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Does Empire Matter?

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reflects on the most important events of the last millennium compared with the first, the ascent of the English-speaking peoples to predominance in the world surely ranks the highest.

At the end of the first millennium it was the Arabs who could have rightly had the same sense of achievement, as seated in Baghdad they surveyed the world described by the Syrian geographer al-Muqadasi:

The Islam he beheld was spread like a pavilion under the tent of the sky, erected as if for some great ceremonial occasion, arrayed with great cities in the role of princes . . . The cities were linked not only by the obvious elements in a common culture . . . but also by commerce. The strict political unity which once characterized Islam had been shattered in the 10th century . . . yet a sense of comity survived, and travelers could feel at home throughout the Dar-al Islam—or to use an image popular with poets—in a garden of Islam, cultivated, walled against the world, yielding for its privileged occupants, shades and tastes of paradise.⁵

At the end of the second millennium Britain was a small island off the coast of Eurasia, whose

rise had begun with a few trading outposts established by its merchant-adventurers around the world. Finding a power vacuum in crumbling empires or in empty lands populated by stateless people, the British established a vast empire. They led the way to modernity, and at the end of the 19th century Britain's dominions and influence stretched to all four corners of the globe. In the last century its outpost in the New World was to further extend this heritage, both economically and militarily. Seen from the perspective of world history, in the last millennium the hopes expressed by Virgil for Rome—"For these I set no bounds in space or time; / I have given them empire without end"—seem to have been fulfilled in large measure for the descendants of this "sceptered isle." Yet in those millennial celebrations in the Dome there was no pride in these amazing British achievements. For in New Labour's modernizing project, Britain's past, and particularly its empire, has been airbrushed away. But this is a mistake, and it is time to recognize that the British and now the American imperium have offered the best hope of peace and prosperity to vast multitudes around the globe in a congenitally disorderly world.

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Case for Classical Liberalism in the Twenty-First Century (Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Modern Library, 1513/1950), 18.

² S. E. Finer, *The History of Government*, 3 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:34.

³ P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*, 2nd ed. (Longman, 2001).

⁴ Quotations from Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 98, 99.

⁵ The nationalist claims of the deleterious effects of the British Raj on India are critically evaluated in my *The Hindu Equilibrium: India c. 1500 B.C. – 2000 A.D.*, abridged and revised ed. (Oxford University Press, 2005) and Lloyd G. Reynolds, *Economic Growth in the Third World, 1850-1980* (Yale University Press, 1985).

⁶ See Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes, Vol. 1: Hopes Betrayed, 1883-1920* (Macmillan, 1983), 325.

⁷ The former concern the worldview of a civilization that provides its moral anchor, and in Plato's words "how one should live." The latter concern beliefs about the best way to make a living. See Deepak Lal, *Unintended Consequences: The Impact of Factor Endowments, Culture, and Politics on Long-Run Economic Performance* (MIT Press, 1998).

⁸ See Deepak Lal, *In Praise of Empires: Globalization and Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), ch. 8.

⁹ Quoted in Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* (Scribner, 1995), 35.

DOES EMPIRE MATTER?

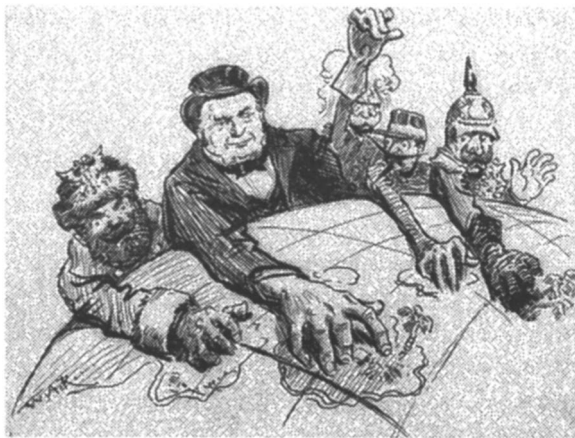
Jan Nederveen Pieterse

Is empire the main street of history, or is it a side street or a cul-de-sac? In relation to American domestic problems and economic prospects, does empire matter? In relation to global problems, does empire matter? Does the American pursuit of primacy contribute to global stability, or is it a destabilizing influence? What inspire these questions are the new wars (war on terror, Iraq, Afghanistan) and the recent outpouring of literature on empire.

An imperial state is one that determines the foreign and domestic policies of another political entity, which the United States has done in Afghanistan and Iraq. A second, broad-brush definition of empire is a state that practices expansionist geopolitics. An example of this is what Chalmers Johnson calls the American "empire of bases" and the pressure it applies to Iran, Syria, and North Korea. A third, loose meaning of empire pertains to ideology. America practices ideological imperialism when it casts itself in the role of global judge, declaring American values to be universal values, deciding who is good, who is evil, who is a terrorist and who a freedom fighter, who spends too much or too little on defense, which economic policies are right and which are wrong.

There are two main rationales for empire. A

mainstream view holds that the United States as the strongest military power must intervene because it is



W. A. Rogers. "The longest reach in land grabbing." ca. 1900. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Cabinet of American Illustration collection.

a dangerous world. This is the overt rationale of hegemony. A reasonable proviso is that American intervention should indeed be stabilizing. The second rationale is control over resources, particularly energy, and strategic real estate. According to Niall Ferguson:

"In our ever more populous world, where certain natural resources are destined to become more scarce, the old mainsprings of imperial rivalry remain. Look only at China's recent vigorous pursuit of privileged relationships with major commodity producers in Africa and elsewhere." This is the covert agenda of empire, which is here presented in the language of preemptive imperialism, charming for its bluntness, yet quaint because of its late 19th-century flavor.

A cartoon depicts an electronic signboard in an American town that reads *Time* 10.07, *Temperature* 76, *Reason for Invading Iraq* . . . This confusion is now routine. The task is "finishing the job," but what again was the job? WMD, regime change, democracy in the Middle East, the freedom agenda, stay the course, combat terrorism, fight terror there or else it will be fought here, no appeasement—the rationales of war change so often, they are hard to keep up with. In Iraq it is on to plan B also because few remember what plan A was. A technical problem is that the covert agenda is classified and not part of polite conversation.

The disconnect between overt and covert agendas leads to strange contradictions. The overt language speaks of stability, security, democracy, while

the covert agenda seeks to use instability, insecurity, autocracy, and Special Forces to advance its ends. Since the actual aims of war are classified, no intelligent public discussion is possible as to whether the aims are being achieved and the methods and cost have been appropriate.

Does an imperial approach work in the 21st century? I will discuss two dimensions, neoliberal globalization and grand strategy, and then draw up a balance sheet.

Neoliberal Globalization

Does empire matter in light of the dynamics of contemporary globalization? Imperialism is a particularly clunky form of globalization, so 19th century. In the 21st century, does empire make sense at all? Is it a viable project? Does neoliberal globalization—effected via international financial institutions and the WTO—need empire? If one project is freeing up markets, especially capital markets, does empire matter, or is control over territory and sovereignty rather a risky and costly burden and an unnecessary distraction? On September 21, 2003, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that “Iraq’s occupation government unveiled a plan to transform the country into a low-tax economy wide open to foreign investment.” If the aim is to transform Iraq into a free enterprise economy, does empire make sense in terms of cost-benefit analysis? In fact, if the objective is obtaining Iraq’s oil, isn’t it much cheaper to buy it?

That there is a “rational” relationship between American military expansion and American capitalism is the assumption of neo-Marxist takes on U.S. hegemony. This is a difficult assumption because economic actors are many and diverse (banks, institutional investors, corporations, government agencies). The circuits of power overlap with those of capital but not in a linear fashion. Business circles and media have been divided on the Iraq War, with the *Wall Street Journal*, the American Enterprise Institute, and other neoconservative think tanks in favor and many others skeptical or opposed, such as *BusinessWeek*, the *Economist*, *Financial Times*, and the Cato Institute. From the viewpoint of corporations the winners are few (military industries, Halliburton, Bechtel, energy companies), many are indifferent unless the cost of military expansion becomes excessive (Wall Street), and many are damaged by American militarism (exporters). The steep loss of American legitimacy represents, in business terms, a failure of brand management. American business groups note with growing concern that American brands worldwide are no longer “cool.”

Grand Strategy

It is a reasonable assumption that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are part of a wider strategic project. This goes back to the Carter doctrine that declared the Persian Gulf to be in the vital U.S. national security interest. It involves long-term American engagement in Iraq (supporting Saddam in the war against Iran), Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Gulf War, abiding strate-

gic interest in the Caspian Basin, and American bases in the Central Asian republics. Pressure on Iran and Syria is part of this. Zbigniew Brzezinski in *The Grand Chess Game* put it in stark language: “He who controls Eurasia controls the world.”

However, seeking land power on a distant continent is a chancy project. Per definition, the supply lines are long. Because of a lack of geographical contiguity and shared history, cultural affinities are slim or nonexistent. The U.S.’s main ally in this project, Israel, is isolated in the region. Not just the countries under attack but neighboring states feel threatened, and their regional networks and supply lines come under pressure, creating an incentive to seek alternative security and energy networks. Thus if American designs

In the 21st century the imperial state, the state that chooses war, is a weak state, a state that lacks alternative institutional resources and imagination to pursue its aims.

to prolong the unipolar moment hinge on gaining control of Eurasia, this is a high-risk project, like Napoleon’s Russian campaign. Achieving it requires village level control, but American forces have traditionally failed in overseas ground combat. The U.S. military has been successful in airborne operations and interventions using overwhelming force followed by quick withdrawal, but not in sustained ground operations.

The United States tries to compensate for these weaknesses through an ideological offensive of “bringing democracy to the Middle East.” American Orientalism places Islam on the outskirts of modernity, devalues Middle East culture, and stars the United States in the role of bringing the region freedom, democracy, modernity, and security. This strategy ignores the interdependence of American influence and authoritarianism in the region, ignores the area experts who counsel that democracy at this stage will bring Islamists to power, and ignores the clash between ends and means in U.S. policy. Propaganda outfits such as the Rendon Group and the Lincoln Group seek to bridge the gap and influence Middle East opinion from air-conditioned offices in Virginia. Public diplomacy Madison Avenue-style with Charlotte Beers followed by Karen Hughes as top public diplomat advertises a lack of cultural affinity and is counteracted by Al Jazeera and Al Manar broadcasting.

The neoconservative gamble of using military force to gain control over energy resources is backfiring. Iraq’s oil production, infrastructure, and services are below what they were before the war. Afghanistan is chronically unstable. American access to the Caspian Basin and Central Asia has diminished due to countermoves on the part of Russia and China.

The American record in the Middle East—particularly its support of authoritarian regimes whose development record, as documented in the Arab

Human Development reports, is abysmal—is yet another problem. Authoritarianism, corruption, arm sales, and fundamentalism come together in a package that carries the label “McJihad.” Double standards for Israel are part of this record. Add the American voiceover that declares that the wanton destruction of Lebanon signals “the birth pangs of the new Middle East.”

Forces in the Middle East and the Islamic world have begun to hit back. Hamas and Hezbollah are democratically elected parties. In this deeply polarized region which, in significant measure, is of American making, technological changes enable both new media and channels of influence such as Al Jazeera and the “democratization” of means of violence.

Non-state actors can obtain small arms, Stingers, and in some cases missiles and drones. For various reasons the imperial option has become very costly—in blood, treasure, and legitimacy.

Does Empire Matter?

My central thesis is that in the 21st century the imperial state, the state that *chooses* war, is a weak state, a

state that lacks alternative institutional resources and imagination to pursue its aims.

Hence in drawing up a balance sheet we must come to terms not with American power but American weakness. We need to disentangle two dynamics, the ramifications of twenty-five years of neoliberalism and the new wars. It’s not obvious whether we are witnessing the harvest of neoliberal policies since Reagan’s rollback of government or just a war-prone administration that happens to be inept.

Neoliberalism eviscerates state capabilities, shrinks the social state, and strengthens the security state. The mature neoliberal state, after decades of government rollback, is typically institutionally inept *and* a military and law-and-order state. Well before government is “small enough to be drowned in a bath tub”—Grover Norquist’s right-wing utopia—special interests have walked away with it. The state is captured by K Street lobbyists and neoconservative zealots who fudge intelligence and war plans by setting up their own shadow state operations. Hence the neoliberal state doesn’t spend less, it spends more, but on corporate and security agendas. The weakening of countervailing forces within the state reinforces institutional dependence on the security apparatus and yields a Situation Room worldview that specializes in threat assessment and, just in case, threat inflation.

The unsurprising outcome is state agencies that don’t function, whether in disaster management, Medicare reform, or drug prescription policies. The neoliberal state is both war prone (the security sector grows as other state functions shrink) and inept (because of the erosion of state capabilities and the capture of state functions by special interests). Hence the gradual erosion of international institutions that the United States, in an earlier incarnation, helped to build. The outcome is a state that is both inclined to empire and incapable of empire. I have earlier tried to capture this under the heading of neoliberal empire.¹

It marks this era that the debacle of Katrina and the debacle of Baghdad have become merged in people's minds. Both display government ineptitude, neglect of infrastructure and public services, corporate profiteering, no-bid contracts, private security agencies, staggering mismanagement, and systemic lack of accountability.

Consider an article headlined "U.S. Cuts in Africa Aid Hurt War on Terror and Increase China's Influence, Officials Say."¹ It reports that since 2003 U.S. military aid to most African states and several Latin American states has been stopped because the leaders of these states have declined to sign agreements exempting American troops from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court in The Hague. This leaves openings for China to expand its economic and political influence in these regions. This is an example of a state riddled by policy incoherence.

The United States places itself outside international law, outside the institutions that it has helped build—the Geneva Convention, the International Court, the UN Charter, the Declaration of Human Rights. Acting as a global judge *and* placing oneself outside international law is not a sustainable combination.

Thus preoccupied by a conundrum of its own making (including stubborn, one-sided policies in the Middle East), the United States on its fool's errand leaves the global field wide open for other countries to emerge and expand. While the U.S. and UK, the leaders of the war party, are stuck on the path they have chosen, entangled in the backlash it entails (the technical term is dialectics), and duly obsessed by Islamic militancy, the rest of the world travels a different path.

The domestic consequences of the American rendezvous with power include the opportunity costs of empire, i.e., what the U.S. government could have done instead of pursuing unipolarity. Economic con-

sequences include the overall neglect of economic policy and the structural loss of U.S. manufacturing capacity. Together with the neglect of education, this results in loss of competitiveness and loss of jobs. That the largest American company is a retail company that sells Chinese and other Asian goods with a logistics system that runs on Indian software is a telling sign. It leads to import dependence, an irreversibly growing trade deficit, massive current account deficits, and pressure on the dollar.

Now that the armed forces serve as both an avenue of social mobility (the nation's main affirmative action and workfare program) and the centerpiece of public culture, America is becoming increasingly out of sync with world trends—politically, economically, and culturally. Further, as militarism's influence in American culture grows, so does the influence of military authoritarianism. Contemporary American society involves a triple authoritarianism—in corporations as top-down hierarchical institutions (particularly in times of downsizing), in politics because of post-9/11 securitization and the general inclination toward presidentialism and mammoth bureaucracies, and as part of militarism. No wonder that a major American cultural preoccupation is with "leadership."

Empire stimulates regrouping on the part of social forces and countries that increasingly work around the United States. Empire accelerates global realignments. The American preoccupation with geostrategic primacy leaves the economic terrain to industrial newcomers and thus makes space for industrial development in the semi-periphery, as was the case during the interwar years in the first half of the 20th century when the great powers were distracted by rivalry and war. For some time growth rates in the global South have been much higher than in the North. With this come new patterns of South-South relations around trade, energy, and security.

Military primacy on weak economic foundations means a giant on feet of clay. As the world's major deficit country, the U.S. has much less economic leverage than it had in the past. The wars drag on but American hegemony is already crumbling. The failure of the Doha round, the impasse of the WTO, the demise of the FTAA, the vanishing act of APEC, and the retreat of the World Bank and IMF signal growing American weakness. Alternative clusters are taking shape that the United States is not part of. For imports and the funds to buy them the United States depends on Asian vendor financing, which will continue until the tipping point is reached, when American demand slips (rising interest rates prompting a slowdown) or when alternative markets, regional Asian markets, and rising domestic demand take shape. Empire matters in hastening American decline.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse is professor of sociology at University of Illinois. His most recent books are Globalization or Empire? (Routledge, 2004) and Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

¹ Niall Ferguson, "Empires with Expiration Dates," *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2006): 46-52.

² Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chess Game: American Primacy and Its Geostategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1997), xiv.

³ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization or Empire?* (Routledge, 2004), ch. 4.

⁴ Mark Mazzetti, *New York Times*, July 23, 2006.

ANALOG OF EMPIRE: REFLECTIONS ON U.S. ASCENDANCY

Charles S. Maier

Is America an empire? This essay responds indirectly to those readers of my recent book, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Precursors*, who have taken me to task for evading a definitive answer. In part, I did so as an authorial strategy. The question arouses such feeling that a firm answer either way would alienate many readers from the outset. Certainly most Americans today do not think they aspire to empire, although the founding generation of the republic often used the term just to describe the vast dimensions of the country they had created. At a minimum, empires imply extensive territory, whether accumulated in one large land mass or in overseas possessions. As early as

1778 the South Carolina patriot David Ramsay had predicted that American "substratum for empire" would propel the country beyond the conquests of the Macedonians, Romans, and British. But the original concept of empire as size was quickly overshadowed. Empire became identified with conquest—a program inimical to the republic for some, its destiny for others. For some commentators, the idea of the United States as an empire of conquest seems an absurd proposition. For others, such as my colleague Niall Ferguson, the fact of American empire seems self-evident and not particularly disturbing.

But there are further reasons for ambivalence. I am also reluctant to declare that our country is or is

not an empire because I believe taxonomy in the social sciences is always difficult—and often unfruitful. When sociologists or historians identify a social or political category by induction, arguing about whether the category does or does not include a particular case will often be inconclusive. We have had long debates on whether certain countries or individuals are "fascist"; whether some regimes are "totalitarian"; whether one or another political upheaval is "revolutionary." Such discussions can strain our patience and after a while become tedious. But they can also advance analysis.

Historians like to think that it is only sociologists or political scientists who earn their living by