

Niall Ferguson

The unconscious colossus: limits of (& alternatives to) American empire

What is an empire? In the words of one of the few modern historians to attempt a genuinely comparative study of empires, it is

First and foremost, a very great power that has left its mark on the international relations of an era ... a polity that rules over wide territories and many peoples, since the management of space and multi-ethnicity is one of the great perennial dilemmas of empire An empire is by definition ... not a polity ruled with the explicit consent of its peoples [But] by a process of assimilation of peoples and democratization of institutions empires can transform themselves into multinational federations or even nation states.¹

It is possible to be still more precise than this. In the table below, I have attempted a simple typology intended to capture the diversity of forms that can be subsumed under the heading empire. Note that the table should be read as a menu rather than as a grid. For ex-

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ample, an empire could be an oligarchy at home, aiming to acquire raw materials from abroad, thereby increasing international trade, using mainly military methods, imposing a market economy, serving the interests of its ruling elite, and fostering a hierarchical social character. Another empire might be a democracy at home, aiming to ensure security, providing peace as a public good, ruling mainly through firms and NGOs, promoting a mixed economy, serving the interests of all inhabitants, and fostering an assimilative social character.

The first column reminds us that imperial power can be acquired by more than one type of political system. The self-interested objectives of imperial expansion (second column) range from the fundamental need to ensure the security of the metropolis by imposing order on enemies at its (initial) borders, to the collection of rents and taxation from subject peoples, to say nothing of the perhaps more obvious prizes of new land for settlement, raw materials, treasure, and manpower – all of which, it should be emphasized, would need to be available at prices lower than those established in free exchange with independent peoples if the cost of conquest

¹ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (London: John Murray, 2000), xiv.

Table 1
An imperial typology

Metropolitan system	Self-interested objectives	Public goods	Methods of rule	Economic system	Cui bono?	Social character
Tyranny	Security	Peace	Military	Plantation	Ruling elite	Genocidal
Aristocracy	Communications	Trade	Bureaucracy	Feudal	Metropolitan populace	Hierarchical
Oligarchy	Land	Investment	Settlement	Mercantilist	Settlers	Converting
Democracy	Raw materials	Law	NGOs	Market	Local elites	Assimilative
	Treasure	Governance	Firms	Mixed	All inhabitants	
	Manpower	Education	Delegation to local elites	Planned		
	Rents	Conversion				
	Taxation	Health				

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and colonization were to be justified.² At the same time, an empire may provide public goods – that is, intended or unintended benefits of imperial rule flowing not to the rulers but to the ruled and beyond to third parties: less conflict, more trade or investment, improved justice or governance, better education (which may or may not be associated with religious conversion, something we would not nowadays regard as a public good), or improved material conditions.

The fourth column tells us that imperial rule can be implemented by more than one kind of functionary: soldiers, civil servants, settlers, voluntary associations, firms, and local elites can in different ways impose the will of the center on the periphery. There are almost as many varieties of imperial economic systems,

2 For an attempt at a formal economic theory of empire, see Herschel I. Grossman and Juan Mendoza, “Annexation or Conquest? The Economics of Empire Building,” NBER Working Paper No. 8109 (February 2001).

ranging from slavery to laissez-faire, from one form of serfdom (feudalism) to another (the planned economy).

Nor is it by any means a given that the benefits of empire should flow simply to the metropolitan society. It may only be the elites of that society – or colonists drawn from lower income groups in the metropole, or subject peoples, or the elites within subject societies – that reap the benefits of empire.

Finally, the social character of an empire – to be precise, the attitudes of the rulers toward the ruled – may vary. At one extreme lies the genocidal empire of National Socialist Germany, intent on the annihilation of specific ethnic groups and the deliberate degradation of others. At the other extreme lies the Roman Empire, in which citizenship was obtainable under certain conditions regardless of ethnicity. In the middle lies the Victorian Empire, in which inequalities of wealth and status were mitigated by a general (though certainly not unquali-

fied) principle of equality before the law. The precise combination of all these variables determines, among other things, the geographical extent – and of course the duration – of an empire.

All told, there have been no more than seventy empires in history, if *The Times Atlas of World History* is to be believed. The question is whether the United States should be numbered among them. Applying the typology set out in the table, it is certainly not difficult to characterize the United States as an empire. It goes without saying that it is a liberal democracy and market economy (though its polity has some illiberal characteristics, and its economy a surprisingly high level of state intervention). It is primarily concerned with its own security and maintaining international communications and, secondarily, with ensuring access to raw materials. It is also in the business of providing a limited number of public goods: peace, by intervening against some bellicose regimes and in some civil wars; freedom of the seas and skies for trade; and a distinctive form of conversion usually called Americanization, which is carried out less by old-style Christian missionaries than by the exporters of American consumer goods and entertainment. Its methods of formal rule are primarily military in character; its methods of informal rule rely heavily on corporations and nongovernmental organizations and, in some cases, local elites.

Who benefits from this empire? Some would argue, with the economist Paul Krugman, that only its wealthy elite does – specifically, that part of its wealthy elite associated with the Republican Party and the oil industry.³ The conven-

³ Paul Krugman, *The Great Unraveling: Losing Our Way in the New Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

tional wisdom on the Left is that the United States uses its power, wittingly or unwittingly, to shore up the position of American corporations and the regimes (usually corrupt and authoritarian) that are willing to do the same.⁴ The losers are the impoverished majorities in the developing world. Others would claim that many millions of people around the world have benefited in some way from the existence of America's empire (not least the Western Europeans, Japanese, and South Koreans who were able to prosper during the Cold War under the protection of the American empire by invitation); and that the economic losers of the post-Cold War era, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, are victims not of American power, but of its absence. For the American empire is limited in its extent: It conspicuously lacks the voracious appetite for territorial expansion overseas that characterized the empires of the Western European seaboard. Even when it conquers, it resists annexation – one reason why the durations of its offshore imperial undertakings have tended to be, and will in all probability continue to be, relatively short.

How different is the American empire from previous empires? Like the ancient Egyptian Empire, it erects towering edifices in its heartland, though these house the living rather than the dead. Like the Athenian Empire, it has proved adept at leading alliances against rival powers. Like the empire of Alexander, it has staggering geographical range. Like the Chinese Empire that arose in the Chi'in era and reached its zenith under the Ming dynasty, it has united the lands and peoples of a vast territory and has forged

⁴ For two recent diatribes, see Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003), and Chalmers A. Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

them into a nation. Like the Roman Empire, it has a system of citizenship that is remarkably open: Purple Hearts and U.S. citizenship were conferred simultaneously on a number of the soldiers serving in Iraq last year, just as service in the legions was once a route to becoming a *civis romanus*. Indeed, with the classical architecture of its capital and the republican structure of its constitution, the United States is perhaps more like Rome than any previous empire – albeit a Rome in which the Senate has thus far retained some hold on would-be emperors. In its relationship with Western Europe, too, the United States can sometimes seem like a second Rome.

Yet in its capacity for spreading its own language and culture – at once monotheistic and mathematical – the United States also shares features of the Abbasid caliphate established by the heirs of Mohammed. And though it is sometimes portrayed as the heir as well as the rebellious product of the Western European empires that arose in the sixteenth century and persisted until the twentieth – in truth the United States has as much, if not more, in common with the great land empires of Central and Eastern Europe. In practice, its political structures are sometimes more reminiscent of Vienna or Berlin than they are of the Hague, capital of the last great imperial republic, or London, hub of the first Anglophone empire.

To those who would still insist on American exceptionalism, the historian of empires can only retort: as exceptional as all the other sixty-nine empires.

It is perfectly acceptable to say in some circles that the United States is an empire – provided that you deplore the fact. It is also acceptable to say in other circles that American power is potentially bene-

ficent – provided that you do not describe it as imperial. What is not allowed is to say that the United States is an empire and that this might not be wholly bad.

In my book *Colossus*, I set out to do just that, and thereby succeeded in antagonizing both conservative and liberal critics. Conservatives repudiated my contention that the United States is and, indeed, has always been an empire. Liberals were dismayed by my suggestion that the American empire might have positive as well as negative attributes. As in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*, so in the United States today, it seems to be expected "That every boy and every gal / That's born into the world alive / Is either a little Liberal, / Or else a little Conservative!" But I am afraid my book is neither. Here, in a simplified form, is what it says: that the United States has always been, functionally if not self-consciously, an empire; that a self-conscious American imperialism might well be preferable to the available alternatives; but that financial, human, and cultural constraints make such self-consciousness highly unlikely; and that therefore the American empire, insofar as it continues to exist, will remain a somewhat dysfunctional entity.

By self-conscious imperialism, please note, I do not mean that the United States should unabashedly proclaim itself an empire and its president an emperor. I merely mean that Americans need to recognize the imperial characteristics of their own power today and, if possible, to learn from the achievements and failures of past empires. It is no longer sensible to maintain the fiction that there is something wholly unique about the foreign relations of the United States. The dilemmas that America faces today have more in common with those of the later Caesars

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than with those of the Founding Fathers.⁵

At the same time, however, the book makes clear the grave perils of being an “empire in denial.” Americans are not wholly oblivious to the imperial role their country plays in the world – but they dislike it. “I think we’re trying to run the business of the world too much,” a Kansas farmer told the British author Timothy Garton Ash in 2003, “like the Romans used to.”⁶ To such feelings of unease, American politicians respond with a categorical reassurance: “We’re not an imperial power,” declared President George W. Bush last April, “We’re a liberating power.”⁷

Of all the misconceptions that need to be dispelled here, this is perhaps the most obvious: that simply because Americans say they do not *do* empire, there cannot be such a thing as American imperialism. As I write, American troops are engaged in defending governments forcibly installed by the United States in two distant countries, Afghanistan and Iraq. They are likely to be there for some years to come; even President Bush’s Democratic rival John Kerry implied last September that if he were elected, U.S. forces would be withdrawn from Iraq within four years – not, in other words, the day after his inauguration.⁸

5 It is symptomatic that John Lewis Gaddis interprets the present predicament of the United States with reference to John Quincy Adams: Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

6 Timothy Garton Ash, *Free World: Why a Crisis of the West Reveals the Opportunity of Our Time* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 102.

7 Text of President Bush’s speech, *The New York Times*, April 13, 2004.

8 David M. Halbfinger and David E. Sanger,

Iraq, however, is only the frontline of an American imperium that, like all the great world empires of history, aspires to much more than just military dominance along a vast and variegated strategic frontier.⁹ On November 6, 2003, in his speech to mark the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush set out a vision of American foreign policy that, for all its Wilsonian language, strongly implied the kind of universal civilizing mission that has been a feature of all the great empires:

The United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution The advance of freedom is the calling of our time; it is the calling of our country We believe that liberty is the design of nature; we believe that liberty is the direction of history. We believe that human fulfillment and excellence come in the responsible exercise of liberty. And we believe that freedom – the freedom we prize – is not for us alone, it is the right and the capacity of all mankind.¹⁰

He restated this messianic credo in his speech to the Republican National Convention in September of 2004:

“Bush and Kerry Clash Over Iraq and a Timetable,” *The New York Times*, September 7, 2004.

9 On the significance of the frontier in imperial history, see Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (forthcoming).

10 Remarks by the president at the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy, November 6, 2003, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>>.

The story of America is the story of expanding liberty: an ever-widening circle, constantly growing to reach further and include more. Our nation's founding commitment is still our deepest commitment: In our world, and here at home, we will extend the frontiers of freedom . . . We are working to advance liberty in the broader Middle East because freedom will bring a future of hope and the peace we all want . . . Freedom is on the march. I believe in the transformational power of liberty: The wisest use of American strength is to advance freedom.¹¹

To the majority of Americans, it would appear, there is no contradiction between the ends of global democratization and the means of American military power. As defined by their president, the democratizing mission of the United States is both altruistic and distinct from the ambitions of past empires, which (so it is generally assumed) aimed to impose their own rule on foreign peoples.

The difficulty is that President Bush's ideal of freedom as a universal desideratum rather closely resembles the Victorian ideal of civilization. Freedom means, on close inspection, the American model of democracy and capitalism; when Americans speak of nation building, they actually mean state replicating, in the sense that they want to build political and economic institutions that are fundamentally similar to their own.¹² They may not aspire to rule; but they do aspire to have others rule themselves in the American way.

Yet the very act of imposing freedom simultaneously subverts it. Just as the

11 President Bush's speech to the Republican National Convention, *The New York Times*, September 2, 2004.

12 See Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

Victorians seemed hypocrites when they spread civilization with the Maxim gun, so there is something fishy about those who would democratize Fallujah with the Abrams tank. President Bush's distinction between conquest and liberation would have been entirely familiar to the liberal imperialists of the early 1900s, who likewise saw Britain's far-flung legions as agents of emancipation (not least in the Middle East during and after World War I). Equally familiar to that earlier generation would have been the impatience of American officials to hand over sovereignty to an Iraqi government sooner rather than later. Indirect rule – which installed nominally independent native rulers while leaving British civilian administrators and military forces in practical control of financial matters and military security – was the preferred model for British colonial expansion in many parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Iraq itself was an example of indirect rule after the Hashemite dynasty was established there in the 1920s.

The crucial question today is whether or not the United States has the capabilities, both material and moral, to make a success of its version of indirect rule. The danger lies in the inclination of American politicians, eager to live up to their own emancipatory rhetoric as well as to bring the boys back home, to unwind their overseas commitments prematurely – in short, to opt for premature decolonization rather than sustained indirect rule. Unfortunately, history shows that the most violent time in the history of an empire often comes at the moment of its dissolution, precisely because – as soon as it has been announced – the withdrawal of imperial troops unleashes a struggle between rival local elites for control of the indigenous armed forces.

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But is the very concept of empire an anachronism? A number of critics have argued that imperialism was a discreet historical phenomenon that reached its apogee in the late nineteenth century and has been defunct since the 1950s. “The Age of Empire is passed,” declared *The New York Times* as L. Paul Bremer III left Baghdad:

The experience of Iraq has demonstrated ... that when America does not disguise its imperial force, when a proconsul leads an “occupying power,” it is liable to find itself in an untenable position quickly enough. There are three reasons: the people being governed do not accept such a form of rule, the rest of the world does not accept it and Americans themselves do not accept it.¹³

In supporting the claim that empire is defunct, one reviewer of *Colossus* cited nationalism as “a much more powerful force now than it was during the heyday of the Victorian era.”¹⁴ Another cited “the tectonic changes wrought by independence movements and ethnic and religious politics in the years since the end of World War II.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, a favorite argument of journalists is – perhaps not surprisingly – that the power of the modern media makes it impossible for empires to operate as they did in the past, because their misdeeds are so quickly broadcast to an indignant world.

Such arguments betray a touching naivety about both the past and the present. First, empire was no temporary con-

dition of the Victorian age. Empires, as we have seen, can be traced as far back as recorded history goes; indeed, most history is the history of empires precisely because empires are so good at recording, replicating, and transmitting their own words and deeds. It is the nation-state – an essentially nineteenth-century ideal – that is the historical novelty and that may yet prove to be the more ephemeral entity. Given the ethnic heterogeneity and restless mobility of mankind, this should not surprise us. On close inspection, many of the most successful nation-states started life as empires: what is the modern United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland if not the legate of an earlier English imperialism?

Secondly, it is a fantasy that the age of empire came to an end in a global springtime of the peoples after 1945. On the contrary, World War II merely saw the defeat of three would-be empires (the German, Japanese, and Italian) by an alliance between the old Western European empires (principally the British, since the others were so swiftly beaten) and the newer empires of the Soviet Union and the United States. Though the United States subsequently ran, for the most part, an empire by invitation, to the extent that it was more a hegemon than an empire, the Soviet Union was and remained until its precipitous decline and fall a true empire. Moreover, the other great Communist power to emerge from the 1940s, the People’s Republic of China, remains in many respects an empire to this day. Its three most extensive provinces – Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet – were all acquired as a result of imperial expansion, and China continues to lay claim to Taiwan as well as numerous smaller islands, to say nothing of some territories in Russian Siberia and Kazakhstan.

13 Roger Cohen, “‘Imperial America’ Retreats from Iraq,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2004.

14 Daniel Drezner, “Bestriding the World, Sort of,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 2004.

15 Michiko Kakutani, “Attention Deficit Disorder in a Most Peculiar Empire,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 2004.

Empires, in short, are always with us. Nor is it immediately obvious why the modern media should threaten their longevity. The growth of the popular press did nothing to weaken the British Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; on the contrary, the mass-circulation newspapers tended to enhance the popular legitimacy of the empire. Anyone who watched how American television networks covered the invasion of Iraq ought to understand that the mass media are not necessarily solvents of imperial power. As for nationalism, it is something of a myth that this was what brought down the old empires of Western Europe. Far more lethal to their longevity were the costs of fighting rival empires – empires that were still more contemptuous of the principle of self-determination.¹⁶

Another common misconception is that the United States can and should achieve its international objectives – above all, its own security – as a hegemon rather than an empire, relying on ‘soft’ as much as on ‘hard’ power.¹⁷ Closely allied to this idea are the assumptions that there will always be less violence in the absence of an empire and that the United States would therefore make the world a safer place if it brought home its troops from the Middle East.

One way to test such arguments is to ask the counterfactual question: Would American foreign policy have been more effective in the past four years – or, if you prefer, would the world be a safer place today – if Afghanistan and Iraq had not been invaded? In the case of Afghanistan, there is little question that soft

16 See my *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

17 See Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

power would not have sufficed to oust the sponsors of Al Qaeda from their stronghold in Kabul. In the case of Iraq, it is surely better that Saddam Hussein is the prisoner of an interim Iraqi government rather than still reigning in Baghdad. Open-ended ‘containment’ – which was effectively what the French government argued for in 2003 – would, on balance, have been a worse policy. Policing Iraq from the air while periodically firing missiles at suspect installations was costing money without solving the problem posed by Saddam. Sanctions were doing nothing but depriving ordinary Iraqis. As for the United Nations’ Oil-for-Food Programme, we now know that it was simply breeding corruption while bolstering Saddam’s economic position.

In short, regime change was right; arguably, the principal defect of American policy toward Iraq was that the task was left undone for twelve years. Those who fret about the doctrine of preemption enunciated in the president’s National Security Strategy should bear in mind that the overthrow of Saddam was as much ‘postemption’ as preemption, since Saddam had done nearly all the mischief of which he was capable some time before March of 2003. Meanwhile, those who persist in imagining that the United Nations is a substitute for the United States when it comes to dealing with murderous rogue regimes should simply contemplate the United Nations’ lamentably sluggish and ineffectual response to the genocide currently being perpetrated in the Sudanese region of Darfur. Events there furnish an unfortunate reminder of the United Nations’ failures in Rwanda and Bosnia in the 1990s.

Yet it would be absurd to deny that much of what has happened in the past year – to say nothing of what has been revealed about earlier events – has tend-

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ed to undermine the legitimacy of the Bush administration's policy. To put it bluntly: What went wrong? And has the very notion of an American empire been discredited?

The first seed of future troubles was the administration's decision to treat suspected Al Qaeda personnel captured in Afghanistan and elsewhere as "unlawful enemy combatants" beyond both American and international law. Prisoners were held incommunicado and indefinitely at Guantánamo Bay. As the rules governing interrogation were chopped and changed, many of these prisoners were subjected to forms of mental and physical intimidation that in some cases amounted to torture.¹⁸ Indeed, Justice Department memoranda were written to rationalize the use of torture as a matter for presidential discretion in times of war. Evidently, some members of the administration felt that extreme measures were justified by the shadowy nature of the foe they faced, as well as by the public appetite for retribution after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

All of this the Supreme Court rightly denounced in its stinging judgment delivered in June of 2004. As the justices put it, not even the imperatives of resisting "an assault by the forces of tyranny" could justify the use by an American president of "the tools of tyrants." Yet power corrupts, and even small amounts of power can corrupt a very great deal. It may not have been official policy to flout the Geneva Conventions in Iraq, but not enough was done by senior officers to protect prisoners held at Abu Ghraib

18 By the end of August of 2004, there had been around 300 allegations of mistreatment of detainees; 155 had so far been investigated, of which 66 had been substantiated. See *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2004.

from gratuitous abuse – what the inquiry chaired by James Schlesinger called "freelance activities on the part of the night shift."¹⁹ The photographic evidence of these activities has done more than anything else to discredit the claim of the United States and its allies to stand not merely for an abstract liberty but also for the effective rule of law.

Second, it was more than mere exaggeration on the part of Vice President Cheney, the former CIA Chief George Tenet, and, ultimately, President Bush himself – to say nothing of Prime Minister Tony Blair – to claim they knew *for certain* that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. It was, we now know, a downright lie that went far beyond what the available intelligence indicated. What they could legitimately have said was this: "After all his evasions, we simply can't be sure whether or not Saddam Hussein has got any WMD. So, on the precautionary principle, we just can't leave him in power indefinitely. Better safe than sorry." But that was not enough for Cheney, who felt compelled to make the bald assertion that "Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction." Bush himself had doubts, but was reassured by Tenet that it was a "slam-dunk case."²⁰ Other doubters soon fell into line. Still more misleading was the administration's allegation that Saddam was 'teaming up' with Al Qaeda. Sketchy evidence of contact between the two was used to insinuate Iraqi complicity in the 9/11 attacks, for which not a shred of proof has yet been found.

Third, it was a near disaster that responsibility for the postwar occupation

19 Ibid.

20 Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 249.

of Iraq was seized by the Defense Department, intoxicated as its principals became in the heat of their blitzkrieg. The State Department had spent long hours preparing a plan for the aftermath of a successful invasion. That plan was simply junked by Secretary Rumsfeld and his close advisers, who were convinced that once Saddam had gone, Iraq would magically reconstruct itself after a period of suitably ecstatic celebration at the advent of freedom.

As one official told the *Financial Times* last year, Under Secretary Douglas Feith led

a group in the Pentagon who all along felt that this was going to be not just a cakewalk, it was going to be 60 – 90 days, a flip-over and hand-off, a lateral or whatever to ... the INC [Iraqi National Congress]. The DoD [Department of Defense] could then wash its hands of the whole affair and depart quickly, smoothly and swiftly. And there would be a democratic Iraq that was amenable to our wishes and desires left in its wake. And that's all there was to it.²¹

When General Eric Shinseki, the army chief of staff, stated in late February of 2003 that “something of the order of several hundred thousand soldiers” would be required to stabilize postwar Iraq, he was brusquely put down by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz as “wildly off the mark.” Wolfowitz professed himself “reasonably certain” that the Iraqi people would “greet us as liberators.” Such illusions were not, it should be remembered, confined to neoconservatives in the Pentagon. Even General Tommy Franks was under the impression that it would be possible to reduce troop levels to just fifty thousand after

21 “The Best-laid Plans?” *Financial Times*, August 3, 2003.

eighteen months. It was left to Colin Powell to point out to the president that regime change had serious – not to say imperial – implications. The Pottery Barn rule, he suggested to Bush, was bound to be applicable to Iraq: “You break it, you own it.”²²

Fourth, American diplomacy in 2003 was like the two-headed Pushmepullyou in *Doctor Doolittle*: it pointed in opposite directions. On one side was Cheney, dismissing the United Nations as a negligible factor. On the other was Powell, insisting that any action would require some form of UN authorization to be legitimate.

It is possible that one of these approaches might have worked. It was, however, hopeless to try to apply both. Europe was in fact coming around as a consequence of some fairly successful diplomatic browbeating. No fewer than eighteen European governments signed letters expressing support of the impending war against Saddam. Yet the decision to seek a second UN resolution – on the ground that the language of Resolution 1441 was not strong enough to justify all-out war – was a blunder that allowed the French government to regain the initiative by virtue of its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Despite the fact that more than forty countries declared their support for the invasion of Iraq and that three (Britain, Australia, and Poland) sent troops, the threat of a French veto, delivered with a Gallic flourish, created the indelible impression that the United States was acting unilaterally – and even illegally.²³

22 Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 150, 270.

23 See the remarks of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in an interview with the BBC in September of 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3661640.stm>.

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All these mistakes had one thing in common: they sprang from a failure to learn from history. For among the most obvious lessons of history is that an empire cannot rule by coercion alone. It needs legitimacy – in the eyes of the subject people, in the eyes of the other Great Powers, and, above all, in the eyes of the people back home.

Did those concerned know no history? We are told that President Bush was reading Edward Morris's *Theodore Rex* as the war in Iraq was being planned; presumably he had not got to the part where the American occupation sparked off a Filipino insurrection. Before the invasion of Iraq, Deputy National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley was heard to refer to a purely unilateral American invasion as "the imperial option." Did no one else grasp that occupying and trying to transform Iraq (with or without allies) was a quintessentially imperial undertaking – and one that would not only cost money but would also take many years to succeed?

Had policymakers troubled to consider what befell the last Anglophone occupation of Iraq they might have been less surprised by the persistent resistance they encountered in certain parts of the country during 2004. For in May of 1920 there was a major anti-British revolt there. This happened six months after a referendum (in practice, a round of consultations with tribal leaders) on the country's future, and just after the announcement that Iraq would become a League of Nations mandate under British trusteeship rather than continue under colonial rule. Strikingly, neither consultation with Iraqis nor the promise of internationalization sufficed to avert an uprising.

In 1920, as in 2004, the insurrection had religious origins and leaders, but it soon transcended the country's ancient

ethnic and sectarian divisions. The first anti-British demonstrations were in the mosques of Baghdad, but the violence quickly spread to the Shiite holy city of Karbala, where British rule was denounced by Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Shirazi, the historical counterpart of today's Shiite firebrand, Moktada al-Sadr. At its height, the revolt stretched as far north as the Kurdish city of Kirkuk and as far south as Samawah.

Then, as in 2004, much of the violence was more symbolic than strategically significant – British bodies were mutilated, much as American bodies were at Fallujah. But there was a real threat to the British position. The rebels systematically sought to disrupt the occupiers' infrastructure, attacking railways and telegraph lines. In some places, British troops and civilians were cut off and besieged. By August of 1920 the situation in Iraq was so desperate that the general in charge appealed to London not only for reinforcements but also for chemical weapons (mustard gas bombs or shells), though, contrary to historical legend, these turned out to be unavailable and so were never used.²⁴

This brings us to the second lesson the United States might have learned from the British experience: reestablishing order is no easy task. In 1920 the British eventually ended the rebellion through a combination of aerial bombardments and punitive village-burning expeditions. Even Winston Churchill, then the minister responsible for the Royal Air Force, was shocked by the actions of some trigger-happy pilots and vengeful

24 Daniel Barnard, "The Great Iraqi Revolt: The 1919–20 Insurrections Against the British in Mesopotamia," paper presented at the Harvard Graduate Student Conference in International History, April 23, 2004, <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~conih/abstracts/Barnard_article.doc>.

ground troops. And despite their overwhelming technological superiority, British forces still suffered more than two thousand dead and wounded. Moreover, the British had to keep troops in Iraq long after the country was granted full sovereignty. Although Iraq was declared formally independent in 1932, British troops remained there until 1955.

Is history therefore repeating itself, with one Anglophone empire unwittingly reenacting its predecessor's Mesopotamian experiment in indirect rule? For all the talk there was in June of restoring full sovereignty to an interim Iraqi government, President Bush made it clear that he intended to "maintain our troop level . . . as long as necessary," and that U.S. troops would continue to operate "under American command." This implied something significantly less than full sovereignty. For if the new Iraqi government did not have control over a well-armed foreign army in its own territory, then it lacked one of the defining characteristics of a sovereign state: a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. That was precisely the point made in April by Marc Grossman, under secretary of state for political affairs, during congressional hearings on the future of Iraq. In Grossman's words, "The arrangement would be, I think as we are doing today, that we would do our very best to consult with that interim government and take their views into account." But American commanders would still "have the right, and the power, and the obligation" to decide on the appropriate role for their troops.²⁵

There is, in principle, nothing inherently wrong with limited sovereignty; in

both West Germany and Japan sovereignty was limited for some years after 1945. Sovereignty is not an absolute but a relative concept. Indeed, it is a common characteristic of empires that they consist of multiple tiers of sovereignty. According to what Charles Maier has called the "fractal geometry of empire," the overarching hierarchy of power contains within it multiple scaled-down versions of itself, none fully sovereign. Again, however, there is a need for American policymakers and voters to understand the imperial business they are now in. For this business can have costly overheads. The problem is that for indirect rule – or limited sovereignty – to be successful in Iraq, Americans must be willing to foot a substantial bill for the occupation and reconstruction of the country. Unfortunately, in the absence of a radical change in the direction of U.S. fiscal policy, their ability to do so is set to diminish, if not to disappear.

In the first four years of the Bush presidency, total federal outlays rose by an estimated \$530 billion, a 30 percent increase. This increase can only be partly attributed to the wars the administration has fought; higher defense expenditures account for just 30 percent of the total increment, whereas increased spending on health care accounts for 17 percent, that on Social Security and that on income security for 16 percent apiece, and that on Medicare for 14 percent.²⁶ The reality is that the Bush administration has increased spending on welfare by rather more than spending on warfare.

Meanwhile, even as expenditure has risen, there has been a steep reduction in the federal government's revenues,

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25 "White House Says Iraq Sovereignty Could Be Limited," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2004.

26 These are my own calculations based on "Budget of the United States Government," 2005 historical tables, <<http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/multidb.cgi>>.

which have slumped from 21 percent of gross domestic product in 2000 to less than 16 percent in 2004.²⁷ The recession of 2001 played only a minor role in creating this shortfall of receipts. More important were the three successive tax cuts enacted by the administration with the support of the Republican-led Congress, beginning with the initial \$1.35 trillion tax cut over ten years and the \$38 billion tax rebate of the Economic Growth and Tax Reform Reconciliation Act in 2001, continuing with the Job Creation and Worker Assistance Act in 2002, and concluding with the reform of the double taxation of dividend income in 2003. With a combined value of \$188 billion – equivalent to around 2 percent of the 2003 national income – these tax cuts were significantly larger than those passed in Ronald Reagan’s Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981.²⁸ The effect of this combination of increased spending and reduced revenue has been a dramatic growth in the federal deficit. Bush inherited a surplus of around \$236 billion from the fiscal year 2000. At the time of writing, the projected deficit for 2004 was \$521 billion, representing a swing from the black into the red of three-quarters of a trillion dollars.²⁹

Government spokesmen have sometimes defended this borrowing spree as a stimulus to economic activity. There are good reasons to be skeptical about this, however, not least because the principal beneficiaries of these tax cuts have been

the very wealthy. Vice President Cheney belied the macroeconomic argument when he justified the third tax cut in the following candid terms: “We won the midterms. This is our due.”³⁰ Another Cheney aphorism that is bound to be quoted by future historians was his assertion that “Reagan proved deficits don’t matter.”³¹ But Reagan did nothing of the kind. The need to raise taxes to bring the deficit back under control was one of the key factors in George H. W. Bush’s defeat in 1992; in turn, the systematic reduction of the deficit under Bill Clinton was one of the reasons long-term interest rates declined and the economy boomed in the late 1990s.

The only reason that, under Bush junior, deficits have not seemed to matter is the persistence of low interest rates over the past four years, which has allowed Bush – in common with many American households – to borrow more while paying less in debt service. Net interest payments on the federal debt amounted to just 1.4 percent of the GDP last year, whereas the figure was 2.3 percent in 2000 and 3.2 percent in 1995.³²

Yet this persistence of low long-term interest rates is not a result of ingenuity on the part of the U.S. Treasury. It is in part a consequence of the willingness of the Asian central banks to buy vast quantities of dollar-denominated securities such as ten-year Treasury bonds, with the primary motivation of keeping their currencies pegged to the dollar, and the secondary consequence of funding

27 “Budget of the United States Government,” 2005, table 1.3, <<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy05/sheets/histo122.xls>>.

28 “Kennedy, Reagan, and Bush Tax Cuts in Historical Perspective,” <<http://www.taxfoundation.org/bushtaxplan-size.htm>>.

29 “Economic Report of the President,” table B-81, <<http://wais.access.gpo.gov>>.

30 Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O’Neill* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 291.

31 Ibid.

32 Congressional Budget Office, *The Budget and Economic Outlook*, January 2005.

the Bush deficits.³³ It is no coincidence that more than half the publicly held federal debt is now in foreign hands – more than double the proportion of ten years ago.³⁴ Not since the days of tsarist Russia has a great empire relied so heavily on lending from abroad. The trouble is that these flows of foreign capital into the United States cannot be relied on indefinitely, especially if there is a likelihood of rising deficits in the future. And that is why the Bush administration's failure to address the fundamental question of fiscal reform is so important. The reality is that the official figures for both the deficit and the accumulated federal debt understate the magnitude of the country's impending fiscal problems because they leave out of account the huge and unfunded liabilities of the Medicare and Social Security systems.³⁵

The United States benefits significantly from the status of the dollar as the world's principal reserve currency; it is one reason why foreign investors are

33 See Michael P. Dooley, David Folkerts-Landau, and Peter Garber, "An Essay on the Revived Bretton Woods System," NBER Working Paper No. 9971 (September 2003), and "The Revived Bretton Woods System: The Effects of Periphery Intervention and Reserve Management on Interest Rates and Exchange Rates in Center Countries," NBER Working Paper No. 10332 (March 2004).

34 Treasury Bulletin, June 2004, <<http://www.fms.treas.gov/bulletin/>>. Cf. Pýivi Munter, "Most Treasuries in Foreign Hands," *Financial Times*, June 14, 2004.

35 See, most recently, Peter G. Peterson, *Running on Empty: How the Democratic and Republican Parties Are Bankrupting Our Future and What Americans Can Do About It* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004). According to the April 2004 report of the Medicare trustees, the system's obligations to future retirees are unfunded by \$62 trillion; see Joe Liebermann, "America Needs Honest Fiscal Accounting," *Financial Times*, May 25, 2004.

prepared to hold such large volumes of dollar-denominated assets. But reserve-currency status is not divinely ordained; it could be undermined if international markets took fright at the magnitude of America's still latent fiscal crisis.³⁶ A decline in the dollar would certainly hurt foreign holders of U.S. currency more than it would hurt Americans. But a shift in international expectations about U.S. finances might also bring about a sharp increase in long-term interest rates, which would have immediate and negative feedback effects on the federal deficit by pushing up the cost of debt service.³⁷ It would also hurt highly geared American households, especially the rising proportion of them with adjustable-rate mortgages.³⁸

Empires need not be a burden on the taxpayers of the metropolis; indeed, many empires have arisen precisely in order to shift tax burdens from the center to the periphery. Yet there is little sign that the United States will be able to achieve even a modest amount of 'burden sharing' in the foreseeable future. During the Cold War, American allies contributed at least some money and considerable manpower to the maintenance of the West's collective security. But those days are gone. At the Demo-

36 Niall Ferguson, "A Dollar Crash? Euro Trashing," *The New Republic*, June 21, 2004.

37 See Paul Krugman, "Questions of Interest," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2004. For a different view, see David Malpass, "Don't Blame the Deficits for America's Rate Hikes," *Financial Times*, May 3, 2004.

38 Niall Ferguson, "Who's Buried by Higher Rates," *Fortune*, June 14, 2004. On the macroeconomic implications of the decline of the American savings rate, see Lawrence H. Summers, "The United States and the Global Adjustment Process," Third Annual Stavros S. Niarchos Lecture, Institute for International Economics, Washington, D.C., March 23, 2004.

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cratic National Convention in Boston, John Kerry pledged to “bring our allies to our side and share the burden, reduce the cost to American taxpayers, and reduce the risk to American soldiers” in order to “get the job done and bring our troops home.” “We don’t have to go it alone in the world,” he declared. “And we need to rebuild our alliances.”³⁹

Yet it is far from clear that any American president would be able to persuade Europeans today to commit significant resources to Iraq. In accepting his party’s nomination, Kerry recalled how, as a boy, he had watched British, French, and American troops working together in postwar Berlin. In those days, however, there was a much bigger incentive – symbolized by the Red Army units that surrounded West Berlin – for European states to support American foreign policy. It is not that the French and the Germans (or for that matter, the British) were passionately pro-American during the Cold War; on the contrary, American experts constantly fretted about the levels of popular anti-Americanism in Europe, on both the Left and the Right. Nevertheless, as long as there was a Soviet Union to the east, there was one overwhelming argument for the unity of the West. That ceased to be the case fifteen years ago, when the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev caused the Soviet empire to crumble. And ever since then the incentives for transatlantic harmony have grown steadily weaker.

For whatever reason, Europeans do not regard the threat posed by Islamist terrorism as sufficiently serious to justify unconditional solidarity with the United States. On the contrary, since the Spanish general election last year, they have acted as if the optimal response to the

39 “Kerry’s Acceptance: There Is a Right Way and a Wrong Way to Be Strong,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2004.

growing threat of Islamist terrorism is to distance themselves from the United States. In a recent Gallup poll, 61 percent of Europeans said they thought the European Union plays a positive role with regard to peace in the world; just 8 percent said its role was negative. No fewer than 50 percent of those polled took the view that the United States now plays a negative role.⁴⁰

So the United States is what it would rather not be: a colossus to some, a Goliath to others – an empire that dare not speak its name.⁴¹ Yet what is the alternative to American empire? If, as so many people seem to wish, the United States were to scale back its military commitments overseas, then what?

Unless one believes that international order will occur spontaneously, it is necessary to pin one’s faith on those supranational bodies created under U.S. leadership after World War II: the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. There is no shortage of liberal thinkers willing to make the case for global governance on the basis of these institutions.⁴² Unfortunately, their limitations are all too obvious when it comes to dealing with (to use the now hackneyed but convenient

40 Robert Manchin and Gergely Hideg, “E.U. Survey: Are Transatlantic Ties Loosening?” <<http://www.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=12247&pg=1>>.

41 “An empire that dare not speak its name” is Charles Maier’s phrase.

42 See, for example, David Held, *Global Covenant: The Social Democratic Alternative to the Washington Consensus* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity, 2004). Rather more pessimistic – and more aware of medieval visions of a global ‘civil society’ – is Ian Linden, *A New Map of the World* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2003).

phrase) failed states and rogue regimes, and with the non-state actors – above all, terrorist organizations – that flourish in the conditions they create. It is a sad fact that the total budget of the United Nations and all its ancillary organizations is equal to barely 1 percent of the federal budget of the United States.

If the United Nations tries to fashion itself as some kind of alternative to American power, it is bound to fail; its only future lies in playing the role its architects intended for it, namely, as an agency through which the United States, in partnership with the other Great Powers of the postwar era, can build some measure of international consensus for their *Grosse Politik*. In doing so, it will no more prevent the United States from behaving like an empire than the regular meetings of the sovereigns, foreign ministers, and ambassadors of the Great Powers prevented the United Kingdom from behaving like an empire in the nineteenth century. But it may help American policymakers from stumbling into that less than splendid isolation abhorred by the later Victorian imperialists.

Empires are not all bad; nor should anyone claim that they are all good. They are inevitably compromised by the power they wield; they are doomed to engender their own dissolution at home, even as they impose order abroad. That is why our expectations should not be pitched too high. It is hard enough to be an empire when you believe you have a mandate from heaven. It is still harder for the United States, which believes that heaven intended it to free the world, not rule it.

Sadly, there are still a few places in the world that must be ruled before they can be freed. Sadly, the act of ruling them will sorely try Americans, who instinctively begrudge such places the blood,

treasure, and time they consume. Yet saddest of all, there seems to be no better alternative available to the United States and to the world.

Once, a hundred and sixty years ago, America's imperial destiny seemed manifest. It has since become obscure. But it is America's destiny just the same.

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