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BODY:

A DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Why America Should Rejoin the World

By Will Hutton

Norton. 319 pp. \$ 27.95

It was a time to be tragic; it was a time to be trite. It was a time to be warlike; it was a time to be wordy. It was a time to be passionate; it was a time to be pompous. The post-Sept. 11 publishing boom in big books about Saving the World shows no signs of abating. Many of them recite slogans about as profound as those offered by beauty-pageant contestants.

British journalist Will Hutton's book about how America should rejoin the world is the latest entry in this onslaught. It is above average for the genre. Among the many dimensions in which he claims Europeans are superior to Americans, he could have included that their political analysts (if he is a typical example) are somewhat less trite, wordy and pompous than their American counterparts. He is reasonably eloquent and quickly gets to the point: that America has to give up its hyper-individualistic creed in favor of the recognition that people within nations are interdependent. It must give up its foreign policy unilateralism in favor of the recognition that nations, too, are interdependent. American capitalism is too greedy and every-CEO-for-himself; Europeans understand better that capitalist chieftains have obligations to their customers, workers and society at large. America shamefully neglects its poor; the Europeans care for theirs with a Social Contract. America acts alone; Europe negotiates within the United Nations. If only America were more like Europe, the world would be a better place.

"Americans, we Europeans need you back," he says plaintively. But were we ever there in the first place? I don't recall a U.N. resolution backing America's war in Vietnam, which occurred during the high tide of the American liberalism whose passing Hutton laments. America has a long tradition of being suspicious of grand international entanglements, often for good reason when the international organizations and agreements did (and do) include tyrants who don't exactly share the values Hutton celebrates. I'm not too convinced that the United Nations, one of the world's most unaccountable and inefficient bureaucracies, should be the model for international cooperation.

I'm not sure how much the United States can trust the United Nations after incidents such as the notorious vote that left the United States off the U.N. Commission for Human Rights in 2002 but included Algeria, Burundi, China, Cuba, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Hutton complains that the United States did not do enough to support the U.N. Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, but there is not much that can be done with a summit that had 185 separate action recommendations drafted by U.N. bureaucrats -- including more efficient use of cow dung. And Hutton complains America doesn't supply enough foreign aid to the poor nations, yet foreign aid -- weighed down by the same ponderous bureaucracies that plague the United Nations -- has not exactly covered itself with glory lately.

Even Europe's own European Union bureaucracy is notorious for petty squabbles and politicized appointments strictly apportioned by nationality. And European generosity toward the poor nations should be put in perspective: The French support ugly characters in their former colonies, and the average EU cow gets about as much in annual farm subsidies as the average African earns in a year. In the long-running "Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus" debate, Europeans always complain about Americans' excessive individualism. Well, okay, but individualism saved the United States from Europe's disastrous detours into fascism and communism. That counts, too, as long as we are keeping score.

Hutton attributes the woeful American record on helping the poor to the cowboy refusal to do anything other than let individuals lift themselves by their own spurs. He calls the alleged higher upward mobility (today) of American society a myth. I don't know about his numbers for today, but America's historical success at absorbing wave after wave of penniless immigrants into the middle class is built on far more than fairy tales. And America is far more open even today to immigrants than major European nations such as France or Italy. America's lamentable underclass probably has more to do with race and the legacy of slavery than with individualism.

Having said all this, I should stress that Hutton is often right to appeal to the better angels of our American natures. Should we really arrogate to ourselves the right to invade whomever we feel like? Hutton is right that America can't seem to decide how to match its values with its enormous power -- should it topple all tyrants (an inexhaustible list) or prop up tyrants who are friendly to the United States or do both at the same time? Can't our diplomats do better than meddle in other peoples' quarrels in a way that leaves everyone enraged at us? Can't we find a way to spread prosperity to inner cities as well as to upscale suburbs? We could probably learn a few lessons from post-World War II European societies on some of these questions, as Hutton argues.

So America would indeed do well to be more modest about its accomplishments at home and abroad, as Hutton advocates. However, this is unlikely to be a message that goes down well with American readers who are asked to admit that their society is inferior to the blessed European social contract (overlooking a few ugly historical and modern details) and Euro-multilateralism. How about we compromise and agree that both Americans and Europeans need to be modest? *

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