

America's Imperial Dilemma

Dimitri K. Simes

THE RELUCTANT EMPIRE

ANY REALISTIC DISCUSSION of U.S. foreign policy must begin with the recognition that, notwithstanding Americans' views and preferences, most of the world sees the United States as a nascent imperial power. Some nations support the United States precisely because of this, viewing it as a benign liberal empire that can protect them against ambitious regional powers. Others resent it because it stands in the way of their goals. Still others acquiesce to U.S. imperial predominance as a fact of life that cannot be changed and must be accepted.

It is understandable why supporters of the Bush administration's foreign policy balk at any mention of the "e" word. Many past empires were given a bad name not just by their opponents, from national liberation movements to Marxists, but also by their conduct; Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were the ugliest manifestations. The United States, on the other hand, is said to seek benign influence rather than domination. Its political culture and even its institutional design mitigate against its acting as an effective imperial power. These arguments are not without merit. Still, they reflect more a reluctance to associate American foreign policy with negative imperial stereotypes than a reasoned appreciation of how earlier empires emerged and functioned.

Although empires, like democracies, have taken vastly different forms through history, they have several features in common. First, empires exercise great authority over large and varied territories populated by diverse ethnic groups, cultures, and religions. They rely on a broad range of tools and incentives to maintain this dominance:

DIMITRI K. SIMES is President of the Nixon Center in Washington, D.C., and Co-publisher of *The National Interest*.

political persuasion, economic advantage, and cultural influence where possible; coercion and force when necessary. Empires generally expect neighboring states and dependencies to accept their power and accommodate to it. This often contributes to a sense that the imperial power itself need not play by the same rules as ordinary states and that it has unique responsibilities and rights.

Second, empires, more often than not, have emerged spontaneously rather than through a master plan. They frequently evolve as if following the laws of physics; an initial success generates momentum, which is subsequently maintained by inertia. Each new advance creates opportunities and challenges that extend the empire's definition of its interests far beyond its original form.

Ancient Athens, for example, began as the leader of a victorious alliance that defeated the Persians. But it quickly evolved into an empire, against the will of many of its former partners. Thucydides, one of the fathers of realism, describes the Athenian perspective thus: "We did not gain this empire by force. ... It was the actual course of events which first compelled us to increase our power to its present extent: fear of Persia was our chief motive, though afterwards we thought, too, of our own honor and our own interest."

Third, empires do not always have sovereignty over their domains. This was certainly the case with Athens. It was also the case in the early period of the Roman Empire, when Rome sought domination rather than direct control over its dependencies. Although some continental European empires, such as Austria-Hungary and tsarist Russia, did establish sovereignty within their territories, other modern empires were less formal, comfortable with enough preponderance to accomplish their political and economic objectives. The Soviet empire, for example, attempted to dominate rather than directly control territories outside of its borders after Stalin's death.

Finally, despite the unpleasant present-day connotations, the imperial experience has not been uniformly negative. Some former empires were agents of change and progress and had generally good intentions vis-à-vis their subjects. The United Kingdom was a prime example of this type, approaching its empire not only with a desire to promote development, but with a self-sacrificing willingness to spend its resources toward that end.



Whether or not the United States now views itself as an empire, for many foreigners it increasingly looks, walks, and talks like one, and they respond to Washington accordingly. There is certainly no reason for American policymakers to refer to the United States as such in public pronouncements, but an understanding of America as an evolving, if reluctant, modern empire is an important analytic tool with profound consequences that American leaders should understand.

Empires cannot escape the laws of history. One of the most salient of these laws is that empires generate opposition to their rule, ranging from strategic realignment among states to terrorism within them. Another is that empires have never been cost free and that the level of opposition to

them depends on the costs that the imperial power is willing to shoulder. Both imperial Britain and imperial Rome spent a good deal of time and money quelling unrest and promoting loyalty within their territories. Finally, imperial powers often alter their preimperial forms of government and ways of life. Rome, for example, lost its republican government when it chose to don the imperial mantle. And although the United Kingdom chose democracy over the demands of maintaining its empire, it accumulated substantial immigrant populations from its former colonies, with significant political and economic consequences.

UTOPIAN URGES

AN EMPIRE that displays weakness and is not taken seriously is an empire in trouble. Being perceived as capricious or imperious, however, is also dangerous. This problem has often occurred when an imperial power insists on imposing a particular vision on the world. How many twentieth-century tragedies were caused, directly or indirectly, in this way? Destiny and choice have made the United States the dominant power in the world today, yet many U.S. policymakers—both Republican and Democrat—have failed to learn from past mistakes. The pursuit of their universal democratic utopia, as attractive as it may seem, is damaging vital U.S. interests and is increasingly coming into conflict with the United States' founding principle of "no taxation without representation."

In the past, a pragmatic foreign policy establishment at home and powerful constraints abroad restrained the United States' messianic instincts. This establishment was built largely around business leaders and lawyers who, although they shared American idealism and a strong sense of the national interest, were cautious and flexible in applying their beliefs to international politics. The Vietnam debacle discredited and divided this group, however, and later demographic and social trends diversified and democratized it. By the 1990s, the pragmatic component in the new foreign policy elite had declined in influence. Instead, powerful but too often reckless single-issue groups and non-governmental organizations—which aspired to shape policy without having responsibility for its consequences—came to the fore, as did emotional but poorly explained television images.

As a result, American foreign policy moved away from its generally high-minded but interest-based roots to espouse a form of global social engineering. Two illusions facilitated this process: that international crusading can be done cheaply and that those who oppose the United States are motivated by a blanket hatred for American freedom and power, rather than by self-interested objections to specific American actions. These assumptions are simply not accurate, however. A recent major global survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reveals that those who hold unfavorable views of the United States generally support democratic ideals.

As pragmatism waned, the disintegration of the Soviet Union removed the principal external constraint on U.S. international behavior. The United States' unchallenged military, economic, and political superiority facilitated the view that it could do almost anything it wanted to do in the international arena. In this environment, a new utopian vision was born, the notion that the United States is both entitled and obliged to promote democracy wherever it can—by force if necessary. This idea was enthusiastically promoted in Washington by a *de facto* alliance of aggressive Wilsonians and neoconservatives, whose apparent belief that the United States cannot settle for anything less than permanent worldwide revolution has more in common with Trotsky than with the legacy of America's forefathers or even the muscular but pragmatic idealism of Theodore Roosevelt.

Typically, the pursuit of moralistic projects has undermined not only American interests but also American values. Double standards and deception, or at least considerable self-deception, have become all too common. For example, U.S. politicians who opposed the International Criminal Court—out of legitimate concern for American sovereignty and fear of politically motivated prosecutions of American soldiers—were simultaneously pressuring the newly democratic Yugoslavia to send its citizens to international war crimes tribunals. Others persuaded the Clinton administration to ignore the UN arms embargo in Bosnia but expressed outrage when other nations violated international sanctions. U.S. politicians across the spectrum have

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also applied double standards in their approach to foreign campaign contributions: appalled at the notion of another country contributing to the Republicans or Democrats, while insisting that the United States has a duty to fund various foreign political parties, regardless of foreign local laws.

THE CLINTON DOCTRINE

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON's humanitarian and nation-building efforts were a departure from earlier interventions. Defending the Panama Canal or attacking Grenada may have saved innocent lives, but these missions were enacted primarily to serve important American interests or destroy declared enemies. Clinton's moralistic projects, on the other hand, typically were divorced from U.S. interests. Take Haiti, where the United States ousted a nasty, but basically friendly, junta in order to restore to power a nasty, but rather less friendly, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who expressed his gratitude by restoring diplomatic relations with Cuba. Or Bosnia, where the Clinton administration cold-shouldered the Vance-Owen partition plan, even though this offered the best hope for a quick end to the bloodshed.

Overall, the results of Clinton's humanitarian interventions were mixed at best. On the positive side, the United States did eventually prevail in Haiti and the Balkans, and it certainly enhanced global perceptions of its power. In addition, U.S.-led interventions probably prevented tit-for-tat killing from spiraling out of control in Bosnia and Kosovo. Yet some of the atrocities that took place were partly the result of the Clinton administration's actions themselves. For example, U.S. policy in the Balkans allowed Croatia to drive 200,000 Serbs from Krajina. It also encouraged Muslims, especially Kosovar Albanians, to pursue radical objectives and reject compromises that, in combination with international pressure, could have averted considerable carnage. To this day, Bosnia and Kosovo remain NATO protectorates, and neither seems prepared to accept the U.S. ideal of interethnic harmony.

Humanitarian interventions also diverted the Clinton administration's energy, attention, and resources away from more pressing concerns, such as the growing threat posed by al Qaeda. These misdirected priorities damaged relations with Russia and, inadvertently,

China, complicating efforts to win their cooperation against terrorism in the period before September 11, 2001. Ironically, tension with Russia even contributed to the Clinton administration's rejection of Moscow's proposal to work against the Taliban, offered as early as 1999.

EMPIRE'S NEW CLOTHES

ALTHOUGH SEPTEMBER 11 was a wake-up call to American leaders about the dangers of terrorism, too many seem to have drawn the wrong policy conclusions. The principal problem is the mistaken belief that democracy is a talisman for all the world's ills, including terrorism, and that the United States has a responsibility to promote democratic government wherever in the world it is lacking.

The flaw in this approach is not with democracy per se. Liberal democracy with civil society, the rule of law, minority rights, and free but regulated markets is undoubtedly the most humane and efficient way to organize modern society. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice is right to point out that suggesting certain people are not interested in freedom or are not ready for democracy's responsibilities is deeply condescending.

It is also condescending, however, to claim that America has the right to impose democracy on other nations and cultures, regardless of their circumstances and preferences. From the Roman Empire to the British Empire, civilization brought on the tips of swords or bayonets has never inspired lasting gratitude. Why should precision weapons be any more effective? As Winston Churchill said, "democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." Treating democracy as a divine revelation—and Washington as its prophet and global enforcer—simply does not square with the historical record of this form of government, nor with the geopolitical realities of the modern world.

Advocates of the militant promotion of democracy have advanced a variety of questionable arguments to explain why imposing democracy it is not just a moral imperative but an essential practical goal for the United States. One of the most pervasive of these arguments is that democracy will prevent terrorism, since, in the words of former Congressman Newt Gingrich, "the advance of freedom is the surest

strategy to undermine the appeal of terror in the world." Recent history suggests otherwise. Even setting aside Islamist terrorists in the United States, how can one explain homegrown terrorists such as radical environmentalists, the Weathermen in the 1960s and 1970s, or Eric Rudolph, recently charged with the Atlanta Olympics bombing? And what about the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland or Basque terrorism in democratic Spain?

Another favorite argument is that democracies do not fight one another. But this claim also collapses under scrutiny. If one is willing to consider states democratic by the standards of their time, then there have been several wars between democracies in the past: between Athens and Syracuse, Rome and Carthage, Cromwell's England and the Dutch, and Victorian Britain and South Africa. Moreover, two wars on

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American soil—the War of 1812 against the United Kingdom and the Civil War itself—were essentially fought between democracies. The reason there were fewer such disputes in the twentieth century was partly because the democracies were united in their struggle against Nazism and communism. With these common enemies gone, however, it is by no

means certain that democracies will remain in pacific union. In the Middle East, for example, where popular antisemitic and anti-American feelings abound, democracy could actually increase the probability of conflict between Arab countries and Israel or the United States.

Those who dismiss the idea of conflict between democracies often reject the notion of multipolarity because, in the words of National Security Adviser Rice, "it is a theory of rivalry, of competing interests—and at its worst—competing values." But this position ignores the legitimacy of others' perspectives and would alienate even pro-American democracies if it were to become a principle of U.S. foreign policy. The debate over Iraq demonstrated how little is required for democracies like the United States and France to discover one another's imperfections. Some Russian observers already see recent U.S. administrations as resembling the Soviet Union in their determination to impose homegrown views on others and in their allegedly "Brezhnevite" approach to national sovereignty.

Even if democracy could prevent conflict, it would not guarantee American leadership or even broad support for the United States. In the war against Iraq, for example, democracy was an obstacle to Turkey's support and reinforced, rather than weakened, anti-American policies in France and Germany. On the other hand, the lack of democracy in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Pakistan allowed those governments to cooperate with the United States, despite hostile public opinion.

Just as democratic nations are not always prepared to support the United States, authoritarian ones sometimes are, including on the crucial issues of our time, such as nonproliferation and terrorism. Driving away such nations—from China to Saudi Arabia—could seriously jeopardize American interests. Obtaining international support for the recent war in Iraq could have been easier if the United States had done a better job in cultivating key partners and regional players.

BREAKING THE BONDS

THE UNITED STATES must be willing to use force, unilaterally if necessary, to protect its security and that of its allies, but it is time for a hardheaded assessment of American interests to play a greater role in Washington's foreign policy calculus. American-led and American-financed military interventions for humanitarian ends should in the future be reserved for clear-cut cases of genocide, as took place in the Holocaust, Cambodia in the 1970s and 1980s, and Rwanda in 1994. Otherwise, the United States should engage in humanitarian interventions only with a UN mandate (unlike Kosovo) and, more important, in the certain knowledge that other nations are committed to providing substantial resources.

The Bush administration is correct to argue that the United States should be prepared to do what it takes—including engaging in preemptive action—to pursue terrorists and their sponsors, particularly those seeking weapons of mass destruction. But selective wars of "liberation" are likely to alienate crucial allies. And building constructive relationships with key players, including China and Russia and (as distasteful as it may be to some) Germany and France, is key to success

in the war against terrorism and the struggle against WMD proliferation. Thus, although decisive—even ruthless—use of force is appropriate when there is a credible threat, it is important that the United States not use force as a routine instrument of nation building.

Take Iraq. Saddam Hussein's checkered record on WMD, his persistent bullying of neighboring states, his continued violation of UN Security Council resolutions, his support for terrorists, and his attempt to assassinate a former U.S. president revealed him to be a major threat to American interests. Three administrations in a row could not resolve this problem through diplomatic processes. This stalemate justified the U.S.-led invasion last spring. Yet turning Iraq into another American protectorate is less easy to justify, especially when the United States does not possess an international

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mandate that would increase its legitimacy and defray the mounting costs. Iraq is, predictably, becoming more of a burden than a prize, and the Bush administration would do well to find a formula through which the United States can cede principal responsibility for reconstruction efforts to international organizations while maintaining military control. Acquiring additional

burdens by engaging in new wars of liberation is the last thing the United States needs. Even if the U.S. economy improves, such adventures could overwhelm the federal budget, forcing the United States to choose between Roman exploitation—which sowed the seeds of that empire's destruction—and British imperial overstretch—which led to retreat.

The Bush administration's aggressive promotion of democracy also has worrying implications for American interests. As a rule, democratic advancement should be accomplished through the power of example and positive inducement. It is a self-evident fact that being friends with America brings numerous advantages and that the United States prefers to associate with other democracies. This should be incentive enough. Meanwhile, formal unilateral sanctions, which are usually more irritating than punishing, should not be applied as a matter of routine simply to demonstrate U.S. disapproval.

As the indisputable center of power in the world, the United States both benefits from a bandwagon effect and suffers from inevitable foreign backlash. Recent international debates over the U.S. intervention in Iraq demonstrate that although other countries are not prepared to give Washington *carte blanche*, most are willing to go a long way to accommodate American preferences. American leaders need not shy away from displaying U.S. power assertively, but they must let go of the pretension that the United States is the ultimate font of global wisdom.

Similarly, U.S. leaders must recognize that although rabid anti-American sentiments held in parts of the Muslim world are wholly unjustified, they are partly fueled by a perception of the United States as Israel's uncritical protector. This is not to say that the administration should abandon a staunch ally, nor pressure Israel into fighting terrorism in an unassertive manner. But ending American support for nonessential and provocative Israeli policies—such as its new settlement activity or its refusal to dismantle existing illegal outposts—could have a significant effect on how the United States is viewed in the Muslim world and would probably reduce the appeal of al Qaeda and other extremist groups.

Finally, the United States must address one of its greatest potential vulnerabilities: the combination of empire and immigration. As James Kurth, professor of political science at Swarthmore College, writes, “the conjunction of American empire (America expanding into the world) and American immigration (the world coming into America) has made the very idea of the American national interest problematic. There is a causal connection between empire and immigration, and the two are now coming together as a dynamic duo to utterly transform our world.”

It has become increasingly difficult for state and federal agencies to take the tough measures required to regain control over immigration, which has outpaced the absorptive capacity of American society and institutions and is overwhelming the government's ability to enforce crucial immigration laws. No one knows when the United States will reach the point when Balkanization becomes an inevitability. But it is clear from America's current political environment—where single-issue interest groups and true believers in various causes are increasingly

able to shape the national agenda—that this point is not very far away. Taking the necessary steps to stop the creeping invasion by illegal immigrants will be controversial and costly. But it is becoming increasingly vital.

Those who criticize the Bush administration for introducing a heavy-handed and unilateral foreign policy miss the mark. There is considerably more continuity between Clinton's interventionism and the current administration's foreign policy than meets the eye. Although candidate George W. Bush said that the United States should be a humble nation and warned against nation building, powerful domestic interests and the shock of September 11 put U.S. foreign policy back onto the track of dangerous imperial overreach: a "one size fits all" approach to democracy promotion fomented under Clinton. A new approach is badly needed, one that exercises power in a determined yet realistic and responsible way—keeping a close eye on American interests and values—but is not bashful about U.S. global supremacy. Only then will the United States be able to take maximum advantage of its power, without being bogged down in expensive and dangerous secondary pursuits that diminish its ability to lead.❷

