More than 30 years ago, journalist and author Frances FitzGerald pointed out that American history textbooks had changed. Until the 1960s, they had portrayed the United States as the greatest nation in the world, the model of democracy, freedom, prosperity and progress. "But now," Ms. FitzGerald suggested, textbooks lavished less praise on America, devoting more and more space to the nation's problems: poverty, income inequality, racial injustice, and global entanglements.

A sweeping account of the United States from the end of World War II to the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, "American Empire" belongs to this tradition. Throughout the volume, Joshua Freeman, a professor of history at Queens College in New York City, argues that the United States, which emerged as an economic and military superpower in 1945, failed to address its "serious deficiencies as a democratic polity" and expand the rights of its citizens.

By the mid-'70s, Mr. Freeman indicates, the nation "could no longer sustain economic progress, domestic harmony, or international dominance." As the 21st century began, "the United States proved itself to be a can't-do imperial power, an incompetent, blustering, sometimes brutal nation, whose hubris and carelessness caused enormous harm to its allies, those it claimed to be helping, and itself."

Mr. Freeman is disappointed by the performance of every Democratic president from Harry Truman to Barack Obama. But he reserves his most withering criticism for Republican occupants of the Oval Office. Playing his strongest cards -- self-assurance, affability, and an apparent willingness to take decisive action -- to a fare-thee-well, Ronald Reagan, Mr. Freeman claims, actually practiced a supply-side conservatism with a "mean-spirited edge"; exhibited indifference, callousness or contempt for the poor, especially non-whites; feathered the nests of corporate fat cats; hollowed out the nation's transportation and education infrastructure; was "one of the least informed presidents the country ever had"; and left a political legacy of "blithe disregard for consequences." And Mr. Freeman sums up the administration of George W. Bush in two words: "Reaganism Redux."

In no small measure because their votes ushered in the "conservative ascendancy," Mr. Freeman is disappointed with the American people as well.
After World War II ended, he claims, they did not discuss, let alone demand, a small peacetime military and an end to overseas bases. They cared little about "strict adherence to the Constitution" by their leaders or the use of "irregular methods" in defense of empire. Most distressing of all, having developed the conviction that the United States was exempt from history, they squandered opportunity after opportunity to redefine priorities and goals, and "simply did not think about" the consequences for the national and global environment of a "growing society living large."

Sober, sour, searching and scorching, "American Empire" can be criticized for accentuating the negative, exaggerating the agreement between Democrats and Republicans over foreign policy and political economy, and for failing to interrogate its own ideological presuppositions, identify politically viable policy alternatives, or investigate why they got no traction.

Nonetheless, you do not have to be a left-winger to conclude that some of Mr. Freeman's assessments ring true. After all, as he reminds us, when the recession recedes, a long list of urgent problems will remain: high rates of infant mortality and adolescent obesity; inferior public schools, power grids, transportation and communication facilities; stagnant family incomes; perverse private sector incentives and compensation packages; an economy addicted to consumption; global competition; energy and climate crises; and unsustainable government debt.

It seems clear, doesn't it, that it's time to go beyond slogans, sound bites, and partisan posturing to understand how we got there -- and what we need to do to breathe new life into the American Dream?

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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