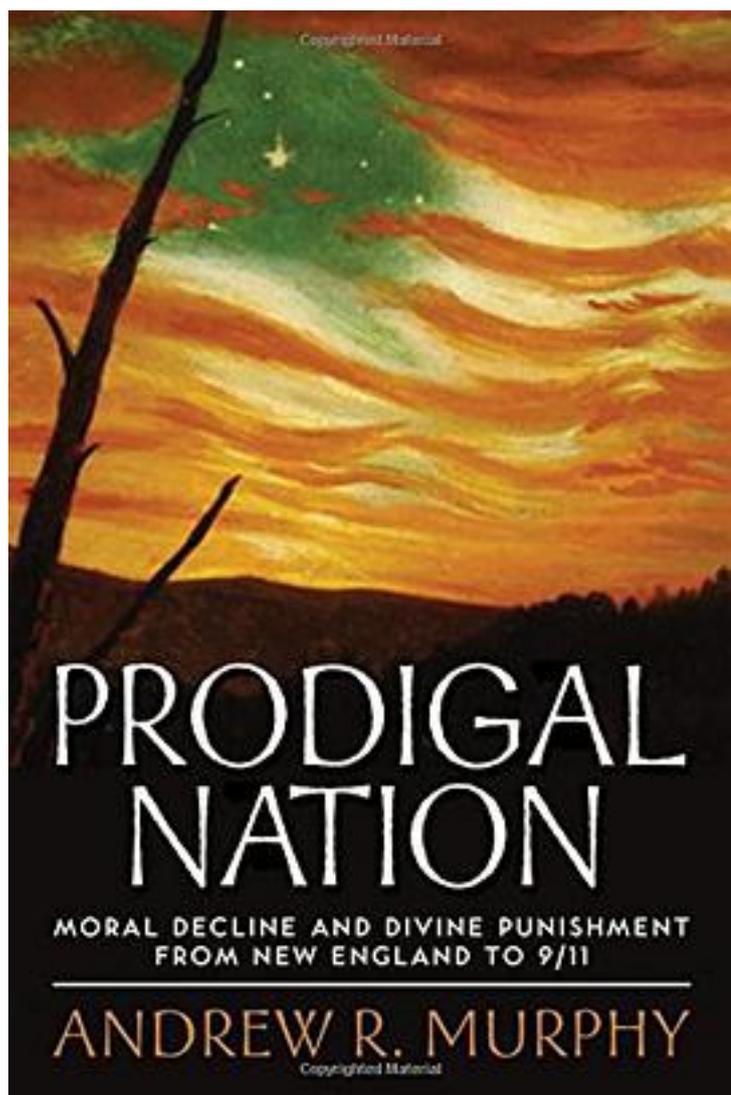


Prodigal Nation



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America's supposed moral decline from an imagined golden age, and the threat of divine punishment for the sin of straying from the path of righteousness, have been consistent themes in its political and religious rhetoric. But why is this myth so compelling to Americans? In *Prodigal Nation*, Andrew Murphy investigates the jeremiad's historical roots and probes the ways in which it continues to illuminate larger themes and tensions in American social and political life. He examines its role in colonial New England, shows how it was employed during the Civil War, and demonstrates its continued power in today's political climate. Far from being simply a force for conservatism-the yearning for a return to "a simpler time"-the jeremiad has often been employed in favor of progressive causes. Americans of all political stripes-not just Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, but Abraham Lincoln and Robert Kennedy-have used the language of moral decline for political purposes. Murphy shows how Americans' powerful attachment to an idealized past, and the hope of a return to John Winthrop's imagined "City on a Hill," continue to shape public life.

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