



John E. Moser. *Twisting the Lion's Tail : American Anglophobia between the World Wars.* New York: New York University Press, 1999. x + 263 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5615-7.



Reviewed by Antoine Capet (Université de Rouen)

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It should perhaps be pointed out straight away that the book's subtitle, "American Anglophobia between the World Wars," is misleading. It is too reductive since in fact the period covered extends to the Second World War and even a little beyond, with references to the Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO in the last chapter. Generally, when the coverage does not coincide with the title, the coverage is smaller and the reader feels short-changed. But here, we have the opposite, and we can only rejoice that World War II should be included, as it gives an essential perspective to the debates of the inter-war years, which remain the central subject of the book.

It should also be pointed out that Isolationists will be disappointed in this book, since the author, far from vindicating their position, associates it with "parochialism, a widespread ignorance of foreign peoples and cultures." (p.190) In fact, probably unintentionally, Moser's general tone calls to mind the "Theme of the Volume" in Churchill's *The Gathering Storm (The Second World War. Volume I : Preface)* : "How the English-speaking peoples / through their unwisdom / carelessness and good nature / allowed the wicked / to rearm." "(Parochial) unwisdom, (ignorant) carelessness and (misguided) good nature" : these are in fact the three pillars of Moser's argument. As he says in his Conclusion : "Stereotypes and historic prejudice, not rational regard of American interests, mo-

tivated a great deal of U.S. policy toward Great Britain throughout the period considered here. (p.191) This he derives from what he calls "the national myth," which "encouraged in Americans a belief in the inherent evil of power politics as practiced by the British," whereas "to most Americans, moral principles, and not national interests, were the only justification for foreign intervention." (p.192)

Interestingly, the book does not give many examples of international "power politics" as practiced by the British or Americans, but it gives a wealth of information on American domestic "power politics." The battles between political parties are exhaustively documented, as are the differences between Eastern and Western or Northern and Southern politicians, the conflicts between Presidents and Senators, the contrasting attitudes of native-born and foreign-born Americans, and the antagonism between sophisticated liberal intellectuals and the uneducated rural electorate. What emerges from the book is that American policy towards Britain was hardly ever guided by rational arguments. Instead, Britain was a sort of "political football," used by different players at different stages in the domestic political game. What Moser very convincingly demonstrates is that the same man could one day attack Britain, if this served his political purposes, and the very next day support Britain,

if the wind had changed. Now, conventional wisdom has it that there was nevertheless some consistency in this, since the attitude towards Britain was in point of fact dictated by the average American's perception of foreign threats. This idea we could call the "foul-weather" friend theory: America pooh-poohed Britain when there seemed to be no need for friends, but befriended Britain again when enemies appeared.

Moser shows that this theory may be valid for the post-1947 period, but certainly does not account for the period when the Nazi threat was (or should have been) obvious to all. The description which he gives of the debates on Lend-Lease during the winter of 1940-1941 shows that American Anglophobes were still grinding their own individual axes, with little regard for the ultimate interests of the United States: "Conservatives saw it as a presidential effort to emasculate Congress; nationalists feared that turning over arms to Great Britain would weaken the military strength of the United States; pacifists believed such an obviously unneutral act would draw the U.S. into war; and anglophobes opposed helping Great Britain on general principle." (p.142)

The last point is interesting, as it constitutes an underlying theme of the book. As reportedly expressed by a Senator, American Anglophobia was due to "the memory of the redcoats." (p.190) Less cryptically, it rests on the idea that the nation that freed itself from British Imperialism should never do anything to bolster the British Empire. Defending the British position in the world was an "immoral" war aim, to which a good American could not subscribe in conscience—therefore an alliance between the two countries was ruled out. With this, we are back to the "national myth" argument, subtly underlined by Moser throughout the book and crudely expressed by Senator Robert Reynolds (D-NC) during the Lend-Lease debate, when he called Lend-Lease "a bill for the defense of the British Empire at the expense of the lives of American men and at the expense of the American taxpayer, and for the preservation of the British Empire, without any consideration for the preservation of the United States."

To be fair to Moser, he fully states the Isolationist argument that World War I could be considered an eye-opener to the sordid reality of international politics. The American public had been led to believe that the war was fought "in defense of American ideals," to make the world "safe for democracy." (p.39) But not all Americans believed that the Kaiser alone was responsible for the war, and there was certainly reason to doubt that the

Entente powers shared America's foreign policy ideals. Thus, when Moser describes the attitude of the average American towards Hitler, there is absolutely no implicit criticism of that attitude: "While there was virtually no sympathy for the Nazi regime among Americans, there had been a certain willingness to accept his foreign goals as nothing more than a reversal of the unjust Versailles treaty." (p.119)

Moser in fact reserves his most devastating ammunition for rabid Anglophobes like Senator Hiram Johnson (R-CA). Senator Johnson voted *for* entering the war in 1917, but soon joined the ranks of those who believed that "British propaganda" had lured the U.S. into a war in which it had no vital interest." (p.39) Implicitly supporting the "redcoats theory," he wrote to his son in 1922 that Great Britain was "striving to do insidiously and by propaganda that which she had failed to accomplish in two wars with the United States." (p.39)

Now, of course, this could be justified as a post-Versailles reaction: Britain could be made the villain of the piece in 1922, in the absence of any really threatening, anti-democratic power in the world. But what of the Senator's reaction to Lend-Lease in 1941, when he wrote: "Like the dog gone back to his vomit, the country has become English again"? (p.143)

Even after the creation of the Grand Alliance—as Churchill called it—Moser shows that wrong-headed criticism did not abate. The naive approach to the complexity of the Old World manifested itself, for instance, in charges against British policy in Greece: "In the Senate such liberal stalwarts as Claude Pepper (D-FL) and Glen Taylor (D-ID) charged that London was subjecting Greece to a 'selfish clique of rulers' and 'a dissolute puppet king' for no other reason than 'to protect British investments.'" (p.166)

But we all know that a few years later the U.S. policy of "containment" was to fully vindicate Britain's suspicion of Greek patriots." The point at issue, of course, is not whether the British Government in 1943-1945 or the American Government after 1947 were right or wrong in their approach to the problems of Greece; the point is that the British were in fact blamed for being far-sighted, for introducing too soon a policy which was to be enthusiastically embraced by the United States a few years later. The attitude of these "liberal internationalists," as Moser calls them (p.170) is excellently summed up in a remark made by the editor of the *New Republic* to the effect that Churchill was fighting "a white British Tories' war" (p.168)—a remark which neatly encapsulates all the "rad-

ical chic“ clichés whose reductive oversimplifications are so seductive to self-professed intellectuals.

The other anti-British camp in 1945 proposed a definition of the so-called Special Relationship which hardly made it special any longer: “Nationalists,” comprising mainly southern Democrats and northeastern (pre-Pearl Harbor interventionist) Republicans, saw the United States as the leading power of the postwar world, and they expected Great Britain to follow the American lead in all important matters.” (p.169). So, whoever carried the day in the internal American debate on postwar Foreign Policy—whether it be the “Nationalists” or the “Internationalists”—Britain was bound to lose.

In practice, the “Nationalists” got the upper hand, but not immediately, with curious consequences for British anti-Communists like Churchill. Many readers will be surprised to learn that Churchill’s celebrated ‘Iron Curtain’ speech of 5 March 1946 at Fulton, Missouri, was not well received in the United States. He was accused by prominent American newspapers like the *New York Herald Tribune* or the *Boston Globe* of “promoting anti-Soviet hysteria” and he was even criticized by Eleanor Roosevelt. (p.178) Phrases like “the guarantor of British imperialism” or “the roll of the drums and the flutter of the flag of Empire” were once more heard in the U.S. Senate. The old “redcoats’ syndrome” reappeared in the editorial of the *Chicago Tribune*, which spoke of “slavery,” of an “old and evil empire” and argued that Americans “would be asked to furnish 90 percent of the fighting power and 80 percent of the money in any British alliance to maintain British tyranny in the world.” (p.178)

Clearly, then, the attacks against Churchill’s “white British Tories’ war” did not disappear with his own fall from power. Worse, while the “British Tories” like Churchill were being reviled by the American Left, the British Labour Government was being accused by the American Right of asking for a loan “to bolster a shaky Socialist regime” (p.181): poor Britain was in a Catch-22

situation, and it seemed that, as far as American attitudes towards Britain were concerned, the post-World War II years would be an exact replica of the post-World War I period. But then the Soviet threat was perceived far more quickly than the Nazi one had been in the United States and, as Moser puts it, “Communism, and not imperialism, had become the chief concern” by 1947. In a mind-boggling U-turn which calls Orwell to mind, the British Empire, a life-long liability in American eyes, became a major asset overnight, as expressed by Admiral Leahy: “The defeat or disintegration of the British Empire would eliminate from Eurasia the last bulwark of resistance between the United States and Soviet expansion.” (p.187)

This enables Moser to conclude in a cynical mood: “In the late 1940s it became ridiculous to imagine that Great Britain posed any sort of threat to the United States, so fear and hatred of Great Britain simply gave way to paranoia about the Russian Bear and the Red Menace, which yielded in the 1980s to fears of Japanese domination of international trade, and in the 1990s to the specter of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East. Washington’s advice regarding ‘excessive dislike’ of foreign nations remains, alas, unfortunately unheeded to this day.” (p.194)

Now, the implicit lesson of his conclusion goes much further than the initial ambit of his task as the chronicler of “American Anglophobia between the World Wars”: the book offers in fact an interpretation of the Americans’ extraordinarily complex - or extraordinarily oversimplified - vision of the world and their own role in it. As such, of course, it cannot be *the* definitive monograph on the subject, but it will certainly stand out as a major contribution to what remains after all a very arduous field of research if one wants to go beyond the hackneyed conventions, as Moser certainly does here.

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