Why have many Americans believed since the late nineteenth century that they should try to liberate and remake Russia? How has engagement in crusades to free and reform Russia affected how Americans have felt about the United States? Why has Russia, more persistently than any other foreign country, been a foil for the definition and reaffirmation of American national identity? Those were some of the central questions I sought to investigate in research between 1995 and 2006 that culminated in the publication last fall of The American Mission and the “Evil Empire.”

The book is not a comprehensive history of all facets of American-Russian relations. Instead, it focuses primarily on how Russia since 1881 has been “seen as both an object of the American mission and the opposite of American virtues.” Even with that


1 The best single-volume history is John Lewis Gaddis, Russia, the Soviet Union and the United States (New York, 2nd ed., 1990), unfortunately out of print in recent years.

specific focus, there were many episodes from the last 125 years that I could not recount or
could not discuss at length in the space of a little more than 125,000 words.

I am grateful to the H-Diplo editors for organizing this roundtable discussion of my book
and I am gratified that the reviewers have found so much to praise in their insightful
commentaries. I am also glad to have an opportunity to clarify my thinking about a number
of questions raised by the reviewers.

Walter Hixson’s generous and enthusiastic review leaves me with only a few points to
address. In commenting on my chapter on the interwar period, “Doors opened and closed: opportunities and obstructions in early Soviet Russia, 1921-1940,” Hixson observes that I
might have done more “to play out the profound impact of American racial formations on
foreign policy.” This is certainly true. I did note in passing that some American Relief
Administration workers in the early 1920s disparaged listless Russians as hopelessly
“Oriental” and that the embittered first U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, William
Christian Bullitt, railed about Stalin’s “Asiatic despotism” in the late 1930s. But I did not
dwell on this theme, which David Engerman stressed in his excellent recent book,
Modernization from the Other Shore. Instead, I sought to highlight in this chapter and
throughout the book how many Americans who sought to redeem or regenerate Russia
either set aside or directly disputed negative stereotypes about the Russian national
character. Thus, one Pentecostal leader’s 1927 reference to Russians as “white people,”
which Hixson cites, was part of a long tradition in which American religious missionaries
and political crusaders explicitly defined Russians as European, Caucasian, or “Aryan.” In
1914, for example, George Kennan, the great crusader against tsarist despotism,
insisted that “the Russians are among the most gifted of the Aryan peoples.” In
subsequent decades, his namesake, George F. Kennan, the key figure in launching U.S. “psychological warfare” against Stalinist despotism, stressed that Russians were not Mongols but
Europeans who had migrated to the north and east.

Discussing my treatment of the 1960s and 1970s, Hixson suggests that my study “would
have benefited from more cultural analysis of familiar events such as the Cuban Missile
Crisis as well as the détente era.” Although it may be possible for other historians to
develop fresh analysis of the cultural impact of the Cuban Missile Crisis, I am not sure how
that would have fit in my study. In my chapter on the détente era I discussed how U.S.
diplomats, propagandists, and cultural exchange officials tried in a low-key way to promote

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3 David C. Engerman, Modernization From the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of
Russian Development (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

4 For precedents to the 1927 statement, see David S. Foglesong, “Redeeming Russia? American


6 The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”, 120-1.
the gradual liberalization of the Soviet system, and I briefly analyzed the waning of anticommunist demonization of the Soviet Union. However, I felt that those developments merited less detailed discussion than the more fervent drive for “liberation” before the détente era and the revival of the crusade for a free Russia at the end of the détente era.

Reviewing my final chapter on the 1990s, Hixson writes, “perhaps somewhat in contradiction with the evidence he has presented, Foglesong hints that the United States might have transformed Russia or made progress toward that aim through wiser policies.” Let me clarify my views. I do not believe that Americans could have transformed Russia almost overnight into a liberal democracy with a flourishing market economy and widespread conversions to Protestant faiths. However, I do believe that Americans could have been somewhat more successful if the United States had been able to deliver more financial aid in the crucial first year after the Soviet Union collapsed; if U.S. economic advisers had not urged the hasty privatization of state enterprises that enriched handfuls of unscrupulous, well-connected individuals; if Clinton administration officials had cautioned Russian President Boris Yeltsin in 1993 against provoking a violent showdown with the Russian parliament instead of assuring him that the United States would back him to the hilt in his confrontation; if more Protestant missionaries had studied Russian language and culture before flying to Russia; and if the United States had not pushed the rapid eastward expansion of NATO, which inflamed Russian nationalist resentment of the West and undermined the position of liberals in Russia.

Finally, alluding to a famous comment by George F. Kennan in 1951, Hixson suggests that “the problem all along was in not allowing Russia to be Russia.” It is worth highlighting two other statements by Kennan that illuminate why it has been so difficult for many Americans to let Russians “be Russians.” In the summer of 1945, after journeying to Siberia to investigate popular attitudes across the Soviet Union, Kennan declared that since Russians were a “responsive people, capable of absorbing and enriching all forms of human experience,” they were an especially suitable outlet for “the yearning to feel themselves helpful to others” that was a signal trait of the American character. Kennan therefore felt intensely frustrated that the Russian people “places itself in the hands of a ruthless authoritarian regime” and “beyond the power of others to help.”7 In 1988, when many Americans still clung to an emotional antipathy to the rapidly changing Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev, Kennan explained that “A large segment of the American population has the need to cultivate the idea of American innocence and virtue – which requires an opposite pole of evil.”8

Deborah Welch Larson’s thorough review is so precise and apt that I have little to say in response. The only major point about which I may disagree with Larson concerns the relationship between American popular attitudes and the policy positions of political elites

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in the United States. Larson rightly notes that there has often been a “gap between public attitudes and governmental policy.” However, one of the points I sought to emphasize was that key U.S. policymakers have shared the popular ambition to liberate Russia and they have at crucial moments succumbed to the illusion that American influence could inspire a rapid transformation of Russia. A few of the most dramatic cases will serve to illustrate this point. In April 1917 Woodrow Wilson rapturously hailed the way the Romanov autocracy had been overthrown by the Russian people, who were “always in fact democratic at heart.” In the summer of 1918, when Wilson sent military expeditions to northern Russia and eastern Siberia, he unrealistically hoped that the small U.S. forces would help “the Russian people in their endeavour to regain control of their own affairs” from the Bolshevik usurpers. From 1944 through the early 1950s, when George F. Kennan was at the peak of his influence on U.S. policy, he cherished the unrealistic ideas that the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church could “prove to be politically a match for the people in the Kremlin” and that the religiosity of the Russian people could be mobilized against the despotic regime by outside influence. In Ronald Reagan’s second term, when he overrode hard-liners in his administration and pursued a strategy of diplomatic engagement with Mikhail Gorbachev, he was strongly influenced by the belief that the Communist leader could be converted to American political, economic, and religious principles. Through its discussion of these and subtler cases when U.S. leaders have been guided by their religious beliefs and political ideals, The American Mission and the “Evil Empire” is, I believe, not “consistent with realism” (as Larson writes) but a challenge to assumptions that the tough-minded thinking of policymakers can be sharply and consistently differentiated from the moralism and idealism of the U.S. public.

Although Katherine A. S. Sibley praises The American Mission and the “Evil Empire” as “meticulously researched” and “crowded with compelling examples,” she also criticizes what she regards as shortcomings and she finds the treatment of the most recent decades of American-Russian relations to be “sometimes questionable.” I will address her criticisms and try to clear up some confusion about points I believe she has misunderstood.

According to Sibley, “one of the book’s weaknesses is the limited attention it devotes to economic developments between the two nations.” When I first began research on this topic, I planned to devote roughly equal attention to the economic, political, and religious dimensions of American drives to transform or reform Russia. However, as my research proceeded I found the actions and thinking of American business leaders yielded less illumination of the themes of mission and demonization than I had expected. The fact that the book focuses more on propagandists and missionaries than on manufacturers and merchants is thus not a result of my being “less interested in economic developments,” as

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9 One of the economic developments I originally planned to discuss was PepsiCo’s penetration of the Soviet Union, from Chairman Donald Kendall’s dreams in the 1950s through the agreements with the Soviet government in the early 1970s. Unfortunately, I did not receive permission to work in the Pepsi corporate archive and the documents I was permitted to see in the Russian Foreign Ministry Archive (AVPRF Fond 129, op. 58, papka 246) were too fragmentary to permit a satisfactory discussion. Perhaps other scholars will be able to discuss this subject in the future.
Sibley puts it, but a result of my finding business interests less valuable and important for answering the questions I pursued. However, the book does discuss the economic relationship in a number of ways that Sibley does not mention in her review. For example, I argue that during the last decades of the tsarist era, Russia's rapid economic development led Americans to pay more attention to that vast empire, to envision Russia as an enormous potential market, to dream about the “regeneration” of Russian agriculture by American machines, and to proclaim that Russia was destined to follow the United States' path of modernization. As I show, the ambition to expand trade with Russia came into conflict with American moral indignation at Russian mistreatment of Jews, and in 1911, public and congressional pressure compelled the Taft administration to abrogate the U.S. commercial treaty with Russia. That step momentarily satisfied American desires to affirm the enlightened tolerance of the United States in contrast to the benighted bigotry of the Russians, but it did not compel tsarist officials to improve their treatment of Jews and there is some evidence that it aggravated religious persecution. This episode is one of several instances when economic developments intersected with the drives to reform Russia and reaffirm American virtues that are discussed in The American Mission and the “Evil Empire.”

After the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917, the United States sought to encourage their removal and to affirm American principles by refusing to recognize the Soviet government for sixteen years. According to Sibley, that righteous stance “was increasingly meaningless as greater and greater trade burgeoned” in the 1920s. That view appears to disregard how the non-recognition policy remained quite meaningful both to Soviet leaders, who cut back purchases in the United States as a way to increase pressure for recognition, and to American anticommunists, who persistently opposed diplomatic recognition as a compromise of American moral principles and a tacit acceptance of an evil regime.

Sibley complains that I do not mention how Soviet agents secretly sought to obtain American technology, particularly during the Second World War – a subject of her book, Red Spies in America. This is an important topic, but I do not see how it is significant for the history of American thinking about emancipating and redeeming Russia.

One of the arguments in The American Mission and the “Evil Empire” that is most troubling to Sibley is the assertion that during the Brezhnev era (1964-1982) few Russians yearned for spiritual liberation from communism as desperately as exiled writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn claimed they did. In support of this assertion I cited several recent works, including a study by V. A. Kozlov that found a dramatic decline in the number of mass uprisings and disorders in the Brezhnev years. I also cited a July 1975 report by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. The report noted that the Soviet regime’s economic, agricultural, and nationality problems were “all relatively under control,” that “dissenters have become more disorganized and less effective,” and that Soviet propaganda emphasis on

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consumerism and nationalistic patriotism had “been effective, especially among the ethnic Russian” [sic]. Sibley challenges my assertion that few Russians were eager for liberation by noting that around the same time “Czechoslovaks and others were inspired by the Helsinki Accords to call their government to account in the Charter 77 proclamation of January 1977.” I don’t think it is appropriate to make inferences about the complex attitudes of Soviet citizens from a courageous statement by Czechoslovakian dissidents. Sibley demands a simple answer: “which is it? Did communist peoples want to be liberated or not?” I don’t believe it is useful to try to reduce the ambivalent feelings of most Soviet citizens – often mingling cynicism about Communist ideology and frustration at shortages of consumer goods with pride in Soviet military power and relief at the relative economic security of the 1970s – to a yes or no answer.

Commenting on my treatment of the Reagan era, Sibley writes that I am “suggesting that the American mission was appropriately applied in the 1980s.” I think it is important to differentiate more carefully between the harshly confrontational policies of the early 1980s, which I argue were counterproductive, and the policies of the last years of Reagan’s presidency, which placed much greater emphasis on dialogue and negotiation. Even then I argue against overstating the impact of Reagan’s private statements on Gorbachev’s moves, for example toward an end to religious persecution. I conclude that “it was not so much Reagan’s missionary drive as his acceptance of the need for the American and Soviet systems to coexist, that facilitated the steps Gorbachev took which led to the unraveling of the Soviet empire.”

In the last pages of her review, Sibley takes snippets of quotations out of the contexts of many different pages of several different chapters and the brief epilogue of The American Mission and the “Evil Empire,” then either contrasts or lumps them. The result is to create an impression of contradictions and a great deal of confusion, some of which I will try to sort out. I do believe that George F. Kennan offered “sage” advice when he recommended in 1951 that “when Soviet power has run its course,” Americans should not apply “litmus papers daily to their political complexions to find out whether they answer to our concept of ‘democratic’” but should instead “let them be Russians.” I am not “sharply critical of President George W. Bush” for saying “I don’t expect Russia to look like the United States.” I did find “excessive” the harshly negative judgments of Russia by some prominent Americans at the end of the 1990s, such as the declaration of one Republican congressional leader that Russia had become “a looted and bankrupt zone of nuclearized anarchy.” I did not find “Western coverage of the death of journalist Aleksandr Litvinenko... unnecessarily ‘vituperative’ and representative of a ‘demonization of Putin’.” In fact, I did not even

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12 Telegram from the American Embassy in Moscow to the Secretary of State, 23 July 1975, Box 20, National Security Adviser Presidential Country Files for Europe and Canada, Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.


14 The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”, 217.
mention the former KGB and FSB agent Litvinenko, who died in November 2006, a month after I sent the epilogue to the publisher. (Sibley appears to have confused Litvinenko with the journalist Anna Politkovskaya.) I did say that comparisons of Putin to Pinochet, Franco, Mussolini, and Stalin reflect a tradition of American demonization of Russian leaders that extends back at least as far as the condemnation of Tsar Nicholas II in the early twentieth century.

Victoria Zhuravleva’s eloquent review not only summarizes but also elucidates and elaborates many of the major arguments in The American Mission and the “Evil Empire.” I am grateful to her for her thoughtful and discerning comments.

Drawing on her expertise on American-Russian relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Zhuravleva points to some nuances that warrant further attention and she highlights some topics, such as the influence of Russian spouses of prominent American commentators, that could be pursued by other historians. Zhuravleva rightly notes that ethnic and religious minorities who emigrated from Russia in the early twentieth century contributed significantly to the demonization of the Russian empire, and this undoubtedly deserves more thorough treatment by other scholars. However, I think it is important to keep in mind that immigrants from Russia did not by themselves exert strong, sustained influence on American public opinion and U.S. government policy throughout the last half century of tsarist rule. Immigrants from Russia achieved their greatest influence at specific moments when their causes were championed by Anglo-Americans who found their own meaning in the crusades. I chose to focus especially on those Anglo-Americans, such as the settlement house socialists who were attracted to radical Jewish women and New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson, who declared in 1911 that putting concern for the rights of Jews above American commerce with Russia would show that “America is not a mere body of traders.”

Zhuravleva is quite right that more attention could be devoted to the influence of negative stereotypes and ideological notions on American academic research about Russia. Thomas Bailey’s book about American popular attitudes toward Russia, which Zhuravleva cites, is an especially striking example of how a fine historian writing in the early Cold War embodied and perpetuated notions about a confrontation between American “civilization” and Russian “barbarism” that had gained prominence fifty years earlier. The anthropologists Margaret Mead and Clyde Kluckhohn are among the other academics whose influence on public and governmental views of Russia I was not able to discuss within the limits of my book. David Engerman focused on intellectuals’ ideas about Russia in his thoroughly researched study. I concentrated more on how wider public attitudes have been influenced by crusaders for a “free Russia” and their opponents in the highly charged debate that has continued for more than 125 years.

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15 The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”, 44.
17 Engerman, Modernization From the Other Shore.
In a subtle criticism, Zhuravleva writes that *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* conveys “the impression that the Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet reality had a rather tangential effect on the American perception of Russia.” She does not indicate what passages in the book give that impression. What I sought to show throughout the book is that real developments in Russia have been distorted by American lenses. Sometimes this has involved magnification. For example, the real and horrible massacre of Jews at Kishinev in 1903 became in the eyes of many Americans a mark of the essential “savagery” of the Russian people and the “barbarism” of the tsarist government, a blot so huge and hideous that it eclipsed the race riots and lynchings in the United States. At other times the distortion has involved minimization. For example, the real persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1920s was often downplayed and condoned by American Protestants, who described it as a necessary clearing of a reactionary obstruction to social progress and the spread of “real spiritual religion.” In more recent times, the real hardships ordinary Russians suffered in the 1990s were minimized by American commentators who hailed how Russia was becoming a market democracy, while the real political intimidation and manipulation in the Putin era has been magnified into a reversion to Stalinist tyranny. In each of these cases, the Russian “reality” was not “tangential” to American perceptions but distorted in American eyes, especially because of American messianic aspirations and tendencies to use Russia as a scapegoat or whipping boy.

A few points in Zhuravleva’s excellent review may warrant some minor clarification or refinement. The Bolshevik persecution of the Protestant churches in the late 1920s did not come “after failure of the messianic project to convert Russian believers and priests to Protestantism”; rather, the success of the rapidly growing Protestant “sects” alarmed key communists and led to the intensified persecution of Protestant leaders. During the Second World War it was not “various Evangelical missions” but writers for popular and religious magazines who were primarily responsible for spreading unrealistic expectations concerning the reformation of Stalinist Russia. I do not hold that by itself “Russia’s spiritual revival was the key element in Ronald Reagan’s view of the Soviet Union”; rather, I argue that the combination of Reagan’s hopes for a broad religious revival in Russia and his belief in the irresistible attraction of American consumer abundance inclined him to believe that Russia could be converted and seduced, in contrast to more pessimistic advisers who maintained that the Soviet Union was an irredeemable enemy and would always be an “evil empire.”