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# American empire – a dangerous distortion?

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Abstract. This article reviews the idea of 'American Empire'. For most of the Cold War, this term formed part of particular kind of Marxian critique of American power. Neither American nor European statesmen, nor the mainstream press, regarded America as an 'empire'. Interestingly, the idea of an 'American Empire', stripped of its Marxian connotations, entered the mainstream towards the end of Cold War. This article asks two questions: what does it mean? Is it a useful expression or a dangerous distortion? It will be argued that, as a general statement of American political economy, 'American Empire' is meaningless: it neither lends itself to positive comparison with European empires nor describes any concrete aspect of the international relations of the US. However, it is possible to refer to American empires limited in time and space, for instance to formal empire in the Philippines or informal empire in Iran. 'American Empire' is thus a distortion; but is it dangerous? The idea certainly captured the neoconservative imagination, but it does not seem to have had real policy implications.

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## Introduction

In 1947, *The Economist* asked whether the world was witnessing 'a new phase in American policy, a phase of expansion and imperialism'. To *The Economist*, the answer was clear: 'only those whose view of America is distorted by ignorance or malice, or obscured by dogmatism, could possibly believe any such thesis.'[1] Towards the end of the Cold War, however, the view changed: 'empire' ceased to be an implicit criticism of America's 'rise to globalism', and took on a variety of new meanings, as a neutral/analytic means of comparing America to other global powers in history, or as a justification/exhortation for America to adopt an aggressive new stance in world politics.

Yet this calls 'American Empire' into some doubt: what is it? A variety of competing ideas have been lumped into 'American Empire': something comparable to European empires, or else exceptional; formal (political) empire, informal (economic-cum-political) empire, American hegemony, America as rule-setter or *primus inter pares*, and American 'empire' as a Jeffersonian 'empire of liberty', encompassing thereby traditional American anti-imperialism.[2] This article will ask

[1] 'Imperialism or Indifference?' *The Economist*, 152:5413 (24 May 1947), p. 785.
[2] Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).



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two questions: what does 'American Empire' mean? Is it useful, or a dangerous distortion?

## Empire: a spotter's guide

'Empire', D.A. Low argued, 'was fundamentally based on force'.[3] The *ultimo ratio* of empire formal or informal – what Michael Doyle labels effective sovereignty – is force. If one third of Britain's empire in India was 'informal' in character, the sovereignty of the princely states was fictive, because the prerogatives of force clearly resided elsewhere: this was the case in Awadh in 1856 and remained so in Hyderabad in 1948.[4] Force binds the subordinate to the dominant society, to whatever end. Inasmuch as the end of imperialism is empire, Doyle argues it should be understood in terms of its effects: 'defining imperialism as the disposition (such as monopoly capitalism) that purportedly causes it risks creating a simple tautology, not an explanation.'[5] Imperialism is bracketed, on the one hand, by a declaratory purpose; on the other, by the success or failure of that purpose.[6] Imperial peoples may be absent-minded; imperialists tend to know what they want – and how to get it.[7]

This might appropriately be called a 'realist' definition of empire. A 'liberal' definition takes a broader view. Ronald Robinson argued succinctly:

> imperialism in the industrial era is a process whereby agents of an expanding society gain inordinate influence or control over the vitals of weaker societies by 'dollar' and 'gun-boat' diplomacy, ideological suasion, conquest and rule, or by planting colonies of its own people abroad.[8]

This widens the definition of imperialism to include the exploitation of economic asymmetries, and deepens it, suggesting that (modern) imperialism is characterised by an intensive social and economic project. Thus, (modern) empire is a system based upon the forceful exploitation of power asymmetries mediated through systems of local collaboration in order to expropriate resources (for example, slaves, mineral rights) in service of (global) commerce.[9]

Of course, this merely identifies the elements: there is disagreement as to what constitutes a working 'system', how 'asymmetries' are defined, how 'force' is applied, the importance of 'local collaboration', the relationship of commerce and power politics, or the role of 'purposeful conduct'. One theorist's imperial vocation may be another's official mind. Nevertheless, as we scan the horizons of world

[3] D. A. Low, 'The Contraction of England; an inaugural lecture', in D. A. Low, *Eclipse of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 3.
[4] Thomas Metcalf & Barbara Metcalf, *A Concise History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 95 & 220.
[5] Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 33.
[6] Max Beloff, *Imperial Sunset*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1969 & 1989).
[7] Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[8] Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European foundations of European imperialism: Sketch for a theory of collaboration', in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (eds), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 118–9.
[9] John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 23.

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politics, we can formulate questions which give us a sense of the creature we're looking for, and ask whether American power sports the right stripes.

Firstly, is there a declaratory purpose to establish an empire? Following a war against fascism, confronted by British and Soviet imperialism, Americans were unlikely to announce a countervailing imperial programme, though President Truman clearly indicated his willingness to acquire territory.[10] Did later policies, for instance NSC-68, constitute such a programme? In theory, the objective of NSC-68 was the preservation of sovereign national states against Communist subversion/invasion; in practice, it was a charter for a global interventionism which sometimes involved the subordination of societies (for example, Chile, Guatemala, Iran), or forceful efforts to recast whole societies (for example, Vietnam). In David Lake's memorable formulation, polities simply choose the relationship, between 'anarchic' interstate relations or 'hierarchic' imperial programmes, which minimise the costs of producing the desired level of security.[11] American policy has led to imperial ventures, but the lack of a declaratory purpose is troubling; we will return to this point.

Secondly, does there exist an asymmetrical relationship between two societies, such that dominion of one by the other constitutes the exercise of (effective) sovereignty without a concomitant community? This question need not be limited to the realm of 'external' affairs: since J.A. Hobson's brilliant study of imperialism, most critiques of empire have been concerned above all with exposing (and deposing) a 'power elite' whose venal, self-serving ventures fed upon civil society, at home and abroad.[12] Yet what is striking about American policy is precisely its restraint, evident not least in the absence of, say, a post-1945 class of 'Nabobs' grown fat upon European blood.[13] In 1945, the possibilities for an American Empire were boundless: every last democracy stood ready to become, in Gladwyn Jebb's words, outposts of 'American Pluto-democracy'.[14] The Canadian Government, for instance, desperate to preserve Canadian sovereignty, purchased every American installation on Canadian soil.[15] However, these fears came to nothing: given the relative scale of American power after 1945, the 'return' on it was laughable – as an irate Senate often asserted, for instance when it torpedoed the Anglo-American Petroleum Agreement. Nobody needed to tell the Senate about 'third dimensional' power – what aggravated the legislature was precisely the use of executive power to frustrate sectional interests in the conduct of American foreign policy. The North Atlantic pact was an exercise in limiting America's effective sovereignty, formulated as a security community, under Article 51 of the UN Charter, rather than as a regional arrangement under Articles 52–54.[16] NATO was constituted, not as a Delian League to balance Russia, but as a microcosm of the UN, fulfilling more perfectly the ideals of the Charter. Ernest Bevin described

[10] Harry Truman, radio report on the Potsdam Conference, 9 August 1945. Harry S. Truman, *Public Papers: 12 April to 31 December, 1945* (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1961), p. 203.
[11] David Lake, *Entangling Relations: American Foreign Policy in its Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 41.
[12] Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).
[13] Percival Spear, *The Nabobs: A study of the social life of the English in eighteenth century India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[14] Lord Gladwyn, *The Memoirs of Lord Gladwyn* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), p. 117.
[15] R. M. MacDonnell, Ottawa, to Jack Hickerson, 19 October 1945. *Documents on Canadian External Relations*, vol. 11, '1945' (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer), pp. 1499–500.
[16] Nicholas Mansergh, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of Wartime Cooperation and Post-war Change, 1939–1952* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 339–42.

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it as 'an endeavour to express on paper the underlying determination to preserve our way of life – freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the rights and liberty of the individual.'[17] NATO relied upon American power, true, but never sufficed upon it – which helps to explain why it survived the Cold War. If NATO is not the heartland of a global empire, what are we to make of the scattered handful of cases remaining under the banner, 'American Empire'?

Thirdly, has one society succeeded in effectively dominating another by force, and of translating its dominion into terms of local political economy? This raises the question, what amount of force is effective? Arguably, the sanction of force has become progressively less effective as the costs of using force have risen, the willingness (in the West) to bear those costs has declined, and the constitution of solidarist programmes – Communism, ethnic nationalism, religious radicalism – gives societies a high incentive to resist oppression and privation.[18] The development of small arms (for example, the ubiquitous AK-47 and RPG-7) allows small groups to claim to wage war, and inflict disproportionate losses on their adversaries. Meanwhile, mass-politicisation ensures that political elites fear domestic discontent more than faraway emperors. In these respects, the American experience of 'globalism' clearly contrasts with the European: American 'air pacification' of Iraq in the 1990s was substantially less effective than British air pacification there in the 1920s.[19] America's informal empire in Persia, meanwhile, though a notable success for some 25 years, was effaced, not by great power rivalries and the back-and-forth of the 'great game', but by a mobilised and hostile population, and one which graphically demonstrated the limits of American 'hard power'.[20] The fate of the Pahlavi Dynasty indicated, even more clearly than non-alignment or the NIEO, that the first concern of any remotely modern state in an era of global travel and global communications must be soft power – the ability to shape preferences and control a public 'narrative' – as projected, not 'abroad', but right at home.[21]

Fourthly, is the dominant society successful in obtaining its ends by means of exploiting power asymmetries? Does 'imperialism' translate into 'empire'? With respect to the immediate post-war years, one of the more interesting elements of American policy was restraint. From the Atlantic Charter to Bretton Woods, a key American objective was to open the Sterling Area; and yet, when Sterling tottered on the brink in 1946, America rescued it. This ensured that the Bretton Woods system coexisted with Sterling until the 1960s; even as the British system declined, Europe erected its own system in the form of the European Economic Community.[22] Europe did not become an American 'periphery'; to the contrary, Europe became a key competitor/partner with America in most fields of finance and

[17] Quoted by Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary, 1945–1951* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 671.

[18] *Unsere Mauern brechen; unsere Herzen nicht:* fitting epitaph to the Allied bombing of Germany.

[19] David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 18–38; on 'no-fly zones' see Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 107–21.

[20] James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 216–60.

[21] Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The means to success in world politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. 5–18.

[22] Richard Gardner, *Sterling-Dollar Diplomacy in Current Perspective: The Origins and Prospects of our International Economic Order*, rev. edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989),

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industry. Farther afield, while it is clearly the case that America has engaged in imperial ventures – in Guatemala in 1954, for instance, or Chile in 1973 – it is hard to see what America actually achieved by many of them. If the US helped to bankroll Augusto Pinochet, Chilean-American relations soured badly after 1976 as a result of Congressional intervention, President Carter's aversion to Pinochet's human rights abuses and international condemnation of the Pinochet regime.[23] America backed a succession of reactionary governments in Guatemala after 1954, but given that the United Fruit Company fell prey to (American) anti-trust suits, irrespective of the 1954 coup, this support seems to have arisen from the use of maps on too small a scale and reflexive anti-Communism, rather than from any definite policy. The oversight ensured the disintegration of Guatemala under a succession of vicious, murdering thugs.[24] If Americans have occasionally been enthusiastic about imperial ventures, since 1945 they have been less than enthusiastic about governing, or even properly exploiting, the resulting mess; Iran was one of the few clear exceptions to this rule. No mighty ramparts, the scattered boundaries of the 'American Empire': they flicker out of existence almost as soon as they appear.

What about American 'dollar imperialism', in the form of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation? These organisations may employ unpalatable methods, but force is not one of them – a clear contrast with, say, the Opium Wars, Rhodes' wars in Matabeleland, or Wellesley's campaigns in the Deccan. Imperial ventures are often conspiratorial, but they also leave trails of paper and money – to Jardine Matheson, Anglo-American or the East India Company, in the above cases. Even trenchantly critical accounts of the IMF *et al*. reject insider conspiracies with selective enrichment as their object.[25] These organisations lack transparency, engage in hypocrisy and act counterproductively; they are not supported by force or motivated by conspiratorial designs. The costs/benefits of controversial restructuring programmes, for instance, are measured econometrically, and not by the monopolies acquired by foreign firms. It may be accurate to say this is hegemonic, hypocritical, incoherent – but the 'Washington Consensus' was about rents, not imperialism.[26] As for the privileged position of the dollar itself, the appropriate term is seigniorage, not empire: America benefits from the global position of the dollar, but the dollar depends for its position upon international cooperation.[27]

Three points may be made at this stage. First, 'empire' as defined here describes the asymmetrical relations *within* many polities better than it does the international

pp. 286–385. Also see the overview in Alan Milward, 'Was the Marshall Plan Necessary?', *Diplomatic History*, 13:2 (Spring 1989), pp. 231–53.

[23] David R. Manes and Francisco Rojas Aravena, *The US and Chile: Coming in from the Cold* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 10–15.

[24] Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 227–66.

[25] Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), pp. 198–213.

[26] Akira Kohsaka, 'New Development Strategies: Beyond the Washington Consensus', in Akira Kohsaka (ed.), *New Development Strategies: Beyond the Washington Consensus* (London: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 1–2.

[27] Robert Gilpin, *The Challenge of Global Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 120–4. Some form of coercion would be necessary to satisfy the charge 'dollar imperialism'; sometimes commentators hint this might become the case, but there is as yet no proof for the charge.

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system.[28] Second, if America has sometimes acted imperialistically, and acquired a (temporary) empire on occasion, 'empire' does a poor job of describing the political economy of American power more generally. Third, as Iran or Guatemala obliquely illustrate, almost every instance of empire perpetrated by the US since 1945 emerged out of a conspiracy against the civil society of the 'subject' people – and against the American public. As Adam Smith and others have been shouting for centuries, empires are rarely a good deal for 'people' wherever they reside, but even crapulent aristocrats were able to mollify complacent domestic audiences with palatable justifications such as the spread of 'Christian civilisation'. If the 'American Empire' has tended to flicker into and out of existence, surely this is because Americans have been hostile to the notion that they are an imperial people or hostile anyway to paying for the pretension.[29] A cranky civil society imposes major constraints on the nature/length of the adventures it will tolerate.[30]

## *Empire by invitation?*

Why did the 'American Empire' enter such a vogue towards the end of the Cold War? Most airport bookshops now stock at least one title celebrating America's Athenian/Roman/British accomplishments or pondering America's Athenian/Roman/British fate. The idea was proposed by J. L. Gaddis in 1981, who suggested that both Moscow and Washington acquired empires after 1945, the one by force, the other by invitation.[31] This was an interesting development for an historian whose first book demolished Marxian claims about America and the origins of the Cold War. What was this 'empire'? Another essay, a few years later, explained: America was 'undoubtedly' an empire, but a defensive empire; Vietnam thus represented a classic case of imperial overstretch, an ineffectual and disproportionate defence of empire against 'local insurgencies'. Gaddis quoted Pericles: once acquired, empires were dangerous to let go.[32]

This begged the question: was it dangerous to let the 'empire' go in Vietnam? European empires were dealt mortal blows by the Japanese, who destroyed the foundations of white prestige and local complacency which made empire viable in the first place.[33] Pericles' warning held true for these empires; what about America? In fact, American power *endured* the withdrawal of American troops, the collapse of American prestige, and the breakdown of the post-war consensus that had sustained American activism. If the Vietnam debacle did not spell the end of

[28] In which connection, see Robert Jackson, *Quasi-states: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[29] As Michael Mann writes, 'it is not so much the material resources which are lacking as the supportive ideologies to deploy them.' Michael Mann, 'The first failed empire of the 21st century', *Review of International Studies*, 30:4 (October 2004), p. 637.

[30] Lest the Vietnam War be considered lengthy, the Anglo-Maratha Wars ran 1777–1818, and the Maori Wars 1845–1872. Also, the British won – something of a *sine qua non* of empire-building.

[31] J. L. Gaddis, 'Containment: Its Past and Future', *International Security*, 5:4 (Spring 1981), p. 79.

[32] J. L. Gaddis, 'The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War', *Diplomatic History*, 7:3 (Summer 1983), p. 182.

[33] Suke Wolton, *Lord Hailey, the Colonial Office and the Politics of Race and Empire in the Second World War: The Loss of White Prestige* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 35–64; also Paul B. Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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American power on the far side of the Pacific, surely the analogy to European (or Athenian) empires does not hold?

'American Empire' gave coherence to new international histories: Geir Lundestad used 'empire by invitation' to relate American power to a far-flung periphery, arguing America's post-war experience paralleled Britain's after 1815.[34] Interestingly, though Lundestad intended to disprove American exceptionalism, he scrupulously bracketed 'empire' to indicate that it was an informal, invitational, peculiarly *American* phenomenon.[35] Gaddis apparently felt qualms as to whether American political economy fit an imperial framework; in *The Long Peace*, he used 'expansion by invitation' to qualify Lundestad's thesis.[36]

By the end of the 1980s, however, the idea had taken flight, and a variety of authors, from Paul Kennedy to Walter Russell Mead, propounded 'American Empire'. It goes without saying that it was a declining empire. *Newsweek* wailed, 'is it twilight for America?'[37] *Time*, more sagely, accepted that all empires come to dust.[38]

What was the American Empire? According to Mead, the 'American Empire' consisted of three concentric tiers of states defined by proximity to the US. He posited a formal structure of power, modelled on the British Empire, in which America protected weak Europeans and maintained 'somewhat retooled' European colonial empires.[39] This point of view was recently expressed as Venutian Europeans and Martian Americans.[40] Kennedy refrained from labelling America an empire, but established a clear basis for comparison with other empires which, he argued, rose to dominion in virtue of comparative economic advantage; when this waned, they were left in positions of imperial overstretch.[41] 'Imperial overstretch', like 'America unbound', has become a theme with numerous variations.[42] As for Gaddis, his view has evolved: 'empire by invitation' was back for *We Now Know*,[43] but the word 'hegemony' replaced it in 2002,[44] only to be replaced by 'empire', now linked to the Jeffersonian 'empire of liberty', in 2004.[45] Lundestad's views also evolved with his 'empire by integration' thesis, which fits broadly within the 'empire of liberty' tradition.[46]

[34] Geir Lundestad, 'Empire by Invitation? The US and Western Europe, 1945–1952', *Journal of Peace Research*, 23:3 (September 1986), pp. 263–77.
[35] Geir Lundestad, *The American 'Empire'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 37–9.
[36] J. L. Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 59n.
[37] John Barry, 'Is it Twilight for America?', *Newsweek* (25 January 1988), p. 21.
[38] Paul Gray, 'Why All Empires Come to Dust', *Time* (15 February 1988), p. 56.
[39] Walter Russell Mead, *Mortal Splendor: The American Empire in Transition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
[40] Robert Kagan, *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (London: Atlantic, 2003).
[41] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).
[42] Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
[43] J. L. Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 26–53.
[44] J. L. Gaddis, 'A Grand Strategy of Transformation', *Foreign Affairs*, 113 (Nov–Dec 2002), pp. 50–7.
[45] J. L. Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 107–13.
[46] Geir Lundestad, *'Empire' by integration: The US and European integration, 1945–1997* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). As in his 'empire by invitation' thesis, Lundestad seems torn between

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Each of these ideas is potentially valid, and 'American Empire' is clearly compelling, but when a variety of well-respected commentators use the same words to mean totally different things, the descriptive utility of those words becomes questionable. If the collective goods/burdens deriving from America's presence or conduct in global affairs resembles that of European empires, it still behoves us to be precise about how, why and where. Whatever we may say of historical analogies, the British Empire had a reasonably precise, often legal, taxonomy: 'Crown Colonies,' 'Dominions,' or 'Commonwealth,' for instance. This taxonomy was integral to defending/maintaining the empire. While many people think the 'American Empire' exists, there is little agreement as to what it is, whence it came or where it went. 'American Empire' does not describe a concrete object; it describes an essentially contested concept, a key variable, 'X', onto which commentators project different values and definitions, not to say prejudices, and over which they erect different theories and conclusions.

Lest this be thought quibbling, empires used to be things people could shake a stick at. An empire massacred people at Amritsar in 1919; another crushed Algiers in 1956; yet another marched into Prague in 1968. Perhaps it was an empire that unseated Mohammed Mossadeq, bombed Hanoi and invaded Cambodia – in which case, it was a thing operating in specific ways, at specific times, in specific locations, and not what Raymond Aron mockingly paraphrased as 'empire sans frontières et sans souveraineté, invisible et omniprésent.'[47] So – which is it? There is a hidden tension in the term 'American Empire': it reflects a persistent debate about the nature, role and purpose of American power. That debate grew more acute in light of the new international history, which complicated the simple, compelling narrative of post-war superpower competition, and the end of the Cold War itself, which derailed every post-war narrative, simple or not. While the definition of 'American Empire' is essentially contested, it is also an effort to give American history a particular kind of teleology. Does this debate have ramifications for how Americans define themselves and their foreign policy?

## *American empire: a dangerous distortion?*

The question is especially pertinent since the US has established informal empires in Afghanistan and Iraq. Though grounded upon the law of occupation, these occupations effectively uphold the principles of trusteeship, combining a civilising mission with special legal/administrative arrangements (for example, private military contractors, the 'green zone'), backed by American military power.[48]

the desire to compare America to leading great powers and empires of the past, and the admission that America's 'empire', as such, fits but loosely (if at all) any such definition. This tension is particularly evident in the empire by integration thesis, since the only evidence Lundestad can adduce for 'empire' is that American 'support' for European integration (talk about a post-modern emperor!) was somewhat self-interested. This is why I classify it as part of the 'empire of liberty' school.

[47] Raymond Aron, *République Impériale: Les États-Unis dans le monde, 1945–1972* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1973), p. 283.

[48] William Bain, *Between Anarchy and Society: Trusteeship and the Obligations of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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America exercises a degree of effective sovereignty inside both states; how long this will remain the case is unclear.

What is interesting is the degree to which imperial rhetoric explicitly coloured debate prior to both invasions. Niall Ferguson argued America was an empire that dare not speak its name at precisely the moment that imperial grandeur was all the rage[49]: commentators argued that Americans ought to don jodhpurs and pith helmets (Max Boot),[50] acquire a 'pagan' ethos (Robert Kaplan),[51] even found a 'colonial office' (Charles Krauthammer).[52] Proponents of American interventionism outlined an imperial vocation for America, and many critics took them at their word;[53] this sidelined the (more pertinent) debate on liberal internationalism/humanitarian intervention.[54]

Arguably, what was at stake in Iraq was a deep-seated question of *American* identity, one which echoed earlier debates about America's 'imperial republic'. Even if Americans do not seek an empire, they might pursue a sense of identity or purpose so overweening or self-obsessed as to be indistinguishable from imperialism.[55] It is particularly interesting that the classification of Iraqi factions – as 'freedom fighters', 'Islamofascists,' etc. – reflect positions on American motives rather than Iraqi objectives.[56] As Fouad Ajami observed wistfully:

> This was a world that could whittle down, even devour a big American victory [. . .] It could reject the message of reform by dwelling on the sins of the American messengers. It could call up the fury of the Israeli-Palestinian violence [. . .] It could shout down its own would-be reformers, write them off as accomplices of a foreign power. It could throw up its defences and wait for the US to weary of its expedition.[57]

Sticks aplenty waited to be shaken at the American invaders/liberators. An overweening sense of purpose might allow Americans to blithely ignore both the sticks and the people waving them; is it capable of maintaining an empire once those sticks raise welts? Limited shelf-life has defined America's empire(s). Might this reflect not only domestic opposition to long-term/expensive foreign ventures, but an enduring incomprehension of foreigners? Successful empires develop a clinical understanding of subject peoples: the British had schools (for example,

[49] Niall Ferguson, 'The empire that dare not speak its name', *The Sunday Times* (13 April 2003), p. 3.
[50] Max Boot, 'The Case for American Empire', *The Weekly Standard*, 7:5 (15 October 2001), p. 27.
[51] Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002).
[52] Charles Krauthammer, 'In Defense of Democratic Realism', *The National Interest*, 77 (Fall 2004), pp. 15–25.
[53] For instance, Jay Bookman, 'The President's real goal in Iraq', in Michael C. Sifry and Christopher Cerf (eds), *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), pp. 347–52. More generally, see Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order*, trans. C. Jon Delogu (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
[54] See the thoughtful essays in Thomas Cushman (ed.), *A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
[55] This statement borrows heavily from Robert Tucker, *Nation or Empire? The Debate over American Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968). Also see G. John Ikenberry, 'America's Imperial Ambition', *Foreign Affairs*, 81:5 (September–October 2002), pp. 44–60.
[56] There is an expanding library on this topic. See, for instance, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's green zone* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006); Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005).
[57] Fouad Ajami, *The Foreigner's Gift: The Americans, the Arabs and the Iraqis in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 85.

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College of Fort William), bureaucracies (for example, Colonial Office), non-governmental organisations (for example, London Mission Society), whole populations (for example, 'Anglo-Indians') whose business it was to organise, categorise, penetrate and govern 'the other'. Americans abroad more closely resemble E. M. Forester's middle class tourists (my translator is *gay*?) than they do Kipling's sunburned, polyglot officers. The long, loud debate about what Iraq means for America persistently ignored the vital other half of the imperial equation.[58] What if 'empire' merely describes the belated and temporary exceptions to the rule of American power?

## Conclusion

Despite the imperial rhetoric surrounding Iraq/Afghanistan – and despite the (temporary) informal empire which America acquired in consequence – it is not clear that 'American Empire' has altered American identity or foreign policy. Clearly, the idea touched a romantic streak in the neoconservative psyche; and the 2002 National Security Strategy was a neoconservative document.[59] Yet, the confusion between American foreign policy and domestic identity, or the debacle that was American post-hostilities planning in Iraq, did not necessarily follow from romanticising the British Empire. President Clinton's foreign policy also emphasised the universalism of American values, while militaries the world round need little prompting to wage obscure battles over doctrine. Bluntly put, had British imperialism really provided the historical analogy for American policy in Iraq, that policy might have looked a bit more dubious. 'American Empire' was a nice rhetorical flourish; it is hard to say that America's current informal empire followed from a deliberate policy of imperial aggrandisement.

If Americans are accidental (or incoherent) imperialists, what does the 'American Empire' mean? The term performs several functions: (1) it establishes grounds of comparison between American and other world powers, either in political economy or global mission; (2) it posits a resolution of the contradictions between domestic politics and foreign policy, so that identities or preferences characterising the former become key variables of the latter; (3) it frames American power within a readily-accessible narrative of 'rise' and/or 'fall'.

Yet, each of these elements is peculiarly double-edged: the argument that America inherited Britain's role may become, *pace* Ferguson, the moral imperative to do so; the resolution of domestic preferences and foreign policy may become confusion between them; and obsession with narratives of descent/ascent may lead to unwarranted defeatism/triumphalism. The question naturally follows: does this indicate the presence of an empire, or highlight the problem of understanding or defining America's place in the world? If 'American Empire' does not represent

[58] Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), pp. 97–177; Hew Strachan, 'The Lost Meaning of Strategy', *Survival*, 47:3 (Autumn 2005), pp. 33–54; Hew Strachan, 'Making Strategy: Civil-Military Relations after Iraq', *Survival*, 48:3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 59–86.

[59] 'The National Security Strategy of the US of America', September 2002. Available at: {http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html}. Also see, William Kristol & Robert Kagan, 'Towards a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 75:4 (July–August, 1996), pp. 18–32. More generally, see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (London: Penguin, 2004).

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anything concrete, it may nevertheless represent a persistent 'imperial temptation' in American foreign policy. Several questions follow: when and where has that temptation been acted upon? Does it amount to a policy of imperial aggrandisement, that is, an imperial vocation, or is it something into which Americans occasionally stumble – empire by fit of absence of mind? These are pertinent questions precisely because it is hard to credit Americans as successful imperialists: the broad brush of empire may explain American failures; it hardly does justice to the persistent sources of American success.

It cannot be argued that America has *never* pursued an imperial policy at certain times and places; it is simply hard to see how the term 'empire' describes American conduct or purpose more generally. It is noticeable that recent proponents of the idea of 'American Empire' tend to argue that alliances, treaties, economic institutions – what used to be known as 'statecraft' in the old days – all constitute markers of 'informal' empire.[60] Iraq and Afghanistan fall into that category today, as Iran and the Philippines did a generation ago, but the point is that 'American Empire', or more appropriately, America's empires, ought to be understood in light of *specific* kinds of relationships framed by *particular* sorts of power and hierarchy, rather than as a general statement of the nature, role or purpose of American power in global affairs. In light of the grave consequences of misreading American power or purpose, it is vital that terms of art like 'American Empire' illuminate and clarify. At present, the term, while it was (probably) not responsible for the debacle in Iraq, is not illuminating; it is a rhetorical superfluity or obfuscation.

[60] Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), pp. 12–3.

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