



# Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Spring 2005

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on imperialism

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*Inside front cover: 'Freedom on the march':*  
Iraqi villagers queue up to vote in the national elections in a precinct in Al Anbar province west of Baghdad, January 30, 2005. See Niall Ferguson on *The unconscious colossus: limits of (& alternatives to) American empire*, pages 18 – 33: “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. 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?”  
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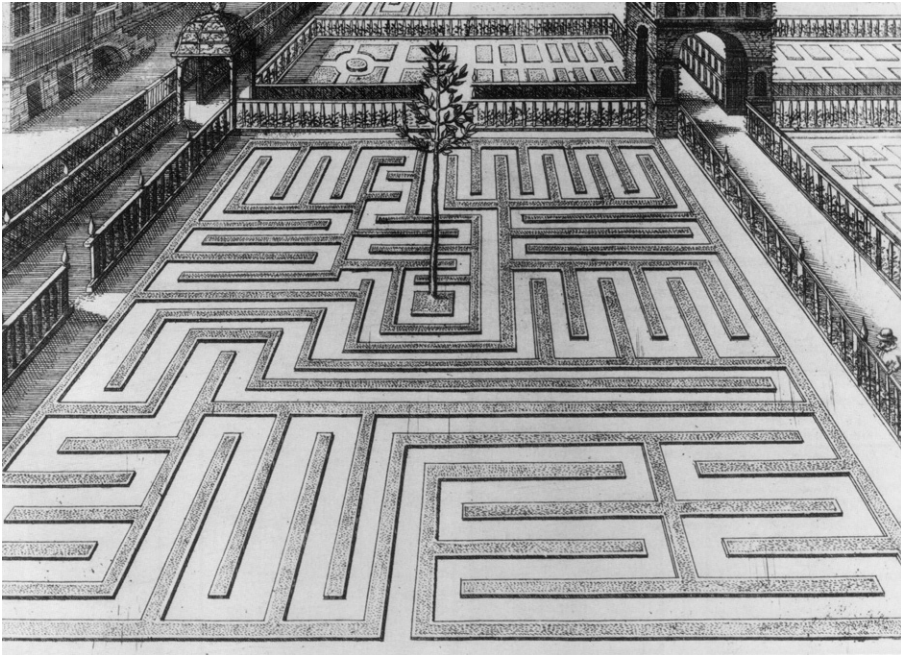
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Dædalus was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. The journal's namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. Its emblem, a maze seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to "lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness."

The American Academy of Arts & Sciences, like its journal, brings together distinguished individuals from every field of human endeavor. It was chartered in 1780 as a forum "to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honour, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people." Now in its third century, the Academy, with its more than four thousand elected members, continues to provide intellectual leadership to meet the critical challenges facing our world.

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## Comment by Jonathan R. Cole

### *Academic freedom under fire*

Today, a half century after the 1954 House Un-American Activities Committee held congressional hearings on communists in American universities, faculty members are witnessing once again a rising tide of anti-intellectualism and threats to academic freedom.<sup>1</sup> They are increasingly apprehensive about the influence of external politics on university decision making. The attacks on professors like Joseph Massad, Thomas Butler, Rashid Khalidi, Ward Churchill, and Edward Said, coupled with other actions taken by the federal government in the name of national security, suggest that we may well be headed for another era of intolerance and repression.

The United States paid a heavy price when the leaders of its research universities failed in the 1950s to defend the leader of the Manhattan Project J. Robert Oppenheimer; the double Nobel Prize chemist Linus Pauling; and the China

expert Owen Lattimore. But a wave of repression in American universities today is apt to have even more dramatic consequences for the nation than the repression of the Cold War.

Compared to today, universities during the McCarthy period were relatively small institutions that were not much dependent on government contracts and grants. In the early 1950s, Columbia University's annual budget was substantially less than \$50 million. Its annual budget is now roughly \$2.4 billion, and more than a quarter of this comes from the federal government, leaving research universities like it ever more vulnerable to political manipulation and control.

Universities today are also more deeply embedded in the broader society than ever before. They are linked to industry, business, and government in multiple ways. Their links to the larger society inevitably lead to public criticism of the university when faculty members or students express ideas or behave in ways that some in the public find repugnant.

Can the leaders and the tenured faculty of our great research universities rise to the challenge of rebutting such criticism? Can we do better at defending academic freedom than our predecessors did in the 1950s?

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<sup>1</sup> Many colleagues have provided useful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I received particularly helpful comments from Akeel Bilgrami, David Cohen, Joanna L. Cole, Susanna Cole, Tom Goldstein, Eric Foner, James Miller, Richard Shweder, and Geoffrey Stone.

Comment by  
Jonathan R.  
Cole

To do so, we must convince the public that a failure to defend dissenting voices on the campus places at risk the greatest engine for the creation of new ideas and scientific innovation the world has ever known. We must explain that one can never know the true worth of an idea unless one is free to examine it. We must explain that such freedom of inquiry is a key to innovation and progress over the long term in the sciences as well as the humanities. Above all, we must show that a threat to academic freedom poses a threat as well to the welfare and prosperity of the nation.

The preeminence of American universities is an established fact. It was recently reaffirmed in a 2004 study conducted in China at Shanghai Jiao Tong University that evaluated five hundred of the world's universities. The United States has 80 percent of the world's twenty most distinguished research universities and about 70 percent of the top fifty. We lead the world in the production of new knowledge and its transmission to undergraduate, doctoral, and postdoctoral students. Since the 1930s, the United States has dominated the receipt of Nobel Prizes, capturing roughly 60 percent of these awards.

Our universities are the envy of the world, in part because the systems of higher education in many other countries – China is a good example – do not allow their faculty and students the extensive freedom of inquiry that is the hallmark of the American system. As a consequence, our universities attract students from all over the world who either remain in this country as highly skilled members of our society or return home to become leaders in their own countries and ambassadors for the United States. The advanced graduates of the American research university populate

the world's great industrial laboratories, its high-tech incubator companies, and its leading professions. Many of the emerging industries on which the nation depends to create new jobs and maintain its leading role in the world economy grow out of discoveries made at the American research university.<sup>2</sup> The laser, the MRI, the algorithm for Google searches, the Global Positioning System, the fundamental discoveries leading to biotechnology, the emerging uses of nanoscience, the methods of surveying public opinion, even Viagra – all these discoveries and thousands of other inventions and medical miracles were created by scholars working in the American research university.

Unfortunately, most leaders of higher education have done a poor job of educating the public about the essential values of the American research university. They have also failed to make the case for the research university as the incubator of new ideas and discoveries. As a consequence, when a professor comes under attack for the content of his or her ideas, the public has little understanding of why the leader of a research university, if he or she is to uphold the core principle of academic freedom, *must* come to the professor's defense.

Attacks on academics follow a clear pattern: A professor is singled out for criticism. This is followed by media coverage that carries the allegations to larger audiences. The coverage is often cursory and sometimes distorted. Some citizens conclude that the university har-

2 The role of industry is, of course, critical as well, but most of the great industrial laboratories are highly dependent on these same research universities for PhDs who join these companies. So universities have both a direct and an indirect influence on the production of innovation.



bors extremists who subvert our national ideals. Pressed by irate constituents, political leaders and alumni demand that the university sanction or fire the professor. This is an all-too-familiar story in our nation's history.

The recent attack on Professor Joseph Massad of Columbia University offers a perfect example of how this process unfolds. The drama began with a group called the David Project, which was launched in 2002 "in response to the growing ideological assault on Israel." The Project subsequently produced a one-sided twenty-five-minute film, "Columbia Unbecoming," in which former students accused Professor Massad of inappropriate behavior in his elective course, "Palestinian and Israeli Politics and Societies." One former student alleged on camera that Massad used "racial stereotypes" and "intimidation tactics . . . in order to push a distinct ideological line on the curriculum"; another asserted that Massad had crossed the line "between vigorous debate and discussion, and hate."<sup>3</sup>

The David Project distributed this film to the media, and one-sided stories soon began to appear in conservative publications such as *The New York Sun*. This triggered follow-up stories in *The New York Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and other local, national, and international news outlets. One, appearing in the November 21, 2004, Sunday edition of *The New York Daily News*, bore the headline "HATE 101."

Not every story about Massad was this crude. A correspondent for *The Jewish Week*, for example, interviewed an Israeli student at Columbia who strongly defended Massad. "The class was an incredible experience," this student re-

ported. "It wasn't fun to be the only Israeli in class, but I never felt intimidated. Passionate, emotional, but not intimidated."

Unfortunately, these nuanced accounts could not compete with strident headlines about hate. At one point, Congressman Anthony D. Weiner, a New York Democrat, asked Columbia President Lee Bollinger to fire the untenured Professor Massad as a way of demonstrating Columbia's commitment to tolerance. The irony was seemingly lost on Mr. Weiner, who had the audacity to write, "By publicly rebuking anti-Semitic events on campus and terminating Professor Massad, Columbia would make a brave statement in support of tolerance and academic freedom."

Weiner's Orwellian ploy – of calling intolerance "tolerance" – must be seen in a broader context. There is a growing effort to pressure universities to monitor classroom discussion, create speech codes, and, more generally, enable disgruntled students to savage professors who express ideas they find disagreeable. There is an effort to transmogrify speech that some people find offensive into a type of action that is punishable.

There is of course no place in the American research university classroom for physical intimidation, physical assault, or violations of the personal space of students. There is no place for faculty members to use their positions of authority to coerce and cow students into conforming to their own point of view. No university will protect a professor's use of a string of epithets directed toward a particular student in a gratuitous manner that is unrelated to the substance of the course. There are workplace rules in place at universities that govern and control such forms of behavior. And there must be, by law, mecha-

<sup>3</sup> The film has been shown in at least four or five different versions; its content is continually changing.

nisms for students or others at the university to lodge complaints against professors who violate these rules. This basic commitment to civility and professional responsibility is part of the code of conduct at Columbia and at every other major American research university.<sup>4</sup>

But the codes that place limits on conduct must *never* be directed at the content of ideas – however offensive they may be to students, faculty, alumni, benefactors, or politicians.

Critics of the university, such as those affiliated with the David Project, tend to blur the distinction between speech and action. They accuse professors of inappropriate action and intimidation when they are actually trying to attack the content of their ideas. They also tend to expropriate key terms in the liberal lexicon, as if they were the only true champions of freedom and diversity on college campuses.

Consider Students for Academic Freedom (SAF), an organization launched by veteran conservative activists. The group's very name implies a commitment to a core liberal value, just as the group's tactics promise to empower aggrieved students. Currently, the SAF is encouraging students nationwide to organize and lobby university leaders, alumni, and members of state legislatures to adopt a "student bill of rights."

But SAF's language and tactics are misleading. Under the banner of seeking balance and diversity in the classroom,

<sup>4</sup> "Academic freedom implies that all officers of instruction are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subjects: that they are entitled to freedom in research and in the publication of its results; and that they may not be penalized by the University for expression of opinion or associations in their private civic capacity; *but they should bear in mind the special obligations arising from their position in the academic community* [italics added]." From *The Faculty Handbook*, Columbia University, 2000, 184.

these students are trying to limit discussion of ideas with which they disagree. They want students to become judges, if not final arbiters, of faculty competence. They have supported the campaign against Massad at Columbia, and have urged students to report "unfair grading, one-sided lectures, and stacked reading lists" as an abuse of student rights.

While I was provost at Columbia there were many efforts by outside groups to influence university policy and to silence specific members of the faculty. Repeated efforts were made to defame and discredit the renowned literary critic and Palestinian advocate Edward Said. External groups tried, but failed, to have Columbia deny an appointment to an eminent Middle East historian, Rashid Khalidi. Sixty-two members of Congress wrote to Columbia calling on us to fire Nicholas de Genova, a professor of anthropology, after he made inflammatory remarks at an antiwar teach-in prior to the most recent Iraq War – even though his remarks were immediately criticized at the same teach-in by other Columbia faculty members.

Even when nobody loses his or her job, these assaults take a toll. As Professor Massad explains on his website, "With this campaign against me going into its fourth year, I chose under the duress of coercion and intimidation not to teach my course ['Palestinian and Israeli Politics and Societies'] this year."

Most of the recent attacks on university professors have been leveled against social scientists and humanists. Many critics of the university seem to believe that sanctioning one group of professors will have no effect on those in other disciplines. This is dangerously naive, both in principle and in practice.

The stakes are high. The destruction of university systems has historically been caused by the imposition of external

political ideology on the conduct of scholarly and scientific research. Defense of faculty members in the humanities and social sciences from external political pressure protects *all* members of the university community.

History suggests that the natural sciences, too, can be infected by political pressures to conform to ideological beliefs. German universities still have not recovered from the catastrophe of 1933 when Hitler began to dismantle German science and technology by purging those researchers who did 'Jewish science.' Japanese universities were damaged immeasurably in the 1930s by the purging of dissident intellectuals. Soviet biology never fully recovered from the imposition of Lysenkoism into the biological sciences.

Today, political pressure to include 'creationism' and theories of 'intelligent design' as alternatives to Darwinian evolution in the secondary school science curriculum has already led to a purging of Darwin's theory from the science curriculum in at least thirteen states. The National Academies of Sciences and the Union of Concerned Scientists have cataloged many examples of Bush administration interference with research and education. Consider just a few examples: Foreign students and scholars from 'suspect' nations are harassed and even denied entry into the United States without a scintilla of evidence that they are security risks. American professors are prevented from working with gifted foreign scientists and students. Open scholarly communication is impeded by policies designed to isolate nations supporting terrorism; library and computer records are searched; political litmus tests are used by the Bush administration to decide who will serve on scientific advisory committees; and scientific reports whose content is inconsistent with the Bush administration's ideology have

been altered. Even though the National Institutes of Health supported the research, some members of Congress almost succeeded in rescinding funding for projects on HIV/AIDS. Another recent bill, House Resolution 3077, almost succeeded in mandating direct government oversight of university 'area studies' programs (the bill passed the House but died in the Senate).

These attacks should be related to still other threats to scientific inquiry. The USA PATRIOT Act and the Bioterrorism Defense Act have, for example, led to the criminal prosecution of Dr. Thomas Butler, one of the nation's leading experts on plague bacteria. Butler faced a fifteen-count indictment for violating the Patriot Act's provision requiring reporting on the use and transport of specific biological agents and toxins that in principle could be used by bioterrorists. Butler was acquitted of all charges related to the Patriot Act, except for a minor one – his failure to obtain a transport permit for moving the bacteria from Tanzania to his Texas laboratory, as he had done for the past twenty years. However, while investigating Butler's work with plague bacteria, the FBI combed over everything in his lab at Texas Tech University, reviewed all of his accounts, and added on fifty-four counts of tax evasion, theft, and fraud unrelated to the Patriot Act. His conviction was based on the add-on counts. The upshot of all of this was that he lost his medical license, was fired from his job, and now, if he loses his appeal, faces up to nine years in jail.

In another case, Attorney General John Ashcroft publicly targeted Dr. Steven J. Hatfill of Louisiana State University as "a person of interest" in the anthrax scare that followed 9/11. Although Hatfill has never been charged with any crime, LSU fired him because of the accusation and intervention of the

Justice Department. Other faculty members at other institutions have suffered through unannounced and intimidating visits from the FBI to their homes or campus offices.

These crude efforts to enforce the Patriot Act have already had some serious consequences. Robert C. Richardson, whose work on liquid helium earned him a Nobel Prize in Physics, has described the atrophy of bioterrorism research at Cornell:

The Patriot Act, which was passed after 9/11, has a section in it to control who can work on “select agents,” pathogens that might be developed as bioweapons. At Cornell [before 9/11], we had something like 76 faculty members who had projects on lethal pathogens and something like 38 working specifically on select agents. There were stringent regulations for control of the pathogens – certain categories of foreign nationals who were not allowed to handle them, be in a room with them or even be aware of research results. So what is the situation now? We went from 38 people who could work on select agents to 2. We’ve got a lot less people working on interventions to vaccinate against smallpox, West Nile virus, anthrax and any of 30 other scourges.<sup>5</sup>

Is our national security enhanced when the government turns our best immunology and biodefense laboratories into ghost towns?

In an atmosphere of growing fear and intimidation, we would be wise not to dismiss these attacks on the American research university as mere aberrations. Indeed, universities are fragile institutions, and they have historically caved in

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Claudia Dreifus, “The Chilling of American Science: A Conversation with Robert C. Richardson,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 2004, D2.

to external political pressure at key moments – as they did during the Red Scares that followed the two world wars.<sup>6</sup>

Periodically, often during times of national fear, political leaders and ideologues on the Right and the Left have silenced dissent and pressured universities to abandon their most fundamental values of free and open inquiry. Most university leaders and faculty members fell easily into line during the First Red Scare of 1919 – 1921 and during the reign of Joseph McCarthy. As historians Ellen Schrecker and Sigmund Diamond have shown, presidents and trustees of research universities often publicly espoused civil liberties, academic freedom, and free inquiry while privately collaborating with the FBI to purge faculty members accused of holding seditious political views.<sup>7</sup>

Some university leaders underestimated the gravity of the threat and bowed to wealthy benefactors who threatened to withdraw their support. Others dismissed professors out of fear of bad publicity. Still others supported these purges because they believed in them. For example, Cornell President E. E. Day maintained that “a man who belongs to the Communist Party and who follows the party line is thereby disqualified from participating in a free, honest inquiry after truth, and from belonging on a university faculty devoted to the search for

<sup>6</sup> For an exceptionally fine discussion of these failures, see Geoffrey Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime From the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Reviewing the now available archival material at Harvard University, Robert N. Bellah has confirmed the accounts of Diamond and Schrecker. Bellah reports his findings in “McCarthyism at Harvard,” letter to *The New York Review of Books*, February 10, 2005, 42 – 43.



truth.” Yale President Charles Seymour proclaimed, “There will be no witch hunts at Yale because there will be no witches. We do not intend to hire Communists.”

Robert Maynard Hutchins, chancellor of the University of Chicago, was one of the few great heroes during those perilous times. In 1949, testifying before a state commission investigating communists on campus, he boldly argued for tolerance:

The danger to our institutions is not from the tiny minority who do not believe in them. It is from those who would mistakenly repress the free spirit upon which those institutions are built. . . . The policy of repression of ideas cannot work and has never worked. The alternative is the long, difficult road of education.

On another occasion, Hutchins observed that the problem with witch-hunts was “not how many professors would be fired for their beliefs, but how many think they *might* be. The entire teaching profession is intimidated.”

Hutchins’s boss, Laird Bell, chairman of the University of Chicago’s Board of Trustees, was equally outspoken: “To be great,” he declared,

a university must adhere to principle. It cannot shift with the winds of passing public opinion. . . . It must rely for its support upon a relatively small number of people who understand the important contributions it makes to the welfare of the community and the improvement of mankind: upon those who understand that academic freedom is important not because of its benefits to professors but because of its benefits to all of us.

What, then, are the defining principles that guide the work of the university? As scholars and scientists, we place a

premium on openness, rigor, fairness, originality, and skepticism. We are part of an international community of scholars and scientists whose ideas transcend international borders. We collaborate and exchange ideas with Iraqis, Russians, Iranians, Chinese, and Israelis without considering politics or nationality. We hold that members of our community must always be free to dissent – to pursue and express new and even radical ideas in an environment of unfettered freedom.

By the same token, proponents of new ideas and their critics must be free to disagree. And this is especially true in the classroom, in which faculty and students must be free to explore and develop their ideas in robust and uninhibited debate. By encouraging independent thinking, no matter how preposterous or outrageous, the university promotes trust, creativity, collaboration, and innovation.

The goal is to establish an environment in which it is possible for the inquisitive mind to flourish. In contrast to private enterprise, the university places the welfare of the community above individual gain. The coin of the academic realm is the recognition that professors and students receive based on the quality of their contributions to the creation, transmission, and understanding of knowledge. The university is a meritocracy. Ideally, quality of mind expressed through teaching, research, and learning is rewarded without regard to race, religion, nationality, or gender.

This does not mean, of course, that real merit is always rewarded: like any complex institution, the modern university does not always function as it is meant to. But it is simply ridiculous to perpetuate the myth that research universities are rogue institutions that operate in an uncontrolled environment.

Most of them are probably more accountable for their products and for their financial transactions than most large American corporations.<sup>8</sup>

Universities are evaluating themselves from dawn to dusk. State and regional accrediting agencies are continually reviewing the academic quality of university programs and faculties. Federal funding agencies conduct extensive peer reviews of grant applications that evaluate the quality of applicants' prior work, the quality of the proposals submitted, and the potential value of the work when completed; they use site visits to review elaborate proposals before funding large centers or university institutes. Obsessed with knowledge about their reputation and quality, research universities use ad hoc or standing committees of experts to evaluate the quality of the curriculum, the quality of the faculty, and the quality of departments and schools. The scientific and scholarly papers and monographs of faculty members are peer reviewed before they are accepted for publication and are assessed in terms of the potential impact of this work on the field. The results of course evaluations by undergraduate and graduate students are part of the 'teaching portfolios' that are used in deciding on the promotion and tenure of junior faculty members. Finally, there is accountability

<sup>8</sup> I'm not focusing here on financial accountability. In fact, universities have many ways of reviewing and accounting for their financial transactions. Fund accounting at universities allows auditors to review every research grant or contract in minute detail. Full-time federal auditors are fixtures at universities. Major accounting firms audit the books of the universities on an annual basis. Bonds floated by universities to finance construction projects are brought to market only after bond-rating agencies evaluate the credit worthiness of the university and rate the bonds. The ratings depend almost as much on qualitative factors of the quality of university schools and departments as on financial ratios and other indicators.

for personal conduct: students and colleagues can file grievances of discrimination with deans, department chairs, ombuds officers, the university senate, and the EEOC, among other outlets for claims of inappropriate behavior.

The governing role played by peers makes universities different from most other American institutions. The research university was founded on the idea that professors should regulate their own affairs. This aspiration has never been fully realized. But it is plainly evident in the tradition that those who oversee the core academic work of the university – the president, the provost, the deans, and the department chairs – are themselves distinguished scholars and teachers who are respected members of the faculty. Moreover, university leaders govern by persuasive and delegated authority, not by the exercise of power.

Another essential feature of the American research university is that no one speaks 'for' the university – not even its official leaders. While the president and the provost and the board of trustees have the responsibility and the authority to formulate and carry out university policies, the essence of a university lies in its multiplicity of voices: those of its faculty, its students, its researchers, its staff. Presidents and provosts are often asked questions of the following kind: "What is the university's position on the writings, or remarks, or actions of Professor X?"

In fact, there is no 'university position' on such matters. The university does not decide which ideas are good and bad, which are right and wrong. That is up for constant debate, deliberation, and discourse among the faculty and students. For the university to take such positions would stifle academic freedom and alienate those whose views differ from those of the institution's leaders. The

responsibility of these leaders is not to decide whose ideas are best, but to create an environment in which all ideas may be explored and tested.

First and foremost, the American research university is designed to be unsettling. Was this not Socrates' purpose as well? Because it is committed to the creation of *new* knowledge and the intellectual growth of its students, the university must nurture the expression of novel and sometimes startling ideas and opinions. Lionel Trilling, the preeminent literary critic, wrote in *Beyond Culture* about the contentious nature of the literature sometimes taught at the university:

Any historian of literature of the modern age will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, the actual subversive intention, that characterizes modern writing – he will perceive its clear purpose of detaching the reader from habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and a vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise, the culture that has produced him.

Whether in 1965, when this was published and Trilling taught at Columbia, or today, the mission of the American research university is to encourage faculty and students to challenge prevailing values, policies, beliefs, and institutions. That is why the university will always have – and must welcome – dissenting voices and radical critics.

Researchers at America's universities do not generally investigate questions for which there are 'right' or ready answers – answers at the back of a book. The goal of academic discourse is not merely to convey information, but to provoke, to stimulate ideas, and to teach students to *think* and provide them with the intellectual and analytical tools that

will enable them to think *well*. Great teachers challenge their students' and colleagues' biases and presuppositions. They present unsettling ideas and dare others to rebut them and to defend their own beliefs in a coherent and principled manner. The American research university pushes and pulls at the walls of orthodoxy and rejects politically correct thinking. In this process, students and professors may sometimes feel intimidated, overwhelmed, and confused. But it is by working through this process that they learn to think better and more clearly *for themselves*.

Unsettling by nature, the university culture is also highly conservative. It demands evidence before accepting novel challenges to existing theories and methods. The university ought to be viewed in terms of a fundamental interdependence between the liberality of its intellectual life and the conservatism of its methodological demands. Because the university encourages discussion of even the most radical ideas, it must set its standards at a high level. We permit almost any idea to be put forward – but only because we demand arguments and evidence to back up the ideas we debate and because we set the bar of proof at such a high level.

These two components – tolerance for unsettling ideas and insistence on rigorous skepticism about all ideas – create an essential tension at the heart of the American research university. It will not thrive without *both* components operating effectively and simultaneously.

Here we must acknowledge an area where the university today faces a real and difficult problem with the mechanisms it uses to evaluate the work of its scholars. For the threats to free inquiry do not come only from government policies, from local or national politicians, from external lobbying groups, or from

lazy journalism. Some of the most subtle threats come from within the academy itself.

For example, an unspoken but widespread aversion to airing topics that are politically sensitive in various fields sometimes limits debates that ought to take place. The growth of knowledge is greatly inhibited when methodological thresholds for evidence are relaxed, and claims to truth are advanced on the basis of shoddy evidence, or on the basis of supposedly possessing privileged insight simply as a result of one's race, gender, religion, or ethnicity.

Most scholars and scientists at leading universities would more than likely exercise their right to remain silent before placing on the table for debate any number of controversial ideas: for example, the idea that differences in educational performance between different racial groups are not a result of discrimination; that occupational differentiation by gender may be a good thing; that dietary cholesterol above and beyond genetic predispositions has only a minimal effect on coronary heart deaths; that the children of crack cocaine mothers will nevertheless experience normal cognitive development; or, until recently, that prions, as well as bacteria or viruses, can cause disease.

I have suggested that we entertain radical and even offensive ideas at universities because we simultaneously embrace rigorous standards in determining the adequacy of truth claims. But if scholarly skepticism is sometimes compromised by a lack of courage or an intolerance for competing points of view, then the primary mechanisms by which universities ensure the quality of research will not always reliably function. To complicate matters, different disciplines have evolved somewhat differently in institutionalizing mechanisms to ensure

that rigorous standards exist to evaluate ideas and the results of research.

Biologists may broadly agree that advocates of creationism are simply in error and that the theory they defend is unworthy of serious scientific debate, while social scientists are more likely, for example, to disagree about the scholarly merits of theories that stress the influence of socialization rather than innate abilities on individual achievement. As new areas of research and inquiry appear in the modern university and begin to dominate their disciplines, the definition of acceptable research questions may well change, as may definitions of what is acceptable methodology, acceptable evidence, acceptable standards of proof, and also acceptable peer reviewers (who in turn will judge whether a given scholar's methodology and use of evidence is acceptable). As a statistician might put it, whoever owns the 'null hypothesis' often determines what is taken for fact.

When skepticism falters or fails, does the academic community, even in the longer run for which it is built, have the mechanisms to correct its errors?

This has to be an open question. Currently, there is broader agreement about the appropriate corrective mechanisms in the natural sciences than in the humanities and social sciences, although in periods of what Thomas Kuhn called revolutionary rather than normal science, we often also find sharp disagreements within natural science over standards of proof and truth claims. It is the very possibility of ongoing disagreement, however, that is a primary justification for protecting and promoting freedom of thought. John Stuart Mill put it this way:

Truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites, that very few have minds sufficiently capacious and



impartial to make adjustment with an approach to correctness, and it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, as Mill well knew, it is more important to tolerate an occasional error in the current appraisal of conflicting ideas than to risk compromising free expression. For in the long run, it is unfettered freedom of inquiry that ensures innovation, intellectual progress, and the continued growth of knowledge.

I have defended the right of academic freedom within the community of scholars. But what, if any, right to freedom of expression does a student have as against his or her professor? The rise of groups like Students for Academic Freedom raises this important question.

Students clearly have the right – indeed, the obligation – to enter the general debate within the university community. They have the right to express their ideas forcefully in the classroom, and to argue against their professor’s views. I’ve made the point that professors in the classroom must never discriminate against students on the basis of their ascribed characteristics – simply on the basis of who they are in terms of their race, ethnicity, religion, or gender.

At the same time, there is a clear differentiation of roles between professors and students. We expect professors, not students, to offer their own best judgment on competing truth claims. A student may argue for creationism or intelligent design; but that does not oblige his or her biology professor to take his or her views seriously as a rival to the evolutionary accounts favored by virtually all contemporary biologists. Similarly, a

professor of Jewish history is under no obligation to take seriously the arguments of a student who denies the Holocaust.

What, then, about a student who says he or she is being discriminated against by Professor Massad of Columbia, because Massad declares the student’s position on the 1982 Shatila massacres in Lebanon to be factually erroneous. Is that student therefore entitled to level formal charges against Massad?

If we are going to allow the biology professor and the Jewish historian a right to offer their best judgment on competing truth claims, and because of those judgments to take some students more seriously than others, then don’t we also have to grant this right to Joseph Massad?

In any case, we should remember that the proper goal of higher education is enlightenment – not some abstract ideal of ‘balance.’ Indeed, those who demand balance on some issues never demand it on others. The University of Chicago’s school of economics is admired widely for its accomplishments. Must Chicago seek balance by forcing its economics department to hire scholars with contrasting points of view?

Occasionally, students have to do the hard work of seeking alternative points of view across institutional boundaries. They cannot always expect ‘balance’ to be delivered in neat packages. It is the professor’s pedagogical role that grants him or her the authority and the right to judge which scientific theories or historical facts are presented in the classroom. We cannot deny the asymmetry in these roles. If we do, we fail to understand a legitimate goal of higher education: to impart knowledge to those who lack it. Of course, one can question the competence of a professor – that happens routinely in a good university. But the evalu-

9 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 49.

ation of that competence must be, and is, left to the professor's peers – not to students, and surely not to trustees, regents, congressmen, advocacy groups, or members of the press.

Over the past seventy-five years, the Supreme Court has expanded greatly the protection of free speech. Today, prevailing First Amendment doctrine holds that the government cannot restrict speech because of its content, and that only forms of “low value” speech, such as “fighting words,” libel, commercial advertising, or obscenity, can be regulated. Universities cannot act outside the law,<sup>10</sup> but they can – and should – try to expand still further the limits placed on free expression, when those constraints hamper inquiry and debate.

Expression in the classroom requires virtually absolute protection. Absent such protection, professors will hesitate to discuss sensitive topics out of fear of retribution, suspension, dismissal, or litigation.

The university cannot and should not attempt to decide what ideas or perspectives are appropriate for the classroom. For one student, a professor's ideas may represent repugnant stereotypes or efforts at intimidation; for another, the same ideas may represent profound challenges to ostensibly settled issues. For example, a professor's discussion of our culture's bias against female circumcision may seem to one student an affront to what is self-evidently a basic human right; but to another student, it may seem a provocative illustration of cultural imperialism, raising serious moral questions that ought to be put on the table for debate. Are we to take seriously those who would have us sanction the

10 Here I'm putting aside the distinction between public and private universities.

professor for raising this subject in a seminar? And if we did, who would be cast in the role of the ‘Grand Inquisitor’?

The broadest possible protection of freedom of expression is of a piece with another important aspect of the academy. We have understood for some time now that the university is not a place where we exclusively house or train the kind of scientist or scholar who advises the prince – those who currently control the government. There are members of the faculty who sometimes voluntarily give advice to the prince – and there may even be academic programs (such as Russian studies during the Cold War) that exist in part to inform government policy – but it is not the point or the rationale of universities to furnish such advice, nor to have the thematic pursuits of inquiry in the university shaped by the interests of the prince. That is why universities will often find in their midst those who air the most radical critiques of the prince and his interests. Were we to silence or even to inhibit such people, we would not only be undermining free inquiry, we would also gradually reinforce the countervailing power of conformism.

Despite the commitment of the American research university to freedom of thought, the natural tendency of professors and students, as we have seen, is to avoid expressing views that may offend others. But the responsibility of the university is to combat this tendency and to encourage, rather than squelch, free-wheeling inquiry. The university must do everything it can to combat the coercive demand for political litmus tests from the Right and the Left, and the pressure to conform with established academic paradigms.

By affording virtually absolute protection to classroom debate, the university

encourages the sort of open inquiry for which universities exist. Those members of the university community who are willing to take on prevailing beliefs and ideologies – be they the pieties of the academic Left or the marching orders of the politicians currently in power – need to know that the university will defend them unconditionally if they are attacked for the content of their ideas.

**T**he defense of academic freedom is never easy.

It is understandable that university leaders will react to outside attacks with caution. There is always a risk that taking a public position on a controversial matter may alienate potential donors or offend one of the modern university's many and varied constituencies. In response to negative publicity, it is entirely natural for presidents and provosts – and for trustees and regents – to work feverishly 'to get this incident behind us' and to reach for an accommodation that calms the critics and makes the problem go away.

However, to act on such understandable impulses would be a grievous mistake. There are few matters on which universities must stand on absolute principle. Academic freedom is one of them. If we fail to defend this core value, then we jeopardize the global preeminence of our universities in the production and transmission of new knowledge in the sciences, in the arts, indeed in every field of inquiry. Whenever academic freedom is under fire, we must rise to its defense with courage – and without compromise.

For freedom of inquiry is our reason for being.

– March 16, 2005

# 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-

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

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



*Table 1*  
An imperial typology

<i>Metropolitan system</i>	<i>Self-interested objectives</i>	<i>Public goods</i>	<i>Methods of rule</i>	<i>Economic system</i>	<i>Cui bono?</i>	<i>Social character</i>
Tyranny	Security	Peace	Military	Plantation	Ruling elite	Genocidal
Aristocracy	Communi- cations	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-

<sup>2</sup> 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

*Limits of  
(& alternatives to)  
American  
empire*

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.

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

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

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 cake-walk, 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

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)>.

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

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,

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

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

which have slumped from 21 percent of gross domestic product in 2000 to less than 16 percent in 2004.<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  
(& alternatives to)  
American  
empire*

# Kenneth Pomeranz

## *Empire & ‘civilizing’ missions, past & present*

‘Imperialism’ is a frustratingly vague term, but a useful one – and not only for outside observers and protesting subjects.<sup>1</sup> Historically, rulers have often sought to make their empires visible as such by following regional – and in recent centuries, global – standards for acting imperially. Even the past century, in which empires often shunned that designation, is only a partial exception.

Imperialism is also topical. While some compare the contemporary United States to imperial Rome, more analysts see it as the latest of a series of military-mercantile hegemonies that set the rules for their eras’ global political economies. Depending on where they locate the start of the world economy, some stretch that series back many centuries, while most identify only an Anglo-American succession spanning two centuries of liberal industrial capitalism. Others

mark out the last two hundred years for a different, though complementary, reason: as an era in which Western empires, influenced by the Enlightenment, cast themselves as agents of progress.

In this essay I will also emphasize the self-assigned ‘civilizing’ mission of modern empires, but will argue that the two-hundred-year, Atlantic-centered framework is both too narrow and too broad. On the one hand, civilizing empires have emerged outside the Enlightenment West; an East/West dichotomy often proves less useful than one between contiguous and overseas empires. On the other hand, since the 1970s the American government’s approach to ‘development’ and ‘nation building’ – the twentieth-century version of ‘civilizing’ – has broken with basic ideas about how empire could confer benefits on subject peoples that had evolved over the previous two centuries. This makes today’s American empire different both in word and deed.

In empires, leaders of one society rule directly or indirectly over at least one other society, using instruments differ-

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Walter LaFeber, Robert Moeller, Jeffrey Wasserstrom, and R. Bin Wong for exceptionally helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, and to Mark Elliott for clarifying specific questions of Qing frontier policy.



ent from (though not necessarily more authoritarian than) those used to rule at home. For empires, varied kinds of rule are not just concessions to large spaces and limited means, but appropriate to differences among their subject peoples. Many contemporary states rule less accessible regions very differently from their capital districts, but this is considered a temporary failing; in theory, nations should have one kind of government and citizen from border to border. Empires, by contrast, may plan to modify differences among their domains, but not to extinguish them.

In modern times, one particular difference increasingly overshadowed others: most empires came to have at their core one nation conceived to be 'free' and 'modern,' while other domains were 'unfree' and 'backward.' This distinction became more pronounced in the nineteenth century than it had been before: most of those whom we anachronistically call the 'German' or 'Spanish' subjects of the seventeenth-century Hapsburgs, for instance, had not been notably more enfranchised than many of the other Hapsburg subjects. Even in the eighteenth-century British Empire, which may have come closest among pre-nineteenth-century empires to having a nation at its core, the majority of Britons were neither economically nor politically more privileged than their North American cousins, or even perhaps than the white residents of various other British colonies. The citizen/subject dichotomy only became sharp when the thirteen colonies broke away, many local representative bodies in the rest of the empire were either emasculated or abolished,<sup>2</sup> and the rights afforded

2 See C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989), who labels many of the new

to citizens were expanded in Britain itself.

Nonetheless, the distinction between a supposedly civilized core nation and backward others was not new in 1800. Indeed, the groups most closely tied to historic imperial centers often made their alleged cultural superiority a justification for empire. Some tried hard to 'civilize' their subjects. For instance, a civilizing agenda has been part of Chinese imperial statecraft for more than two thousand years. Insistence on this civilizing mission waxed and waned over time, but not on the strength of rival claims for the allegiance of border peoples. Recent scholarship emphasizes how Qing (1644–1912) expansionism in the southwest resembled many contemporaneous expansionisms, and how Eastern and Western empires self-consciously adopted standard ways of claiming territory and peoples, such as increasingly standardized ethnographic and cartographic conventions.<sup>3</sup>

Around 1800, the imperial stake in 'civilization' got higher – for at least two reasons. First, Europeans and Americans (North and South) increasingly accepted the idea that civilized peoples should rule themselves. (The Romans had never worried that respecting Greek civilization conflicted with imposing outside rule on them. In fact, as far as the Romans were concerned, being too civi-

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and reorganized colonies of the 1800–1840 era as "proconsular despotisms."

3 Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); James A. Millward, "'Coming onto the Map': 'Western Regions' Geography and Cartographic Nomenclature in the Making of Chinese Empire in Xinjiang," *Late Imperial China* 20 (2) (December 2000): 61–98.

lized – i.e., decadent – could be a disqualification for self-rule.) The Atlantic revolutions both promulgated this idea and spawned expansionist states, producing strange new locutions: Jefferson described American westward expansion as “an empire of liberty,” and Napoleon insisted that French conquests brought “freedom.”

These locutions paralleled tensions in the metropolises, where liberal regimes acknowledged certain universal rights but then denied many groups those rights in practice. It was frequently argued that those whose rights were denied lacked reason or self-control or were in some other way not fully human. By the same token, if civilized people should rule themselves, societies ruled from afar had to be labeled uncivilized. Empire was then justified as tutelage that would eventually make those societies fit either for self-rule or full union with the metropole. Though civilizing remained a vague, contested goal, most nineteenth- and twentieth-century empires invoked this rationale much more than their predecessors had.

The second reason why the imperial stake in civilization got higher was that an alternate model for empire was vanishing. For centuries, nomadic cavalry experts had periodically conquered the sedentary empires they lived near, but this pattern was disappearing by 1800. The Qajars in Persia, the Saudis in western Arabia, and, more briefly, the Marathas and Nadir Shah in India faintly echoed processes that had put the Mongols, Mughals, and others in power, but record population growth and intensified land use put nomads on the defensive thereafter throughout Eurasia.

Existing empires that had descended from tribal conquerors also became less prone to claim they had virtues that resulted from being relatively uncorrupted

by civilization; increasingly they also saw themselves as civilizers. Decades before the Tanzimat reforms of the 1830s, the Ottomans began working to standardize administration and property law, reform social practices, and rein in mystical and enthusiastic forms of Islam in their outer provinces. The Romanovs undertook ‘Russification’ efforts in Poland and the Ukraine around 1830 and in Central Asia thereafter.

The Qing, descended from Manchu invaders, had long made ‘civilizing’ efforts on some frontiers – replacing tribal chiefs with appointed magistrates, imposing Han Chinese marriage customs, and promoting Chinese education for elites; but they had also criticized excessively civilized Han Chinese. This latter stance became harder to sustain after spectacular corruption and high living among elite Manchus were exposed in 1799. After 1800, Han literati became more interested and involved in frontier management, emphasizing the superiority of Chinese civilization rather than commonalities among the Qing and their Central Asian subjects. Many Manchu officials followed suit, invoking earlier Mongol precedents less frequently.<sup>4</sup> (Implementation of more aggressively ‘civilizing’ policies came slowly, however, due to a series of nineteenth-century invasions, rebellions, and other crises.) Thus, nineteenth-century empires that did not share Enlightenment notions about progress, tutelage, and self-rule also worked to ‘civilize’ their subject populations.

4 On Qing disdain for decadent Han Chinese, see, for instance, Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). On the increased assertiveness of Han literati in frontier and foreign policy, see James Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

But accepting a civilizing justification, even rhetorically, created a distinctive tension in which any empire claiming complete success would in effect be calling for its own dissolution.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, modern empires have claimed to be readying 'natives' for self-rule, while simultaneously asserting that the empires' continued presence is essential for maintaining this direction. (This problem has appeared in Iraq, as the U.S. government has insisted on rapid progress toward Iraqi self-rule – even as it also insists that a continued American military presence is essential.)

By 1900, perceived readiness for self-rule involved social, economic, and cultural characteristics of whole populations: readiness to be self-disciplined free laborers, patriotic soldiers, practitioners of modern hygiene, etc. These civilizing projects went well beyond Macaulay's famous proposal, in his 1834 "Minute on [Indian] Education," that Britain should aim to create a class of people in the subcontinent who would share its outlook. In focusing on training a 'civilized' ruling class, Macaulay's assimilationist imperialism was, despite its Enlightenment origins, not unlike that of Wanyan Yun Zhu (who wrote in 1833 that finding a few Yunnanese women who could write decent Chinese showed the glories of Qing expansion) and that of Chen Hongmou, the eighteenth-century official who tirelessly promoted classical education on China's southwestern frontier.

Whatever their similarities, all these projects for creating new gentries were

quite remote from later ambitions to create new citizenries. As Christopher Bayly has shown, despite the growing importance of commercial interests in early-nineteenth-century Britain, the empire's dominant ideas were evangelist and agrarianist.<sup>6</sup> Taking Britain's concentrated landholding as a model, agrarianism sought to build colonial societies that would also be led by an elite of large landlords dedicated to improving their properties and to setting an example for their neighbors. Meanwhile, evangelist rhetoric often held that imperial rule would 'awaken' its subjects.

Many, including Macaulay, equated awakening with rejecting local tradition to embrace superior Western ideas. Others – from colonial officials such as Thomas Munro, who hoped to revive an ancient "Hindoo constitution," to intellectuals such as F. D. Maurice and James Legge, who saw anticipations of Christian monotheism in various ancient civilizations – regarded imperialism as helping people rediscover truths their cultures had forgotten but that Europeans had meanwhile enlarged upon. Many Westerners, for instance, considered China a 'sleeping giant,' thus justifying the Opium War (1839 – 1842) as a way to rouse that country from its slumber.

Increasingly, colonial nationalists picked up this metaphor, which conveniently implied that the long-sleeping nation was old enough to be historically authentic. 'Awakening,' as this appropriation of the term showed, was an unstable justification for empire; it could theoretically happen instantaneously, making foreign rule suddenly superfluous.

'Development,' by contrast, implied a need for continuing guidance. It fit an understanding that whole societies had to be transformed, and it had more ob-

5 The most influential formulation of this is Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in Cooper and Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1 – 56.

6 Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, 133 – 163.

jective, measurable correlatives. Development could also serve metropolitan economic interests, making an empire a valuable market for the metropole's manufactures and financial services rather than just a source of raw materials.

Amidst increasingly restive 'nationalities' and growing metropolitan queasiness about the ethics and feasibility of relying on force, pomp, and often improvised 'tradition' to sustain European rule, a mission stressing economic development provided a seemingly defensible basis for a colonial social contract. A fundamentally socioeconomic notion of empire's purpose also suited metropolitan professionals seeking opportunities abroad as well as the desires of some of the colonized. The commitment of many colonial nationalists to developmentalism is among modern imperialism's most important legacies. It is striking how many twentieth-century arguments about North-South relations came to assume that good regimes create sustained per capita economic growth – a relatively novel and narrow measure of human well-being.

Meanwhile, non- or semi-European states that wanted to be recognized as great powers, including old empires like the Ottoman and new ones like Japan, also assimilated many Western notions of what constituted appropriate imperial behavior. The resulting fusions of Western and indigenous notions reoriented these states' policies toward their Miao, Palestinian, Kazakh, Taiwanese, and other 'backward' subjects – and thereby gave attempts to recast empire as a developmental effort a truly global scope.

Many late-nineteenth-century colonial regimes believed that creating and enforcing a more liberal property rights system constituted a sufficient develop-

mental effort – but this was hardly simple. Herders, shifting cultivators, and forest peoples – many of whose traditional practices were construed as criminal trespassing under that system – suffered greatly; so did tenants who lost customary guarantees against eviction and access to common lands. Liberalization could also undermine local elite collaborators central to cost-saving indirect rule (those, for instance, with rights to collect tribute goods or use unpaid labor), or white settlers for whom coercion kept labor cheap amidst still plentiful land. For these and other reasons, colonial powers rarely implemented full-fledged liberalization. (In fact, the late Ottoman and Qing Empires, which were cautious but persistent about extending the sway of markets, were probably more successful in this respect than some European empires.)

The part of laissez-faire most firmly upheld in many empires was stinginess on the part of the state. The most notorious example was the near-total absence of relief during India's massive late-nineteenth-century famines. Growing trade may have raised aggregate income and lifted some boats; but more generally, the combination of minimal famine relief, incentives to export crops, new property rights that sometimes placed emergency 'wasteland' food sources off-limits, and new migration patterns that spread epidemics, made the late nineteenth century a particularly deadly era for much of the developing world – and guaranteed resistance to a narrowly liberal developmentalism.<sup>7</sup>

Efforts to increase raw materials exports often created enclaves, built and maintained in ways that kept costs low

7 See Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts* (London: Verso, 2001), for a harrowing account of the Indian episode and similar ones during the same period.

but hardly created market economies. Forced labor on infrastructure projects and some plantations continued into the 1940s in French Africa; such unpaid 'apprenticeships' were justified by the argument that the 'natives' were not yet self-disciplined enough to be motivated by wages.<sup>8</sup>

The Dutch Cultivation System, in which Javanese export crops were extracted as tribute with help from local elites, was officially abolished in 1870, but coerced labor continued in Java well into the 1880s. Mines and plantations often utilized immigrant workers isolated in barracks rather than paying local workers the family-supporting wages demanded by (and gradually conceded to) North Atlantic workers. Outside capital and skills often came from other colonies (for instance, in British Africa) rather than the metropole.

Where exported raw materials began to be locally processed, these infant industries were often undone by post-World War I protectionism. Thus, while gross output grew significantly in many colonies and semicolonies during the 1870–1914 trade boom, this dynamic would probably not have proved self-sustaining even if World War I had not intervened, and even if people had accepted the massive human costs of keeping social spending minimal.

A combination of circumstances elicited broader developmental efforts after 1900, and especially after World War I. Movements among the colonized often demanded basic public services. In the

8 Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt, and Rebecca Scott, "Introduction," and Cooper, "Conditions Analogous to Slavery," in Cooper, Holt, and Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Post-Emancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1–32, 107–149, develop this point – and the metaphor of apprenticeship in particular.

metropolises themselves, faith in government planning, rising liberal/Left political coalitions, and interest in colonies as social laboratories were all factors. But if a civilizing mission were to include building infrastructure, educating people, promoting public health, channeling investment, and buffering social dislocations, its costs would rise considerably. Moreover, by claiming as a mission's aim the need to transform the entire population, even in such intimate aspects of their lives as hygiene and marriage, modern empires undertook tasks at which they were particularly likely to fail, potentially raising embarrassing questions about their own superiority in the process. (By contrast, the Qing had backed off a campaign against Han Chinese footbinding in the late 1600s, allowing even their own women to adopt shoes that made their feet look bound.)

Meanwhile, the colonial development initiatives were mostly locally funded (as witness, for instance, the rapid post-1900 growth of India's public debt). This limited their scale, and usually meant relying on fiscal instruments available to states weak at the grassroots, including tariffs, monopolies, sin taxes, and price-fixing export control boards. These often had unfortunate social effects or imperiled other developmental efforts – for example, discouraging export production by taxing it. But once established, these measures frequently became the way for postindependence regimes to support themselves. (Opium monopolies, which provided anywhere from 15 to 50 percent of revenue in various colonies and protectorates,<sup>9</sup> were an exception, being so

9 For sample figures, see Carl Trocki, "Drugs, Taxes, and Chinese Capitalism," in Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, eds., *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 82; John Richards, "The Opium Indus-



strongly associated with national weakness that they rarely survived independence.)

Nonetheless, when developmental imperialism chose cost-effective projects – for example, vaccinations, sanitation, clean water, and basic literacy efforts – it could contribute significantly to human well-being. While life expectancy often stagnated or declined during early colonial rule, it generally improved near the end of it.<sup>10</sup> The empire that probably has the strongest claim to having laid firm foundations for its colonies' economic success – albeit often very coercively – is Japan, which conquered Taiwan, Korea, and southern Manchuria and took a very interventionist stance from the start, targeting entire populations for social, economic, and cultural change.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever its merits and demerits, this activism was short-lived, curtailed by the Depression and World War II. Twentieth-century enthusiasm for social engineering notwithstanding, empire was not supposed to cost metropolitan taxpayers money.

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try in British India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Special Issue: Essays in Memory of Dharma Kumar 39 (2, 3) (2002): 149 – 180. See especially charts 2 and 3.

10 See, for instance, Norman Owen, ed., *Death and Disease in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13 – 14, 82 – 84, 276 – 277; Leela Visaria and Pravin Visaria, "Population (1757 – 1947)," in Dharma Kumar and Tapan Raychaudhuri, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume 2: 1757 – 1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 471, 501 – 502.

11 The essays in Mark R. Peattie and Ramon H. Myers, eds., *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895 – 1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), are a good starting place; Samuel Ho's contribution on economic development is particularly useful.

Nor could developmentalism prevent growing nationalist movements from making empire increasingly costly, in blood as well as money. Once it became clear how difficult broad-gauged development would be – and that even activist tutelage would not guarantee lasting deference – most colonial powers quit. Cold War competition, which made the Soviet Union and the United States eager to create societies that could be attractive 'showcases' of either state socialist or capitalist development, sustained some nation building and development efforts into the 1970s, but these rarely approached what would have been needed to make the hoped-for transformations or to legitimate continued direct rule.

The forms of imperialism that flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries encompassed more than ruling colonies and long-term protectorates. Imperial powers often intervened militarily in formally independent states that committed or permitted 'uncivilized' acts: piracy on the North African coast, the Boxer Uprising in China, or occasional kidnappings of Westerners. The resulting invasions also claimed an educational purpose; the eight-power Boxer intervention, for instance, was supposed to teach China an unforgettably violent lesson about respecting 'civilized' norms.<sup>12</sup> But these were understood as short-term missions to redress 'outrages' and inflict instructive traumas, not as long-term developmental commitments. Certainly nobody expected development aid to follow the Boxer expedition; on the contrary, a huge indemnity was imposed, in part

12 James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

to reinforce the lesson. While in practice punitive excursions sometimes became lengthy occupations, in theory they were quite distinct.

Decolonization, however, muddled this distinction. On the one hand, surrendering sovereignty allowed metropolitan powers to limit their responsibility for development, even when they remained influential. On the other hand, the characteristically modern imperial idea that violating self-determination creates moral and economic obligations had become widely accepted. While many in the Bush administration quite likely wanted an Afghan war that resembled the Boxer expedition – an exemplary punishment for Western civilian deaths, followed by a relatively quick exit – this was not broadly acceptable. Even in a decolonized and post-Cold War world, imperial powers cannot completely abjure nation building – especially when failed states become potential terrorist bases.

Western developmental imperialism had parallels in Eurasia's great land-based empires both before and after the Russian and Chinese revolutions – empires where capital for such efforts was particularly scarce. As noted earlier, even Macaulay's quintessentially liberal "Minute on Education" shared several assumptions with Chinese agendas for civilizing conquered societies. Both assumed that there was one truly civilized way to live; that one could find an elite anywhere (if not necessarily the current elite) sufficiently rational to embrace that way of life; and that such an elite could then legitimately rule their society in accordance with universal (imperial) values. Macaulay's formulation suggests that once civilized, India's elite would rule its own country, while the Qing imagined civilized Miao being incorpo-

rated more fully into the empire – but this difference is not logically necessary, nor does it sharply divide East from West. The French envisioned incorporation rather than independence for civilized colonies, while the Chinese imagined their influence civilizing both separate tributary kingdoms (for example, Vietnam) and minority peoples within the empire.

But the breadth and depth of socioeconomic transformation imagined by late-nineteenth-century civilizing missions created new differences between capital-poor and capital-rich empires. While the correlation is not perfect, the capital-poor empires tended to be contiguous and land based, while the capital-rich ones were more often noncontiguous and maritime. Russians, Chinese, and, to some extent, Turks found the costs of developmental imperialism in their borderlands particularly challenging. But because no oceans separated their empires from their metropolises – nor did strong representative institutions sharply distinguish their core polity from their other domains – they also found it harder than Western Europeans to declare success and pull out. Moreover, the USSR and revolutionary China – even more than their Western rivals, who also invoked individual rights and religion – staked their legitimacy on a universally applicable formula for economic progress. Especially relative to the countries' resources, central government spending to develop Soviet Central Asia and the post-1949 Chinese Far West was quite impressive, though the results were much less so. (The same, of course, was often true of their investments at home.) And with other methods falling short, Russia and especially China often encouraged immigration to their borderlands – not just for basic labor power, but also to improve work skills, 'civi-

lization,’ and loyalty in ‘backward’ regions.

Thus China’s recently accelerated “Go West” initiative – aimed at both extracting raw materials and securing the region by raising living standards – has seen previous restrictions on Han immigration replaced by encouragements, and minorities’ exemptions from China’s “fewer, later, better” birth control policy rescinded. With state-led development for western China emphasizing natural resource production for sale to the semicapitalist, consumer-driven East, contemporary China has many features of imperial dualisms, with large differences in average wealth, the degree of local autonomy, the scope allowed to dissent, and the prominence of military priorities between core and periphery. It has some of the features of settler colonialism as well, with Han Chinese immigrants increasingly reshaping much of the landscape to their liking. Any ambivalence about exporting Han values (now including consumerism) to Central Asia seems gone, despite serious political and ecological risks.

Imperial Japan combined features of contiguous and overseas empires. Although water separated it from Korea, Taiwan, and southern Manchuria, Japan considered these close enough to be part of its metropole’s security zone – areas that had to be kept stable and in friendly hands at almost any price in order for the home islands to be secure. The low transport costs and ecological complementarity between Japan and these nearby colonies also facilitated plans for more thorough economic integration than was easily imagined for Europe and its tropical colonies. And early-twentieth-century Japan, though capital-poor relative to Western Europe, was less so than China and probably Russia. Finally, while the Japanese, like other colonial

masters, were quick to claim racial superiority over their colonial subjects, they also often asserted a racial solidarity that allowed their Asian subjects to join the ‘imperial race’; this differed sharply both from European assertions of unbridgeable difference from their subjects and from universalist assertions that anyone could be Europeanized. Japanese leaders and intellectuals always imagined their empire as regional, naturally suited to only some ‘backward’ peoples.

In this context, Japan pursued both cultural aggression (including, for instance, plans to eliminate the Korean language) and broad developmental efforts (which consumed over 40 percent of Taiwan’s colonial budget, versus miniscule amounts in most European colonies), mobilizing people and resources with an intensity more often found in independent mid-twentieth-century states that claimed a mandate to fundamentally transform their societies. Massive Japanese settlement in the colonies was also considered, though not much had been carried out by 1945. And since Japan’s empire ended with defeat in World War II rather than with defeat at the hands of anticolonial insurgents, we will never know how doggedly Tokyo would have resisted decolonization.

In recent decades, Western imperialism has moved in a different direction, weakening the link between empire and developmentalism. While this shift has been most starkly evident since Cold War competition for third-world clients ended, it seems to have originated in the 1970s when, roughly speaking, Portugal’s withdrawal from Africa and the ouster of the West from Indochina essentially completed decolonization.

Great powers continue to abridge the sovereignty of others, often by force or

threat of force. With American military bases in over 120 countries, we have hardly seen the end of empire. Like other modern empires, the United States today invokes a rationale of benevolent transformation, but the nature of the rationale has changed in recent decades. Defeat in Vietnam, stagflation, and political backlash reduced American interest in 'nation building' from the 1970s on; meanwhile, the structural adjustment policies increasingly favored over Keynesian development strategies mean that market-oriented advice has come to be considered more useful than material assistance.<sup>13</sup>

From the 1970s on, American geopolitical concerns shifted toward the Middle East, where some key client states had substantial wealth. Those that did not, such as Egypt, received economic aid that rarely aimed for more than stabilization, in contrast to the grander developmental plans of earlier decades for favored clients such as Taiwan, South Korea,<sup>14</sup> and (much less successfully) the Philippines. U.S. foreign economic

aid, which never reached its target levels, is down more than 25 percent since 1962; as a percentage of either GDP or the federal budget, it is down more than 80 percent.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, since the Mayaguez incident of 1975 (the first post-Vietnam use of U.S. troops abroad), most U.S. military interventions have been presented as one-time rescues or retaliation for uncivilized behavior (as in Grenada, Somalia, Panama, Haiti, etc., plus various bombings without ground troops), whatever additional motives there were. Even in tiny and highly literate Grenada, which earlier might have seemed an ideal place to create a postinvasion showcase, the United States undertook no substantial developmental program – and that was in 1983, when Cold War tensions were high. When the Soviet Bloc collapsed a few years later, U.S. policymakers became even less interested in concrete development assistance.

Some still argue that U.S. hegemony serves developmental and civilizing purposes. But rather than promising to transform any particular place through difficult 'nation building,' American policymakers now argue that U.S. power creates opportunities for any society to transform itself by underpinning a global order of security and free markets.

While the idea that underdevelopment breeds terrorism has been more salient since September 11, the U.S. commitment to an almost exclusively private-sector development model means that this has not led to much aid. Indeed, current American emphasis on privatization of basic services, on openness to

13 For a fascinating discussion of how Americans as far back as the 1890s misunderstood their own economic history in a way that made such an approach to development seem logical, see Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), and Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900 – 1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

14 From 1945 to 1984, South Korea and Taiwan received almost as much U.S. aid as all Africa and Latin America put together (Bruce Cumings, "The Origins and Development of the Northeast Asian Political Economy," *International Organizations* 38 [1] [1984]: 24). But as Taiwan and South Korea became more prosperous, the U.S. relationship with China stabilized, and oil imports became more critical (U.S. production peaked in 1970, and imports doubled in the next three years), American geopolitical concern shifted toward the Middle East.

15 Isaac Shapiro and Nancy Birdsall, "How Does the Proposed Level of Foreign Economic Aid Under the Bush Budget Compare with Historical Levels?" Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, <[www.cbpp.org/3-14-02foreignaid.htm](http://www.cbpp.org/3-14-02foreignaid.htm)>, accessed July 5, 2004.



foreign bidders, and on removing subsidies for basic goods (most recently water) is so unpopular that even a government that endorses these as long-term strategies is unlikely to want to implement them unless publicly forced to.

The downsizing of secular nationalist governments has also contributed to the rise of ethnoreligious mass movements that provide alternative services, from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the B.J.P. in India. Current U.S. development strategies are thus much harder to integrate into strategies for stable rule than were twentieth-century colonial development efforts or New Deal-influenced Cold War development efforts.

Moreover, as in the late nineteenth century, the invisible hand alone has had limited success. 'Free markets' have also notably excluded open borders for migrants and the elimination of subsidies for farmers in wealthy countries. Global income inequality has soared since 1973, and poverty reduction has been slight outside of China – which has relied on heavy state investment and other measures to stimulate its economy while shielding some of its more vulnerable sectors from foreign competition, thus violating the 'Washington consensus' in favor of growth strategies based on minimal government intervention and maximum openness to the global economy.<sup>16</sup>

As a result, the globalizing imperial vision the United States now pursues is quite different from earlier imperial visions, though proponents ranging

16 See Robert Hunter Wade, "The Rising Inequality of World Income Distribution," *Finance and Development* 38 (4) (December 2001). On numbers of people in poverty in 2001 versus 1981, see Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion, "How Have the World's Poor Fared Since the Early 1980s?" <<http://www.worldbank.org/research/povmonitor/index.htm>>, especially table 3, accessed July 8, 2004.

from Niall Ferguson to Deepak Lal, and critics such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi, have cast the United States as the latest in a succession of hegemonies guaranteeing a global order facilitating trade. But even the nineteenth-century Pax Britannica never involved comparable efforts to lay down global rules.<sup>17</sup> Britain promoted free trade within its empire, made bilateral agreements with a few countries – some freely negotiated, others products of gunboat diplomacy – and kept Britain's own markets open. But much of the world, including rapidly growing Germany, Russia, and the United States, was protectionist – certainly there was nothing remotely comparable to the World Trade Organization.

Britain's claims to upholding human rights were likewise more modest than the United States' rhetoric in recent decades, though using the Royal Navy in a sustained campaign against the slave trade may have actually done more than contemporary developed-world governments (as opposed to NGOs, the United Nations, and so on) can claim.<sup>18</sup> And

17 Patrick O'Brien, "The Governance of Globalization: The Political Economy of Anglo-American Hegemony, 1793 – 2003," CESifo Working Paper No. 1023 (Center for European Studies, University of Munich, and Ifo Institute for Economic Research), October 2003.

18 Parliament outlawed the slave trade within the British Empire in 1807 and authorized the Royal Navy to collect fines for slaves found on any British ship. In 1827, it declared participation in the slave trade to be a form of piracy punishable by death. At first, British action was limited to British ships and ports, but Britain gradually claimed the right to board other countries' ships as well. For British policy with respect to the Brazilian slave trade (the world's largest), see Leslie Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade: Britain, Brazil and the Slave Trade Question, 1807 – 1869* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).



today's vast archipelago of U.S. military bases policing access to raw materials far exceeds nineteenth-century British ambitions. Britain's imperium consisted of specific, albeit numerous, colonies and clients; the American imperial vision is much more global, and yet makes fewer commitments involving any particular place. While the United States has pressed the governments of other wealthy nations (which of course share a stake in stability, especially in the Middle East) to provide postwar aid in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq, it has provided very little such aid itself and has not offered much political influence in return for aid. And though private foundations, firms, and international organizations carry out many development projects, most have a distant relationship to the United States and other governments and often prefer it that way.

We thus have some multilateral development efforts, but they are separate from what is essentially a unilateral imperialism. As long as the United States keeps political power for itself, its retreat from hands-on 'nation building' will break the link between hegemony and the promise of development that was central in most other modern empires, and accelerate the widespread loss of hope that secular nation-states can both transcend ethnoreligious identifications and promote material progress. This gives the Bush administration's current imperial vision an oddly pre-Enlightenment cast: one that offers a particularly stingy understanding of development, subverts negotiated exchanges of assistance for the acceptance of hegemony, and inadvertently encourages violent efforts to escape empire altogether.

# 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.

But 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

1 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.

2 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 corporis*).<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

3 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.

*Imperialism,  
liberalism  
& the quest  
for perpetual  
peace*

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

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 credits 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.

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



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

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

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

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

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<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

9 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).

10 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

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.

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-

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

31 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. Inter-ethnic 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

32 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

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.

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.



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.

In countries with weak political institutions the transition to democracy carries

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

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.

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  
democratization*

# Robin Blackburn

## *Emancipation & empire, from Cromwell to Karl Rove*

‘Empire’ only became a dirty word in the twentieth century. Prior to this, educated Europeans and North Americans believed that while there were certainly bad empires (usually Eastern and despotic in character), there were also good empires – notably that of Rome, the cradle of Christian civilization and a model for enlightened later monarchies and republics. The Catholic Church always had an affinity with empire and saw even the heathen variety as providential if there was any chance of converting the ruler, as had happened with such prodigious consequences with Constantine in fourth-century Rome. Charlemagne, Frederic II, Charles V, Philip II, Louis XIV, Napoleon – all dreamt of reestablishing the universal empire. Republicans, too, admired the emancipatory vigor of the Roman Republic, seeing its imperial reach as proof of the special

virtue of this form of government, even as they worried about the danger that a republican empire could be undermined by its own successes and capsize (as Rome did) into militarism and monarchy.

Under the circumstances, it is not so surprising that the idea that there might be something wrong with empire caught on very slowly – a process worth reviewing in more detail.

The triple success of colonial rebels in the Americas (of the North American revolutionaries in 1776 – 1783, the Haitian revolutionaries in 1791 – 1804, and the Spanish American revolutionaries in 1810 – 1825) should have impressed on all thoughtful observers the vanity of empire, and for a time it did play a part in discouraging overseas expansion. The terms Jefferson used in 1811 to denounce European imperialism also stressed its absurdity:

What in short is the whole system of Europe towards America? One hemisphere of the earth, separated from the other by wide seas on both sides, having a different system of interests flowing from different climates, different soils, different productions, different modes of existence and its own local relations and duties, is made subservient to all the petty interests

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of the other, to their laws, their regulations, their passions and wars.

The implications were ironic, however. For Jefferson's anathema left open a path for the United States to further extend its own institutions in its own continent.

For much of the U.S. Republic's first one hundred and forty years, its leading statesmen would find it natural to talk of an American empire – an 'empire of liberty,' as it was sometimes called – and to see no tension between this and the revolutionary tradition of 1776. This was good republican empire, not bad monarchical empire. John Quincy Adams and Martin Van Buren opposed the unfolding of empire and the wars and displacements it involved, but this stance led them to defeat or isolation. The removal of Indians and the acquisition of territory were justified in the name of a 'manifest destiny' that would spread good order and good husbandry, prosperity and republican institutions.

Thus domestic disorder in Mexico in the 1840s was seen as a sufficient threat to warrant a wholesale military invasion and the seizure of extensive territory. Though the actions of statesmen – especially the Louisiana Purchase and the Mexican War – were decisively important to U.S. expansion in the nineteenth century, these could only be effective because they expressed the dynamic of a whole social formation, with its increasingly commercial farming and new manufacturing, its canals and railways, its slave plantations, and its celebration of liberty and race. When Spain and France acquired Louisiana by treaty, each could make nothing of it. Within a few decades of its acquisition by the United States it comprised eleven flourishing states. Empire was felt to be a projection of the republic's native virtues and, like the republic's, was rooted in revolution.

The victory of the North in the Civil War was a striking victory for republican empire, just as the defeat of the Confederacy was a defeat for the right of self-determination. The slave emancipation policy lent a needed idealistic dimension to the Union cause. Elsewhere in the Americas, attempts were made to construct monarchical empires – in Mexico (Iturbide, 1823 – 1824; Maximilian, 1863 – 1865), Haiti (Dessalines, 1804 – 1806; Soulouque, 1849 – 1859), and Brazil (Pedro I and II, 1821 – 1889). With the exception of the Brazilian Empire, which boasted many 'liberal' and parliamentary features, these attempts foundered quite quickly. The imperial idea fared better in the Old World: Napoleon III helped to unify Italy and was himself defeated by the formidable new German Empire. Russia consolidated a transcontinental empire even larger than that of the U.S. Republic.

Following the Berlin Africa Conference of 1884 – 1885, the European Great Powers carved up what was left of Africa and Asia. This was empire not simply as a monarchical style, but as a program of overseas territorial expansion and rule. The Europeans claimed they were acquiring colonies in order to stamp out the slave trade, to improve the condition of women, and to extend the benefits of free trade and civilization. The republics of Central and South America were spared outright colonization, but were still the objects of debt-collecting gunboat diplomacy. The United States had not claimed any prizes in the scramble for Africa – though it did support the Belgian king's claim to the Congo, citing his supposed abolitionist credentials.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the antislavery claims made by the European imperialists, the

1 Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999).

*Emancipation  
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spread of European rule in Africa in the late nineteenth century led to a horrendous expansion of slavery and forced labor in the newly acquired territories as the new rulers and their favored enterprises recruited labor for public works, plantations, and mines. While cynicism, racism, and cruelty contributed to this result, it was also brought on by colonial entrepreneurs whose efforts to recruit paid labor attracted little response. The Atlantic slave trade had created large-scale slave raiding and trading complexes. With its end, large numbers of slaves were available on the African market at low prices.

Still, attitudes toward empire were changing. The implicitly positive charge of the term was challenged around the turn of the century by three spectacles of colonial bloodletting: in 1895–1898, Spain sought to suppress a Cuban rebellion; in 1899–1902, Britain put down the Boer republics in South Africa; and in 1901–1904, the United States stamped out Filipino resistance to colonization. This moment witnessed the rise of an anti-imperial movement in the United States that attracted such illustrious supporters as Henry Adams and Mark Twain. In Britain there was radical and liberal opposition to the groundswell of imperial jingoism. J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism* elaborated a thoroughgoing critique of the new imperialism.

But in neither the United States nor the United Kingdom did the anti-imperial movement prevail: The British imposed their rule on the Boers. Washington clung on to the Philippines and Puerto Rico, extended its grip on Hawaii, established naval stations in the Pacific and Caribbean, and schemed to promote a canal in the Isthmus of Panama. The U.S. military occupation of Cuba ended in 1902 with the establishment of a Cuban republic, which was obliged, by the

terms of the Platt Amendment, to lease back Guantánamo and to accept a constitutional clause allowing for U.S. intervention if Washington deemed good order or U.S. property to be at risk. The nominal independence given to Cuba stemmed from the fact that the United States had supposedly gone to war to help the plucky Cubans in their valiant struggle to free their country. There was, indeed, some danger that the Cubans might revolt once again if denied the form of independence. Washington was also aware that the government and people of the war-devastated island would be more likely to be accommodating if treated with a little respect.

However, in the case of the Philippines and Puerto Rico, the openly imperial reflex triumphed, because President McKinley and Vice President Theodore Roosevelt believed that the United States could not stand aside from the global scramble for territory and coaling stations. Unlike Jefferson and Jackson, McKinley proposed overseas, not continental, acquisition: it was America's sacred duty to rule over its 'little brown brother.' The president famously claimed to a visiting delegation of Protestant pastors that he had gone down on his knees to the Almighty in his perplexity as to what to do – and then it came to him that the Philippines should not be given back to Spain, nor turned over to Germany or France, "our commercial rivals," but should rather be taken into American custody to "uplift and civilize and Christianize" its inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

The sanctimonious rhetoric of imperial statesmen was belied by the results of the new colonialism that included a huge loss of life among native peoples, as well as wholesale plunder and great cru-

2 Leon Wolff, *Little Brown Brother: How the United States Purchased and Pacified the Philippines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).



elty. Whether monarchical or republican, liberal or conservative, parliamentary or presidential, the new imperialism was based on racial oppression and economic exploitation. In this species of imperialism, the ownership of railways, loans, plantations, and mines were just as important as the control of territory, harbors, and coaling stations. Indeed, J. A. Hobson defined the new imperialism by its mobilization of extra-economic means to gain complex economic ends – its willingness to use gunboats or garrisons to secure supplies of tropical produce and scarce mineral deposits, to control overseas markets, and to guarantee the most secure investment conditions for the export of capital. It was this, rather than the seizure of territory, that defined the new capitalist imperialism.<sup>3</sup>

The British Empire drew great profit from plantations in the Americas, Africa, and the Far East; it balanced its international trade thanks to its grip on India; and it staked out strategic claims to oil in the Middle East. The British built railways and harbors but their aim was to facilitate the movement of grain and troops. While the troops were to deter native unrest, the grain was to move to where it could be sold. In Ireland and India, even in times of dearth, huge quantities of grain were sold to the metropolis, and thus were not available to feed the starving subjects of the Queen-Empress. Indian textiles enjoyed global primacy when the British arrived, but the commercial arrangements of the Raj rendered the entire subcontinent a captive market for English manufactur-

3 J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 71–109. Hobson's sharp attention to the "economic taproot of imperialism" is complemented by a vigorous discussion of the "moral and sentimental factors" mobilized by imperialist policy. See *Ibid.*, 196–222.

ers. In 1750, India produced 24.5 percent of global manufactures; by 1900 this number had sunk to 1.7 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The famines that brought many millions of deaths to India in 1876–1878 and 1896–1897 were not widely reported in Europe, where they were seen as unavoidable natural disasters. But while Britain was not responsible for the drought cycle, it was responsible for the agricultural and commercial policies that aggravated the impact of the dearth. Native irrigation systems were neglected, and, in deference to laissez-faire doctrines, huge quantities of wheat were sold for export to Britain. Some U.S. observers blamed these devastating events on British arrogance, thirst for revenue, and lack of concern for native peoples.

The Indian elite, upon whom British rule depended, protested the destruction of native manufacturing and the flaunting of racial privilege. When the Indian National Congress called for a boycott of British manufactures in 1905–1906, it was speaking for an anticolonial movement that was well organized, respectable, popular, and modern, at a time when the Raj, under Lord Curzon, was mounting such pseudo-feudal displays of vice-regal splendor as the Delhi Durbar.

During the same period, reports of pitiless repression and concentration camps in Spanish Cuba, British South Africa, and the U.S.-occupied Philippines in the years 1897–1903 showed that armies supposedly answerable to

4 See Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), especially 279–340; Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968); S. B. Saul, *Studies in British Overseas Trade, 1870–1914* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1960); B. R. Tomlinson, "Economics: The Periphery," in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

presidents and parliaments could act with great brutality. Imperial rivalries made it difficult to conceal news of atrocities. In the 1900s, the revelation of the terrible consequences of King Leopold's rule in the Congo, and of the extermination of indigenous peoples by German forces in southwest Africa, made a mockery of the claims of the powers that had met in Berlin two decades earlier. Indeed anyone who cared to look into the matter would discover that, since empire was everywhere plagued by a lack of legitimacy, colonial authorities would typically resort to naked violence when challenged. But in these cases the victims were 'colored' and seen as savages or heathens of the 'lower races.'

The Great War of 1914 – 1918 was different. It showed that the rival empires were also prepared to slaughter white Christians, and to do so on an industrial scale.

The carnage of World War I discredited the new imperialism in the eyes of many citizens of the belligerent states. It was also marked by nationalist stirrings in the colonial empires. In Russia, the Bolsheviks sought to make themselves the standard-bearers of the anti-imperial idea. They gained power in 1917 by insisting that Russia would withdraw from the war, and they kept their promise. Leon Trotsky, the first commissar for foreign affairs, published the secret treaties between France, Britain, and Russia that outlined their aim to dismember the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires.<sup>5</sup> President Wilson, notwithstanding his willingness to enter the conflict in alliance with the Entente Powers, saw the need to redefine the aims of the war. To the considerable discomfort of his new al-

5 Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879 – 1921* (London: Verso, 2003).

lies, he declared in early 1918 that the United States was aiming for a peace that would embody the self-determination of peoples.

Wilson's brandishing of the right of peoples to self-determination reflected an understanding of the power of nationalism and aimed to head off any revolutionary appropriation of the anti-imperial cause. As a Southerner, Wilson was keenly aware of the bitterness and resentment that could be provoked by alien occupation. He also sensed that the United States had no need of a territorial empire – a conclusion also belatedly reached by Theodore Roosevelt. The U.S. president was able to wield great leverage in 1918 – 1920 because of the utter exhaustion of Europe and the booming state of the U.S. economy. In the difficult year or two following the end of the war, the United States denied succor to those states that were reluctant to fall into line with its plans. Béla Kun's revolutionary government in Hungary was brought down by a food blockade and a Western-backed Romanian military intervention. Herbert Hoover, the 'Food Tsar,' saw it as his duty to prevent radical socialists from gaining strength in the German Revolution and to offer support only to moderates, even though they had earlier backed the war. Arno Mayer has shown that the arbitrating role of the United States in 1918 – 1919 stemmed not only from General Pershing's divisions, but also from the U.S. ability to orchestrate a blockade of Central Europe that threatened millions with starvation.<sup>6</sup>

But Wilson's hope that the United States would continue to exercise world leadership was not shared by Congress, which declined to ratify the League of

6 Arno Mayer, *The Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918 – 1919* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 3 – 30, 266 – 273, 510 – 514, 716 – 852.

Nations. The Treaty of Versailles dismembered the German and Ottoman Empires, chiefly to the advantage of Britain and France, though in deference to Wilsonian rhetoric the latter acquired 'trusteeships,' not colonies.

Wilson had sent a punitive expedition to Mexico in 1913, and his immediate successors routinely ordered U.S. Marines to occupy any Caribbean or Central American state whose government was deemed to be slacking in its duties to U.S. companies or creditors. Franklin Roosevelt believed there were better and more effective ways to promote U.S. interests. When the military strongman Fulgencio Batista put an end to Cuban revolutionary turmoil in 1933 – 1934, the U.S. government formally revoked the Platt Amendment while retaining the lease on Guantánamo. World War II and the Cold War were to consolidate the emergence of a de facto U.S. global empire based on financial and military power rather than territorial conquest. The expansion of Japan had swept Western colonialism out of Southeast Asia, its defeat opening the path for indigenous nationalism. But Washington had the resources to bid for leadership of the multiplying ranks of the United Nations.

The U.S. sway over the greater part of the world's peoples was embodied in the special role of the dollar, the structures of the IMF and World Bank, the power to open or deny access to the U.S. domestic market, the power of Wall Street and Hollywood, and, last but not least, the global network of alliances and military bases. From FDR onward, U.S. presidents once again took to decrying territorial colonialism and to proclaiming a Wilsonian faith in national self-determination. But the bases and alliances meant that there was still a territorial dimension to U.S. global ascendancy. While the United States refused to back

a crudely colonialist Anglo-French power play at Suez in 1956, it often contrived to integrate strategic assets that had previously been exploited by the former colonial powers.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 – 1991 boosted U.S. global power to new heights, prompting a redefinition and extension of the United States' informal empire. If the Soviet Bloc had crumbled almost bloodlessly, then it might have seemed rational to rely on the existing apparatus of sanctions and incentives, and the new alliance with Russia, against lesser threats. But the opportunity to act with less constraint could not be resisted. Both the elder Bush and Bill Clinton advanced the idea of a new world order led by the United States and structured by an expansion of the old system of alliances – in particular, a NATO that spread eastward, surrounding Russia. The new NATO, spurning help that Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe would willingly have furnished, took unilateral action against Serbia and was prepared to act out of theater.<sup>7</sup> According to Clinton's secretary of state Madeleine Albright, the United States was the "essential nation" because only it possessed decisive military might.

Those wishing to impress by their realism already spoke of a U.S. empire. But it was George W. Bush and his response to the 9/11 attack that gave the term 'empire' wide currency through the writings of Max Boot, Niall Ferguson, and Michael Ignatieff, who all supported the second Iraq war. Capitalizing on the global wave of sympathy elicited by 9/11,

<sup>7</sup> I explain my reasons for believing this, based in part on observations made by Gorbachev during a visit to Cambridge, England, in March of 1999, in Robin Blackburn, "Kosovo: The War of NATO Expansion," *New Left Review*, series 1, no. 235 (May/June 1999): 107 – 123.

the United States acted with needless unilateralism, first in Afghanistan, and then by seeking long-term advantage by establishing new bases in Central Asia. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a more brazen act of empire, responding to no direct aggression or threat. Washington rubbed salt in the wound by first soliciting UN help and then flouting a Security Council veto.

The new imperialists held that the UN Charter doctrine that one member state had no right to attack another was obsolete and dangerous in a world menaced by rogue states, failed states, terrorist networks, and proliferating weapons of mass destruction. A global gendarme, equipped with the power to intervene preemptively, was needed. Only the United States could play this role, and it could not allow others to determine its actions. Washington's willingness to overthrow governments and establish occupation authorities was saluted by some as the unveiling of a new empire. However, most of those who endorsed the Iraq war still shrank, as did the administration itself, from using the E word: 'Empire' was not a term that George W. Bush or Colin Powell wanted to use, for reasons I will explore later.

The recent turn to overt empire talk stems as much from frustration at the state of the planet as it does from the unprecedented power of the United States. The misery of Africa and the dismal condition of the Middle East and of parts of South Asia and Latin America generate frustration and despair among bien-pensant observers of every description. Neocon advocates of the big stick acquire liberal allies who also believe that the answer is for the world's most powerful state to lead and to take matters into its own hands. The often deeply disappointing results of decolonization

lead to a revisionism that forgets why colonialism was discredited in the first place. Niall Ferguson made himself an outstanding exponent of this revisionism with the publication of *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* in 2003 and *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* in 2004.

Ferguson is to be commended for calling empire by its name, and for not shrinking from spelling out its logical corollaries. His message is that Britain did much to invent capitalism and, with it, the most valuable ideas and institutions of the modern world – the English language, private property, the rule of law, parliamentary institutions, individual freedom, and Protestant Christianity. This British self-regard easily segues into endorsement for American national messianism, with the Anglo-American imperial formula (handily termed 'Anglobalization') offering the colonized the best hope of capitalist success. As a historian of the English-speaking peoples, Ferguson seeks to rescue Winston Churchill's narrative from its contemporary fate – that of being entombed in countless forbidding leather-bound volumes. He offers a pacier narrative, garnished with excellent quotes from the great man and many shafts of his own droll wit (his one-liners are too reliant on puns to be fully Churchillian).

Still, Ferguson's subtitle to *Empire* – "How Britain Made the Modern World" – should have given him some pause, considering the sad state of our world. Many of the most intractable and bloody communal divisions we live with today were fostered, if not invented, by Britain's imperial policy of divide and rule. Any list of the world's most dangerous and difficult communal conflicts would include the standoff between Pakistan and India and the Arab/Israeli clash. The partition of Cyprus, the still unresolved

conflict in Northern Ireland, and the deep racial tensions in Guyana and Fiji would also figure in such a list. In the postapartheid era, the racial legacy of empire and colonization is being gradually dismantled in South Africa, but problems remain in many other parts of Africa.

Ferguson urges that ethnic sentiment and division long preceded colonization. He rightly observes that expatriate colonizers were often the driving force behind injurious racial privileges and distinctions. Yet liberal imperial strategists from Locke to Gladstone went along with colonial racism because that is what empire was based on. Nor does Ferguson register the fondness of imperial administrators for cultivating the so-called martial races at the expense of other colonial subjects; or the deliberate fostering of poisonous divisions – between Muslims and Hindus in India, Jews and Arabs in Palestine, Turks and Greeks in Cyprus, Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, Indians and natives in Fiji, blacks and (east) Indians in British Guyana. The communal fault lines were not always of the imperial administrators' making, but those administrators nevertheless have much to answer for – after all, they were in charge. (Likewise, today's neo-imperialists are partly responsible for aggravating communal divisions in the Balkans and Iraq.)

Today the division of the world between rich and poor regions roughly follows the former division between imperial and colonized areas, even though it has sometimes been partially counteracted or qualified by resistance to empire, or by prior institutional or natural endowments. The colonial experience weakened the ability of the colonized to negotiate an advantageous relationship to the emerging capitalist world market and often condemned them to subordi-

nation and neglect. Ferguson cites the disappointing performance of most ex-colonies as part of his case for empire, when it would be more logical to conclude that the empires did not, in fact, really equip the colonized with survival skills. The poor record of Britain's former African colonies leads him to plead that "even the best institutions work less well in landlocked, excessively hot or disease-ridden places."<sup>8</sup> He concedes that, at 0.12 percent, India's overall annual rate of growth between 1820 and 1950 was pitifully low, but he won't hold selfish imperial arrangements responsible because "[t]he supposed 'drain' of capital from India to Britain turns out to have been surprisingly modest: only 1 percent of Indian national income between the 1860s and the 1930s, according to one estimate of the export surplus."<sup>9</sup> But obviously a country growing at only 0.12 percent a year would have had many good uses for that lost 1 percent of national income. Ferguson himself points out that in 1913, Britain's school enrollment rate was eight times that of India's.

Empires did not invent the uneven development of capitalism, but, having inherited or established a hierarchical structure of advantage, they reinforced it. For example, plantation slavery certainly brought great wealth to some in the plantation colonies and states. But it did not generate sustained and independent growth in the plantation zone, as the postemancipation experience of the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and the Brazilian northeast testify. Empires tended to encourage only those infrastructure improvements that facilitated the movement of troops and the export

8 Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 197.

9 *Ibid.*, 195.



of commodities. In the process that Davis calls “the origins of the third world,” Western incursions into China from the Opium War onward weakened the Qing authorities and prevented them from maintaining the country’s vital system of hydraulic defenses. With its customs service run by a consortium of foreign powers, China suffered a deindustrialization almost as severe as that of India.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, Ferguson’s neoliberal agenda and British focus lead him to miss the way that non-Anglo-Saxon empires promoted economic integration and coordination by nonmarket means. In an off-the-cuff remark explaining “why it was that Britain was able to overhaul her Iberian rivals,” he fails to explain the source of Spanish wealth, but says that Britain “had to settle for colonizing the unpromising wastes of Virginia and New England, rather than the eminently lootable cities of Mexico and Peru.”<sup>11</sup> Both the Spanish and the British certainly looted American silver and gold. But Ferguson does not explain how this Spanish, rival species of empire worked, and seems to regard it as economically less impressive than the record of British settlement. Spanish administrators were, in fact, innovators who mainly relied on wage labor to mine and process the silver ore. In place of simple ‘looting’ they adopted a tribute system, echoing Inca and Aztec arrangements that required the native villages to supply either labor or foodstuffs and textiles to the royal warehouses. The king claimed a royalty of a fifth of the silver mined. But he garnered much more by selling mining concessions and the tribute food and clothing in his warehouses

10 Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 279–310.

11 Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 369.

to the miners. It was this ingenious system, not looting, that sustained a highly productive network of exploitation for nearly three centuries. This is just one example of the productive organization promoted by Iberian imperialism that explains why the Mexican and Peruvian elite were so reluctant to break with empire. But with Spanish American independence, all such coordination ceased, and entry into Britain’s informal empire of free trade led to economic stagnation or regression.

Empires could promote a limited and usually self-interested species of colonial development. Often, as today, the imperial impulse stemmed from overweening confidence and a missionary impulse as much as from a sober calculation of material gain. When empires spread, they did so partly because they could, partly because they engaged in a rivalrous multistate system, and partly because, in metropolitan regions where capitalism was taking hold, consumers wanted colonial products. Starting with the Portuguese, the European maritime empires entered the lists partly because they saw an advantage they did not want to yield to others, and partly because those newly in receipt of rents, fees, profits, and wages had a thirst for exotic commodities.

But there was still another more paradoxical and perplexing factor. This was the role that revolutionary changes within the metropolitan societies played in boosting the impulse to empire. Since Ferguson does not much address the connection between the domestic and overseas articulation of power, it will be necessary to pursue the argument without his help.

There have been at once real and fantastic connections between empire and revolution. The real connection is that

societies that had been internally transformed by revolution thereby acquired social capacities that made economic, cultural, and territorial expansion possible. But the fantastic connection was just as important, in that a deluded revolutionary conceit dreamt that empire might elevate and redeem otherwise benighted, recalcitrant native peoples. Such notions as the elect nation, the New Zion, and the republic 'one and indivisible,' prepared the ground for the 'Anglo-Saxon race,' jingoism, and chauvinism.

In areas where the native peoples were largely wiped out by settlers and disease, as in North America and Australia, something approaching the replication of the metropolis – or of those elements of the metropolis that were compatible with modernity – was achieved. The land was appropriated in a way that echoed Europe's own social arrangements as they had been shaped by the neolithic revolution, the Roman Empire, the territorial expansion of Christendom, and the rise of commercial society in England. The relationship of settlers to the land was defined by displacement of the original inhabitants, deforestation, exhaustive exploitation, and absolute property rights.<sup>12</sup> The resulting transformations nourished the mistaken idea that the metropolis in other areas as well would eventually transform the colonized into replicas of the colonizers, namely, self-governing, individualist Anglo-Saxons.<sup>13</sup>

12 See Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900 – 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe, 950 – 1350* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

13 See Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-*

The rise of the absolutist states had been based on the defeat of rebellious peasants and independent towns, on a military and administrative revolution, and on the raising of sufficient revenue and credit to pay for this. Absolutist monarchs embodied an administrative transformation and sociopolitical formula that easily carried over into empire.<sup>14</sup> Despite setbacks and reversals, England's Tudors and Stuarts emulated enough of this to make a contribution to the imperial organization of the British state. When clerics beholden to Henry VIII first spoke of a 'British Empire,' the term certainly gestured at a wish to rule the whole of the British Isles. But the charge of the term 'empire' was also theological and political. It was a declaration of independence from the pope, and an insistence that the ruler of Britain had direct access to the Almighty – a foible more forgivable in a sixteenth-century monarch than in George W. Bush.

While several British monarchs, notably James II, made a contribution to the foundations of empire, the real substance came from elsewhere. England's new merchants of the mid-seventeenth century took their cue from Dutch businessmen, not the Spanish kings. They were interested in catering to mass consumption, not in supplying the court or aristocracy with rare silks and fine wines. Both the civil war of the 1640s and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 carried forward a fateful link between domestic transformation and overseas expansion.<sup>15</sup> As in nineteenth-century

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*Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

14 Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: N.L.B., 1974).

15 Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and Lon-*

America, military victories and diplomatic treaties could only lead to permanent results where the ground had already been prepared by pioneering settlers and entrepreneurial merchants. This explains the very different fates of England's seventeenth-century acquisitions of Virginia and Algeria: while the former became a self-financing tobacco plantation, the latter had to be abandoned as a costly encumbrance.

The colonial impulse fed on the notion that native barbarism and backwardness demanded civilized intervention. The colonial mission was a transformative one. Indeed, the nature of modern empire, with its commercial impulses, cannot be grasped unless its relationship to revolution – real and surrogate – is understood. The process classically known as the 'bourgeois revolution' – and the tremendous boost it gave to the polities it transformed – helps us to identify one of the dynamic components of modern imperialism, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century and beyond, or, if you can forgive the bathos, from Cromwell to Karl Rove (on whom more below). If colonialism had a partly revolutionary impulse, it also invariably marked the limits of the transformative power of revolution, the geographical and social spaces that the bourgeois revolution could not penetrate.

The Dutch war of independence against Spain could not be confined to the Low Countries and eventually encompassed an attempt to take on, and take over, Iberian imperial strong points in the Americas and Africa. Grotius's *Mare Liberum* was both a cry of Dutch defiance and a charter of commercial expansion. The Dutch East and West India Companies established a global

network of trading posts and colonies. But the disinclination of many Dutch to emigrate and the vulnerability of the Dutch state in Europe led to the loss of Dutch Brazil and North America. The English Puritans who had opposed the Stuarts did so in the name of a more aggressive policy against Spain in the New World. The Commonwealth period in Britain organized a new navy, checked Dutch power, and confronted Spain. It gave birth to the 'Western Design,' the capture of Jamaica, and the first version of the empire-fostering Navigation Acts. British colonial rule in Ireland was extended and reinforced. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 confirmed the imperial orientation and scope of the British state.

The American Declaration of Independence in 1776 certainly enunciated momentous principles of self-determination but, as we have seen, these soon spilled over into the project of a new empire. The Continental Congress, the Northwest Ordinance, and the Louisiana Purchase all bear witness to the imperial urge of many of America's Founding Fathers, their wish to expand their sway over all North America. Long before the French Republic was transformed into Napoleon's empire, the revolutionary Convention, by hurling itself against the old order in both Europe and the Caribbean, enunciated some of the themes of an 'emancipatory' empire radiating from the republic 'one and indivisible.' In each of these cases there were countercurrents that saw the urge to empire as a betrayal of the true ideals of the revolution – but the countercurrents did not prevail.

These revolutions did much to shape the world in which we live. But their best results were at home, not overseas. They could export goods much more easily than social arrangements. The

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*don's Overseas Traders, 1550 – 1653* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Dutch intensified an odious slave traffic, while the English Puritans resorted to barbaric reprisals against the stubbornly Catholic and alien Irish. The Americans repeatedly failed to turn Indians into 'Americans' and instead sought to remove or extirpate them. Following the Civil War, America's 'Second Revolution,' the North failed to modernize the South and instead allowed it to remain for a century in the grip of Jim Crow, landlordism, and rapacious supply merchants. Under pressure from a tenacious slave uprising in Saint-Domingue, the French enacted the first comprehensive emancipation in 1794, but within less than a decade Napoleon's forces were trying to reintroduce slavery.

In 1848 and 1871 Europe was again haunted by the specter of revolution. In the wake of the suppression of revolutionary movements, the governments of France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy turned to a new wave of colonial expansion, partly in the hope that it would furnish an outlet for those who were discontented, and partly to display the potency of newly established polities – the French Third Republic, newly reunited Italy and Germany – but overseas these newly constitutional states resorted to a grim repertoire of land clearances, forced labor, racial privilege, and, where resistance was encountered, native extermination.

The national historiography of empire stresses each state's unique features and destiny. In reality the different empires ceaselessly borrowed from one another. The Spanish borrowed from the Incas and Aztecs, drawing on their tribute systems to extract silver, textiles, and foodstuffs in the Andes and Central America. The Portuguese learned from local merchants how to trade slaves along the African coast and drew on this trade to establish sugar plantations. The Dutch

improved on Iberian seamanship and trading; they also passed on expertise to English and French planters and merchants. The English refined and developed their own slave plantations and colonial system while the French brought to both a new pitch of intensity. The colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was even more imitative and reflexive, with each power trying to preempt the other. The United States was drawn into colonial acquisition in part because it believed that it had to have its own coaling stations and secure territory in the Caribbean and Pacific to compete with European rivals. Most of today's far-flung U.S. military outposts are relics of bygone battles with bygone empires. The imperial practices that prevailed were those that inspired imitation and stood the test of time – which often meant the tests of war, revolution, and economic competition.

The retreat of empire was often impelled by genuine national and social revolutions that trumped the phony imperial variety – as in China, Cuba, Algeria, and Vietnam. However, none of the European empires collapsed simply from internal resistance. The two world wars were watershed events, rendering the European empires very vulnerable. But there was one empire – the Soviet – of which this was less true. While it was obviously weakened by economic failure and the strain of Afghanistan, it was also undermined by its relative success in fostering nation-states. Stalin's rise at the expense of Bolshevik internationalism, and the Red Army's advances in the Great Patriotic War, seemed simply to boost the old Russian Empire, albeit in Communist disguise. Yet the Soviet constitution entrenched a right of secession to its constituent republics, while the autarchic economy nourished a species of

nation building. In Eastern Europe, where Yalta brutally aligned national groups with new borders, the “people’s democracies” were allotted the trappings of sovereignty, and Moscow’s often heavy-handed tutelage nourished a countervailing nationalism.<sup>16</sup> The peaceful breakup of the Soviet empire was owed partly to the strength of such processes, partly to Gorbachev’s idealism, and partly to the Russian people’s disinclination to defend an empire that brought more burdens than privileges. No other empire yielded with such readiness.

Today the major international question is whether, for a similar mixture of motives, the people and government of the United States can also be induced to give up empire.

The optimist must hope that a similarly mild quietus can be administered to the new imperialism. While the new lurch to empire will certainly join the heap of discards sooner or later, there are many in U.S. ruling circles who still cannot read the writing on the wall, even though that wall is in the land of ancient Babylon. Their dream is that neoliberalism, with its market fundamentalism, and neoconservatism, with its jingoism and Old Testament certainties, can impose on the whole world what Ferguson calls Anglobalization.

In the aftermath of twentieth-century decolonization and the breakup of the Soviet Bloc, some neoconservatives and liberal imperialists got a frisson from rehabilitating the ‘politically incorrect’ language of empire. It underlines the hard-headedness and candor of those who use it and allows them to urge even

16 Ronald Suny, “Incomplete Revolution: National Movements and the Collapse of the Soviet Empire,” *New Left Review*, series 1, no. 189 (September/October 1991): 111 – 125.

greater boldness on Washington. But if we scan the speeches of George W. Bush or the National Security Document of September of 2002, we find a repeated invocation of the need for ‘liberation,’ understood not just as national independence but as a further commitment to what the president called “democratic revolution” in his speech at the Banqueting Hall, London, in November of 2003. Given that he was the guest of the English monarch, it is understandable that he did not remind his listeners of the Banqueting Hall’s previous rendezvous with history – the execution of Charles I – but he did declare that the time for alliance with absolutist monarchs and dictatorships in the Middle East was over.

The echo of revolution may be no more than rhetoric, but it would be wrong to neglect it just the same. It allowed Bush and Blair to sell their subsequent war, at least for a while, to their electorates and to some sectors of liberal opinion. When the charge that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD was discredited, it was the subsidiary claim that regime change would open the way to democracy in the Middle East that took its place.

Bush’s address to the United Nations in September of 2004, in the midst of the presidential election, returned to the theme that the U.S. mission was to advance liberation, rights, and democracy. By contrast, John Kerry, the Democratic contender, urged that ‘stability,’ not democracy, was the best that could be hoped for in Iraq. While President Bush appealed to a naive but idealistic belief among voters that their country could and would promote democracy, Kerry implicitly favored the argument from realpolitik and a deal with the strongmen who run so much of the Arab world. In their different ways, both poli-



cies were imperial: they were based on the idea that Iraq should be occupied for years to come, with the occupier determining the scope of the country's politics. Prior to its departure in June of 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) had dismantled much of the apparatus of the Iraqi state, with dire consequences for the delivery of basic public services. It had seized and spent oil revenues and had handed out large contracts to foreign, mainly U.S., firms. Resistance from Shiite leaders obliged the CPA to abandon an attempt to entrench in Iraq's basic law the wholesale privatization of national property. These leaders also insisted that the date for elections be brought forward. The CPA, and the caretaker government led by Allawi that it appointed, chose to prepare for elections by attempting to silence or arrest critics of the occupation. Allawi's party received less than an eighth of the total votes.

Karl Rove, George W. Bush's chief political strategist, has said that the book that most influenced him as a graduate student was Eric Foner's classic study of the origins and rise of the Republican ideology in the 1840s and 1850s, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*. There can be little doubt that Bush sees himself as the man ordained to complete the neoconservative revolution of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and to bring it home to the 'axis of evil' and to any other countries that stand in the way (China, Vietnam, Cuba, and Venezuela being candidates here). The vision is both an imperial and a revolutionary one, since it seeks to reshape the whole social formation of target countries. That vision seeks to dismantle the local state and to entrust its essential functions to foreign corporations linked to the military-industrial, and as Abu Ghraib made clear, prison-industrial

complexes.<sup>17</sup> The whole awkward structure is to be guaranteed, as Chalmers Johnson stresses, by a multiplication of military bases in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.<sup>18</sup> Once acquired, such dubious assets are difficult to give up, further swelling the hugely expensive, provocative – and ultimately indefensible – global U.S. military establishment.

The emphasis that Niall Ferguson places on the imperial export of a neo-liberal institutional package places him squarely in the camp of those who believe that democratic revolution can be introduced from outside.

Ferguson believed that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the occupation of Iraq would help bring Middle Eastern terrorism under control – he still argues this as justification for the war in his book *Colossus*. But instead of wiping out those he calls Islamo-Bolsheviks, the occupation has given them perfect conditions for jihadist mayhem. This is extremely unwelcome to most Iraqi nationalists and to the long-oppressed Shia majority. But since the continuing occupation furnishes an excuse to the jihadists, it is unrealistic to expect Iraqis to rally round the occupiers. Large numbers of Iraqis who loathed Saddam have nevertheless come out in opposition to

17 Tariq Ali, *Bush in Babylon*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2004). For the "prison industrial complex," see Loic Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *New Left Review*, series 2, no. 13 (January/February 2002): 41–60. While contemporary imperial thinking denies the state a social role, it still needs to foster a global network of states strong enough to enforce property rights and trading conditions; see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Empire of Capital* (London: Verso, 2003), 138–169.

18 Chalmers A. Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

the occupation. The second anniversary of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April of 2005 was marked by a demonstration of 300,000 people in Baghdad calling for the withdrawal of all occupying forces. So far as the scourge of terrorism is concerned, the U.S. presence is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Only a government fully representative of Iraqi opinion and beholden to no outside power – especially a power interested in Iraqi assets – can hope to defeat the jihadists. The jihadists are neither numerous nor popular, but they can only be isolated by an unimpeachably Iraqi government. A government that cannot secure the withdrawal of the occupying powers and the closing of their bases will lack legitimacy.

The old empires eventually yielded to, or preempted, a rising tide of nationalism. The agitations of the Irish and the Indians, the pitched battles fought by Vietnamese and Algerians, the need to crush rebels in Malaya and Kenya – all prompted the metropolitan elite to undertake a rigorous cost-benefit analysis and to explore decolonization as a new form of indirect rule. While particular colonial ventures could be very profitable (I have given examples above), the costs tended to rise as other empires sought to enter the field, acting as competitors or spoilers.

As the British found out as early as the 1780s, decolonization did not need to be an economic disaster. In fact, Anglo-American exchanges soon boomed. After World War II, Western Europe discovered extraordinary prosperity as it shed colonies. There is a message here for the United States today. Those who really believe in market forces should conclude that it makes no sense to secure control of oil-producing states at great cost, since, in the end, the oil will

have to be purchased and sold at market prices. If there are energy shortages in store, then fuel efficiency will be cheaper in the long run than expeditions that require a down payment of \$200 billion, followed by heavy running costs.

The new imperialism is a very much more flimsy entity than the old. The sad condition of Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia – plagued by differing combinations of insecurity, communalism, lack of legitimacy, drug trafficking, and warlordism – is no advertisement for it. Few will be happy to pay a price in blood and money to achieve such results. There are no problems that the United States should expect to be able to solve by flexing its military muscles. China and India must soon be recognized as Great Powers, and Brazil and Iran as worthy of a place at the top table. Bullying these countries would be folly, just as it is perilous and provocative to encircle China and Russia with bases. Eventually, it must be hoped, the United States will acquire a president who will understand and see the advantages of a less exposed and overweening stance. Withdrawal from all overseas bases would be a good start.

The neo-imperial project may well help to destabilize the old order without achieving its own goals. We can be quite sure that indigenous democratic revolutions will sweep the Arab lands, Iran, and China. They will arise sooner rather than later, and advance notions of liberty without any ‘Made in USA’ label. The overwhelming case for homegrown democracy does not mean that each state and people should simply be allowed to sink or swim. Today states are ceaselessly, if often ineffectively, coerced into approved capitalist behavior, including a wholesale downsizing of social provision. Ferguson believes that public entitlements should be drastically slashed in

the United States as well as in developing countries. He rightly insists that the citizens of the United States must choose between empire and Social Security and Medicare – or, as this option used to be phrased, between ‘guns’ and ‘butter.’ But he is wrong to argue that it is ‘guns’ that should be preferred.

A just international order remains to be built. While it, too, would require the more advanced countries to make a contribution, it would seek to stimulate sustainable growth. It would require a fundamental reshaping of world institutions that function simply as relays for the Washington–Wall Street consensus.<sup>19</sup> It would also require a willingness to seek out the ways in which transnational banks and corporations might be obliged to contribute to badly needed expenditures on education, infrastructure, and social insurance.<sup>20</sup> These are problems that do not even appear on the radar screen of the new imperialists – something which sets them apart from their classical Anglo-Saxon forebears, from Joseph Chamberlain to Winston Churchill and from Teddy Roosevelt to FDR. A century or more ago the combination of imperialism and social reform proved to be rather effective. The formula of ‘imperialism and social counterrevolution’ is unlikely to have the same appeal.

Ferguson is not unaware of the problem of the ineffectiveness and weakness of too many states in the modern world, but he does not see that ever-larger doses of imperial intervention and free-market

philosophy will make the problem worse. What is required is institutional innovation and a democratic, new ‘cosmopolitics’ that nourishes the social and economic capacities of its constituent states.

*Emancipation  
& empire,  
from  
Cromwell to  
Karl Rove*

19 For a debate on what this might entail, see Danielle Archibugi, ed., *Cosmopolitics* (London: Verso, 2004).

20 I have some suggestions as to how that might be done in “The Pension Gap and How to Meet It,” *Challenge* (July/August 2004): 99 – 112.

## *The Ottoman experience*

When those states which have been acquired are accustomed to live at liberty under their own laws, there are three ways of holding them. The first is to despoil them; the second is to go and live there in person; the third is to allow them to live under their own laws, taking tribute of them and creating within the country a government composed of a few who will keep it friendly to you.

– Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532

Toward the end of the fifteenth century, an Ottoman scribe named Bali was charged with surveying the newly acquired island of Limnos in the northern Aegean. The Ottoman treasury needed to know what sorts of revenues the island could be expected to provide. Bali

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went out of his way to explain the animal husbandry practices of the peasants so that the treasury would understand his calculation of the sheep tax:

because the climate of the island is temperate and is not excessively cold, they apparently are not accustomed to separating their rams from their ewes. For this reason their lambs are not particular to one season. Were they to be counted along with the sheep it would cause the peasants some distress; because they were desirous of and agreed to give 1 *akçe* per head of sheep, their lambs were not counted with them. It was recorded that only their sheep be counted, and that 1 *akçe* be given per head of sheep.<sup>1</sup>

It is an arresting image: an Ottoman scribe, pen in hand, listens patiently to the inhabitants' explanations and then copies their words into the imperial survey that will find its way to the palace in Istanbul. But it is more than an image. This detail from the 1490 survey of the island of Limnos is an early example of what would prove to be an enduring imperial style that had two essential, and closely related, features.

First, the empire possessed an extraordinary ability to find those few local residents who were willing and able to keep

<sup>1</sup> Heath W. Lowry, *Fifteenth Century Ottoman Realities: Christian Peasant Life on the Aegean Island of Limnos* (Istanbul: Eren, 2002), 109.

vast territories friendly to the House of Osman. Second, the Ottoman imperial administration had an uncanny knack for going into a newly conquered area and figuring out how things were done there. Having read the local landscape, it would adjust imperial rule accordingly.

In short, the extraordinary sensitivity of the Ottoman elite to local conditions allowed them to build an empire across three continents that endured for many centuries.

The Ottomans first emerge on the historical stage at the very end of the thirteenth century. In the royal myth, the dynasty stretches much further back, of course, but it was only under the leadership of Osman (1299 – 1326) that this small group of warriors managed to move out from its base in northwestern Anatolia and start conquering territory.<sup>2</sup> Their first significant victories occurred in the Balkans, and these conquests allowed them to return to western Anatolia flush with men and money. By the middle of the fifteenth century they had surrounded the Byzantine capital Constantinople. Their capture of the great city in 1453 marked the beginning of the imperial phase of Ottoman history.

Over the course of the next century they pushed steadily eastward and then southward. First they defeated the remaining Turkish principalities in Anatolia and then, in 1516 and 1517, they conquered the heartlands of the Islamic world – Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. With these latter-day conquests they could now claim leadership of the Islamic world. The empire reached its greatest territorial extent under Suleyman (1520 – 1566), who conquered Hungary in the north (1526), Iraq in the east (1534), and

<sup>2</sup> It is Osman who gave the dynasty its name – the Osmanli, or followers of Osman. ‘Osmanli’ became ‘Ottoman’ to European observers.

North Africa in the west – the last in a series of incremental gains dating from the earlier part of his reign.

Except for the loss of Hungary at the end of the seventeenth century, the territory of the empire remained relatively stable until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Serbian (1804) and Greek (1821) insurrections were the beginning of what proved to be an unstoppable hemorrhaging of territory in the empire’s European heartland. A combination of nationalist aspirations and Great Power interference led to the end of the Ottoman Empire in Europe by the eve of World War I. The Ottoman entry into the war on the German side had fatal consequences for the survival of what remained of the empire. The victorious British and French armies took over the Middle East and carved it up into colonies, although these were called ‘mandates’ in deference to rising anti-colonialist sentiment. Anatolia, which was all that remained, was also in danger of being parceled out to various contenders. It was only the unexpected military resistance of a group of disaffected Ottoman army officers – led by the remarkable Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk – that saved the day.

But Kemal was not interested in saving the empire. Rather, he wanted to create a modern state that would replace a defeated empire whose leaders had proved unable to fashion a response to European imperialism. Thus it was a Turk, ironically enough, who brought about the end of the Ottoman Empire. Under Atatürk’s leadership, the Grand National Assembly abolished the sultanate in 1922 and declared the new Republic of Turkey in 1923.

In 1490, when Bali wrote to Istanbul about Limniot practices of animal husbandry, the Ottoman army was plowing



through the Balkan Peninsula, subduing one city after another in rapid succession. The army would soon do the same in Anatolia and the Arab lands. Naturally enough, then, it is the janissary, and not the scribe, who figures prominently in conventional depictions of the empire during the golden age of conquest.

The janissary, with his crashing cymbals as he marched onto the battlefield, was the terror of Christendom. Compared to European military forces, the janissary corps was famously disciplined; it was said that when janissaries bowed their heads at the same time, they resembled a field of ripe corn rippling in the breeze. The janissary seemed to embody everything that was believed – and to a great extent is still believed – to account for the greatness of the Ottomans in their prime in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Plucked from his (Christian) mother's breast at a young age, he proved the sultan's ability to reach down into society and remake individuals at will. Once trained, the janissary was believed to possess unsurpassed martial virtue. At the same time, he, like the rest of the Ottoman bureaucracy, gave the sultan absolute obedience. The end result has often been described as a perfectly ordered machine.

It is not surprising that war and conquest, rather than the more mundane activities of scribes, are still at the center of our view of the Ottomans. We are the inheritors of a long tradition of European writings on the empire, and the Europeans wrote with their own concerns in mind. The Ottomans were *the* threat to European civilization. "This most powerful emperor's forces are of two kinds, those of the sea and those of the land and both are terrifying," wrote a Venetian diplomat in 1573.<sup>3</sup> The Ottomans

3 Lucette Valensi, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 28.

were the first state to maintain a standing army in Europe since Roman days, and this impressed the Europeans to no end. The Byzantine Chalcocondyle marveled that "there is no prince who has his armies and camps in better order, both in abundance of victuals and in the beautiful order they use in encamping without any confusion or embarrassment."<sup>4</sup>

But an undue emphasis on the Ottoman war machine has deflected our attention from an appreciation of how the Ottomans actually ruled their vast territories for over six hundred years. Military conquest created the empire, but it did not, and could not, sustain it. For that the Ottomans needed scribes, not janissaries. Limnos is one of the earliest examples of an imperial style that relied heavily on local people to run things for Istanbul. This example undermines the view that the empire was administered by a central bureaucracy whose dictates were enforced by military power.

Limnos was contested territory on the edge of the Ottoman Empire in 1490. Over the previous half century, the island had gone back and forth between Latin and Ottoman rule; the most recent exchange dated back only a decade to when the Venetians surrendered the island to Sultan Beyazit II. Yet a mere nineteen janissaries garrisoned the island (a number of them, recent converts to Islam, spoke Greek). The real work of securing the island's defense was done by several hundred local Christian troops who enjoyed a reduced tax status in exchange for their military service, and who had been recruited by the Ottomans for the very reason that they had

4 Jason Goodwin, *Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 70.

served a similar function under the Byzantines. The local nobility retained their holdings, and church and monastic property went undisturbed.

Even in this brief account we can see the Ottomans' keen attentiveness to the local, in terms not just of accommodation, but also of an ability to size up the situation and turn it to Ottoman advantage. A predilection for co-optation had been evident from the very moment the Ottomans entered the historical record. In the case of Limnos, they were able to discern who had traditionally undertaken the defense of the island and to enlist them. We do not know who Bali was; he may have been a Greek by birth who converted to Islam and joined the bureaucracy. Or he could have been accompanied by a translator who communicated his queries to the Limniots. Whichever the case, the Ottomans were able to deploy adequately trained individuals who effectively turned conquests into tax-producing provinces.

If we turn to newly conquered, mid-sixteenth-century Palestine, the same method is on display. By now the Ottoman bureaucracy was fully developed and the Palestinian provinces received a full compliment of officials, many more than Limnos had in 1490. But these officials were quick to bring village leaders into the hierarchy of government, albeit informally. The office of village leader, known as *rais*, was already a very old one by the time the Ottomans arrived in the Fertile Crescent. They retained the *rais* as a useful liaison to the tax-paying population and rewarded him with robes (the traditional gift to officials from the earliest days of Islam), thereby integrating local leaders into the symbolic structure of the empire.

Local people also figured prominently in the proceedings of the Ottoman court, where many lines of authority converged. The *kadi*, or judge, routinely

called upon local experts to assist him in investigating the cases that came before him, such as disputes over taxation. Impressed by the neat categories in Ottoman survey registers, we have failed to adequately appreciate that taxation was a complicated business. Palestinian olive trees, for example, were taxed differently depending on their age, which affected their fruit-bearing ability. It was unlikely that someone from Istanbul would have been able to determine the age of those trees.<sup>5</sup>

Even those who officially served in the name of the sultan were a more heterogeneous group than has commonly been presented. Prior to the seventeenth century, the link between the military and provincial administration was an essential device of Ottoman governance. In return for their work, the sultan's soldiers, known as timariots, were assigned one or multiple villages whose revenue they were entitled to collect. When they were not off on campaign, these soldiers resided in or near their holdings. In this way the state both supported an army and gained a class of provincial administrators who were charged with tax collection and the maintenance of law and order.

But rural administration did not rest in the hands of timariots alone. When the province of Aintab in southeastern Anatolia was wrested from the Mamluks and joined to the empire's domains in 1517, not all the villages were assigned to the soldiers of the standing army. Some went to local Turkmen tribal chiefs, while others stayed in the hands of the urban magnates from Aintab or from nearby Aleppo who had privately owned them. For example, the village of Cağdı-

5 This account of Ottoman administration in Palestine is drawn from Amy Singer, *Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials: Rural Administration Around Sixteenth-Century Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

ğın belonged to a very special family indeed, namely, the heirs of the last powerful Mamluk sultan, from whom the Ottomans had wrested Egypt and Greater Syria.<sup>6</sup> The Ghawri family resided in Aleppo and employed a local agent to manage its estates and collect taxes. Over time the family was absorbed into the Ottoman elite; the governor-general of Aleppo in 1574 was one Mehmed Pasha al-Ghawri.

The cases of Palestine and Aintab that I have just discussed are particularly significant because they occurred in the middle of the sixteenth century, traditionally seen as the era when the Ottomans were at the very height of their power. As we have seen, an important part of this power was administrative; the Ottomans recruited, developed, and deployed a class of imperial bureaucrats across the empire. These bureaucrats, who ironed out and smoothed over local peculiarities, it is said, gave the empire its effectiveness and uniformity. In this story of the empire, local elites either failed to develop or were bypassed, and would only become important later on when the central bureaucracy was less effective.

This description overstates the case and misclassifies what was a rather fleeting moment as the classical juncture from which all future developments are said to have deviated. After all, the Ottomans only assigned a career officer to Palestine in 1520; by the end of the century the entire region was back under the control of Bedouin chiefs who were officially recognized by the Ottomans as local governors.<sup>7</sup>

6 Leslie P. Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 139.

7 Singer, *Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials*, 32.

In a classic article written many years ago, Albert Hourani coined the phrase “the politics of notables” to characterize the constellation of forces that governed the empire as a whole in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He described a class of conservative notables who were firmly entrenched in local society and equipped with their own private militias, and who offered themselves as mediators between the Ottoman authorities and provincial society. The Ottomans were content to rely on these informal elites, bestowing tax-gathering privileges and political office on them in exchange for loyalty.

Rather than framing this development as decline, historians are now asking more open-ended questions about the experience of provincial life in the Ottoman Empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In one historian’s felicitous phrase, we would like to know more about “the meaning of autonomy.”<sup>8</sup> Beshara Doumani’s recent study of Nablus and its hinterland – once again, in Palestine – provides us with a particularly vivid sense of place.

As was true across the Ottoman Empire, the Nablusis had a strong sense of local identity that was nurtured by the imperial style of rule. They were proud of the beauty of their city, whose twenty-two gushing springs fed the olive groves, vineyards, and fruit orchards that surrounded it. Localism was buttressed by the fact that the city was ruled by local sons, most of whom had descended from the same families for generations. Many of the patriarchs of the ruling families had originally come to the city as Ottoman soldiers, but they quickly melted into the local population,

8 Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700 – 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

marrying into wealthy merchant and religious families. They vied with one another for appointment to political office, a process controlled and shrewdly exploited by the Ottoman governor of Damascus.

Their conservative rule endured even through the upheavals of the nineteenth century. While they were disinclined to fight for the sultan in faraway places, they were quick to defend themselves when threatened. In the course of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, it was the Nablusis who handed the French emperor his first defeat in Palestine. Moneylending and trade networks, rather than military power and tax collection, tied the countryside to the city. Long-standing clientage relationships between peasants and urban merchants were passed from father to son, and the rootedness of these networks allowed trading activity to flourish across a wide area, despite an often unpredictable political environment. Even today, elderly Palestinians can remember how their grandfathers were expected to host their rural clients when they came into the city. The peasants had to be put up and fed well, lest their urban patrons suffer a loss of honor.

Besides stressing militarism, the tradition of European writing on the Ottoman Empire has also firmly fixed the empire's Islamic identity in the mind of the general reader. The term 'Muslim empire' has been more than simply descriptive; it has been a sort of shorthand for what we think the Ottomans represented. Their successful military conquests, it is said, were driven by the religious obligation of holy war against the infidel. There is the standard nod to Suleyman the Magnificent, who brought the empire's legal system into accordance with Islamic precepts. European

scholarship also typically hauls in Islam to explain that old saw, the decline of the Ottoman Empire. According to this theory, the decline was brought about in part by the rise of an intolerant Islamic spirit that smothered creativity.<sup>9</sup>

It is a mistake to describe the Ottomans in terms of some sort of essential Islamic mission. The impulse to do so is, I think, a reflection of the fact that any discussion of empire today is very hard to disentangle from the ideology of imperialism. We must separate the practice of empire from the ideology of imperialism if we wish to understand the Ottoman Empire. Empire as governance existed long before imperialism as ideology. Particularly in the Mediterranean world, which had been subject to imperial rule from the time of the Romans, the Ottomans were able to draw on a number of rich political and cultural traditions, only some of which were Islamic. The challenge was not to justify empire.<sup>10</sup> What other aspiration could a potential ruler possibly have? The challenge was to justify themselves as the proper leaders of a *new* empire. It was the House of Osman, not empire, that was on trial as the new state slowly took shape.

Ottoman claims of legitimacy drew on several sources, of which the Islamic tra-

9 See, for example, the penultimate chapter in Halil Inalcik's book *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300 - 1600* (London: Phoenix, 1994). The chapter is entitled "The Triumph of Fanaticism."

10 It is perhaps this inability to separate empire from the historical experience of imperialism that led a reviewer in a recent *New York Times Book Review* devoted to empires to assert the "dull uniformity of Asian empires." The Ottomans, it seems, like the Safavids and the Mughals, did not have an exciting enough project. See Paul Kennedy, "Conquerors and Missionaries," *The New York Times Book Review*, July 25, 2004, 10.

dition was only one. In the words of one historian, “the Ottomans were highly flexible in their use of legitimizing ideologies.”<sup>11</sup> One of the earliest tropes to emerge was the celebration of the early Ottomans as *ghazis*, or warriors for Islam, whose raids and wars were part of a divinely imposed obligation.<sup>12</sup> This was a straightforward enough claim with regard to the Balkans, where the population was Christian. To get around the somewhat awkward fact that many of the early wars in Anatolia were fought against other Muslim rulers, two traditions developed. First, it was asserted that oftentimes territory was acquired through peaceful acquisition rather than force of arms. Second, rulers who had been vanquished were charged with having oppressed Muslims, thus justifying Ottoman intervention. Some historians have gone so far as to wonder whether the Ottomans saw themselves as Islamic warriors or if they adhered to a more general, and religiously nonspecific, ideal of heroism and honorable conduct.

The Ottomans also asserted a more illustrious genealogy than that of the other Turkish emirs in Anatolia. They claimed that their sultans descended from Oğuz Khan, a legendary great ruler and ancestor of the Turks, while their Turkish neighbors were only distant relations.

Once Mehmet the Conqueror took Constantinople, the imperial capital par excellence, in 1453, he adopted many imperial motifs, including the Golden Ap-

ple, a commonly recognized symbol of universal sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Prior sultans in the former capitals of Bursa, then Edirne, had lived simply and prayed alongside fellow Muslims in the mosque. The palace that Mehmet had constructed for himself on the ancient acropolis of Byzantium was designed to ensure imperial seclusion, as was the dynastic law code he drew up toward the end of his reign. Among other things, it abolished the practice of eating in the presence of his courtiers and strictly limited the occasions on which petitions could be presented to him in person.

Mehmet was famously inspired by the empires of the past and saw himself as the heir to the Roman Empire. His identification with Alexander the Great was so strong that he commissioned a biography of himself, in Greek, on the same paper and in the same format as his copy of Arrian’s *The Life of Alexander the Great*. The latter was read to him daily.<sup>14</sup>

The beginning of the sixteenth century saw the rise of an enemy more formidable than the patchwork of Turkish emirates that the Ottomans had swept away in Anatolia. In Iran, the Safavid dynasty, established by the charismatic mystical leader Ismail Shah, proclaimed a militant Shiism that was presented as morally, religiously, and politically superior to the Sunni form of Islam observed in the

11 Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560 – 1660* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 294.

12 There is tremendous debate amongst Ottoman historians about the extent to which the earliest Ottomans saw themselves as Muslims fighting a holy war.

13 Legend had it that Alexander the Great possessed an apple made from the gold taken as tribute from the conquered provinces, which he held in his hand as if he held the world. Gülru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 12.

14 Philip Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World’s Desire, 1453 – 1924* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 6.



Ottoman Empire. The consolidation of Spanish Hapsburg rule at the other end of the Mediterranean also contributed to an age of strenuous ideological competition.

In response, the Ottomans increasingly portrayed themselves as pious orthodox Muslims. Suleyman, assisted by his energetic and long-serving religious advisor, sought to reconcile sultanic with Islamic law in an ambitious program of legal reform that included the strengthening of Islamic courts and the extension of state purview over matters that had previously been of little official concern, such as marriage. In the 1540s, Suleyman added the Islamic term 'caliph' to his list of titles.

A lesser-known image of Suleyman is that of the Lawgiver as Messiah; the prophetic and messianic currents that were so strong in Europe and the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century had their counterpart in the Ottoman Empire. Those around him, and Suleyman himself, proclaimed him as the Emperor of the Last Age, who would soon establish universal dominion. The sultan's geomancer wrote that the ultimate victory and establishment of the universal rule of Islam would be ensured by an army of invisible saints fighting by the sultan's side.

Yet even before Suleyman's death in 1566 there was a new emphasis on the institutional and judicial perfection of the sultan. No longer the restless world conqueror, he was lauded as the creator and quiet center of the perfect order; he was the Refuge of the World. As the Ottoman war machine wound down, seventeenth-century writers would further encourage the idea of consolidation. Citing the theories and biological metaphors of Ibn Khaldun, they stated that the empire was no longer in the heroic phase of expansion, but had entered the

more mature stage of security and tranquility.

Throughout all the permutations of the imperial image, the provision of justice, to the peasantry in particular, remained absolutely central to sultanic legitimacy. This was not an empty rhetoric. It is clear that both the population and the sultan took the latter's responsibility for justice seriously; the Ottoman archives are stuffed with thousands of petitions that were recorded in the registers, and responded to, year after year. The council hall in the palace where petitions were read was built with open walls to symbolize the free access of the empire's subjects, Muslim and non-Muslim, to imperial justice. This duty of the ruler to provide justice, to embody imperial benevolence, was something the Ottomans shared with all premodern states. In the Near Eastern tradition, it was expressed through the Circle of Justice, which said that the ruler could not exist without the military, nor the military without the sword, nor the sword without money, nor money without the peasants, nor the peasants without justice. The Chinese also tied royal legitimacy to the provision of justice to the peasants. The right to petition the king was limited in Europe, but there too justice was the jewel in the crown of the Christian King.

The Circle of Justice represented a consensus on the proper ordering of society that was shared by both rulers and ruled. This consensus would come apart in the nineteenth century, and it was the state itself that would launch its dismantling.

Through the skillful co-optation of military and financial leaders, the Ottomans had achieved a form of rule that was extremely stable, even though its maintenance required constant bargaining. The

other side of the coin, however, was that the government could attract only a low level of commitment from most of its subjects. Its ability to mobilize manpower and money was limited. The residents of Nablus, for example, were perfectly willing to battle Napoleon, but they undertook this in the defense of local interests and not on behalf of the sultan.

This was sufficient for a time. The last quarter of the eighteenth century, however, was marked by war, war, and more war. Russia, whose power had been growing steadily, managed to wrest the Crimea and the northern shores of the Black Sea from the Ottomans. The shock of these losses was great, since both were areas of dense Muslim settlement. The Ottomans also fought with the Hapsburgs. Then came the French occupation of Egypt in 1798, which signaled the return of Great Power conflict to the Mediterranean after a long hiatus. Turmoil continued throughout the Napoleonic Wars, including an internal uprising in Serbia that received external support, due to European designs on the Ottoman Empire.

Faced with these threats, the Ottoman sultans, beginning with Selim III, initiated a series of reforms that, at the most basic level, sought to mobilize the people and the resources of the empire in the service of the state. Military reform, naturally enough, was the initial priority, but initiatives soon spread to other areas such as education. A medical school was set up in 1827 to train doctors for the new army. In the 1830s, schools proliferated as Sultan Mahmud II, sometimes described as the Peter the Great of the Ottoman Empire, sought to create not just an officer corps but also a new civil service to implement and enforce his measures.

A famous decree of 1839, which was henceforth known as Tanzimat, laid

down the essential themes of Ottoman reform. These themes would be modified, diluted, or strengthened over the course of the next eighty years or so, but they remained the basis for state policy nevertheless. Tanzimat declared the security of life, honor, and property for all Ottoman subjects. Tax farming was abolished and an elaborate centralized provincial administration – modeled on the French system – was laid down. Equality before the law for all subjects, for Muslim and non-Muslim, was decreed.

These measures, as well as an assortment of more minor reforms, were linked by the wish to mobilize society and to effectively direct it through a newly energized, centralized state. By making property rights more secure, it was hoped that a new class of private property owners would increase agriculture revenues. The proclamation of religious equality before the law sought to facilitate the creation of a new, secular elite – a group of ardent Ottoman citizens who would become loyal patriots, not unlike those in France, England, and the other ascendant European nation-states.

The Ottoman reforms were ambitious and wide-ranging. Not surprisingly, some were resisted and many others were only imperfectly or partially executed. In the Balkans, the Ottomans, hemmed in by Great Power competition and the territorial ambitions of the new nation-states on the peninsula, were racing against the clock. A bad harvest in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1874 led to a peasant revolt the following year. One hundred years earlier this would have been purely an internal matter, but it quickly turned into an international crisis that, through a long and convoluted series of events, ended with the creation of the new state of Bulgaria in 1878. By

the eve of World War I, the Ottoman Empire had lost almost all its European territories.

Elsewhere, however, in Anatolia and the Arab lands, the Ottoman Empire in fact became more powerful, more rational, and more capable of imposing its will on society. Faced with European encroachment, it did not disintegrate, as did so many other non-Western empires – for example, in Iran and India. Bureaucrats managed not only to centralize many of the empire's activities, but also to establish effective rule in places that had always been notoriously difficult to rule, such as the tribal areas of Arabia and Transjordan. Through the application of reformist land laws, Transjordan recovered a level of demographic and economic growth not seen since Byzantine times.<sup>15</sup> In the last quarter of the century, the British, who were busy concluding local agreements with Arab sheikhs, were alarmed by the new influence of the Ottomans in the Arabian Gulf.

Yet the reforms, by launching such a determined attack on traditional power-sharing arrangements, by their radical rethinking of the relationship between ruler and ruled, required the government to embark on an ambitious project of ideological legitimation. Its response was very similar to that of other modernizing empires, such as Austria, Russia, and Japan, in the pressure cooker of the nineteenth century. The 'invention of tradition' dramatically increased the pomp and circumstance surrounding the sultan and all activities of state. By the end of the nineteenth century, for example, curious onlookers lined the road to watch the Friday prayer ceremony as

15 Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850 – 1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 69.

Abdulhamid and his entourage departed from the palace and headed for the Yıldız Mosque. Albanian house guards in livery, their spears glinting in the sun, escorted the imperial landau while a military band struck up the *Hamidiye*, the musical salute to the sultan. A sort of dais was built to accommodate foreign visitors who were permitted to watch the procession and to salute the monarch.

The state also tried to define a new basis for loyalty to the House of Osman. The novel concept of Ottoman patriotism, which declared the unity and equality of all Ottoman subjects, was favored at midcentury. As time wore on and the European provinces dropped away, Islamic and then Turkish nationalism rendered the earlier concept of an Ottoman citizenry increasingly problematic. Throughout this last century of the empire, the project of Ottoman subjecthood was fraught with tensions and contradictions that undermined formerly stable traditions of rule.

The regime's use of the Islamic heritage was complex and multifaceted. The Ottomans sought to exploit Islam for imperial advantage in a sort of 'Islamic etatism,' just as Catherine II had used Christian orthodoxy in Russia and Maria Theresa had turned to Catholicism in the Hapsburg lands. Among other things, Islam was used to try and enlist the empire's Muslim subjects in the state's modernizing goals. After the destruction of the janissaries, Mahmud II turned to the conscription of Ottoman Muslim subjects and dubbed his new army the "Trained Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad." This is just one example. Again and again over the course of the next century, political leaders turned to Islam as a way of establishing a connection between them and their Muslim subjects.

At the same time, the Ottomans settled on Islam to articulate and proclaim their fundamental difference from the West in an era of rampant Westernization. It is ironic that the Europeans, too, saw Islam as the defining characteristic of the East, although the conclusions they drew from this fact were very different. And yet, as we have seen in the Tanzimat reforms, the Ottoman Empire relentlessly pursued a policy of secularization.

How can these seeming oppositions be reconciled? We must understand that there was a central tension in Ottoman reform. The goal was not just to strengthen the state; it was to strengthen it in a certain way, so that the state looked bureaucratic, tolerant, and, most of all, modern. The Tanzimat was, in this sense, an internalization of European representations of the Orient and its problems. But the Ottomans were also duty-bound to resist the West, because the West denied the possibility of progress for the Muslim world. The embrace of Islam was their way of defying the fate that was predicted for them.

It is ironic that Arab elites were never more Ottoman than at the moment of the empire's dissolution.<sup>16</sup> Abandoning the looser style of rule that had been typical of earlier centuries, nineteenth-century reforms succeeded in creating several generations of Arab bureaucrats who were closely tied to the imperial project. An Arab official in 1900 was more likely to speak Turkish, and to send his son to study in Istanbul at one of the new academies, than his predecessor would have been one hundred years prior. This helps explain why, the myth

16 Here I am speaking of Greater Syria and of Iraq. Egypt had been under British occupation since 1882 and thus had a rather different history.

of Lawrence of Arabia notwithstanding, the vast majority of Arabs remained loyal to the empire till the very end.

This loyalty left the Arab world singularly ill equipped to deal with the changes that were suddenly thrust upon it in the wake of World War I. Not only was it forcibly cut off from the state that had defined its political existence for the past four hundred years; it also had to contend with an unprecedented level of Great Power involvement in the region as the British and the French went about establishing their respective spheres of influence. In the critical days and months following the Ottoman defeat in 1918, the Arabs failed to produce a leader of Atatürk's caliber. This could not have been simply a coincidence. The political class was, in the end, a provincial elite that did not have the same habits of leadership the Turks possessed. Even worse, draconian Ottoman policies against Arab nationalists during World War I had created tremendous polarization (some of those executed were the relatives of older, more conservative politicians who supported the empire), and this made solidarity against Western imperialism even harder to accomplish.

Finally, an effective response was hampered by the intense localism of Arab elites. Part of this was due to the opportunities presented by imperial rivalries in the region. The Syrian leadership, for example, was eager to cooperate with the British in the hope that they would pressure the French to leave Syria. But the Palestinians thought the Syrians should resolutely confront the British plan to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. However, the localism ran deeper than the dilemmas of the moment.

This essay began with an Ottoman scribe explaining the conditions of animal husbandry on the island of Limnos

to his superiors back in Istanbul. Even during the ambitious nineteenth century, when the state worked to create a more unified society, the Ottomans were always very willing to accommodate local realities and to work with homegrown elites. This style of rule encouraged a corresponding provincialism on the part of the Arabs. The men who directed their societies in the waning decades of the empire knew how to mediate local concerns, but they found it very difficult to respond to broader crises, such as the imposition of European mandates throughout the Near East. Their inability to resist Western colonialism would have serious and fateful consequences that are still with us today.



# Henk Wesseling

## *Imperialism & the roots of the Great War*

In history textbooks, the period from 1871 to 1914 is known as the age of imperialism. During this period, the European powers extended their control over the rest of the world to an extent never seen before. In 1870, Dutch control over the Netherlands Indies was effectively limited to Java and a few outposts on the other islands. French rule in Indochina was virtually negligible, while the British were only just beginning to reestablish control of India after the Mutiny of 1857. By 1914, the Europeans ruled over nearly the whole of South and Southeast Asia. Similarly, in 1870, Africa was still largely *terra incognita* for the Europeans. Settlements were limited to South Africa and Algeria, although there were a few scattered European possessions on the coast of West Africa, as well as the Portuguese territories in Mozambique. However,

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by 1914, European rule had spread to the entire continent, with the exception of Liberia and Ethiopia. At the same time, European influence also grew in the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and China.

It seems extraordinary that a period during which the European powers so obviously conquered the world is also generally considered to have been a period of relative tranquillity, sometimes called the age of armed peace. This can be explained by the fact that most historical texts have been written by Europeans and that Europe experienced a period of prolonged peace between 1871 and 1914.

Still, in the imperial hinterlands, wars were constantly being waged – to colonize new areas and to crush episodic rebellions. The best-known examples of such imperialist conflicts are the Boxer Rebellion in China, the German wars against the Herero people in southwest Africa, the South African War, and Kitchener's conquest of the Egyptian Sudan. There were many other conflicts that received a lot of coverage in the newspapers of the day, but most have long been forgotten. These include the prolonged struggle of the French against the African resistance leader Samori in West Africa, the Maji-Maji wars in East Africa, the French conquest of Madagascar, and the Dutch wars against Aceh

and Lombok in Indonesia. In most cases, annexation preceded war, because resistance came only later. In these instances, the military operations were not considered acts of war, but rather campaigns against rebels.

As a result, it is not easy to quantify the military activities that took place during this period. Nevertheless, we do have some statistics at our disposal. In their book *The Wages of War, 1816 – 1965*, the political scientists J. David Singer and Melvin Small survey all the wars that occurred during 150 years of modern history.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of certain criteria (most importantly, the number of casualties), they determine that ten larger disputes during the period 1871 – 1914 qualify as colonial wars. These are four British wars (against the Zulu's, against the Mahdists, the Second British-Afghan War, and the Boer War in South Africa), two French wars (in Madagascar and Indochina), one Dutch war (the Aceh War), two wars in the Philippines, and one Italian war (in Ethiopia). They also specify seven smaller wars. Thus, of all the many military operations during this period, only seventeen could be classed as fully fledged wars.

In his book *Colonial Small Wars, 1837 – 1901*, Donald Featherstone describes twenty-two important British wars during the period 1871 – 1900, as well as a multitude of incidents and skirmishes along the northwest frontier of India.<sup>2</sup> The period after 1900, which saw the 'pacification' of Kenya, Nigeria, and the Gold Coast, was not much better. A book on the Netherlands Indies Army during

the period 1871 – 1914 provides a colorful list of "troubles," "irregularities," "expeditions," "disturbances," "actions," and "uprisings" in which that army was involved.<sup>3</sup> In all, it lists thirty-two operations, even when the thirty-two years of war in Aceh are considered as a single military operation. There has been no comparable review of French warfare, but Gabriel Hanotaux and A. Martineau describe about forty colonial operations and campaigns in their 1930 *Histoire des colonies*.

Overall, it can be concluded that during this period three major colonial powers were involved in at least a hundred colonial military operations.

Several case studies on specific regions offer more detailed insight into what actually took place. Helge Kjekshus's study of German warfare in Tanganyika is especially illuminating.<sup>4</sup> The most important war in Tanganyika was the German campaign waged to suppress the Maji-Maji Rebellion. This war, named after the magic water that Africans in the region believed changed bullets into water, raged from 1905 to 1907. Because traditional military methods were not effective in dealing with guerrilla warfare, scorched earth tactics were applied on a large scale. By targeting the civilian population in the agricultural regions, particularly during the sowing season, the Germans broke armed resistance by means of starvation. In the fourteen years running up to this major war there had already been eighty-four military

1 J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *The Wages of War, 1816 – 1965: A Statistical Handbook* (New York: Wiley, 1972).

2 Donald Featherstone, *Colonial Small Wars, 1837 – 1901* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973).

3 The book is H. L. Zwitser and C. A. Heshuisius, *Het Koninklijk Nederlands-Indische leger, 1830 – 1950* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1977).

4 Helge Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika, 1850 – 1950* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1977).

operations classed as battles according to German law. (The law, passed on June 27, 1871, stipulated that German soldiers involved in an official battle were entitled to a government pension.) In Tanganyika, a 'quiet' year thus entailed about six battles as well as many other violent acts, such as burning huts or stealing livestock.

In his article "The Politics of Conquest," John Lonsdale paints a similar picture of British activities in western Kenya between 1894 and 1914.<sup>5</sup> In this twenty-year period, there were nearly fifty incidents in the country that were so serious that the British thought it necessary to resort to or at least consider using force. In eleven cases the British refrained from action because they lacked the necessary military equipment; in two cases the expedition ended in defeat or retreat; in thirteen cases a display of military power alone was sufficient; and in twenty cases a punitive military expedition battle ensued. This means that on average during this period the British military engaged in one official battle per year.

These data clearly indicate that the conquest and pacification of Africa by Britain and Germany was a continual process. Not a single year passed without a war; in fact, not one month passed without some kind of violent incident or act of repression.

Some historians have tried to calculate the total loss of human life that resulted from violent encounters between Europeans and the colonized peoples. Up to now, no such calculations have been performed specifically on the period between 1870 and 1914. However, according to the economic historian Paul Bai-

roch, a reasonable estimate is that between 1750 and 1913 the lives of 300,000 European and 100,000 non-European soldiers were lost in the process of conquering 34 million square kilometers of African and Asian territory and of subjecting 534 million people in that conquered territory to European rule. Among their opponents, the number of lives lost is estimated to have been somewhere between 800,000 and 1,000,000. However, the total number of deaths resulting from the wars and subsequent forced migrations and famines was probably more like a staggering 25 million.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the European armies did not suffer great losses in battle during their campaigns; 80 to 90 percent of deaths were related to disease and exhaustion rather than to actual combat. The British colonial war theorist Colonel C. E. Callwell rightly called the colonial wars "campaigns against nature,"<sup>7</sup> and, in the same vein, the British colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain quipped, "The mosquitoes saved the West Africans, not the eloquence of the intellectuals."<sup>8</sup>

Asians and Africans were more likely to die in battle than of disease and exhaustion. However, it is difficult to assess the loss of life accurately because only the Europeans kept records, and these typically accounted only for the

5 John Lonsdale, "The Politics of Conquest: The British in Western Kenya, 1894–1908," *The Historical Journal* 20 (1977): 841–870.

6 Paul Bairoch, *Victoires et déboires: histoire économique et sociale du monde du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), vol. 2, 638.

7 C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1906), 57.

8 Quoted in George Padmore, *The Gold Coast Revolution* (London: Dobson, 1953), 35.

deaths of their own troops. In the rare event that they actually quantified enemy deaths, the figures would ignore civilian casualties.

Nevertheless, there are some figures available, for example, for the Maji-Maji wars. The official German report, which was presented to the Reichstag in 1907, states that 75,000 Africans died. Other estimates, however, suggest that 120,000 to 145,000 died; some even estimate 250,000 to 300,000—a huge number for such a small region within Tanganyika. More than 90 percent of some tribes perished. A variation on Tacitus's famous quote – “They left a void and called it peace” – is applicable here.

The figures for the British-Zulu War of 1879 are equally staggering. Half of the 50,000 Zulu warriors who fought were either killed (8,000) or wounded (16,000). On the British side, 1,430 white men and 1,000 ‘Natal Kaffirs’ were killed in this war that lasted only six months.

It was not only Britain and Germany that conducted wars on such a scale. The Aceh War waged by the Dutch in Indonesia was no less devastating. Here also the European casualties were recorded in more detail than those of the opposition forces. During the entire conflict, 2,000 soldiers from the Netherlands Indies Army were killed in action and another 10,000 died from disease. On the Indonesian side, it is estimated that 60,000 to 70,000 Acehnese were killed and 25,000 died from disease and exhaustion in labor camps. In total, about 100,000 men perished and another 500,000 people were wounded in the war. As mentioned previously, the Netherlands Indies Army was also involved in another thirty-one military operations at the time, although these were far less significant.

The huge discrepancy between the number of European and non-European

lives lost in battle can be attributed to the superiority of the European firearms. This is apparent from Hilaire Belloc's famous lines:

Whatever happens, we have got  
The Maxim gun and they have not.

The effectiveness of these weapons was a cause for great pride among European officers, politicians, and reporters. A well-known example of that effectiveness was the Battle of Omdurman, near Khartoum, in the British campaign against the followers of the Sudanese religious leader known as the Mahdi. As the sun rose on September 2, 1898, battle commenced. At the end of the morning, the British commander General Horatio Kitchener put away his binoculars and remarked that “the enemy has been given a good dusting.” This was an understatement: by 11:30 a.m., nearly 11,000 Mahdists had been killed and another 16,000 wounded. In contrast, the Anglo-Egyptian army counted 48 dead and 382 wounded. Winston Churchill, who took part in the campaign as a journalist and as a soldier, called the battle “the most signal triumph ever gained by the arms of science over barbarians.”<sup>9</sup> The Mahdi's tomb was opened, his nails were taken as souvenirs, and the rest of his body was burned. The Mahdi's successor, the Khalifa, escaped and was not seen again until a year later, when he was killed in battle on November 24, 1899.

Considering the overwhelming superiority of European firearms, the most successful way for colonized peoples to fight the Europeans was to refuse to engage in conventional battle. In guerrilla warfare, local skills such as knowledge of the terrain, popular support, and familiarity

9 Both quotes are from H. L. Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880 – 1914* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 253.

with the local conditions gave the indigenous peoples an advantage. Where this was the case, as in Madagascar, Indochina, and Morocco, the 'pacification process' took much longer and required far more effort from the Europeans.

The process was called pacification because the aim of these military operations was to create a permanent state of peace by gaining absolute control. In this respect, these conflicts differed from classical European warfare. The main characteristic of colonial wars was that they were instigated not just to defeat an enemy, but also to annex the opponent's territory and to subject the population.

As Clausewitz's famous formula has it, "war is the continuation of politics by other means." In other words, political aims determine wars. In the 'ordinary' European wars, the aims were usually limited. The peace agreements often included ceding territory, but usually this would only concern a particular region. In contrast, colonial wars were absolute: The colonial conquerors came to stay. Their aim was the permanent and total subjection of the population.

The nature of the aims driving the colonial wars had consequences for the outcome. Normally a war is said to have been won when the opponent is beaten and accepts the victor's terms. But when is a colonial war won? When is an opponent defeated? How can victory be defined?

There were usually no peace conditions and often it was not even known who the opponent actually was. Colonel Callwell drew attention to this problem in his book *Small Wars*. He claimed that in contrast to 'civilized' wars, in small wars there were no clear targets such as a ruler, a seat of government, a capital city, or any large group of people. Callwell exaggerated somewhat, but in many

cases the enemy was indeed difficult to identify.

There also was another problem. The Europeans not only had to defeat the opposition but also had to make sure the local population subsequently accepted them as the rulers. The French generals Joseph Gallieni and Hubert Lyautey developed a general theory of colonial warfare in which they addressed this issue. They made a distinction between slow action, which was aimed at gradually purging the resistance in a particular region while establishing permanent occupation, and quick action, which involved military action against the enemy. Gallieni and Lyautey summarized their strategy as "Fight if necessary, but fight as little as possible." Their own two most famous maxims were "To destroy only to reconstruct" and "With pacification a great wave of civilization spreads out like an oil slick."

Unfortunately, the theory that colonial conquest brought civilization was often not borne out in practice. The famous British colonial commander General Sir Garnet Wolseley maintained that in a war against an "uncivilized nation [a population without a capital city] ... your first objective should be the capture of whatever they prize most." For Callwell too this was the crux of the matter: "If the enemy cannot be touched in his patriotism or his honour, he can be touched through his pocket." This meant that the invaders often resorted to stealing cattle and burning villages and that "the war assume[d] an aspect which may shock the humanitarian."

Sometimes the goal of pacification and civilization turned into an operation of elimination and extermination. The most notorious example of this occurred in 1904 when General Lothar von Trotha issued the so-called *Vernichtungsbefehl* (extermination order) during the Ger-



man war against the Hereros in south-west Africa. In this notorious proclamation, he declared, "Within the German borders, every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, shall be shot down. No woman or child shall be admitted: I shall send them back to their people or have them shot. These are my words to the Herero people." It was signed: "The great general of the all-powerful emperor, Von Trotha."<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, when the war in Aceh was going badly for the Dutch, a commentator remarked, "Our policy should no longer be aimed at their assimilation but at their elimination." On July 27, 1900, in his so-called Hun Speech, the German Kaiser said as much to the German soldiers being sent to China to quell the Boxer Rebellion:

No pardon will be given, and prisoners will not be made. Anyone who falls into your hands falls to your sword! Just as the Huns... created for themselves a thousand years ago a name which men still respect, you should give the name of German such cause to be remembered in China for a thousand years that no Chinaman... will dare to look a German in the face."<sup>11</sup>

All these statements reflected the prevailing political climate in Europe, which had become harsher under the influence of social Darwinism. Even such a respectable and wise statesman as the British prime minister Lord Salisbury expressed such views: "'Eat and be eaten' is the great law of political as of animated nature. The nations of the earth are divided into the sheep and the wolves."<sup>12</sup> Similar views appear in many

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in H. L. Wesseling, *The European Colonial Empires, 1815 - 1919* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education, 2004), 187.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

writings from the decade before World War I.

During the years of the 'armed peace,' the armies of the Great Powers, apart from Russia, did not engage in major warfare in Europe. This meant that the only way to see action and obtain fighting experience was to join the colonial army. Moreover, because the colonial officer also had to be a good administrator, there were more skills to learn than fighting. *Lettres du Tonkin et de Madagascar*, the collection of letters that Lyautey wrote between 1894 and 1899, gives a lyrical description of the life of the colonial officer. Lyautey describes with obvious pride the results of the "creative feats" of the colonial leaders: land reclamation, paddy fields, sleepy valleys transformed into hives of activity. "What nobler task for a man of action!" he exclaims.

But there is at first glance little that is heroic or soldierly in such peaceful achievements – in, as Lyautey put it, "laborious, thankless, and lowly jobs which are the daily and only productive task of the colonial officer." Anticipating claims that such work diverted the soldier's attention from the real task of defending his native soil, Lyautey wrote that it was nonsense to suggest that officers serving in the colonies were demilitarized when such manly qualities as initiative, responsibility, and militancy were constantly required of them. On the contrary, "it is the grandeur which colonial warfare alone, understood in that sense, bestows upon life."

The texts of Lyautey and Gallieni were published in distinguished journals and read by the intellectual elite. French newspaper readers, however, were more interested in the spectacular aspects of colonial warfare. Never before had the printed press reached an audience as

large as in those years. In 1910, the Parisian daily newspaper *Le Petit Journal* sold 835,000 copies a day, and *Le Petit Parisien* even more at 1,400,000. These popular newspapers featured colorful, full-page illustrations of the heroic feats of the French colonial armies – for example, the struggle with the river pirates in Indochina, the execution of the rulers of Madagascar, the battle against the female soldiers of the King of Dahomey and the entrance of General Dodds into their capital, and the conquest of Morocco.

Novelists also wrote about military glory and the colonial world – Rudyard Kipling is of course the best-known English apologist and prophet of Western expansion and the British Empire. A less well-known but very successful writer in his day was Ernest Psichari, grandson of the great scholar and writer Ernest Renan, who was a colonial soldier. In his novels, Psichari idolized the colonial army, whose deeds in the tropical forests of Central Africa and the immeasurable plains of the North African desert seemed to embody the great French traditions that were absent in urban France. In his work, he merges heroism, exoticism, and nationalism to produce a lyrical hymn praising the colonial soldiers who do not indulge in the materialistic and decadent lifestyle of metropolitan France but live an austere life of devotion and self-sacrifice in the colonies overseas.

Colonial warfare also influenced military thinking. Although there was peace in Europe during these years, there was an international arms race. The costs were so high that in 1899 the Russian tsar convened an international conference in The Hague to see whether the ongoing increase of armaments could be stopped or at least curtailed. Another conference followed in 1907 – but still the arms race

went on. At the same time, disarmament fell into disfavor. The Russian foreign minister Alexandr Izvolsky called disarmament “a craze of Jews, socialists and hysterical women.”<sup>13</sup>

Military experts studied the wars that were being waged, especially the Boer War in South Africa (1899 – 1902) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904 – 1905). According to the experts, these wars confirmed the theory that willpower and moral fiber were the most vital qualities in war and that, therefore, an offensive attitude was all-important. Writing in *Small Wars*, Callwell argued that offensive warfare should be directed toward breaking the morale of the opponent, that this should be achieved by a combination of strength and bluff, and that the commanding officers must continually seek and hold the initiative: “the enemy must not only be beaten. He must be beaten thoroughly.”

This view, widespread in Europe at the time, gave the strong the confidence that they possessed the moral right to subject the weak, who were by definition inferior. Colonial wars were not only exciting – they were justified. More important, colonial wars were nearly always successful, and the colonial armies were therefore almost always triumphant. Of course, there were some exceptions – such as the British defeat at Isandlwana and the Italian humiliation at Adowa – but these incidents were rare. As a rule, the colonial armies came, saw, and conquered.

There are striking similarities between the thinking of the colonial war theorists and the thinking of the great military theorists of the pre-World War I period.

13 Quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890 – 1914* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 324.

Lyautey's colonial warfare theory that "passive defense can only lead to being overrun" differs little from Ferdinand Foch's claim that "passive defense cannot avert defeat." Similarly, Colonel Callwell's statement that "moral effect ranks almost before material gain" is echoed by Colonel Grandmaison's remark that "moral factors are not the most important; they are the only ones that matter in war."

There was another important and tangible link between the colonial wars and the Great War: Colonel Grandmaison had been Gallieni's adjutant in Tonkin. The British generals Allenby and Wilson had studied under Miller Maguire, the English theorist of guerrilla warfare. Some of the best-known generals from the colonial wars, such as Kitchener, Gallieni, and Lyautey, became ministers of war during World War I. Joffre had been with Gallieni in Madagascar before he became the first colonial officer to be appointed head of the French General Staff. Within the first months of the war, he nominated many colonial officers – Mangin, Franchet d'Esperey, and others – to high positions.

Soon the ideas about moral factors and the offensive spirit were put to the test. World War I was characterized by large-scale offensives accompanied by massive slaughter. This strategy was directly related to the colonial belief that willpower and morale were the decisive factors in war. As Foch said, "Victoire égale volonté." This belief that victory is achieved by breaking the will of the enemy was supported by expert analyses of imperial conflicts and colonial wars.

At the same time, colonial military novels presented a romantic view of military life: Colonial wars took place in an exotic, heroic world. War was difficult and harsh but the rewards were rich. These writings painted an image of war

that made it possible, fifty years after the Battle of Solferino, to believe again in the glory of war. In this way, the small wars in the colonies paved the way for the Great War.

The colonial armies were accustomed to continually mounting attacks regardless of the probability of success, in order to sustain an image of European superiority. It is not difficult to see the connection between this approach and the predominant mentality of the World War I generals who valued willpower, moral fiber, and bold attack. As V. G. Kiernan ruefully wrote in *The Lords of Human Kind*, "Their generals in the rear, many of them with minds still farther away in the Asian or African campaigning grounds of their youth, could not be got to see the point."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Victor Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1972), 320.

Akira Iriye

*Beyond imperialism: the new internationalism*

Much has been said about the United States having become, or having to become, an empire. To provide the chaotic world, especially in the wake of the Cold War, with some semblance of law and order, it has been asserted, the international community needs a new world order, a global empire, a superpower that can speak on behalf of all countries and all peoples, a power willing to use its military and economic resources to protect all against the forces of violence and anarchy. There is only one nation that can fulfill the task: the United States. In the twenty-first century, therefore, humankind may be forced to choose between continued disorder and imperial governance instituted by the United States.

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So one side of the argument goes. But others dispute this contention, insisting that for practical or moral reasons the United States should never take on an imperial role.

A historian can only contribute to this debate by historicizing it – that is, by noting what empires and imperialism have meant in the past, and by examining what these might mean in today's world. This essay seeks to put empires and imperialism in the context of modern world affairs and to discuss how they contributed, or failed to contribute, to stabilizing international order.

It cannot be denied that there was a time when empires provided some sort of world order. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the globe was dotted by huge territorial empires, including the Ottoman, Persian, Mughal (Mogul), Russian, and Chinese (Qing). They presided over large, multiethnic populations and kept (with varying degrees of success) local tensions under control. These were traditional imperial states under the rule of dynasties whose origins went back several centuries. They governed essentially contiguous territories, thereby establishing some semblance of regional order. One might include the United States in this list as

well: it, too, grew as a territorial empire during the nineteenth century, expanding northward, westward, and southward, with the central government establishing its authority over all parts of its territory, at least after the Civil War.

These landed empires were joined by the maritime empires of Britain, France, Spain, and other European nations that superimposed a commercial regime over the vast, traditional empires of the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. The relationship between the landed and maritime empires was sometimes violent – for example, in India during the 1850s when Britain displaced the Mughal Empire with its own colonial regime. On the whole, however, the traditional empires continued to function, even as merchants, sailors, and missionaries from the maritime powers infiltrated their lands.

Until the last decades of the nineteenth century, these territorial and maritime empires constituted an international order. The system of international law that had originated in Europe in the seventeenth century steadily spread to other parts of the world, and all these empires, as well as other independent states, entered into treaty relations with one another. This was an age of multiple empires. When we talk of empires today, or of the United States having become an empire, we obviously do not have in mind such a situation. Rather, many observers draw the analogy between empire today and the British and other maritime empires that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century when a handful of colonial regimes established near-total control over most of the world's land and people. This distinction is important, since much depends on what historical antecedent one is referring to when one talks about an empire.

Likewise significant, in contemporary discussions the 'imperialism' that is most relevant is the 'new imperialism' that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century and persisted only through the first decades of the twentieth. A handful of nations whose empires were both territorial and maritime exercised the new imperialism; great military powers such as Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the United States, and Japan incorporated overseas territory into their respective domains, thereby emerging as world powers. Most of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific were carved into their colonies and spheres of influence. Once acquired, these lands were governed by cadres of administrators recruited both at home and in the colonies; and these colonial regimes were in turn protected by officers and men sent from the metropolises and by troops and police recruited locally. The new imperialists vied with one another for control over land, resources, and people, and in the process they fought many colonial wars. Instead of producing global chaos and anarchy as a consequence, however, these empires at times managed to establish some sort of world order. They did so both by seeking to stabilize their relationships with one another and by making sure the people they controlled would not threaten the system.

The Russo-Japanese War (1904 – 1905) and its aftermath serve as a good illustration. Ignited by Russia and Japan's clashing ambitions in northeast China (Manchuria) and the Korean peninsula, this first major war of the twentieth century was a typically imperialistic war. When negotiations to define their respective spheres of domination failed, the two countries fought on land and at sea, but not on Russian or Japanese soil; the Chinese and Koreans themselves had no say



in this war that would determine their nations' futures. Victorious, Japan won control over Korea and southern Manchuria, turning the former into its colony and the latter into its base of operation on the Chinese mainland. The other Great Powers, assuming their own imperial domains would not be directly threatened by the conflict or its eventual outcome, did not intervene, but in the end the United States offered mediation with a view to preventing further bloodshed and regional disorder. Within two years of the war's end, moreover, Russia and Japan reconciled and agreed to divide Manchuria (and later, Inner Mongolia) between them.

The two empires had fought an imperialistic war and, just as quickly, had decided to preserve their imperial spheres through cooperation. Such behavior was typical in the age of the new imperialism. The other imperialists essentially stood by, accepting the new status quo in Asia, although the United States, with its empire in the Pacific, began to view Japan's growing power with alarm. Still, the United States and Japan reached agreement that they would not challenge their respective empires: the United States would not dispute Japanese control over Korea or southern Manchuria, and Japan would not infringe on U.S. sovereignty in the Philippines, Guam, or Hawaii. The Japanese also accepted French control over Indochina and Dutch control over the East Indies, despite the movements against colonialism that were developing in those colonies. Some of these movements' leaders looked to Japan, the only non-Western Great Power, for support, but Japan chose to identify itself with the other imperialists.

At least for the time being, the imperial powers colluded with one another to keep their respective colonial popula-

tions under tight control. The world order they established entailed a division of humankind between the ruler and the ruled, the powerful and the weak, the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized.'

The world of the new empires had its heyday at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it disintegrated rapidly following the Great War. The German, Austrian, and Ottoman Empires collapsed after the four years of fighting, while the Russian Empire, on the opposite side of the conflict, was undone by the revolutionaries who came to power during the war. The empires of Britain, France, Japan, and the United States did not disappear, but they were no longer capable of providing the globe with system and order. They might have tried to cooperate with one another to preserve the new imperialism, but they had neither the will nor the resources to do so. Imperialistic collusion broke down, and Japan began challenging the existing empires in Asia and the Pacific in the 1930s. Under Nazi leadership a new German empire emerged, and Japan and Germany in combination collided head-on with the remaining empires of Europe and the United States.

In that sense, World War II was an imperialistic war, but it was also the beginning of the end of all empires, new and old. By seeking to destroy each other, the empires had committed collective suicide – but that was only one reason behind the demise of imperialism. More fundamental was the emergence of anti-imperialism as a major force in twentieth-century world affairs.

Anti-imperialistic nationalism had many sources – ideological, political, social, and racial – but above all, it was fostered by the development of the transnational forces that are usually identified as globalization. The age of the new impe-

rialism coincided with the quickening tempo of technological change and of international economic interchanges; more and more quantities of goods and capital crossed borders, and distances between people of different countries narrowed dramatically, thanks to the development of the telegraph, the telephone, the steamship, the automobile, and many other devices.

These advances in science and technology at one level facilitated imperialistic control over distant lands – and for this reason most historians tend to claim that imperialism and globalization went hand in hand. Without the international order sustained by the imperial powers (in particular, by the British Empire), it is often argued, economic globalization would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, to develop. The empire provided a political and legal framework, backed up by military force, for the economic transactions and technological developments of the day. The imperial administrators built roads, established schools, and helped eradicate diseases in their colonies and spheres of influence, thereby modernizing these areas and incorporating them into an increasingly integrated globe. Thus, if one accepts such a perspective, it is possible to say that imperialism and globalization reinforced one another, even that they were two sides of the same phenomenon – something like the development of a stable and interdependent world order.

But it is also clear that globalization facilitated the growth of colonial resistance to imperialist domination. To the extent that globalization was an integrative force, bringing people of all countries closer together, it undermined one essential condition of imperialism: the rigid separation of colonizer and colonized. The blurring of the distinction took many forms: mixed marriages be-

tween these two groups of people, compradors acting as middlemen between colonial administrators and the native populations, and the education of colonial elite in the schools and universities of the European metropolises. Imperialism would have ceased to function if such blurring continued – and that was why, even while colonizer and colonized were intermingling at one level, at another a system of rigid social and cultural distinction was maintained. Such distinction in turn aroused resistance and opposition from the indigenous populations, reinforcing anticolonialist sentiments.

If globalization, in short, facilitated the new imperialism, it also provided favorable conditions for the emergence of anti-imperialism. And in the end, anti-imperialism proved to be a far stronger imperative than imperialism.

Before the Great War, anti-imperialists in Tunisia, Egypt, India, China, Korea, and elsewhere were already aware that modern transportation and communications technology could serve their interests as well as they had served those of their colonial masters. Anti-imperialists could use railways and steamships to travel long distances and organize resistance movements; they could use the mass media and circulate handbills and newspapers among an increasingly literate populace; and they could even establish transnational connections and convene international congresses against imperialism.

Although some in the metropolises supported the anti-imperialist movement, before the Great War it had not significantly weakened or altered the structure of imperial governance. Yet even as large numbers of colonial troops were recruited to fight for their respective masters, the war experience did nothing but encourage the growth of anti-imperialism.

Both the Bolshevik revolutionaries' anti-imperialist ideology and Woodrow Wilson's conception of self-determination indicated that even among the victorious Allies the ranks of the imperialist powers were breaking down. The processes of globalization that had facilitated imperialism were now encouraging the spread of anticolonial nationalism. If empires had defined the nineteenth century, then nationalism would define the twentieth.

This became quite evident after the Great War, when economic globalization resumed, buttressed by such technological inventions as the airplane, the radio, and the cinema. Imperialism, however, was not reinforced by this process but, on the contrary, was eclipsed by an ever-more vociferous clamor for national liberation all over the world. When the remaining imperial powers failed to respond in unison to such voices, or to prevent another calamitous war from breaking out between themselves, anti-imperialist movements grew so strong that by the end of World War II, nationalism had come to be seen as a plausible alternative to imperialism as the basis for reconstructing world order.

Instead of a handful of large and powerful empires providing law and order in the world, now, after World War II, sovereign states were expected to act as both the constituents and guardians of the international system. The former empires that were now shorn of colonies, the newly decolonized countries, and the countries that had been independent but noncolonial states – all would be equal players in the postwar world order. They would ensure domestic stability while at the same time cooperating with one another through the United Nations, an organization whose basic principle is national independence and sovereignty. The so-called West-

phalian system of sovereign states that had provided the normative framework for European international affairs since the seventeenth century would now be applied to the entire globe, as country after country achieved independence in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere. Global governance would no longer be based on a vertical division of the world into the ruling powers and all the rest, but instead established through a horizontal system of cooperation among nations of presumably equal status.

The history of the world in the second half of the twentieth century was to show, however, that sovereign states were no more capable of producing stable international order than the empires had been: nearly as many lives were lost in interstate and civil wars after 1945 as in World War II. With rare exceptions, the United Nations proved incapable of preventing such conflict when national interests collided, and few countries were willing to give precedence to the principle of international cooperation.

It is often argued that the postwar international system was defined by the cold war in which the United States and the Soviet Union effectively divided the globe into two counterbalancing spheres of influence. The two countries, which controlled the domestic affairs of their allies and client states to maintain local order, managed to prevent a third world war from erupting. If we accept this view, we are in effect saying the United States and the Soviet Union behaved like erstwhile empires, as providers and sustainers of local and international order. But it must be recognized that unlike the nineteenth-century empires, they did not discourage nationalism.

The United States, after all, continued to espouse the principle of national self-

determination, and the Soviet Union, for its part, preached ideological anti-imperialism. Both superpowers supported colonial liberation movements, although in practice they did not always find them compatible with their global strategies. Meanwhile, the independent states of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America often refused to heed the dictates of the Cold War antagonists. Nationalism, once unleashed, could not be contained even by the Cold War's new empires.

Globalization proceeded apace after World War II, but this was not because of the Cold War or postcolonial nationalism, but rather in spite of them. Economic, social, and cultural bonds of interdependence were strengthened across nations by supranational entities (especially regional communities) and by non-state actors (such as multinational enterprises and international nongovernmental organizations). Regional communities, most notably the European Economic Community, sought to subordinate separate national interests to considerations of collective well-being. The idea had always been there – after all, it was well recognized that globalization implied some sort of transnationally shared interest – but it was not put into practice until a group of European countries agreed to put an end to their history of internecine wars and to give up part of their respective sovereign rights for the sake of regional peace and solidarity.

The number of non-state actors grew rapidly after World War II. Whereas in the quarter century after 1945 the number of independent states nearly doubled, international nongovernmental organizations and multinational enterprises increased even more spectacularly. While the superpowers worked to advance their own geopolitical agendas,

and independent states continued to look after their own parochial interests, these non-state actors together promoted globalization and a sense of transnational interdependence.

The question, then, was whether the non-state actors would be able to provide global order if this task could not be entrusted to the superpowers or the sovereign states.

This was the key question that had to be addressed in the last three decades of the twentieth century – and it remains the key question today. Indeed, it is the question at the heart of the contemporary debate on empire.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as Cold War tensions abated, fresh national rivalries were unleashed, fracturing Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. At the same time, forces for transnational interconnectedness were strengthened. The European Economic Community, now joined by Britain, steadily effected regional integration, and its success encouraged similar, if smaller-scale, arrangements elsewhere, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the North American Free Trade Area.

Whether such regional entities would, by themselves, succeed in establishing a new international order remained to be seen. If such communities developed as exclusionary groupings, pursuing only their internally shared interests, they might end up dividing the world. But other developments in the last decades of the century tended to encourage international and interregional cooperation and to generate conditions for the emergence of a new, stable order. During the 1970s, for instance, issues such as environmental degradation and human rights abuses were becoming so serious that they would have to be solved

through transnationally coordinated action. The United Nations sponsored conferences to deal with them, and it was joined by newly formed nongovernmental organizations that were transnational in character, such as Friends of the Earth and Amnesty International. Acts of international terrorism also aroused global awareness, evoking calls for collective response.

These issues were no longer confined to specific countries or regions. It was no accident, then, that international organizations of all sorts, but especially of the nongovernmental variety, grew spectacularly in the last decades of the century. At a time when sovereign states were proving incapable of constructing a viable international order, and when the Cold War was ebbing, regional communities, international organizations, and non-state actors were actively seeking an alternative – a global community that did not rely for its viability on the existing governments and armed forces, but on the transnational activities of individuals and organizations. These were all aspects of the globalizing trend of international affairs.

Can such transnational forces and activities somehow manage to combine to establish a global structure of governance? That is the major challenge today.

A hundred years ago, globalization had coincided with the new imperialism. By the late twentieth century, nineteenth-century-style imperialism had long since disappeared from the scene, but the postcolonial states had proved no more capable of establishing a stable world order than the older nations that had been in existence for a long time. Would the regional communities provide the answer? If not, would transnational non-state entities such as non-

governmental organizations and multinational enterprises be able to construct a global civil society? How could non-state bodies establish any sort of governing structure to provide law and order? How would they define their relationship to the existing states?

These were serious questions to which no satisfactory answer was readily available. It may have been for this reason that some began to look back fondly on empires as providers of international order. Two developments at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first made the question of effective world governance extremely urgent. One was the frequency and geographical spread of international terrorism, and the other, the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons across national boundaries.

Both were serious challenges to the whole world, requiring an effective response from all – states, international organizations, regional communities, and non-state actors. Such cooperation, however, would take a long time to develop, so in the meantime the United States took it upon itself to punish terrorist groups and the ‘rogue states’ suspected of harboring weapons of mass destruction. For those who believed that international order must be buttressed by a great military power willing to use its resources for this purpose, the United States provided the ready, and possibly only, answer. The nation would carry out the functions that the earlier empires had performed. It would be the empire for the twenty-first century.

But today there is little tolerance for any sort of imperialism anywhere in the world. Although old-fashioned imperialism is far from dead, it has no legitimacy in the international community, which is, at least in theory, constructed on the



principles of national self-determination and human rights. Moreover, the Atlantic world, which dominated modern international relations and of which the United States was an integral part, can no longer claim the same degree of hegemony in world affairs.

On one hand, European countries have tended to move within the framework of their regional community, quite independently of the transatlantic ties. On the other hand, China, India, and some Latin American and Middle Eastern countries are likely to develop as centers of economic and even military power. To the extent that the new imperialism of a hundred years ago was largely a product of Western civilization, today we must reckon with the fact that non-Western civilizations have grown in strength and self-confidence. If a new empire were to emerge, therefore, it would not be able to function if it were identified solely with the West. Such an empire would have to accommodate different civilizations from all regions of the Earth, and it would need to be mindful of the transnational networks of goods, capital, ideas, and individuals that constitute global civil society.

In other words, a new empire for the new millennium would not be an empire in any traditional sense.

What may have worked briefly a hundred years ago cannot be expected to reappear and function in the same way today. There is, however, another nineteenth-century legacy that might, in its twenty-first-century incarnation, provide a more relevant solution to today's problems: the legacy of internationalism.

It is sometimes forgotten that the age of the new imperialism was also a time when modern internationalism was vig-

orously promoted, by governments, private organizations, and individuals. The Olympic Games were one example, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, another. The internationalists established transnational organizations and convened world congresses. They sought an alternative to a world order that was dominated by the imperialists. Yet the contest for influence between imperialism and internationalism appeared to be decided in the former's favor when, despite the internationalists' ardent pleas for peace and understanding among nations, the world powers chose war.

But the Great War proved to be the swan song of empires, and their certain demise was implicit in the establishment of the League of Nations, an internationalist project par excellence. Although the League did little about the existing empires besides placing Germany's former colonies and those of its wartime allies under a system of mandates, and while it proved powerless to check the aggressive imperialism of Germany and Japan in the 1930s, its internationalist vision never died. The international body, assisted by a host of nongovernmental organizations, kept up the efforts – even during the dark days of World War II – to define norms of behavior for nations and individuals, efforts that laid the ground for conceptions of human rights, crimes against humanity, and universal equality and justice under the law. The United States and Great Britain, even as they fought against the Axis Powers, without hesitation embraced this internationalist legacy that became the basis of the United Nations.

Even if somehow a new empire were to emerge, that empire would have to embody principles of human rights and justice for all. It would have to be an em-

*Akira Iriye  
on  
imperialism*

pire of freedom in support of the emergent transnational institutions of global civil society.

Since such a development is highly unlikely, we would do better to explore the alternative. After all, there actually are other ways of securing international order. And there is no reason why the internationalist legacy, rather than the legacy of the briefly dominant new imperialism, should not serve humankind today.

# Poems by Franz Wright

## *Lesson*

Because what is outer is inner  
there is no outer  
there is no inner –  
I am trying to get this straight  
And what the long sentence  
assembled  
by cemetery sparrows said  
before my presence  
arrived  
dispersing them in its brief  
wake, oh  
wordless endless.

## *The Choice*

When you look at the sky, when you look at the  
stars, God is not  
*there.*

Someone in hell is sitting beside you on the train.  
Somebody burning unnoticed walks past in the street.

Sailors in snow –

God can do what is impossible, but  
God can only do what is impossible.

Sad incurable gift.

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*Franz Wright received the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for his most recent collection of poetry, "Walking to Martha's Vineyard" (2003). His other books include "Midnight Postscript" (1993), "Ill Lit: New and Selected Poems" (1998), and "The Beforelife" (2001). He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim and Whiting Foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry.*

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# Fiction by Margaret Atwood

## FOUR SHORT PIECES: *King Log in exile,* *Post-colonial, Salome was a dancer* *& Take charge*

### *King Log in exile*

After he had been deposed by the frogs, King Log lay disconsolately among the ferns and dead leaves a short distance from the pond. He'd had only enough energy to roll that far: he'd been King of the Pond for so long that he was heavily waterlogged. In the distance he could hear the jubilant croaking and the joyful trilling that signaled the coronation of his celebrated replacement, the experienced and efficient King Stork; and then – it seemed but a mini-second later – the shrieks of terror and the splashes of panic as King Stork set about spearing and gobbling up his new subjects.

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*Margaret Atwood is the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays. Her most recent novel, "Oryx and Crake" (2003), was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and the Giller Prize in Canada. Her other books include the 2000 Booker Prize-winning "The Blind Assassin" (2000), "Alias Grace" (1996), which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy, "The Robber Bride" (1993), "Cat's Eye" (1988), and "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985). Her latest collection of nonfiction, "Writing with Intent," will be published this spring. She has been a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy since 1988.*

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King Log – ex-King Log – sighed. It was a squelchy sigh, the sigh of a damp hunk of wood that has been stepped on. What had he done wrong? Nothing. He himself had not murdered his citizens, as the Stork King was now doing. It was true he had done nothing right, either. He had done – in a word – nothing.

But surely his had been a benevolent inertia. As he'd drifted here and there, borne by the sluggish currents of the pond, tadpoles had sheltered beneath him and nibbled the algae that grew on him, and adult frogs had sunbathed on his back. Why then had he been so ignominiously dumped? In a coup d'état orchestrated by foreign powers, it went without saying; though certain factions among the frogs – stirred up by outside agitators – had been denouncing him for some time. They'd said a strong leader was needed. Well, now they had one.

There'd been that minor trade deal, of course. He'd signed it under duress, though nobody'd held a gun to his head, or what passed for his head. And hadn't it benefited the pond? There had been a sharp upturn in exports, the chief commodity being frogs' legs. But he himself had never been directly involved. He'd just been a facilitator. He'd tucked his cut of the profits away in a Swiss bank account, just in case.

Now the frogs were blaming him for the depredations of the Stork King. If



King Log had been a better king, they were yelling – if he hadn't let the rot set in – none of this would have happened.

He knew he couldn't stay in the vicinity of the pond much longer. He must not give in to *anomie*. Already there were puffballs growing out of him, and under his bark the grubs were at work. He trundled away through the woods, the cries of amphibian anguish receding behind him. Served them right, he thought, sadly and a little bitterly.

King Log has retired to a villa in the Alps, where he is at present sprouting a fine crop of shitake mushrooms and working on his memoirs, one word at a time. Logs write slowly, and log kings more slowly than most. He has engaged a meditation guru who encourages him to visualize himself as a large pencil, but he can only get as far as the eraser.

He misses the old days. He misses the lapping of the water in the breeze, the rustling of the bulrushes. He misses the choruses of praise sung to him by the frogs in the pink light of evening. Nobody sings to him now.

Meanwhile the Stork King has eaten all the frogs and sold the tadpoles into sexual slavery. Now he is draining the pond. Soon it will be turned into desirable residential estates.

### *Post-colonial*

We all have them: the building with the dome, late Victorian, solid masonry, stone lions in front of it; the brick houses, three-story, with or without fretwork, wood or painted iron, which now bear the word Historic on tasteful enameled or bronze plaques and can be visited most days except Monday; the roses, big ones, of a variety that were not here before. Before what? Before the ships landed, we all had ships landing; before

the men in beaver hats, sailor hats, top hats, hats anyway, got out of the ships; before the native inhabitants shot the men in hats with arrows or befriended them and saved them from starvation, we all had native inhabitants. Arrows or not, it didn't stop the men in hats, or not for long, and they had flags too, we all had flags, flags that were not the same flags as the flags we have now. The native inhabitants did not have hats or flags, or not as such, and so something had to be done. There are the pictures of the things being done, the before and after pictures you might say, painted by the painters who turned up right on cue, we all had painters. They painted the native inhabitants in their colorful, hatless attire, they painted the men in hats, they painted the wives and children of the man in hats, once they had wives and children, once they had three-story brick houses to put them in. They painted the brave new animals and birds, plentiful then, they painted the landscapes, before and after, and sometimes during, with axes and fire busily at work, you can see some of these paintings in the Historic houses and some of them in the museums.

We go into the museums, where we muse. We muse about the time before, we muse about the something that was done, we muse about the native inhabitants, who had a bad time of it at our hands despite arrows, or, conversely, despite helpfulness. They were ravaged by disease: nobody painted that. Also hunted down, shot, clubbed over the head, robbed, and so forth. We muse about these things and we feel terrible. *We did that*, we think, *to them*. We say the word *them*, believing we know what we mean by it; we say the word *we*, even though we were not born at the time, even though our parents were not born, even though the ancestors of our ancestors may have come from somewhere else

entirely, some place with dubious hats and with a flag quite different from the one that was wafted ashore here, on the wind, on the ill wind that (we also muse) has blown us quite a lot of good. We eat well, the lights go on most of the time, the roof on the whole does not leak, the wheels turn round.

As for *them*, our capital cities have names made from their names, and so do our brands of beer, and some but not all of the items we fob off on tourists. We make free with the word *authentic*. We are enamoured of hyphens as well: our word, their word, joined at the hip. Sometimes they turn up in our museums, without hats, in their colorful clothing from before, singing authentic songs, pretending to be themselves. It's a paying job. But at moments, from time to time, at dusk perhaps, when the moths and the night-blooming flowers come out, our hands smell of blood. Just the odd whiff. *We did that, to them*.

But who are *we* now, apart from the question *Who are we now?* We all share that question. Who are we, now, inside the *we* corral, the *we* palisade, the *we* fortress, and who are *they*? Is that *them*, landing in their illicit boats, at night? Is that them, sneaking in here with outlandish hats, with flags we can't even imagine? Should we befriend them or shoot them with arrows? What are their plans, immediate, long-term, and will these plans of theirs serve us right? It's a constant worry, this *we*, this *them*.

And there you have it, in one word, or possibly two: post-colonial.

### *Salome was a dancer*

Salome went after the religious studies teacher. It was really mean of her, he wasn't up to her at all, no more sense of self-protection than a zucchini, always

droning on about morality and so forth but he'd finger the grapefruits in the supermarket in this creepy way, a grapefruit in each hand, he'd stand there practically drooling, one of those gaunt-looking men who'd fall on his knees if a woman ever looked at him seriously, but so far none of them had. As I say, it was really mean of her, but he'd failed her on her midterm and she was under pressure at home, they wanted her to perform, as they put it, so I guess she thought this would be a shortcut.

Anyway, with a mother like hers what could you expect? Divorced, remarried, bracelets all up her arms and fake eyelashes out to here, and pushy as hell. Started entering Salome in those frilly-panty beauty contests when she was five, tap dance lessons, the lot, they'd slather the makeup on those poor tots and teach them to wiggle their little behinds, what can you expect. And then her stepdad ran the biggest bank in town so I guess she thought she could get away with anything. I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't some hanky-panky going on in that direction too, the way she'd bat her baby blues at him and wheedle, sickening to watch her rubbing up against him and cooing, he'd promised her a Porsche when she turned sixteen.

She was Tinker Bell in the school play when she was twelve, I certainly remember that. Seven layers of cheesecloth was all she wore, there was supposed to be a body stocking underneath but whether there was or not, your guess is as good as mine. And all those middle-aged dads sitting with their legs crossed. Oh, she knew what she was doing!

Anyway, when she got the rotten mark in religious studies she went to work on the guy, who knows how it started but when they were caught together in the stockroom she had her shirt off. The teacher was growling away at her bra, having trouble with the hooks, or so the

story goes, you have to laugh. If you want what's in the package you should at least know how to get the string off, is what I say. Anyway, big scandal, and then he started badmouthing her, said she was a little slut and she'd led him on, did some innuendo on the mother just for good measure. Everyone believed him of course, but you always knew with Salome that if anyone's head was going to roll it wouldn't be hers. She accused the poor jerk of sexual assault, and since she was technically a minor, and of course her banker stepdad threw his weight around, she made it stick. Last seen, the guy was panhandling in the subway stations, down there in Toronto; grown a beard, looks like Jesus, crazy as a bedbug. Lost his head completely.

Salome didn't come to a good end either. Tried out for ballet school, modern dance was what she thought would suit her, show a lot of skin, center your thoughts on the pelvis, bare feet, fling yourself around, but she didn't get in. Left home after some sort of blowup between the mom and the stepdad, midnight yelling about Miss Princess and her goings-on, furniture was thrown. After that she took to stripping in bars, just to annoy them I bet. Got whacked in her dressing room one night, right before the show, too bad for management, clobbered her over the head with a vase, nothing on but her black leather macramé bikini and that steel-studded choke collar, used to get the clients all worked up, not that I'd know personally. Saw two guys running out the stage door in bicycle courier outfits, some sort of uniform anyway, never caught them though. Hit men set on by the stepdad is one rumor, wild with jealousy. Guys get like that when their hair falls out. It was all the mother's fault, if you ask me.

## Take charge

I

– Sir, their cannons have blown a hole in the ship. It's below the waterline. Water is pouring into the hold, Sir.

– Don't just stand there, you blockhead! Cut a piece of canvas, dive down, patch it!

– Sir, I can't swim.

– Bloody hell and damn your eyes, what wet nurse let you go to sea? No help for it, I'll have to do it myself. Hold my jacket. Put out that fire. Clear away those spars.

– Sir, my leg's been shot off.

– Well do the best you can.

II

– Sir, their antitank missiles have shredded the left tread on our tank.

– Don't just sit there, you nitwit! Take a wrench, crawl underneath the tank, fix it!

– Sir, I'm a gunner, not a mechanic. Anyway that wouldn't work.

– Why in hell do they send me useless twits like you? No help for it, I'll have to do it myself. Cover me with your machine gun. Stand by with grenades. Hand me that spanner.

– Sir, my arm's been burnt off.

– Well do the best you can.

III

– Sir, their diabolical worm virus has infected our missile command system. It's eating the software like candy.

– Don't just lounge there, you dickhead! Get going with the firewalls, or whatever you use.

– Sir, I’m a screen monitor, not a troubleshooter.  
 – Shit in a bucket, what do they think we’re running here, a beauty parlor? If you can’t do it, where’s the nerdy spot-faced geek who can?  
 – Sir, it was him wrote the virus. He was not a team player, Sir. The missiles have already launched and they’re heading straight for us.  
 – No help for it, I’ll have to do it myself. Hand me that sledgehammer.  
 – Sir, we’ve got sixty seconds.  
 – Well do the best you can.

#### IV

– Sir, the makorin has malfunctioned and set off the pizzlewistle. That has saddammed the glopzoid plapoodle. It may be the work of hostile nanobacons.  
 – Don’t just hover there, you clone-drone! Dopples the magmatron, reboot the fragebender, and insert the hi-speed crockblade with the pessimal-point attachment! That’ll captcha the nasty little biobots!  
 – Sir, the magmatron is not within my area of expertise.  
 – What pixelwit deployed you? No help for it, I’ll have to do it myself. Hand me the mutesuck blandplaster!  
 – Sir, I have been brain-napped. My brain is in a jar in Uzbekistan, guarded by a phalanx of virtual gonkwarriors. I am speaking to you via simulation hologram.  
 – Well do the best you can.

#### V

– Sir, the wild dogs have dug their way into the food cache and they’re eating the winter supplies.

– Don’t just squat there, you layabout! Pick up your stone axe and bash them on the head!  
 – Sir, these are not ordinary wild dogs. They are red-eyed demon-spirit dogs, sent by the angry ancestors. Anyway my stone axe has a curse on it.  
 – By my mother’s bones, what did I do to deserve such a useless duck-turd brother’s nephew’s son as you? No help for it, I’ll have to do it myself. Recite the red-eyed-demon-spirit-dog-killing charm and hand me my consecrated sacred-fire-hardened spear.  
 – Sir, they’ve torn my throat out.  
 – Well do the best you can.

*Four short pieces*

# Dialogue between Barry Mazur & Peter Pesic

## *On mathematics, imagination & the beauty of numbers*

PETER PESIC: Many intelligent people only see in mathematics a wasteland of dreary formalism, a mind-numbing expanse of theorems and proofs expressed in very abstract language. Doubtless this is partly due to the way it is taught, but such teaching is widespread, the product of good intentions and much effort. The disconnection between the inner, lived world of mathematicians and the mainstream of intelligent people is very deep, despite the sensual character of mathematics that you describe so well in your recent book, *Imagining Numbers: (particularly the square root of minus fifteen)*.

This raises a hard question: How – if at all – can this living world of mathematics become accessible?

BARRY MAZUR: I can't answer that question, but I can offer some comments. A person's first steps in his or her mathematical development are exceedingly important. Early education deserves our efforts and ingenuity. But also here is a message to any older person who has never given a thought to mathematics or science during their school days or afterwards: You may be ready to start. Starting can be intellectually thrilling, and there are quite a few old classics written in just the right style to accompany you as you begin to take your first steps in mathematics. I'm thinking, for example, of the old T. C. Mits series, or Tobias Dantzig's wonderful *Number: The Language of Science*, or Lancelot Hogben's *Mathematics for the Millions*. Moreover, one should not be dismayed that there are many steps – there is no need to take them *all*. Just enjoy each one you do take.

Bill Thurston, a great geometer, uses the word 'tall' to describe mathematics: math is a tall subject in the sense that skyscrapers are tall. That is, one piece of mathematics lies on top of a prior piece of mathematics and lies under the next piece of mathematics, etc. To get to the

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Barry Mazur, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1978, is the Gerhard Gade University Professor at Harvard University, where he has taught for over four decades. He has done research in many aspects of pure mathematics and is the author of "*Imagining Numbers: (particularly the square root of minus fifteen)*" (2003).

Peter Pesic is a tutor and musician-in-residence at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He is the author of "*Labyrinth: A Search for the Hidden Meaning of Science*" (2000), "*Seeing Double: Shared Identities in Physics, Philosophy, and Literature*" (2001), "*Abel's Proof: An Essay on the Sources and Meaning of Mathematical Unsolvability*" (2003), and "*Sky in a Bottle*" (2005).

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fiftieth story you must traverse all the prior forty-nine, and in the right order. I like this image, but would want to insist that it may be more of a Gaudi-esque structure, with a wide choice of alternate staircases joining and crossing so if you are ever uncomfortable with one route – if the risers are too high, or not high enough – there are other, more accommodating stairwells. And besides, even the view from the first story is a marvel.

PP: What is your earliest memory of mathematics?

BM: The very earliest was when I was seven or eight years old. My father, who was always fascinated with numbers, would shower me with arithmetical queries like, What is the number that when you double it and add one gives you eleven? I don't think I was particularly adept at finding the answers to these problems, but I did love them. My method was, of course, trial and error. Then, after an especially long barrage of such queries, my father smiled at me and said, "I'll tell you a secret. Here is how you can do these problems more quickly." The "secret" he imparted to me was to invoke the magical  $X$  of algebra, restate the problem in the language of algebra, and then to simplify the algebraic sentence, where by simplify he meant solve for  $X$ . That  $X$  became, after simplification, an actual number, which astonished me. My father also insisted on the ritual palindrome of analysis and synthesis, in the sense that once the value of  $X$  was found, I was to redo the steps of the derivation in reverse order to check that the number I came up with for  $X$  really worked.

I suppose that I had an especially literal mind, for I actually did think that this information was some sort of secret. A family secret, perhaps, as there might

be family secret recipes for particular dishes. I remember being stunned a few years later in a math class, for somehow the teacher had gotten wind of this secret and seemed to be in the process of explaining it to the entire class.

PP: As you confronted this secret, how did it act on you, and especially on your imagination?

BM: I think it acted more on my sense of wonder than on any concrete imaginings.

To work out those simple queries (e.g., What is that number which when you double it and add one you get eleven?) is rather like seeing a concrete visual image develop out of a blank nothing on photographic paper in a darkroom tray. You start with something you deemed  $X$ , and at the end of the process you discover  $X$  to be concrete, some particular number. There is a sense of power in this (as you and I know, the early algebraists were very aware of this unexpected power). What could be more enticing than having this power be 'secret' as well? When I realized this was part of a much larger common heritage, I wasn't sad: it made it that much larger a clubhouse. My early fascination was that out of pure thought, starting with nothing, something concrete emerges. I remember, a good deal later, being still struck by the equation *nothing + thought = something*.

About a year before high school, I became an avid reader of popular books about electronics and math. When I was building radio receivers (maladroitly, for the most part) I had the idea of deriving Maxwell's equations by pure thought. How this was going to be accomplished was not so clear, for it is too simple-minded to imagine that some Saint Anselmian strategy (making the sole assumption, for example, that the laws

governing radio transmission were the “most perfect laws”) would lead to laws none other than Maxwell’s. But when I was in high school I had complete faith that such a derivation was possible.

PP: In those early days, to what extent was your access to mathematics mediated through physical devices like radios or through visualization, as in electronic schematics? I am thinking of Einstein’s insistence that he was always primarily a visual thinker, not an abstract one.

BM: Let me respond to this question going from the back to the front. I don’t think I ever deal with things that are abstract. To be more explicit, I don’t like the word ‘abstract’ except as a comparative term, even though lots of mathematicians use it in a way that reminds me of the dangling comparatives that sometimes show up in ordinary speech. Texts and courses have titles like *Abstract Algebra*, etc.; my impulse when I see these is to wonder, “Abstract compared to what?” To put it another way, think of the tactic of taking a concept that has arisen in one context and then stripping it from that particular context. For instance, start with Euclidean geometry in the full expression of its geometric intuition and with all its axioms, then strip a few axioms from the list and consider the structure that ensues, with either no concrete realization in mind, or at least as an entity of thought separate from any geometric realization. This is a situation where I believe it is helpful to say that one has abstracted a structure, separating it from its habitual concrete and visualizable context.

Even so, I’m hesitant to use such a Latinate word as ‘abstract’ for this mode of thought. Aristotle, for example, has at least two different ways of referring to the activity of abstraction: He employs

the verb *aphairein*, which indeed means to ‘abstract,’ to ‘take away.’ But at times, as in Book 13 of the *Metaphysics*, he employs the more explanatory phrase “to take that which does not exist in separation and consider it separately” – a description that has, to my mind, a less scary aspect. But once the concept has been, as people say, abstracted, or once it is, as Aristotle would say, taken separately, if one is to deal effectively with it, one must floodlight it with intuitions of some sort or other. If one is really thinking about this ‘abstracted’ concept and working with it seriously, it will become utterly as concrete as any other concept. Of course, one may have to homegrow the appropriate intuitions to deal seriously with it.

Electronics, or at least circuitry at the primitive level that I used as a kid, was saturated with concretizing analogies. As I’m sure you know, Kirchhoff’s law and Ohm’s law are made vivid by a simple analogy to hydraulics – plumbing, if you wish. And Maxwell, when he sought to give vocabulary for the energy in electromagnetic fields, went surprisingly further with this analogy: the somewhat mysterious displacement current that he denoted  $j$  (and that seemed so wonderful to me when I first encountered it) – a marvelous concretization of ‘action at a distance.’

PP: What you are saying here is consistent with what you write in *Imagining Numbers*, where you seek felt correlates for an ‘abstract’ concept like  $i = \sqrt{-1}$ . But now you are extending this view in a daring way. What happens then in ‘abstract’ thinking on the level that you and other mathematicians pursue it, in which (at least for many intelligent people) there seems to be *no* trace of any sensual, concrete content?

BM: I think that analogy is a powerful tool, and it can extend, indefinitely, the range of what we are happy to call concrete, or sensual. Let us start with the truism that the stock-in-trade of poets is to concretize things by analogy. Any snatch of poetry offers some illustration of this. Consider, for example, these lines of Yeats: "Like a long-legged fly upon the stream / His mind moves upon silence." Here the equation is between something that is concrete/sensual and external (the "long-legged fly upon the stream") and something that might actually be even more intimately connected to us, but much harder to catch and hold still: a curious interior state.

Mathematicians are constantly using analogy to expand the realm of what they hold to be concrete. The ubiquitous activity of generalizing, which is one of the staples of mathematical and scientific progress, is a way of analogizing. We start with a structure or concept we feel at home with (say, multiplication of ordinary numbers), and we see a broader realm for which the same or at least an analogous structure or concept may possibly make sense (say, think of composition of transformations as a kind of multiplication operation). We make ourselves at home with this more general concept, initially at least, by depending heavily on the analogy it has with the more familiar, less general concept.

One genre of analogizing in mathematics is to deal with a problem that at first does not seem to be geometric by recasting it in geometric language. For example, consider Fredholm's idea for finding the (unique) function that is the solution of a certain type of equation by translating the problem to that of finding a fixed point of a certain distance-shrinking transformation on a geometric space.

PP: In your view, is there, then, *any* part of mathematics that is radically divorced from sensual intuition? What about number theory, where there is no geometric, hence visual, field, at least at first glance?

BM: I don't think there is any mathematics radically divorced from some kind of vivid intuition that illuminates it and ties it to the sensual.

You say that number theory has no geometric, hence visual, field at first glance – but that is only at first glance. For most practitioners of number theory these days, number theory is intensely geometric. In the late 1950s and early 1960s I was a geometer, a topologist, and the hook that got me fascinated with number theory was to understand that the set of integers

... -3, -2, -1, 0, +1, +2, +3 ...

has properties closely analogous to the three-dimensional sphere. Strange as it may seem, the prime numbers are analogous to knots (closed non-self-intersecting loops) in the three-dimensional sphere. Once you see this analogy you begin to see deeply instructive parallels between geometry and number theory.

For example, the skew symmetry of the linking number of one knot relative to another is somehow formally related to what is known in number theory as quadratic reciprocity (a deep reciprocal relationship, initially discovered by Gauss, that holds between any two prime numbers). This is hardly the only analogy that ties number theory to geometry – there are so many that very often it is hard to classify a theorem as being in the one field or the other.

The connections here began as far back as in the works of Abel, in that Galois theory itself sits – ambiguously – between geometry (the study of

finite coverings of spaces) on the one hand, and algebra (the study of solutions of polynomial equations). This relationship was thoroughly understood by Kronecker and Weber over a hundred years ago. The mathematical discipline of algebraic geometry already expresses the ineluctable joining of these fields.

Sixty years ago, André Weil dreamt up a striking way of very tightly controlling and counting the number of solutions of systems of polynomial equations over finite fields (this being a quintessentially number-theoretic problem) by surmising that there must be a tool for number theory closely analogous to the basic topological theory that efficiently counts the numbers of intersections that one geometric subspace has with another subspace when both are contained within a larger ambient space. All this apparatus has now been set up and establishes a vivid geometric mode of understanding polynomials and systems of polynomials in any algebraic context; indeed, much of number theory is now very comfortably viewed as a piece of a smooth-working synthesis, usually referred to as arithmetic algebraic geometry.

This long-winded answer, then, is simply to say that to many current researchers, number theory is inseparable from geometry, and much mathematical work occurs in a realm that is – marvelously – a synthesis of the two.

PP: But what about considerations involving higher dimensions than the three of common spatial experience? Must we rely on analogies to that common world? To what extent would that be possible without, perhaps, deluding ourselves that we are really understanding those more complex spaces, not just squashing them to fit our limited senses?

BM: But I think we *are* squashing them, and slicing them, to fit our limited senses – or at least to fit the limits that our senses are constrained to at present. And squashing them is a prelude to understanding them. Without some real innovation, real insight, and exercise of imagination, you don't even know how to begin any squashing procedure.

Squash how? Any act of squashing takes work, and the work itself is what expands one's intuition – expands the limits of our senses. Let me remind you of some standard examples. The most immediate source of examples does not come from high dimensions, but is already in our three-dimensional space of common experience. To visualize things well in three dimensions takes some artifice. Think of the repertoire: the top view, side view, front view, etc., of architectural drawings; the Mercator and other projections to render the globe flat; the CAT scans and MRIs that make pictures of slices of three-dimensional bodies, these slice pictures being taken in various moving and rotating planes and then cleverly put together to render a more faithful understanding of the full three-dimensionality of the examined body. Or think, if you wish, about that chair you are looking at, which you have only one view of (give or take a bit of the parallax of your two eyes and your moving head), and whose utter three-dimensionality you are so at home with.

In a way, all the artifices, as I called them, which work so well for us to substantiate our common three-dimensional experience, are there to be employed to bring higher dimensions into our ken as well. The special theory of relativity deals with four coordinates  $(x,y,z,t)$  usually referred to as 'space-time,' and the usual way of thinking graphically about anything happening in this four-dimensional geometry is as a movie of

three-dimensional slices changing in time.

But there are other modes of squashing the thing down to our limited senses, thereby, in effect, extending those senses. For example, one might envision the four-dimensional space as a planar (i.e., two-parameter) family of planes that, taken all together, fill out four-dimensional space: every point in four-dimensional space will lie on exactly one of these two-dimensional slices. The fun here is that you need a two-dimensional collection of these two-dimensional slices to sweep out the entirety of four-dimensional space:  $2 + 2 = 4$ , after all. You then have the option of thinking of (or visualizing, if you wish) any geometric object in four-dimensional space in terms of how it is diced by this procedure. This type of intuition is very well developed in people who do complex analysis.

Even this list understates the issue. One isn't quite finished if I just give you a finite repertoire – a bag of tricks, so to speak, in the art of squashing – because at a point in one's development of these intuitions, one actually sees more than the mere sum of tricks. One realizes that there is a certain unexpected pliability of spatial intuitions that makes spaces of *any* dimension equally accessible – equally accessible, and in certain respects (and here's a surprise) more easily accessible than lower-dimensional spaces. Topologists understand very well that for certain important work, higher-dimensional spaces are simply easier than lower-dimensional spaces – there's more room to move around!

For example, the Poincaré conjecture was first proved by Steve Smale in the mid-1960s in dimensions equal to five or more. It took well over a decade after that for it to be proved by Michael Freedman in dimension four. Dimension three

is still open, although a Russian mathematician, Perelman, has recently announced that he has a proof. The short answer here is that one will always try to reach out as far as one can with whatever intuition one has and squash as much as one can into it. Doing this squashing has the effect of extending and improving our intuition.

PP: Are there *no* spaces that are utterly alien to our intuition, only available through a kind of reasoning that is not accessible to our senses?

BM: I want to think of our intuition as not an inert, unchanging resource, but rather as something that can expand when challenged, when exercised. And the mechanism that forces this expansion is analogy. So, are there spaces utterly alien to our intuition? All I can say is that I don't think utterly.

PP: But the very struggle of human imagination to extend itself so far past its common limits indicates that these spaces really may transcend our sensibility. We struggle to grasp new mathematical truths not just because it is hard to visualize them, but also because they defy our most deeply held presumptions. For instance, we try to visualize the infinite-dimensional Hilbert space of quantum theory using visual analogues, but a spinning ball is utterly unlike an electron with spin. At a certain point, doesn't the visual and anthropomorphic fail just because we have gone beyond what we can visualize? And doesn't symbolic mathematics then save us by allowing us to reason securely even when we can no longer see?

BM: What you say is unassailable. But the full panoply of our mathematical intuitions – the intuitions that mathe-



matics helps strengthen, and refines – is not limited to pure visualization or pure symbolic combinatorial processes or, for that matter, pure any one thing.

I would say that the most powerful of our intuitions are combinations: a potent blending of visualization and artful algebra, of intrinsic canniness of estimation, and of all the intuitions that are the children of sheer experience – knowing when to approximate, when to insist on exact calculations, when to neglect some terms, when to pay the closest attention to them, when to rely upon an analogy, when to distrust it, and . . . well, I would not want to limit this list.

But there are two things I would like to emphasize about the ingredients of the brew I just described. The first is that these intuitions tend to amplify, to magnify, each other. The second is that these intuitions show up and are, in some form, perfectly available to anyone who tries their hand at understanding any piece of mathematics, however elementary.

Now let's return to your example of the infinite-dimensional Hilbert space that provides a model for quantum mechanical considerations. I think the notion of infinite-dimensional Hilbert space is a wonderful example of how algebra amplifies the range of visualizability of geometry. A Hilbert space is, almost by formal definition, a space, of never mind how many dimensions, such that any two-dimensional plane in it has all the properties of the Euclidean plane. You can think of it as being very, very visualizable in two-dimensional slices despite its immensity, along with a guarantee from Hilbert that this very feature of it – visualizability in slices – is what is going to be most relevant.

Now once we (or initially, I suppose, Hilbert) hit upon this idea, our basic intuitions regarding Euclidean geome-

try – the Euclidean geometry of our high school days – become magically available even in contexts where we would hardly have dared to imagine that visualization would have any relevance.

The example you offer of electrons with spin modeled in terms of Hilbert space is a great testimonial, precisely, to the manner in which visualization as an intuition can be amplified and made more powerful by mathematical analogies. Our comprehension of Euclidean geometry is amplified, thanks to Hilbert, to be a useful thing in understanding even the most seemingly unvisual aspects of atomic particles.

PP: Here you point to new possibilities that would surprise many people who consider themselves mathematically hopeless. Perhaps they think themselves incapable of abstraction or manipulating formalism. You are telling them that, on the contrary, it is the sensual side they are missing.

BM: Living mathematics is in no way abstract, at least to the people who live it. Intuitions can tie mathematics to the most concrete pictures, sensual experiences, and things that are immediate to all of us. There are always loads of alternate routes. If you are blocked at one route, no problem – try another. I believe this is the common understanding of just about everyone who practices mathematics. Mathematics is often taught without such connections, but there is no reason that it can't be taught so that a student's intuitions are fully engaged and exercised every step of the way.

Michael Hechter

*on the 2004  
presidential election*

To many observers, the outcome of the recent American election was a shock. Prior to the election, unemployment had been stubbornly high, economic growth was faltering, the chief justification for invading Iraq had been discredited, the occupation itself was increasingly troubled, and the president's approval ratings were consistently low. Under these conditions the prospects for defeating the incumbent seemed good.

Instead, as we all know, George W. Bush was returned to office by a narrow margin.

In the postmortems that followed, the role of cultural differences seemed to

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loom large. Many pundits characterized red and blue states as homogeneous territories advocating distinctive – and opposing – moral values. Somehow, issues like gay marriage, abortion, and religion trumped naked economic interests in many voters' eyes.

This was a surprise, because political analysts have long viewed elections as a democratic expression of class struggle: The extension of universal male suffrage in mid-nineteenth-century Britain was damned by conservatives – and praised by radicals – for empowering the working classes. The rise of socialist parties in Western Europe seemed consistent with the view that workers voted with their economic interests very much in mind. Likewise, conservative parties like the British Tories received disproportionate support from the upper classes.

The rationale for the primacy of class voting owes to more than historical evidence, however. The spatial models used by many postwar political scientists have flowed from a very similar assumption – that voters' preferences for policies like government intervention in the economy can be arrayed from left to right on a single dimension. Presumably the poorer that voters are, the more they will prefer government intervention in the economy (especially transfers and entitlements), and vice versa. Since monetary resources are fungible and can be put to any number of discrete ends, voters should be inclined to vote on the basis of their economic interests.

Although the cultural interpretation of the 2004 election is simplistic, like many clichés it contains more than a grain of truth. Over a decade ago scholars began to observe that since about 1965, voters' preferences in the advanced democracies could not be adequately modeled as emanating from a single left-right dimension (ostensibly associated with

social class); at least two distinct dimensions were now needed to model accurately the behavior of voters. The new dimension of political cleavage was variably named by different writers: Inglehart described a materialist/postmaterialist divide, Kitschelt a libertarian/authoritarian divide, Miller and Schofield a socially liberal/socially conservative divide, and Fiorina a moral/amoral divide. Despite this difference in terminology, in each case the new dimension of political cleavage represented cultural interests that were at least partially orthogonal to economic interests.

Why has cultural voting gained at the expense of class voting? One explanation is that such trends ultimately flow from shifting moral attitudes in the advanced democracies. According to this view, the historically unprecedented levels of prosperity that have arisen since the end of World War II made voting for one's economic interest less important than it once had been. Prosperity encouraged people to put aside traditional concerns for their material welfare in favor of 'postmaterial' concerns for moral values and cultural issues. The evidence for this explanation, however, is vanishingly thin. In the United States, for instance, there has been no significant change in attitudes about abortion, homosexuality, and other hot-button moral issues from the early 1970s to the present day.

If changing moral attitudes cannot explain the shift from class to cultural politics, what can? In recently published research I suggest that changes in the nature of governance in the advanced societies – especially the growth of direct rule – play an important role.

Individuals in advanced societies have multiple social attributes, each of which may influence their vote in a given election: everyone simultaneously has a

class position, a gender, an ethnicity, and a religious orientation. Which of these various attributes has the greatest salience for their voting behavior? On the one hand, voting *intentions* are influenced by the ideas that are promulgated in key social groups. Whereas the talk in unions is likely to revolve around issues of class, no doubt the emphasis in churches is more spiritual. On the other hand, voter *turnout* is affected by these groups' capability to mobilize their memberships. Indeed, the day after the election, one leading Democrat, Richard Gephardt, argued that the Republican victory grew out of religious and pro-gun groups' ability to get their members to vote. In a society with effective trade unions and class-based political parties, class voting will tend to come to the fore. The converse will tend to occur in a society where trade unions are relatively weak and cultural groups are relatively strong.

The prevalence of class and cultural groups, in turn, is decisively affected by the directness of a state's rule. In states characterized by direct rule, the central government takes principal responsibility for the provision of public goods. In the wake of the French Revolution, which marked the first important instance of direct rule in modern history, direct rule spread throughout Western Europe, with Bismarck in Germany as a key innovator. Industrial workers in these countries left behind the agrarian institutions that had supplied them with insurance and welfare benefits. To establish a new source for these benefits, the urban workers formed mutual benefit societies, fraternal organizations, and trade unions.

Direct rule was established, in part, to control the emergent class-based organizations of the proletariat. In this respect, direct rule's most fundamental institu-

tion was the welfare state, which developed in one form or another in all the industrial societies. By weaning industrial workers from their dependence on trade unions and left-wing political parties, the welfare state and its subsequently enacted entitlements sharply reduced the incentives for membership in working-class organizations.

Not surprisingly, the proportion of workers in unions is at an all-time low in most of the advanced democracies. Since membership in class-based organizations promotes class voting, the decline of unions has undercut the political salience of class in the United States and elsewhere.

At the same time, the growth of direct rule makes ever more politically salient a variety of moral values and cultural concerns. The direct rule state is relentlessly activist; it penetrates into previously sovereign realms of private life. It has the power to set educational and legal standards for all within its boundaries, to take children away from parents it deems abusive, and to charge husbands with spousal rape.

Even in the United States, which has a federal constitution that delegates the primary power to regulate morality to the individual states, direct rule has played a growing role. Thus President Truman desegregated the military in 1948, and the Supreme Court subsequently struck down state laws that had regulated school segregation, abortion, and pornography. In the United States, direct rule since World War II has extended its largesse in novel ways. A striking increase in national legislative enactments began in the 1950s, and the increased power of the federal government led to the formation of a host of new organizations representing the national interests of previously marginalized groups – from blacks in the 1950s to

women in the 1960s to gays and lesbians more recently.

When it is responsive to the demands pressed by such new social movements, the direct rule state may inadvertently spur cultural conflict. Thus the provision of bilingual education may be resisted by the linguistic majority; the enforcement of federal civil rights may spawn racist resistance; and the legalization of abortion may raise the political salience of religious and moral values. Much as Reconstruction fractured the Republican Party after the Civil War, these by-products of postwar direct rule in the United States split the Democratic Party, allowing the Republicans to consolidate their strategy for the South.

From this perspective, the outcome of the 2004 election is not so much an example of American exceptionalism or – as the London *Daily Mirror* famously claimed on November 3 – the stupidity of 59 million voters. Rather, the increasing influence of moral values and cultural politics is part of a secular trend sweeping all the advanced democracies.

The extension of direct rule provides individuals with a greater incentive to form and sustain cultural groups as against those based on class. This ensures the continued salience of cultural voting. By contrast, the politics of class is only likely to regain its former importance if direct rule – and the safety net provided by its various welfare regimes – is dismantled.

But in the United States, this, too, may yet come to pass.

Morris E. Fine  
& Peter W. Voorhees

*on the evolving  
curriculum in materials  
science & engineering*

In 1950, materials science and engineering did not exist as a university department. Instead, there were separate departments for metallurgical engineering and ceramic engineering. Polymers were taught in chemistry and chemical engineering departments. Solid-state physics was a well-established branch of physics, but introductory solid-state physics was taught in metallurgy departments. Specific areas of electronic materials were taught in many different departments. Subjects such as corrosion, me-

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chanical properties, and materials processing were also found in a wide range of university departments.

During the following ten to fifteen years, many universities initiated educational programs in materials science and engineering. In 1955, for instance, the metallurgy department at Northwestern University broadened its coverage to include several subfields of materials science and engineering – polymers, metals, electronic materials, and ceramics. The university's board of trustees changed the name of the department to materials science in January of 1959. Some time earlier the concept of a unified materials course based on principles that applied to a broad range of materials, rather than on the cataloging of materials and their properties, began to take form.

It has long been recognized that interdisciplinarity is at the core of materials science. In his *Ten Books on Architecture* more than two thousand years ago, Vitruvius cited wood, steel, bronze, rope, and stone as the *materia* that constitute machines. In recent times, electrical engineers, ceramists, physicists, and chemists worked together at Arthur Von Hippel's laboratory for insulator research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, one of the first interdisciplinary materials science laboratories at a university. During World War II at the Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago, researchers from almost every branch of the physical sciences and engineering collaborated on designing and building nuclear reactors. The development of the transistor at the Bell Telephone Laboratories was achieved through a collaboration of researchers in many materials subfields.

After World War II, the engineering sciences became an increasingly large component of engineering education. The U.S. government and many indus-



trial companies put pressure on the universities to provide a broader education in materials, fundamental for developing new products and improving existing ones. In 1952, the American Society of Engineering Education appointed the Committee on Evaluation of Engineering Education. The committee's report recommended thirty-six semester hours of engineering sciences in the curriculum. It listed engineering materials as well as physical metallurgy as engineering sciences. In 1956, the first report of the Atomic Energy Commission's Metallurgy and Materials Branch recommended new buildings and facilities for education and research in materials. The Office of Naval Research's Solid States Sciences Advisory Panel issued a report on the opportunities for solid-state sciences research after examining the U.S. Navy's materials problems. A study by the National Academy of Sciences chaired by J. Herbert Hollomon (who had assembled a materials department at the GE Research Laboratory) recommended the creation of a national materials laboratory. These and other considerations such as Sputnik led the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the Department of Defense to issue an invitation to all major universities in the United States to submit pre-proposals for funding to establish interdisciplinary materials research laboratories, with education of doctoral students to be a major component. The program still exists and is sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

The emergence of materials science and engineering as an academic discipline was a logical pedagogical development. The ability to incorporate such a wide range of materials into a single curriculum stems from the focus of materials science: the study of the relationships among processing, structure, and properties of materials. This paradigm

provides the intellectual framework for choosing the scientific base and experimental methods that are discussed in the curricula. It is more efficient to teach basic information in solid-state physics, thermodynamics, kinetics, molecular and crystalline structure, mechanical properties, etc. for all materials than to teach these subjects separately for each class of materials.

Biological materials are now being integrated into the materials science and engineering curricula at many universities. Of course, wood and cellulose products have been among man's most important materials from the beginning of civilization, but the current major push has come from the biomedical field. The resurgence of interest in biomaterials since the 1970s is largely a result of the revolution that has taken place in molecular biology. Given the exquisite molecular control afforded by the techniques that have been developed by molecular biologists and biochemists, it is now possible to control the biological response of materials and to use biological routes to create new materials. Incorporating such approaches into materials curricula will require broadening the scope of the basic courses to include molecular biology and biochemistry.

Nerves carry electrical impulses from one region of the body to another, a subject that could be taught in a course on electronic materials. Similarly, the basics of molecular biology can be developed under the rubric of a course on soft or biological materials. By keeping the focus on the processing-structure-properties-performance paradigm of materials science, folding this new area into existing materials science curricula will be straightforward. Subjects such as X-ray diffraction and electron microscopy and diffraction currently include biological materials.

*Note by  
Morris E.  
Fine &  
Peter W.  
Voorhees*

Of course, the discovery of the double helix was based on X-ray diffraction observations, and electron microscopy has long been a tool of the biological scientist. The theories of the bonding between atoms and how atoms are arranged in a material are general to all materials. Self-assembly is a phase transformation and must follow the same thermodynamic and kinetic principles as solidification, crystallization, and precipitation. Bones require a set of mechanical properties not too dissimilar from those required of other structural materials. Functionalized molecular scaffolds are used to promote the growth of a wide range of tissues. The processing-structure-properties-performance paradigm of materials science and engineering is illustrated by the strong relationship between the structure of the molecular scaffolds and the ability of these scaffolds to promote cell growth.

The materials science and engineering curriculum has evolved considerably over the past fifty years. Biological materials will be the next major addition to the curriculum. The result will be a broader and yet more intellectually vibrant field of study.

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*Inside back cover*: Britannia chastising Egypt in a 1924 *Punch* cartoon over the caption, "I GAVE YOU LIBERTY. SEE TO IT THAT THE THINGS DONE BY YOU IN HER NAME DO NOT MAKE ME REPENT MY GIFT." See Jack Snyder on *Empire: a blunt tool for democratization*, pages 58 – 71: "Democratization 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." Cartoon reproduced with permission of Punch Ltd.



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