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# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> 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	Metro-politan 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				

and colonization were to be justified.<sup>2</sup> 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,

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-

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).

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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



than with those of the Founding Fathers.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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

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“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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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

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.

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

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

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup> Another cited “the tectonic changes wrought by independence movements and ethnic and religious politics in the years since the end of World War II.”<sup>15</sup> 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 legatee 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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

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-

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).

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.<sup>18</sup> 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."<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.”<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3661640.stm)>.

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.<sup>24</sup>

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](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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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,

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

<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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.”<sup>30</sup> Another Cheney aphorism that is bound to be quoted by future historians was his assertion that “Reagan proved deficits don’t matter.”<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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/histo1z2.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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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

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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> It would also hurt highly geared American households, especially the rising proportion of them with adjustable-rate mortgages.<sup>38</sup>

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-

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.

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.

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.”<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> 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.

*Limits of  
(& alter-  
natives to)  
American  
empire*

Anthony Pagden

*Imperialism, liberalism &  
the quest for perpetual peace*

For at least two generations, 'empire' and 'imperialism' have been dirty words. Already by 1959, when neither the French nor the British Empire had yet quite ceased to exist, Raymond Aaron dismissed imperialism as a "name given by rivals, or spectators, to the diplomacy of a great power" – something, that is, that only others did or had. By the 1970s, a consensus had emerged in liberal circles in the West that all empires – or at least those of European or North American origin – had only ever been systems of power that constituted a denial by one people of the rights (above all, the right to self-determination) of countless others. They had never benefited anyone but their rulers; all of those

who had lived under imperial rule would much rather not have and finally they had all risen up and driven out their conquerors.

Very recently this picture has begun to change. Now that empires are no more (the last serious imperial outpost, Hong Kong, vanished in 1997), a more nuanced account of their long histories is beginning to be written. It has become harder to avoid the conclusion that some empires were much weaker than was commonly claimed; that at least some of the colonized collaborated willingly, for at least some of the time, with their colonizers; that minorities often fared better under empires than under nation-states; and that empires were often more successful than nation-states at managing the murderous consequences of religious differences.

Ever since 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan, a few intrepid voices have even been heard to declare that some empires might in fact have been forces for good. Books both for and against – with such titles as *The Sorrows of Empire*, *America's Inadvertent Empire*, *Resurrecting Empire*, and *The Obligation of Empire* – now appear almost daily. As these titles suggest, the current revival of interest in empire is not unrelated to the behavior of the current U.S. administration in interna-

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tional affairs, and to the widespread assumption that the United States has become a new imperial power. Even so, most Americans continue to feel uncomfortable with the designation, which (forgetting Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico) they have long regarded as a European evil. Yet ever since the mid-1990s, the rhetoric of U.S. international relations has become increasingly imperial. “If we have to use force, it is because we are America,” declared Madeleine Albright in 1998, taking care not to pronounce the word ‘empire.’ “We are the indispensable nation, We stand tall, We see further into the future.”<sup>1</sup> No British proconsul could have put it better.

**B**ut for all the talk about a new American empire, is the United States today really, in Niall Ferguson’s words, “the empire that does not dare to speak its name – an empire in denial”?<sup>2</sup>

This would appear to suggest that the United States behaves like and pursues the recognized objectives of an empire while being unprepared to commit itself ideologically to imperialism, or to take the necessary measures to ensure that those objectives constitute a long-term success. Is that really so?

Before these questions can be answered, we need to answer a rather more fundamental one – namely, what is an empire? The word has been used to describe societies as diverse as Mesoamerican tribute-distribution systems

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Emmanuel Todd, *Après l’empire: essai sur la décomposition du système américain* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 22. Ironically – or perhaps not – she was justifying a missile attack on Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 317; Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 3–7.

(the so-called Aztec and Inca Empires), tribal conquest states (the Mongol and Ottoman Empires), European composite monarchies (the Hapsburg and Austro-Hungarian Empires), and even networks of economic and political clientage (the current relation of the First to the Third World) – not to mention the British Empire, which combined features of all of these. Faced with such diversity, simple definitions will clearly be of little use. It is, of course, possible to define the word so narrowly as to exclude all but the most obvious European (and a few Asian) megastates. On the other hand, defining it so widely as to include any kind of extensive international power runs the risk of rending the concept indeterminate.

So let me begin by saying that an empire is an extensive state in which one ethnic or tribal group, by one means or another, rules over several others – roughly what the first-century Roman historian Tacitus meant when he spoke of the Roman world as an “immense body of empire” (*immensum imperii corpus*).<sup>3</sup> As such, empires have always been more frequent, more extensive political and social forms than tribal territories or nations have ever been. Ever since antiquity, large areas of Asia were ruled by imperial states of one kind or another, and so too were substantial areas of Africa. Vishanagar, Assyria, Elam, Urartu, Benin, Maori New Zealand – all were, in this sense, empires.

All empires inevitably involve the exercise of imperium, or sovereign authority, usually acquired by force. Few empires have survived for long without suppressing opposition, and probably all were initially created to supply the

<sup>3</sup> See P. A. Blunt, “Laus imperii,” in Peter Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker, eds., *Imperialism in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 159–191.

metropolis with goods it could not otherwise acquire. In 1918, the great Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter described territorial expansion as “the purely instinctual inclination towards war and conquest” and relegated it to an earlier atavistic period of human history that he believed was now past.<sup>4</sup> He would have to wait another half century for the final dismemberment of the world’s last significant colonial outposts. But he could see that in the new global economies that he projected for the world in the wake of the Great War, conquest would no longer be possible and that without conquest there could be no empire

But Schumpeter’s view is only part of the picture. War and conquest would have achieved very little if that is all there had been. To survive for long, all empires have had to win over their conquered populations. The Romans learned this very early in their history.<sup>5</sup> “An empire,” declared the historian Livy at the end of the first century B.C., “remains powerful so long as its subjects rejoice in it.”

Rome had a lot to offer its conquered populations – architecture, baths, the ability to bring fresh water from distant hills or to heat marble-lined rooms in villas in the wilds of Northumberland. (The historian Tacitus acidly commented that in adopting baths, porticos, and banquets, all the unwitting Britons had done was to describe as “humanity” what was in reality “an aspect of their slavery.”) Ultimately, however, Rome’s greatest attraction was citizenship – a

4 Joseph Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes*, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1951), 7.

5 This has been described most recently and with great brilliance by Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

concept that, in its recognizably modern form, the Romans invented and that, ever since the early days of the Republic, had been the main ideological prop of the Roman world. Of course, not all Rome’s subject peoples wished for such things; but if a substantial number had not, its empire could not have survived as long as it did.

All the later European empires did the best they could to follow at least part of the example Rome had set them. The Spanish and the French both attempted to create something resembling a single society governed by a single body of law. Similarly, the British in India could never have succeeded in seizing control of the former Mughal Empire without the active and sometimes enthusiastic assistance of the emperors’ former subjects. Without Indian bureaucrats, Indian judges, and, above all, Indian soldiers, the British Raj would have remained a private trading company. At the Battle of Plassey in 1757, which marked the beginning of the East India Company’s political ascendancy over the Mughal Empire, twice as many Indians as Europeans fought on the British side.<sup>6</sup>

It was this process of absorption – and with it the ambition to create a single community that would embrace, as the Roman Empire had, both the mother country and the indigenous inhabitants of its colonies – that allowed Edmund Burke to speak of the victims of the brutal regime of Warren Hastings, governor of Bengal, as “our distressed fellow-citizens in India.”<sup>7</sup> Empire was a sacred trust, “given,” as Burke insisted, “by an

6 Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600 – 1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), 259.

7 “Speech on the Nabob of Arcot’s Debts,” quoted in Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 157.



incomprehensible dispensation of Divine providence into our hands.” To abuse it, as Hastings had, was not just morally offensive; more significantly for Burke, it threatened the very existence not only of the “British constitution,” but of “the civilization of Europe.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet the idea of empire based upon universal citizenship created a paradox. If all the inhabitants of the empire were indeed fellow citizens, then a new kind of society, universal and cosmopolitan, would have had to come into being to accommodate them. With hindsight it was possible to argue, as Edward Gibbon did, that in the second century, when “the Roman Empire comprehended the fairest part of the earth and the most civilized portion of mankind,” a new kind of society had indeed arisen.<sup>9</sup> But in the eighteenth century, things did not look quite so harmonious. Instead of one world community, the European overseas powers had created what the French philosopher and economist the Marquis de Mirabeau described in 1758 as “a new and monstrous system” that vainly attempted to combine three distinct types of political association (or, as he called them, *esprits*): domination, commerce, and settlement. The inevitable conflict that had arisen between these had thrown all the European powers into crisis. In Mirabeau’s view, the only way forward was to abandon both settlement and conquest – especially conquest – in favor of commerce.

He was not alone. For those like Mirabeau and his near-contemporary Adam Smith, what in the eighteenth century was called ‘the commercial society’

8 Edmund Burke, *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters*, ed. David Bromwich (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 15 – 16.

9 Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chap. 3.

seemed to provide a means to create a new, more ecumenical form of empire that now would benefit all its members. For, in theory at least, commerce created a relationship between peoples that did not involve dependency of any kind and that, most importantly, avoided any use of force. In these new commercialized societies, the various peoples of the world would swap new technologies and basic scientific and cultural skills as readily as they would swap foodstuffs. These would not be empires of conquest, but “empires of liberty.”<sup>10</sup>

But this vision never materialized because, as Smith fully recognized, the European empires were not, nor had ever been, merely means to economic ends; they were also matters of international prestige.<sup>11</sup> Smith knew that without colonies Britain would be nothing more than a small European state. The disparity in size between the mother country and the rest of the empire remained a constant worry. Furthermore, as David Hume pointed out, the “sweet commerce” in which Montesquieu and others had placed such trust was, at best, an uncertain panacea for the ills of mankind: in reality, even the most highly commercialized states tended to “look upon their neighbours with a suspicious eye, to consider all trading states as their rivals, and to suppose that it is impossible for any of them to flourish, but at their expence.”<sup>12</sup>

10 See Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500 – c.1800* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 178 – 187.

11 Adam Smith, “Thoughts on the State of the Contest with America,” in Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross, eds., *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 6 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 383.

12 David Hume, “On the Jealousy of Trade,” in Eugene F. Miller, ed., *Essays, Moral, Political, and*

Hume's skepticism proved all too accurate. It was in the long run more profitable, as both the British and the Dutch discovered in Asia, to exercise direct control over the sources of supply through conquest than it was to trade with them. But the Enlightenment vision of the future transvaluation of empire was finally swept aside not so much by the actual practice of the "empires of liberty" as by Napoleon's attempt to build quite a different kind of empire within Europe itself.

Initially the very brevity and bloodiness of the Napoleonic ambition to transform Europe into a series of satellite kingdoms seemed to the liberals who had suffered from it – Alexis de Tocqueville and Benjamin Constant in particular – to have rendered all such projects unrepeatable. In 1813, with Napoleon apparently out of the way, Constant felt able to declare that, at last, "pleasure and utility" had "opposed irony to every real or feigned enthusiasm" of the kind that had always been the driving force behind all modes of imperialism. Napoleon, and, above all, Napoleon's fall, had shown that postrevolutionary politics were to be conducted not in the name of "conquest and usurpation," but in accordance with public opinion. And public opinion, Constant confidently predicted, would have nothing to do with empire. "The force that a people needs to keep all others in subjection," he wrote,

is today, more than ever, a privilege that cannot last. The nation that aimed at such an empire would place itself in a more dangerous position than the weakest of tribes. It would become the object of universal horror. Every opinion, every desire, every hatred, would threaten it, and soon-

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*Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 328.

er or later those hatreds, those opinions, and those desires would explode and engulf it.<sup>13</sup>

Like Smith, Constant also believed that commerce, or "civilized calculation," as he called it, would come to control all future relationships between peoples. Nearly a century later, Schumpeter expressed, in characteristically unquestioning terms, the same conviction. "It may be stated as beyond controversy," he declared, "that where free trade prevails no class has an interest in forcible expansion as such."<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, in view of the similarity of these claims, what separated Schumpeter from Constant in time was a phase of imperial expansion that was more atavistic, more "enthusiastic" even than the one Constant hoped he had seen the last of. For what in fact followed Napoleon's final defeat was not a return to the Enlightenment status quo ante, but the emergence of modern nationalism. After the Congress of Vienna, the newly self-conscious European states and, subsequently, the new nations of Europe – Belgium (founded in 1831), Italy (1861), and Germany (1876) – all began to compete with one another for the status and economic gains that empire was thought to bestow. Public opinion, far from turning an ironical eye on the imperialistic pretensions of the new European nations, embraced them with enthusiasm. National prestige was, for instance, the main grounds on which Tocqueville supported the French invasion of Algeria in 1830.

13 Benjamin Constant, *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their Relation to European Civilization in Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 79.

14 Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes*, 99.

The new imperialism turned out to be very different from the kind of empire of liberty for which Burke and Smith and Mirabeau had argued. No “sacred trust” was involved here – only, in Joseph Conrad’s famous phrase, “the taking away [of the earth] from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves.” In the new nationalist calculus, the more of this earth you could take away, the greater you became. By 1899, imperialism had indeed become, as Curzon remarked, “the faith of a nation.”<sup>15</sup>

There was something else that was new about the new imperialism. With the exception of the Spanish, the earlier European powers had been only marginally concerned with changing the lives, beliefs, and customs of the peoples whose lands they had occupied. Missionaries – Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist – were present in British and French America, and even in British, French, and Dutch Asia, but their activities were always of secondary political importance and generally looked upon by the civilian authorities as something of a nuisance.

In the nineteenth century, however, Africa and even India became the testing grounds for a new missionary zeal. Driven partly by Christian ideals, partly by a belief in the overwhelming superiority of European culture, the new imperialists sought to make of the world one world – Christian, liberal, and, ultimately (since none of the virtues peddled by the missionaries could be sustained in any other kind of society), commercial and industrial.

In this vision of empire, the ‘natives,’ Rudyard Kipling’s “new-caught sullen

peoples, half devil and half child,” had not merely to be ruled, they had to be ruled for their own good – however much they might resent it at first – and had to be made to recognize that one way of life was the inevitable goal of all mankind. This was empire as tutelage. Ironically, and fatally for the imperial powers as it turned out, it also implied that one day all the subjects of all the European empires would become self-governing.

“By good government,” Lord Macaulay had declared as early as 1833, “we may educate our subjects into a capacity for better government; that having become instructed in European knowledge they may, in some future age, demand European institutions.” He did not know when this would come about, but he was certain that when it did, “it will be the proudest day in English history.”<sup>16</sup> In practice, self-determination would be postponed into the remote future. But Macaulay was forced to acknowledge that, theoretically at least, it could not be postponed indefinitely.

Nationalist imperialism, however, brought to the fore a question that had remained unanswered for a long time: in the modern world what, precisely, was the nature of empire? Ever since 1648, the modern nation-state has been one in which imperium has been regarded as indivisible. The monarchs of Europe had spent centuries wresting authority from nobles, bishops, towns, guilds, military orders, and any number of quasi-independent, quasi-sovereign bodies. Indivisibility had been one of the shibboleths of prerevolutionary Europe, and one which the French Revolution had gone on to place at the center of the con-

15 Quoted in Harold Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase, 1919 – 1925: A Study in Post-War Diplomacy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 13.

16 Quoted in Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 34.

ception of the modern state. The modern person is a rights-bearing individual, but – as the 1791 *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* had made clear – he or she is so only by virtue of being a citizen of a single indivisible state.<sup>17</sup>

Such a strong notion of sovereignty could apply, however, only within Europe. In the world beyond, things were very different. It had been impossible for any empire to thrive without sharing power with either local settler elites or with local inhabitants. As Henry Maine, a renowned jurist, historian, and legal member of the viceroy’s council in India, had declared in 1887, “Sovereignty has always been regarded as divisible in international law.”<sup>18</sup> Failure to cede this point had, after all, been the prime cause of the American Revolution, and, after 1810, of the revolt of the Spanish colonies in South America – and had almost driven the French settlers of Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Martinique into the waiting arms of the British.

Nowhere was the question of divided sovereignty so acute as in the British Empire, which by the early nineteenth century had become larger and more widespread, and consequently more varied, than any of its rivals or predecessors. “I know of no example of it either in ancient or modern history,” wrote Disraeli in 1878. “No Caesar or Charlemagne ever presided over a dominion so peculiar.” If such a conglomerate was to survive at all, it could insist on no single constitutional identity. It was this feature of the empire that led the historian

17 See Anthony Pagden, “Human Rights, Natural Rights and Europe’s Imperial Legacy,” *Political Theory* 31 (2003): 171–199.

18 Quoted in Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63.

Sir Robert Seeley in 1883 to make his famous remark that it seemed as if England had “conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind.”<sup>19</sup>

Nothing, it seems, could be further removed from the present position of the United States. Is then the United States really an empire?

I think if we look at the history of the European empires, the answer must be no. It is often assumed that because America possesses the military capability to become an empire, any overseas interest it does have must necessarily be imperial.<sup>20</sup> But if military muscle had been all that was required to make an empire, neither Rome nor Britain – to name only two – would have been one. Contrary to the popular image, most empires were, in fact, for most of their histories, fragile structures, always dependent on their subject peoples for survival. Universal citizenship was not created out of generosity. It was created out of need. “What else proved fatal to Sparta and Athens in spite of their power in arms,” the emperor Claudius asked the Roman Senate when it attempted to deny citizenship to the Gauls in Italy, “but their policy of holding the conquered aloof as alien-born?”<sup>21</sup>

This is not to say that the United States has not resorted to some of the

19 Sir John Robert Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 12.

20 This, for instance, is the argument behind Robert D. Kaplan’s *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002), and in a very different and more measured tone, Chalmers A. Johnson’s, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004) – although Kaplan approves and Johnson disapproves.

21 Tacitus, *Annals* II, 23–24.



strategies of past empires. Today, for instance, Iraq and Afghanistan look remarkably like British protectorates. Whatever the administration may claim publicly about the autonomy of the current Iraqi and Afghan leadership, the United States in fact shares sovereignty with the civilian governments of both places, since it retains control over the countries' armed forces. What, however, the United States is not committed to is the view that empire – the exercise of imperium – is the best, or even a possible, way to achieve this.

In a number of crucial respects, the United States is, indeed, very unimperial. Despite allusions to the *Pax Americana*, twenty-first-century America bears not the slightest resemblance to ancient Rome. Unlike all previous European empires, it has no significant overseas settler populations in any of its formal dependencies and no obvious desire to acquire any. It does not conceive its hegemony beyond its borders as constituting a form of citizenship. It exercises no direct rule anywhere outside these areas; and it has always attempted to extricate itself as swiftly as possible from anything that looks as if it were about to develop into even indirect rule.

Cecil Rhodes once said that he would colonize the stars if he could. It is hard to image any prominent American policymaker, even Paul Wolfowitz, even secretly, harboring such desires. As Viscount James Bryce, one of the most astute observers of the Americas both North and South, said of the (North) Americans, “they have none of the earth-hunger which burns in the great nations of Europe.”<sup>22</sup>

The one feature the United States does share with many past empires is the de-

<sup>22</sup> Quoted by Arthur Schelsinger, Jr. in “The Making of a Mess,” *The New York Review of Books* 51 (14) (September 2004): 41.

sire to impose its political values on the rest of the world. Like the ‘liberal’ empires of nineteenth-century Britain and France, the United States is broadly committed to the liberal-democratic view that democracy is the highest possible form of government and should therefore be exported. This is the American mission to which Madeleine Albright alluded, and it has existed in one form or another ever since the creation of the republic.

In addressing the need to “contain” Communist China, Harry Truman – comparing America to Achaemenid Persia, Macedonian Greece, Antonine Rome, and Victorian Britain – claimed that the only way to save the world from totalitarianism was for the “whole world [to] adopt the American system.” By this he meant, roughly, what George W. Bush means by freedom – democratic institutions and free trade. Truman, knowingly or unknowingly, took the phrase “American system” from Alexander Hamilton, who firmly believed that the new republic should one day be able to “concur in erecting one great American system superior to the control of all transatlantic force or influence and able to dictate the terms of the connections between the old world and the new.”<sup>23</sup> “For the American system,” Truman continued, could only survive “by becoming a world system.”<sup>24</sup> What for Hamilton was to be a feature of international relations, for Truman was to be nothing less than a world culture.

But even making the rest of the world adopt the American system did not mean, as it had for all the other empires Truman cited, ruling the rest of the

<sup>23</sup> Federalist 11 in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 133 – 134.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Ferguson, *Colossus*, 80.

world. For Truman assumed, as has every American administration since, that the world's 'others' no longer needed to be led and cajoled until one day they finally demanded their own democratic institutions. American values, as Bush put it in 2002, are not only "right and true for every person in every society" – they are self-evidently so.<sup>25</sup> All humanity is capable of recognizing that democracy, or 'freedom,' will always be in its own best interest. All that has ever prevented some peoples from grasping this simple truth is fanaticism, the misguided claims of (certain) religions, and the actions of malevolent, self-interested leaders. Rather than empire, the United States' objective, then, is to eliminate these internal obstacles, to establish the conditions necessary for democracy, and then to retreat.

There can be little doubt that this assumption has been the cause, in Iraq as much as in El Salvador, of the failure to establish regimes that are democratic in more than name. Humanity is not, as Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated, destined to find democracy more enticing than any other alternative. You may not need to be an American to embrace 'American values' – but you certainly need to be much closer to American beliefs and cultural expectations than most of the populations of the Middle East currently are. Tocqueville made a similar point about Algeria. It would have been impossible to make Algeria into a modern nation without "civilizing" the Arabs, he argued, a task that would be impossible to achieve unless Algeria was made into not a "colony," but "an extension of France itself on the

25 Quoted in Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 3.

far side of the Mediterranean."<sup>26</sup> The French government chose to ignore him and made it into a colony nonetheless.

But such an arrangement has never been an option for the United States. If only because the United States is the one modern nation in which no division of sovereignty is, at least conceptually, possible. The federal government shares sovereignty with the individual states of which the union is composed, but it could not contemplate, as former empires all had to, sharing sovereignty with the members of *other* nations. Only very briefly has the mainland United States ever been considered an empire rather than a nation. As each new U.S. territory was settled or conquered it became, within a very short space of time, a new state within the Union. This implied that any territories the United States might acquire overseas had, like Hawaii, to be incorporated fully into the nation – or returned to its native inhabitants. No American administration has been willing to tolerate any kind of colonialism for very long. Even so resolute an imperialist as Teddy Roosevelt could not imagine turning Cuba or the Philippines into colonies.<sup>27</sup> The United States does possess a number of dependent territories – Guam, the Virgin Islands, Samoa, etc. – but these are too few and too small to constitute an overseas colonial empire. The major exception to this rule is Puerto Rico. The existence of a vigorous debate over the status of this 'commonwealth' – a term which itself suggests

26 "Rapport fait par M. Tocqueville sur le projet de la loi relative aux crédits extraordinaires demandés pour l'Algérie," in Seloua Luste Boulbina, ed., *Tocqueville sur l'Algérie, 1847* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), 228.

27 Frank Ninkovich, *The United States and Imperialism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 75.

that Puerto Rico is an independent republic – and the fact that the status quo strikes everyone, even those who support its continuation, as an anomaly, largely proves the rule.<sup>28</sup>

Those advocating a more forceful U.S. imperial policy overlook that if America is in denial, it is in it for a very good reason. To become a true empire, as even the British were at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States would have to change radically the nature of its political culture. It is a liberal democracy (as most of the Western world now conceives it) – and liberal democracy and liberal empire (as Mill conceived it) are incompatible.<sup>29</sup> The form of empire championed by Mill existed to enforce the virtues and advantages that accompanied free or liberal government in places that otherwise would be, in Mill's language, "barbarous." The time might indeed come when the inhabitants of such places would demand European institutions – but as Mill and even Macaulay knew, when that happened, the empire would be at an end.

By contrast the United States makes no claim to be holding Iraq and Afghanistan in trust until such time as their peoples are able to govern themselves in a suitable – i.e., Western – manner. It seeks, however imperfectly, to confer free democratic institutions directly on those places, and then to depart, leaving the hapless natives to fabricate as best they can the social and political infrastructure without which no democratic process can survive for long.

28 See Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

29 On this term, see Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003), 11.

In the end, perhaps, what Smith, Constant, and Schumpeter prophesied has come to pass: commerce has finally replaced conquest. True, it is commerce stripped of all its eighteenth-century attributes of benevolence, but it is commerce nonetheless. The long-term political objectives of the United States, which have varied little from administration to administration, have been to sustain and, where necessary, to create a world of democracies bound inexorably together by international trade. And the political forms best suited to international commerce are federations (such as the European Union) and trading partnerships (the OECD or NAFTA), not empires.

In *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, Robert Kagan boasts that whereas the "old" Europeans had moved beyond "power into a self-contained world of laws and rules and transnational negotiation and cooperation ... a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity, the realization of Immanuel Kant's 'perpetual peace,'" the United States

remains mired in history, exercising power in an anarchic Hobbesian world where international rules are unreliable, and where true security and the defense and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to know just what Kagan takes the words 'Kant' and 'Hobbes' to stand for. But on any reasoned understanding of the writings of Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant, he would seem to have inverted the objectives of the Europeans and the Americans. For it

30 Robert Kagan, *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 3.

is the Europeans (or at least the majority of them) who – by attempting to isolate the European Union as far as possible from all forms of external conflict that are considered to pose no immediate domestic threat – are the true Hobbesians. And in most respects the objectives of Kant’s conception of a “universal *cosmopolitan existence*” – which would constitute the “matrix within which all the original capacities of the human race may develop”<sup>31</sup> – is, mutatis mutandis, what the current U.S. government claims to be attempting to achieve.

Kant argued that the peoples of the world would never be at peace so long as the existing world powers – what he called “universal monarchies” – were locked into internecine competition with one another. They had, he said, to be persuaded to join a league for their own mutual protection. To make this possible, however, it was not enough to rely on international trade agreements or peace treaties, because in the long run the parties to such agreements would honor them only if they perceived them to be in their interests. A true world federation could only come about once all the states of the world shared a common political order, what Kant called “representative republicanism.” Only then would they all have the same interests, and only then would those interests be to promote mutual prosperity and to avoid warfare. The reason he believed this to be so was that such societies were the only ones in which human beings were treated as ends not means; the only ones, therefore, in which human beings could be fully autonomous; and the only ones, consequently, in which no people

31 Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in Hans Reiss, ed., *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 51.

would ever go to war to satisfy the greed or ambition of their rulers.

With due allowance for the huge differences between the late eighteenth century and the early twenty-first, and between what Kant understood by representative republics and what is meant today by liberal democracies, the United States’ vision for the world is roughly similar: a union of democracies, certainly not equal in size or power, but all committed to the common goal of greater prosperity and peace through free trade. The members of this union have the right to defend themselves against aggressors and, in the pursuit of defense, they are also entitled to do their best to cajole so-called rogue states into mending their ways sufficiently to be admitted into the union. This is what Kant called the “cosmopolitan right.”<sup>32</sup> We may assume that Truman had such an arrangement in mind when he said that the American system could only survive by becoming a world system.

For like the “American system,” Kant’s “cosmopolitan right” was intended to provide precisely the kind of harmonious environment in which it was possible to pursue what Kant valued most highly, namely, the interdependence of all human societies. This indisputably “liberal order” still depended “on the possession and use of military might,” but there would be no permanent, clearly identifiable, perpetual enemy – only dissidents, ‘rogue’ states, and the perverse malice of the excluded. Kant was also not, as Kagan seems to imply, some kind of high-minded idealist, in contrast to Hobbes, the indefatigably realist. He was in fact very suspicious of high-mindedness of any kind. “This

32 Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 156.



rational idea of a *peaceful*, even if not friendly, thoroughgoing community of all the nations on the earth,” he wrote, “is not a philanthropic (ethical), principle, but a principle *having to do with rights*.”<sup>33</sup> It was based quite as firmly upon a calculation of reasonable self-interest as was Hobbes’s suggestion for exiting from the “war of all against all.”<sup>34</sup>

Kant, however, was also aware that bringing human beings to understand just what is in their own self-interest would always be a long and arduous task. In order to recognize that autonomy is the highest human good, humans have to disentangle themselves from the “leading strings” by which the “guardians” – priests, lawyers, and rulers – have made them “domesticated animals.” Only he who could “throw off the ball and chain of his perpetual immaturity” would be properly “enlightened,” and only the enlightened could create the kind of state in which true autonomy would be possible.<sup>35</sup> Because of this, the cosmopolitan right still lay for most at some considerable distance in the future.

It still does – few states today fulfill Kant’s criteria. And of course Kant never addressed the problem of how the transition from one or another kind of despotism to “representative republicanism” was to be achieved (although he seems to have thought that the French

Revolution, at least in its early phases, offered one kind of model).

Kant’s project for perpetual peace has often been taken to be some kind of moral blueprint for the United Nations. But in my view, it is far closer to the final objective of the modern global state system in which the United States is undoubtedly, for the moment at least, the key player. It is also, precisely because it is a project for some future time, a far better guide to the overall ideological objectives of the United States than anything that now goes under the name of ‘empire.’

33 Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 158; Anthony Pagden, “Stoicism, Cosmopolitanism and the Legacy of European Imperialism,” *Constellations* 7 (2000): 3 – 22.

34 Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” in Reiss, ed., *Political Writings*, 112.

35 Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” in Reiss, ed., *Political Writings*, 54 – 55.

Jack Snyder

## *Empire: a blunt tool for democratization*

On its face, using military occupation as a tool to promote democratization is about as intuitive as forcing people to take a self-improvement class to learn how to be more spontaneous. And yet the two most recent U.S. administrations, though on opposite ends of the political spectrum, have used America's might to try to advance the cause of democracy in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and, at least nominally, Afghanistan. The Bush administration's major statement of its strategic policy, known mainly for its justification of preventive war, dwells on the need to "shift the balance of power in favor of freedom."<sup>1</sup>

Scholars and public intellectuals have played a prominent role as drummers on

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this bandwagon. Historian Niall Ferguson, in a colorful collection of stories that ends with a paean to empire, contends that "without the influence of British imperial rule, it is hard to believe that the institutions of parliamentary democracy would have been adopted by the majority of states in the world, as they are today."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, most of the postcolonial states that have remained almost continuously democratic since independence, such as India and some West Indian island states, are former British possessions. Still, as Ferguson acknowledges, many former British colonies have failed to achieve democratic stability: Pakistan and Nigeria oscillate between chaotic elected regimes and military dictatorships; Sri Lanka has held elections that stoked the fires of ethnic conflict; Malaysia has averted ethnic conflict only by limiting democracy; Singapore is stuck in a pattern of stable but noncompetitive electoral politics; Kenya is emerging from a long interlude of one-party rule; and Iraq in the late 1940s flirted with electoral politics that played into the hands of violent rad-

1 Office of the President, "National Security Strategy of the United States," September 2002, <[www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html)>.

2 Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 358.

icals. The list continues with even more parlous cases, from Burma to Zimbabwe.

Despite this mixed track record, it is worth looking back on imperial Britain's strategies, successes, and failures in attempting to prepare its far-flung possessions for democratic self-government. From the 1920s onward, the British undertook systematic efforts to write transitional democratic constitutions for countries they expected would soon be self-governing. At the same time, they devised political, economic, administrative, and cultural strategies to facilitate this transition.

In other words, they attempted roughly what the United States and the United Nations have been trying to accomplish on a shorter timetable in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor. What problems and trade-offs they faced in this enterprise help illuminate, at least in a general way, the kind of troubles that the democracy-promoting empire still confronts today.

To illustrate these processes, I draw on several examples, particularly those of Iraq in the late 1940s, India in the 1930s through the 1940s, Sri Lanka in the 1930s through the 1950s, and Malaysia in the 1940s through the 1960s.

**D**emocratization by imperial fiat sounds paradoxical, and it is. The imperial power insists not only that the society it rules should become democratic, but also that the outcome of democratization should be one that it approves: namely, that the new democracy should continue to abide by the rules laid down by the departing imperial power, should be stable and peaceful, and should maintain good relations with the former overlord. This is difficult enough when the empire has actually succeeded in installing the full set of tools the postcolonial state will need to make democracy func-

tion: a competent civil service; impartial courts and police that can implement the rule of law; independent, professionalized news media; and the rest. Even when these institutions are well established, outcomes may not conform to the empire's wishes, because the self-determining people may have their own ideas and interests that diverge from the empire's.

When democratic institutions are only partially formed, as is commonly the case at the moment of decolonization, the problem is much worse. Transitional regimes typically face a gap between high demand for mass political participation and weak institutions to integrate society's conflicting needs.<sup>3</sup> The imperial power may have put in place some of the institutional window dressing of democracy, but daily political maneuvering, energized by the devolution of power, is shaped more by ties of patronage and ethnicity, and by unregulated opportunism, than by democratic processes. This situation is ripe for the turbulent politics of ethnic particularism, coups, and rebellions.

The imperial ruler sometimes imagines that politics will take a holiday while the democratic system is being established – that groups contending for power will not exploit the weakness of transitional arrangements. In Malaya shortly after World War II, for example, the British hoped that a battery of social and economic reforms inspired by Fabian socialism would depoliticize class and ethnic conflicts during democratization. When it turned out that reform intensified the expression of competing demands, the British temporarily reverted to their earlier reliance on indirect rule through undemocratic traditional elites

<sup>3</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968).

of the Malay ethnic group. “Colonial policy,” says historian T. N. Harper, “lurched between authoritarianism and a missionary adherence to the rule of law.”<sup>4</sup>

Imperial strategists of the democratic transition often thought of this simply as a problem of the speed of reform. A 1960 Foreign Office memorandum, for example, stated that the task in East Africa was “to regulate the pace of political development so that it was fast enough to satisfy the African desire for self-government but not so fast as to jeopardize economic progress or the security situation.”<sup>5</sup> Actually, the problem is far more complex than this. Temporarily putting on the brake, as in the Malayan example, often involved ruling undemocratically through traditional elites or minority ethnic groups in the classic strategy of divide and rule. This was not simply a matter of “freezing colonial societies.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, this process actively created new divisions, altered the political meaning of traditional identities, and distributed power in ways that would complicate subsequent efforts to install a sense of national unity.

Both in public and private, officials of the Colonial Office sounded well meaning: “the present time [1947] is one of unprecedented vigour and imagination”

4 T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 378; for other points, see 58, 75, 82–83.

5 Ronald Hyam, “Bureaucracy and ‘Trusteeship’ in Colonial Empire,” in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 278, quoting a Foreign Office memorandum by William Gorell Barnes.

6 John W. Cell, “Colonial Rule,” in Brown and Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Twentieth Century*.

in British colonial policy, “one cheerful thing in a depressing world.”<sup>7</sup> “The fundamental objectives [for 1948] in Africa are to foster the emergence of large-scale societies, integrated for self-government by effective and democratic political and economic institutions both national and local, inspired by a common faith in progress and Western values and equipped with efficient techniques of production and betterment.”<sup>8</sup> The problem, at least at this stage of imperial stewardship, was not primarily bad intentions. Rather, it was the paradox of promoting democracy by fiat, which often required the adoption of politically expedient methods of rule that undercut the achievement of the ultimate objective of democratic consolidation.

Attempted democratic transitions are likely to turn violent and to stall short of democratic consolidation when they are undertaken in a society that lacks the institutions needed to make democracy work. Such societies face a gap between rising demands for broad participation in politics and inadequate institutions to manage those popular demands. All of this happens at a time when new institutions of democratic accountability have not yet been constructed to replace the old, divested institutions of imperial authority or traditional rule.

In the absence of routine institutional authority, political leaders find they need to rule through ideological or charismatic appeals. Rallying popular support by invoking threats from rival nations or ethnic groups is an attractive expedient

7 Speech by A. Hilton Poynton at the United Nations, October 3, 1947, quoted in Hyam, “Bureaucracy and ‘Trusteeship’ in Colonial Empire,” 277.

8 Colonial Office paper, quoted in Hyam, “Bureaucracy and ‘Trusteeship’ in Colonial Empire,” 277.



for hard-pressed leaders who desperately need to shore up their legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> The institutional weaknesses of early democratization create both the motive to use this strategy of rule and the opportunity to dodge accountability for its costs.

A common side effect of state weakness during early democratization is a poorly defined sense of the nation. Democracy requires national self-determination, but people in weak states who are just emerging into political consciousness often lack a clear, agreed answer to the question, who are we?

Notwithstanding the typical view among nationalists that the identity of nations is fixed by immutable nature or culture, it is normally the common experience of a people sharing a fate in a strong state that solidifies and demarcates a sense of nationality. Even in France, a country with a long and venerable history, it was only the late-nineteenth-century experience of common military service, national railways, standardized education, and mass democracy that completed the process of forging a culturally diverse peasantry into self-conscious Frenchmen.<sup>10</sup> In the absence of strong state institutions to knit together the nation, leaders must struggle for legitimacy in an ill-defined, contested political arena.

In weakly institutionalized, newly democratizing states, this contestation over national self-determination takes place amid the shifting fortunes of elites and mass groups. Elites left over from the old regime look desperately for strat-

egies that will prevent their fall, while rising elites try to muscle in. Both sets of elites scramble for allies among the newly aroused masses.

Nationalism – the doctrine that a distinctive people deserve to rule themselves in a state that protects and advances their distinctive cultural or political interests – often emerges as an apparently attractive solution to these political dilemmas. It helps rally mass support on the basis of sentiment in lieu of institutional accountability, and helps define the people who are exercising self-determination. It thus clarifies the lines between the people and their external foes, who become available as scapegoats in a self-fulfilling strategy that rallies support in protection against external threats.

Civil or international war may sometimes result from this potent political brew as a direct result of nationalist political objectives, such as the aim of regaining a lost piece of national territory. However, war may also be an indirect result of the complex politics of transitional states. Political leaders may become trapped in reckless policies when uncompromising nationalism becomes the indispensable common denominator that keeps their heterogeneous political coalitions together.

These problems are likely to face any society that tries to democratize before building the requisite institutions. This is no less the case when a democracy-promoting empire is overseeing the process. If the empire understands this problem, it may try to maintain its position of domination longer to buy time to put the needed institutions in place. When considerations of rising cost and waning legitimacy finally compel decolonization, the empire may attempt an awkward compromise between authoritarian order keeping and democratic legitimacy, leaving in place a hybrid

<sup>9</sup> Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005); Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1976).

political system based on both traditional and elected authority. This expedient acknowledges the problem but does not necessarily solve it.

The chaotic democratic processes that followed Britain's imperial departure from Iraq provide a telling example of such dilemmas.

Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s was a country undergoing the strains of socioeconomic modernization and decolonization with no coherent identity, tradition, or political institutions.<sup>11</sup> Under a British mandate, Iraq's 1924 constitution divided powers between the king and an indirectly elected parliament chosen by universal manhood suffrage. After gaining independence in 1932, Iraq suffered a series of tribal rebellions and leadership struggles. These culminated in a coup by nationalist military officers, which triggered British reoccupation of the country from 1941 to 1945.<sup>12</sup>

Following World War II, the British encouraged the regent Abd al-Ilah, who was ruling on behalf of the young King Faysal II, to liberalize the regime to enhance its popular legitimacy in the eyes of the alienated urban middle class. Press restrictions were removed, opposition parties were licensed, and electoral districts were redrawn to reflect population shifts to urban areas. However, the plan for political liberalization provoked resistance from established elites.<sup>13</sup> The

Iraqi prime minister told a British diplomat that his government had "decided to allow political parties in order that it should become clear how harmful they are and their abolition be demanded."<sup>14</sup> Reflecting traditions of patronage politics in a still largely rural society, local notables dominated the parliament chosen in the election of 1946.<sup>15</sup>

Middle-class nationalists, though thinly represented in parliament, remained loud voices in public debate. Important in government service, in the military, in the economy, and potentially in the streets, these educated urbanites could not be ignored. To appease such critics, Iraqi diplomats took the most radical stance on the Palestine issue at the June 1946 meeting of the Arab League, gratuitously calling for a boycott of British and American trade that they knew the Saudis and Egyptians would have to veto.<sup>16</sup>

Such public relations tactics became increasingly entrenched in 1947, as the new Iraqi prime minister Salih Jabr groped to find a rhetorical stance that would reconcile Iraq's diverse constituencies to his weakly institutionalized regime. Jabr faced a general economic crisis, severe food shortages, and a shortfall of money for salaries of civil servants, a prime constituency for Arab nationalist groups.<sup>17</sup> The regent and the traditional ruling elites hoped that

11 Reeva Simon, *Iraq Between the Two World Wars: The Creation and Implementation of a Nationalist Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 3–4.

12 Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), 55–93.

13 Ibid., 96–100; Matthew Elliot, "Independent Iraq": *The Monarchy and British Influence, 1941–1958* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 25.

14 Elliot, "Independent Iraq," 26.

15 Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 101; Michael Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 139.

16 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallization of the Arab State System, 1945–1954* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 36.

17 Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq*, 167; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 103.

British economic and military aid would help them weather the crisis and fend off burgeoning urban radicalism. In pursuit of that strategy, Jabr hoped to renegotiate Iraq's treaty with Britain in order to eliminate the embarrassing presence of British air bases on Iraqi soil and to create a firmer basis for economic and political cooperation.<sup>18</sup>

For the nationalists, however, even an improved agreement with the former colonial overlord was anathema. Thus, to immunize himself from nationalist objections, Jabr relied on demagoguery on the Palestine issue. In August of 1947, he broke precedent in calling for the use of the regular armies of Arab states, not just volunteers, to fight against the Jews in Palestine. Nonetheless, amid a worsening of the economy and a shortfall of expected British aid, the strategy of nationalist demagoguery on this issue failed to reconcile Iraqi nationalists to the renewal of the treaty with Britain. The signing of the treaty in January of 1948 provoked a wave of student strikes, demonstrations, and denunciations from political parties, leading to Jabr's replacement by a politician who was untainted by association with the treaty.<sup>19</sup>

While Jabr's rhetoric on Palestine failed to achieve its intended consequences, its unintended consequences were profound. A British diplomat reported that "the Iraqi Government is now to some extent the victim of their own brave words, which the opposition

is not slow to challenge them to make good."<sup>20</sup> In a vicious cycle of outbidding, the regent, the parliamentary notables, and the socialist parties now all competed with the nationalist opposition to adopt the most militant position on Palestine. Since Iraq was not a front-line state, the costs of undermining the chances of compromise in Palestine were low compared to the domestic political costs of being outbid on the Arab nationalism issue. This rhetoric reverberated not just within Iraq, but also throughout the Arab world. Jabr's militant stance on Palestine at the October and November 1947 meetings of the Arab League helped to set off a spiral of increasingly vehement anti-Israeli rhetoric in other Arab states. In the echo chamber of popular Arab politics, Iraq's incompletely democratized regime led the way in adopting a demagogic strategy that increasingly tied the hands of less democratic Arab states that otherwise might have been able to resist such popular pressures.<sup>21</sup>

It would be an exaggeration to say that Britain's inadequate effort to install partially democratic institutions in Iraq was the sole cause of these outcomes; politics in modernizing Iraq might have been fraught with turmoil under any scenario. Nonetheless, this serves as a cautionary tale, demonstrating how a democracy-promoting empire can unleash illiberal forces in societies with weak political institutions.

18 Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq*, 159, 162 – 163; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 101 – 102.

19 Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallization of the Arab State System*, 49; Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq*, 143, 164 – 166, 174 – 175; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 101 – 105.

20 Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict in the History of Modern Iraq*, 169.

21 Ibid., 141 – 142, 158, 181, 193; Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 102; Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallization of the Arab State System*, 49. For a related argument, see Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 87 – 91.

One of the most common charges laid against the British Empire is that it unscrupulously played the game of divide and rule. In order to maintain its authority over millions of colonial subjects with a minimum of expense and British manpower, the British built up elites of local ethnic groups or tribes who served as Britain's agents of indirect rule. The British also armed local ethnic minorities who kept order effectively at rock-bottom prices. Scholars have argued that these tactics contributed to the politicization of ethnicity, which loaded the dice in favor of bloody ethnic conflicts once the empire retreated. Even when the British were trying to prepare a colony for peaceful, democratic self-government, such tactics as institutionalized power sharing or minority representation among ethnic groups tended to politicize earlier ethnic divisions. These latent fissures tended to crack open with the move to independence and true universal-suffrage democracy.

India is often invoked as an example of the divisive legacy of British tactics of divide and rule, but it is by no means unique. In Ceylon (later Sri Lanka), for example, the British relied disproportionately on English-speaking civil servants from Tamil and other minority groups. In Malaya, the British encouraged immigration of Chinese and Indian workers to man the rubber plantations and other enterprises needed to sustain the broader imperial economy and military machine. These measures laid the groundwork in both of these colonies for the envy of the rural ethnic majority groups, the Sinhalese and Malays, that sought affirmative action and language-use privileges to correct perceived injustices.

The British dealt with these problems by oscillating between power-sharing schemes that protected minorities and

universal-suffrage democracy that empowered the majority. The generation of British-trained politicians that took power immediately after independence kept up this balancing game for a time, but in the long run the system's opposed principles turned out to be incompatible. In Malaysia, the problem was solved when the state curtailed the democratic process and civil rights in 1969; in Sri Lanka, democracy spiraled into ever-worsening ethnic warfare. These examples illustrate a widespread pattern in imperial attempts to democratize multi-ethnic societies.

Democratic transitions are most successful and peaceful when undertaken in a context of bureaucratic efficiency, rule of law, mature political parties, and established free press. One of the reasons that India has remained a fairly stable democracy is that all these elements were put in place, largely as a result of British efforts, before its independence in 1947. However, to buy the time to accomplish this (both for Britain's own strategic reasons and arguably to prepare India better for the transition), the empire needed to shore up local allies who supported the continuation of the colonial regime. In India in the 1920s and 1930s, these included traditional Muslim elites who welcomed British rule as a protection against the feared tyranny of the Hindu majority. (A consequence of this policy, many have argued, was the bloody partition of the British Raj into India and Pakistan in 1947, in which it has been estimated that nearly a million people died.<sup>22</sup>) To strengthen these allies while gradually introducing democratic reforms in preparation for eventu-

22 Radha Kumar, "The Troubled History of Partition," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1) (January/February 1997): 26.



al independence, the British established a system of separate electorates and guaranteed numbers of seats in provincial parliaments for Muslims and Hindus. As the political system began to democratize, this system of ethnic representation helped to channel mass loyalties along ethnic lines.<sup>23</sup>

British policy promoted the politicization of Muslim identity still further during World War II. When Britain committed India to the war effort against Germany without consultation, Congress Party members in the Indian government resigned en masse. Congress leaders were jailed. The Muslim League, however, continued to see Britain as their protector against the Hindu majority, and so supported the British war effort. Enjoying a clear field for political organizing with no opposition from the Congress, the League emerged from the war with a strengthened hold over the Muslim electorate.

In the postwar 1946 elections, the League gained 76 percent of the Muslim vote through its irresistible call for the creation of the state of Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> When in 1947 the League euphemistically called for “direct action” in the streets to press the Congress for concessions on Muslim autonomy, the new electorate, its loyalties channeled by the system of representation separated by ethnicity, responded by rioting in Calcutta and in other major cities. Looking to extricate themselves through a policy that critics have labeled ‘divide and quit,’ the British abandoned India to a chaotic, bloody

partition of the extensively intermingled religious communities.

On the one hand, the British legacy of liberal institutions facilitated India’s transition to a fairly stable democracy. On the other hand, the legacy of institutionalized ethnicity, an expedient to sustain British rule while awaiting the transfer of power to the local majority, increased the likelihood that cultural cleavages would become the basis for divisive politics in the transitional state.

In Sri Lanka, the British fostered the development of a small, English-educated, cosmopolitan political and bureaucratic elite who tended to favor the inclusive civic identity of ‘Ceylonese,’ based on loyalty to the governmental system that Britain had established in the colony of Ceylon, rather than the exclusive ethnic identities of Sinhalese or Tamil.<sup>25</sup> Because of the success of Christian missionary activities in the Tamil-populated Jaffna region, Tamils constituted a disproportionate share of that elite. Fewer Sinhalese learned English because the powerful Buddhist priesthood blocked British inroads into the traditional monopoly of temple schools over the education of lay children.<sup>26</sup>

High-level British-trained native officials never sunk deep roots into local communities and thus failed to attract a popular following. During the 1920s, Ceylon’s main representative body, the State Council, was elected under a power-sharing system that restricted suf-

23 Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936 – 1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 237; Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), chap. 8; H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide* (London: Hutchison, 1969), 14 – 15, 48.

24 Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India*, 243.

25 K. N. O. Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness: The Growth of Sinhalese Nationalism in Sri Lanka* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 225 – 226, 254.

26 Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 65 – 66, 79, 155.

frage and reserved a proportion of the seats for Tamils. This system buffered indigenous officials from full accountability to mass constituencies. In 1931, however, the British Donoughmore Commission, in an attempt to prepare Ceylon for independence and full democracy, stripped away this buffer by eliminating separate minority representation and introducing universal suffrage.<sup>27</sup>

Despite growing populist ferment, the old cosmopolitan elite managed to prevail in elections to form the first two postindependence governments in 1947 and 1952. Soon, however, the Sinhalese rebellion against proficiency in the English language as a requirement for government employment began to gather force. Sinhalese teachers and Buddhist monks also wanted to exclude Tamil as an official language, arguing that language parity would somehow allow the large Tamil population of South India to swamp Sinhalese culture. Radical monks in the less wealthy temples resented the influence of Western culture and administrative practices, which deprived them of their traditional role as the link between the state and the villages.<sup>28</sup> These monks experimented with socialist rhetoric in the late 1940s, but by the mid-1950s they found that nationalist populist themes were a more effective vehicle for expressing their demands.

Given the competitive incentives of universal-suffrage elections, even a secu-

lar, cosmopolitan, Oxford-educated politician such as Solomon Bandaranaike found it expedient to tap into this popular movement. Perceiving an opportunity to gain power in the 1956 elections, the Buddhist political organization offered to support Bandaranaike's challenge to the ruling United National Party, on the condition that he campaign on the platform of making Sinhala the official state language. This marriage of convenience consolidated the ideological shift of Ceylon's Buddhist movement from socialism to ethnonationalism. Through word of mouth, by playing a central role at local political meetings, and by distributing election leaflets, local monks delivered 'vote banks' on behalf of Bandaranaike and the ethnically divisive language policy.<sup>29</sup>

Although Bandaranaike owed his electoral victory to the support of militant Buddhists, once in power he negotiated a pact with Tamil leaders to establish Tamil as the language of administration in Tamil-majority provinces in the northeast of the country and to allow local authorities to block Sinhalese immigration into their regions. These concessions triggered anti-Tamil rioting in the capital city of Colombo. Bandaranaike gave up his plan to gain legislative approval of the pact, declared an emergency, and implemented the main features of the agreement by decree. Buddhists, claiming the pact would "lead to the total annihilation of the Sinhalese race," only intensified their resistance.<sup>30</sup>

27 Urmila Phadnis, *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1976), 159; Chelvadurai Manogaran, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 8; James Manor, "The Failure of Political Integration in Sri Lanka (Ceylon)," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 17 (1) (March 1979): 23.

28 Tambiah, *Sri Lanka*, 8, 20; Phadnis, *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka*, 74.

29 Phadnis, *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka*, 73–74, 160, 164–165, 183–187; Manor, "The Failure of Political Integration in Sri Lanka (Ceylon)," 21–22; Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness*, 296–297, 300, 314.

30 Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 50.

A monk assassinated Bandaranaike in 1959.

From this point on, the pattern of electoral outbidding among Sinhalese parties was firmly established. Even Junius Jayawardene's hitherto moderate Sinhalese United National Party attacked Bandaranaike's power-sharing agreement with the Tamils. On several subsequent occasions, the Sinhalese party in power sought an agreement with the Tamil minority to achieve a majority coalition in parliament, and the Sinhalese opposition party responded with demagogic attacks to wreck the agreement. Revamping the electoral system in 1977 to reward candidates who appealed across ethnic lines also failed to break the spiral of conflict.<sup>31</sup> By that time, groups had developed the habit of rioting in the streets against policies they disliked, so conflict was fueled regardless of electoral incentives.

The legacy of British imperialism exacerbated the problems of the democratic transition in Sri Lanka's multiethnic society. In Sri Lanka as elsewhere, this legacy included the contradictory elements of a divide-and-rule preference for ethnic minorities and the subsequent move to universal-suffrage democracy. In this setting, even the Donoughmore Commission's well-intentioned plan turned out to be fraught with unintended consequences.

Malaysia achieved independence from Britain in 1957, a decade after Sri

<sup>31</sup> Donald Horowitz, "Making Moderation Pay," in Joseph Montville, ed., *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 463. On the more recent period, see Amita Shatri, "Government Policy and the Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka," in Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, eds., *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 129–164.

Lanka. In many respects, the two started out on similar trajectories. In a process that closely resembled Sri Lanka's transition to independence, the British in Malaysia brokered an agreement for a democratic constitution, which was underpinned by a power-sharing accord between cosmopolitan, English-speaking elites from the Malayan and Chinese communities. Having brought Chinese and Indian immigrants to Malaya to sustain the imperial economy, the British hoped that democratic power sharing could overcome the political divisions this had brought about. But that expectation was too optimistic. As in Sri Lanka over the course of the first decade after independence, the logic of mass electoral competition began to undermine the power-sharing accord, as nationalist parties in both major ethnic groups began to draw votes away from the centrist, cross-ethnic alliance. Interethnic harmony was restored only after democracy was truncated through a suspension of the liberal constitution following the 1969 postelectoral riots.<sup>32</sup>

During the early years of the Cold War, an armed rebellion mounted by the Chinese-dominated Malaysian Communist Party had left all Chinese politically suspect. As a result, the Chinese business elite faced difficulties in organizing politically on its own. Moreover, wealthy Chinese found that their interests often coincided more closely with those of Malayan bureaucratic elites than with those of working-class Chinese. As a result, the main Chinese party, the Malaysian Chinese Association, combined with the Malayan elite party, the United

<sup>32</sup> Gordon P. Means, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 1; Muthiah Alagappa, "Contestation and Crisis," in Alagappa, ed., *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 63–64.

Malays National Organization, to form a coalition, known as the Alliance, for the purpose of contesting the Kuala Lumpur city elections in 1952. The British reinforced this arrangement and made ethnic cooperation a precondition of eventual independence.<sup>33</sup>

The cross-ethnic coalition agreement held firm for the first two postindependence elections: In 1959, the Alliance won 52 percent of the vote in free and fair elections and, because of the magnifying effects of single-member districts, 74 out of 104 seats in parliament. In 1964, the Alliance benefited from the rallying effect induced by military threats from Indonesia and increased its margin of victory.<sup>34</sup>

By 1969, however, the Alliance's power-sharing formula was coming under intense challenge by a second generation of political elites that was more ethnically oriented and less cosmopolitan than the founders of the independent Malaysian state. The Alliance continued to campaign on what in retrospect sounds like an extraordinarily reasonable platform: Alliance politicians offered programs to rectify the economic disadvantages of impoverished, poorly educated Malaysians, and they justified these programs in terms of the need to develop agriculture, not of ethnic favoritism. Malay was to become the sole official language, but other languages could be used for official business as needed. The Chinese would continue to benefit from a liberal policy on citizenship. The Alliance's ideology was one of Malaysian

civic-territorial nationalism, not Malaysian ethnic nationalism.<sup>35</sup>

This reasonable-seeming formula began to wear thin, however, in the troubled economic context of 1969. Both the Malays and the Chinese had grounds for complaint against the elitist Alliance, whose supporters came disproportionately from the upper-income groups of both ethnicities. By 1969, Malays' per capita income remained less than half that of non-Malays. Opposition parties catering to Malay constituencies believed the solution should be a massive program of employing Malays in new, state-sector industries. Yet they saw that the Malay political power needed to accomplish this was receding, because the Alliance's liberal citizenship policies were swelling the ranks of Chinese nationalist voters. "Racial harmony is only skin deep," the manifesto of the Malay opposition party concluded. "Ninety percent of the nation's wealth is still in the hands of non-Malays."<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, Chinese economic grievances were rising. A devaluation of the British pound sterling harmed Chinese business interests. Because the Alliance was hard-pressed by the Malay opposition in the hard-fought 1969 parliamentary election campaign, it refused to compensate those who suffered financial losses as a result of the devaluation. This gave added ammunition to the Chinese opposition parties. In a perverse form of interethnic elite collusion, the Malay nationalist and Chinese nationalist parties had agreed not to divide the opposition vote and so refrained from running opposing candidates in districts where one of the two parties held the majority. The Alliance had gained only 49 percent

33 Stanley S. Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore: The Building of New States* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 85–87.

34 Karl von Vorys, *Democracy Without Consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 249, 297.

35 *Ibid.*, 268.

36 *Ibid.*, 271.



of the popular vote, though it retained a majority of the seats in parliament. Despite this 'victory,' the Alliance government eventually succumbed to tactics of ethnic polarization and suffered ultimate electoral defeat at the hands of the ethnic opposition parties. When riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur between Chinese and Malays in the ethnically polarized atmosphere after this tense election, the government declared an emergency and suspended the constitution.

The government then began to pursue a two-pronged strategy of truncating democracy while implementing a technocratic policy designed to maximize economic growth and increase educational and employment opportunities for ethnic Malays. Heavy government investments would modernize rural areas where Malays were the majority. According to this formula, which was codified in the Second Malaysia Plan of 1971, Chinese businesses could continue to enrich themselves, but national symbolism and government-backed affirmative action would strongly favor Malays. Inflammatory ethnic appeals were made illegal. Political coalitions were arranged through backroom bargaining and patronage deals rather than through open contestation.<sup>37</sup> In the jargon of social science, the Alliance instituted an "ethnic control regime" based on a combination of repression and side payments to some of the losers.<sup>38</sup>

This strategy was so successful that by 1973 even the nationalist opposition par-

ties had been co-opted into the ruling Alliance, which now controlled 80 percent of the seats in parliament. Under this system of sharp limitations on free speech and truncated democratic rights, Malaysia enjoyed three decades of extraordinary economic growth without serious ethnic violence, with the Alliance unassailably in power.<sup>39</sup>

A key factor in this success was the power of Malaysian state administrators over society. British Malaya had bequeathed an effective central bureaucracy, a powerful tool that Alliance politicians could use to coerce or buy off opponents under the Second Malaysia Plan.<sup>40</sup> The powers held by the state under the revised 1971 constitution included the ability to distribute patronage to cooperative opposition politicians, to distribute central tax revenues to cooperative localities, and to parcel out economic development projects. The loyalty and efficiency of the Malay-dominated military and police immediately made it possible to repress rioting. Sarawak ranger units, composed of Iban tribesmen brought in from the Malaysian part of Borneo, proved equally ruthless in repressing unruly gangs.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, the state had strong powers to bar ethnonationalist messages from the

39 Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 152; William Case, "Malaysia: Aspects and Audiences of Legitimacy," in Alagappa, ed., *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia*, 75–76, 79–80, 106; Sumit Ganguly, "Ethnic Politics and Political Quiescence in Malaysia and Singapore," in Brown and Ganguly, eds., *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*, 233–272.

40 Milton Esman, *Administration and Development in Malaysia: Institution Building and Reform in a Plural Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972).

41 Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 166–167; von Vorys, *Democracy Without Consensus*, 348.

37 Ibid., 394–412; Means, *Malaysian Politics*, 439; Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 116.

38 D. Rumley, "Political Geography of Control of Minorities," *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geographie* 84 (1) (1993); Ian Lustick, "Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism Versus Control," *World Politics* 31 (3) (April 1979): 325–344.

media. A 1971 constitutional amendment made it a crime even for legislators to discuss ethnically sensitive questions about Malay language dominance, citizenship, or the constitutionally mandated special rights of Malays as the country's indigenous group. Ownership and staff of the mass media were 'Malaysianized' in the 1970s. This assertion of state authority over the press was legitimized in part by a policy begun under the British, who had required newspapers to apply for annual licenses and had threatened seditious newspapers with closure. Even as recently as 1987, the main Chinese newspaper was closed down for a year after it protested the policy of having Malay principals administer Chinese schools.<sup>42</sup>

The paired cases of Sri Lanka and Malaysia show that democratization risks the exacerbation of ethnic tensions, especially when imperial policies have fostered envy and promoted politicization along ethnic lines. Ironically, some of the measures that became ethnically divisive were originally adopted as expedients to sustain imperial rule while trying to prepare the ground for democracy. Whereas British-style institutions of representative democracy were a dubious blessing in both cases, the most valuable legacy of empire in Malaysia turned out to be an effective administrative apparatus capable of managing ethnic divisions while overseeing coherent economic policies that benefited all groups.

**I**n countries with weak political institutions the transition to democracy carries

42 Means, *Malaysian Politics*, 137–140; Bedlington, *Malaysia and Singapore*, 150; Jon Vanden Heuvel, *The Unfolding Lotus: East Asia's Changing Media* (New York: Columbia University, Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1993), 146–162; von Vorys, *Democracy Without Consensus*, 429.

a higher risk of civil or international war. Nonetheless, when a democratic power militarily occupies a country, it is likely to promote democracy there as part of its strategy of withdrawal. This preference reflects the democratic power's self-image and values, its expectation that democratization will create a cooperative partner after the withdrawal, and its desire to legitimate the military intervention as consistent with the target state's presumed right to national self-determination.

Normally, the imperial state seeks to organize the basic institutional preconditions for democracy before handing power back to the occupied nation. However, while this effort is being undertaken, the empire usually must govern through local elites whose legitimacy or political support is typically based on traditional authority or ethnic sectarianism.

Unfortunately, such short-run expedients may hinder the long-run transition to democracy by increasing ethnic polarization. Even if the empire does not take active steps to politicize ethnicity, the mere act of unleashing premature demands for mass political participation before democratic institutions are ready will increase the risk of a polarized, violent, unsuccessful transition. British imperialists fell prey to these dilemmas between the 1920s and 1960s, notwithstanding their frequently benign intentions. The United States risks falling into the same trap as it tries to promote democracy in the wake of military interventions.

Elections under the U.S. occupation of Iraq in January of 2005 reflected the typical pattern of ethnic and religious polarization in culturally divided societies that attempt democracy before coherent state institutions have been constructed. The United States was not consciously

playing the game of divide and rule, but the elections it sponsored inadvertently complicated efforts to overcome divisions among Kurds, Shia Arabs, and Sunni Arabs. With the Sunni refraining from voting out of fear or protest, and the Kurds and Shia voting strictly along group lines, the assembly elected to write the country's constitution turned out to be less comprehensive in its representation and more culturally polarized than a nondemocratic process would have devised. After the elections, Sunni insurgents increasingly directed their attacks against Shia civilian targets rather than only against U.S. and Iraqi government targets. If the United States continues to try to impose democracy on ill-prepared societies, it can expect more uphill struggles such as this one.

*Empire:  
a blunt  
tool for  
democra-  
tization*