



Michael Cox

Empire, imperialism and the Bush doctrine

Originally published in Review of international studies, 30 (4). pp. 585-608 © 2004 Cambridge University Press.

You may cite this version as:

Cox, Michael (2004). Empire, imperialism and the Bush doctrine [online]. London: LSE Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/archive/00000765>

Available online: May 2006

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>

Contact LSE Research Online at: Library.Researchonline@lse.ac.uk

Empire, imperialism and the Bush doctrine

MICHAEL COX

Introduction

It is an empire without a consciousness of itself as such, constantly shocked that its good intentions arouse resentment abroad. But that does not make it any the less of an empire, with a conviction that it alone, in Herman Melville's words, bears 'the ark of liberties of the world.'¹

If all history according to Marx has been the history of class struggle, then all international history, it could just as well be argued, has been the struggle between different kinds of Empire vying for hegemony in a world where the only measure was success and the only means of achieving this was through war.² Indeed, so obvious is this fact to historians – but so fixated has the profession of International Relations been with the Westphalian settlement – that it too readily forgets that imperial conquest, rather than mere state survival, has been the principle dynamic shaping the contours of the world system from the sixteenth century onwards. Empires, however, were not just mere agents existing in static structures. They were living entities that thought, planned, and then tried to draw the appropriate lessons from the study of what had happened to others in the past. Thus Rome learned much from the Greeks, the British in turn were inspired by the Ancients, and the British of course passed on their imperial knowledge to their Atlantic cousins at the end of World War II, remarking as they did so that like the sophisticated 'Greeks' of old, they were now transferring responsibility to those untutored, vulgar, but extraordinarily powerful 'Romans' who happened to live beside the Potomac. Certainly, the most important architect of the postwar order was quite clear in his own mind about the importance of Empires in history. A great admirer of the British Empire in particular, Dean Acheson talked in glowing terms of the indispensable economic and strategic role played by Britain in the previous century, the obvious conclusion being that what the British had done for the peace of the world after Waterloo, the Americans would now do in an era turned upside down by war,

¹ Quote from Michael Ignatieff, 'Empire Lite', *Prospect*, 83 (February 2003), p. 36.

² On the role played by war in the formation of great states, see Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

revolution and the rise of a modern revolutionary state in the shape of the Soviet Union. His British peers could not have agreed more, and like the 'Dean' took the long view, pragmatically concluding that if they had to pass on the imperial torch to anyone, far better it went to their white Anglo-Saxon allies across the Atlantic than anybody else. Out of this imperial moment of death and renewal was thus born that which came to be known more prosaically as the 'special relationship'.³

The sheer size of the American economy in 1945, the military superiority it enjoyed over all potential rivals, and the indispensable role it played in both rebuilding and protecting international capitalism after World War II, meant that few at the time had much difficulty in thinking of the United States as a new kind of hegemon, which like all great hegemons before it set the rules and punished those who broke them.⁴ Indeed, the idea of a *Pax Americana* sounded no more odd to Americans in the 1950s than did the idea of *Pax Britannica* in the age of Victoria, and *Pax Romana* before Christianity.⁵ In fact, many Americans were so taken with their new-found role that they sometimes looked to others for advice, and found it, significantly, in the work of Arnold Toynbee, the famous scholar of world history. As has been observed, this 'tutor and mentor to a generation of British imperial administrators' had 'little difficulty reconciling himself to American imperialism'.⁶ For a while he even enjoyed something of a cult-like status in the United States itself, largely because he provided the American elite with a general theory of history and how and why hegemons rose, endured and, until the postwar period at least, faded away. The past, he insisted, had much to teach the new kid on the block; but what it taught most obviously was that survival was never guaranteed. There were, he insisted, two major problems facing all great powers: the threat of decay from within and the ever-present danger of overextension abroad. There was though one constant which, according to Toynbee, acted to both secure hegemons while threatening to destroy them altogether – the existence of a clear and present challenge posed by an external 'other'. The task of serious diplomacy was thus clear: to keep the enemy at bay while using the menace it posed to unite and discipline those fortunate enough to be living within the *imperium*.⁷

Of course, the United States was different. It espoused a formally democratic ideology; its ostensible purpose was defensive; its rule was more indirect than direct; and it appeared more reluctant than willing to take on new responsibilities.⁸ Like all great powers before it, however, it saw itself as the embodiment of a new and higher

³ John T. McNay, *Acheson and the Empire: the British Accent in American Foreign Policy* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

⁴ On the scale of American preponderance in 1945, see Donald White, 'The Nature of World Power in American History: an Evaluation at the End of World War II', *Diplomatic History*, 11: 3 (1987), pp. 181–202.

⁵ For one of the better studies of the American Empire, see Ronald Steel, *Pax Americana* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967).

⁶ Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p. 68.

⁷ Toynbee, it has been observed, 'attended Winchester and studied classics at Oxford, both of which were intended to prepare young men for service in an enlightened Empire'. Quoted from Cornelia Navari, 'Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975): Prophecy and Civilization', *Review of International Studies*, 26: 2 (April 2000), p. 289.

⁸ On what he sees as the 'myth of the reluctant superpower', see Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of US Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 7–31.

kind of civilisation; and it had a well-defined ideological mission of holding back the 'barbarians' (known in the Cold War as the Soviet Union and Communist China). It was also historically conscious. Indeed, its leaders constantly used history as a laboratory from which to draw important lessons, and the most important one of all was that global order presupposed an active dominant power. Even the emerging discipline of International Relations seemed to recognise this self-evident fact. In fact, the highly influential notion of hegemonic stability was almost entirely derived from a particular reading of history which led its advocates to the not illogical conclusion that international stability depended, in the last analysis, on the existence of a single great power willing 'to create and sustain order';⁹ moreover, if no such power existed, or refused to face up to its responsibilities – as the United States had refused to after 1919 – then chaos was bound to be the result. The implications were obvious. The United States had to use its vast capabilities and project power so as to compel, or entice, others to do its bidding. Only in this way could it construct the kind of secure world that had been absent for so long.¹⁰

This leads us, then, to an interesting paradox: the apparently deep resistance by many Americans to thinking of either the United States, or the postwar system it forged, in terms of Empire.¹¹ As one of the more entertaining of modern right-wing British historians has put it, the problem with the US is not that it is an Empire (that much is obvious to outside observers) but rather that quite a few of its citizens stubbornly refuse to recognise the fact.¹² Indeed, such has been, and largely remains, the reluctance to employ the notion, that those who have been most inclined to break the taboo have been, and largely continue to be, those with the least intellectual influence within the United States itself: namely, marginalised critics on the left who have used it as a means of questioning the moral purpose of American foreign policy,¹³ and a long line of iconoclastic foreigners who have felt that the notion of Empire, however understood, was, and remains, as good a way as any of characterising the worldwide character of American influence.¹⁴ Outside these very different circles, the idea has, by and large, been regarded as being highly problematic,

⁹ G. John Ikenberry, 'Rethinking The Origins of American Hegemony', *Political Science Quarterly*, 104: 3 (1989), p. 377.

¹⁰ According to one of the principle American theorists of hegemonic stability, it was E.H.Carr in *The Twenty Years' Crisis* who first 'demonstrated that a liberal world economy world must rest on a dominant liberal power'. See Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), fn. 52, pp. 100–1.

¹¹ Even the best American study on the subject uses the term Empire to apply to every other power—other than the United States. See Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1986).

¹² Niall Ferguson, 'Is the US Empire an Empire in Denial?' Lecture given at the Foreign Policy Association, 17 September 2003. <<http://www.fpa.org/topics>>. Ferguson later argued that the United States is 'an empire . . . that dare not speak its name. It is an empire in denial.' Quote from his popular, *Empire: How Britain Made The Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 381.

¹³ Most famously William Appleman Williams in his *Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Random House, 1969).

¹⁴ A point made by Dimitri K. Simes in his useful 'America's Imperial Dilemma', *Foreign Affairs*, 82: 6 (November/December 2003), p. 93. On foreign reflections on the American Empire, see for instance Raymond Aron, *The Imperial Republic: the United States and the World, 1945–1973* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1975), Geir Lundestad, 'Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952', *Journal of Peace Research*, 23: 3 (1986), pp. 263–77, and Susan Strange, 'The Future of the American Empire', *Journal of International Affairs*, 42: 1 (1988), pp. 1–18.

virtually un-American – partly because of its unfortunate association with those of known radical persuasion, but more obviously because it runs counter to so many national myths.

The tale of imperial denial is a familiar one. The United States, it has been routinely argued (by Americans) waged a war of national liberation against those brutal British red-coats. It then went on to build a democratic country like no other. And as their leaders repeated *ad nauseum* thereafter, the new republic formed part of an ideologically progressive New World which stood in sharp contrast to that reactionary Old one with its penchant for taking over other people's land.¹⁵ So how could it be an Empire? Moreover, didn't Empire imply oppression; didn't it also involve travelling abroad? And weren't these activities in which Americans have always been deeply reluctant to engage? As one influential analyst has put it – more in seriousness than irony it seems – other peoples might like the lure of foreign lands, but Americans, it seems, only like America.¹⁶ Thus the national story goes on, all proving, to American satisfaction at least, that the United States was, and remains, different: the one great exception to the expansionary logic that has governed the behaviour of all other great powers in the past.¹⁷

Naturally, the deep reluctance to engage with the idea of an American Empire did not prevent the term popping up in the writings of one or two intellectual mavericks. Like Banquo at that unfortunate feast, the idea that dared not speak its name did occasionally slip into polite conversation.¹⁸ Furthermore, as the pessimism of the post-Vietnam period gave way to the upbeat optimism of the 1990s, a few writers were now prepared to concede that it was possible, with some qualification, to employ the idea (or something close to it like 'hegemon') with greater confidence.¹⁹ There were even one or two writers in the post-Cold War era who regarded the new penchant for 'humanitarian intervention' as a modern form of liberal imperialism. Still, in the end, it took a crisis of almost biblical proportions for the term to enter into the mainstream of public debate. Much has already been written about September 11.²⁰ Some in fact have already suggested it could well have been avoided.²¹ But hardly anyone could have foreseen that one of its more interesting intellectual consequences would be to make the case for Empire. Yet this is precisely what happened. However, whereas in the past the idea had been primarily employed by left-wing critics opposed to American power,²² now it was to be used with

¹⁵ Emma Rothschild, 'Empire Beware!', *The New York Review of Books*, 51: 5 (25 March 2004), pp. 37–8.

¹⁶ Charles Krauthammer, *Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy For A Unipolar World* (Washington, DC: The AEI Press, 2004), pp. 2–3.

¹⁷ On Empire denial in the United States, see the comments by Andrew J. Bacevich in his edited volume *The Imperial Tense: Prospects and Problems of American Empire* (Chicago, IL: Ivor R. Dee, 2003), p. x.

¹⁸ See for example George Liska, *Career of Empire* (Washington, John Hopkins University Press, 1979).

¹⁹ I discuss the rebirth of the idea of hegemony in the 1990s in my 'September 11th and US Hegemony – Or Will the 21st Century Be American Too?', *International Studies Perspective*, 3 (2002), pp. 53–70.

²⁰ Still the most useful overview of 9/11 is Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (eds.), *Worlds in Collision* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

²¹ Most recently, the former US Director of Counterterrorism, Richard Clarke, in his *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

²² For contemporary Marxist assessments of US foreign policy, see Alex Callinicos, 'The Actuality of Imperialism' *Millennium*, 31: 2 (2002), pp. 319–26 and David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

increasing regularity by those who wanted it deployed it with much greater ruthlessness. Only in this way, they argued, could one build a more stable order.²³ Indeed, what many of them appeared to be saying was as shocking to some as it was unacceptable to others: namely, that America was an Empire anyway, and in an increasingly threatening epoch where the United States stood in an almost unrivalled position, it had both the capacity and the need to act in a far more assertive fashion.²⁴ Admittedly it would be doing so for essentially benevolent reasons; and its actions were more inspired by fear of the outside world than any desire to take it over. However, that did not mean it should not act in an imperial fashion.²⁵ Nor should the US apologise for doing so. As one of the new ideologues of Empire put it, in an era where old forms of deterrence and traditional assumptions about threats no longer held, the 'logic of neo-imperialism' had simply become 'too compelling to resist'.²⁶

The 'imperial turn' in the age of Bush was, by any stretch of the imagination, a most extraordinary phenomenon. After all, the previous century had witnessed the progressive demise of all formal Empires, yet here now was a group of right-wing American intellectuals talking at the beginning of the next millennium about the need for a new Empire; and this in a country where 'one of the central themes' in orthodox discourse had always been that there was no such thing as an American Empire.²⁷ The move was an intellectually radical one. As one rather astute analyst pointed out shortly after the fall of the Twin Towers, 'a decade ago, certainly two', the very idea of Empire would have caused 'righteous indignation' amongst most US observers; but not any longer it seemed.²⁸ As Ronald Wright has noted, 'how recently we believed the age of empire was dead', but how popular the idea had now become, and especially so amongst those who appeared to have a very clear and direct connection with key Bush policymakers.²⁹ This was perhaps the most stunning development of all. It was one thing when garrulous intellectuals talked in their typically abstract way about power; it was something else altogether when they did so from a position of some influence. And influential some of the new imperialists appeared to be. One, for example, was, or at least had been, an important and well-regarded writer on *The Wall Street Journal* who went on to write a major book on the rise of the American Empire in the late nineteenth century;³⁰ another was a popular pundit with a well-established reputation for capturing the American

²³ A point also endorsed by a few revisionist liberal writers. See Michael Ignatieff, 'American Empire: Get Used To It', *New York Times Magazine*, 5 January 2003; and also Robert Cooper's advocacy of a voluntary imperium in Europe in his *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003).

²⁴ Max Boot, 'The Case for American Empire', *Weekly Standard*, 15 October 2001.

²⁵ Michael Ignatieff insists that 'America's entire war on terror is an exercise in imperialism', *New York Times Magazine*, 28 July 2002.

²⁶ Sebastian Mallaby, 'The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire', *Foreign Affairs*, 81: 2 (March-April 2002), p. 6.

²⁷ William Appleman Williams, 'The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy', *Pacific Historic Review*, 24 (1955), p. 379.

²⁸ Charles S. Maier, 'An American Empire', *Harvard Magazine*, 105: 2 (November-December 2002), pp. 28–31.

²⁹ Ronald Wright, 'For a wild surmise', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 December 2002, p. 3.

³⁰ Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

mood;³¹ a third had already made his name in the earlier neo-conservative intervention on multiculturalism;³² and a fourth was a regular columnist for the *Washington Post*, who like many of his peers probably felt he was only expressing in public what many in the White House had been talking about in private.³³ Clearly, the new cohort knew their way around Washington.

In the end though it was not just the messengers who made a difference but the message itself, and the message to those inside the Beltway could not have been clearer: that after a period of post-Cold War illusion during which history had taken what one of their number termed a 'holiday', it was now time to take off the gloves and show the world who was really in charge.³⁴ Indeed, it was precisely because Clinton had assumed that the world had changed for the better that September 11 happened in the first place.³⁵ Such amnesia was no longer an option. Mainstream politicians might want to call it something else, and no doubt President Bush would repeat the tired old mantra that 'America' had no 'Empire to extend'.³⁶ However, in a fragmenting, postmodern world, where small bands of fanatics based in crumbling polities could cause havoc and mayhem elsewhere, imperialism with American characteristics was the only real answer to the kind of dangers that now threatened the peace.

The emergence of a group of influential writers prepared to argue that US leaders could do a lot worse than turn to the chroniclers of the Greek, Roman and British empires 'for helpful hints about how to run American foreign policy'³⁷ obviously requires careful analysis. As even one of the most articulate critics of the Bush administration has noted, we may not like the new imperialists, their ideas or their policy prescriptions; nonetheless, we still need to engage with what they have had to say: in part because of the influence they have exerted and partly because they have generated one of the more interesting public discussions about American power for several years.³⁸ For serious students of international affairs it would in fact be quite irresponsible not to respond. The flood of articles, the many symposia, and the several books that have all appeared because of what the new cohort have had to say, all bear witness to the importance of a group of thinkers who in less than three years have not only challenged much of what has passed for debate about American power in the wider intellectual community, but have almost managed to dethrone the

³¹ Robert Kaplan. See Preston Jones, 'The world according to Robert Kaplan', *Ottawa Citizen*, 3 March 2002.

³² Dinesh D'Souza, 'In praise of American empire', *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 April 2002.

³³ Sebastian Mallaby, 'The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States and the Case for an American Empire', *Foreign Affairs*, 81: 2 (March-April 2002), pp. 2-7.

³⁴ '... troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets'. Max Boot, quoted in Emily Eakin, 'It takes an Empire say several thinkers', *New York Times*, 2 April 2002.

³⁵ Thomas E. Ricks, 'Empire or not? A quiet debate over the US role', *Washington Post*, 21 August 2001.

³⁶ George Bush speeches to cadets at West Point (June 2002) and to veterans at the White House (November 2002).

³⁷ Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 152, 153.

³⁸ See G. John Ikenberry, 'The Illusions of Empire', *Foreign Affairs*, 82: 2 (2004), pp. 144-154 and his 'The End of the Neo-Conservative Moment', *Survival*, 46: 1 (2004), pp. 47-62.

once dominant view that globalisation is, and would for ever remain, the defining characteristic of our age. It has been quite an intellectual transformation.³⁹

In what follows I want to make three broad points about the current controversy about the idea of an American Empire. The first, which I shall outline in the first section, is that whilst this discussion appears to be largely modern in origin, in point of fact it represents the culmination of a much longer debate in the modern era about how to maintain US primacy in a rapidly changing world.⁴⁰ This debate began in earnest in the uncertain years following American defeat in Vietnam, became more intense still in the Reagan era of revitalised containment, continued in the period immediately following the upheavals that brought the United States victory in the Cold War, and finally reached an intellectual climax of sorts during the late 1990s when a number of key thinkers concluded that Clinton was failing to exploit to the full the potential inherent in a world without a serious rival. There were many twists and turns in this discussion. However, at its heart there was always a simple, consistent and oft-repeated question: to wit, how could the United States preserve, maintain, and where possible, extend its preponderance?⁴¹ Our 'new' imperialists may have been bold. They are certainly controversial. Nevertheless, they stand at the end of a long line of thinkers and policymakers who have never deviated from the simple proposition that once announced, the American century was here for ever.⁴²

Naturally, not everybody concurred with the idea that America could achieve security through expansion and greater influence in the world through the deployment of US hard power.⁴³ They remained cooler still about the idea of a specific kind of American Empire, arguing, amongst other things, that it was not only impossible to achieve in a world where US reach was becoming increasingly circumscribed, but likely to lead to a hubristic foreign policy that could only end in disaster.⁴⁴ I take these objections seriously. Nonetheless, in their intellectual haste to throw out the theoretical baby called Empire with its strategic manifestation in the

³⁹ 'Whatever Happened to Globalization?' asks Chalmers Johnson in his *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* (London: Verso Books, 2004), pp. 255–82.

⁴⁰ For confirmation of this thesis see the very useful James Mann, *The Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004).

⁴¹ A point made by Michael Mastanduno about the 1990s in particular in his 'Incomplete Hegemony and Security Order in the Asia-Pacific' in G. John Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 192.

⁴² On the theme of a 'new American century' in modern neo-conservative theory see the influential publications of the *Project for a New American Century* at <<http://www.newamericancentury.org>> Key figures associated with this very important pressure group – founded in 1998 – include several people who later went on to exert great influence under George W. Bush. It included, amongst others, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, I. Lewis Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Kagan, Max Boot, Frank Carlucci, Midge Decter, Elliot Abrams, Donald Kagan, R. James Woolsey, William Kristol, William J. Bennett, Aaron Friedberg, Dan Quayle, Fred C. Ikle, Jeb Bush, Peter W. Rodman, and Norman Podhoretz.

⁴³ See, for example, Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), David C. Hendrickson, 'Toward Universal Empire: The Dangerous Quest for Absolute Security', *World Policy Journal*, 19: 3 (Fall 2002), pp. 1–10, and John Lewis Gaddis, 'A Grand Strategy of Transformation', *Foreign Policy* (November–December 2002), pp. 1–8.

⁴⁴ For a liberal critique of the Bush foreign policy, see Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003). A conservative critique can be found in Ivan Eland, 'The Empire Strikes Out; The "New Imperialism" and Its Fatal Flaws', *Policy Analysis*, 459 (26 November 2002), pp. 1–27.

form of the Bush Doctrine, many writers, in my view, have gone too far.⁴⁵ There is much to what the critics have to say. My point, though, is that the sceptics in their rush to reject the idea of Empire almost in its entirety, eliminate from serious discussion a notion that might help us think more creatively about the American role in the world. Indeed, I want to argue (and will do so in the second section) that whatever its conceptual limits, we should still welcome the debate about Empire – if for no other reason that it brings back a notion that has for too long been marginalised in international relations.⁴⁶ Furthermore, we should be able to do so without either being accused of favouring imperialism, championing the war in Iraq, or seeking to whitewash US foreign policy.

Finally, I want to speculate on where the current neo-imperial strategy might be heading. It is impossible to offer any firm predictions about the future. But we should beware two positions: one that has already become increasingly popular following the highly problematic occupation of Iraq; this suggests that the ‘new’ American Empire is already dead;⁴⁷ and another which argues that the United States can act with virtual impunity given its enormous military assets.⁴⁸ Both, I maintain, are one-sided: the former because it only focuses on what the United States is unable to do, and the latter because it comes close to suggesting it can do almost anything. In many ways, the new imperialists are correct: the United States does have vast military capabilities, it will not be challenged for the foreseeable future by any of the other great powers, and it plays a very special role at the heart of an international system over which it continues to exert enormous influence.⁴⁹ And all this will pertain whatever happens in Iraq. On the other hand, there is no such thing as Empire without contradiction.⁵⁰ Nor does imperialism come cheap. Indeed, the United States under Bush might just be beginning to discover just how expensive in terms of blood and treasure this ‘new’ American Empire is turning out to be. Difficult days lie ahead.

The exceptional Empire?⁵¹

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

⁴⁵ Though, for a useful discussion, see Martin Shaw, ‘Post-Imperial and Quasi-Imperial: State and Empire in the Global Era’, *Millennium*, 31: 2 (2002), pp. 327–36.

⁴⁶ A point made in Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations’, *Millennium*, 31: 1 (2002), pp. 109–27.

⁴⁷ See Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London, Verso Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ See Alfredo Valladao, *The Twenty First Century Will Be American* (London: Verso, 1996).

⁴⁹ Thanh Duong, *Hegemonic Globalisation: US Centrality and Global Strategy in the Emerging World Order* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁵⁰ See David Campbell, ‘Contradictions of Lonely Superpower’, in David Slater and Peter J. Taylor (eds.), *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 222–42.

⁵¹ For a fuller discussion of the issues raised here, see my longer ‘Whatever Happened to American Decline? International Relations and the New United States Hegemony’, *New Political Economy*, 6: 3 (2002), pp. 311–40.

in policy 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.⁵²

The rise of the United States as a world power by the beginning of the twentieth century, its more complete entry on to the international stage by the end of the Second World War, and its final emergence as the only major international player following the end of the Cold War and collapse of the USSR, is one of the great historical fairy tales of the last one hundred years. Yet there was nothing inevitable about this. Nor was the apparently smooth upward movement of the United States without its fair share of serious problems. Indeed, within only a few decades of victory being declared over the Axis in 1945, America was already being talked about by several analysts as some sort of has-been great power which might have had a splendid past but now faced an indifferent kind of future.⁵³ In fact, only a year before the collapse of Communism in Europe, one of the many writers on the by now hugely popular theme of American hegemonic decline was arguing to a large and receptive audience that like all major powers in the past, the United States was facing its own kind of nemesis, the consequence on the one hand of the huge costs involved in being a great power, and on the other of a series of economic flaws that were fast eroding its capacity to compete in world markets.⁵⁴ True, not all analysts accepted this tale of gloom and doom. Some in fact strongly contested the view that the United States was going the way of all other Empires. Nonetheless, the consensus seemed to be that the wings of the imperial eagle had become entangled and that the US was fast becoming just like any other 'ordinary country'.⁵⁵ *Pax Americana* in other words was dead.

The policy response to this deteriorating situation was a deeply ambiguous one.⁵⁶ A few to be sure – realists like Kissinger and liberals like Hoffmann – accepted that America's position was fast slipping and that the primary purpose of grand strategy now was to adjust to new world realities by cutting costs, coming to terms with former enemies, and devolving power to reliable friends.⁵⁷ This was not a position however which recommended itself to key figures in the foreign policy establishment. Raised on the central strategic notion that peace presupposed power and power determined outcomes, they needed little persuasion that the US had to resist what others seemed to regard as an almost 'natural' process of ageing. The Cold War, they argued, had been successfully fought until Vietnam because – and only because – the United States had managed to retain a clear edge over friends and enemies

⁵² Quote from Dmitri K. Simes, 'America's Imperial Dilemma', *Foreign Affairs*, p. 93.

⁵³ Walter Russell Mead, *Mortal Splendour: The American Empire in Transition* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

⁵⁴ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500–2000* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1988).

⁵⁵ See Richard Rosecrance, *America as an Ordinary Country: US Foreign Policy and the Future* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976).

⁵⁶ Stephen Gill explores one response to hegemonic crisis in his *American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵⁷ See Henry A. Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 3rd edn. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), and Stanley Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order? American Foreign Policy Since the Cold War* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978).

alike. This had been momentarily lost. However, there was no reason why it could not be won back again. America after all still commanded vast political reserves; its economy remained the biggest in the world; its military reach was still immense; it remained the central provider of security in Europe and Asia; it held the all powerful dollar; and it possessed a culture of optimism. Thus there was no need to retreat. Indeed, if it were to do so, then the consequences for world order would be nothing less than catastrophic.⁵⁸

One of the results of this bitter debate that defined the period between communist victory in Vietnam and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was to set the stage for the eventual election of Ronald Reagan. Reagan was no intellectual. However he (or at least his advisors) did have a theory of the world, at the heart of which was the basic proposition that after ten years of retreat the United States would now prove that it was the exception to the historical rule of great-power decay.⁵⁹ A robust effort though would be required to revive US fortunes, and the most ideologically acceptable way of doing this of course was by casting the strategy in terms of containing the Soviet Union. A critical series of decisions was thus taken following the collapse of the much hated policy of superpower *détente* to compete more forcefully with the USSR: first and foremost by increasing the US defence budget, secondly by attacking the Soviet position in the Third World, and finally by providing increasingly large amounts of military aid to those (including radical Islamists) opposed to the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. All this was then cast within a larger ideological framework that stressed the vitality of the free world, the moral character of markets, and the evil nature of a communist enemy that would sooner, rather than later, be cast on to what Reagan called 'the ash-heap of history'. Sold at the time as a legitimate effort to revitalise containment after a period of Soviet advances, the deeper purpose of the policy was to shift the balance of forces more generally, and in this way place the United States back on the pedestal from which it had been momentarily toppled. Reagan may not have been the most academically endowed of US leaders – no more than George W. Bush has an eye for geography. What he did possess however was a great capacity of not only allowing Americans to feel better about their country (a not insignificant achievement at the time) but of making it appear as if the United States was acting defensively when in fact it was doing precisely the opposite.⁶⁰

Whether this ambitious strategy actually undermined the Soviet system, accelerated its decline, or made very little difference at all, is still being contested by historians.⁶¹ The reality is that by the middle of the last decade of the Cold War a new and more accommodating leader was in the Kremlin, four years later he was leading Russia's retreat out of Central and Eastern Europe, and two years on was present when the

⁵⁸ To get a flavour of the ideology of the 'new' Cold Warriors of the time see the publications of the Committee on the Present Danger, especially *Is America Becoming Number Two?* (Washington DC, 1978) and *Has America Become Number Two?* (Washington DC, 1982).

⁵⁹ A view also supported by a number of those opposed to Reagan's foreign policy of revitalised containment, including Bruce Russett, 'The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony: Or, Is Mark Twain Really Dead?', *International Organization*, 39: 2 (1985), pp. 206–31.

⁶⁰ A point well made in Fred Halliday's classic, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso Books, 1983).

⁶¹ See the several contributions in the *Review of International Studies*, 25: 4 (1999).

USSR unexpectedly imploded. Realist jeremiads to the contrary, the consequences were almost wholly favourable to the United States as the international system was transformed almost overnight from one in which there had been at least some semblance of balance, to another in which there was virtually none.⁶² Washington obviously had much to celebrate. Its only serious rival had gone under, the Warsaw Pact had collapsed, in the former Communist countries the free market was fast becoming all the rage, while in the Third World one-time anti-imperialist regimes were beginning to sign up to a new economic ‘consensus’ that took its name from the American capital. It was an extraordinary sea-change. Little wonder that Bush senior could talk so confidently in 1990 of building what he termed a ‘new world order’ with the United States at its head. Little surprise either that both he and his successor in the form of Bill Clinton could face the future with a high degree of confidence.⁶³

It was at this precise point in time that we can begin to trace the origins of what is now referred to as the ‘new’ American Empire. It is an act in two apparently distinct parts. Part one was played out in the years immediately following the collapse of the USSR, a period according to the conventional wisdom that was marked by drift and indecision, but in fact saw the American position in the international system being massively enhanced: in part because the military capabilities of others declined, in part because those of America’s remained relatively intact, and partly because potential rivals in the form of Germany and Japan entered very choppy waters indeed. Clinton moreover took economics extremely seriously and implemented a series of critical regenerative measures which eliminated the deficit, boosted domestic productivity, and transformed the American state into an even more powerful agent of international economic competitiveness.⁶⁴ The results were impressive by any measure. The economy boomed. Profits soared. America’s position in world markets was enhanced. And its share of world economic output rose. Clinton might not have been the most serious Commander-In-Chief in American military history.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, he did much to enhance the US position in an era of cut-throat competition where the real battles it seemed were not between ideologies or armies but companies and corporations. Not for nothing do his admirers now look back on the 1990s as being an especially heroic ‘moment’ in American history, one which left the nation in a more prosperous and secure position than it had been for years.⁶⁶

Yet in spite of this, there were still some who felt the US could do much better – or more precisely much more – to exploit all its various assets and turn them to even greater American advantage.⁶⁷ Reaganite by background and deeply hostile to what

⁶² Coral Bell, *A World Out of Balance: American Ascendancy and International Politics in the 21st Century* (New South Wales, Australia: Longueville Books, 2003).

⁶³ See my ‘International History since 1989’, in John Baylis and Steve Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 122–4.

⁶⁴ I discuss this in my *US Foreign Policy After the Cold War: Superpower Without a Mission?* (London: Pinter, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995).

⁶⁵ For a critique of Clinton’s lack of military purpose see the detailed David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

⁶⁶ On the American renaissance in the 1990s, see Bruce Cumings, ‘Still the American Century’ in Michael Cox, Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (eds.), *The Interregnum: Controversies in World Politics, 1989–1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 271–99.

⁶⁷ This section draws heavily from the excellent first-hand description provided by Nicholas Lehmann, ‘The next world order: the Bush Administration may have a brand-new doctrine of power’, *The New Yorker*, 4 April 2002. To be found at <<http://new.yorker.com/fact/content/?020401faFACT1>>.

they considered to be Clinton's lack of 'grand strategy', their analysis was not without its own internal logic. At its core was a simple and none too original thesis about the international politics of power; and what this led its supporters to conclude was that the United States was in such a position of power that it really should start acting in a far more determined way. Above all, it needed to prevent any other state, or combination of states, emerging that might one day challenge its right to rule; and the most effective way of doing this, it was reasoned, was by becoming so strong militarily that no other power would even dream of becoming a rival.⁶⁸ Nor was this a mere pipe-dream. The collapse of the USSR on the one hand, and America's huge investment in new weapons technologies on the other, made it all perfectly feasible.⁶⁹ Thus why not seize the moment and push ahead with measures that would guarantee what amounted to a permanent American hegemony? In fact, under conditions where Washington began to be compared with increasing regularity to a new Rome, why feel bound at all by the traditional rules of the international game? As the influential Charles Krauthammer put it, why play 'pygmy' when you could be doing 'Prometheus'?⁷⁰

Even history was plundered, yet again, in order to justify this more assertive policy. Two periods inspired the radical right most: first, and most significantly, the late nineteenth century when America moved from being an economically dynamic nation to becoming a major world power; and second, and most critically, the Reagan epoch during which the United States, they argued, had raised the stakes and thus brought about regime change in the USSR. The former they believed had turned the US from being an inward-looking economic giant into a force to be reckoned with abroad. However, neither outcome had been foreordained. Indeed without some very determined leadership – provided in one era by Ronald Reagan and in earlier times by Theodore Roosevelt – the US would not have been able to renegotiate its relationship with the rest of the world. The lesson was obvious. Decisive action would be required once again if the United States wished to realise its full potential. This in the end is why Clinton was such a disaster. He may have talked about the US as the 'indispensable' nation; he may have even acted with some determination when needs be. But there was no consistency of purpose. He was in fact a most reluctant warrior, more concerned with saving American military lives than enforcing the peace. Moreover, instead of using the power he had, he took the United States off on what his own CIA Director later called an extended 'national beach party'.⁷¹ The result was to undermine US credibility and make the world a potentially far more dangerous place.⁷²

Long before the election of George W. Bush, therefore the intellectual ground had already been prepared for a far more assertive policy whose ultimate objective was to impose a new (or perhaps not so new) set of American rules on the world. This in turn would necessitate vastly increased levels of military spending, a more deter-

⁶⁸ The document which summed up these hegemonic thoughts was put together by a group of defence intellectuals in 1992 led by Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Albert Wohlstetter, I. Lewis Libby and Zalmay Khalizad.

⁶⁹ See James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, pp. 208–15.

⁷⁰ Charles Krauthammer, 'The New Unilateralism' *Washington Post*, 8 June 2001, p. 29.

⁷¹ James Woolsey, 'Interview by Galina J. Michkovitch', *Prospect*, September (2003), pp. 20–23.

⁷² For a sample of this kind of thinking, see the neo-conservative magazine *The Weekly Standard*.

mined opposition to those who did not play by the rules of the game, and a liberation from the various constraints that had been imposed upon the US by those Treaty-addicted, Kantian-inclined Europeans. Naturally, forging what amounted to a neo-imperial foreign policy for a post-communist world would be no easy task.⁷³ And not surprisingly, during its first few months in office, the newly elected Bush team ran into a barrage of international opposition to its policies.⁷⁴ This is why 9/11 was so important, not because it reduced criticism from abroad (though for a brief moment it did) but because it created an acute sense of crisis which made previously controversial policies now seem far more acceptable at home. There was no little irony in this. After all, as we now know, though the radical right loved to stress threats, the one it stressed least before 9/11 was international terrorism.⁷⁵ It was thus more than a little strange that the one event that made the realisation of at least one of its ambitions possible – regime change in Iraq – was the entirely predictable but (for the Bushies at least) quite unexpected attack on the United States by Al-Qaeda.⁷⁶

This though did not prevent the neo-imperialists in the Bush administration from seizing the high ground. Indeed, as many members of his inner circle have now admitted, September 11 was a most opportune wake-up call. It certainly proved in the most dramatic fashion possible that the world was still a very dangerous place, and that unless decisive action was now taken things could easily get much worse. In fact, the so-called ‘war against terror’ – which soon metamorphosed into something much wider – provided the neo-conservatives with an extraordinarily useful cover story. For if, as it was now claimed, America was threatened (as it was) by a transnational and undeterrable enemy with hidden cells here and shadowy allies there who were prepared to use weapons of mass destruction to achieve their theological ends (which they were), then Washington quite literally had no alternative but to intervene robustly and ruthlessly abroad. The fact that this might cause resentment in other countries was unfortunate. But this was of much less concern to these particular Americans than achieving results. Ultimately, the new right took a quite philosophical view of all this foreign noise. In the end, they reasoned, what would shape international attitudes would not be weasel words but decisive action backed up by overwhelming military power. Situations of strength not diplomatic niceties would determine how friends and enemies responded to the Bush Doctrine.⁷⁷

⁷³ William Kristol and Robert Kagan, ‘Towards a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 1996, pp. 23–35.

⁷⁴ I discuss European criticism of the early Bush policies in my ‘Europe and the New American Challenge after September 11: Crisis–What Crisis?’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 1: 1 (2003), pp. 37–55.

⁷⁵ In one of the more significant studies edited and authored by key figures on the new right, nearly every other threat was mentioned from China to Iraq, but little was said about the Sunni-inspired terrorism articulated and practised by Bin Laden. See Robert Kagan and William Kristol (eds.), *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (New York: Encounter Books, 2000).

⁷⁶ On 20 September 2001, Bush told Blair that ‘after Afghanistan we must come back to Iraq’. Cited in Bryan Burrough, Evgenia Peretz, David Rose and David Wise, ‘The Path to War’, *Vanity Fair*, 525 (May 2004), pp. 100–16, 169–82.

⁷⁷ To see how European allies responded to the Bush Doctrine, see Philip H. Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe and the Crisis Over Iraq* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

Empire? Sure! Why not?⁷⁸

Over the last two millennia the word 'empire' has meant many different things to different people from different countries at different times.⁷⁹

Yet even if we accept this interpretation of recent American history, not to mention the admittedly contentious characterisation of September 11 as a historic chance to realise larger ambitions,⁸⁰ this still does answer the more basic question about whether or not the United States should be regarded as an Empire. In fact, even those who argue that the real issue now is 'not whether the United States has become an imperial power' but 'what sort of empire' it is likely to become,⁸¹ still have to face the problem that the term Empire is riddled with problems. As its many critics have argued, the notion (in the wrong hands) is just as likely to mislead as illuminate. The United States, after all, has conquered no territory. It has championed, and still does, the principle of self-determination. And it lives in a world of independent states. Furthermore, as Ikenberry has astutely pointed out, under conditions of globalisation, where there is a complex web of international rules to which even the United States has to adjust its behaviour, what sense does it make to talk of an American Empire?⁸² These are all fair-minded questions, and cannot be dismissed as some of the more conspiratorially-minded might like to, by accusing those who advance them of supping with the devil.

Let us deal firstly with the issue of territory. The point has been made so often before that it does not need too much elaboration here. Stated in its barest form, the argument runs thus. Most states ultimately become Empires by annexing the territory of others. The motives are not important; the outcome however is. In the American case however there has been no such annexation. *Ergo*, the United States is not an Empire. As one of the more intelligent sceptics has put it, 'there has to be some sort of direct rule over the dominion for a power to be classified as an empire'. It follows therefore that the United States cannot be an Empire.⁸³

This particular argument has been restated so often that few now seem willing to question its validity. But it is critical to do, for the rather obvious reason that it happens to be seriously misleading when we come to look at American history. After all, when the first new nation broke away from Britain, it constituted only thirteen, fairly insignificant states, on the edge of a huge continent which still happened to be occupied, owned or possessed by other people. Yet a century or so later, this vast space was now in the hands of the heirs of those original colonists. Indeed, those who now repeat the line that the US cannot be an Empire because it has never

⁷⁸ Quoted in Christopher Hitchens, 'Imperialism, superpower dominance, malignant and benign', 10 December 2002. <<http://slate.msn.com/id=2075261>>

⁷⁹ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p. 3.

⁸⁰ On September 11 as opportunity see Andrew Roberts, 'Americans are on the march', *The Times*, 12 April 2003.

⁸¹ Quote from Andrew Bacevich, cited in Niall Ferguson, 'The empire that dares not speak its name', *The Sunday Times*, 13 April 2003.

⁸² G. John Ikenberry, 'The Illusions of Empire', *Foreign Affairs*, 83: 2 (March/April 2004), pp. 154–62.

⁸³ Dominic Lieven, 'The Concept of Empire', *Fathom: The Source for Online Learning*. See <<http://www.fathom.com/feature/122086>>

acquired other people's land seem to forget the rather obvious, and no doubt deeply uncomfortable 'fact', that the nation we now call the United States of America only became this particular entity because it acquired a great deal of the stuff: by purchase in the case of France and Russia, through military conquest when it came to Spain and Mexico, by agreement with Britain (Oregon), and, most brutally of all, by a systematic process of ethnic cleansing in the case of those various 'Indian' nations who were nearly all eliminated in one of the largest land grabs in modern history.⁸⁴

Even some Americans were aware that something more than just another nation was being built at the time. The Founding Fathers no less talked quite openly of building an 'Empire of Liberty' that would one day stretch from sea to shining sea.⁸⁵ Their successors talked more belligerently still of an American Manifest Destiny, and by the 1890s were practising a particular form of this in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Certainly, it is difficult to see how the United States acted any differently to their European counterparts when it took over Hawaii and then brutally conquered the Philippines, in the process killing nearly 30,000 insurgents. Nor were they averse to some good old fashioned imperial interventionism of their own in Central and Latin America. Indeed, if the United States was the exception to the imperial rule, as many claim, then how do we explain the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, its sending of those black ships under Commodore Perry to intimidate Japan, and Woodrow Wilson's use of military force on no less than ten occasions? If this was not an imperialism, it is difficult to think of what might be.⁸⁶

Yet the more general question remains: why did the United States normally prefer to exercise control abroad through means other than the direct acquisition of territory? One part of the answer lies in the extraordinary resources of the American economy and its historically proven ability to shape the affairs of others using its vast material capabilities. This method of exercising control had two very obvious advantages: it played to America's competitive strengths and it meant the United States was very rarely left with the cost of occupying other people's countries. Moreover, as Doyle has shown in his now much forgotten classic on the subject,⁸⁷ Empires can assume many complex forms; and a study of the most developed would indicate that they have invariably combined different forms of rule, none more successfully than America's presumed predecessor, Great Britain. As the famous Gallagher and Robinson team have shown in their justly celebrated work, British imperialism entertained both formal annexation and informal domination, direct political rule and indirect economic control. The real issue for the British therefore was not the means they employed to secure the outcomes they wanted, but the outcomes themselves.⁸⁸ Thus if one could create a system overall that guaranteed the

⁸⁴ It remains a moot point as to whether or not territorial expansion was even constitutional. See Gary Lawson and Guy Seidman, *The Constitution of Liberty: Territorial Expansion and American Legal History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁸⁵ In a letter to James Madison in 1809, Thomas Jefferson wrote that 'no constitution was ever so well calculated as ours for extensive empire'. Quoted in Gary Lawson and Guy Seidman, *ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ I discuss this in my 'America and the World', in Robert Singh (ed.), *Governing America: the Politics of a Divided Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 13–31.

⁸⁷ *Empires*, see fn. 11.

⁸⁸ See John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 6: 1 (1953), pp. 1–25.

right results – which for Britain meant a stable international space within which its goods could find a market and its capital a profitable home – then that would be perfectly fine. In fact, it was precisely this model of Empire (underpinned of course by overwhelming military superiority) that the Americans had in mind when they contemplated the postwar world in 1945.⁸⁹

Of course, nobody would be so foolish as to suggest that the United States achieved total control of the whole world in the postwar period. Empire, we should recall, is not the same thing as omnipotence. Nor did America always get its own way, even with its most dependent allies.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, it still managed to achieve a great deal. The results moreover were quite remarkable. Indeed, in a relatively short space of time, following what amounted to a thirty-year crisis before the guns finally fell silent in 1945, it managed to build the basis for a new international order within which others (old enemies and traditional economic rivals alike) could successfully operate. It also achieved most of this under the most testing of political conditions with all sorts of enemies constantly trying to pull down what it was attempting to build. So successful was it, in fact, that after several years of costly stand-off, it even began to push its various ideological rivals back. Not for it therefore the Roman fate of being overrun by the Mongol Hordes or the British experience of lowering the flag in one costly dependency after another. On the contrary, by the beginning of the 1990s, the American Empire faced neither disintegration, imperial overstretch nor even the balancing activities of other great powers, but rather a more open, seemingly less dangerous world in which nearly all the main actors (with the exception of a few rogue states) were now prepared to bandwagon and remain under its protective umbrella. Clearly, there was to be no ‘fall’ for this particular Empire.

But this still leaves open the problem of how we can legitimately talk of an American Empire when one of the United States’ primary objectives in the twentieth century has involved support for the right of self-determination. The objection is a perfectly reasonable one and obviously points to a very different kind of Empire to those which have existed in the past. But there is a legitimate answer to this particular question: that if and when the US has supported the creation of new nations, it has not done so out of pure idealism but because it realistically calculated that the break-up of other Empires was likely to decrease the power of rivals while increasing its own weight in a reformed world system. As the great American historian William Appleman Williams noted many years ago, no doubt in its own mind the US combated colonialism for the highest possible motive; nonetheless, this moral purpose more often than not worked to its own particular advantage.⁹¹ Others of a less radical persuasion have come to exactly the same conclusion, noting that if and when the United States did act ethically it did so for largely self-interested reasons.⁹² Imperialism, as has been noted, can sometimes wear a grimace and some-

⁸⁹ This point is outlined in terms of IR theory by Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 97–102.

⁹⁰ A point made by G. John Ikenberry in his ‘Rethinking the Origins of American Hegemony’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 104 (1989), pp. 375–400.

⁹¹ See the chapter on ‘Imperial Anticolonialism’ in William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1959).

⁹² On British suspicion of American moral rhetoric, see Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made The World*, pp. 348–52.

times a smile; and in the American case nothing was more likely to bring a smile to its face than the thought that while it was acquiring friends by proclaiming the virtues of liberty, it was doing so at the expense firstly of its European rivals (which is why so many of Europe's leaders disliked Wilson and feared FDR) and then, after 1989, of the USSR itself.⁹³

This brings us then to the issue of influence and the capacity of the United States to fashion outcomes to its own liking under contemporary conditions. The problem revolves as much around our understanding of what Empires have managed to do in the past, as it does about what we mean by influence now. Let us deal with both issues briefly, beginning with the first question about influence.

As any historian of previous empires knows, no Empire worth the name has ever been able to determine all outcomes at all times within its own *imperium*. All Empires in other words have had their limits. Even the Roman, to take the most cited example, was based on the recognition that there were certain things it could and could not do, including by the way pushing the outer boundaries of its rule too far.⁹⁴ Britain too was well aware that if it wanted to maintain influence it had to make concessions here and compromises there in order not to provoke what some analysts would now refer to as 'blowback'. How otherwise could it have run India for the better part of two hundred years with only fifty thousand soldiers and a few thousand administrators? Much the same could be said about the way in which the United States has generally preferred to rule its Empire. Thus like the British it has not always imposed its own form of government on other countries; it has often tolerated a good deal of difference; and it has been careful, though not always, not to undermine the authority of friendly local elites. In fact, the more formally independent dependent countries were, the more legitimate American hegemony was perceived to be. There was only one thing the United States asked in return: that those who were members of the club and wished to benefit from membership, had to behave like gentlemen. A little unruliness here and some disagreement there was fine, so long as it was within accepted bounds. In fact, the argument could be made – and has been – that the United States was at its most influential abroad not when it shouted loudest or tried to impose its will on others, but when it permitted others a good deal of slack. It has been more secure still when it has been invited in by those whose fate ultimately lay in its hands. Indeed, in much the same way as the wiser Roman governors and the more successful of the British Viceroy's conceded when concessions were necessary, so too have the great American empire builders of the postwar era. Far easier, they reasoned, to cut bargains and do deals with those over whom they ultimately had huge leverage rather than upset local sensitivities. It was only when the locals transgressed, as they did on occasion by acting badly abroad or outside the bounds of acceptable behaviour at home, that the US put its foot down firmly to show who was really in charge.⁹⁵

⁹³ On the more general uses of self-determination as a means of advancing US influence, see Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry and Takashi Inoguchi (eds.), *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, Impacts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹⁴ See John Wacher (ed.), 2 vols, *The Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 139.

⁹⁵ 'Empire is the rule exercised by one nation over others both to regulate their external behavior and to ensure minimally acceptable forms of internal behavior within the subordinate states'. Quoted in Stephen Peter Rosen, 'An Empire, If You Can keep It', *The National Interest*, 71 (Spring 2003), p. 51.

Yet the sceptics still make a good point. Under modern conditions, it is extraordinarily difficult for any single state to exercise preponderant influence at all times, a point made with great force in both a recent radical attempt to theorise the notion of Empire⁹⁶ and a liberal effort to rubbish it.⁹⁷ The argument is well made. In fact it is obvious: under conditions of globalisation where money moves with extraordinary speed in an apparently borderless world, it is very difficult indeed for any state – even one as powerful as the United States – to exercise complete control over all international relations. There is also the question of its own economic capabilities. The United States might have a huge military capacity. However, in the purely material realm it is far less powerful than it was say twenty years ago – before Europe and China became more serious economic actors – or immediately after the war when it controlled 70 per cent of the world’s financial resources. All this much is self-evident and any honest analysis of the ‘new’ American empire would have to take this on board.

However, one should not push the point too far. After all, the US economy continues to account for nearly 30 per cent of world product, it is roughly 40 per cent bigger than any of its nearest rivals, the dollar still remains the most important global currency, and Wall Street still represents the beating heart of the modern international financial system. Not only that: the biggest and most important corporations in the world are still located in the United States. Furthermore, as the better literature on globalisation indicates, the world economic system is not completely out of control: governments still have a key role to play. Indeed, the enormous resources at the American government’s disposal not only gives it a very large role in shaping the material environment within which we all happen to live, but also provides it with huge influence within those bodies whose purpose it is to manage the world capitalist system. America’s control of these might not be complete, and the outcomes might not always be to its liking. But they get their way more often than not. As one insider rather bluntly put it, ‘IMF programmes are typically dictated from Washington’.⁹⁸ Moreover, as Robert Wade has convincingly shown, by mere virtue of its ability to regulate the sources and supply routes of the vital energy and raw material needs of even its most successful economic competitors, the US quite literally holds the fate of the world in its hands. This not only makes the world dependent on the United States but means the US really is the key state upon which the fate of others depends.⁹⁹

Finally, any assessment as to whether or not the United States is, or is not, an Empire, has to address the problem of ideology and how American leaders view the US role in the world. The issue is a complex one as there are many strands to America’s world outlook. Nonetheless, the United States does have an ideology of sorts, one that leads most members of its foreign policy elite to view the US as having a very special role to play by virtue of its unique history, its huge capabilities

⁹⁶ ‘The US does not and indeed no nation-state can today form the centre of an imperialist project’. Cited in John Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) pp. xiii–xiv.

⁹⁷ Joseph Nye Jr, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁹⁸ Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 24.

⁹⁹ Robert Wade, ‘The invisible hand of the American Empire’, Unpublished ms., 15 February 2003.

and accumulated experience of running the world for the last fifty years. At times they may tire of performing this onerous task. Occasionally they falter. However, if it was ever suggested that they give up that role, they would no doubt throw up their hands in horror. Being number one does, after all, have its advantages. It also generates its own kind of imperial outlook in which other states are invariably regarded as problems to be managed, while the United States is perceived as having an indispensable role to perform, one of such vital importance that there is no reason why it should always be subject to the same rules of the international game as everybody else. This is why the United States, like all great imperial powers in the past, is frequently accused of being 'unilateral'. The charge might be just; basically however it is irrelevant. Indeed, as Americans frequently argue (in much the same way as the British and the Romans might have argued before them) the responsibilities of leadership and the reality of power means that the strong have to do what they must – even if this is sometimes deemed to be unfair – while the weak are compelled to accept their fate.¹⁰⁰ So it was in the past; so it has been, and will no doubt continue to be with the United States of America.¹⁰¹

A failed Empire?

The Iraq venture was doomed from the outset by the attempt made by American neo-conservatives to create what some of them styled a 'New American Empire'. This exaggerated American powers, made facile historical comparisons with previous Empires, and mis-identified the century we live in. So this early 21st attempt at Empire is failing.¹⁰²

As I hope I have tried to show, we can welcome the new debate on Empire without necessarily endorsing the Bush strategy. In fact, as I have implied, it is essential to make a distinction between the two. We can after all read Machiavelli and Hobbes without accepting their views on democracy; we can study Marx without concurring with his theory of proletarian revolution; by the same token we do not have to agree with the policy prescriptions of the neo-conservatives in order to recognise the important contribution some of them have made to the modern debate about American power. Indeed, they have, in my view, raised questions about the nature of order that have for far too long been ignored by more traditional liberal and realist theorists; moreover, if intellectual life is about who defines agendas and asks the more significant (and interesting) questions, then in the US at least, the modern new right would appear to have generated more real debate than most of their academically more respectable peers. If nothing else, by thinking the unthinkable, they have not only precipitated one of the more productive discussions in recent

¹⁰⁰ The main reason cited by the United States for not joining The International Criminal Court. See Dominic McGoldreick, Peter Rowe and Eric Donnelly (eds.), *The Permanent International Criminal Court: Legal and Policy Issues* (Oxford and Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, 2004), pp. 400–52.

¹⁰¹ For a further elaboration of the issues raised in this section see my 'The Empire's Back in Town: or America's Imperial Temptation – Again', *Millennium*, 32: 1 (2003), esp. pp. 14–22.

¹⁰² Michael Mann, 'The First Failed Empire of the 21st Century', in David Held and Mathias Kosnig-Archibugi, *American Power in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

American history, in the process they have also been able to challenge one of the more restrictive and stultifying concepts that has made intelligent debate about the US so difficult in the past: the notion that the United States is so exceptional, so special, so unique, that it is impossible to compare it with anything at all. If nothing else, the idea of Empire drags the country back into the historical mainstream where it should be, and hopefully will remain.¹⁰³

Recognising the utility of the idea of Empire however is one thing; speculating about the future of Empires is quite a different matter, especially in the American case where so much of this in the past appears to have been so wide of the mark with its predictions of the nation's imminent decline. But it is still something we need to do, partly because many people continue to think that US hegemony is here to stay,¹⁰⁴ and partly because the new imperialists genuinely do think their strategy is bearing fruit. Certainly, their view of the current period remains remarkably upbeat. Thus Iraq, they argue, has been tamed; China and Russia have signed up to the war on terror; India has fallen into America's arms; Libya has announced an end to its weapons programme; a number of repressive polities that once turned a blind eye to terror are no longer doing so; reform is beginning in the Middle East; and though the danger is far from over, the real terrorists are on the run. Admittedly this may have involved the use of some dubious means.¹⁰⁵ It may have even put the US on the wrong side of the law.¹⁰⁶ However, in a war against some very desperate and dangerous people there was no serious alternative other than to take the political offensive.

This, however, is not how things look to critics. Indeed, as some of the more trenchant have pointed out, the biggest problem with the 'new' assertive strategy is that far from making the Empire more secure (which was presumably the original aim of the new strategy) it has, if anything, made it a good deal weaker. This should not undermine American power, any more than it is likely to lead to the end of US primacy.¹⁰⁷ What it has generated, though, are some enormous problems. These have not only left the United States in a potentially more vulnerable position politically, but made the world as a whole a much more dangerous place.¹⁰⁸ Why has this happened? A number of reasons suggest themselves.

The first is connected to the issue of power itself. Here we need to return to the much maligned Clinton to illustrate the point. Clinton may have had many flaws. However, the one thing he understood especially well was how to sell American power to others. Believing that the United States had to lead from the front by playing the triple role of progressive policeman, benign economic shepherd, and

¹⁰³ Though not to the liking of some Americans. See Philip Zelikow, 'The Transformation of National Security: Five Redefinitions', *The National Interest*, 71 (Spring 2003), p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ See 'America's World', *The Economist*, 23 October 1999, p. 15, and John M. Owen, 'Why American Hegemony Is Here To Stay', Symposium: *Pax Americana or International Rule of Law*, 16 January 2003. <<http://fesportal.fes.de/pls/portal30/docs>>.

¹⁰⁵ Dana Priest and Joe Stephens, 'The secret world of US interrogation', *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 12 May 2004.

¹⁰⁶ See Dominic McGoldrick, *From '9-11' to the Iraq War 2003: International Law in an Age of Complexity* (Oxford and Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, 2004).

¹⁰⁷ See Charles A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

¹⁰⁸ A points also made by Clyde Prestowitz in his *Rogue Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

fatherly umpire in the world's many trouble spots, he indeed made it easy for most states to look upon the United States in a rather favourable way.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, under conditions of globalisation where one was confronted with an increasingly complex world of self-determining nations, by far and away the most effective way of making US power acceptable to others was by acting – or at least appearing to act – not just in America's interest but in that of its major allies too. Bush, as we know, had no such vision, and egged on by his neo-conservative advisors effectively abandoned what they saw as a policy of weakness. The net result might have freed the United States from formal constraint; unfortunately it did so at a price of transforming it from appearing to be benign into looking like an arrogant braggart.¹¹⁰ In effect, what the new right manifestly failed to understand was one of the most basic laws of international relations: namely, that unless carefully masked in various ways, the vast accumulation of power in one pair of hands is likely to generate deep resentment. As one critic has fairly remarked, no single state – not even the most benevolent – could possess as much power as the United States without, at best, causing a good deal of jealousy, or, at worst, some very dangerous opposition.¹¹¹ We need to be careful, of course. The 9/11 attack on the United States would have happened anyway, with or without Bush being in the White House. Yet we cannot deny what to many people at the time, and since, seems patently obvious: that bin Laden and his comrades chose their targets in very large part because they were symbols of a mighty (and to them distinctly alien) Empire across the ocean.¹¹² Indeed, such an outrage was anticipated for precisely that reason. As the now famous Hart-Rudman report suggested in 1999, though millions might have admired the United States, quite a few did not; and those who admired it least would most likely launch a terrorist attack on the homeland. Which in the end is what happened two years later.¹¹³

This leads us then to the more general question of legitimacy.¹¹⁴ As liberals have always been keen to point out, there are some rather obvious reasons why the United States ought to be working with others – the most self-interested being that it helps validate its policies in the eyes of those who might otherwise be critics.¹¹⁵ Thus one is cooperative not because it is the nice thing to be, but as Madelaine Albright once quipped, because it is the 'smart thing' to do. After the fiasco in the UN in 2002 and 2003, even some would-be imperialists now look like conceding the point. In fact, one of their original number now seems to be repeating what certain critics have been saying for some time: that a unilateral policy has left the US in a

¹⁰⁹ On Clinton as a more effective Empire builder than George W. Bush, see Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic*, pp. 255–6.

¹¹⁰ Fareed Zakaria, 'Arrogant Empire', *Newsweek*, March 2003.

¹¹¹ Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, original 2000 edition: New York: Time Warner Paperbacks, 2002).

¹¹² I discuss this in my 'September 11th and US Hegemony – Or Will the 21st Century Be American Too?', *International Studies Perspective*, 3 (2002), pp. 53–70.

¹¹³ See *New World Coming: American Security in the Twenty First Century. Phase I Report*. The United States Commission on National Security/21st Century, 15 September 1999.

¹¹⁴ See Chris Reus-Smit, *American Power and Global Order* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004).

¹¹⁵ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York and London, Oxford University Press, 2002).

dangerously isolated position. Kagan also admits why this might have happened: because the United States decided to transform what most people regarded as a just but contested war against terrorism, into what many others came to regard as an imperial adventure against Iraq.¹¹⁶ The result, as many analysts foresaw, was to be most damaging. Indeed, as several realists commented at the time, never had the United States gone into battle with so few allies actually prepared to back it enthusiastically; and never had such a war, according to another writer, generated so much global opposition in the process.¹¹⁷ As a relatively friendly European later remarked, rarely in history had one nation mobilised so much hard power in such a short space of time, and never had it lost so much soft power in the process.¹¹⁸

Which brings us to the question of consensus and the American public: that vital ‘second opinion’ according to Grieco.¹¹⁹ The United States, as we have earlier suggested, has always faced a very real dilemma, of on the one hand pursuing an imperial strategy, while on the other denying it was doing so to the American people. During the Cold War the circle was squared, in large part, by arguing that its own policies were not so much the result of some expansionary logic but a reasonable reaction forced upon it by the aggressive policies of another power. In the same way, Bush has sought to justify his actions by insisting that these were the necessary response to global terrorism. And in some very obvious way, they are. But defining a war is one thing: maintaining support amongst a people as parochial (and sensitive to loss) as the American was never going to be an easy job. As one of the new right’s few foreign admirers has noted, Americans suffer from several deficits, but the most serious by far is that concerning their attention.¹²⁰ Nor is this all. As has also been remarked, since September 11 the Bush team has been able to exploit a state of emergency to mobilise support for a more active foreign policy. It is not at all clear however that it will be able to do so for ever. Al-Qaeda may be reactionary, dangerous and deadly; but it is hardly a powerful opponent. Indeed, unlike the USSR, it has limited military assets, few important allies, and can hardly be described as the bearer of a progressive ideology that is likely to appeal to millions of different kinds of people around the world. This means that support for the ‘war’ against it is always going to be more difficult to sustain, especially when – as Grieco has pointed out – the US does not have the full support of important friends abroad. As even one or two radicals on the right have now conceded, without such endorsement, it is going to be increasingly difficult to gain popular American support for a war without apparent end, conducted against a nebulous enemy, without a specific political base in the form of a state.

There is, in addition, the very important problem of costs. There has invariably been a close relationship between Empire and economics, with the more successful Empires in history always being able to maintain a healthy domestic base, make a reasonable return on their overseas investment, and where feasible, transfer as much

¹¹⁶ See Robert Kagan, ‘America’s Crisis of Legitimacy’, *Foreign Affairs*, 83: 2 (March–April 2004), pp. 65–87.

¹¹⁷ See the critical comments by a former undersecretary of state to Clinton and a senior adviser to Senator Kerry on foreign policy. James P. Rubin, ‘Political dynamite’, *FT Magazine*, 3 April 2004.

¹¹⁸ Charles Grant, ‘Comment’, The Centre for European Economic Reform. May 2003.

¹¹⁹ See Joseph M. Grieco, ‘Let’s get a second opinion: allies, the UN and US public support for war’. Unpublished manuscript, June 2002.

¹²⁰ Niall Ferguson, *Colossus*, p. 293.

of the burden of their imperial rule to their various satellites. In all these various areas the United States has been massively successful since the end of the Second World War; and until recently one might have predicted it would continue to be so.¹²¹ But the warning signs are already there. These may not be quite so worrisome as suggested by one writer on the subject.¹²² However, there are some problematic trends – many of which can be traced back to the imperial policies pursued by a Bush administration that has not only overseen a massive boost in spending on its own national security (while its tax base has gone down) but has received hardly any financial support from others in its endeavour to pacify Iraq. Never the favoured candidate of Wall Street and crucial sections of capital anyway, Bush could easily face – in fact is already facing – a raft of criticism from sections of the American economic establishment who clearly do worry about deficits, who obviously do fear for the future of global economic relations in an age of increasing international restrictions, and who do sense that the team in Washington are a group of economic illiterates who might know a great deal about weapons systems and the revolution in military affairs, but seem to understand very little at all about the modern capitalist economy.¹²³ Even Iraq has turned into an economic disaster, one that has already cost the United States close to \$200bn and done little for the fortunes of those once very hungry corporate raiders like Haliburton and Exxon. Worse still, the strategy of confrontation is creating a sense of uncertainty and unease that is undermining market confidence across the globe. Capitalists are the most pragmatic of people but several (including the highly influential financier George Soros) are starting to wonder whether Bush is putting at risk the international system which underpins world stability and US corporate profits.¹²⁴ The unilateral use of American power for what many are increasingly seeing as a misguided purpose has crippled, though not yet destroyed, this system. However, if it goes on for very much longer, with more bad news from the Middle East, more anti-Americanism,¹²⁵ and a further deterioration of relations with allies across the Atlantic, then it might come close.¹²⁶

All roads in the end though lead back to Iraq – that most visible military result of a policy designed in the 1990s, made possible by the election of the most right-wing president in over twenty years, and sold to the American people as the most effective way of fighting the kind of terrorists who attacked them on September 11. Much could still happen; and not all of this need necessarily be bad. Nonetheless, the signs are hardly encouraging with revelations of mass detention and torture making the situation on the ground look less like liberation and more like an old-style colonial

¹²¹ Robert Hunter Wade, 'The Invisible Hand of the American Empire', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 17: 2 (2003), pp. 77–88.

¹²² See Robert Brenner, 'The Crisis in the US Economy', *London Review of Books*, 25: 3 (6 February 2003), pp. 18–23.

¹²³ Precisely the point made by Bush's first Secretary of the Treasury, Paul O'Neill who was later sacked for pointing out that massive tax cuts for the rich combined with huge defence outlays was likely to lead to serious deficit problems. See Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, The White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

¹²⁴ See George Soros, *The Bubble of American Supremacy: Correcting the Misuse of American Power* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2004).

¹²⁵ See Richard Crockatt, *America Embattled: September 11, Anti-Americanism and the Global Order* (London and New York, Routledge, 2003), esp. pp. 39–71.

¹²⁶ See Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

occupation. Nor is just a question of mistakes made here and poor decisions made there; for what is happening can be traced back to the original decision born of hubris to make war on a weak state in order to prove to others that America could. This is why Iraq could prove so important, not just because of the impact it is likely to have on the region or the world as a whole but for the one it is already having on the American people. Comparisons with Vietnam are unfair, and in critical ways, beside the point. That said, a rather high price has already been paid by the United States for its decision to bring about regime change, and not surprisingly this has generated deep divisions in a nation where memories of past quagmires still loom very large in the public consciousness. In reality, that well known 'Syndrome' associated with that well known disaster in South East Asia in the 1960s has not yet gone away. Nor is it likely to.¹²⁷ Talking imperialism is one thing. Putting it into practice in a country where images of body bags and the like have burned a deep hole in the American imagination, is something else altogether. It would be ironic indeed, though by no means surprising, that in their rush to prove their 'manly' virtues in Iraq, the United States ended up undermining the case for imperial adventure for at least another generation. It happened after Vietnam: there is no reason to think it could not happen again, if and when the Americans finally decide – as they probably will – to leave Baghdad. Some difficult decisions lie ahead for our new Romans on the Potomac.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ After having concluded that the situation in Iraq by May 2004 was as difficult as the one that had driven the United States out of Vietnam, one former Clinton official argued: 'We now have to admit that the American position is untenable'. Richard Holbrooke, quoted in *International Herald Tribune*, 11 May 2004.

¹²⁸ The title on the cover of one well known US magazine said all that most Americans wanted or needed to know about Iraq: 'State of Siege', *Time*, 163: 16 (19 April 2004). In the same issue one poll showed that whereas in April 2003 over 50 per cent of Americans felt safer because of having got rid of Saddam, a year later the figure had fallen to 40 per cent.