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Response to Ledeen - 2

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Response

Emily S. Rosenberg

Michael Ledeen has, for some time, been a strategic theorist influential in neoconservative Republican circles. He has recently advocated regime change in Iran, an agenda pressed in his Roundtable essay and elaborated in his numerous other publications. "Iraq is only one theater in a regional war," he wrote in a *National Review* article. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq represent, in his calculus, only the first and second installments in the "regional war" that he says should encompass Iran, Syria, and Lebanon as well. He has deplored President George Bush's failure to quickly spread "freedom" to Iran, as Iran, not Iraq, should be the central target of the United States. The road to Tehran should have run *through* Baghdad, not stopped there. Had the U.S. supported the pro-democracy demonstrations in Iran right after the Afghani war, he claims, we probably could have unseated the regime: "I do not think we would have needed a single bomb or a single bullet."¹ Even now, with all the hostility U.S. actions in Iraq have produced in the Islamic world, he still contends that military force would not be needed to unseat the government in Iran. U.S.-supplied money, equipment like satellite phones, radios, and television stations, he promises in his Roundtable essay, will embolden the pro-democracy forces to rise against the clerics. These goodies should be accompanied, of course, by unambiguous tough talk by the U.S. president about supporting democracy and freedom. Ledeen seems to promise easy regime change, little cost, and vast popular support without a backlash or Iraqi-style insurgency.

Dr. Ledeen sets these recommendations about "regional war" within a historical framework that presents the history of the United States as that of an "exceptional" power. The title of his essay, "The American Mission," and the opening paragraph asserting that the U.S. is "different" from other powers announces that he adheres to that long-analyzed and critiqued perspective that historians call "American exceptionalism," a view that Niall Ferguson debunked in his essay. Ledeen does not enter, even in his footnotes, the large scholarly discussion over "exceptionalist" ideology; he simply asserts exceptionalism as an unchallenged truth of history.²

His essay presents two problems: it advances a dubious narrative of U.S. history and it urges an unrealistic policy in the name of realism.

Cast within a frame of American exceptionalism, Ledeen presents recent world history as one long unfolding of a U.S.-led expansion of freedom. Advancing a textbook example of classic imperial ideology, he envisions a universalization of American values and practices that will serve both the United States and the world.³ This exceptional mission is “part of our national DNA” or “national genome.” Naturalizing political power by invoking biological metaphors is a characteristic move of imperial ideologies.

In his view, U.S. history not only charts a providential course, but U.S. policy oscillates between impulses exemplified by George Washington (the impulse of noninvolvement in foreign affairs) and Thomas Jefferson (the impulse of exporting democracy). Such a formulation allows Ledeen to wear, of all things, a Jeffersonian mantle. Should we support the spread of “freedom” to Iran?, he asks. “Just ask Tom Jefferson,” he answers. He does not explain how we might engage in that conversation or for what purpose. Frankly, I’m skeptical of historical “channeling” or of cultural ventriloquism, not to mention the concept of a national DNA. My objections to his essay, however, are far broader than the skepticism arising from such dramatic flourishes.

Although Washington and Jefferson staked out rival positions on foreign policy in the late 18th century—one siding with the Federalists in their pro-British leanings and the other bending toward France—their approaches held as much similarity as difference. Washington was no isolationist, despite a superficial reading of his much-quoted “Farewell Address,” which warned against entangling alliances. And Jefferson’s vision of an emerging “empire of liberty,” with a limited government and no standing armies, can hardly be updated into a modern leviathan carrying out a “regional war.” Far from being symbols for isolationism versus idealistic crusades, respectively, both understood the late 18th-century order as one in which leaders pursued their nation’s interests within a framework of balance of power. Both calculated not only what might be good, but what might be possible within the nation’s limited means. Washington warned against “entangling alliances” because they might restrict his nation’s ability to react flexibly within a balance of world power. Jefferson, although generally a proponent of a rather limited central government, jumped at the opportunity to purchase the Louisiana Territory when European rivalries provided the opportunity to do through diplomacy what could not have been attempted

by force. The classic studies of early U.S. diplomacy all emphasize this so-called “interests of the state” approach.⁴

Although I do want to highlight the absurdity of turning Washington and Jefferson into trans-historical symbols that will frame a policy argument for regime change in Iran, I do not want to promote a discussion of “original intent” among the Founding Fathers. Frankly, what gems of wisdom might be gained from either Jefferson or Washington are really beside the point because of the United States’ very different status in the world now, as Dr. Ferguson pointed out. Questionable characterizations of Founding Fathers, however, only begin the fairy-tale version of history to which we have been treated.

Ledeen has suggested that through most of our history we were isolated by oceans. He writes, “we really didn’t think much about the rest of the world.” I would first ask who is the “we”? It is a rhetorical category used without introspection or examination throughout Ledeen’s essay. Then I would respond: “didn’t think much”—except for buying Louisiana from France; jockeying to acquire territory from Spain; entering into a century of battles and treaties with Native American “nations” (which Ledeen apparently does not include in his conceptualization of “the world”); entering difficult negotiations with Britain to gain Oregon; snatching one-third of the territory of Mexico; opening Japan to commerce; moving to block European expansion in the western hemisphere; seizing colonies and protectorates from other colonial powers and from their own independence movements; trying to mediate the war between England and Germany in 1915 and 1916; working out a vision for a League of Nations; encouraging massive private lending to stabilize Germany (and thus Europe) in the early 1920s; and so on. The United States has always been in the world and actively so. The idea that vast oceans, crisscrossed by trade, produced some splendid isolationism in policy is simply not supportable. Expansionism is the heart of U.S. policy during its first century and a half, and nations do not overspread a continent and several colonial acquisitions without “thinking about the world.” The idea that empires grow in fits of absentmindedness has, I should think, long ago been put to rest.⁵

Next, Ledeen states that the U.S. system is not designed to conduct foreign policy. There is much that is insightful in this analysis, for U.S. policy does frequently exhibit dysfunction and fragmentation. Still, highlighting U.S. incompetence and weakness leads to a framework in which, he claims, the United States never *seeks* war or influence but is always forced into it by an attack. U.S. history, in this view, is a rep-

etitious replay of an unprepared innocent that invites attack because of its weakness and incompetence.⁶ “Whenever a war is over, we dismantle our military establishment,” he claims, and set ourselves up for another “sucker punch.” Although the United States did champion military disarmament (not just for itself but for the world) in the Washington Treaties and other agreements at the end of World War I, the pattern hardly holds in other 20th-century cases such as World War II, Korea, or Vietnam. If I were asked to describe U.S. military power and capabilities in the half-century since 1945, “dismantled” would not be the first descriptor to come to mind. Having rhetorically disarmed the United States, however, Ledeen can suggest that the United States is always weak, defensive, and under attack by bullies. Our government, he laments, does not have the “blank check” to spend on the military that other countries enjoy, nor can it operate with secrecy or a compliant media. This “underdog” interpretation fails to explain the dramatic growth of U.S. power in the world or explore how it is exercised.

He clinches his argument about perennial U.S. weakness by saying that the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran inaugurated a war against the United States by terrorists. He deplores the fact that it has taken the United States over twenty years to respond. This example gets to the crux of the problem with his analysis—seeing mainly U.S. weakness, not U.S. strength. To present the Iranian Revolution primarily as a sucker punch against the United States leaves out a lot of relevant detail. Whatever one thinks of the Islamic fundamentalist regime that came to power in 1979, it was swept in by Islamic radicals who were able to lead a massive popular uprising, partly because of twenty-five years of U.S. support for Shah Reza Pahlavi’s regime, which, especially in its latter years, brutalized its people while richly rewarding U.S. oil and military contractors. The U.S. and British covert action that installed the Shah in 1953 by supplying money and media strategies (just the kind of interventionism that Ledeen now wants to repeat) helped give rise to Islamic militancy in Iran and shaped the crisis of 1979 as an act of revenge against U.S. manipulations. I would argue that the Iranian revolution arose not from U.S. weakness or its disorganized policies, but from the secretive, interventionist, and human-rights-be-damned tactics that the U.S. exercised during the Cold War in the name of keeping communism at bay in the oil-rich Gulf region.⁷

Ledeen's notion that the United States responded weakly to terrorism after 1979 needs to be examined in another context as well. During the 1980s, the United States *allied* with radical Islamic terrorists because they provided the best fighting brigades for rolling back the communist regime in Afghanistan. I agree that the United States failed to check the spread of radical Islamic terrorists; worse yet, it actually funded them. The Carter and Reagan administrations, fearing to appear weak, engaged in standing up strongly to communism by sending money, weapons, and electronic equipment to any non-communist group they could find, including those we now call terrorists.⁸ The strategy of regime change by supplying covert assistance to the enemies of our enemies, used by the United States both in Iran in 1953 and in Afghanistan during the 1980s, has a track record that needs more careful examination.

Ledeen bypasses such complications with his assertion that the growth of hate and terrorism in the Middle East is simply unrelated to U.S. policies. In his view, the rise of anger against the United States is *not* fuelled by dominance over oil riches, support for abusive dictatorships, a growing military footprint on Islamic soil, seemingly unquestioned support of Israeli policies, or now a botched occupation of Iraq. Rather, anger grows out of Middle Easterners' own failures, coupled with U.S. weakness and "our" Jeffersonian impulses to spread freedom.

That observation suggests my second concern: unrealistic policy-making. What seems so remarkable about Ledeen's essay, in addition to its cavalier approach to the uses of history, is its utopianism, a quality that runs precisely counter to the more hard-headed, realist approaches of either Washington or Jefferson or even to the traditions that Ledeen himself invokes with approval. In a recent article, even Francis Fukuyama, author of *The End of History and the Last Man*, warned against the utopianism involved in the projects of those advocating "transformation" in the Middle East through hard-line policies and regime change.⁹

It should be acknowledged that Ledeen strikes a posture in which *he* critiques policy utopianism. He suggests that *he* knows that power is what really runs the world and states that the United States needs to be more deliberate in its application. The subtext here, from this author of a book on Machiavelli, is that *he* is a realist, unlike the rest of

us who oscillate between being foolish isolationists and endearing but fuzzy-headed moralistic crusaders. He clearly wishes we would get to the business of building strength and checking the power of unfriendly governments whenever they challenge us.

But to quote David Riesman, "this way of being realistic may have nothing to do with reality."¹⁰ Grand historical narratives about exceptional history, Founding Fathers, and the United States' perennial military weaknesses cannot mask Ledeen's failure to map out how his recommended overthrow in Iran might actually work in the real world. Where is the evidence that his shadowy tactic for regime change would stand a chance? Where is his sense of balance of power, of proportionality, of alliance building, of "blowback," of the limits of power? Where is his assessment of the poor planning and execution of policy in Iraq in 2003 and of the regional consequences of U.S. blunders? Where is the hallmark of realist analysis—a careful judgment of whether the means available can possibly meet the desired ends? Some Iranians may have stood by in 1953 and watched a U.S.- and British-led coup manipulate their political process and their oil, but what could possibly make one think they would all stand by and allow a second such manipulation? There is, of course, a democracy movement in Iran, but would it be furthered or set back by a possibly clumsy attempt to manipulate the country's culture and politics? Iran's nuclear program represents an enormous foreign policy challenge for the United States, but will strident public rhetoric about spreading "freedom" through various covert techniques help or hurt? Realists would more carefully address a calculation of diplomatic means rather than feed abstract, moralistic calls to fulfill "America's mission."¹¹

Advancing utopian visions, Ledeen does not weigh how the U.S. might succeed against an anti-Western insurgency in his "regional war," where the U.S. government has so little cultural and linguistic competence and where the economic stakes are so high because of oil dependency. His way of avoiding the complications of intervention is simply to say that it is ethnocentric to assume that Islamic people cannot learn democracy and freedom and become like the West. Therefore, warnings that they will not welcome U.S.-sponsored regime change cannot rightly be raised. Eastern Europe, with its very different history, becomes his default historical lesson for the "they-will-always-welcome-us-with-hearts-and-flowers" view.

But history does not teach lessons. Rather, it helps provide perspectives. It complicates rather than simplifies. Other speakers have

pointed to the relevance, in the run-up to the Iraqi War, of understanding the British role in Iraq in the 1920s, or the U.S. pacification of the Philippines just after the turn of the century, or the interactive spiral that develops between foreign occupation and local insurgencies. History should not be a rummage pile into which policy analysts can grope and grab simplistic analogies for policy justifications. Examining diverse histories and diverse historical analogies should provoke questions, not answers: What contingencies need to be studied; what unintended consequences considered; what dissents heard and discussed?¹²

Dr. Ledeen's essay is, in short, deeply troubling for its talk of America's exceptional mission, its manipulation of the past, and its confusion of moral stance with on-the-ground policy planning. Ledeen has provided a textbook case of the rhetoric of empire. It articulates universalism and reimagines a fairy-tale history of innocence. It sets up the nation as hero of its own global narrative of light and darkness. And it hears no other stories. Such imperial hubris without realistic assessment of risk may breed militarism and financial crises and lead to various nightmare scenarios, some of which the other two speakers addressed at length.

There is a debate in the land as to whether people of Ledeen's persuasion are true believers in their utopian visions *and* their apparently utopian means of achieving them (with a few radios and some tough talk). Or are they hard-headed realists who seek to entrench U.S. influence in the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf regions, and who develop elaborate moralistic cover to sell the power politics and interventions they see as essential to forging a so-called New American Century?

I do not have the answer to this debate. Ledeen's formulation of a zealous "American Mission," together with his alarming claim that it would be cheap and easy to manipulate a regime change in Iran, however, should be challenged on grounds of both history and policy.

Notes

1. Michael Ledeen, "Iran, When," *National Review Online*, 5 October 2004, online at <http://www.nationalreview.com/ledeen/ledeen200410050930.asp>.
2. The literature on exceptionalism is huge but start with Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review* 96 (October

1991): 1031–72; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Jack Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

3. On the classic characteristics of the ideology of colonialism see, for example, Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), p. 16.

4. There is a huge literature on the subject of the foreign policy of the early Republic that Dr. Ledeen does not engage or cite. The classic study on Washington's doctrine is Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961). Other standard overviews are Bradford Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776–1865*, Volume 1 of *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Colonies into Nation* (New York: MacMillan, 1972).

5. A short interpretation of United States expansionism is Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

6. I have discussed this frame of victimization, constructed in narratives about the Alamo, Custer's Last Stand, and Pearl Harbor, in my book *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 11–33.

7. The most recent study of the coup is Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2003).

8. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

9. For a discussion of the fragmentation among neoconservatives on the issue of whether the transformation of the entire Middle East is "utopian," see Francis Fukuyama, "The Neoconservative Moment," 1 June 2004, online at http://www.tharwaproject.com/English/Main-Sec/NetWatch/NW_08_30_04/Fukuyama.htm.

10. David Reisman, "The American Crisis," in *Abundance for What?: And Other Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1964).

11. The most influential realist analysis and critique of the idea of "mission," written in the context of cold-war policymaking, is George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: Mentor, 1951).

12. The classic elaboration of this view is Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).