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Empire? The Bush Doctrine and the Lessons of History

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“Empire – Sure! Why Not?”¹

It is either the privilege of the influential, or their enormous egos, that allows them to reflect more frequently than most on the condition of their existence; and certainly long before the 2004 presidential election turned the United States into an even more self-obsessed nation than it had been before, three large questions had animated intellectual debate about that perennially fascinating topic: American power.

The first, given academic definition by an English import,² and stimulated by what seemed at the time to be serious problems facing the Reagan administration, asked whether or not the United States could even be compared to other major powers; and, assuming that it could, whether, then, it was likely to decline in (more or less) the same fashion as all other powerful states in the past? The answer provided by many writers – though by no means all – was that the US, though still in possession of several unique assets, had reached the limit of its influence. Challenged on the one hand by what Paul Kennedy famously termed “imperial over-

stretch,” and on the other by dynamic economic change that was rapidly undermining the nation’s capacity to compete in world markets, the United States was entering dangerous times – and unless it took some critical decisions, and took them soon, it would face the direst of consequences. Difficult days lay ahead. The era of Pax Americana, at last, was over.³

The collapse of the communist project, followed in quick succession by a stunning American victory in the first Gulf War, the implosion of the USSR, and the quite unexpected failure of Japan and Europe to realize their potential in the 1990s, not only undercut the intellectual case for decline, it compelled critics to face, and ask, an even more revisionist kind of question: namely, that if the United States was not in fact going the way of all other great imperiums, then should we not accept that there was something very special about the American system of power; and that much as one might have resisted the idea before, should we not concede, reluctantly perhaps, that the United States was, in effect, the exception to the golden rule of great power decline and would continue for the indefinite future to write the rules of the global game from an unrivaled position of self-evident strength?⁴ The answer provided was a clear and emphatic “Yes” that spelt academic doom for those who had once foreseen a dire future for America. As one of the new triumphalists noted in a tough attack on the pessimists of old, those who had earlier anticipated (and looked forward to) US decline had been proved completely wrong. The country had recovered its nerve, proved its economic mettle, and entered the new millennium in fine shape. The “American Century” was here to stay.⁵

The third moment in this great debate came with the election of George W. Bush, followed by September 11 and the brilliantly successful ground and air wars conducted against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam in Iraq. Now the question of American power was posed more sharply still by those who later went on to provide theoretical justification for the so-called Bush doctrine.⁶ In an era of unchallenged US military supremacy they argued, where the United States effectively spent more on security than the rest of the world put together, in an international system where its reach was becoming more extensive than ever,

why not accept that America was either becoming, or in fact had already become, something more than just another great power: that is, an Empire? Admittedly, it was an Empire with a democratic imperative; and its actions were more governed by good intentions than bad ones. But that did not make it any the less of an imperial power with all the essential features of an Empire, including the capacity to set the larger rules of the game.⁷ Thus why not take the extra step and admit what was self-evident to most outsiders, if not to all Americans? Indeed, what else was one supposed to call the United States? As one of the more celebrated (non-American) theorists of the modern era was to remark – in some frustration – what word other than Empire better described this extensive system that was the American international order with its host of dependent allies, its vast intelligence networks, its five global military commands, its more than 1 million men- and women-at-arms on five continents, its carrier battle groups on watch in every ocean, and its 30 percent control of the world's economic product? None at least that he could think of.⁸

The “imperial turn” in the age of Bush was by any stretch of the imagination a most extraordinary phenomenon, particularly in a country where, as Williams pointed out many years ago, “one of the central themes of American historiography” was that there was “no American Empire,”⁹ and woe betide the writer who suggested otherwise. As another American academic remarked in 2002, “a decade ago, certainly two,” the very idea of Empire would have caused “righteous indignation” amongst most US observers. But not any longer it would seem.¹⁰ As Ronald Wright has noted, “how recently we believed the age of empire was dead,” but how popular the idea had now become in an era of international terrorism.¹¹ But something interesting, and strange, was to happen along the way. For whereas in the 1960s the term was the monopoly of the left,¹² by the turn of the century, it had become all the rage on the neoconservative right; and what many of them appeared to be suggesting was quite startling: in effect, that under conditions of international anarchy, where order remained the prime concern, the United States had to learn the most important and self-evident lesson of history – if there was to be any form of order at all, it had to act in the same imperial fashion as the

British and Romans had done in the past. In fact, it was precisely because the United States had been insufficiently assertive in the 1990s that 9/11 happened in the first place.¹³ Such inertia was no longer an option. In a fragmenting postmodern world, where small bands of fanatics could cause havoc and mayhem, there was only one possible solution. Politicians might want to call it something else; and no doubt President Bush would repeat the old mantra that “America” had no “Empire to extend.”¹⁴ But that is precisely what the United States would have to do. Other existing methods had been tried and found wanting. Now, in a new era, where old forms of deterrence and traditional assumptions about threats no longer held, it was up to America to impose its own form of “peace” on a disorderly world: to fight the savage war of peace (to quote one of the new gurus) so as to protect and enlarge the empire of liberty.¹⁵

Of course, the new imperialists were careful to make some important distinctions. The American Empire they conceded had its own very distinct, American characteristics. As others were to point out, there was something distinctly “virtual,” “funny,” almost “incoherent” about this particular Empire.¹⁶ But this was no reason not to use the term at all. It was – according to the new cohort – more suggestive than the obvious intellectual competitors in the form of “superpower” and “hegemon”; it certainly forced people to think more historically about the nature of American power; and it compelled people to act. And in these new, more disturbed times, this was absolutely vital. As one of the new theorists of Empire put it, American policymakers could do a lot worse than turn to the chroniclers of the Greek, Roman, and British empires “for helpful hints about how to run American foreign policy.”¹⁷ And what such wise men taught was simple and blunt: that the only way for an imperial power to remain great was by acting assertively and ruthlessly. Such a policy had worked for others in the past, and there was no reason it should not work for America now. “The logic of neo-imperialism” was, in the last analysis, simply “too compelling to resist.”¹⁸

Naturally, not everybody agreed. Most American academics in fact – liberals and realists alike – remained decidedly cool about

the idea that one could achieve security through expansion.¹⁹ Furthermore, these voices were to grow louder as the easy war in Iraq gave way to a deeply uneasy peace. Yet as another writer remarked, “whether or not the United States” now viewed itself “as an empire,” an increasingly large number of people (including “many foreigners”) had arrived at the not illogical conclusion that if it looked, talked, and walked like an Empire, then that is most decidedly what it was.²⁰ The modern imperialists could not have agreed more. Indeed, they were not only convinced of the correctness of their own cause, but were keen to convince others too; and they were in a position to do so. One for example was, or at least had been, an influential writer on the *Wall Street Journal*,²¹ another was a popular pundit with a well-established reputation for capturing the American mood;²² a third had already made his name in the earlier neoconservative intervention on multiculturalism;²³ and a fourth was a regular columnist for the *Washington Post*, who like many of his peers probably felt he was only expressing in public what many in the White House had been talking about in private.²⁴ Some of the talk was not even that confidential, as the famous 2002 National Security Strategy document revealed only too graphically.²⁵ One thing was clear, though. In the shadow of 9/11 many new ideas were circulating within the foreign policy community, but the most radical, by far, was that in an age of “unparalleled global dominance” the United States had every right to arrogate to itself the international role of setting standards, determining threats, using force, and meting out justice.²⁶ Call it unilateralism; call it the necessary response to new threats: it was imperialism by any other name. The idea that had “dared not speak its name” for at least a generation had been thrust back on to the agenda.²⁷

In what follows I want to reflect on the theory and practice of the “new” American Empire – the Bush Doctrine by any other name – by dealing in an abbreviated and I hope provocative fashion with three very specific issues: the sources of the new debate about Empire, the more general applicability of the term, and the obvious limits of the American Empire as a real world phenomenon. I make a number of claims.

The first is that Empire is not really new at all in US grand narratives; in fact one can trace the debate back to the very foundations of the American republic. Furthermore, while the more modern version of the discussion only really began in earnest after 9/11, one can detect powerful rumblings on the conservative right long before the attack itself. To this extent September 11 is probably better understood as a catalytic converter for a debate that was already under way, rather than the direct cause of the debate itself. This in turn leads to a second issue: about the appropriateness of the term itself. It is evident that the idea of Empire as applied to the United States can be questioned on several grounds.²⁸ But as the new conservatives have pointed out, the concept (ambiguous warts and all) does have its uses as a comparative tool of analysis, one which has not been fully exploited in the past, partly for methodological reasons – the term after all is open to different meanings – but largely because it has for so long been associated with a radical critique of American foreign policy.²⁹ This has been particularly unfortunate and has made it virtually impossible for other commentators to employ the concept at all.³⁰ My argument here is that it is now time to rescue the idea and put it back where it belongs, at the centre of the discussion of what in fact has become the most extensive international system in history.

Finally, I want to explore the future of the American Empire. Here I argue that this may be less problematic than has been implied by a number of writers (most forcefully by Michael Mann in this volume) but more serious than has been suggested by the new triumphalists – including the modern neoconservative imperialists – who, as we have seen, have been predicting an extraordinarily bright time ahead for the United States. It may well be the case that the twenty-first century will turn out to be just as American as the twentieth.³¹ But this does not mean it will be roses all the way. The American Empire retains many obvious assets and for the foreseeable future will play the central role at the heart of the world order.³² However, it confronts some very serious challenges – some increasingly of its own making – and it might find these very difficult to resolve in the turbulent years that undoubtedly lie ahead.³³

Empire of Liberty³⁴

It is an empire without a consciousness of itself as such, constantly shocked that its good intentions arouse resentment abroad. But that does not make it any the less of an empire, with a conviction that it alone, in Herman Melville's words, bears "the ark of liberties of the world."³⁵

The concept of Empire in the United States was of course first employed by the Founding Fathers to describe a political mission linked to a geographical aspiration in which liberty and continental expansion were intimately connected. In effect one could not exist without the other. Thus the conquest of America required a people yearning to be free, while freedom, as Frederick Jackson Turner later noted in one of the more important essays ever written on American history, demanded an ever expanding frontier.³⁶ This influential, and very American notion combined in turn with another equally powerful set of ideas about American exceptionalism, a condition which described the obvious fact (at least obvious to most Americans) that the United States was both distinctive and superior to all other nations. This not only rendered it immune to criticism from abroad – always useful for a nation with global ambitions; it also meant it had the God-given duty to spread the dream and promise of America beyond its own shores. Indeed, as many Americans readily admitted, if the American way was good enough for the United States then it was certainly good enough for the rest of the world.³⁷ But in no way should this be confused with imperialism of the more traditional kind. After all, even though the US might have used force outside of its borders on no less than 101 occasions between 1801 and 1904, its mission – at least in its own mind – was not to conquer other peoples but to liberate them from despotism, in much the same way as it had liberated itself from British rule in the late eighteenth century. In this fashion, the US managed to carve out a special position for itself in the long history of aspiring world powers. Not for America the ideological embarrassment of trying to defend the institution of colonialism, or the costs involved in occupying other countries, but the more noble purpose of bringing a better way of life to others less fortunate than itself.

Naturally, such an outlook inevitably infused US foreign policy with a particularly moralistic and idealistic tone, much to the great chagrin of later realist critics like Morgenthau and Kennan. But it also permitted it the rare privilege of pursuing policies designed to advance its own interests while all the time believing, or at least claiming, that it was doing so for the benefit of mankind. J. R. Seeley once wrote that the British acquired an Empire in a fit of absentmindedness. When the United States acquired one of its own it would be in a state of “deep denial.”³⁸

The rise of the United States as a world power by 1898, and its more complete emergence as a superpower in two stages at the end of World War I and then World War II, is one of the great American stories with its assortment of European deadbeats, perfidious but heroic Brits, internationalist paragons, and isolationist villains, all playing their various walk-on parts in a play of epic proportions that in the end left only one serious actor standing on the stage of history. Yet to read many of the less reflective tales told about this spectacular but deeply uneven process, one could easily come away thinking the United States never really wanted to become a major international player in the first place. It was, to use that most useful of phrases, a most “reluctant superpower,” one that feared “entangling alliances” which was only enticed out of its natural state of self-imposed isolationism by the threat posed by others. It is all very comforting. But brute facts still remain brute facts – as Chris Brown has rather nicely put it – and the fact of the matter is that by 1945 this most innocent of countries, with apparently little liking for the idea of power, and even less for running the world, happened to be in charge of most of the world’s economic resources, the majority of its military capabilities and a network of bases stretching across two oceans and four continents. No doubt it was helped in this endeavor by the foibles of others; moreover, there were many Americans who actively strove to keep the United States at home. Nonetheless, when the guns fell silent, this retiring wallflower with apparently few ambitions of its own, found itself in a position of influence unparalleled in history. Little wonder that Washington now came to be known by some as the new Rome, and its Chief Executive spoken of more often than not as the “Imperial” President.³⁹

Nor did the Cold War do much to halt America's upward mobility. If anything, this often dangerous and costly conflict afforded the United States many important opportunities; and in this, ironically, it was much helped by the activities of its chief rival, the Soviet Union. The Soviet threat was real enough. That much is obvious from any reading of the new primary sources.⁴⁰ Yet the USSR's often brutal and sometimes ill-judged actions not only did little to weaken the West but in many vital respects helped shape and define it.⁴¹ As Truman readily conceded, Stalin was in his own way as much a Western asset as he was an American enemy. Indeed, Soviet actions not only helped US leaders mobilize America's vastly superior capabilities against what turned out to be a most incomplete superpower rival, but over time provided them with almost the most perfect of all imperial ideologies. For if the Soviet Union was a menace to the whole of the free world – as Cold Warriors claimed – then this demanded nothing less than a global response. Moreover, if the menace took several forms, then the US would have to develop the capabilities and policies needed to counter this, from building extensive international alliances and extending military aid to the far corners of the globe, to reconstructing the global economy and taking the lead role in those various multilateral institutions that would ensure its healthy development. In these various overlapping ways, the United States managed to extend its reach to every part of the free world. Of course, Pax Americana did not manage to penetrate everywhere. Nor did its economic position go unchallenged. In fact, for most of the 1970s and 1980s, many pundits assumed it was rapidly falling behind its more competitive allies in Europe and Japan.⁴² No matter. By the time the edifice of the Cold War came tumbling down, the United States – and the United States alone – still possessed what others lacked: a series of embedded assets that gave it true global reach.⁴³

It is at this precise point in time that we can begin to trace the sources of what is now referred to as the “new” American Empire. It is an act in two parts. Part one, of course, was played out in the 1990s, a period according to the conventional wisdom that was marked by drift, indecision, and a lack of grand strategy; but as we have already shown, this was a really quite innovative decade

that saw the United States experiencing an enormous economic boost at home accompanied by increased freedom to act abroad.⁴⁴ Yet in spite of this, there were some who still felt the US could do much better – or more precisely, could do far more to exploit all its various assets and turn them to American advantage.⁴⁵ Reaganite by background, hegemonist by inclination, and keenly aware that there existed a growing gap between US military capabilities and America's ever-expanding global role, the new ideologues on the right were determined to remove all the constraints that they felt had been imposed on the last remaining superpower by the "international community" in the post-Cold War period.⁴⁶ Primacy was the name of the game and a new American century the prize.⁴⁷ However, the former would mean nothing and the latter remain a pipe dream without a much greater projection of US hard power. As Charles Krauthammer put it, "after a decade of Prometheus playing pygmy" the United States now had to act.⁴⁸

Some even drew lessons from the late nineteenth century to make their case for them. By the end of the 1880s the US, they argued, was economically powerful but internationally irrelevant. Something therefore had to be done, and in the end it was, first by more resolute state intervention and then by some very determined presidential leadership. The lesson was clear: decisive political action was essential again if the United States wanted to realize its full potential. This in the end is why Clinton was such a disaster. He may have talked about US leadership. But at heart he was a born-again multilateralist who was prepared to stake all on the ability of international institutions to achieve world order. This was a road to nowhere. Indeed, in the neoconservative vision of an America unchained, even such bodies as NATO could no longer be regarded as being unambiguously useful assets. There was also the difficult problem of Europe. Since it was unwilling and incapable of building a serious military capacity of its own, America – it was argued by the new right – had for too long been far too sensitive to the continent's needs. Not any more. In a world where the key threats to global security emanated from outside of Europe, and in which the Europeans were more often than not likely to get things wrong than right

(note here their collective failure in Bosnia), there was no need to buy into the shibboleth known as the transatlantic security community. And to be blunt, there were very good reasons for not doing so given the European inclination to resolve problems in just the sort of ways – through recourse to international law and global regulation – that were bound to tie the American Gulliver down.⁴⁹

Long before 9/11 therefore the intellectual ground was already shifting on the right. However, it took the quite unexpected election of a particular kind of President, followed by the even more unexpected tragedy of September 2001, for the balance of argument to shift decisively towards those who had for some time been arguing for a more determined policy. Naturally, forging what amounted to a neo-imperial foreign policy for a post-communist world would be no easy task.⁵⁰ And as we now know, during its first few months in office, the Bush team ran into a barrage of international opposition to its policies.⁵¹ This is why 9/11 was so important, not because it reduced criticism from abroad (though for a brief moment it did) but because it created an acute sense of crisis which made previously controversial policies now seem far more acceptable at home. If nothing else 9/11 certainly proved in the most dramatic fashion possible that the world was still a very dangerous place, and that unless decisive action was taken things could easily get much worse. Indeed, the so-called “war against terror” – which soon metamorphosed into something much wider – provided the neoconservatives, as they readily conceded, with an opportunity of unparalleled importance. For if, as it was now claimed, America was threatened by a transnational and undeterrable enemy with hidden cells here and shadowy allies there who were prepared to use weapons of mass destruction to achieve their theological ends, then Washington quite literally had no alternative but to intervene robustly and ruthlessly abroad. The fact that this might cause resentment in other countries was unfortunate. But this was of much less concern to certain Americans than achieving results. Ultimately, the new right took a quite philosophical view of all this foreign noise. In the end, they reasoned, what would shape international attitudes would not be weasel words but decisive action backed

up by overwhelming military power. Situations of strength not diplomatic niceties would determine how friends and enemies responded to the new Bush Doctrine.⁵²

To Empire or not Empire?

Over the last two millennia the word “empire” has meant many different things to different people from different countries at different times.⁵³

9/11 therefore not only marked a significant watershed in its own right, but was successfully used by those who had earlier “spotted” what one British admirer of American neoconservatism referred to later as “an historic opportunity” to exploit the possibilities already present in a post-Cold War world.⁵⁴ This does not mean the attack was of little importance or that the Bush team did not view the threat of terrorism as being real. Nor is it meant to imply that every member of the Bush administration was now won over to the idea of Empire. What it does point to however is a connection – between a very real trauma on the one hand and a larger game plan on the other. Nor should this kind of opportunism come as a great surprise to those who know their diplomatic history. Indeed, there has been a very long American tradition of genuine crises being tapped to serve a wider foreign policy purpose. The Cold War was full of them. The very real Czech coup of 1948 for example helped “sell” Marshall aid to a reluctant Congress, the Berlin blockade then convinced them of the necessity of NATO, Korea persuaded a skeptical Truman of the virtues of NSC-68, and nearly thirty years later the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and martial law in Poland helped justify the Reagan military buildup. It is certainly not the first time in the history of American grand strategy when significant events outside of anybody’s control have been used to great effect by those with a preexisting set of policy preferences. And, no doubt, it will not be the last.

But even if we accept this, and even agree with the judgement that the real issue now is “not whether the United States has

become an imperial power” but “what sort of empire” (the citizenry of America) “intends theirs to be,”⁵⁵ this still does not answer the question as to whether or not we should really be employing the term Empire at all. It might capture the current mood. It might even have much to recommend it as a metaphor. But none of this addresses the important issue of appropriateness: and there are some very serious intellectual objections to the idea. One concerns the very obvious fact that the United States controls very little territory itself, another is that if America were an Empire then why has it championed the principle of self-determination, and a third is that if it had the kind of power some now claim it does, then why does it sometimes appear to have less influence over world affairs than one would imagine? A number of critics would also argue that it makes little sense to talk of an American Empire under what Anthony Giddens has termed modern “runaway” conditions; and if it did, then how do we account for the fact that the United States not only seems unable to control financial markets but cannot even “extend democracy to other regions, to impose its own system on the rest of the world”?⁵⁶ These are all fair questions, and cannot be dismissed as some of the more conspiratorially-minded might like to, by accusing those who advance them of supping with the devil.

Let us deal firstly with the issue of territory. It is obviously the case that most Empires in the past, from the Greek to the Spanish, the Ottoman to the Russian, have been defined as such because they brought vast swathes of land belonging to other people under their control. It is equally true that the United States in the main has not practiced such forms of annexation beyond its current boundaries. And to some therefore this is proof that the United States is not an Empire in any meaningful sense of that word. This is a fair point even though it might be considered a rather narrow definitional base upon which to discuss and compare all Empires. But even if we were prepared to – just for the moment – this still ignores one rather important historical fact: that America has indeed done more than its fair share of land grabbing. In fact, those who would claim that the United States is not an Empire because it has never acquired other people’s territory seem to forget that the nation we now call the United States of America only became

the United States of America because it annexed a great deal during the nineteenth century: from France and Russia (through purchase), Spain and Mexico (by military conquest), from Britain (by agreement), and, most savagely, from those 3 million Native Americans who were nearly all eliminated in the process. Admittedly, this tells us little about how it then used its massive geographical power base in the global arena. Nor can we assume that what it did in the process of conquering the American interior, it would do, or would want to do, to the rest of the world. But it does at least hint at the possibility that ruthlessness and ambition in the pursuit of power and the American experience are not quite so alien to each other as some would have us believe.⁵⁷

Then there is the small matter of Latin and Central America. Admittedly, neither was ever formally colonized by the US. But should that preclude us from thinking of the US relationship with its immediate South in imperial terms? Perhaps so, if you are an American from the United States. But that is not the way most Latin Americans look upon their own problematic connection with their very large and extraordinarily powerful neighbor to the North. Nor to be blunt do many North Americans. As even the more uncritical of them would readily concede, the whole purpose of the famous Monroe Doctrine was not to limit American influence in the region but to embed it. Moreover, the story thereafter is not one of US disengagement from the region but of the latter's more complete integration into an American-led system – one which presupposed a definite hierarchy of power, was sometimes brutally exploitative in character, and was constructed around some fairly typical racial stereotypes of the “other.” More than that. It was built on the good old-fashioned ideology – much beloved by European colonials – which assumed that certain areas should, of right, fall within the sphere of influence of one of the great powers. In fact, it was precisely because the Americans thought in such terms that policymakers in Washington (even more liberal ones) rarely felt any compunction in intervening in the region whenever and wherever they saw fit. If this was not imperialism by any other name, then it is difficult to think what might be.⁵⁸

However, there still remains the more general question about territory and the degree to which America's overall lack of territorial ambition means we should either not use the term or only do so in the most qualified fashion possible. There is no unambiguously straightforward answer. In the end it very much depends on whether or not territory, and territory alone, constitutes the basis of Empire. Many would insist that it does. Dominic Lieven, for example, has argued that "there has to be some sort of direct rule over the dominion for a power to be classified as an empire."⁵⁹ Others however would point to the complex forms which all Empires have taken through time; indeed, a study of the most developed would indicate that they have invariably combined different forms of rule, none more successfully than America's presumed predecessor, Great Britain. As the famous Gallagher and Robinson team showed in their justly celebrated work, British imperialism entertained both formal annexation and informal domination, direct political rule and indirect economic control. The real issue for the British therefore was not the means they employed to secure the outcomes they wanted, but the outcomes themselves.⁶⁰ Thus if one could create a system overall that guaranteed the right results – which for Britain meant a stable international space within which its goods could find a market and its capital a profitable home – then that was perfectly fine. And what was fine for the British, it could be argued, has been equally fine for the Americans. In fact, not only did they adopt a similar set of criteria after 1945 by which to measure success; many of its more able leaders like Dean Acheson were great admirers of the British Empire. The British, he felt, had done a very good job in the nineteenth century defending the world trade system by pumping their surplus capital into other countries; and there was no reason why the United States with its vast wealth and enormous power after World War II should not do the same. In many ways, it had no real alternative in his view. For as he argued at the time, global order presupposed power, power resided with states, and it was up to the strongest state – the hegemon to use the jargon – to pay the bills and enforce the rules of the game. And if it did not do so (as it had failed to do in the interwar period) then the international system was doomed.⁶¹

Of course, nobody would be so foolish as to suggest that the United States achieved total control of the whole world as a result. Nor did it always get its own way, even with the most dependent of its allies.⁶² Nonetheless, it still achieved a very great deal and did so in a quite conscious fashion. Indeed, in a relatively short space of time, following what amounted to a 30-year crisis, it managed to construct the basis for a new international order within which others – old enemies and traditional rivals alike – could successfully operate. But not only did they manage to operate; the international economy as a whole flourished, to such an extent that between 1947 and 2000 there was a 20-fold increase in the volume of world trade and a 700 percent rise in gross world product. And the US achieved all this under the most testing of political conditions with all sorts of ideological “barbarians” constantly trying to pull down what it was attempting to build.⁶³ So successful was it in fact that, after several years of costly standoff, it even began to push its various rivals back – initially in the contested and unstable Third World, then in Eastern Europe, and finally in the enemy’s heartland itself. Not for it therefore the Roman fate of being overrun by the Mongol hordes or the British experience of lowering the flag in one costly dependency after another. On the contrary, by the beginning of the 1990s, the American Empire faced neither disintegration nor imperial overstretch, but found itself gazing forth upon a more open, seemingly less dangerous world in which nearly all the main actors (with the exception of a few rogue states) were now prepared to accept its terms and come under its umbrella. Clearly, there was to be no “fall” for this particular Empire.⁶⁴

But this still leaves open the problem of how we can legitimately talk of an American Empire when one of the United States’ primary objectives in the twentieth century has involved support for the right of self-determination. The objection is a perfectly reasonable one and obviously points to a very different kind of Empire from those which have existed in the past. But there is a legitimate answer to this particular question – that if and when the US did support the creation of new nations in the twentieth century, it did not do so out of pure idealism but because it realistically calculated that the breakup of other Empires was likely

to decrease the power of rivals while increasing its own weight in a reformed world system. As the great American historian William Appleman Williams noted many years ago, when and where the US has combated colonialism – both traditional and communist – it has done so for the highest possible motive. But the fact remains that it only acted in this fashion (and then not always consistently) in the full knowledge that it would win a host of new and potentially dependent allies as a result.⁶⁵ Imperialism, as others have pointed out, can sometimes wear a grimace and sometimes a smile; and in the American case nothing was more likely to bring a smile to its face than the thought that while it was winning friends amongst the new states, it was doing so at the expense firstly of its European rivals (which is why so many of Europe's leaders disliked Wilson and feared FDR) and then, after 1989, of the USSR.⁶⁶

This brings us then to the issue of influence and the capacity of the United States to fashion outcomes to its own liking under contemporary conditions. The problem revolves as much around our understanding of what empires have managed to do in the past, as it does about what we mean by influence now. Let us deal with both issues briefly – beginning with the first question about influence.

As any historian of previous Empires knows, no Empire worth the name has ever been able to determine all outcomes at all times within its own imperium. All Empires in other words have had their limits. Even the Roman Empire, to take the most cited example, was based on the recognition that there were certain things it could and could not do, including, by the way, pushing the outer boundaries of its rule too far.⁶⁷ Britain too was well aware that if it wanted to maintain influence it had to make concessions here and compromises there in order not to provoke what some analysts would now refer to as “blowback.”⁶⁸ How otherwise could it have run India for the better part of 200 years with only 50,000 soldiers and an army of administrators? Much the same could be said about the way in which the United States has generally preferred to rule its Empire. Thus like the British Empire it has not always imposed its own form of government on other countries; it has often tolerated a good deal of acceptable dissent;

and it has been careful, though not always, not to undermine the authority of friendly local elites. In fact, the more formally independent they were, the more legitimate its own hegemony was perceived to be. There was only one thing the United States asked in return: that those who were members of the club and wished to benefit from membership had to abide by the club's rules and behave like gentlemen. A little unruliness here and some disagreement there was fine; so long as it was within accepted bounds. In fact, the argument could be made – and has been – that the United States was at its most influential abroad not when it shouted loudest or tried to impose its will on others, but when it permitted others a good deal of slack. It has been more secure still when it has been invited in by those whose fate ultimately lay in its hands. Indeed, in much the same way as the wiser Roman governors and the more successful of the British viceroys conceded when concessions were necessary, so too have the great American Empire builders of the postwar era. Far easier, they reasoned, to cut bargains and do deals with those over whom they ultimately had huge leverage rather than upset local sensitivities. It was only when the locals transgressed, as they did on occasion by acting badly abroad or outside the bounds of acceptable behavior at home, that the US put its foot down firmly to show who was really in charge.⁶⁹

Yet the skeptics still make a good point. Under modern conditions, it is extraordinarily difficult for any single state to exercise preponderant influence at all times, a point made with great force in both a recent radical attempt to theorize the notion of Empire⁷⁰ and a liberal effort to rubbish it.⁷¹ The argument is well made. In fact it is obvious: under conditions of globalization where money moves with extraordinary speed in an apparently borderless world, it is very difficult indeed for any state – even one as powerful as the United States – to exercise complete control over all international relations. There is also the question of its own economic capabilities. The United States might have a huge military capacity. However, in the purely material realm it is far less powerful than it was say 20 years ago – before Europe and China became more serious economic actors – or immediately after the war when it controlled 70 percent of the world's financial

resources. All this much is self-evident and any honest analysis of the “new” American Empire would have to take this on board. But one should not push the point too far. After all, the US economy continues to account for nearly 30 percent of world product, it is roughly 40 percent bigger than any of its nearest rivals, the dollar still remains mighty, and Wall Street is still located at the heart of the international financial system. Furthermore, as the better literature on modern globalization shows, the world economic system is not completely out of control; governments still have a key role to play; and the enormous resources at the American government’s disposal not only give it a very large role in shaping the material environment within which we all happen to live, but also provide it with huge influence within those bodies whose function it is to manage the world economy. America’s control of these might not be complete, and the outcomes might not always be to its liking. But they get their way more often than not. As one insider rather bluntly put it, “IMF programmes are typically dictated from Washington.”⁷² Furthermore, as Robert Wade has convincingly shown, by mere virtue of its ability to regulate the sources and supply routes of the vital energy and raw material needs of even its most successful economic competitors, the US quite literally holds the fate of the world in its hands. This in the end is why the war in Iraq will prove to be so important, not just because it will allow the world to enjoy lower oil prices – though it should – but because it will prove once again that the United States alone has the ability to determine the fate of the region, and by so doing reinforce its central role in the wider world system.⁷³

Finally, any assessment as to whether or not the United States is, or is not an Empire, has to address the problem of perception, or more concretely of how US leaders view America’s role and how the world in turn looks upon the United States. It is difficult to make easy generalizations. Nonetheless, it would not be a million miles away from the truth to suggest that most members of the Washington foreign policy elite do tend to see themselves as masters of a larger universe in which the United States has a very special part to play by virtue of its unique history, its huge capabilities, and its accumulated experience of running the world

for the last 50 years. At times they may tire of performing this onerous task. Occasionally they falter. However, if it was ever suggested that they give up that role, they would no doubt throw up their hands in horror. Being number one does have its advantages after all. It also generates its own kind of imperial outlook in which other states are invariably regarded as problems to be managed, while the United States is perceived as having an indispensable role to perform, one of such vital importance that there is no reason why it should always be subject to the same rules of the international game as everybody else. This is why the United States, like all great imperial powers in the past, is frequently accused of being "unilateral." The charge might be just, but basically it is irrelevant. Indeed, as Americans frequently argue (in much the same way as the British and the Romans might have argued before them), the responsibilities of leadership and the reality of power mean that the strong have to do what they must – even if this is sometimes deemed to be unfair – while the weak are compelled to accept their fate. So it was in the past; so it has been, and will continue to be, with the United States.

But how then do others look upon the United States? With a good deal of loathing in some quarters to be sure; and rather jealously in others no doubt. But this is by no means the whole story. For while many may resent the metropolitan center, most are conscious of the fact that the benefits of living under the American imperium normally outweigh any of the disadvantages. In fact, this is one of the reasons why the American Empire has been so successful. After all, given the choice of living within its compass or trying to survive outside it, most nations – and most people – have invariably chosen the former over the latter. If nothing else life is likely to be safer and conditions more prosperous. As one of the more surreal examinations of one former Empire illustrated only too graphically, even the more discontented are well aware that life under imperial rule may not be quite so bad as some would have us think. Recall the famous scene in *Life of Brian*. The anti-imperialist leader, trying to stir up revolt, asks his rather small band of followers the following: "Tell me then, what has the Roman Empire ever done for you?" No doubt he later wished he had not asked the question in the first place, for the reply was

simple and arrestingly honest, “Well, actually, quite a lot in fact” – from building straight roads to keeping the Huns and the Visigoths at bay, to constructing a decent sewage system through to maintaining law and order. This surely is the issue. Many Empires, including the American, have not always been benign; and they have not always been sensitive. However, the more successful including the American have lasted not just because they were feared, but because they performed a series of broader political and economic functions that no other state or combination of states was willing or able to undertake. Indeed, one suspects that the US still has a very long way to go. For whereas other more formal Empires in the past failed in the end because they could not withstand progressive change, the United States will go on and on – or so some feel – precisely because it embraces and celebrates change. Not for it therefore the ignominy of being outflanked by history but the very real chance of being in its vanguard. If the optimists are to be believed, the sun may never set on this modern Empire.⁷⁴

The Limits of Empire

*Not since Rome has one nation loomed so large above the others.*⁷⁵

*The American era appears to be alive and well. That encapsulates the conventional wisdom – and it is woefully off the mark.*⁷⁶

This essay began with a reflection on the ongoing debate about American power and went on to do three things: one, explain how and why so many influential figures on the right today are prepared to make the case for a new American Empire; two, suggest that there may in fact be nothing particularly new about the idea of Empire in the United States; and finally try to argue that in spite of its possible imperfections as a concept, the notion of Empire has a good deal to recommend it. Nowhere of course have I tried to insist that the idea is without its flaws. Nor have I attempted to understate the differences between America as a

democratic Empire with very special features and other kinds of Empire. What I have tried to suggest, though, is that by employing the term in a creative rather than dogmatic fashion, it does at least make it possible for us to make useful – and not necessarily misleading – comparisons between the United States and other “great powers” in history. To this extent I very strongly disagree with those who would argue that the term does not enrich our understanding of the United States.⁷⁷ Indeed, it is only by making such comparisons that we are able to challenge one of the more restrictive and stultifying concepts that has made intelligent discussion of America so difficult in the past: namely the notion that it is so exceptional that it is impossible to compare it with anything at all. If nothing else, the idea of Empire drags the United States back into the historical mainstream where it should be, and hopefully will remain.

Recognizing the utility of the idea of Empire however is one thing; speculating about the future of Empires is quite a different matter, especially in the American case where so much of this in the past appears to have been so wide of the mark with its predictions of its imminent decline. But it is still something we need to do – most obviously because many writers now appear to think that the new century is likely to be just as “American” as the old one. It may well be the case, as the *Economist* put it, that “the United States” now “bestrides the globe like a colossus.”⁷⁸ We might even concede that “American hegemony is here to stay.”⁷⁹ But that does not mean the hegemon is without its limits.

The first limit has to do with the character of American power itself. Nearly everybody agrees that the United States has an enormous amount of the hard stuff; and no doubt most Americans think this is just fine and dandy. Yet if history teaches us anything – and if the events since 9/11 teach us anything at all – it is that those who possess vast power are just as likely to be resented as feared; and if recent polls are to be believed, then over the last two years there has never been quite so much resentment of the United States as there is today. This began to manifest itself in various forms before 9/11, but it took off with a vengeance as the US prepared and then went to war with Iraq. As one American commentator admitted, never had the country gone into battle

(with the sole exception of Vietnam back in the 1960s) with so few allies actually prepared to back it enthusiastically.⁸⁰ In fact, never had such a war, even before it began, generated so much global opposition, the overwhelming bulk of it caused less by any sympathy that people might have had towards America's intended target, and more by what many regarded as the dangerously aggressive policies of an overpowerful state led by a President with little concern for global opinion.⁸¹ As one friendly European critic remarked, rarely in history had one nation mobilized so much hard power in such a short space of time: and never had it lost so much soft power in the process.⁸²

The first problem facing the United States therefore revolves around the issue of power and the extent to which its own imperial behavior is already beginning to generate various forms of resistance. This in turn raises a second question about the conditions under which the United States exercises its power. As Nye amongst others has pointed out, America may be the world's only superpower, but this does not necessarily mean it can always go it alone, and at the same time hope to maintain friendly or amicable relations with other countries. Coalitions are wonderful things, and coalitions of the very willing even better. But when coalitions are compelled into being by fear rather than consent, then something is not quite right. Of course, the new hegemonists in Washington take a typically hard-nosed view of all this. As they point out, the US still managed to build an alliance of sorts against Iraq; former critics meanwhile are now running for cover; so why all the fuss? The answer should be obvious: because the more secure Empires in history have been those that could lead rather than coerce, inspire affection rather than suspicion. And while the United States might still have more than its fair share of friends around the world, it is currently testing their loyalty to the utmost.⁸³

A third challenge concerns the United States itself. Views about the last remaining superpower have always been deeply divided and will almost certainly remain so. Nonetheless, for most of the post-Cold War period when the nation was at peace with itself, and liberals of both a Republican and Democratic persuasion were defining the political agenda, international attitudes towards the

United States – with some obvious exceptions – tended to be positive. This however has changed since September 11, and has done so in large part not just because of what America has been doing abroad, but because of what has been happening on the home front. Indeed, in the process of securing the nation against further terrorist attacks, America appears to have become a decidedly less open and welcoming society. One should not exaggerate. To talk of a new “empire of fear,” as some on the left have already done, might be going too far. However, there are some deeply worrying signs, and if the American state becomes ever more intrusive, and many of its people less and less tolerant, in a world that seems to be more and more threatening, then in the years ahead the great shining city on the hill is going to look anything but – especially in those European countries where anti-Americanism is already on the rise.⁸⁴

This in turn raises a question about the domestic sources of the “new” American Empire and the policies currently being pursued by the Bush administration. Thus far the Bush team have been brilliantly successful in maintaining a high level of support for its current strategy of assertion – it may even win the 2004 election. However, there is no guaranteeing Bush’s support will last forever. A series of setbacks abroad (most obviously in Iraq), another attack on the United States itself, or the feeling that all this is costing far too much treasure and aggravation abroad, could easily see the mood swing back in either a more isolationist or even a less unilateral direction. Significantly, according to another survey, the American people even now seem to have little stomach for going it alone, and this could have consequences over the longer term for the conduct of US foreign policy, especially if the policy fails to tackle the original reasons for going imperial in the first place – namely the threat of international terrorism.⁸⁵

Finally, the success of Empires in general, and, it could be argued, of the American Empire in particular, has in the end rested on its ability to deliver a bundle of public goods in the form of improved living standards, economic opportunity, and growth worldwide. This in large part brought it victory in the Cold War and self-confidence for most of the 1990s. However, as recent economic events have revealed only too graphically, none of this can

any longer be taken for granted. Naturally, we should beware crying wolf.⁸⁶ The US capitalist system continues to have huge reserves and an even greater capacity for regenerating itself. Yet the warning signs are there; and to make matters worse, Europe is beginning to show clear signs of challenging the United States.⁸⁷ This will not necessarily undermine America's position of material (let alone strategic) privilege within the wider international system; if anything, under conditions of crisis, its position is likely to be augmented rather than weakened simply because it has greater political capacity and market space. Nonetheless, the economic dominance it once enjoyed can no longer be taken for granted, especially in an age when it is becoming increasingly dependent on the financial largesse of others to manage its growing debt.⁸⁸ America and Americans live, in other words, in deeply troubling times where the old economic truths are coming under challenge. In some ways, the modern imperialists in Washington could not have thought of a more inauspicious time to start building their "new" American Empire.

Notes

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