

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

BEING AMERICA:

Liberty, Commerce, and Violence in an American World.

By Jedediah Purdy. Knopf.

337 pp. \$24

Chinese university students protest against the United States by day and apply to American graduate schools by night. Violent Mexican guerrillas mail teddy bears to journalists, hoping to spark international coverage of their cause. And multinational companies attract environmentally savvy customers with anticonsumerist, antimaterialist marketing campaigns.

Welcome to the surreal world of globalization politics, the subject of this ambitious but uneven second book by Jedediah Purdy. In *For Common Things* (1999), he examined the state of U.S. politics and found it sterilized by irony and disaffection. Now, this 28-year-old social critic casts his earnest gaze toward the rest of the globe and finds it grappling with tradeoffs between violence and liberty and caught in a love-hate relationship with the United States.

In the Middle East, Asia, and the Americas, Purdy spoke with everyone from pro-bin Laden law students in Cairo to gay rights activists in Bombay, and those conversations are some of the most interesting and original segments of the book. Indian software mogul N. R. Narayana Murthy, for example, reveals how, in order to succeed globally, Indian business leaders feel they must adopt the prefab façade of corporate America. The headquarters of Murthy's NASDAQ-listed company, Infosys, are modeled after Microsoft's campus in Redmond, Washington, with open fields and clean roads. Murthy explains, "You will think that you have left India. . . . This is to show our foreign clients that we are serious, that we are world-class."

Unfortunately, Purdy interrupts this reportage with meandering discourses on the nature of humanity, the meaning of desire, and what "we Americans" believe. These tangents inform us that slavery is "wicked," that nationalism can lead to violence, and that the United States should refrain from invading Russia and China—truths hardly requiring Jedediah Purdy's validation. He also insists on paying incessant (and distracting) homage to his favorite writers and thinkers. Hannah Arendt,

Edmund Burke, William Shakespeare, and William Butler Yeats all take curtain calls—and that's in the first five pages. Yet he disregards contemporary thinkers who have tackled similar issues. His look at corporate branding and the "oratory of commerce," for example, clearly relates to the work of Canadian writer-activist Naomi Klein, the author of *No Logo* (2001).

But though Purdy sometimes seems to fancy himself the first person to ponder globalization, that attitude is a strength as well as a weakness, and it leads to some fresh insights and trenchant observations. For example, he deftly explains how anti-Americanism abroad is not incompatible with the global embrace of U.S. pop culture: "Emulation and resentment are the paired fruits of imperial power, and the stronger the compulsion to emulate, the more intense the resentment is likely to be."

The irony of this thoughtful, evenhanded work is that it ultimately succumbs to the sort of U.S.-centered self-involvement that so much of the world decries. In his conclusion, Purdy holds up *Federalist* 10 as a template for understanding civilization. James Madison argued that, in the face of competing economic interests, opinions, and passions, humankind would always be divided. "I believe that this view is right," writes Purdy, "and that because liberalism is the best spirit of civilization yet tried in modernity, recognizing the mixed, unstable nature of human beings is a requirement for civilization." True, perhaps. But in such cultural arrogance, however subtle or well intentioned, any American who has ever asked "Why do they hate us?" might well find the beginnings of an answer.

—CARLOS LOZADA

COLLISION COURSE:

The Strange Convergence of Affirmative Action and Immigration Policy in America.

By Hugh Davis Graham. Oxford Univ. Press. 246 pp. \$30

When Congress adopted the Civil Rights Act of 1964, supporters insisted it would never lead to preferences or quotas. Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.)

offered to eat the pages of the bill if that happened. And when Congress adopted the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, supporters insisted it would have little impact on the number of immigrants coming to the United States or on the nation's ethnic mix.

As it turns out, the backers of both landmark bills were wildly mistaken. The consequences of their shortsightedness include the arrival since 1965 of 35 million immigrants, with three-quarters of them immediately eligible for affirmative action preferences in hiring, university admissions, and government benefits—preferences created to remedy past American discrimination that these immigrants couldn't possibly have experienced.

How could a democratic country arrange to give preferences to newcomers—even illegal ones—over its own native-born citizens? And how will immigration and affirmative action intertwine in the future? Those are the fascinating questions tackled in this brief and brilliant work. A Vanderbilt University historian and political scientist who died in 2002, Hugh Davis Graham clearly believed—and goes a long way toward demonstrating here—that America's policies on affirmative action and immigration represent a tangled shambles of good intentions, contradictory impulses, and sometimes ludicrous outcomes.

The U.S. Small Business Administration, for instance, was besieged during the 1980s by requests to declare various ethnic groups eligible for minority set-asides in government contracting. It rejected Iranians for being “too narrow” a group and for failing to demonstrate long-term discrimination in the United States, yet approved immigrants from Bhutan, Burma, and even Tonga. The agency evidently wanted to draw the line at the Khyber Pass lest it have to make Middle Eastern immigrants eligible too. But Indonesians got into the set-aside pool despite enjoying greater affluence and education than the average American.

Graham traces government-mandated affirmative action in private-sector hiring to a Nixon administration initiative that tar-

geted discriminatory trade unions in Philadelphia. The policy was intended to undercut the power of organized labor, drive a wedge between unions and civil rights leaders, ease inflation by reducing construction costs, and allay social unrest by opening more jobs to blacks. When implemented, though, the Philadelphia plan rapidly evolved into a national system of numerical requirements for workplace “diversity” that were difficult to distinguish from quotas. Lobbyists for the beneficiaries, in turn, vigorously defended the new requirements. Affirmative action was soon ubiquitous.

Why? One culprit, Graham contends, is divided government. When different parties control the White House and Congress, interest groups can exert greater influence. Sometimes they manage to get policies adopted that nobody would dream of putting to a public referendum. The author also makes the important point that social legislation is especially susceptible to unintended consequences. Not that these consequences are invariably bad: He notes that affirmative action has helped produce a vast black middle class even as immigrants and women have come to overwhelm blacks as beneficiaries, and that mass immigration has spared America the demographic crisis facing Europe and Japan, with their low birthrates and relatively meager immigration.

American immigration policy from the outset “has oscillated between flood and drought models, and the country has paid a heavy price in the excesses associated with each extreme,” Graham writes. Sheer momentum and the proximity of Mexico suggest that heavy immigration is here to stay, even if our way of choosing immigrants—by family ties—is haphazard. But he notes that persistent terrorism or a depressed economy could force the pendulum back. He is more doubtful about the durability of affirmative action, which lacks popular support and suffers from shifting rationales. It depends, moreover, on ethnic categories that are rapidly being blurred by intermarriage in a population made ever more diverse by immigration.

—DANIEL AKST