where he goes off the rails writing about the place of the U.S. in the world today. The U.S., he suggests, is a "new kind of empire," but like previous empires it must go through the same "three stages"—expansion, overextension, and collapse." Indeed the U.S. is already well into the second stage, even though the new American empire can't be any older than the current Bush administration—surely no one said it was an empire when Bill Clinton was president. "A year ago we were told that American military power was so great that we could intervene anywhere and fight several wars at once....But...now,...we find ourselves seriously overextended and badly in need of help from others in the form of troops and money." Though it's "too soon to

begin. Some historical perspective might help. The 20th century began with dire warnings (Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* comes to mind) about the imminent collapse of Western civilization. The great philosopher Edmund Husserl wrote of "The Crisis of European Sciences," and Leo Strauss spoke of the "crisis of western rationalism." In one way or another these gloomy cogitations are traceable to the work

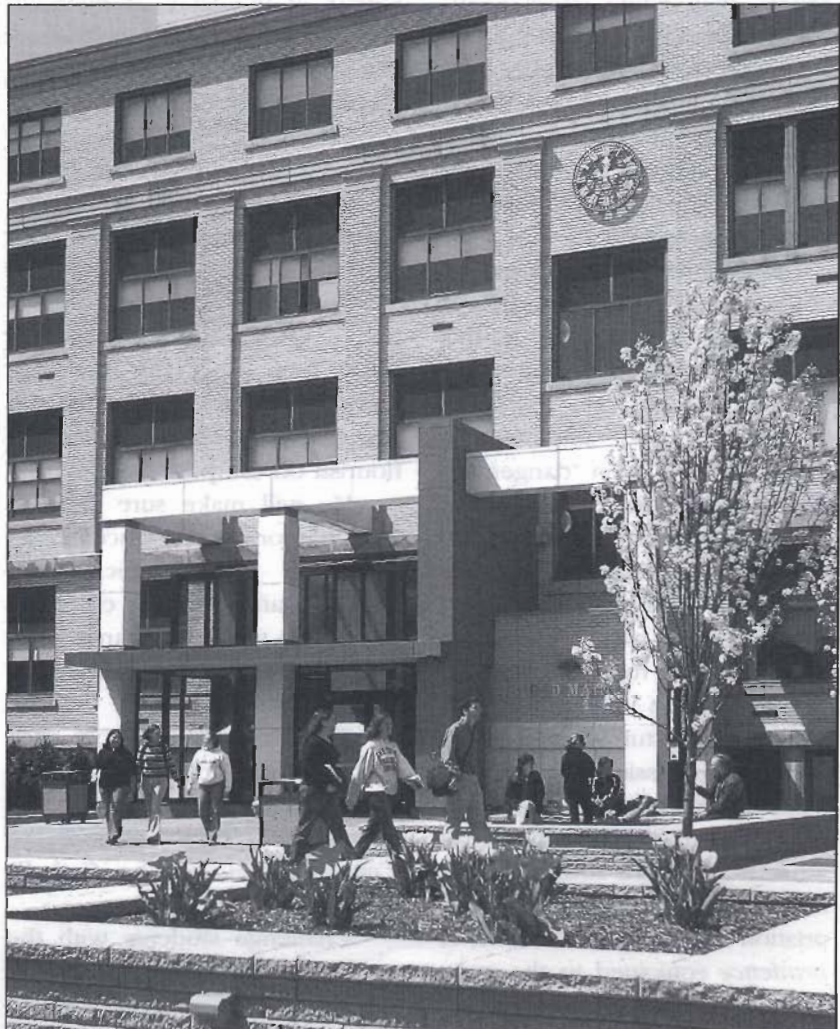
of Friedrich Nietzsche, the towering late 19th century figure who announced not only the death of God, but the end of philosophy—as practiced in the West since Socrates. "Nihilism stands at the door. Whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?" he asked. Nietzsche wrote famously about "what is most contemptible," the "last men," the final inheritors of the morally bankrupt and decadent Western tradition, "No shep-

Bellah goes off the rails...

...speak of collapse," the U.S. is enormously powerful, and "since we

dominate the world, not absolutely but still enormously, we are responsible for the world we dominate. That, I think, is the greatest challenge for American education today."

It is hard to know where to



Old Main atrium, Canisius College.

herd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse... 'Formerly, all the world was mad,' say the most refined, and they blink." The most refined know that nothing is worth fighting about.

What is remarkable at the dawn of the twenty-first century is the gulf which divides one part of the West—the USA—from western Europe, its intellectual and spiritual parent. In Europe we see dying societies: steeply declining populations (which have long since ceased meeting even the replacement rate of reproduction), shockingly widespread practice of euthanasia, and empty churches. European nations are socialist cocoons where 10 percent unemployment is considered normal while governments spend 50 percent or more of the resources generated by sclerotic or moribund economies. When we look at "old Europe," the predictions of Nietzsche, Spengler, et al., seem to have come true in spades. But somehow these predictions don't apply to the U.S. Why? Part of the story may be robust immigration into the U.S., of energetic and freedom-seeking people. Whatever the explanation, the difference between the U.S. and Europe may help us to understand the viewpoint of Professor Bellah and others who share his views. To the morally exhausted, timid and fearful leadership of, say, France, President Bush looks like a cowboy indeed: he has courage and resolve, and he believes some things are worth fighting for. The nations of Europe could not defend them-

selves if they had to; their armies are made up of cooks and barbers, because they have made their armies not fighting forces, but part of the great socialist program of "full employment."

Who were the bad guys now?

In a speech in 1998 President Clinton told us that the world was at peace and we had no enemies. Professor Bellah seems to think this was generally accurate. After the collapse of communism, he writes, "the world was still a dangerous place, but how were we to understand it? Who were the bad guys now? Through most of the nineties we floundered about trying to find an answer. 9/11 changed all that." He implies that some of us breathed a sigh of relief after the nation was attacked, because now we could feel superior again. "It was now clear who the bad guys are; they are the terrorists, and we, as usual are the good guys who will 'win the war on terrorism.'" That Dubya is *such* a simpleton! It's so tempting to see the world in terms of "us against them," and those simplistic Republicans always fall into the trap; they don't even know what "nuance" means.

Some of us view these mat-

ters differently. We think the U.S. was on a "holiday from history" in the nineties, willfully ignoring those who were real enemies and had declared their determination to destroy us. In his 1996 "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places" (following the first World Trade Center attack in 1993, the battle in Somalia (1993), and the massive bombing of the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia in 1996), Osama Bin Laden declared his intention of waging *jihad* against the West in order to restore the Caliphate, or Muslim rule including *Shari'ah* (the law of Allah rather than man-made law). Of course not all Muslims share the views of the "Islamofacists." Neither President Bush nor his advisors have ever suggested as much. (But then they never proclaimed the U.S. to be all-powerful, Professor Bellah's feverish imaginings to the contrary notwithstanding.) Recognizing that the U.S. has been attacked, and is at war—many of us actually believe this to be the case!—dismays the professor, who looks down his nose at "this deeply provincial nation." Perhaps he should listen more closely to us provincials. Our record, whether in World War II, the Cold War, or the war on terror, hasn't been all that bad. Europe's hasn't been all that good.

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