

America Ascendant: The Rise of American Exceptionalism, by Dennis M. Spragg. Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2019. xxi, 409 pp. Notes, images, bibliography, index. \$34.95, hardcover.

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According to this book's back cover, broadcasting professional and media researcher Dennis Spragg aims to show how the Second World War's media-government alliance established the case for American exceptionalism. It would be easy to imagine this book as a contribution to the field by focusing on that alliance, in line with Wendy Wall's excellent *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (2008).

That was not the book that was written. Spragg does not engage Wall or other historians who have worked on state-media relations at all. Instead, the book traces the background and success of FDR's supposed goal of doing away with "expansionism as a national imperative and replacing it with interventionism" as proof of American exceptionalism (xiii). It would be fine to write a book trying to argue for American exceptionalism. The author of such a book would have to be clear-eyed when addressing idealists' arguments detailing failings to live up to U.S. rhetoric and realists' points on how the U.S. behaves like other great powers. A book on exceptionalism ought therefore to have an international perspective. Calling one nation exceptional is inherently a relativistic claim, as it speaks to some unexceptional average that defines most nations.

Spragg did none of those things. The text's normative objective led to an unfocused, rambling book. There is a chapter centered on Alexander Hamilton. The Second World War makes up only a minority of the book. The book ends with points on the problems that the U.S. faced in the 2010s, tied to the "largely liberal news media [being] aligned with one political party and, increasingly, the leftist wing of that party" (334). Spragg is more interested in telling the reader America is exceptional rather than providing evidence of something, in fact, exceptional.

Spragg sets up strawmen to knock down. Much of the United States's difficulty with Latin America is because Latin Americans "resented" America's "cultural, economic, and political" achievements (33). He brushes aside one of the most famous U.S. imperial adventures abroad, arguing that "the United States did more in fifty years to aid Philippine development than Spain did in five hundred years" (37).

Spragg does not consider that the possible sources for that putative progress have to do with general twentieth century technological breakthroughs and how poor and devastated the Philippines was in 1946. MacArthur in Japan gets hagiographic treatment, while the Reverse Course goes unmentioned. "Revisionists," meanwhile, are alone in condemning "the American strategy that supported regime change or influenced elections in nations such as Iran and Guatemala" (317).

The history Spragg tells to make these points covers well-known episodes in U.S. history, concentrated on presidents. It is mostly a correct narration, while there are many slipups that stand out. For instance, American philanthropy has deeper roots than America in the wake of the Gilded Age (69). The British did not think they were agreeing to quickly end their hold on India when they signed onto the Atlantic Charter (95). The Korean War did not prevent future Maoist brinkmanship (309). Spragg strikes many right notes on race, for example, when talking about stereotypes in World War II media, but makes dubious claims as well. While FDR "did not pass any significant civil rights legislation . . . people of color worshipped him," Spragg contends (105). An African American majority indeed swung for FDR in all of his national elections aside from 1940, but that is beside the point. A nuanced historian would not essentialize a large and varied group as worshipping someone. It is that type of generalization which populates this book.

In the book's middle chapters, there is interesting and more specialized history on Washington, D.C., looping John Ford, Walt Disney, and other media luminaries into the war effort. There is incisive analysis of how controversies related to media-government coordination were resolved and films made and received. Even in these chapters, the historical reasoning and sequencing is more often uncertain. Spragg's focus on selling the war seems to stem from Dwight Eisenhower's dictum: "Morale is the greatest single factor in a successful war" (188). Spragg does not foreground that point but hides it in a chapter outlining the progress of WWII battles and offering plot summaries for Oscar-winning movies. Spragg makes no attempt to transition between the high politics surrounding Allied espionage within Nazi Germany and detailing the release of and actors in *Mrs. Miniver*.

This book should serve as a warning to writers trying to cover too much and a lesson in how not to wage historiographical war.

The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities, by Kate Bowler. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 338 pp. Glossary, images, appendices, notes, index. \$29.95 hardcover.